

GEORGE RAYMOND BEASLEY-MURRAY

A Personal Appreciation

On 23 March 1937 George Beasley-Murray made a formal application to enter Spurgeon's College, London, to be trained for the Baptist ministry. He was born in Hackney, London, on 10 October 1916, the son of George Alfred Beasley and Kathleen Brady. Before he was a year old, his father was killed in a road accident while serving in the First World War. In 1920 his mother married George Murray and the family moved to Leicester. George won a scholarship to the City Boys' Secondary School and matriculated in English and History. He left school at sixteen and went to work for the City Gas Department where he was employed both as a clerk and salesman.

At the age of eighteen he was awarded the Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music for pianoforte teaching. Music was his major pre-occupation. In his contribution to a book edited by C. A. Joyce, *My Call to the Ministry*, he admits that he spent so many hours at the piano that his mind was never free from music in any waking moment. A poster of 9 October 1933 pictured George at a grand piano giving an Invitation Recital at Leicester's Edward Wood Hall. It was his mother who first joined Beasley with Murray, as the poster indicates, so that concert-goers would know that George Beasley was in fact Mrs Murray's son! The matter was regularised when George changed his name by Deed Poll in 1938, thus honouring his father and stepfather.

It seemed very likely that he would become an accomplished concert pianist. However, a team of students from Spurgeon's College conducted an evangelistic mission at the North Evington Free Church in Leicester and the challenge of the Gospel was a totally new experience. George remembers his baptism at the age of four in a Roman Catholic Church but he had little church contact in childhood. He responded eagerly to the message of the Gospel which captivated his heart and mind: 'It was like the coming of day I went home walking on air.' Whereas until that moment he would have said 'to me to live is music', he could now say 'to me to live is Christ'. He was baptised on 18 December 1932 at North Evington, and from the beginning of his Christian life he had a strong desire to communicate the Gospel so that others might come to know Jesus Christ for themselves. The 'Young Life Campaign' and the 'Christian Endeavour' contributed to his spiritual growth and opened up opportunities for Christian witness. He taught in the Sunday School, took part in the open-air work, and preached in local churches. He spoke with confidence, conviction and courtesy and was an able preacher. When he applied to Spurgeon's College for ministerial training he stated on his application form: 'Two causes have impelled me to enter the ministry: the first is a whole-hearted desire to dedicate my life, with every talent and gift that it can possibly yield, to the glory of God. The second is the utter indifference of men concerning the things of God, and their ignorance of the consequences of unbelief have made me long to win them to Christ and be the means of their salvation.' No one at Spurgeon's had any doubt regarding his suitability for the task, but for George it was a hard choice. At one stage he gave up playing the piano for six months lest he be tempted to give up the call of God. His parents strongly disapproved of this new direction to his life, and even called a family conference to try to dissuade him.

The Student

Head down, back bent over a book-laden table, pen poised, oblivious to the presence of his three room-mates, a picture of intense concentration - that was George

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Beasley-Murray making the most of the compulsory study period. Able and diligent, he set a pace which few could match and which has never slackened during fifty-four years of study and ministry. The discipline and hard work which characterised his student life are still in evidence. Alongside the college curriculum George applied himself to the syllabus of the external B.D. of London University. His all-round ability won the respect of his fellow-students, but lest Juniors should become 'exalted above measure', Seniors felt called to administer deterrents to pride. In a poem commissioned by the student hierarchy, George ventured to refer to his elder brethren as 'cacophonous cads'. Punitive action followed, but he survived! It was all very hilarious. Each intake of students was known as a 'Batch', and the member of the group whose surname stood highest in the alphabetical list became leader. So the lot fell on Beasley. He had responsibility for calling and presiding over Batch meetings, arranging prayer times and representing the Batch at consultations with student officers and staff.

At this time George made the acquaintance of Ruth Weston, the daughter of a well-known preacher and convention speaker among the Christian Brethren. John Weston and his future son-in-law were at one in their admiration for Charles Haddon Spurgeon. John possessed a full set of the *New Park Street Pulpit* and the *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* and revelled in Spurgeon's sermons. This gracious Christian gentleman warmed to the student in training at Spurgeon's College, readily received him into the hospitable Weston household and later into the family.

The outbreak of World War II on 3 September 1939 did not seriously disrupt the college course for the members of the Beasley-Murray Batch. It was thought that the college premises might be requisitioned by the Government and that theological students would not be exempt from military service. Neither of these eventualities materialised. Students on vacation in the summer of 1939 were invited to return, albeit at their own risk, to resume their studies in October. Everyone accepted the invitation, except the South African member of the Batch who returned home. The students grew accustomed to the wail of air-raid warning sirens, the drone of bomber planes, the crack of anti-aircraft guns, the screech of falling bombs and the sight of searchlights sweeping the night sky. Trenches were dug across the college lawn in an exercise worthy of *Dad's Army*! Preaching engagements were fulfilled as far as possible Sunday by Sunday. George accepted a 'call' to the Ashurst Drive Baptist Church, Ilford, in East London, and was ordained there on Sunday, 27 July 1941, by college tutor, Dr Frederick Cawley. The Induction Service the following Thursday had as the guest preacher Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones, the minister of Westminster Chapel.

The Family Man

George and Ruth were married at Ashurst Drive Baptist Church on 4 April 1942. Ruth proved herself to be a devoted and supportive partner, playing a full part in the life of the local church. They have four children, Paul, Elizabeth, Stephen and Andrew, of whom their parents are justifiably proud. Ruth has made her own significant contribution to Baptist life, serving as President of the Baptist Ministers' and Missionaries' Wives' Prayer Fellowship, and in 1972 as National President of the Baptist Women's League. At Spurgeon's College Ruth began regular meetings for the wives and fiancées of students.

The Pastor

When George was inducted at Ilford it was said he had the mind of a scholar and the heart of an evangelist. Both were energetically employed in the context of the life

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and work of the local church. In all his preaching, teaching and writing there was an evangelistic thrust. His presentation of the Gospel had reasoned argument and winsome appeal, as was apparent in his first book, *Christ is Alive!* (1947). The book was born out of a deep conviction that the truth concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ urgently required proclamation. Sixteen years later, when invited by the BBC to broadcast four talks during Lent, George enquired whether any previous speaker in the Lenten Series had dealt with this subject. None had. The talks were published in 1964 in response to many requests. He wrote: 'I could not think of anything so important to talk to men and women about.' For him the resurrection was the beating heart of the Christian faith, and it provided the motivation of his preaching and pastoral care.

He lectured at the London Bible College and contributed erudite articles to religious journals, but nothing diverted him from his essential ministry. In the first year at Ilford he baptised twenty-seven candidates and welcomed forty new members. His exposition of Scripture built people up in the faith, and his evangelistic preaching and leadership kept them aware of the church's mission and active in it. After seven years of effective service in Ilford, George accepted an invitation to become the minister of Zion Baptist Church, Cambridge, where he maintained his high standard of preaching and pastoral ministry. At this time the church gave him the opportunity to advance his academic work through Jesus College where he took Part III of the honours degree in theology.

The Tutor

In 1950 the Council of Spurgeon's College invited George to become New Testament Tutor. This marked the commencement of a long career in theological education. Once more he set a fast pace, stimulated by high spiritual and academic ideals. His colleagues admired his commitment, competence and intellectual honesty. His students testified to his integrity, graciousness and devotion to Christ. Not only the language and literature of the New Testament, but also Church History and Homiletics were part of his teaching programme. He was Secretary of Spurgeon's College Conference, trained the student choir, served as Librarian and had responsibility for the Principal P. W. Evans' Memorial Fund, a task which appealed to him since it commemorated the man who was Principal when George was a student and for whom he had a very high regard.

George gave himself wholeheartedly to each assignment and everyone in the college community felt the impact of his vitality. His lectures were clear and interesting. His leadership in devotional sessions evoked deep spirituality. His sense of humour was never far below the surface and his 'silent laughter' was proverbial.

In 1956 he moved to the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Rüschtikon, Zürich, where he became Professor of Greek and New Testament Interpretation. Frank Fitzsimmonds succeeded him at the college, and during George's Principalship was a trusted friend and valued colleague. George spent a fruitful two years at Rüschtikon where he had unparalleled opportunities to meet European scholars on the one hand and the Southern Baptists on the other. It broadened his horizon in regard to scholarship and the world Baptist community. But there was an unexpected turn of events.

The office of Principal at Spurgeon's College fell vacant as the result of an unresolved difference between the incumbent, Eric H. Worstead, and the college's governing body. An air of crisis, uncertainty and sadness pervaded college life. George Beasley-Murray's name was mentioned as a possible successor. It was decided that the Chairman and Treasurer of Spurgeon's College should journey to Switzerland

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to approach George personally, requesting him to give prayerful consideration to the proposal that he might return to the College as Principal. He faced no small dilemma. At the personal level he was immensely happy in Zürich: his teaching work, his colleagues, the environment were all very much to his liking, but he came to the conviction that he should respond positively to the College's pressing invitation.

At his Induction Service at the College on Speech Day, 26 June 1958, he said: 'God led me out. He has even more surprisingly led me back', adding that against all human reasoning he had felt it right to accept the compelling call. On the same occasion the President of the Rüsclikon Seminary, Dr Nordenhaug, was gracious enough to say that, while he was glad to be present at that significant event, he could now understand why the mother of the bride usually wept at the wedding! It was not a smooth transition for the Beasley-Murray family. Accommodation at the Principal's Flat in the college building was scarcely suitable for a family of six which meant that structural alterations were needed. The initial period of re-adjustment was not easy for those immediately concerned, but the future was promising. New concepts were developed, coupled with ideas which had been initiated by previous Principals and Tutors, especially in the field of academic excellence and in the more thorough preparation of pastor-evangelists who could minister effectively in local churches.

The Principal

Writing about his return to the college in 1958, George commented that nowhere in Europe could Baptists afford to be content with a poorly educated ministry, nor could they afford to have ministers unable to do their job properly. High academic standards were to be maintained. At the same time students were encouraged to become evangelists, pastors and teachers sensitive to the need of the hour and to the possibilities of meeting that need with the Gospel presented in fresh and untried ways. By precept and example he put the students to work. He was patient enough with students whose academic potential was limited but whose preaching and pastoral gifts were evident. He sometimes overlooked the fact that others were less gifted than himself and not everyone had his enthusiasm for exacting study. His intense concentration could be mistaken for aloofness. But it takes time to descend from the dizzy heights of advanced academic exploration. Once down to earth, however, no one could have been more caring about the needs which were drawn to his attention.

He combined the duties of Principal with those of Warden. Since his residence was part of the college's main building, he was constantly 'on call' to meet the demands of people and premises. His pastoral concern was evident when at the Friday morning act of worship in the chapel he named past members of the college fraternity and prayed for them. He arranged post-collegiate residential conferences for former students who had been in the ministry for eighteen months. They were encouraged to come with their wives and families to talk about their experience in their first pastorate, to voice their problems, their disappointments and their hopes for the future, and to consult with staff members and senior ministers.

To improve academic standards he initiated enquiries with the Council for National Academic Awards, hopeful that the college would obtain validation for its own degrees and be able to shape and control courses suitable for Baptist ministerial students.

The Principal's commendation of the presentation of the gospel in fresh and untried ways encouraged a number of students to form a music group, called 'The Venturers'. They sang lively gospel songs to the accompaniment of various instruments: stringed, woodwind and drums, and they gained popularity as they

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conducted evangelistic missions in churches and in the open air. The group attracted reports in the tabloid press and provoked criticism from those who judged the method was undignified and 'worldly'. The students, they said, would be better employed with their books. George saw no reason to prohibit an activity which was breaking new ground in evangelistic outreach. It gave him a further opportunity to emphasise the point that academic excellence and evangelistic outreach go hand-in-hand. He was personally involved in front-line evangelism when in 1963 the teaching staff and the students combined to form a team of sixty which joined with the four Baptist churches in the vast housing estate in Dagenham for the purpose of evangelistic mission. They engaged in church services and meetings for all age groups, participated in visits to numerous homes, as well as public-houses, clubs, schools and factories. The Principal played his part and encouraged the team and the churches.

George's Principalship was characterised by change and progress. The annual gathering of the College Conference in the summer of 1958 took place in the recently opened college chapel. This sanctuary, designed by Clifford Measday, a former student, was a much-needed focal point for worship where prayers were offered each day, where academic terms began and ended and where graduation services and other significant events in the college year were held.

Relationships with other theological colleges were developed. George implemented the arrangements whereby six students from Spurgeon's College interchanged for a week with a similar number from the Church of England Theological College in Lincoln.

1961 saw the acceptance of the first woman student at Spurgeon's College in the person of Margaret Jarman. Already an accredited deaconess, trained at Struan, she was appointed Organizing Secretary of the Deaconess Department of the Baptist Union of Great Britain in 1963. The following year she was ordained, and in 1987 she became the President of the Baptist Union, the first woman minister to hold this office.

Ernest Willmott was appointed full-time College Secretary to deal with the growing administrative work. Geoffrey Rusling had combined the secretaryship with his duties as Tutor and Vice-Principal. Increasing numbers of students and the extension of premises added to the management load carried by both Secretary and Principal. In 1964 a new block was built, linked to the existing library building, which consisted of a large lecture room, nineteen study bedrooms and a spacious recreation room.

Rex Mason was appointed in 1965 to teach Old Testament History, Religion and Literature. Three years later Lewis Drummond of Louisville, Kentucky, became the college's first Tutor in Evangelism and Pastoral Instruction. In 1971 Raymond Brown was appointed Tutor in Ecclesiastical History and Christian Doctrine.

Faced with an increasing number of married students, the college had to find suitable accommodation for couples and families. In 1972 thirty-three of the fifty-five students were married. New interviewing structures for prospective students were formulated to explore in greater detail the character and personality of the candidates, to examine more carefully their sense of call to the ministry, their academic ability and potential, and their suitability for training as pastors. Modern technology was introduced in the form of a videotape camera and recorder with related equipment which added to the tribulation of the sermon class! George encouraged the annual appointment of a leaving student to serve on the staff of First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas for a year. This provided the nominee with a splendid opportunity to gain pastoral and administrative experience in a different environment before beginning to work in the UK.

For fifteen years George Beasley-Murray carried a heavy burden of responsibility as leader of the faculty team, organiser of college life and work, teacher and warden,

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to say nothing of committee meetings and preaching engagements week by week. It was fortunate that he had such an astonishing capacity for work.

Staff colleagues valued his friendship and responded to his leadership. With equal warmth students expressed appreciation of his participation in student affairs, his scholarship, and his humanity, shown as he leaped up and down on the touchline in excitement at soccer matches between the college and some rival institution. George brought the college to the threshold of recognition by the Council for National Academic Awards. It was the crowning achievement of his Principalship. He never begrudged anything he did for the college and enjoyed the whole range of the work.

It was at this moment he received and accepted an invitation to become Professor of New Testament Interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. For some time he had felt frustrated by the lack of time to apply himself to programmes of advanced research and writing. He longed to be free from the weight of administration. He believed that in the new situation in Louisville he would be able to fulfil long-held intentions to publish works of scholarship for the benefit of students and ministers.

The loss to the college was alleviated to a great extent by the appointment of Raymond Brown, a distinguished son of the college, as the new Principal. He was a student at Spurgeon's when George was Tutor and later served with him for two years on the staff. In his capable hands and with the co-operation of able colleagues, the arrangements with the CNAA were finalised.

The Scholar

The scholarship which emerged in George Beasley-Murray's student years developed quickly. He was encouraged in this by a comment from Douglas Johnson, then secretary of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship who, knowing George's great desire to be an evangelist, suggested that he would be of more use as a 'backroom boy' and should develop his gift for biblical scholarship. Soon after beginning his ministry he consulted with F. F. Bruce, then of Leeds, regarding a possible research programme. Professor Bruce recalled the conversation later and commented, 'His [George's] subsequent research has shown that he did not really require much help!' In 1944 he contributed to the *Evangelical Quarterly* a not uncritical review of H. H. Rowley's *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*. F. F. Bruce remembered that the editor was somewhat perturbed that a young and largely unknown writer should review a work of so eminent a scholar. 'However,' continued Professor Bruce, 'he had no need to be perturbed, Dr Rowley had a high opinion of George's ability.' In the Foreword to *Christ is Alive!*, F. F. Bruce wrote: 'Though this is not a work of scholarship in the strict sense, the discerning reader will recognise the exact, thoughtful and well-informed scholarship which underlies it.'

In 1953 George submitted his doctoral dissertation to London University. The accepted thesis was published under the title *Jesus and the Future: An Examination of the Criticism of the Eschatological Discourse, Mark 13, with Special Reference to the Little Apocalypse Theory* (London 1954). This 'biggest problem in the Gospel' appealed to his agile mind! He set out to read everything of repute written on the subject since 1864. Bibliography and copious notes reveal the enormity of the task. Scholarly critics noted the author's thorough preparation. One reviewer stated: 'The whole investigation cannot be ignored by any school of eschatological insight either as a positive help to the elucidation of these perplexing issues or as a warning against facile over-simplification of the problem.' Three years later George wrote *A Commentary on Mark 13*, unusual in that it was a commentary on a single chapter. It was done in response to repeated suggestions from readers of *Jesus and the Future*,

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who wanted maximum benefit from the research which had been so carefully mastered. The commentary deals with the authenticity of Mark 13 as an original discourse of Jesus, giving a detailed exposition of each verse.

George's well-established reputation as a scholar with a specialist interest in eschatology led to an invitation to contribute a commentary to the New Century Bible series on *Revelation* (1974). G. B. Caird said it was written with 'clarity of style, soundness of judgment and a comprehensive knowledge of recent scholarly literature'. The *Church Times* review described it as first class, 'all that a commentary should be'. In 1972 the Broadman Press, USA, had published George's *Highlights of the Book of Revelation*, which was an extended version of lectures given at the Nationwide Baptist Convention at Dallas in 1971. George gave the Drew Lecture on Immortality at Whitefield Memorial Church, London, in October 1972, when his chosen theme was 'The contribution of the Book of Revelation to the Christian Belief in Immortality'. The lecture likened John's symbolism to the political cartoon, using images readily understood by contemporary readers; and it contains a fascinating exposition of the promises to the 'conquerors' in the letters to the seven churches.

Years of reading and reflection on the subject of apocalyptic resulted in another major publication, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (1986). Howard Marshall commented on George's 'meticulous, well-informed, and creative New Testament scholarship'. The Roman Catholic scholar, R. E. Brown, wrote: 'This challenging work will have to be weighed and discussed by all who are seriously interested in these crucial and theological matters.'

Another important area of study which has occupied George's mind is the New Testament doctrine of baptism. In 1959 he contributed a chapter on 'Baptism in the Epistles of Paul' to *Christian Baptism*. In this volume, edited by Alec Gilmore, eleven Baptist scholars combined to make a fresh attempt to understand the rite in terms of scripture, history and theology. In 1962 George published *Baptism in the New Testament*, based on his 1959 Whitley Lectures which had been given at Regent's Park College, Oxford, and at University College, Bangor, in north Wales. The reviewer in the *Expository Times* wrote: 'The work shows all the careful scholarship which [the author's] earlier writings on eschatology have led us to expect. At every point he has something illuminating to say. His account of the New Testament theology of baptism will become a standard work'. The treatment was thorough and courageous. George was not afraid to challenge the position of eminent paedobaptist scholars, Jeremias and Cullmann. Twenty years later Dr Michael Walker, presenting a paper on 'Baptist Worship' at a Baptist Historical Society Summer School, claimed that, along with R. E. O. White's *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation*, George's book revolutionised contemporary Baptist understanding in Britain. It showed that baptism was not simply a confession of faith but 'an integral part of that process of conversion by which a man or woman is raised from death to life in Christ and endowed with the gift of the Spirit.' In 1966, a little against his will, George produced *Baptism Today and Tomorrow*, a consideration of some of the controversial issues facing churches regarding baptismal practice. Originally given as the Adolph Olsen Memorial Lectures at Bethel Theological Seminary, St Paul, Minnesota, the book dealt with the significance of the baptismal controversy in and between local churches. George admired the work of Rudolf Schnackenburg in relation to the New Testament study of baptism, and was the translator of the German Roman Catholic scholar's *Baptism in the Thought of St Paul*.

George became secretary of the European section of the Faith and Order Commission which produced *One Lord, One Baptism*. In this he worked alongside well-known scholars such as Anders Nygren, Geoffrey Lampe, Oscar Cullmann, Edmund Schlink, T. F. Torrance and John Marsh. He was, in this capacity, one of

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eighteen Baptist representatives present at the fourth World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal in 1963.

George made a special study of the Gospel of *John*. His commentary was published in the Word Biblical Commentary series in 1987. In the introduction he reveals something of himself. As a teenager he found the fourth Gospel thrilling, though the first sentence baffled him! As a theological student he discovered unsuspected depths of meaning. As a pastor in war-time London he learned the comfort of this Gospel's message for the shattered people to whom he ministered. He had listened with keen appreciation to C. H. Dodd and other scholars. Now, with busy local ministers in mind, he set out to pass on some of the treasures of modern study, believing that to read John's Gospel with integrity and openness under the guidance of the Holy Spirit would lead to a deeper understanding of the person of Christ and result in a more adequate witness to Christ in the world.

An avowedly conservative scholar, George was nevertheless prepared to translate into English Rudolf Bultmann's commentary on *John*. This illustrates his life-long concern to learn from fellow-searchers after truth whatever their presuppositions might be. 'Where scholars divide', he said in his Drew Lecture, 'one has to make one's own decision and maintain it with respect for the opinions of others.' His integrity in such matters is seen in his handling of one of the most difficult questions in historical theology, namely, the time of the Parousia. It demanded courage and honesty, revealed in his two books, *Jesus and the Future* (1954) and *A Commentary on Mark Thirteen* (1957), when he concluded that Christ's unfulfilled prediction concerning the imminence of the Parousia in no way discredited the Lord's teaching. The Son of God has limited knowledge, since the last word is with God the Father, who alone has full knowledge of the End. Therefore all the words of the Son of God are subject to that word.

George carries his scholarship lightly, and it is all dedicated to Christ, his Church and its mission. In addition to degrees which he has received for work done at London and Cambridge Universities, he received a D.D. from Cambridge in 1989 for his achievements in New Testament scholarship and for *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* in particular. In the same year, Spurgeon's College, under the auspices of the Council for National Academic Awards, conferred an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters, which recognised his scholarship, his contribution to theological education and his profound influence on the Christian ministry and life of Baptist churches.

The Preacher

George Beasley-Murray has always been in demand as a preacher of the Word. His sermons are an enriching contribution to the worship of the people of God whether offered in Sunday public worship or on special occasions such as Ordination and Induction services. The preaching is not lightweight. It has the stamp of thorough preparation, and shows that he never offers to his Lord that which costs him nothing. He is happiest when expounding scripture: careful explanation combined with unashamed fervency, vivid illustration and touches of humour ensure compulsive listening - a preacher who demands a response. He may sometimes forget that his hearers neither possess his depth of knowledge nor share his breadth of perception, yet he constantly seeks to present 'the truth as it is in Jesus' and to evoke an appropriate commitment to Jesus Christ and the work of God's Kingdom.

George earnestly desires his scholarship to inform and enliven Christian proclamation. This is well illustrated in *Preaching the Gospel from the Gospels*, published in 1956, in which he expanded some lectures given initially to a joint meeting of the London Baptist and Congregational lay preachers. The *Expository*

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Times said: 'Surely there can never have been a more closely packed book than this. An amazing amount of ground is covered and the author touches nothing that he does not illuminate. Every sentence will expand into a sermon!'

George's sermon given at the Missionary Meeting of the annual Baptist Assembly in Leeds in 1965 provides an excellent example of his method, style and power. His text was Isaiah 42.4, the climax of the first song of the Servant of the Lord. He dealt with the identity, the task, the way and the spirit of the Servant. He concluded by urging those present to develop Servant attitudes in the missionary work which confronted the churches. 'In such a spirit let us go to our mission. Chicken-heartedness and pessimism have no place in Christianity, nor feeble knees, helpless hands and hang-dog looks. We are the people of the resurrection with the message of life for the world. Share the faith of Jesus. Do not fail nor be discouraged. Set the Gospel in the earth. For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.'

The Denominational Leader

The Principals of affiliated colleges of the Baptist Union of Great Britain have a place on the Baptist Union Council through which the denomination transacts its business. For fifteen years, as Principal of Spurgeon's College, and again more recently as a past President of the Baptist Union, George has played a significant part in denominational life. He brings a keen mind to the cut and thrust of debate, expressing his convictions forcefully but not harshly. In 1969 the Council decided to elect a chairman for three years to ensure continuity of its leadership and to relieve the annually-elected President of this arduous task. Having every confidence in his judgment and ability, the Council elected George as the first holder of this office.

It was another occasion for a hard choice when, shortly before his term of office was completed, George relinquished the Chair. An issue of weighty theological importance had arisen regarding which he wished to speak freely according to the dictates of his conscience. Continued occupation of the Chair would have imposed too great a restriction. The crisis sprang from an address delivered by the Revd Michael Taylor, then Principal of the Northern Baptist College, at the 1971 Annual Baptist Assembly. The subject was 'How much of a man was Jesus Christ?', chosen by the President, the Revd Dr G. Henton Davies, as part of the development of his Assembly theme, 'The Incarnate Presence'. George was not alone in detecting in the address a view of the person of Christ which differed significantly from generally accepted Christian belief.

In a statement issued by Dr David Russell and published in the *Baptist Times*, two reasons were given for George's resignation from the Chair: 'first, his desire to dissent in the strongest possible manner from the Council's decision not to affirm the inadequacy of a view of Christ, propounded in our Assembly, which he believes seriously departs from the New Testament teaching about Christ and the Gospel, and is irreconcilable with the Union's Declaration of Principle; secondly, his desire for complete freedom in making known his convictions relating to these issues.'

George recognised the grave theological implications of the address, and he was equally aware of the practical consequences of failure to face the issues. The threat to denominational unity, for example, was alarming. The ensuing debate inevitably drew into the arena the principles of freedom and tolerance in theological encounter. George was deeply concerned for the health of the Union, for the faith of Baptist people, and for the preservation of essential Christianity in the Union's churches.

The matter was debated in three meetings of the Baptist Union Council and a resolution was presented at Council for presentation at the Baptist Union Assembly

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in 1972. The resolution called for the whole-hearted acceptance of and belief in the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle, set out in the Union's Constitution, as the basis upon which the denomination could go forward united in the work and extension of Christ's Kingdom. Moved by Sir Cyril Black, MP, it was seconded by George who noted that many in the denomination had felt that the heart of their faith had been called in question by the Assembly address, and many others considered that their freedom in the faith was at stake. George maintained that faith and freedom should be held in creative tension, and urged that it was reasonable to demonstrate unity in Christ by making a positive statement of what Baptists do, and do not, believe. George was convinced that a most serious theological issue was in question and that it was necessary for the denomination to state its basic beliefs. The resolution was accepted by Council and passed by an overwhelming majority at the subsequent Assembly.

George served the Baptist Union Council in a variety of ways. For ten years he was chairman of the Advisory Committee on Church Relations which dealt with ecumenical concerns, and it was he who prepared and presented to the Council in 1967 the document *Baptists and Unity*. This was discussed at local church level and responses were noted in *Baptists and Unity Reviewed* (1969). At the 1969 Assembly George moved a resolution which urged Baptists to continue sharing and exploring ecumenical relationships. The resolution recognised the differences of conviction among Baptists regarding inter-church relationships and the right of member churches to engage in, or refrain from, such ecumenical encounter. It asked the churches of the Union to maintain, in their differences, a mutual trust and love which accorded with fellowship in Christ. The tone and content of George's presentation on this delicate issue was a factor in the Assembly's acceptance of the Report.

George's representative presence on various groups within both the British and World Council of Churches was welcomed by the denomination since his scholarship and evangelical convictions were well-known and respected. His final chapter in *Baptism in the New Testament* recognises the pain of ecumenical discussion but he is not prevented from drawing conclusions, albeit with candour and courtesy, contrary to many of his paedobaptist colleagues, 'for the sake of the truth after which we all strive and which we but partially see.'

In addition to extensive work on inter-church relations, George also served on various Union committees, including the Ministerial Recognition Committee, the General Purposes and Finance Executive, the Assembly Programme Committee, and the Joint Consultative Committee which brings together the executive officers of the United Kingdom Baptist Unions and the Baptist Missionary Society. George's musical gifts were used as a member of the editorial committee which produced the *Baptist Hymn Book* in 1962. Serving on the BMS General Committee in his capacity as College Principal, he was a constant advocate of the Baptist Missionary Society, and first his daughter Elizabeth and then his son Paul served as short-term missionaries with the Society.

The denomination honoured George with its highest distinction when he became President in 1968. It was a recognition of loyal service and at the same time a call to leadership. He challenged the churches, through his Presidential theme, to be 'Renewed for Mission'. He deliberately chose the second half of the slogan adopted by the 1964 Faith and Order Conference held at Nottingham. He made the point that the denomination had given much attention to the meaning of 'One Church' and he believed that the time had come to give equally intensive consideration to renewal by the Holy Spirit and the mission of Christ. The nature of mission he described as proclamation of the Gospel and action commensurate with it. The instrument of

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mission is the Church committed to Christ. The mode of mission is the proclamation of the Gospel by the whole Church whose members are missionaries, in a way which is intelligible to contemporary pagans. The condition for carrying on the mission is dependence upon the Holy Spirit. This powerful utterance included a very practical proposal. George challenged the churches to study during the autumn and winter of his Presidential year the meaning of mission and at the next Easter to make a clear-cut witness to Christ's resurrection. It was a clarion call to all the churches to engage in joint action by which the Easter message would be communicated effectively to the nation.

A Retired Minister?

The question mark belongs to the adjective, since George's ministry continues unabated. He retired a year early, welcoming this eagerly as an opportunity to engage in yet more writing and lecturing! He returned to London from Louisville in 1980 and brought to completion two significant volumes, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* and his commentary on *The Gospel of John*, published in 1986 and 1987 respectively. He is Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, and returns to lecture there regularly, and he enjoys preaching in local churches and contributing to conferences in Britain. The Beckenham Baptist Church (Elm Road) benefited from his Moderatorship when their pastor, the late Michael Walker, became a tutor at the South Wales Baptist College, Cardiff; George preached and taught regularly until the vacancy was filled. When George and Ruth moved to Hove, they joined the Holland Road Baptist Church, where George serves as a deacon. At a personal level, George continues to be counsellor and advisor to many who seek him out. A somewhat belated honour came to him when he was elected President of Spurgeon's College Conference, an accolade which his service and devotion to the College and the respect in which he is held by 'Spurgeon's men and women' made inevitable. George chose as his Presidential theme: 'Christians and Jews, yesterday and today'. His own address dealt with the relationship between synagogue and church in the New Testament. A guest speaker was Dr Pinchas Lapide, an orthodox Jewish Rabbi from Frankfurt, who spoke on 'The Creed of a Jewish New Testament Scholar'. Here is another instance of the breadth of George's interests and of his eager desire to build bridges of understanding firmly based on truth and love. This has characterised his life and ministry from the time when he first grasped the wonder of God's love, the marvel of Christ's victory and the hope of his return in glory and 'felt that everybody ought to know about them. 'More explicitly', he later wrote in *My Call to Ministry*, 'it seemed to me that since God had made them known to me, I ought to make them known to others. I believed therefore that God had called me to know Christ and to make Christ known. He had brought me to Himself that I might be a preacher!' Despite the hard choices he has had to make, he has never wavered from the conviction that Jesus Christ entrusted him with a Gospel of reconciliation. He has used his gifts of communication to urge listeners and readers to be at one with God and with each other. This, after all, is the purpose of Christian mission, and mission is the force which fills George Beasley-Murray's life. His preaching and caring, teaching and writing, befriending and counselling have a single-minded aim: to make Christ known as the way, the truth and the life.

J. J. BROWN