

Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

THE FREE CHURCHES

A Baptist Perspective

By JOHN RACKLEY

BAPTIST CHRISTIANS EMERGED in early seventeenth-century England and Holland. They were part of the Radical movement of the Reformation in Europe. They were people who were influenced by the life and work of Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. The Bible was their sole source of belief and life. They created churches which were 'separate' from the established church.

They considered that membership of the Church was for those who had openly confessed their faith in public without the guidance of any other authority. They sought to create a pure form of worship, life and witness. They were 'free' from the constraints of national church and state control. These dissenters eventually became known by names which reflected one or other emphasis in their life-style: Congregationalists, Presbyterians or Quakers. Among them were the Baptists.

In the early 1600s two Baptist groupings emerged because of a divergent view of the atonement: the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists. The General Baptists regarded the salvation of Christ as open to all by faith, whereas the Particular Baptists were more Calvinist and regarded salvation as a gift of God to certain people. Each settled congregations in England. For the purposes of this article we shall draw material from both strands. In the early 1900s the two early groupings became one, and from this has come the Baptist Union that we know today in the UK.

The first English Baptist Church was established by English exiles in Holland in 1607, with John Smyth as its leader. The fundamental question which concerned him was the nature of the Church, its leaders and its mission. He defined the visible Church as 'two, three or more saints joined together by covenant, with God and themselves for their mutual edification and God's glory'.¹ He went on: 'So within the congregation, the brethren jointly have all power both of the kingdom and priesthood immediately from Christ'.² Then with a slightly different and telling emphasis: 'All power is derived from Christ to the Church and then through the Church to elders'.³

There in the roots and experience of one of the first Baptist communities is the essence of the Baptist tradition of spiritual guidance. It is *covenant* and *mutual edification* which are the gifts of Christ to the congregation. But let it be noted, as will emerge later, that once the next step was taken, i.e. that power was attributed to elders, the question of authority is never far away.

Many Baptist churches in the 1600s regarded themselves as covenanted communities. These covenants were written down, read frequently, and subscribing to them was the basis of a person joining that church. The author can recall being present at New Road Baptist Church, Oxford, in 1967 when the covenant first written in the 1640s was read out in public worship. It still is read out at that church's anniversary each year.

It cannot be stressed too much how important this fundamental norm of covenant is for Baptists. I mentioned that a major division arose concerning the nature of the atonement. This is no sideshow to our enquiry into the tradition of Baptist spiritual guidance. The debate was about who are the recipients of God's salvation. Is it open to all or only to the chosen? This is an argument about God's grace.

Grace is not simply a characteristic of God, but is the very nature of God: it is God's nature and activity to love, initiate salvation and nurture. Hence the Baptists argue that the Church is a result of grace. Covenant is the bond which grace creates for people. In 1689 Benjamin Keach, a minister of the Horsly Down Church, described the life-style of such a covenanting church like this:

We believe a true church of Christ is not National nor Parochial but doth consist of a number of godly persons who upon the profession of their faith and repentance . . . give themselves up to the Lord and one another . . . to watch over one another and communicating to each other necessities, as becometh saints.⁴

Once again we note the distinctive emphasis upon the fact that Baptists are about mutual edification. It is to this that we now turn. At this point I put a chronological approach to Baptist history on one side. Let us encounter various Baptist incidents over the past four centuries and consider what this 'watching over one another' may mean. For it is in that human activity, open to all who are in covenant together, that we perceive the essence of their spiritual tradition.

Although Baptists have had ordained ministers from their early days, the spiritual nurture of the individual congregation member was the responsibility of all. Ministers and elders were called out of the congregation, but this process began with a regular occurrence which we discover in various Baptist church records: the meeting together for the study of Scripture and (if needed) discussion of its meaning. We are told that the General Baptist Church at Shad Thames had regular occasions 'when younger brethren were encouraged to assemble at the meeting house every Lord's Day morning to improve their spiritual gifts and graces, to the edifying of such as should give attendance'.⁵ They would have opportunity to preach and teach each other. At Broadmead Baptist Church, Bristol, in the 1680s such an occasion had various functions. The elders of the church could appraise the spiritual condition of those who preached. There was clarification in matters of faith and practice. The gifts of spiritual understanding were discerned by the church together, for it was

assumed they would not always be found among the elders. And the church book records: 'Many souls had their doubts resolved, especially concerning their interest in Christ and their eternal state, when they heard the doubts and experiences of others disclosed'.⁶

The one and same occasion served the needs of all and also discerned the gifts of potential ministers and elders. In such an open forum one can only surmise that discussion could have become rather fraught on occasions!

Often at such times a congregation would be writing its own Confession of Faith. It was important for these early Baptists to work out what it was they really believed. Such confessions were not simply a means of control but a source of guidance. The 1644 Confession of Faith which originated in seven London Particular Baptist churches was adopted by others and in its turn was superseded by another in 1677. Such covenants reveal a deep commitment to the importance of right belief. This appeal to intellectual integrity runs deep in Baptist spirituality. A contemporary writer remarks:

Right belief is too important just to be left to our slogans, without qualification. Perhaps if we were more trusting and open, we should be less fearful and able to explore and grow in faith together. A lively interest in theology, in articulating and discovering the faith by which we live was a feature of earlier Baptist life. It was a task for all the Lord's people.⁷

The language is of the twentieth century but the sentiments are the same as those of the seventeenth. The spiritual task is mutual nurture.

In the 1760s Robert Robinson was a Baptist minister in Cambridge. He advocated the revival of the early church practice of the catechumenate. He suggested there be three classes. The first would be for children, servants and 'grossly ignorant people'; the second for those preparing for baptism; the third would be for the believers who made up the church. Whilst we must feel somewhat distanced by the social élitism which he advocated, it is important to note that in this view to have become a member of the church was simply to have arrived in yet another class! And this introduces a further strand in this picture of the Baptist spiritual tradition: this is discipline.

Up to the present century Baptist records reveal that one of the major purposes of a Baptist congregation meeting together was to judge cases of discipline. Indeed the author knows of one of his elderly members who feared a reprimanding visit from him, as her minister, because she missed a church meeting! However, in different days it was far more serious.

We need to understand that in those early congregations to join was to enter a discipline. If a person did not live up to the standards required, he or she would first be rebuked privately, then before witnesses and then before the whole congregation. If still unrepentant then he or she would be excommunicated. The 1644 Confession already made it clear that: 'Christ hath given power to His church to receive in and cast out any member that deserves it;

and this power is given to every congregation and not any one person'. The list which can be drawn up from various resources is daunting. Disciplinary action would follow absenteeism from the Lord's Supper, idolatry, murder, swearing, associating with prostitutes, heresy (depending on whether you were a General or Particular Baptist, this was a variable matter), marriage outside the Baptist community, associating with Wesleyans, attending a carnival, having a proud spirit, domestic disputes or being married 'in a National Way', i.e. in the parish church.

One wonders that any Baptist church ever survived! There is no doubt that a lot of local issues are hidden in such decisions. However, the point is that there was an expectation that belief and morality would inform each other and that whether this was so in any particular case would be decided by a corporate decision, not by individual preference.

Robert Robinson also noted in his musings about the early Church and the catechumenate that it wisely did not receive members hastily. In his church in Cambridge and in other places the procedure of being admitted to membership was intensive and lengthy. That is still the case today. Part of the discipline of being a Baptist is that one must ask to become a member of a church. Membership is neither offered nor expected when a person joins a Baptist congregation. The candidate receives a visit from church members. They tell the story of their faith. The visitors then report back to the church meeting and a vote is taken. The minister and elders have no priority in making the decision. The high standard for belonging to the church ensures that both candidates for membership and existing members accept the responsibility to watch over each other. This discipline, whilst not unique, is essential to the Baptist understanding of the church. It is a believers' church. That having been said, the role of the minister in a Baptist church is central to its life and spirituality. James Munson declares that in the nineteenth century Baptist preachers were 'the very mouthpiece of their congregation, expressing to them their better selves, the very voice of their inmost hearts so that the whole congregation found itself raised above its ordinary self'.⁸

The life, pastoral work and above all the sermons of the Baptist minister were to be a focus of the mutual edification offered by a church to itself. The 1644 Confession of the Particular Baptists discussed financial support of the ministry in these terms:

The work of the pastors being constantly to attend the service of Christ in His churches, in the ministry of the word and prayer with watching for their souls . . . it is incumbent on the churches, not only to give them all due respect but also to communicate unto them all good things.⁹

An interesting euphemism for 'salary'!

Historically, in the 1600s and for one or two centuries afterwards, it was a non-Baptist who influenced the work of Baptist ministers most profoundly. It

was Richard Baxter, a Puritan, whose book *The Reformed pastor* shaped the mind of people in all the Free Church traditions. However, it is his practice which catches the eye:

During the fourteen years of pastoral ministry at Kidderminster Richard Baxter gave himself to the pastoral care of eight hundred families. He set aside every Monday and Thursday for personal ministry of the Scripture to whole families, listening to them, pastoring them and teaching them.¹⁰

Such activity predates the Methodist class meeting by nearly a hundred years. The foundation of such spiritual guidance was the sermon. In the 1790s Revd J. Rippon compiled the Baptist Annual Register. This was a type of bishop's visitation, and the life and times of many ministers are recorded there. The Register notes that one Daniel Sprague of Tiverton preached over fifteen sermons each week and found this 'strengthened his body and invigorated his soul'. Charles Spurgeon exercised a preaching ministry in London from 1853 to 1892. In the following, which is an extract from a lecture he gave to students training for the ministry, we have an enlightening encounter with the mind of a preacher desperate to restore and deepen the faith of his congregation: 'Quiet contemplation, still worship, unuttered rapture, these are mine; rob not the heart of the deep sea joys, miss not the far down life, by forever babbling among the broken shells and foaming surges of the shore'.¹¹ He then goes on to advocate retreat, solitude and silent prayer.

In his early days Spurgeon read Philip Doddridge's *The rise and progress of religion in the soul*. Doddridge was a Congregational minister. It is probable that, although not a Baptist, what he writes there reflects the pattern of counsel which many Free Church ministers sought to emulate. He counsels a young friend to monitor the progress of his walk with God by an intense, regular sequence of questioning and self-examination. Did he awake with God and a sense of gratitude? Did he offer then and there solemn praises and renew his dedication to God? Did he plan his day with God wisely and well? And then at the end of the day the whole process needed to be done again. Had he seen the hand of God in the mercies, health, food, business and travelling of the day? This was truly a scrutinized life. Later in another letter Doddridge lists the priorities of a Christian's daily life:

That we be serious in the devotions of the day.
That we be diligent in the business of it.
That we be temperate and prudent in the recreation of it.
That we carefully remark the providences of the day.
That we keep up a humble and lively dependence upon the divine influence suitable to every emergency in it.¹²

Seriousness, diligence and tidiness were the hallmarks of Christian living, encouraged by this minister.

The reader would expect from reading thus far that there is an inevitable tension in the relationship of the minister to the membership of a Baptist church. There are not only the tensions which any human community may encounter but also tensions which are born out of the desire to deny to any individual (be they pope, king or local minister) the capacity to decide or negotiate another person's relationship with God.

This is neatly pictured by the way Baptists normally observe the communion service. The minister presides, although he need not do so. Invariably the sermon has been preached. The minister invites all people present who believe in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord to receive the bread and wine. The deacons or people who will take the bread and wine to the congregation then join him and they sit at the Lord's table together.

The minister utters the words of institution, prayers are spoken, often by others, and the bread and wine are served. The minister receives his portion from a deacon, often seated. The deacons then take the bread and wine to the congregation. The minister is given his place. The minister is kept in his place. The careful balance between responsibility and authority is played out in these moments in graphic detail.

Authority is a crucial issue in spiritual direction. It is also central to the ethos of what it is to be Baptist. Some have described it as 'soul freedom'. Sometimes it can degenerate into a rampant individualism, where any meeting of three Baptists will have four opinions and everyone believes God is telling him or her that they are right! Baptist people wish to have the matter many ways. When it comes to authority in the church, they wish to hold together the authorities of the Bible, the church meeting as a covenanted community seeking the will of Christ, and the responsibility of each member to nurture his or her relationship to God. Of course it is impossible: at different times and occasions one or other is in the ascendancy. The consequence for spiritual guidance in a Baptist context is crucial. It works most successfully when all three authorities are seen to be secondary to the authority of Christ.

It was out of this authority that the tradition of Dissent emerged. Baptists would wish to yield to no one what they once called 'the crown rights of the Redeemer'. The authority of Christ in all things spiritual and secular has enabled some Baptists to be in the forefront of political reform, others to become mass-appeal evangelists. A very strong strand of Baptist spirituality would want to declare: 'If what you believe and do because of that belief is not making any difference to the world, then it is not making any difference at all'. So Thomas Helwys, who was put in the Tower of London in 1612 for writing the first Statement of Universal Tolerance, William Knibb, who battled for the release of slaves in Jamaica in the early 1800s, Martin Luther King, who championed human rights in the southern states of the USA, and Billy Graham, who has worked as an evangelist since the early 1950s, are all in the Baptist dissenting tradition. Their form and expression of dissent has been different, but the spiritual root for each of them was a response to the authority of Christ in the life of the individual, worked out in a commitment to

their society and its times. Writing in 1986, Brian Haymes summed up this commitment:

I believe that such commitment to Christ will always lead the church into social, political and economic dissent. I suppose you can have religion without political ramifications but you cannot have the Christian religion without political ramifications. I have to pray for courage above all here to recognise and live out my gospel convictions in a world that is dying for lack of dissent.¹³

In Leicester there is a Baptist church which is not yet a hundred years old. It is built in the Stonegate area, which, either side of the Second World War, was one of the richest communities in Europe. During that period a strange but distinctive Baptist ministry was pursued by a man called Thomas Edmunds. In his book *The Christian remedy* he begins with an abrasive analysis of the human condition. Drawing upon Berdyaev, Jung, Hegel, *Mein Kampf* and the Bible, he concludes: 'The wrong is in the soul; in its conception of itself and of its relations and obligations to God and its fellows. Man is a creature needing rectification, not mere improvement.'¹⁴ He sums up the need in these words: 'The world is suffering from lack of faith in a transcendental truth'.¹⁵

For him knowledge is essential. Humankind needs to treat itself differently. 'Unethicised naturalism is the death of spirituality.' By knowledge he means a spiritual appreciation of a responsive kind. He challenges any mysticism which is purely a religion of direct unmediated communion with God. He accepts that we have an innate capacity to be in contact with God. He believes we can respond 'reverently and obediently to God's self-authenticating, self-imparting disclosure'. But this cannot be indifferent to the historic revelation which came through 'the inspired prophetic movement that culminated in the personality of Jesus'.

According to Edmunds, Jesus was a person who transformed the values of his society and addressed the nation as well as the individuals within it. The Church is created by the personality of Christ. This it should never forget, save at its peril. The result is that life must be lived by faith, faith of a special kind. 'Faith makes a bigger demand upon man to use his intelligence than does any other capacity because what it has to offer him is of such a kind that it can become his only through the exercise of his intelligence.'¹⁶ So he declares that knowledge of the New Testament is not an intellectual luxury but a spiritual necessity: out of such knowledge comes a deep acquaintance with Christ. And thus the primary duty of the Church is education.

In this all too brief précis of a book that was hardly acknowledged in its own day and that is rarely read today, we can spot the essentials of the Baptist spiritual tradition: Christ the supreme revelation of God; Scripture and the investigation of its meaning; an absence of reverence for any human mediation between God and person; a desire to address the prevailing climate of society and the role of the Church in mutual nurture.

For a few years, the present author was minister of that church. A deacon from Thomas Edmund's time was still alive. He used to enjoy telling the following story. Not everyone appreciated Edmund's ministry. On one occasion it was noticed that a prominent member of the church was no longer attending Sunday worship. He was visited by some of the deacons. They were told that each Sunday he travelled to Sheffield to hear a famous preacher who was filling a church to capacity. He found it satisfied his soul. He was told: 'Sir, we look for satisfaction among ourselves'. He had received a typical Baptist reply. At its best, such self-sufficiency can nurture and fulfil. When Baptist spirituality becomes independent of the wider Christian world it can become self-serving and lacking in vision.

NOTES

¹ W. T. Whitley (ed), *The works of John Smyth* vol 1, p 252.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Quoted in Roger Hayden, *English Baptists: history and heritage* (1994).

⁵ J. J. Goadby, *Bye-paths in Baptist history* (1871).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ B. Haymes, *A question of identity: reflections on Baptist principles and practice* (1987).

⁸ J. Munson, *The Nonconformists* (1991).

⁹ J. J. Goadby, *Bye-paths in Baptist history* (1871).

¹⁰ A. Long, *Approaches to spiritual direction*.

¹¹ C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to my students* (1875-94).

¹² P. Doddridge, *The rise and progress of religion in the soul* (1745).

¹³ B. Haymes, *A question of identity: reflections on Baptist principles and practice* (1987).

¹⁴ T. Edmunds, *The Christian remedy* (1939).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*