

# TOWARDS THE COMMON EXPRESSION OF THE APOSTOLIC FAITH TODAY

## BAPTIST REFLECTIONS ON THIS FAITH AND ORDER PROJECT

### INTRODUCTION

Baptists have characteristically always believed that a central requirement of true Christian unity is unity in the faith, as contained in the Scriptures, as affirmed in personal and corporate worship, and as proclaimed in witness to the world. There will therefore be a natural and keen interest in one of the Faith and Order Commission's major current programmes, *Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today*. It follows closely upon the heels of the 'Lima Text', *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), and can be seen as an integral part of the process of 'reception' of the Lima text. If in response to BEM many Baptists have evinced a degree of unease over what they see as an undue emphasis upon 'sacramental' unity - or upon agreement on sacraments and orders as an essential prerequisite of unity - by the same token they might well look more eagerly at this new project which underlines that Faith is no less important than Order and in fact comes first in the search for unity. The study represents the most comprehensive ecumenical attempt yet made to reach a common exposition of the faith, based upon the Scriptures and the classic historical statements of Christian doctrine, yet framed in the contemporary situations of our world, and providing a common basis for our confession of Christ before the world today.

### BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The search for a common expression of faith, and the recognition of its high priority in the quest for unity, has marked the Faith and Order movement from its inception. Indeed, as early as 1920, a preparatory conference on 'Bible and Creed' was held at Geneva, antedating by seven years the first World Conference on Faith and Order at Lausanne. The 'father' of the movement, the American episcopalian Bishop Charles Brent, closed his address to that 1920 meeting with the maxim 'Faith first and then Order. . .'. At the Lausanne Conference itself in 1927, one work group addressed itself to 'The Church's Common Confession of Faith', emphasizing, along with scripture and the ancient creeds, 'the spiritual experience of the Church of Christ'. In the subsequent continuing work and world conferences of Faith and Order, it has always been implicitly maintained, and often explicitly stated, that questions of order, authority, ministry, diversity and unity cannot be understood without reference to still more fundamental theological beliefs. In particular, ecclesiology cannot be detached from christology, for the Church is the Body of Jesus Christ. This was so at Edinburgh (1937), Lund (1952) and - the last World Conference on Faith and Order - Montreal (1963). In fact it was at Montreal that a far-reaching attempt was made at a statement of convergence on the vital question, which for so long has divided Christian traditions, of the relative positions of scripture, tradition and present spiritual experience in the apprehension of Christian truth.

Faith and Order, of course, became a constituent body of the World Council of Churches, formally inaugurated at the Amsterdam Assembly in 1948. Faith

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and Order concerns are therefore pursued as part of the larger WCC programme, though Faith and Order does have an independent status as far as membership of its Standing and Plenary Commissions is concerned, which means that representatives of churches and groups other than those actually in membership with the WCC can be fully involved. There is, therefore, an unparalleled breadth to the diversity, from Roman Catholic to evangelical, from Orthodox to pentecostal, within its ecumenical embrace.

Explicit ventures towards common expressions and declarations of faith can be dated from the early 1970s. *A Common Account of Hope* was a remarkable world-wide programme involving contributions from Christians from a wide diversity of traditions and from very different contexts. It was finalised at Bangalore in 1978. Meanwhile at the Nairobi Assembly of the WCC in 1975, 'Confessing Christ Today' was a major theme for one of the sections, and its report was a powerful affirmation of the need to declare to the world the whole gospel of the one Christ, in the power of the Spirit. There was, significantly, a recognition of the dual loyalty of true witness - loyalty to the context of our witness, and loyalty to the source of our faith: 'While we rejoice hearing the gospel speak to our particular situations and while we must try to communicate the gospel to particular contexts, we must remain faithful to the historical apostolic witness as we find it in the Holy Scriptures and tradition as it is centred in Jesus Christ - lest we accommodate them to our own desires and interests'.<sup>1</sup> The whole Assembly, indeed, recognised the significance of what was being said here, and called upon the member churches 'to undertake a common effort to receive, appropriate and confess together, as contemporary occasion requires, the Christian truth and faith, delivered through the Apostles and handed down through the centuries'.<sup>2</sup>

Thus was the Apostolic Faith project conceived, if not born. At Bangalore in 1978 the Faith and Order Commission decided upon a threefold advance towards unity:

- a) consensus in the apostolic faith
- b) mutual recognition of baptism, eucharist and ministry
- c) structures making possible common teaching and decision-making.

Clearly it was b) which achieved most immediate and conspicuous attention, culminating in the celebrated Lima Text (BEM) of 1982. But Lima was also occupied with plans for the Apostolic Faith programme, on which several consultations had already taken place, and at Lima the Commission adopted unanimously the programme in outline. Nor has the closeness between BEM and Apostolic Faith been seen simply as a matter of closeness in time. Implicit in BEM are a number of questions, of wider reference than sacraments and ministry, which many (Baptists among them) feel require discussion if the quest for unity is not to be distorted and narrowed along a particular sacramental track. For instance, what is the role of faith itself in salvation? How does God act and speak in ways other than the sacramental? How does creation relate to redemption? Where is the Holy Spirit at work? Who is Jesus Christ for us today? Hence the widespread insistence that the response to and reception of BEM goes hand-in-hand with the Apostolic Faith project. Further impetus was provided by the 1983 Assembly of the WCC at Vancouver, notably the report 'Witnessing in a Divided World', and strong encouragement was given to the Faith and Order Commission to pursue the Apostolic Faith project as outlined at Lima.

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### STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAMME

Crucial to the project is the special place assigned to the *Nicene Creed*. (By this is meant, of course, what should more strictly be termed the *Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed* usually ascribed in its present historical form to the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople, 381, and hence frequently referred to as the Ecumenical Creed. Hereinafter it will be designated by NC). In justification of this, the Lima Report 'Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today' states:

. . . together with a growing convergence in our understanding of baptism, eucharist and ministry, the appeal for a common expression of the apostolic faith belongs to the movement towards the unity of the Church. In the attempt to work out such a common expression, it is impossible to disregard the special place of the Nicene Creed. It is the one common creed which is most universally accepted as formulation of the apostolic faith, by churches in all parts of the world, where it primarily serves as the confession of faith in the eucharistic liturgy.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, it was argued that:

It should be remembered how well this Creed has served millions of Christians, with whom we are also bound together in the unity of the Church, in the past. Its brief statement of the essential faith has provided at least formally a thread of unity down the centuries. In one form or another, this Creed has been used by the Orthodox churches, by the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, and by most of the churches of the Protestant Reformation, and in all parts of the world. It has helped the churches to affirm their fundamental belief in God, in the Lord Jesus Christ and his saving action, in the Holy Spirit and the Church, and in the life of the kingdom to come.<sup>4</sup>

Based on this evaluation of NC, the programme comprises three distinct but closely related movements:

- (1) Towards common recognition of NC
- (2) Towards common explication of the apostolic faith as expressed in NC
- (3) Towards common confession of the apostolic faith today.

These three movements do not necessarily imply a chronological sequence of fulfilment. Indeed, there has been much debate as to how, if at all, the second and third aspects can be detached from each other. However, in summary they may be distinguished as follows:

#### 1) Common Recognition of NC

'Our hope is that all the churches will recognize the symbol of Nicea-Constantinople as the common expression of the faith of the Church. . .'. For the reasons given above NC is regarded in the project as of unique status as a unifying ecumenical summary of belief - as in the past so in the present. This is not to say that nothing needs to be stated or done anew after NC, or that new confessions of faith are not required for new situations, but that such new statements 'are to be judged. . . by the criterion of their consonance with that apostolic faith as confessed in the Ecumenical Creed of the Church'.

Hence the crucial call is made: *'We therefore plead with those churches that*

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*do not acknowledge it [NC], or while acknowledging it in reality disregard it, that they ask themselves whether for the sake of unity they might agree to reconsider their attitude'.<sup>5</sup>*

### 2) Common explication of this apostolic faith

What is envisaged here is not a re-writing of NC, nor a new credal substitute for it, but a comprehensive exposition of the 'apostolic faith' based on an *interpretation* of NC, in language and thought-forms appropriate to the contemporary situations of the churches, as they seek to overcome their own divided states, and as they seek to bear witness to the faith in a divided and broken world. It is thus (a) a means whereby the churches can interpret to each other their particular understandings of the apostolic faith as they have received it in their specific traditions and experiences and insights, and thus move towards a greater shared wholeness (catholicity) in the faith; and (b) a means whereby the whole Christian Church can be aided in its missionary task of positively, clearly and unitedly witnessing to the one faith in the context of world religions, ideologies, and all that exposes Christian belief to questioning and even hostility. Based on the framework of NC, such an explication will cover the whole range of belief in the triune God, in creation, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, baptism and the forgiveness of sins, and the life of the age to come.

### 3) Common confession of the Apostolic Faith

This is distinguished from *explication* thus: 'The act of confession is always personal, even if it is done in community. It is personal also in the sense that it finally relates to the person of Jesus Christ and to the personal reality of the triune God. It means taking sides with Jesus (Luke 12.9) for the truth and love he proclaimed'.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, it is recognised that there may need to be many specific confessions made by particular churches to answer special needs and challenges (the Barmen Confession of 1934 is a classic modern instance). On the other hand it is argued that there is a need for a *common confession* 'in view of the challenges arising from contemporary experience which extend to all Christian churches alike, although their focus may be different in different situations. . . The Church is called to be a symbol of [the] eschatological community of justice and peace. But it lives up to this function only to the degree that the community of the Church itself is truly united through the love of Christ'. This common confession has a specific challenge in the encounter with other faiths and ideologies - which is not necessarily one of hostility since 'even explicit rejection of the Christian proclamation may often be conditioned by partial misrepresentations of the truth of the gospel by the churches themselves'.

## PROCEDURE AND PROGRESS TO DATE

Regarding the element of *recognition of NC*, the Secretariat of Faith and Order wrote to Secretaries of the Christian World Communions, in November 1984, enquiring what place was held by the Nicene Creed and other ancient creeds in their respective communions, and what role, if any, was played by historical and contemporary confessional statements among their churches. A number of replies were received (for the BWA reply, see below), which were received at the Faith and Order Plenary Commission meeting in Stavanger, Norway (August, 1985).

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Most effort has been devoted to, and progress made, in the direction of explication of the Apostolic Faith as represented by NC. In fact as early as 1981 - which was of course the 1600th anniversary year of the adoption of NC - two consultations were held at Chambesy and Odessa on the ecumenical significance of NC. During 1984-5, consultations were held at Kottayam (India), Chantilly (France) and Kinshasa (Zaire), considering respectively the second, third and first articles of the Creed. In 1985 at Stavanger the results of these three consultations were discussed with a view to producing a first draft of an agreed explication of the apostolic faith. At a consultation in Paris in April 1987, this was revised and, following consideration by the Standing Commission on Faith and Order in August 1987, the draft has been made available to members of the Plenary Commission. It is also available to the churches, not as an official document inviting responses, but as a record of the project to date, and is also available for study groups for reflection and discussion. It is anticipated that conferral of any 'official' status on the document will have to wait for the meeting of the Plenary Commission on Faith and Order in 1989. In the meantime, as and when it is available, discussion of it both denominationally and ecumenically, at whatever level, will be welcomed. The Doctrine and Inter-Church Co-operation Commission of the Baptist World Alliance is giving the document close attention.

### BAPTISTS AND THE APOSTOLIC FAITH PROJECT: ISSUES AND RESPONSES

Baptist members and associates of the Faith and Order Commission have been involved in the Apostolic Faith project from its inception. They have found it to be an experience both challenging and enriching, as they share with other Christians in exploring the meaning, interpretation and expression of the Christian faith and its great doctrines in the present-day context. Much of the challenge for Baptists lies, of course, in the area of *recognition* of NC as a unique and authoritative symbol of the apostolic faith. It has also to be said that much of the impetus for concerted recognition of the Creed comes from the Orthodox Churches which, more than any other tradition, venerate the NC of 381 as the unique symbol of apostolic faith.

In writing to Secretaries of Christian world communions in November 1984, the Secretariat of Faith and Order addressed the following questions to each:

1. What is the place of the Nicene Creed and other ancient creeds in the tradition and present life of the churches belonging to your World Communion?
2. What role do specific historical confessional statements play in the churches of your World Communion, especially compared with the role of the Nicene Creed?
3. What contemporary statements of faith are officially or unofficially used in the churches of your World Communion?
4. Have churches of your World Communion recognized confessions of faith of other churches?

Dr Denton Lotz, then Associate Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, replied on behalf of the BWA, pointing out that the BWA comprised many unions and conventions. 'We are not a credal denomination. Your questions concerning the Nicene Creed would be better addressed to the Baptist conventions which belong to the WCC. Although most of them would not quote the Nicene Creed, most of our members accept the doctrines of the creeds as much as those

churches that do have the creeds'. Regarding historical confessions of faith, Dr Lotz points out that these play little role in the BWA but that various conventions and unions have produced their own on occasion. 'Baptists do not recognize confessions of faith as such, and therefore we would not recognize the confessions of faith of other churches'. He concludes: 'It is interesting that, although Baptists do not belong to that group of churches which have creeds, we are, in our affirmations of the humanity and divinity of Christ, the trinity, the virgin birth, the resurrection, etc., very close to the Catholic and Orthodox positions'.

Clearly there is an issue of immense importance here for Baptists (as for some other Protestant groups) as we seek to relate in dialogue with other communions which do officially, formally and liturgically 'recognize' the NC. Baptists have cause to explain to their fellow-Christians the reasons why in their tradition, there are both theological and historical factors inhibiting the specific use of the ancient creeds. Theologically, Baptists have wished to assert unequivocally the authority of *Scripture*, and there is an instinctive fear that to elevate any later statement, of however venerable tradition, to high status would inevitably derogate from the attachment to *Scripture*. Further, the characteristic Baptist emphasis upon faith as a living, personal relationship of trust and obedience to Jesus Christ himself - above all expressed in believers' baptism - is bound to be uneasy with an emphasis upon belief in a doctrinal statement with its impersonal and possibly intellectualistic overtones. Historically, Baptists have a corporate memory of the ecclesiastical (and political) misuse of creeds in coercing subscriptions to authority, and this is seen by them as a serious denial of the freedom of conscience of man before God.

There is another aspect of the case, however. Baptists do have a long tradition of producing their own confessions of faith, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>7</sup> Not only so, but *they have never disowned or distanced themselves from the content of the ancient creeds, and have on occasion positively identified themselves with those creeds*. For instance, the General Baptist 'Orthodox' Confession of 1678 specifically cites the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds as those which 'ought thoroughly to be received and believed'. The ground for this was the perceived *scriptural* basis of these creeds, and their utility in providing a succinct and comprehensive summary of the *scriptural* faith. Part of the motive for this acknowledgment was the desire that Baptists should be publicly known to be at one with the great historic tradition of orthodox Christianity, and not as an heretical and schismatical sect in matters of doctrine. In more modern times, the very inauguration of the BWA at its first world congress in London in 1905 provided an illustration of this continuing Baptist concern, when at the opening session the President, Alexander Maclaren, in the course of his address, called upon the Assembly to rise and repeat with him the Apostles' Creed: 'It would be an impressive and a right thing, and would clear away a good many misunderstandings and stop the mouth of a good deal of slander - if we here and now, in the face of the world, not as a piece of coercion or discipline, but as a simple acknowledgement of where we stand and what we believe. . .'.<sup>8</sup> The Assembly did so. 'Never has there been an act of such inspiration, or a moment so historical with us,' commented J. H. Shespeare.<sup>9</sup> The BWA, in other words, marked its birth with recognition and confession of one of the great ancient creeds of the Church!

It is, therefore, a question of some magnitude as to how Baptists answer the question about 'recognition' of NC or other classical symbols. In Faith and Order discussions the distinction is already being used, between 'credal' and

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'non-credal' churches. By most accounts Baptists are seen by themselves and others as 'non-credal' in that we do not use NC regularly in worship or catechesis or on formal occasions where subscription to orthodox belief requires to be attested. Do we then not 'recognise' NC because we do not recite it regularly? Do we recognize it 'implicitly'? If so, precisely how? What are the signs of such recognition? The Orthodox, particularly, will press us hard here. To such traditions, it seems hard to understand why, if we claim to be within the mainstream of Christian belief, we should have qualms about it. It would be particularly tragic if to be 'non-credal' meant, in effect, to be regarded as 'non-apostolic'. So, how can Baptists advance their claims to be both one with the apostolic faith and yet, in terms of regular practice, 'non-credal'? Perhaps we need to argue the case that the Nicene thought, its conceptions and even its phraseology, can find its way into the consciousness and articulated belief of a Christian community in ways other than the 'credal' (in, for instance, the language of prayer, hymnody, the actual content of catechetics, the use of trinitarian language, to name but some).

On the other hand, some Baptists might argue that, given our stated attachment to Scripture, there is no need for concern over 'apostolic faith'. So long as we can demonstrate our biblical fidelity, credal forms can look after themselves! On this view, if NC is 'Scriptural', then there is indeed no objection to its use if people wish so to use it. But equally there is no compelling ground for its use since if it is the Scriptural nature of NC which lends it authority, one may as well return all the way to Scripture. Why bother with a summary when we have got the *whole text* of Scripture open in front of us? Our Orthodox brethren, however, point out to us that NC arose out of a series of disputes in which the appeal to Scripture did not, by itself, settle the matter. Arius appealed to Scripture (and not without effect). As well as Scripture, something is needed which, drawing from Scripture, states what Scripture is about: the act of the triune God in creation, redemption and sanctification.

We are therefore driven right back into the debate over the relation between Scripture and Tradition. One group at Stavanger was greatly occupied with this in its consideration of the problems of recognition of NC today, and the writer, if he be permitted a personal reminiscence at this point, recalls the long, taxing but fascinating and ultimately exhilarating discussion with Greek Orthodox theologians on the relation between NC and Scripture. First, the group recalled what was stated at Montreal in 1963 on this issue:

Our starting-point is that we are all living in a tradition which goes back to our Lord and has its roots in the Old Testament, and are all indebted to that tradition inasmuch as we have received the revealed truth, the Gospel, through its being transmitted from one generation to another. Thus we can say that we exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel. . . testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Tradition taken in this sense is actualized in the preaching of the Word, in the administration of the Sacraments and worship, in Christian teaching and theology, and in mission and witness to Christ by the lives of the members of the Church.<sup>10</sup>

Tradition (capital T), God's self-revelation through the Holy Spirit, takes place through traditions (small t). The group then took up the meaning of the words 'apostolic faith', seeing them as referring to an essentially *dynamic* reality, grounded in the witness of the first apostles but having to be confessed ever

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anew in changing times and places, while always in continuity with the original witness of the apostolic community. NC, while often regarded today as representing the fixity and solidity of the faith once delivered to the saints, is, when viewed in its own historical context, a remarkable testimony to this on-going dynamism of witness. At Stavanger it was argued:

The Nicene Creed stands within the tradition of the apostles but we recognize that the ethical, missional and ecclesial fullness of the Tradition embraces more than is addressed in this one text alone. While the content of the faith remains constant, its confession/expression is a dynamic process. The Nicene Creed is an element in a dynamic Tradition requiring new forms of expression to meet new situations. The very introduction of *homoousios* to express the biblical affirmation, is a testimony to the ongoing process of handing down the apostolic faith, which is done again and again in different historical and cultural contexts.<sup>11</sup>

If there could be agreement that the prime and ultimate witness is that of Scripture, and that NC and like ecumenical symbols are the necessary witness to what it means to be 'Scriptural' in contexts other than that of the original Scriptural witness itself (for instance, the fourth-century context of the Hellenistic world being very different from that of first-century Palestine), then we might indeed be on the way towards finding an identification with the 'apostolic faith' which we could share with our Catholic and Orthodox neighbours.

### THE MUTUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISTS AND THE APOSTOLIC FAITH PROJECT

When the full text of the proposed 'explication' is available there will be much for discussion and comment - not least for Baptists on the explication of the NC clause 'one baptism for the remission of sins'. There are, however, two aspects which are worth underlining in order to stress the importance of Baptist involvement in the project. The first concerns an area where Baptists may benefit from the educative and enriching encounter with other traditions, the second is an area where they will have much to contribute.

First, whatever hesitations Baptists may have about a more explicit recognition and usage of NC (see above), such a symbol and its explication will have a salutary effect in encouraging a greater apprehension of the wholeness of the gospel, the total balance of the great Christian doctrines. Evangelicalism has at times been justly criticised for its partiality in emphasis, its selectivity and lack of balance in doctrinal teaching. For example, unbiblically, redemption has often been preached and taught as something in complete isolation from creation or the doctrine of the Church. Corresponding ethical imbalances can flow from this (witness the slowness of Christians to respond to the ecological crisis). The Apostle Paul exhorts us to comprehend with all the saints, 'what is the breadth and length and height and depth' (Ephesians 3.18). This project will help us towards that genuine 'catholicity', especially as it involves a worldwide communion of churches representing so many social, cultural and political situations and thereby challenging the tendency each of us has to absolutize our particular viewpoints.

Second, Baptists have a major contribution to make in asserting within the ecumenical movement an understanding of the apostolic faith (see above) as a



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dynamic, on-going reality, springing from their missionary emphasis. To be 'apostolic' has commonly been assumed to mean 'faithful to what the apostles taught' and so it is - and more. It is to be faithful to what they did, and were sent to do, namely to be the witnesses of Jesus to all people and all creation. Baptists were among the pioneers of those who, at the birth of the modern missionary movement, interpreted the great commission (Matthew 28.18-20) as being delivered to every generation of Christians and not just to the first apostles. Or, put another way, each generation is to be apostolic in this journeying, witnessing sense. Being apostolic is a continuing, open-ended affair. Being apostolic means not remaining still but being sent 'to the end of the earth' and 'to the end of time'. It means continuity with what the first apostles proclaimed - pursuing the direction they set, pointing towards what they first saw and heard, but from within the new situations of the missionary venture, in new languages and answering new needs.

Baptists have much to give and receive through participation in this project, and through sharing in discussions and reflection upon the material it produces. They need to look honestly at their own past and present attitudes to the Ecumenical Creeds in relation to Scripture, and their own attitudes to Scripture in view of the requirement to do justice to the catholicity of the faith in proclamation and teaching.

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### NOTES

This paper was first presented to the BWA Commission on Doctrine and Inter-Church Co-operation meeting in Amman, Jordan, July 1987.

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|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Apostolic Faith Today</i> , p.100f. | 6. <i>ibid.</i> , p.223.                                     | 9. <i>ibid.</i> , p.vii.               |
| 2. <i>ibid.</i> , p.2.                    | 7. See Lumpkin and West(above).                              | 10. <i>Faith and Renewal</i> , p.159f. |
| 3. <i>ibid.</i> p.216f.                   | 8. First Baptist World Alliance Congress 1905, Report, p.20. | 11. <i>ibid.</i> , p.60.               |
| 4. <i>ibid.</i>                           |                                                              |                                        |
| 5. <i>ibid.</i> , p.218.                  |                                                              |                                        |

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