

Documents

Baptists in Romania

We print below the substance of a long memorandum¹ by Joseph Ton, a Romanian Baptist teacher, who studied for three years at Regent's Park College, Oxford, and has now returned to his own country after obtaining a degree in theology. The Romanian Baptists, like the Uniates, are, and always have been, in a more difficult position politically than other churches in Romania, because though most of them are Romanian by race as well as citizenship, they do not belong to the national Church. This has made them the objects of official suspicion, whether under royalist or communist rule. It is accepted that a Romanian citizen of Hungarian or German race is likely to be Catholic, Reformed or Lutheran, but it is felt to be dangerous to national unity for an ethnic Romanian to belong to the now suppressed Uniate branch of the (Roman) Catholic Church or to a Protestant church of foreign origin such as the Baptists.

Those Baptists who hold strictly to the doctrine of "Independency" (of the local "gathered church") find an added difficulty in any centralized church administration, even if it is free of pressure from an unfriendly state, which of course is not the case in Romania (Editor).

The Baptist Union was formed relatively late—in 1920—and from that date until 1955 preserved the character of all other Baptist Unions, namely that of a representative and consultative organ for mutual assistance.

After the Union's Congress, held in the autumn of 1955, this Union changed its fundamental character, although its Constitution remained the same as before. The 1955 Congress marks the moment when the sacred and essential principles of Baptist faith began to be renounced.

In 1954 the Ministry of Cults issued a *Regularization of Religious Services*, which aimed at reducing the number of services and other church activities. The *Regularization* was imposed, according to a new principle, foreign to our denomination and belief. The authorities asked the leaders of the Union to implement the *Regularization* in such a way that it should seem to be desired by the Union itself and imposed by it on the local churches. Firstly, to accept such a proposition meant that the Union lied, committed a sin, by transmitting as its own a decision which it had in no way made. Moreover its action contains a greater evil—namely the introduction of a principle whereby the Union can impose decisions on the churches. Such an idea is contrary to Baptist principles. We are a Union of self-governing churches, and the Union has no legal right to impose any decision which the local churches do not freely choose to accept.

So, the leadership of the Union refused to accept the *Regularization*. The Ministry of Cults announced that it no longer recognized the Union's leaders and asked the denomination to choose another set of leaders. At the Congress held in the autumn of 1955, the representative from the Ministry of Cults imposed his choice of leaders on the Union. But the Secretary General was only

¹ The complete text has been published as a pamphlet by the CSRC (price : 15p).

ected at the third vote, after the representative of the Ministry of Cults had said categorically that he *must* be chosen since he was the only man whom the State authorities would accept. From that moment the Baptist Union was broken and started down the slope of compromises which followed one after another.

The leadership chosen in 1955 has shown itself ready to accept without comment any resolution of the Department of Cults (the new name for the Ministry of Cults), regardless of whether it contradicts the doctrines and principles of the Baptists, or even the spirit of our country's laws.

One resolution accepted and executed by the Union, and known as the *Arrondation*, led to the closure of hundreds of churches. Within the framework of this act the Union agreed to create a "scheme of service", which fixed a set number of posts for pastors in the country. Although hundreds of churches had the economic resources and wanted to support a pastor, they discovered that they had no right to do so because they were not included in the scheme! The payment of the pastor's salary was also taken out of the hands of the local church and given to the Association (a local State organ). Thus the pastor became financially dependent on the Association and not on the church.

This action was part of a centralizing trend, which is a major deviation from Baptist doctrine. The church is losing increasingly its New Testament character. Nowadays the pastors are not chosen by the church, but appointed and transferred by the Union, often without the consent of the man or of the church, or they are dismissed by the Department of Cults via the Union without a reason being given.

We Baptists declare that we are a church which has returned to the teaching and practices of the New Testament. On the choosing of a pastor our *Confession of Faith* states without the slightest ambiguity: "The method of election is shown in the Greek word *cheirotomia*—sometimes translated in the Romanian Bible as 'appoint'—which means to vote by raising one's hand. A vote is taken when the church is assembled for this purpose".

"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28) is the New Testament formula for a decision taken by the church, and this must always be our practice. When we no longer act under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit as perceived by the assembled church, whom are we obeying? When the churches allow people from outside to resolve their problems they lose the Lordship of Christ over His Church.

Moreover, in recent years, State interference in the life of our churches has been extended to the committee of leaders in a local church. How can a church still say that its committee was chosen under the guidance of the Holy Spirit when the list of candidates for election was first presented to the district inspector of cults for approval? This man can strike whom he likes off the list, and in practice he strikes off those who are the best sons of the church. How can the church still say that it continues to be subject only to the Lordship of Christ, when it allows its pastor, deacon, secretary or any other of its servants to be dismissed by the inspector of cults (usually the real reason for the dismissal is that these men are very active in the cause and have given themselves wholeheartedly to promoting the work of God) and when it is ready to accept another pastor, deacon, or secretary, proposed by someone from outside? The aim of the State's control is to deprive the church's leadership of highly educated men. In

addition any pastor, zealous for the work committed to him, has a good chance of falling into disgrace and being dismissed by the Department of Cults. So long as the pastor is tame, often consults the inspector of cults, and obeys the resolutions of the Department of Cults, he is more likely to remain in his job even if the church would much prefer to have him replaced.

A few years ago, the Department of Cults told the leadership of the Union that from then on any pastor who wished to hold a baptismal service must apply first to the district inspector of cults and present him for his approval with a list of those to be baptized. The Union transmitted this new regulation to the churches *orally*, during the so-called "information meetings" of the Associations. From then on any pastor who did not obey this decision would be immediately dismissed because he had broken a regulation which was not written down and which no one would ever dare to write down in view of its unconstitutional nature.

By the Constitution of our country every citizen is free to believe or not to believe, to change or to renounce his religion. No inspector of cults (nor any pastor or priest) has the legal right to stop a citizen changing his religion, and the inspectors are very careful to avoid any situation in which they could be proved to have broken a law. An inspector of cults, however, strikes off the list of candidates for baptism handed to him for approval by the Baptist pastor all those not born into Baptist families, that is, those who theoretically have another religion and who by baptism want to change that religion and become Baptists. The inspector of cults does not say to the respective citizen that he does not approve of him becoming a Baptist. No, he will not do that, because he knows he does not have the right to approve or stop a change in religious adherence. But he says to the Baptist pastor: "If you baptize this citizen, I will dismiss you." The Baptist pastor, knowing that he is now left by his Union in the hands of the inspector of cults, may accept the ban and tell the candidate that he cannot baptize him. Perhaps he might explain humbly and sadly that he cannot do it because he will lose his livelihood.

The church ought to be sovereign over its own money. Now, however, the State dictates what it is allowed and not allowed to do with its money. Should a church, for example, wish to buy a guitar, it must obtain permission from the Department of Cults. The State can claim the right to verify the honesty of the way this money is administered, but it cannot claim to control the church over the way it uses its own money.

The interference of the State authorities in the churches' internal affairs does not end there. From the beginning of our history in this country, deacons have played a very important role. Where there was no pastor, the deacons carried out every act of the cultus: the Lord's Supper, baptismal services, weddings, funerals, etc. When the number of pastors was severely reduced in the early '60s (when the "scheme of services", discussed above, was introduced) and when almost every pastor had to look after 5-10 churches, the inspectors of cults also introduced and imposed the idea that deacons did not have the right to administer the Lord's Supper. Many pastors and churches accepted this new "doctrine". But from what Bible did they get it? In applying this new "doctrine", some pastors could only administer the Lord's Supper, for—having up to ten churches to look after—they only had time to run from one church to another to administer this service. Recently the 1st Baptist church in Timisoara refused to accept

another pastor after the one they had chosen had been dismissed by the Union at the order of the Department of Cults. The leaders of the Timisoara Association then refused to send this church a pastor who would give them the Lord's Supper, and they threatened her deacons should they dare to administer it themselves.

Many "unwritten laws" governing the life of our churches have recently been introduced. One stipulates that a pastor only has the right to preach in his own church and nowhere else. If a pastor wants to preach elsewhere, he must get the approval of the inspector of cults for his district, or that of the Baptist Union leaders. Now, does this not limit the freedom of movement and speech which is given to us in the Constitution and by this country's laws?

An even more disturbing and dangerous instruction, given by the inspectors of cults, only allows the pastor and members of the local church's committee to preach. How can we reconcile this with our fundamental belief that every Baptist is a priest, and that every member of the church has not only the right but also the duty to contribute to the life of the church and to speak at and lead its services? Yet this instruction is actually implemented by many pastors and by many churches.

Such State interference in the life of our churches reached a head in the spring of this year. A delegate of the Department of Cults was sent to the town, Simeria, and, threatening to withdraw permission for that church to function, asked the secretary of the church to receive back into membership a group of men, whom that church had excluded a few years ago. If we have reached a point where even the quality of a member of a church can be judged by someone from outside, then is it not time for us to ask ourselves "Whose is this church?"

Baptists in Romania are loyal citizens, with high moral standards, who wish to have a chance to show this. They believe that they can contribute something valuable to building up our socialist life, and consequently ask for the right to exist as Baptists in this society, in every sphere of its activity and at every level. The Romanian State will only benefit internally and externally if it accords us the right to a free and undisturbed existence.

The Bible teaches us to love the country in which we live, to respect its authorities, and to give them all that is due to them. However, the Bible further teaches us that our Supreme Master is God. His authority demands from us an unconditional and absolute commitment. When this is affected, we prefer to renounce this life on earth, because we believe in eternal life with God our Creator and with Christ our Saviour.

JOSEPH TON

Chinese Bishop Talks to a Missionary

This year Dr. E. H. Johnson, an ex-China missionary, who is now Secretary for Research and Planning of the Board of World Mission (Presbyterian Church) in Canada, visited China for 22 days. He knew Bishop K. H. Ting (see RCL No. 3, pp. 15-16) personally and went to see him. Bishop Ting said the following to him, according to Dr. Johnson's report:

At the present time in Nanking some 500 Christians are meeting regularly in four areas of the city, in different halls and meeting places, often on Sunday