

# PLANTING SELF-GOVERNING CHURCHES: British Baptist Ecclesiology in the Missionary Context

## INTRODUCTION

The day when a church becomes a sending church, a missionary church, is among the most fateful in its history. When it moves across the seas to be transplanted in other soil, it does of necessity change, either by conscious and willing adaptation or else through its very resistance to change. The factors of growth and change are set out in sharper relief by the situation in a mission field than by the situation within the older churches of Europe and America. Transplantation means mutation.<sup>1</sup>

With these words Bishop Bengt Sundkler began his definitive history of the movement toward church union in South India. They form an equally appropriate starting point for this lecture. The step which those fourteen Baptist ministers and laymen took at Kettering on 2 October 1792 had momentous consequences for the subsequent growth of Christianity in the non-Western world, as we are well aware. But it also carried major implications for the life and faith of British Baptists. What would be the impact on Baptist understanding of church polity and ministry of the endeavour by British Baptists to transplant evangelical Christianity to non-Western cultural contexts? What was it they were called to transplant? An exact replica of a late-eighteenth-century Northamptonshire Particular Baptist church, or a church that was significantly different in its worship, its order, its ministry, even in the mode of expression of its faith? If the latter, then what criteria would determine which features of British Baptist ecclesiology might legitimately be jettisoned, and which had jealously to be preserved?

These questions were not uppermost in the minds of Carey, Fuller, and their colleagues. William Carey was animated, not by a sectarian determination to export Particular Baptist distinctives to the 'heathen' world, but by a burning compulsion to spread the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ to those who currently had no access to such knowledge. Both in his *Enquiry* and in the founding minutes of the Baptist Missionary Society it is emphasized that the need for Particular Baptists to act separately in missionary organization arose pragmatically from 'the present divided state of Christendom', rather than from any necessity of theological principle.<sup>2</sup> The founding fathers of the BMS felt no need to confront ecclesiological issues from the outset, unlike their successors who established 'The Missionary Society' (later the London Missionary Society or LMS) in 1795. The original ideal of 'The Missionary Society' as a society which would embrace all evangelical Christians made imperative a clear line of policy on questions of church order, even if that policy were to prescribe, as it did in the celebrated 'Fundamental Principle', that no one system of church order was to be regarded as normative:

. . . it is declared to be a fundamental principle of The Missionary Society, that its design is not to send Presbyterianism, Independency, Episcopacy, or any other form of Church Order and Government, about which there may be difference of opinion among serious persons, but the glorious Gospel of the Blessed God, to the heathen; and that it shall be left (as it ought to be left) to the minds of the persons whom God may call into the fellowship of His Son from among them to assume for themselves such form of Church Government as to them shall appear most agreeable to the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>

## PLANTING SELF-GOVERNING CHURCHES

Nevertheless, there was no doubt in the minds of the first BMS missionaries that their calling was to establish gathered churches of baptized believers which would be capable of self-sustaining life. That was the pattern of church extension which they practised in Britain, and no member of the BMS questioned that the same pattern must be followed in India. Baptists were committed from the outset of the missionary movement to what have become known as 'Three-Self' principles - the goal of planting indigenous churches which should be self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating - precisely because they had never conceived of the local church as anything other than a self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating company of believers. This is an obvious point, but one rarely made by missionary historians. The most celebrated British exponent of 'Three-Self' principles in the nineteenth century, Henry Venn, Honorary Secretary of the Church Missionary Society from 1841 to 1872, was, of course, an Anglican, paradoxical though that may appear. It is noteworthy that the most recent study of Venn's policy observes that Venn drew much of his inspiration from the commitment of nonconformist missions to implement on the mission field what they practised at home: the planting of genuinely autonomous churches.<sup>4</sup> In some mission fields, notably in late nineteenth-century China, the BMS stood out from other Protestant missions by virtue of its scrupulous adherence to the principles of self-support. There is thus a case for identifying Timothy Richard - a fervent disciple of three-self principles - as one of the progenitors of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in Communist China.<sup>5</sup> However, the sobering question which confronts the historian of the BMS is why a commitment so integral to the Baptist understanding of the nature of the Church proved so difficult to implement in practice in what was by far the Society's largest field for most of its history - India. How was it that a mission so deeply committed to the planting of self-governing churches found itself giving birth to a church that, in large parts of its India field, was a fundamentally dependent one? Three answers can be suggested.

### I THE TRAINING OF AN INDIGENOUS MINISTRY

In the *Enquiry* Carey had made brief mention of the potential role of national converts in winning their fellow-countrymen for Christ.<sup>6</sup> Once in Bengal, his conviction strengthened that the decisive part in the evangelization of India would have to be played by national Christians. In part this conclusion derived from a recognition of the cultural barriers which inhibited European effectiveness in reaching Hindus for Christ; in part it followed from a sober estimate of the vast financial investment required to make Europeans into operational missionaries: in 1812 Carey computed that it cost the BMS at least £600 to bring one European to the point of exercising an effective missionary role.<sup>7</sup> Later in his career, Carey revised this estimate to £1,000.<sup>8</sup> Missionaries who would be more effective at far less cost could, therefore, be raised up from within India itself - hence the foundation of Serampore College in 1818 as an institution for the training of indigenous missionaries.

Convinced of the strategic role to be exercised by Indian evangelists, the Serampore Trio - William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward - insisted that BMS missionaries should draw out the full range of gifts within an indigenous congregation, and resist any tendency to limit the exercise of preaching and evangelism to the ordained ministry. In this regard the expansionist models provided in Britain by the Welsh churches and the Methodists were to be preferred to the contrary pattern exemplified by Scottish Presbyterianism of confining the ministry to a learned élite.<sup>9</sup> Hence the 'Form of Agreement', the covenantal basis for the Serampore mission community adopted in

1805, warned that if 'the practice of confining the ministry of the word to a single individual in a church be once established amongst us, we despair of the gospel's ever making much progress in India by our means', and identified the cultivation of the spiritual gifts of Indian converts as a primary policy objective.<sup>10</sup> To an even greater extent than was true in contemporary Baptist life in Britain, the missionary context dictated that 'ministry' should be seen in an inclusive rather than an exclusive sense. Serampore College was not to be a ministerial seminary in a narrow sense, but one which combined training for pastoral ministry with equipping lay Christians to communicate the gospel to the population at large, from educated Brahmins to ordinary village Hindus. For this reason among others, the original medium of instruction at Serampore was Bengali rather than English, and emphasis was placed on the learning of Sanskrit in order to provide students with a foundation for the learning of a range of Indian languages.<sup>11</sup>

Sadly the original emphasis of Serampore College on Bengali-medium instruction had to be modified in the face of the insistent demand for English-medium education for secular purposes which swept Bengal in the 1830s. English supplanted Sanskrit as the main focus of literary studies, and the evangelistic emphasis of the College weakened.<sup>12</sup> Initially Bengali remained the principal medium of instruction, but by the 1840s it appears that teaching in Bengali had all but disappeared. A small vernacular class for training native pastors and evangelists was established by George Pearce after 1851, but Pearce found the atmosphere of the College uncongenial to such work, and removed his class to Alipore.<sup>13</sup>

All attempts to re-introduce vernacular theological education to Serampore proved unavailing, with the result that in 1883 the BMS Committee, on Alfred Baynes's initiative, resolved to abandon the existing English classes and re-establish the College as a vernacular institution for training pastors and evangelists.<sup>14</sup> This experiment was unsuccessful. When Baynes visited Serampore in 1890, he formed the more drastic conclusion that the College should be closed altogether. Believing that Serampore fostered in its students a grand life-style ill suited to pastoral ministry among the rural poor and fatal to the development of self-supporting churches, Baynes recommended to the BMS Committee that the College be closed and vernacular theological training instituted at Barisal or some other centre closer to the bulk of the Baptist community in East Bengal.<sup>15</sup> This proposal aroused great controversy, and in particular the opposition of Baynes's predecessor as senior secretary, E. B. Underhill. Underhill succeeded in getting the proposal to close Serampore postponed indefinitely. Baynes's retirement in 1906 and replacement by C. E. Wilson, brought home from the Serampore staff, put an end to any talk of the closure of the College, which gained a new lease of life under the principalship of George Howells, appointed in 1906.<sup>16</sup>

The published histories of Serampore College understandably applaud Underhill as the saviour of the College and vindicator of the breadth of its historic ideals, while presenting Baynes, at least by implication, as the villain of the piece.<sup>17</sup> There is no doubt that Serampore has made a uniquely influential contribution to the theological education of the higher echelons of Protestant church leadership in twentieth-century India. However, what it generally failed to do was to train pastors and evangelists capable of serving in, and being supported by, the village Baptist churches of Bengal and North India. The vernacular theological department never attracted sufficient students, and was finally closed in 1926. Hence Serampore never became the training institution for indigenous missionaries which was at the heart of its original vision. In so far as it

## PLANTING SELF-GOVERNING CHURCHES

did train Indians for Christian ministry, its products tended to be a highly educated and Westernized ministerial élite - not the stuff from which a self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating church in a poor rural society could be built.

### II THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN MISSIONARY

The Serampore Trio perceived that the priority of indigenous evangelistic agency implied that the role of the European missionary must be defined in terms which were both more limited in scope and yet more exalted in character than was the Baptist pastoral office in Britain. 'I have suggested an idea to the brethren', wrote William Ward in his journal on 19 October 1805,

that in planting separate churches native pastors shall be chosen, & native deacons, & that the missionaries shall preserve their original character, giving themselves up to the planting of new churches, & superintending those already planted.<sup>18</sup>

This understanding of the missionary's role was written into the Form of Agreement. Native ministers must be allowed to preach the word and administer the ordinances

as much as possible, without the interference of the missionary of the district who will constantly superintend their affairs, give them advice in cases of order and discipline, and correct any errors into which they may fall; and who, joying and beholding their order, and the stedfastness of their faith in Christ, may direct his efforts continually to the planting of new churches in other places, and to the spread of the gospel in his district, to the utmost of his power.<sup>19</sup>

The missionary must not be allowed to assume the pastorate of an Indian church. Rather he should be kept free for functions that were strictly 'apostolic' and 'episcopal': the planting of new churches in virgin territory and the 'superintending' of those already planted. At least for the present, Indian evangelists would be 'under the eye of an European brother'.<sup>20</sup> This was an entirely reasonable position to adopt in 1805, although it should be noted that even in the 'Form of Agreement', there was an implicit tension between 'superintendence' and 'interference': missionaries were to superintend, but not to interfere - an almost impossible tightrope to walk.

The problem in the long term was two-fold. On the one hand, the paucity of well trained Indian pastors meant that many BMS missionaries *did* assume pastoral responsibility of Indian congregations, thus reducing their scope for further church-planting ventures. The BMS Committee consistently disapproved of this trend, but seemed powerless to stop it. On the other hand, as the century proceeded, the tendency became still more pronounced for missionaries and missionary society officials alike to argue that 'natives' of all kinds could not be entrusted with unsupervised responsibility. The very insistence of home officials that missionaries should confine themselves to the vital task of oversight could encourage the latter to hold on to the reins of power. Listen, for example, to Frederick Trestrail, E.B. Underhill's colleague in the BMS secretariat, addressing the interdenominational Liverpool missionary conference in 1860:

. . . the missionary should not become a *pastor*. His position, habits of thought, education, his belonging, in many parts of the world, to the

## THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

dominant race, place him too far apart from the mass of the people for him to exercise the pastoral function with success. His sphere is larger. He is, *or ought to be*, emphatically an overseer of others.<sup>21</sup>

Now it is all too easy for us to respond to such statements by crying 'racism!', and there is no denying that racial assumptions and prejudices played their part. But racism found fertile soil wherever evangelical Christians with a pre-eminent concern to see the 'good deposit' of scriptural faith handed on were confronted by national pastors and deacons attempting to lead their congregations with minimal relevant training and inadequate resources of vernacular Christian literature. The pressure to 'interfere' became irresistible. Hence the BMS Committee in 1867 had to make the staggering admission that, in the whole of its India field, it was not aware that, in a single church presided over by a native pastor,

the Members have been instructed to elect Deacons, or permitted to exercise the full discipline of the Church, or that the Pastor has enjoyed the uncontrolled administration of the ordinances of the Gospel, apart from the immediate supervision of the Missionary.<sup>22</sup>

It was not until the late 1920s and 1930s that the grip of missionary oversight of the Indian churches began to loosen under the impact of determined pressure from a Mission House in London confronted by the need to effect substantial economies on the mission field.<sup>23</sup> The ecumenical significance of this feature of the Baptist tradition in India should not be missed. As Leslie Wenger pointed out in 1956, the fact that Baptist churches in North India had generally experienced a form of 'episcopal government' in the person of the district missionary helps to explain why the Baptist representatives in the church union negotiations in North India had so little difficulty in accepting the principle of constitutional episcopacy as a necessary foundation of the Church of North India.<sup>24</sup>

### III THE PROBLEM OF FINANCIAL DEPENDENCE

Even before he went to India, William Carey possessed a firm conviction, drawn from the Moravian example, that overseas missions ought to be as far as possible financially independent of the sending country.<sup>25</sup> Experience on the field confirmed Carey in this view. If missionary expansion were to become more and more the work of national Christians, dependence on external financial resources must decrease correspondingly, for 'without this the gospel could never be permanently planted in India':

Control originates wholly in Contribution, and is ever commensurate therewith; control indeed follows contribution, as the shadow the substance.<sup>26</sup>

Carey's early participation in the indigo trade, his role as a tutor in Indian languages in the East India Company's Fort William College, and the Trio's involvement in the translation and publication of the Hindu classics were all, to a greater or lesser extent, motivated by the goal of generating an independent income to be used for missionary purposes.<sup>27</sup> During the six years from 1805 to 1810 funds generated by the Serampore missionaries for the support of the mission almost equalled those received from England. From 1810 onwards a total separation between the two sources of funding was effected, whereby all Indian agents were supported wholly from Serampore's own funds, rather

## PLANTING SELF-GOVERNING CHURCHES

than from BMS sources.<sup>28</sup> The Serampore missionaries accepted that it was unrealistic to expect newly planted Indian churches to attain immediate financial self-sufficiency. A continuing flow of funds from Serampore to its surrounding mission stations, and from each of these to its satellite churches, was assumed.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the 'Form of Agreement' urged the importance of the native churches learning the principles of self-support so that the surrounding population would 'more readily identify the cause as belonging to their own nation, and their prejudices at falling into the hands of Europeans will entirely vanish'.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the Serampore mission was seen, not as a wholly European institution, but as a covenanted fellowship which bound together both European and Asiatic brethren in commitment to a common task.<sup>31</sup> There was to be no rigid separation between church and mission in India; if there was a clear distinction to be made, it was between the missionary society in England as an agency for recruiting and dispatching candidates and the mission as an entity financed and directed primarily from within Bengal. It was this understanding of the relationship between domestic committee and overseas mission which was challenged during the notorious Serampore controversy, culminating in the separation between the Serampore Mission and the BMS in 1827. That sad dispute need not detain us. What must be noted is its outcome in ensuring the demise of the attempt, questionable though it may have been in the form tried by the early Serampore missionaries, to found a financially self-supporting mission.

When the reunion of the Serampore Mission with the BMS came into effect in April 1838, about thirty Indian agents employed by Serampore became the financial responsibility of the BMS. Along with the smaller number of nationals (about ten) employed by the BMS during the schism, they became employees of the missionary society.<sup>32</sup> All native preachers and evangelists became directly dependent on BMS funds for their support, thus placing the Society's finances under considerable strain. A deputation sent out from the Mission House in 1850 reached the conclusion that in some cases converts had been engaged as preachers simply 'because the missionary did not know what else to do with them'. In North India more than in Bengal, the rigidity of caste sanctions had driven converts into direct financial dependence on the missionary.<sup>33</sup> Armed with such evidence, the BMS Committee began in 1852-3 to urge the virtues of self-support on the Indian churches.<sup>34</sup> E. B. Underhill, secretary in charge of foreign affairs since 1849, laboured the same theme repeatedly during his extended tour of the India and Ceylon fields from 1854 to 1856, but to no avail.<sup>35</sup> Frederick Trestrail's address to the Liverpool missionary conference in 1860 reflected the experience of his own society when he lamented the prevalence of the system of national pastors being appointed and paid by missionary societies.<sup>36</sup> In 1863 the BMS Committee returned to the fray, passing resolutions exhorting the India missionaries to make rapid progress towards granting independent and self-sustaining status to the Indian churches.<sup>37</sup> The unanimous response of BMS missionaries in Bengal was to the effect that Indian preachers were 'generally not fitted' to discharge pastoral and evangelistic duties without missionary superintendence; as recipients of the Society's funds, they should remain subject to its control. In the words of one respondent, the proper relationship between European missionaries and Indian preachers was that 'we direct and they obey in a Christian spirit'.<sup>38</sup> In 1868 only two or three of the 130 or so native agents employed by the BMS in India were not supported wholly by BMS funds or by funds collected from Europeans in India.<sup>39</sup>

Over the next half-century, this depressing picture was modified to some extent,

## THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

especially in the stronger churches of the Barisal district of East Bengal. By 1913, in the India field as a whole, forty-seven Indian pastors and thirty evangelists were supported by the churches.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the essential problem remained. The fact that many of the most promising Christian leaders who emerged from the Baptist churches ended up, not as church leaders, but as 'Indian home missionaries' of the BMS lies at the root of the relative weakness of the Baptist churches in twentieth-century northern India. William Carey of Barisal, great-grandson of the founder of the BMS, when addressing the triennial conference of all BMS India missionaries in 1917, accurately diagnosed the essential problem as being one of a mission-centric focus rather than a church-centric focus in the Society's work in India:

*Take Indian Agency.* It is all related to the Mission and none of it to the Church. The Mission educates, employs, pays and controls this agency without reference to the Church. This method should cease. It withdraws the very men from the Church who would naturally be its leaders, and forms them into a separate body of professional evangelists under a foreign organization. The injurious effect upon the Church has long been felt and often discussed. It cripples the supply of suitable pastors, and injures the inculcation of a Missionary spirit. It also produces an unfavourable impression on non-Christian observers.<sup>41</sup>

Various responses were possible to this dilemma. One, forcibly argued at the 1917 conference by George Howells, was to advocate the absorption of the BMS in India within a 'real united Baptist church', following the model created in England by J. H. Shakespeare. Baptists in India, as in England, had to recognize that 'independency of the kind we have been accustomed to is not an essential of Baptist Church order'. The BMS at home could set its Indian arm an example by becoming organically one with the Baptist Union.<sup>42</sup> This was, presumably, greeted without wild enthusiasm by the assembled missionaries. Nevertheless, it should be noted that such dissatisfaction with the ecclesiological consequences of the domination of the Protestant missionary movement by voluntary societies provided much of the rationale in the 1950s for those who argued, successfully, that the International Missionary Council should be absorbed into the World Council of Churches.<sup>43</sup> Prompted by Victor Hayward, the BMS eventually supported that step, but without, of course, accepting the corollary that it should be absorbed into the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland.<sup>44</sup>

A less obviously radical solution to the problem was put forward at the 1917 conference by Carey himself. He drew on his own church-planting experience in East Bengal to affirm that the answer was not to send more men to College for training for full-time pastoral ministry - which would merely preoccupy the churches with questions of financial support - but rather 'the promotion of voluntary effective evangelism on a large-scale, by the local membership of the Church.' If this were encouraged, the churches would in time grow their own pastors and evangelists from the spiritual root of this common effort.<sup>45</sup> Whether consciously or not, Carey was advocating a return to his great-grandfather's emphasis on an inclusive concept of ministry and an open encouragement to all church members to discover their ministry through the practice of evangelism.

The problem of financial and structural dependency was one which the BMS shared with almost every other Protestant mission working among the Hindu population of India. It was rooted in the realities of a caste system which frequently drove converts

## PLANTING SELF-GOVERNING CHURCHES

to Christianity to seek the financial and social protection of the missionary. In this context, Baptist principles about the financial and spiritual autonomy of the local congregation, although consistently upheld by BMS officials in London and by some missionaries on the field, proved a less powerful influence than the countervailing impulses towards a system in which authority and finance descended from mission to church. The Indian churches attained their structural independence from the BMS at various points between 1933 and 1948, but remained heavily dependent financially on subsidies from an external 'establishment': the BMS in London. Many of the problems experienced by those Baptist churches which remained outside the Church of North India after 1970 can be traced to that fact.

### IV THE FORM AND THE SUBSTANCE OF AUTONOMY

In the tribal areas of BMS work in India, where conversion took place on a sufficient scale for churches with a greater degree of self-sustaining life to be formed, progress towards an autonomous church was far more rapid. It was no accident that the first fully autonomous church body to be formed in the BMS India mission was the Utkal Central Church Council, established in Orissa in 1933. It drew its numerical strength from the tribal animistic people of West Orissa, brought to Christ from 1893 onwards in one of the earliest examples in a BMS field of a 'people movement' towards Christianity.<sup>46</sup>

An even more striking contrast is provided by the Mizoram mission, where the Baptist community had achieved financial self-sufficiency by 1913, only ten years after the inauguration of the mission, and well before organized congregational life had been developed. The key here was a three-fold emphasis on tithing, the evangelistic responsibility of every convert, and a 'bottom-up' approach to church leadership, in which the most able Christian in each village was identified both as the source of local leadership and as the principal object of missionary instruction. J. H. Lorrain, the missionary chiefly responsible for this policy, held to the principle that the appropriate aim of the mission was not to make the Mizo Christians

Eastern duplicates of Western Baptists, but to bring them to Christ and to so guide them that they shall develop along their own national lines into a strong Lushai Church of God, a living witness of the Power of the Gospel to change savages into saints and head-hunters into soul-hunters.<sup>47</sup>

The result was the growth in Mizoram of a church which, whilst its governmental structure mirrored the presbyterian mission polity of the Calvinistic Methodist Church in the northern half of Mizoram, was indubitably self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating.<sup>48</sup> It was arguably, therefore, a more faithful reflection of true Baptist ecclesiology than Baptist churches elsewhere in India which retained the form of congregational autonomy, but not its substance.

At this point, I wish to make brief reference to the very different story of the BMS in the West Indies. The rapidity and determination with which the BMS Committee enforced independence on the West Indian churches gives the lie to any accusation that the BMS was only half-committed to achieving the goal of self-governing churches. In Jamaica, devolution was accomplished in 1842, less than thirty years after the arrival of John Rowe, the first BMS missionary. From 1 August 1842, the churches of the Jamaica Baptist Association became independent of BMS financial aid and control.<sup>49</sup> Apart from providing finance and teaching personnel for Calabar College, the BMS supplied no missionaries or regular funding to Jamaica until 1941. In the remainder of



the West Indies field, devolution followed fifty years later, following a deputation tour in 1892 by J. G. Greenhough and John Bailey. Over the next few years, the Society withdrew all missionaries and financial support from the remainder of the West Indies field.

In the West Indies case, the BMS certainly cannot be convicted of dilatoriness in the transfer of power. If anything, the Society was precipitate in enforcing devolution on churches which had not been given the leadership resources to cope with it. J. M. Phillippo had grave doubts in 1842 about the cessation of BMS financial aid, warning that it was 'likely to be a death-blow to the mission'. As an old man in 1876, Phillippo looked back gloomily on the step taken in 1842 and drew the conclusion that 'our mission began to decline from this day onwards to the present time'.<sup>50</sup> In part this decline reflected the waning fortunes of the Jamaican sugar economy, which made the support of a native ministry more and more difficult to sustain. More fundamentally, it was a product of inadequate leadership at the level below the ordained pastorate: the Jamaican Baptist churches had inherited an essentially Methodist ecclesiastical polity, in which churches were grouped into circuits superintended by a single ordained minister. The key figures in leading worship and teaching were the class leaders and deacons, most of whom were wholly untrained. The fact that the ordained minister might be able to visit a particular congregation only once in five or six weeks did not increase the willingness of impoverished church members to give realistically to his support. In the early decades of the twentieth century, these problems became increasingly critical.<sup>51</sup> When H. R. Williamson visited Jamaica in 1944, senior Baptist ministers told him that the 1842 decision was 'a mistake', which had left the Jamaican Baptist churches with problems of finance and organization that remained unsolved a century later.<sup>52</sup> The resumption by the BMS of active involvement in Jamaica after 1944 was an acknowledgment that there was at least some truth in the charge that the Society in the nineteenth century had given the churches the outward form of autonomy, but insufficient means to make it a sustainable reality.

In Trinidad and the Bahamas, there is even more substance in the accusation that the BMS imposed independence on churches ill-prepared for it. The decision taken in 1892 to withdraw from Trinidad and the Bahamas was taken in the face of local opinion and contrary to the advice of Greenhough and Bailey. The BMS Committee was left in no doubt that the Bahamian and Trinidadian churches were desperately poverty-stricken, both in financial terms and in terms of leadership resources.<sup>53</sup> Yet the Committee persisted with its plans for total withdrawal, apparently convinced that it would prove precisely the short, sharp shock required to stimulate sluggish churches into new life. The twentieth-century history of the churches in these islands suggests that this was a delusion. The decision taken by the BMS in 1945 to resume its work in Trinidad again marked a recognition that perhaps the earlier decision had been wrong.<sup>54</sup>

## V THE ESSENCE OF BAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY

What is the essence of Baptist ecclesiology? The answer is not so straightforward as might be supposed. Henry Cook, having affirmed early in his exposition of *What Baptists Stand For* that 'an honest reading of the New Testament must always lead to the same general conclusions about the vital things', conceded later in his book that:

Strictly speaking there is no such thing as 'Baptist church polity', because Baptists by their own fundamental principle are committed to accepting the

## PLANTING SELF-GOVERNING CHURCHES

Church polity of the New Testament, and no-one can really say with positive certainty what that actually is.<sup>55</sup>

Cook went on to acknowledge that a case could be made from the New Testament for episcopal or presbyterian, as well as congregational polity, and to insist that *independency* (as opposed to congregationalism), could find little support either in the New Testament or in Baptist tradition.<sup>56</sup> The history of British Baptist missionary endeavour points to the same general conclusion. The churches planted by the BMS have developed systems of church polity which, while retaining elements of the congregational tradition, in their national frameworks are broadly episcopal, or presbyterian, or Methodist, or some glorious combination of all three. By and large, British independency has *not* been transplanted to the non-Western context. Perhaps that ought not to distress us over-much. For the underlying contention of this lecture is that ultimately Baptist ecclesiology in the missionary context is all about planting churches which acquire genuine freedom under the Lordship of Christ to develop their own structures of ministry and government, and are able to serve the cause of mission in their particular cultural context. What should matter for a Baptist is whether the end-product of mission is a family of churches made up of believers who are willing and able to govern their own corporate life, support their own structures of church leadership, and engage in mission on their own account.

If the bicentenary of the BMS is a time, not simply for thanksgiving, but also for deep and self-critical reflection about what we as British Baptists have achieved in mission over the last two hundred years - as surely it is - then this is the standard which we should seek to apply. Our analysis of BMS policy has revealed an admirably unflinching commitment by the Society to move its indigenous churches towards self-sustaining life. In India, the obstacles thrown up by the caste system and by the hesitations of a large missionary force which was only too aware of the deficiencies of inadequately trained local leadership made implementation of that commitment extremely difficult. In the West Indies in the heady days of church growth after slave emancipation, the obstacles were less numerous and the prospects for flourishing independent churches apparently far more promising. The Society is to be commended for its consistent boldness in being willing to yield control to indigenous churches at an early stage in their development. Yet it can legitimately be criticised for its occasional tendency to assume that devolution of authority must necessarily imply the total withdrawal of external resources. There was also an inadequate perception of where the essence of ecclesiastical autonomy was to be found. Programmes of leadership training are crucial to any strategy for the growth of a self-governing church. The Society recognized this, but, in an age when Baptists followed the general trend of placing more and more emphasis on the ordained ministry as a professional and highly educated élite, failed to perceive with sufficient clarity that the key to autonomous church life on the mission field lay elsewhere. Where there was no clear strategy for the training of the local church leader who would never make it to a Serampore or a Calabar, the goal of a self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating church proved hard to implement or sustain.

Many of the issues which we have examined in the context of nineteenth-century India or the West Indies remained high on the Society's agenda in the twentieth century, when the newer fields of China and the Congo acquired greater importance than they had in the Victorian age. In both fields, the essential dilemma was again an educational one.

## THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

It was posed most sharply in China, where, in the years after the Republican Revolution of 1911-12, the missionary movement as a whole devoted enormous resources to the attempt to reach the Chinese intelligentsia for Christ. Although the BMS went less far down that strategic road than some other missions, there was nonetheless a growing emphasis on institutional work in this period. From the retrospective vantage point of the traumatic years of the Communist revolution, it was this aspect of missionary strategy in China which seemed most questionable. The experience of the abrupt end to the missionary era in China forced mission strategists to re-examine their commitment to the principles of a self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating church. Many of them turned back to the writings of the former Anglican China missionary, Roland Allen, for guidance.<sup>57</sup> One of those who did so was Victor Hayward, BMS China missionary since 1934, and appointed in 1951 as H. R. Williamson's successor as Foreign Secretary. Hayward's vision was to replace the aching void left by the exodus from China with a new mission in which almost exclusive emphasis would be laid on the planting of self-supporting churches as the overriding goal of missionary activity. That vision was realized in the Brazil mission, commenced on an experimental basis in 1953, and made a permanent commitment in 1956. By any standards the experiment must be judged to have been a success. It forms an ironic postscript to this lecture to reflect that it was, again, the writings of an Anglican missionary on the spontaneous expansion of the Church which were the ultimate inspiration behind a remarkable story of Baptist church growth.

### NOTES

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- 4 C. Peter Williams, *The Ideal of the Self-Governing Church: A Study in Victorian Missionary Strategy*, Leiden 1990, pp. 25-6, 50-1.
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## PLANTING SELF-GOVERNING CHURCHES

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**BRIAN STANLEY** *Lecturer in Church History, Trinity College, Bristol*

*Details of Dr Stanley's new History of the Baptist Missionary Society are given inside the back cover of this issue.*