

BAPTISTS AND LIBERATION

In the fight for freedom and human dignity, liberty and liberation, the names of several Baptist leaders come to mind. Leaders in almost every country and in every century have been an integral part of the struggle for liberation. The Anabaptists of Holland and of Germany (if not direct ancestors of Baptists, certainly kindred spirits) were 'concerned for your consolation and the assurance of your conscience'. In Cromwell's army there was William Allen of whom Thomas Carlyle remarked that he was 'a most authentic and earnest man ... a strenuous Anabaptist ... a rugged true hearted, not easily governable man, given to Fifth Monarchy and other notions, though with strong head to control them'.¹ Near our time, John Clifford maintained that 'every extension of the franchise and every curtailment of class, or caste privilege [was] a step towards the Kingdom of God',² claiming, 'Freedom is the breath of the nation's life, and it is only as freedom is granted that it is possible for us to face our difficulties and master them, to understand our problems and find the solution of them. And of all the liberties, we should fight for, there is no liberty so great and so absolutely essential as liberty of conscience'.³

John Leland of Culpeper Country, the minister of the church where it is reported Thomas Jefferson was sometimes in attendance, 'was a Jeffersonian Republican and later a follower of Andrew Jackson. In a series of political essays he set forth his views on government, which were to the effect that the republican form of government is the best preservative of good society and all power is vested in, and consequently derived from, the people, and laws made by legislatures which are inconsistent with the constitution are not binding. He also insisted that legislators have no right to alter that compact and that a man is not obliged to surrender his conscience to the state'.⁴

William Knibb of Jamaica, whose role and advocacy for the abolition of slavery is well established, maintained, when exhorted to prudence by Mr Dyer, the Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society of London, 'Myself, my wife and my children are entirely dependent on the Baptist Mission. We have landed without a shilling and may at once be reduced to penury. But, if necessary, I will take them by the hand, and walk bare-foot through the Kingdom, but I will make known to the churches of England what their brethren in Jamaica are suffering.'⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., in an inspired utterance at the Washington Monument, spoke of the fulfilment of the American dream as the freedom for all to be and to become.

Their advocacy of liberty and human rights was neither nationalistic nor particular. The Baptist World Alliance, under the leadership of Rushbrooke, Shakespeare, Ernest Payne, Theodore Adams, Duke McCall, Robert Denny and others, has played an important role on the international stage in delicate diplomatic initiatives on behalf of Baptists in several countries, relieving oppression and obtaining freedom for oppressed and dispossessed minorities.

The basis of their action could be summarised in the declaration of the Alliance at the Atlanta Congress of 27th July 1939, as the war clouds gathered in Europe... 'No man, no government, nor institution, religious, civil, social or economic has the right to dictate how a person may worship God or whether he shall worship God at all ... In continuance of our consistent Baptist practice, we are imperatively constrained again to insist upon the full maintenance of absolute religious liberty for every man of every faith or no faith.'⁶

Wheeler Robinson, a British Baptist, in his valuable study on the *Life and Faith of the Baptists*, maintained that 'the passion of Baptists for liberty is one of their most strongly marked characteristics flowing directly from the spiritual individualism which is their primary emphasis. From the beginning of their history, Baptists have been in the forefront of the battle for political and religious liberty, as their place in

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Cromwell's army shows. To them belongs the distinction of being the first to claim and the first to apply fearlessly the undeterred principle of freedom for religion which is the best tribute to its intrinsic worth.⁷

This claim that the ground of Baptist action rests on 'spiritual individualism' has been made quite often. Henry Cook, another British writer treating the same subject, argued that 'spiritual freedom, freedom to think and be whatever seems to us right - right not because some external authority compels us to say it is right when we ourselves refuse to believe it, but right because we ourselves, with our own eyes see that it is right - that is the highest blessing for man and in the struggle to bring this about Baptists have played a notable part.'⁸

Both Robinson and Cook drew their inspiration from Thomas Helwys, sometimes seen as the Father of English Baptists, who in 1612 wrote to the monarch, James I, in a petition entitled *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*. The declaration was essentially a plea for liberty of conscience and the freedom to worship. He wrote, 'the King is a mortal man and not God, and therefore hath no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them as to set spiritual lords over them; he is but dust and ashes as well as we are; yet though he should kill us, we will speak the truth to him.' This was a declaration in reaction to the theory of the Divine Right of Kings, in which he maintained that there were at least two 'realms'. The realm of the spiritual over which the King (State) had no jurisdiction and the temporal realm over which the King assuredly possessed rights, but limited rights. This concept of the limitation of rights was more clearly outlined when he wrote, 'For men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, rather may the King be judge between God and man.'⁹

The question may, however, be asked whether Helwys and those who thought like him were, in fact, suggesting a spiritual individualism as the basis of liberty or even a doctrine of the two realms? The doctrine of the two realms was, of course, not new and Helwys' plea might be seen as a restatement of the 'two swords'. The deeper issue is whether there was then a current dualism in the understanding of society which allowed for a dichotomy between the spiritual and the temporal. There is room for suggesting that no such dualism was understood at this time. Early Baptists shared a monistic view of society. Article Six of the Schleithem Confession (1527), treating the sword, contains much ambiguity for this reason. While the article tends to forbid the sword to the believer, it does not say so, but instead pleads forgiveness for the repentant. As far as the magistracy is concerned, the article states, 'it is not appropriate for a christian to serve as a magistrate' and lists reasons for this.¹⁰

This basic unity of society created an ambiguity for Baptists, as also for the State which read such statements as making a plea for anarchy. In this was rooted the State's, or the Established Church's, rationale for persecution, that is the disruption of society which, once begun, would gather to it the persecuted and malcontents of varying sorts. Perhaps that is why Baptist statements of this period tended to be polemical and divisive.

The early Baptists were not arguing against the doctrine of the Divine Rights of Kings only, nor the imposition of Creeds as tests of political loyalty; nor were they arguing for laissez-faire in religious matters, but they were arguing for a responsibility in Christian faith, belief and practice that would put the individual in a central perspective. They had a high view of the human being created and redeemed and so caught up by the Spirit of God that the human will voluntarily respond in obedience to the Gospel. And having responded with what the New Hampshire Confession of 1833 calls 'the free agency of man', an individual was to

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exhibit proper evidence in that holy fruit which would be brought forth to the glory of God.

The freedom (liberty) which was being claimed and has been claimed by all Baptists is not a theoretical or philosophical principle but a practical and experiential activity. The debate between John Cotton and Roger Williams, antagonists in a controversy on religious liberty between Rhode Island and Massachusetts Bay in the mid-seventeenth century, illustrates the point. Carl Diemer, Jr., points out that for Williams, 'religion was more than a set of spiritual principles, it was a practical necessity. He believed peace could come to the world when men's consciences were free.'¹¹

It was this constraint to practical and experiential activity which has led Baptists from the mere mouthing of statements on liberty to working for liberation. And it is a constraint which has created and has continued to create tensions within the Baptist Communion and the manifest paradoxes in Baptist confessions. In 1611, in a confession called, *A Declaration of Faith of the English Remaining in Amsterdam*, (1611, § 24) the Baptists who tended to pacifism maintained that the magistrate was a 'minister of God for our wealth, they bear not the sword for nought'. The relationship between the functions of the Church and State as institutions has been, and continues to be, a matter of tension. In the *London Confession of 1644*, in Articles 40-52, Baptists gave respect to the King and Parliament. They wrote that the supreme Magistracy 'we believe to be the King and Parliament freely chosen by the Kingdom and that all Civil laws enacted by them ... we are bound to yield subjection and obedience ... although we should suffer so much from them in not actively submitting to some Ecclesiastical Laws ... which ... we for the present could not see nor our consciences could submit unto.'¹²

It would appear that in societies which are monistic in character Baptists must exist in tension between the two Kingdoms, i.e. the earthly and the heavenly. Baptists take seriously the two citizenships as may be demonstrated from several Confessions. The tension between the two allegiances tends to be resolved in one of two ways. Some Baptists in the past, and some now, become pietists laying more stress upon the 'inner-light', in earlier times making common cause with the Quakers. On the other hand, there have always been others who have felt that inner liberty had to manifest itself in being involved in civil matters. Despite this, both were united in maintaining that the civil authorities ought not to have jurisdiction in non-civil matters. The problem, however, has been where to draw the line and how to define civil and non-civil.

These tensions were and are inevitable because of Baptist assumptions of the unity of Creation in God and the unitary relationship of all human beings. The covenantal theologies of Zwingli, Bullinger and Hubmaier have each had lasting effects on the European Baptist tradition. This covenantal theology may also be seen to have had a direct influence on Jonathan Edwards, and from him it is possible to trace its influence to Shubal Stearns and Daniel Marshall, who established Baptist witness in the south and mid-States of the U.S.A., and through the Southern Baptists to several parts of the world. Two things might be noted. Baptists have maintained a distinction between the old and new covenants, not in a Marcionite formulation but rather in an Augustinian manner, seeing the New Testament as the fulfilment or completion of the Old Testament, so that the New Testament has come to be the test of faith, doctrine and practice. It is by its standard that all human beings are *equally* indicted by God 'as sinners', or *equally* rescued by unmerited grace on the sole initiative of God. This meant that the touchstone of equality was applied to all the so-called sacraments. This had its effect upon the ordering of worship, so that worship became the place of 'koinonia' or the fellowship gathering. The meaning and

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function of the ministry had also to be re-examined in the light of that equality, which meant that the hierarchical pattern was rejected and the nature of church came to be defined as that fellowship of believers gathered in a particular place.¹³ It is understandable, therefore, that these Baptist proposals for equality within any hierarchically structured society and/or church necessarily created conflict. The *Fifth Monarch* movement, embracing some Baptist sympathies, was seen as a revolutionary movement of that time because it maintained that the Kingdom of God was without priest, sacrament, king or government. Similarly, the *Monmouth Rebellion*, which took place in the west country of England was led by Dissenters in reaction to discriminatory laws, which kept privilege in the hands of the few.

There was, of course, other evidence in England (with its effect on the colonies) of Baptist involvement in the struggle for freedom and liberty, such as the effort to repeal the 'Clarendon Code' (1661-1665),¹⁴ the abolition of church rates in 1868, the opening of the grave-yards to all in 1880, the opening of the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge to Dissenters between 1854-56, and the abolition of theological tests for official posts in the universities in 1871. The *Liberation Society*, initiated by Baptists, was formed in 1844 to agitate for the disestablishment of the Church of England, but was fruitful only in the disestablishment of the Irish Church (1868) and the Welsh Church (1920). The Society was a useful ally of the Jamaican Baptists in their petition for the disestablishment of the church in the Caribbean, secured in the 1870s.

In the United States these same principles led Baptists to participate fully in the War of Independence (1776), having suffered disabilities at the hands of Assemblies influenced by the English pattern of government. The Virginia Assembly, for example, exercised only a limited interpretation of the *Act of Toleration*. The Act demanded that preachers be licensed, a demand in which some Baptists, on grounds of conscience, refused to acquiesce. Under the Act Baptists and Presbyterians in North Carolina and Virginia were not allowed to perform marriages, an activity allowed under the same Act in England. The upshot was agitation which led to the disestablishment of the church in Virginia in 1787, as a consequence of the Thomas Jefferson Bill on Religious Freedom, passed two years before by the Assembly. It might be assumed that from Virginia these ideas were disseminated in Washington and became embedded in the American Constitution. It appears reasonable also that the clause dealing with the non-interference of the State in religion in the first ten amendments to the Constitution of the United States of America, called the 'Bill of Rights', is in no small measure also due to the agitation of the Baptists of New England and Virginia.

Baptists have over the centuries marched to a drumbeat of freedom. Before them there have always been the ideals of equality under God and the freedom to respond in the Spirit. This has led to massive involvement in education and in medical work as the practical outworking of that freedom. For the freedom to be and to become are two essential parts of liberty. Much has been done. But today in the confusion of the inner city and the suburban sprawl, the deprivations of rural poverty, the brokenness of the shattered economies of the Third World, side by side with the patched up economies of the First World, the pockets of poverty in the First World and the pockets of wealth in the Third World, the Second World, the Fourth and Fifth Worlds and their problems, the break-up of community and the redefining of the family, the regimes of oppression emerging in several parts of the world, and the subtle forms of persecution now present, the meaning of freedom is uncertain. And yet, because Baptists have always held freedom to be a human right, answers must be found. There are those faithful to their vision to be free to be and to become. They believed the Gospel. And in that witness lies always danger.

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Wheeler Robinson, at one time Principal of Regent's Park College, Oxford, sums it up in this way, 'The achievement of the liberty for which Baptists and other Free Churchmen have contended has brought with it perils of its own. They are now free to enter many doors which once were closed to them; this means that they are the more exposed to 'worldliness' which their ancestors in the faith denounced. It is a more difficult thing to maintain the high ideals of the Baptist faith when the Baptist life is no longer more or less secluded. The fact that external rights of liberty in religious faith and worship have been already won may obscure the vision of these greater issues which are never fully won. Liberty within is more difficult to achieve than liberty without. Prejudices which we nurture in our hearts are more subtle and more dangerous than those whose folly and injustice we can plainly see when it belongs to others ... there are enemies of truth as it is in Jesus more subtle than ecclesiastical courts and more stubborn than vested interests. There are prejudices and errors of knowledge and judgement within every community which can be overcome only by a struggle as protracted and patient as that of the past denominational existence. There is in fact an unachievable liberty within faith as well as for faith.'¹⁵

NOTES

This paper was first presented to the General Council of the Baptist World Alliance.

1. Robinson, Wheeler, *Life and Faith of the Baptists*, 1946, p.32, quoted from Carlyle's *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*.
2. Underwood, A. C., *History of the English Baptists*, 1947, p.228.
3. *ibid.*, p.229.
4. Torbet, Robert, *A History of the Baptists*, 3rd edn., 1975, p.241.
5. Henton, J. H., *Memoirs of William Knibb*, 1849, p.146.
6. Cook, Henry, *What Baptists Stand For*, 1961, pp.164, 248-9.
7. Robinson, Wheeler, *Life and Faith of the Baptists*, 1946, p.223.
8. Cook, *op.cit.*, p.158.
9. *ibid.*, p.163.
10. Leith, John H., ed., *Creeeds of the Churches*, Atlanta, pp.288-9.
11. Estep, Williams, R., ed., 'The Lord's Free People in a Free Land', Forthworth, Texas, 1976, Diemer, Carl, Jr.
12. Russell, Horace, *The Baptist Witness*, El Paso, Texas, p.68ff.
13. West, Morris, *John Hooper and the Origins of Puritanism*, Terldrick, 1955 (private publication)
14. 'Permanent Conventicle Act, 1670' banned all assemblies, religious readings, etc., except those of the Church of England. It was revoked in 1813.
15. Robinson, *op.cit.*, pp.137-8.

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Paul Beasley-Murray, *Pastors under Pressure*, Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne, 84pp, £1-99.

This is the first in a planned series of 'Spurgeon's Booklets', and will include contributions from Andrew Rigden Green, Keith Roberts and others. The Principal of Spurgeon's College writes out of his thirteen years of personal experience in the pastoral ministry. This concise, analytical and positive booklet will be welcomed by ministers who wish to understand their stresses positively. A good bibliography will direct readers to further insight about the handling of the pressures all ministers experience.

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