

# **Baptists in the Ecumenical Context**

*A paper presented by Faith Bowers  
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In Adelaide just before Christmas we went to a musical play, 'Two from Galilee', about Mary and Joseph and the birth of Jesus. It was described as 'a ministry project of the Rostrevor Baptist Church'. Staged at the university, it had a cast of 45, plus a further 30 in the crew, drawn from 25 Christian bodies - six more Baptist churches, and others from right across the Christian spectrum from the Christian Revival Crusade to Roman Catholic. A cast member told us the next Sunday how they all prayed together for forty minutes before each performance, chiefly that some in the audience would be moved to respond to the Gospel.

Here were Baptists in the ecumenical context - working happily with other Christians to spread the Gospel.

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I come from England, where ecumenism is in a fairly advanced state. The primary ecumenical drive was a concern for mission and Baptists therefore felt it was right to join with others to that end.

English Baptists have long co-operated with other mainstream Protestant dissenters and with many Anglicans. In 1948 the BUGB (Baptist Union of Great Britain) Secretary, M.E. Aubrey, was one of the committee of fourteen that drafted the WCC constitution, as a forum for discussion, communication and joint witness.

In the last decade Roman Catholics have also been involved in the British ecumenical bodies. That is challenging for many Baptists. The Baptist Union of Scotland withdrew from Scottish ecumenical bodies and some churches have left our Union as a matter of conscience over this. Most English Baptists, however, have been able to accept the challenge to do more together.

To understand this, it is important to realize that the Roman Catholic Church in England has also been for a long time in dissent from the established Church of England, and also that in recent years English Catholics have rediscovered the Bible anew and have also experienced charismatic renewal. As a result, in spite of the doctrinal differences, English Baptists and Roman Catholics often find themselves in sympathy, making similar points in ecumenical discussion. This results in friendships across the divide that may be incomprehensible for Baptists from some other countries.

English Baptists have indeed gone a long way down the ecumenical road, yet we remain very much the 'awkward squad' ecumenically. Often we must dissent from much that the other churches can agree together. It is not that we like being awkward, but a matter of integrity. Our Baptist ecumenists know their Baptist principles: indeed, ecumenical fellowship demands that we understand why we are different.

We are awkward because:

It is difficult for other churches with strong central leadership to understand those whose wider bodies are made up of independent local churches and whose representatives cannot normally speak authoritatively for the Baptist constituency.

While others seek a unifying bond in 'a common baptism', this is a stumbling block for us. It is hard for others to understand that baptism is not the priority for Baptists, but that we put belief first. Baptism divides us from those who practise infant baptism. In a mobile society, people settling in a new place choose their church more by worship style and warmth of fellowship than by doctrinal particularities. This leads some, baptized as infants, to seek believer's baptism: other churches, who happily recognize the validity of our baptism, are offended when we deny theirs by, as they see it, 'rebaptizing'.

Our evangelical stress on personal religion affects the way we understand church: for us, the church is essentially a body of converted individual believers. Yet this recognition of believers is also a reason for being ecumenical: we can recognize fellow believers when we see them.

Awkward we may have to be, yet British Baptists have produced many ecumenical workers and leaders. Last year our Baptist Historical Society published a preliminary list, compiled by Anthony Cross, of Baptists who in the twentieth century were involved in work of one kind or another alongside Christians from other church traditions. It was a very long list and Dr Cross is now compiling a supplement. Today our Baptist family is providing the Secretaries of three ecumenical bodies - CYTUN which is the body of Welsh churches acting together (Gethin Abraham-Williams), the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (David Goodbourn), and the Council of European Churches (Keith Clements). Myra Blyth, the new Deputy General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, returns after a number of years with first the British and then the World Council of Churches.

In ecumenical relations, we occupy a bridge position between the mainstream denominations and other evangelical Christian groupings, including pentecostal fellowships and black-led churches. Many of these are 'baptistic', practising believer's baptism and congregational church government.

Baptists have particular understandings to contribute to the wider Christian fellowship - and similarly they can learn from emphases made by other traditions. Those we bring as Baptists include:

- our evangelical commitment to the Bible as the primary guide to faith and action

- our evangelical commitment to personal religion and therefore to evangelism which gives people the opportunity to make the choice
- our understanding of the church as a local community of believers, competent to take decisions and act independently
- yet also our understanding that these local churches should work together in interdependence for the common good. (Those who come to a BWA Congress evidently believe this principle and it can also apply to ecumenical co-operation)
- our radical understanding of the priesthood of all believers: we hold that every Baptist is a missionary and a minister. Although we set some apart for special work, they do not form a separate priestly order. This is a difference not easily understood by churches with a different understanding of ministry and priesthood.
- our love of freedom - when it works well this can give us a flexibility of approach. This can apply to worship, allowing us to respond quickly to changing patterns. It can apply to church government, allowing a fast response to new circumstances. It can apply to finance, where dependence on free-will giving as the Spirit moves people can result in amazing generosity. But all this flexibility, permitted by our system, is only seen when we are working at our best and so most open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps I have only become aware of it as a Baptist virtue by comparison with what I have seen of the cumbersome methods of some of our ecumenical partners!
- our concern for religious freedom and human rights - and this requires that we recognize and respect each church's right to decide how far to associate with others.

We English Baptists hear Christ's prayer that his followers may be one and are committed to working with other Christians. When different branches of the Christian Church draw together after centuries of principled and often bitter separation, there is both joy and pain in the process. There is also much frustration and many a tedious discussion.

Ecumenism is not an easy option. Ecumenical Baptists reflect hard on why they are and continue to be Baptists. It must be a matter of integrity, rather than of compromise: goodwill is not enough. We can only move in this direction motivated by hope, grace and Christian love.

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