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Journal of the Irish Baptist Historical Society

Editor: Joshua Thompson
BA, D Phil (Oxon)

Volume 7 (New Series)
1999 - 2000

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EDITORIAL

This issue of the Journal carries two thought-provoking papers. Pastor Rob Millar from his intimate knowledge of religious trends in the Republic of Ireland offers some exciting insights as to the rapid changes in society there and their effects on evangelical life there. The growth in our Baptist witness and the impact those advances are making on Baptist work in the whole island open up prospects that were scarcely glimpsed thirty years ago. The second paper by the secretary of the Irish Baptist College, Pastor John Birnie, is a sober assessment of the relevance of Baptist Principles as the churches enter the year 2000.

Pastor Jim Byers' follow-up paper, 'Some More Irish Baptist Evangelists' was heard with the same enthusiasm at the annual meeting of the Society as his initial "Some Irish Baptist Evangelists" the year before. Though colloquial in its approach the second paper does capture some of the striking work done in those post-war years in the field of evangelism. The directness and fervour of the evangelists' preaching matched by that of their contemporaries in the pastorate produced conversions, baptisms and additions to the churches through which the Baptist community grew by a remarkable 40% in the Fifties and Sixties. The pattern of intensive four-week evangelistic campaigns has changed over the succeeding decades; while the spirit of concern for the salvation of sinners, which was the motivating force, has declined. This is both sad and dangerous, since Baptist churches exist and grow only through conversions and baptisms.

The Historical Society has lost through the death on 27 April 2000 of its President, Dr H D Gribbon, one whose enthusiasm and expertise were given freely and whose interest and wise leadership were deeply appreciated. A tribute to Dr Gribbon appears elsewhere.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN BAPIST CHURCHES IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

An Overview by Robert Millar

It is impossible to understand the changes in Baptist Churches in the Republic of Ireland apart from the changes which have been taking place within the country as a whole. The last ten years have been years of 'seismic' change and re-ordering in Irish society and inevitably these changes impact our churches.

A Decade Of Progress

This decade has witnessed significant growth and development within our family of churches. In 1988 there were 11[1] churches in the Republic by 1998 this number had risen to 16, an increase of 55%. Although the total dropped by one with the withdrawal of a church towards the end of the year. In addition to this there are church planting ministries well under way in Donegal, Athlone[2] and Carrickmacross supported by Baptist Missions, church planting efforts in early stages of development in Maynooth and Ballycullen supported by Grace and Grosvenor Rd respectively. There is one 'joint effort' in County Cork between the churches in Cork and Baptist Missions. In addition, plans are in hand to place a church planting team in Galway early in 2000.

The growth is reflected also in the overall number of members. Here there has been an increase of over 50%, from 396 members in 1988 to 605 ten years later.

One growth trend which has been somewhat slower and which should, perhaps, cause some concern is the growth in average membership. In 1988 this was 36 and ten years later it stood at 40, representing an increase of just under 10% for the decade.

Another feature of the development of the Churches in the Republic is the volume of building projects which have been undertaken. In the last 10 years 6[3] of the 16 churches have pursued major building projects with at least one more currently in planning.[5] This is not simply 'monument building'. Nor does it represent a mere institutional view of the church or a view that a local church must own its own building. These developments reflect growth that has taken place, they at times reflect the difficulty associated with rented accommodation but they also represent a great sense of optimism about future growth and development. We are here to stay!

Backdrop To Development

How has this growth come about? What kind of background is it set against? What factors in Irish society helped or hindered? The backdrop to the development of these churches is complex with factors interacting with one another, however at least five distinct strands can be identified.

But before doing that it must be said that behind all growth and development is a Sovereign Lord who superintends and directs. There can be no church growth without His direct influence and action. However history shows us that He often does use changes in societies to fulfil His plans hence what follows.

(1) Fall out from Vatican Two

Probably the first factor, at least chronologically began in the 1950's if not long before. There was, in Irish religious life a 'dominant culture of control'.[6]This led, according to Tony Flannery, to a religious inflexibility and inability to think through Christian teaching for oneself on the part of those in the priesthood and religious orders. This left many very poorly prepared to deal with the sweeping changes resulting from the Second Vatican Council and with the social upheaval of recent decades.

A quotation from one of the Vatican Two documents may have proven prophetic. 'Ours is a new age of history with critical and swift upheavals spreading gradually to all corners of the earth.' [7]Other documents spoke of the importance of the intellect, personal freedom, taking personal responsibility and so on. They had a profound effect, first on the clergy and subsequently on the people as whole.

I believe it is hard for us today to appreciate the significance of sentences like these, and the impact they made on traditional religious life. Thinking, use of the intellect, having freedom, taking personal responsibility, were now being encouraged, indeed lauded. It is not too strong to say that in a sense they cut the ground from under the form of religious life They destroyed the underlying philosophy and spirituality on which it was based.[8]

In the wake of Vatican Two Irish Catholicism began to pay the price for its rigidity. As people watched the supposedly unchanging church undergoing such profound change they began to wonder how something which, for example, had been a mortal sin yesterday could be quite all right today. Inevitably the questions 'What is sin?', 'Are we really any different from Protestants?' and 'Does the Church's teaching really matter? began to emerge and they persist even to the present.

Nowhere were the changes more deeply felt than in the lives of the religious orders and priesthood. Almost overnight there was a new freedom as people in the religious orders began to mix more freely and informally than ever before. It was around this time, in the mid to late 1960's that the first great exodus from religious orders began to happen. The old religious and social stigma almost disappeared and soon there were so many ex-religious and ex-priests around that people ceased to pay much attention. The phrase 'spoiled priest', once so full of reproach and social rejection, has all but disappeared from the national vocabulary. As the trend towards greater liberty and freedom increased, attitudes towards the priesthood began to change. Up to this point there had been an air of mystique surrounding the religious and priesthood. This was enhanced by the fact that they had only been 'observed from afar'. However now, people saw their priests up close and many of them did not bear up well under such scrutiny.

A religious was someone who dressed in a particular type of clothing, and lived a strict life cut off from ordinary people. What work they did, or whether they worked at all was secondary. It was presumed that they spent a great deal of time in prayer...They were set apart and became in a sense intermediaries between people and God...The average catholic regarded themselves unworthy to approach and be heard by this God. They needed someone holier than themselves to speak on their behalf... As long as the religious remained cut off from the people, it was easy to preserve this illusion that they were especially holy. But as soon as they began to appear, dressed in ordinary clothes and mixing in the everyday events of society, the illusion was shattered. To see your holy man on whom you depended to mediate with the all-powerful and distant God, sitting in a pub, dressed in a shabby anorak and drinking a pint was a test to your faith.[9]

The trend has continued and indeed grown. A survey published in January 1999[10] shows just how much. 51% of people surveyed had little confidence in the ordinary clergy while 62% had little confidence in the Catholic Bishops.

(2) Loss of innocence

This loss of confidence is not exclusively due to theological changes, however. The repeated sexual and financial scandals of the last few years have served as a very vivid reminder that the aura of holiness which surrounded the religious was, in so many cases, an illusion. A survey published in February 1998[11] reported that 90% of those questioned indicated that the recent scandals had undermined the authority of the church. They also believed the church was seriously out of step on issues such as divorce, contraception and celibacy.

Eddie Holt, writing an opinion article entitled 'The Decline And Fall Of The Irish Catholic Church' put it well when he declared 'The Catholic Church in Ireland seems hell-bent on self-destruction'. Having detailed some recent events he concludes:

For all the negative – often ruthlessly uncharitable – aspects of organised religion, there have been benefits too. Where people adhere, or attempt to adhere to, a moral code, civilising values can prosper too. That, arguably, is

the greatest betrayal which the Irish Catholic Church is perpetuating. For how can people believe in a Church – even in the better aspects of its teaching – when members of its hierarchy and priesthood flagrantly abuse those same teachings? They can't and they won't.[12]

(3) Charismatic movement

Another religious phenomenon also developed in the 1970's. The Charismatic movement exploded on the Irish religious scene. In a very short space of time Charismatic prayer groups were flourishing throughout the island's length and breadth. Whatever one may say about the movement's theology and practices a number of very definite changes were brought about. First, it helped foster a greater involvement by 'laity' in religious things. They were no longer observers sitting in pews but participants in Bible study and prayer. The passivity of what had gone before became increasingly dissatisfying. Second, it helped bring people into real contact with the Bible. The powerful word of God began to impact people in a remarkable way. Third it provided many born again believers with unprecedented opportunities to engage in conversation about spiritual things. While most Irish Baptists would find little sympathy with the Charismatic movement there is no doubt in my mind that it contributed to a very significant degree to an atmosphere of openness which has been crucial to our progress.

(4) Social and economic revolution

A new phrase has entered the English Language, or at least the version of it spoken on this island. The 'Celtic Tiger!' New prosperity has brought with it new opportunity to travel, to experience other cultures and different ways of life. Coupled with easier travel it has meant that immigrants no longer stay away for good. They travel, experience a wider world, gain new perspectives develop new attitudes and then return, bringing those new perspectives and attitudes with them. They will not revert to the 'old ways'. They have had a taste of something different and they like it. Some have been profoundly changed. Away from the old influences and restrictions they often felt freer to consider and adopt new ideas. In my own circle of acquaintances there are many who were converted while they were travelling or living abroad. They return to Ireland very different people indeed.

The 'Celtic Tiger' generation may have a darker side however. New prosperity seems also to have brought new self-centredness. Analysts seemed agreed that we are living in the 'me' generation. Patricia Casey catches the spirit of many young Irish people.

Having jettisoned both religion and politics as ideologies, they have no framework from which to develop lasting values; instead their attitudes are likely to derive from an aspiration to personal wealth and from ephemera such as the pursuit of pleasure.[13]

The new prosperity has, of course come in tandem with increasing involvement with the European Community. The impact of this in social and political terms is, perhaps more difficult to judge. However, one cannot imagine that exposure of a very insular society to a wider world would not have profound effects indeed. In recent years Ireland has engaged in another period of 'civil war' albeit a bloodless one. We have battled over abortion, divorce and to a lesser degree 'gay rights'. An interesting feature of these debates are the frequent references to 'European Norms', and of course, the threat of the 'loser' taking his case to the European Court of Human Rights. The disquieting feature from the perspective of Irish Baptists of all this is the fact that those tending towards a conservative Christian views are typically on the 'losing' side.

At least some feel the pressure to conform. During the last divorce referendum I heard several people bemoan the fact that we, among all the European countries, had no divorce legislation. 'It makes us look backward, insular and unattractive' they declared.

Slipping into society almost unnoticed is the pornography publishing business. Only two or three years ago Playboy Magazine was legalised in the Republic. Now the so-called 'skin magazines' infect many book and news stands a graphic symbol of the changes in morality and ethics.

Finally, Post-modernism with its loss of a sense of moral absolutes and resultant confusion is also evident in Irish life. Christian values have increasingly less influence in day to day life. One nun, a teacher of religion in a secondary school observed to me that when she had started teaching they

expected every girl to leave school a dedicated and convinced Catholic, 'now,' she said, 'we're relieved if they believe in God'

The Irish Independent/IMS poll on moral views illustrates this vividly. Only 6% of those under 25 years of age considered that living with one's partner before marriage was unacceptable. While only 9% considered sex before marriage unacceptable and 12% thought parenthood outside marriage unacceptable.

Developments In The Churches

(1) New confidence

Profound as the changes in society have been, society is not the only thing changing. Our churches have also been moving on. Perhaps one of the most striking features of the last decade has been the growth in confidence within churches. The last ten years have seen several of our churches win the battle for survival. They now are working purposefully towards becoming self supporting. The next 5 years will almost certainly see this happening in several cases.

The churches are becoming increasingly confident in dealing with the issues of the day and with the changing social scene around them. This increasing sense of purpose, as well as the awareness of and willingness to tackle issues is seen in the Southern Region conferences. It is no coincidence that the speakers over the past few years have all addressed issues of growth and development. Johanne Lukasse from Belgium talked about evangelism in a post modern society. Jacob Reynolds and Jeffrey Wetheril on the issues of training leaders within the local church, and in the latest conferene, Ian Coffey examined the lessons from five growing churches. The evidence that these conferences tackle real issues and make a difference is seen in the fact that elements of the teaching is reflected in changes in the churches in the months that follow.

(2) Diversity and development

Recent development has not all come from the same strategy.

Carrigaline and Midleton grew out of the vision of the Cork church coupled with the support and personnel of Baptist Missions, Cavan as a result of the interaction of the Mullaghmeen church, the vision of its founding pastor, Baptist Missions and local believers. It was built on a foundation laid over 13 years of home Bible studies held in the areas and led by a number of our pastors. The church in Athlone is effectively being rebuilt, replacing what had been there before. A team ministry is being developed in Donegal town. Despite differences however, some commonalties do emerge.

(3) Increased fellowship and co-operation

At the top of the list has to be the vision of local churches. There must be churches who identify possibilities and who are willing to give of themselves to see possibility become reality. The Cork church is perhaps the best example of this. It seems fair to say that the vision of the then, pastor and the relatively small number of people there to see two additional churches started in the region was the seedbed out of which grew, not only the Midleton and Carrigaline churches but also the Cork Project.

Closely related to this is the necessity of people 'on the ground', that is a core of people in the area who are willing to make long term commitments. A number of the pastors from the newer churches identified that as one of the key elements in the decisions regarding both when a church would be started and where. This does not necessarily imply a large core of people. In two cases it was just four mature, stable and committed individuals.

(4) Baptist Missions

The work of Baptist Missions has also been important. Its policy of support without undue control has been an important factor. It has allowed church planting ministries to develop as necessitated by local realities. This willingness to trust and support without controlling is not always a feature of mission agencies and it is refreshing to be able to affirm our Mission in this. Their work goes back much further, of course. Baptist Mission Personnel have for many decades been a part of Baptist ministry in the Republic. They have played an important part in the development of the churches in Cork city, Limerick, Letterkenny, Brannockstown, and Phibsboro (now Jamestown Rd.).

In fact it is probably no exaggeration to say that, without the intervention of Baptist Missions personnel, the Jamestown Rd. church would not now exist.

Methodology is diverse too. Some churches emphasise door-to-door visiting, others hardly do it at all. Some organise special evangelistic events, while others emphasise personal evangelism and have virtually no special evangelistic events. Yet again common features emerge.

Throughout almost all the churches small, short term evangelistic Bible studies are a prominent feature. 'Christianity Explained' is typical of these. They allow for extended conversation over several weeks, and they bring people into contact with the Scriptures. These studies almost pre-suppose a prior relationship and trust between leader and participant, believer and seeker. In a culture which so highly values social interaction and at a time when people are more concerned with relationship than 'doctrine', small group Bible studies become an increasingly valuable vehicle for communicating the timeless gospel.

It is probably fair to say that all the churches would very much like to have a lot more of these studies. It is also probably fair to say that the work involved in leading such a series is minor compared with the work involved in getting people to commit themselves to one for six weeks.

Closely aligned with this is the relational aspect of the development. A pastor of one of the newer churches told me that the early development of his church was almost entirely along the lines of the founding pastor's web of relationships. Time and again Christians in telling of how they were converted, will say that they first made friends with a Christian who patiently asked and answered questions, prayed and shared. That kind of personal contact is crucial in each church regardless of its evangelistic strategy or methodology for whether you are trying to encourage people to join a series of Bible studies or to come to a special evangelistic event you are to a large degree dependent on your relationship with that individual. New believers should be encouraged not to become estranged from their old friends. It may well be during a lull in the action at a football or hurling match that they will be asked by a friend why and how they have changed, and so the web develops.

Another feature has been the measure of co-operation and fellowship between the churches. This is manifested in a variety of ways. The 'Cork Project' is perhaps the best and most fully developed example of this. The Cork churches have a strong sense of belonging. They meet as a combined congregation regularly and there is a good rapport among the pastors in the area. In Dublin, fellowship is also expressed in co-operation and interaction. For example, the choir from Grosvenor Rd. has made a considerable contribution to the outreach efforts of Jamestown Rd. Each Christmas they perform their Carols by Candlelight programme in Jamestown Rd. Each year the congregation grows and each year at least 60% of the congregation has no connection with either church. This is something the Jamestown Rd. congregation simply does not have the resources to do. In fact, the Grosvenor Rd. Choir has more members than the Jamestown Rd. Church!

Beyond that, the congregations of the four churches in Dublin gather periodically for worship and fellowship with members of each congregation taking part. These are not regular events, they are quite deliberately held at irregular intervals. They reinforce the idea that we all belong to a wider family. There is also an interest in what is happening in each of the churches. I have been asked on a number of occasions, for example to write a short piece on developments in Jamestown Rd. for the Grosvenor Rd. news letter. All of these things inevitably raise awareness and encourage prayer for one another. The pastors also typically enjoy a good rapport. This is expressed in many ways including friendship, prayer, encouragement, advice / consultation, learning from one another's mistakes and successes and so on. Relationships are marked by respect and tolerance.

Lest I paint an unrealistically 'rosy' picture of Southern interaction it should be stated that there are areas where the fellowship and co-operation needs to be improved and developed. There have been noticeable failures and there are some churches which are geographically isolated and perhaps one or two which are isolated by choice but that said, the trend of increasing co-operation and fellowship is firmly set.

Of course, not all the growth has been the result of work by members of Irish Baptist Churches. Some of our growth has come from the addition of existing churches. One of these had its origins in the work of Greater Europe

Mission, a second grew 'spontaneously' following the conversion of one or two individuals. A third recent addition was a church of long standing.

Although quite different it would appear that there are shared concerns which prompted their joining the Association. The desire to belong to a larger body, the doctrinal compatibility which existed, the sense that the Association was stable and the recognition that the larger body would be supportive were all factors in the decision to join. This is also true of at least one church which anticipates making a membership application in the near future.

(5) Southern Region Association

No overview of the developments in the Southern churches would be complete without some consideration of the Southern Association. It too has changed dramatically over the past decade. The committees over the past 10 years are better organised and have become increasingly forward looking. They have sought, through the medium of our conferences to spark our thinking and lift our vision. They have sought to bring us together in meaningful fellowship and useful co-operation. The two annual conferences are deliberately organised to facilitate this. Discussion groups at these conferences tend to be organised along regional lines so that people from adjacent locations can talk and pray together. The presence of a 'tool table' for sharing useful evangelistic tool and ideas is indicative of the approach. Underlying this is the realisation that geography affects fellowship. It is clearly much more difficult for a church in, say, Dublin to have regular fellowship and co-operation in a meaningful way with a church in Cork.

It is likely that in the goodness of God we will see the present Southern Region develop into three regions centred around Munster, Leinster and the North West. This should be seen as a very positive development which moves the association forward in the task it was created to achieve, the fostering of fellowship and co-operation among the churches.

The final question here, which I suppose I must ask, but which I confess I do not have an answer to is 'Do the changes in the Southern Region Association reflect the developments in the churches or has it helped drive the changes? Which came first, the chicken or the egg?!

Challenges Facing Us Now

It is fashionable in this penultimate month of the second millennium to look forward and ask what the new millennium holds. Not being given to gazing into crystal balls I will refrain! But I will suggest seven areas of challenge for the Southern Churches.

First is the challenge to become self supporting. Of the 16 churches only 5 are financially self supporting. The rest receive support either through Baptist Missions, the aided churches scheme or through another mission agency. This support is a lifeline for the churches who receive it. It enables them to have a full-time pastor and enhances the prospect of long-term growth. However, it must always be considered an interim measure. The goal must be to develop these churches and move towards being self-supporting. How this is done is a matter for much prayer and discussion.

Second is the challenge of becoming sending churches. It is true that many from the Southern Churches are serving in missions and in full time Christian work. However most of these people are not fully supported financially by their churches. We need to develop a missionary vision and alongside that develop the structures to facilitate the expression of that vision.

Tied into this is also the development of churches which plant churches. The goal of making our churches self supporting is simply too small. To illustrate: We have 16 churches and 6 church planting projects at various stages. If each of those were to grow to 500 members over the next ten years we would have an overall membership of 11,000 people. Impressive! But still less than 1% of the population, not exactly an influential force in a society. The priority of planting churches is further seen by looking at where the churches currently are. At a recent conference the counties of Leitrim and Roscommon were referred to as the 'Forgotten Counties' due to the fact that they have no known evangelical work of any sort. But there are other areas equally needy but perhaps not as obvious. North Dublin City has only 5 evangelical churches. Jamestown Rd. is one of them. We find ourselves as the only evangelical church in a population of around 100,000 people. Finglas itself has almost as many people as Limerick city, while adjacent districts are equivalent in size to moderate sized towns. That reality is masked by the

statistic that tells us we have 4 Baptist churches in Dublin. However, Swords is 10 miles from Finglas, Grosvenor Rd. 8, Grace, 4 miles in the city centre. We need to look at the country as a whole, to develop a national vision for church planting and think strategically.

Could it be that it is here we have our greatest challenge and difficulty? Could it be that our very proper appreciation for the autonomy of local churches at times overshadows the necessity for strategic development and long term planning? We wait for local churches to take initiative but very often local churches are preoccupied with their own issues. Individually they may have neither the time, money or energy to put into the research, planning and consultation necessary for initiating a church planting endeavour. Indeed it is likely that some of our churches are in need of additional outside assistance first before a church could be planted in a neighbouring area.

Has the time come for a national consultation on church planting? Do we need to engage in a process in which we would bring together not only the churches, but the various departments of our association and under God's direction adopt a church planting development plan which we would then work together to implement? This would have several advantages, first it would help concentrate our minds on the task of church planting at a national level. Second, it would encourage better communications church to church and church to departments. Third, it would help us identify and prioritise areas of need. Fourth, it would help us make better use of scarce resources. Fifth, it would be of particular help to Baptist Missions by giving a clearer view of the needs of the regions and opinions of the churches. Finally it would give a good basis for soliciting help from agencies outside the country. We already have a positive relationship with Conservative Baptist Foreign Missions and others. A development plan would offer guidance to them in the allocation of their resources in Ireland.

The third area of challenge is that of developing 'home grown' pastors. This should not be seen as in any way devaluing the work done by individuals from outside the Republic nor as a criticism of institutions like the Irish Baptist College. Rather it is a recognition that in the process of maturing the Irish Churches need increasingly to shoulder responsibility for training, pastoring and leading. We need to develop models of theological education suited to

the present Irish scene and flexible enough to adapt to the changing Irish scene. We need to develop models of training which help our people understand our culture and speak to their generation in a meaningful way. We need also, to revert to an earlier point, to find ways to financially support our own leaders.

Fourth we must continue to study the society which continues to change. We must strive to understand the changes and their impact. We must constantly seek to communicate with it, showing the relevance of the gospel in a meaningful way. The gospel is never irrelevant but perhaps Christians sometime are. Our challenge is akin to that of a missionary going to a foreign land. One of the first things he or she does is learn to speak the language. We must learn to speak the language of our generation, the great challenge and difficulty is that it is a language which keeps changing is rules and forms.

Closely allied with the previous challenge is that of becoming part of the society. There is a sense among many of our leaders that the churches are still viewed as not quite part of the indigenous scene. Our churches are still in some areas referred to as sects, (an improvement on the term 'cult'!). This reflects not so much religious bigotry as religious ignorance and a sense that we are in some ways a 'foreign' group. To some degree this is inevitable. After all, the gospel does make a difference and in many ways creates separation. However, there are also social and cultural issues that need to be teased out and addressed.

Theologically we will have come to grips with issues as diverse as the E.T.C.I. document, and divorce and remarriage. We will not have the option to abstain from the debates. In the goodness of God divorced and indeed remarried people will be converted and want to join churches. We must understand the Biblical principles and apply them compassionately and lovingly. Inevitably our churches will be invited to 'sign up' to E.C.T.I. and we will have to explain our reasons for declining the invitation. This will be more difficult than it might appear. In an increasingly pluralist and post modern society, refusal to sign a document which affirms another's religious views is rarely understood or tolerated. The danger of being written off as a religious bigot, who more properly belongs in a bygone age, is a very real one. Clearly this would not be a good development for those seriously engaged in trying

to win people to Jesus. I sincerely hope that as Irish Baptists we do act from conviction rather than bigotry but the dilemma remains. How does one remain true to one's convictions, communicate the rationale behind those convictions and at the same time retain a hearing for the gospel?

Above all we must face the challenge of maintaining a vision for ministry and a passion for Christ. There can be no standing still, no holding back, no letting up. The greatest danger in good progress is complacency and complacency is the seed bed of decline. The best defence is to maintain a passion for Christ. He must be the heart of our churches, He the foundation of our lives, He the source of our strength and unity, He the focus of our adoration.

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Footnotes:

1. Statistics drawn from the Annual Reports of the Baptist Union of Ireland, 1988-1999

2. More accurately this is a church re-planting

3. Cavan, Dundalk, Grace, Jamestown Rd, Limerick, Sligo

4. The Mission Work at Athlone has also completed an extensive building project.

5. Carrigaline

6. Tony Flannery CSsR The Death Of Religious Life In Ireland The Columba Press: Dublin (1997) p. 20

7. Pastoral Constitution On The Church In The Modern World' Vatican Collection, Austin Flannery (Ed.)

8 Flannery, p. 31

9. Flannery pp.48, 49

10. IMS/Irish Independent Poll Irish Independent January 2, 1999

11. Reported on RTE Television's Prime Time Programme, broadcast on 3 February, 1998

12. Eddie Holt 'Decline and Fall of the Irish Catholic Church' News of Ireland Web Site http:\www.iol/resources/noi/oct1-95.htm

13. Patricia Casey, 'In relentless pursuit of personal wealth and fleeting pleasure' Irish Independent January 2, 1999

THE IMPORTANCE OF BAPTIST PRINCIPLES TODAY

by John Birnie

It has been said that the man who could speak for all Baptists has not yet been born and that his parents are dead! Chiefly for that reason I find it a daunting (though absorbing) responsibility to attempt to address the issue of the importance of Baptist Principles today. There are other reasons too, expressed in the following questions, why the task is daunting.

Does emphasis on such distinctives not encourage the wrong kind of denominational attitudes, especially when viewed against the background of the divisions within the conservative evangelical family, and the need and desire on the part of many for a greater degree of unity? That is to say, is it not divisive?

Is an exercise in delineating Baptist Principles essentially an exercise in denominational drum-beating?

Furthermore is there not also the danger of intensifying an unedifying attitude of superiority which is endemic to some degree in those of a separatist, theological persuasion?

Are we not in danger of dealing in irrelevancies, of falling into the fatal trap of scratching where there is no sign of an itch?

To all of these questions the answer is: Yes, possibly. There is every danger of fomenting an ungodly disunity among the true children of God. Undoubtedly in the past we have engaged in doctrinal debate in order to display and feed our feelings of doctrinal and ecclesiological superiority. Nor can there be any doubt that we have fiddled away in our doctrinal and theological

corners at times while the world around us has been burning for an answer and a remedy for the destructive power of sin in individual and community life. There is every danger of being irrelevant.

Nevertheless I remain convinced that, with all the attendant dangers, it is imperative that we carefully and correctly address the questions why Baptist Principles? What are their importance today? - for these questions are neither impertinent nor irrelevant. Indeed as Baptists we must address these in order not to succumb to irrelevancy. We need to see how our particular and distinctive convictions relate to the world of the twenty-first century. It is imperative that we earth our theological and doctrinal convictions in the world in which God has placed us, unless we are content to be regarded by that world as a theological variation of the woolly mammoth.

By way of clearing the ground, a number of things should be said at the outset.

The aim of this paper is not in any degree, to encourage an unholy and unhelpful sectarianism. Historically Baptists have defended the right of every individual to be free to worship as he/she feels is right, and they have been happy and comfortable, working out their own convictions against such a background. While holding to their beliefs firmly, they have never taken the view that salvation can only be found in fellowship with Baptists.

There is a sense in which we must emphasise these things, since we believe they are not merely Baptist Principles, but Biblical Principles. This is not meant to be offensive to others, but merely to claim for ourselves what others claim for themselves - the right to interpret, understand, and apply Scripture as we believe we are led by the Holy Spirit. No doubt many Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians etc., think we are mistaken, but that is precisely because they believe their understanding of Biblical truths is correct, and in harmony with Scriptural revelation.

Consequently, we cannot dismiss these things as unimportant or irrelevant. If they are issues of truth, and have a bearing on our worship, witness, and behaviour, then they are important. Some issues may be described as secondary, that is, secondary to the heart and substance and core of the

Gospel, but they are never unimportant. Any survey of church history will quickly show the price sixteenth century Anabaptists (and many seventeenth century English Baptists) had to pay for their practice of many of these Baptist and Biblical principles, and he would be foolish who would summarily dismiss such issues as unimportant.

Those things which we call Baptist Principles impinge on our understanding and presentation of the Gospel. At the very least, we may say that Baptists have absolutely no difficulty - nor have they any excuse - for not carrying out the full terms of the Great Commission as expressed by Jesus in Matthew 28. Without any hint of theological or doctrinal adjustment, Baptists may still take this commission as their marching orders in this new millennium. Disciple, baptize and teach has been our pattern, and we believe it still to be God's order today.

Today is very different from yesterday. The question of relevance already touched on forces us to examine again the cultural, philosophical and religious context in which God has called us to live. We are in the age of post-modernism which is moving beyond and away from the professed certainties and confident self-sufficiency of human reason and ingenuity which were characteristic of the modernism of the Enlightenment. We live in a world of flux; constant, almost giddy change, where pluralism rules. Diversity is lauded almost as an end in itself what Carson calls "cherished pluralism". There are no absolutes, only what is true for you, or right for you. Words can have almost any meaning which you want to give them, and no interpretation can claim to be final. It is my conviction that a number of Baptist distinctive beliefs and convictions have increasing importance and relevance to this kind of thinking and to these we will return later.[1]

In an age of false ecumenism, healthy Biblical ecumenism [unity] can only be built on the foundation of an honest recognition of differences between believers, and a willingness to work with and through these. Any attempt to build unity upon a lowest common denominator declaration of belief, is in my view, insipid and to some degree flawed. Henry Cook was surely right when he wrote:

"Nothing is of greater value in the promotion of truth than the frank

statement of convictions honestly held, so long as this is done without bitternessand with the sincere desire to advance the cause which alone supremely matters - the advancement of the Saviour's Kingdom."[2]

Baptists are not (or ought not to be) slow to recognize and appreciate what Timothy George has called "the common linkage" which joined Baptists with other heirs of the Reformation. He quotes from F W Patterson's address in 1928 to the Baptist World Alliance meeting in Toronto in which Patterson declared that Baptists joyfully acknowledged that they held great areas of truth in common with other believers.[3] Nevertheless Patterson believed that Baptists could best serve Christ, not by joining a pan-church union, but rather by becoming better Baptists. The significant role played by Baptists in the struggle for religious liberty, their distinctive understanding of the church and church order, their considerable emphasis upon and achievements in evangelism and mission, among other things which we might term distinctives, justified, for Patterson [and for me] the continued existence of Baptists as a unique denomination.

It is important to remember that these distinctive principles were not the product of mere academic theological reflection, designed to see where Baptists differed from other professing Christians. Rather, they grew out of history. They were in fact replies to challenges directed at what Baptists believed were important Biblical truths and principles. They were answers to questions posed; counter-arguments to objections lodged; this was Baptist apologetic in the context of opposition and persecution. In the matter of defining Baptist principles, as in so many other aspects of the defining of the faith in church history, opposition, the threat of error, and even persecution played a major and significant definitive role.[4] We need to ask afresh, were our forefathers prepared to suffer and even die for these convictions? What was so important about these distinctives that martyrdom was gladly accepted by some, rather than abandonment of their beliefs? We need then to go on and ask if they were sadly misguided, or if those principles for which they suffered and sometimes died have the same weight, the same significance today.

It is my conviction that Baptists have something of vital importance to say to our world a world which has within the very recent past become more

of a global village than ever could have been imagined, with its with its vast diversity of cultures, religions, world views and philosophies. At the risk of severe over-simplification I will attempt to outline briefly what Baptist distinctives have to say to our post-modern world under three heads.

Firstly they have something to say theologically and doctrinally. All the challenges arising from post-modernism and philosophical pluralism are connected in some way with hermeneutics, with how we interpret things. Post-modernism is an outlook that depends not a little on what are perceived to be the fundamental limitations on the power of interpretation: that is, since interpretation can never be more than 'my' interpretation or 'our' interpretation, no purely objective stance is possible.

This is the kind of thinking which has been gnawing away at the traditional conservative evangelical approach to Scripture as objective revelation from God truth to be recognised and accepted. Among many evangelicals there has been, at the very least, a dulling of the clarity of their conviction that Scripture in its entirety is the authoritative Word of God. While recognising that none can come to Scripture without preconceptions and presuppositions of some sort, Baptists in their thoroughgoing biblicism and readiness always to ask "What do the Scriptures say?" have a strong anchorage in the stormy seas of subjectivism. In opposition to the claims of the new hermeneutic that there is no such thing as the real meaning of any text, only interpreted meaning, Baptists maintain that there is objective truth, revealed to us by God, and given to us in the Scriptures.[5]

It may be observed at this point that Baptists are not alone in their claim to uphold the authority of the Scriptures. True, for as L E Deens wrote on this point: "We Baptists are in complete and hearty agreement with our fellow Protestants. Indeed, the claim that we would make for ourselves is that we are more faithful, more consistent, more uncompromising in our adherence to this position than they are."[6]

This conviction has vital implications for doctrine, for worship, for evangelism, for ethics and so on. There is right and wrong, truth and error. There are acceptable moral standards, and unacceptable ones. There is a known way to approach God; there is a definite message which heralds definite

forgiveness and a definite salvation. "On the essential things", writes Henry Cook, "Baptists are quite convinced that the Scripture speaks with no uncertain sound."[7]

Implicit in the approach of Baptists to Scripture are some fundamental convictions about the nature of the God Whom we worship. He is the God Who speaks, Who intervenes in His world, Who has and is working out His purpose for His world. Contrary to the currents of post-modern thought, there is a meta-narrative - a big story - a purpose in human existence, and God is the Author of it. Believers, individually or in their worshipping communities, are not cast adrift in the world to write their own little unconnected, isolated narratives which in the end add up to meaninglessness.

The Lordship of Christ is a vital truth which touches significantly upon different areas of corporate Baptist life as well as the life of the individual believer. It is the recognition of that Lordship which undergirds and directs the organization of local church life; which keeps evangelism at the top of the agenda; which compels the exercise of the various gifts given to all believers for the common good; which gives meaning to the whole concept of the priesthood of believers as we shall examine in more detail later; and which is the touchstone for the life of true discipleship which Baptists believe is enjoined upon every Christian.

These are vital theological and doctrinal emphases which are peculiarly a part of Baptist belief, and without which the wider Christian world would be a poorer place.

Secondly they have something crucial to say ecclesiologically: W T Whitley the Baptist historian wrote in 1923 that the distinctive feature about Baptists is their doctrine of the Church.[8] It is my own conviction that every truth which we might describe as distinctively Baptist connects directly to ecclesiology. Our understanding of the nature of the church derives, we believe, from Scripture, and in turn is formative of our convictions about worship, the ordinances, evangelism and witness [mission], discipline and discipleship, service and ministry etc. These distinctive beliefs about the church and church life speak directly and relevantly into the secular and post-modern era in which we live.

Consider the following:

Baptist convictions about autonomy allow each local church to relate to the particular and peculiar challenges of its community. While agreeing on the major issues, there is room for diversity in things secondary. So churches can assess and evaluate the needs of the community in which it is planted, and can respond relevantly to those needs.

The absence of authoritarian hierarchical structures similarly recognizes a valid objection in post-modern thought to stifling centralization. It allows for healthy de-centralization without permitting a lapse into ecclesiastical or spiritual anarchy.

Linked to this is the congregational polity of Baptist churches. They are churches of the people of God for the people of God. Ultimate decision-making, while in no measure ignoring or despising true spiritual leadership, is the responsibility of the whole congregation just as the effectiveness of its worship and witness, the quality of its spiritual life and so on, are matters which include and involve the whole believing community as the local expression of the Body of Christ.

The separation of church and state, coupled with its twin, individual liberty of conscience, ensures that there is no place for coercion in matters spiritual. Baptists have insisted on the crucial place of what is called "the voluntary principle" in matters of faith and practice. That is to say, the saving belief in and commitment to Christ must be an act of will of the individual; baptism is a step taken by the believer when he comes to baptism and is not brought to it! Commitment to the local church is a matter for individual choice and decision under God and in the light of one's understanding of the Scriptures. Belief ought not to be, and indeed cannot be coerced! Individuals and their choices are to be respected even when those choices are contrary to the beliefs of Baptists. Baptists are [or should be] able to live and witness effectively in the often uncomfortable surroundings of secularism and religious pluralism.

The priesthood of all believers, understood correctly not merely as the right of private judgement but also as the responsibility of every believer to

be a priest to his fellow-believers, - that is, to serve one another for the purpose of encouragement, edification, and maturity -, at one and the same time recognises both individuality and mutuality. It respects individual thought and gift and service, but summons believers to use these in the service of the whole community. While not denying or despising the individual contribution, it is a necessary corrective to the rampant individualism of our day. The spiritual worth and equality of each believer is recognised, while difference in ministry and responsibility is maintained.

Individual freedom and liberty is upheld, but anarchy is repelled by the particular convictions of Baptists about the nature of the church as a body of baptised believers who voluntarily commit themselves to one another and to the Lord in the service of Him, of each other, and of those in the community and world around who have yet to experience the forgiving grace of God in Christ. Discipline and discipleship have their proper place and function in this gathered community of believers. There is a healthy and necessary emphasis on corporate Christian living and service.

I would add one more local application of the principles of separation of church and state and individual liberty of conscience. These have enabled Baptist witness in Ireland in the main to remain untainted by political sectarianism and to be free from party politics and in some measure to keep our evangelistic efforts uncluttered by political baggage and unbiblical sectarianism. Whatever our individual, personal political opinions and beliefs, and there is a wide spectrum of these in Irish Baptist life, the witness of our churches is one which has remained largely free of any political alignment.

Thirdly they have something to say philosophically. In a sense, this has been the theme running right through this paper, so I will merely summarise a few of the most important aspects of Baptist belief which speak directly into the contemporary Western post-modern world-view.

Countering post-modernistic influences/traits - subjectivity and relativism. Baptists insistence on the reality of Biblical authority is a necessary corrective to the spiritually debilitating influences of the new hermeneutic and the ravages of deconstructionism, that is, the idea that ultimately all meaning is bound up irretrievably with the 'knower' rather than with the text,

and that therefore no claim can be made that any one interpretation is right or final. There are as many valid interpretations as there are interpreters, and language cannot in the final analogy refer to objective reality but only to other words. Carson observes that how hard the new hermeneutic is pressed towards sheer subjectivity varies with the interpreter, and asks that having entered this morass is it possible to continue to maintain that there is some objective truth out there?[8] Baptists answer "Yes", and insist that the Scriptures plainly understood serve as our guide, a guide which is authoritative and reliable.

Countering unbiblical pluralism. There is a pluralism which is healthy namely, that which accepts and maintains core truths while allowing for difference of opinion and conviction in secondary issues. But the pluralism of today's religious world is saying something very different - all religions are valid and lead to God. There is no room for the exclusivistic claims of Jesus Christ; the most one is permitted to say is that Christianity is a [the] superior way to God. Baptist commitment to the ultimate authority of Scripture as the objective, propositional revelation of God to men will not allow them to distort the Gospel and its claims in this way.

Countering secularism: Baptists believe in a community living out its life in dependence upon and, at every point, with reference to God. Historically Baptists have emphasised the reality of discipleship. Like the Anabaptists before them, they have called believers to walk after Christ in simplicity of lifestyle, refusing to allow the unbiblical dichotomy often drawn between the sacred and the secular. Holiness, Christlikeness is to be an everyday dimension to our living, not confined to what might be termed religious exercises. God, Christ, grace, faith, humility, forgiveness, love - all the so-called spiritual realities are at the core of life, not at its edges. This is discipleship; this is the life God desires us to lead; and, more than ever, this needs to be realised in us, if we ever hope to make a meaningful impact on a godless world. I am conscious that I may be speaking here of what ought to be distinctive of us as Baptists rather than what is!

Countering unbiblical individualism: Don Carson[9] deals at length with one of the characteristics of contemporary society, what he calls "rugged individualism veering toward narcissism." He quotes Phillip Hammond whose

view is that the emphasis on personal autonomy in the past two decades has brought about the third disestablishment of religion in America, namely, a suspicion of loyalty and doctrine alike which has resulted in this generation thinking of church in terms of what they can get out of it rather than how they can give service to the church or to God.

Baptist principles emphasise individual responsibility as well as individual freedom and autonomy. Baptists characteristically have stressed not only the importance of individual discipleship, but community life and witness. Our understanding of the church is sectarian in the strictest sense of that term, that is, a body of believers gathered out of the world to be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people [1 Peter 2:9] to live as a believing community. The church is to be separate from the world in its corporate lifestyle and witness, a body functioning effectively for Christ because its members, each member belongs to all the others [Rom.12:5] and functioning in harmony and fellowship with all others. Again the doctrine of the priesthood of believers is at the core of our understanding of the church, each member having the responsibility of ministering to the others in a mutually ministering body which is charged with displaying to the world, community and society as God planned it to be.

Conclusion

It is with that thought we conclude this evening, for the duty of the believer individually, and the church corporately, coalesce in this. We are charged with the responsibility of living our lives and carrying out our service in such a way as to have a transforming effect upon the world in which God has put us. We are to be salt and light, to be the means by which God draws sinners to Christ. We live and serve for the glory of Christ in the salvation of sinners. We bear the responsibility of understanding the will of God, and living accordingly. Successive generations of Baptists before us, and we in their train, have discerned important principles by which they feel compelled to live. We cannot, we dare not abandon these if we sincerely believe them to be of God. Let other believers live according to the light they have; they will answer to God, not to us. But let us, too, live according to the light we have, for we also will answer to Him on that great day.

Footnotes:

1. Keith G Jones A Believing Church (BU of GB 1998), pp.51,52 quotes J W McLendon Jnr. who lists five insights which are key elements of a Baptist theology:

   Biblicism - humble acceptance of the authority of Scripture for both faith and practice

   Mission - the responsibility to witness to Christ and to accept the suffering that witness entails

   Liberty or Soul Competency - God-given freedom to respond to God without the intervention of the state or other powers

   Discipleship - the life transformed into service by the Lordship of Jesus Christ (signified by believer's baptism)

   Community - sharing together in a storied life of obedient service to and with Christ (signified by the Lord's Supper).

2. H Cook, What Baptists Stand For, (Carey Kingsgate 1947), p.11
3. T George, "The Reformation Roots of the Baptist Tradition" in Review and Expositor, (86, 1989), p.19
4. W M S West, Baptist Principles, (Baptist Union of Great Britain 1975), p.5
5. D Carson, The Gagging of God, (Apollos 1996), p.57
6. L E Deens, We Irish Baptists, (Baptist Union of Ireland), p7
7. H Cook, op. cit., p.14
8. W T Whitley, The History of British Baptists, (1932 edition), p.4
9. Carson, op.cit. p.47

SOME MORE IRISH BAPTIST EVANGELISTS

by Jim Byers

John the Baptist is introduced to readers of John's Gospel with these words: "there was a man sent from God whose name was John." Preachers emphasise that he was merely 'a man'. As I introduce you to some more Irish Baptist Evangelists I remind you that they too were men -saved men, gifted men but imperfect men. Please remember this. We are inclined to place preachers, missionaries and sometimes pastors on a pedestal.

Fifty years ago the expression "aggressive evangelism" was frequently used in Christian circles. Mr James Guthrie made these words the theme of his Presidential Address in 1946. Duncan Campbell in his little book The Lewis Awakening 1946-1953 defines the phrase, as he understood it, to mean:

"Not simply an effort in the gospel, not a mission BUT seeing people come into vital relationshop with Jesus Christ, witnessing men and women supernaturally altered and their whole being - body, soul and spirit characterized by holiness."

Our records clearly reveal that the desire in the hearts of the members of the Irish Baptist Home Mission committee was realised over and over again in souls being born again and lives changed through the preaching of the gospel of the grace of God.

Hugh Henry Orr (Evangelist 1944-46)

Hugh Orr was a south Derry man. He was saved when he was in his early twenties, and subsequently became a member of Magherafelt Baptist Church. Pastor Robert Boggs in a paper read to this Society ten years ago mischievously referred to him as being "the product of a mixed marriage,

Hugh's father was a Church of Ireland, his mother a Wesleyan."

"Big-hearted and loveable", "the finest preacher of his time in Ireland", "outstanding as a friend and colleague" are some of the descriptive phrases used to describe this man of God. Boggs commenced his paper, "In the list of those who have contributed much to the enhancement of the spiritual life and reputation of Baptist churches in Ireland few names will rank more highly than that of Hugh Orr."

At the business session of our 1943 Assembly concern was expressed regarding the fewness of conversions. This was taken up by the Union Executive and J H Corbett, a Portadown business man and a member of the Irish Baptist Home Mission comiittee was asked to form a small group to examine the whole situation. This sub-committee affirmed a policy of aggressive evangelism and recommended the appointment of one or more evangelists. Hugh Orr, then pastor of the Kilrea church, accepted the invitation to take up this work at a salary of "£300 a year plus reasonable expenses".

He was not new to the work of an evangelist. George McKillen, sometime pastor of the Tobermore church, founded the South Derry Association which in 1930 employed Hugh Orr as one of its evangelists working in that area, until 1935 when he accepted a call to the Kilrea church. While there he was reputed to have held missions at every cross-roads in the district using a tent or portable hall. It is difficult today for people generally and urban dwellers in particular to appreciate the importance of the cross-roads fifty years ago as meeting place for local people. It was there boy met girl, beasts were often sold, and debts settled. Orr brought the gospel to these meeting places. We surely have a responsibility in our day to discover and use the equivalent in our society - perhaps some 'talk shop' on the Internet, where millions of people log on daily. We may discover a suitable web-site to reach out to these multitudes, but I doubt if we will find a more symbolic place. Fifty years ago people in the Kilrea district referring to the mission would ask each other, "Are you coming to the cross to-night?" or "Have you been to the cross?" Hugh Orr himself was saved at a cross-roads in Co. Tyrone!

At a meeting in the Great Victoria Street church, Belfast, Orr this church

was commissioned as a Home Mission evangelist. Mr Forbes, the secretary of the Mission, "thanked God for the definite leading of the Holy Spirit and assured Pastor Orr that there was behind him a united band of praying people". The Home Mission committee, he said, wished to help smaller churches and planned efforts to open work in districts where there was no evangelical witness.

Orr's first mission was held in the Portadown church in September 1944 when upwards of twenty conversions were reported. This was followed by missions in Banbridge, Dunseverick, Milltown, Limavady, Lurgan and Killyleagh. The Portadown mission began with a conference, the evangelist being one of the speakers. "He gave", it was reported, "a most encouraging message on 'Three Trials of Faith in the Life of Abraham' with three headings: Faith without a Where (Gen 12); Faith without a How (Gen 15); Faith without a Why (Gen 22).

Reporting to the 1945 Annual Assembly Orr spoke of eight missions at which 100 people professed faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. He noted among them several striking cases. At the Banbridge mission a whole family of five professed faith, and an old man of eighty years of age turned to the Lord. He went on to make four suggestions for churches contemplating having a mission: (1) Do not leave all to the Evangelist. (2) Be willing to sacrifice. (3) Commence to attend and work at the beginning. (4) Write to friends who may be in the district asking tham to attend.

1946 was a remarkable year.

Ballynahinch reported: "The Lord blessed Mr Orr's ministry and set His seal of approval to our brother's work in bringing 5 souls to the place of acceptance of the Lord Jesus. To Him be praise. Mr Orr gave himself whole-heartedly to the work, visiting the people of the town and countryside daily, as well as preaching in the marketplace week by week, and in some of the mission halls on Sunday evenings."

Grange church's report read: "Altogether 25 people professed faith in Christ among whom were three men and their wives. Mr Orr made the way of salvation so plain and we are so grateful to him." Fifty-three years later,

confirms that 26 professed faith, including seven couples, and that they all went on [with the Lord]. Clearly, of those who professed, eight later married so making up the seven couples.

Cliftonpark Avenue church, Belfast reported 'fifty-five souls brought into vital relationship with God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ".

Another mission was held in the Great Victoria Street church, Belfast, a feature of which was the early morning prayer meetings at which the evangelist spoke on the subject of "prayer". The large crowds at the Sunday evening services had to be accommodated in two meetings, one at 6.30 the other at 8.00 p.m. "The gospel was proclaimed without fear or favour in the power of the Holy Spirit."

In the East End church, Belfast "many darkened souls passed into the glorious light of God's salvation, backsliders were restored and believers were truly blessed and strengthened."

Orr was a gentle giant, albeit stooped in his later years, with a winsome sense of humour. When asked if he had had enough to eat at the annual conference in Carndaisy he replied, "Those wee sandwiches are like daisies in a coo's mouth."

The Year Book for 1946 summarized his work - "In all these missions the presence and saving power of the Holy Spirit was very evident. Many were brought to a deep consciousness of sin and were led savingly to know the Lord Jesus Christ." Hugh Orr resigned from the Home Mission to become pastor of the East End church. "Tributes were paid to his grand service and thanks given to God for the wonderfu way the evangelist had been used in the salvation of souls."

The story is told of the young Hugh Orr, the tall, dark, unattached evangelist who was staying in the home of Pastor George Olley during a mission held in the Newtownards church. This was while Orr for a brief period a freelance, itinerant evangelist before settling in Kilrea. Pastor and evangelist had known each other earlier when Olley was pastor at Coagh. One evening Olley announced that Orr was bringing his young lady friend to

the meeting the following day. The young girls and some not so young were dumbstruck, and decided to meet the train and get their first glance of the girl from the country. The train arrived and Orr alighted from the carriage and turned to assist his friend from the train. Out stepped a slim, elegant, fair-haired and fashionably dressed young lady. She was a nurse in one of Belfast's teaching hospitals. The girls still attended the meetings, they still prayed for the evangelist, but their dreams dissolved, their vision vanished, their hopes were shattered for May Stitt became Mrs Hugh Orr and was a constant source of strength to her husband, and a true "helpmeet".

James Irvine (Evangelist, 1945 - 1947)

Like Hugh Orr, James Irvine was also the son of a mixed marriage. His father attended a Brethren assembly and his mother was a member of the Baptist church in Newtownards. James was a wayward son and often recalled after his conversion that he used to sing on a Saturday night 'Show me the way to go home.' After the Lord saved him he changed his song to 'The way of the Cross leads home.'

Irvine was saved at the age of twenty-one at a meeting conducted by Tom Rea, an evangelist who was holding a mission in the Baptist church. He was greatly influenced by two men in his early Christian life. One was James McKendrick, a Scottish evangelist, who made frequent visits to the Province. It was McKendrick who taught converts of the W P Nicholson mission in Newtownards the truth about believers' baptism and the regenerate church. His favourite chorus which he sang heartily in his Scottish accent was:

Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there;
If you trust and never doubt
He will surely help you out.
Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.

The other man was Pastor W E Tocher who preached in the Iron Hall and in Templemore Hall in Belfast. He called himself "half a Mephibosheth" because he was lame on one of his feet. Irvine quoted Tocher frequently in his ministry and in his gospel messages.

Irvine's pastor in Newtownards held weekly classes for young men with preaching gift. His method was to give one a text and ask him to prepare a sermon on it for the following week. Irvine arrived at the class in his turn and said, "Pastor, I broke mine in three". "Whatever happened James", was the reply, "did you let it fall?" Drop it or not, Irvine was to break verses and passages from the Scriptures into three for the rest of his life.

James Gunning, his second cousin, was also a great encouragement to Jim in the days following his conversion, and quickly became his trusted counsellor and companion in evangelism. An early evidence of their innovative skills was demonstrated in their home town of Newtownards. They were burdened for the Hannahstown area of the town but they could find no place in which to hold meetings. They came to an arrangement with a Mrs Ross to pay half her rent if she allowed them to use her parlour for a weekly gospel meeting. This they did for some time. A Miss McClelland invited them to Bangor to hold open-air meetings in the Gransha road district. They very soon procured one of the typical wooden bungalows, so common in that area as sea-side holiday homes, for regular gospel meetings. A group of young men joined them for open-air meetings every Monday evening in Newtownards. During the summer months they cycled to Tobermore, Magherafelt, Ballymena and other places to conduct meetings, six of them sleeping in a small tent! On occasions Pastor Tom Bailey of Magherafelt Baptist church allowed them to sleep in the church building.

It was no surprize therefore that Gunning, after attending Bible College in Glasgow, went to Brazil with the Acre Gospel Mission. He and his wife Dorrie spent forty years there as missionaries. Irvine also felt called to full-time Christian work. Mr Mairs, a local preacher from Bangor, introduced James to Lord Street City Mission Hall in Belfast, and he became a frequent preacher there. This led to his appointment to the staff of the Belfast City Mission as missionary of the Donegal Road Hall. The Belfast City Mission originated in the early nineteenth century and in the 1830s came under the control of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. James was a Baptist and wasn't really fulfilled in this work.

In January 1945 Irvine was interviewed by the Evangelistic committee of the Irish Baptist Home Mission.

The secretary, Pastor Frank H Forbes, had heard him preach and reported that "his address had been on sowing and reaping; it was well-arranged and led one to conclude that he was a reader." The committee unanimously recommended that he be given an appointment as an evangelist starting on 1st May 1945 for a two-year period at a salary of £260 per year plus expenses. Irvine owned his own tent and used it throughout that summer. It is recorded that he laboured in the gospel with much encouragement throughout the year in the Coagh-Cookstown district, and in Portstewart, Kilkeel and Limavady.

At that time John McCrea was appointed as an evangelist from 1st October. Announcing this news Pastor Forbes wrote, "This comes to us as a further challenge. We appeal for sustained prayer support so that the open doors and needy parts of our loved land may be entered and Christ's kingdom extended."

Speaking at the 1946 Assembly Irvine told of chequered experiences in evangelism but said that souls had been saved. A report of the Banbridge mission that year reads, "a spirit of expectancy existed in the hearts of many. Altogether 8 professed to accept Christ as Saviour. Mr Irvine gave of his best and his messages were full of challenge and conviction." Of the Carginagh mission in Mourne area we read, "From the start attendances and attention was all that could be desired. Almost everyone in the district from miles around were present night by night. There was a spirit of expectancy among the Christians, who continued in prayer that souls might be saved. Prayer was answered. Souls were born again, more than we know of."

During his time as an evangelist Irvine gained a reputation as an acceptable speaker at church socials. These were very popular events for the whole family in many of our churches. He would often take the common potato as an object lesson - pronounce in Ulster-Scots as the "tator". The Tator Family in the church - husband Richard or "Dictator", wife Agnes, his beloved Aggie or "Agitator", their daughter Hester or "Hesitator", and the little son who wore glasses and was called "specky four eyes" by his schoolmates was "Spectator". I remember Jack Ashcroft of the Coagh church when he heard this talk raising the roof with laughter as he apparently was able to identify these fictitious people in his own church.

Irvine preached his best and most powerful messages when using only skeleton outlines. I was allowed to see the loose-leaf Bible he used in the 40s and 50s. I checked sixteen verses and passages that I clearly remember him preaching from. They were memorable, moreso because he preached from notes written in the margin. For example,

John 1: 40-42 The Conversion of Peter
Peter was sought for Jesus
Peter was brought to Jesus
Peter was changed by Jesus

1 Samuel 3: 1-10 The Call of Samuel
Who the Lord called
Where the Lord called
The Way the Lord called
When the Lord called

Mark 6: 45-52 The Journey of Life
The Destination they expected - "the other side"
The Difficulties they encountered - "the storm"
The Deliverance they experienced
then 3 words - "It is I"
now 3 words - "It is finished"

He had the ability to illustrate his messages with homely and often humorous stories. In order to teach the difference between "Union" and "Unity" he told of the farmer who tied his two goats together by the neck. Asked why they never strayed, the farmer replied, "When one wants to forward, the other wants to go backward, and so they go nowhere." Irvine said, "They had union of body but no unity of purpose."

After two years, Irvine resigned from the Home Mission in April 1947 on accepting a call to the pastorate of Church Street East church, Belfast.

Three days before he died in the Down Hospital, Downpatrick, I visited him. He asked if I was preaching a series. I said I was going through Philippians. He said, "I'll give you an outline. Miss out chapter 1, chapter 2

Encouragement in Christ (v.1); chapter 3 Entirely for Christ (v.7); chapter 4 Everything through Christ." Now", he said, raising himself in the bed, "Go back to chapter 1 Eternity with Christ." "Jam", he said [that is how he pronounced my name], Jam, preach it when I am gone." I promised I would. He did go and was survived by his wife Elizabeth and their only son, Geddis.

John A. McCrea 1945-51

John McCrea came to the Home Mission from the Kinghan Mission to the Deaf and Dumb in 1945, recommended as a man of outstanding ability, an experienced evangelist. He commenced on 1st October at a salary of £280 per year plus expenses. One of his first missions was in the Tandragee church which reported "the gospel was faithfully preached, souls were saved and God's people were revived. To God be the glory."

At the 1946 Assembly he confessed to being afraid of statistics, but stated that in six missions 38 persons had professed conversion. He mentioned the three phases of evangelistic work - Look ye! Pray ye! Go ye!

The Killyleagh church spoke of McCrea's mission there - "The messages were both vital and of great variety. Furthermore, and is not this our crowning joy, as the Word of God was conveyed to the hearts of men and women in the power of the Spirit seven precious souls found refuge and rest in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Reports of all his missions were encouraging with conversions at each: Ballykeel - "gave of his best night after night and also in house-to-house visitation"; Limavady - "God graciously blessed His Word through his faithful servant to the salvation of many souls"; Dungannon - "the unconverted were made to see the folly of rejecting God's way of salvation". I recall that McCrea reserved Friday nights as "Questions Night" when he answered questions submitted during the week.

During 1948 he wrote a series of articles in the Irish Baptist - "Leaves from the Journal of an Evangelist" - they provide a great insight into the man.

"The reader of Paul's epistles soon becomes aware that the great evangelist had no uniform experience in the various centres where he proclaimed the good news." He wrote of four things that give great encouragement to the evangelist: The knowledge (1) that this work is of paramount importance; (2) that the work is being remembered in prayer. "Where there is no vision the people perish," because there is no vision there is no prayer; (3) of the large amount of help received from God's people, preparing the way for the evangelist - distributing tracts and invitations. "The evangelist who is not conscious of his debt to others and who is not encouraged by their devoted service, is unworthy of the name; (4) of the seal of the divine stamped upon his work. To be able to say, "You are my epistles, known and read of all men."

In another article he wrote about the various responses met in evangelistic work. The "I don't see it" person; "I know it all" attitude; "I don't feel it" response; and Agumentative types.

Nineteen forty-seven was an encouraging year. "The faithful ministry of the Word night by night was greatly appreciated. Christians were helped. Some professed faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Judging from the quality of the meetings and the evident concern of the people, we expected an even graeter response to the gospel appeal." McCrea told the Assembly, "The provision of God was realized; the power of God was released; the promises of God were revealed."

It was largely through McCrea that county Fermanagh was opened up to Baptist work. In discussions with the Committee his request to return to this county was granted on several occasions using the Home Mission caravan and working the markets and fairs. In 1949 he found the strain of living in the caravan affecting his health and had to be relieved of that responsibility.

In contrast to the Fermanagh experience he told of a mission in the greater Belfast area: "At the end of the first fortnight 8 persons had been saved or restored, but on the Monday night of the last week the break came. Seekers dealt with included a man of 73 years. From that night until the end of the mission there were conversions every night. The climax came on the last night when no fewer than 12 found the Saviour, making a total of 38.

One man under deep conviction for a full fortnight just overflowed with joy when he was saved. On the last night this man had the joy of seeing 5 of his relatives, including his wife, come to the Saviour."

McCrea resigned in 1951 having accepted a call to the Kilkeel church. He was badly missed!

William David Mullan 1947-1950

Willie Mullan was one of a large family in Newtownards. His mother was a believer and worked hard to provide for her many children. Her husband, Willie's father, died in the first World War. She died when Willie was seventeen. It was at that time that he left home and spent three years living rough. For all that time he never slept in a bed. On his return to his home town he rented a small house but very soon he and his drinking companions had turned it into a den of thieves. It was at this time that he heard Pastor W E Tocher preaching the gospel in the Baptist church. Shortly after, standing in a field, he passed "from death unto life". He subsequently became a member of the Baptist church.

He worked for Dickson's of Hawlmark, the famous rose growers, and became quite an expert, memorizing the Latin names for the different varieties. He married Mary Dalzell and they had two sons. Next, Willie worked happily for a number of years as gardener and handyman for Mr Calder a surgeon in the Ards hospital.

He studied at night, and soon his preaching gift became evident. He was invited to hold missions in various halls and churches, assisted by three young men from the church, dubbed the Ards Trio - Tom Donaldson, Sam Scott and Sam McLean - and destined to enhance the evangelistic ministry of Willie for years to come.

The Home Mission committee invited Mullan, then 36 years old, for an informal meeting in March 1947. He expressed himself willing to take up full-time work as an evangelist as he already was feeling the strain of doing his daily work and holding missions in the evenings. He was offered a two-year appointment at £300 a year plus expenses. A fortnight later after searching

and detailed consideration, concluding that he should continue in his present work, he wrote declining the offer. He added, however, that he was evangelising within a 40 mile radius of Newtownards and if there was an opening in this area he could undertake for the Home Mission, he was willing to help.

A second letter from Mullan reached the Home Mission secretary on 13th August expressing his continued burden about full-time service. He had just completed a mission in the famous Tent Hall in Glasgow when between 1700 and 1800 attended each evening and a number were converted. In his letter he said, "I really want to know my Saviour more. I simply cannot hold out any longer. In the past weeks I have received invitations for eight missions during this winter. If you care to renew your offer of some months ago I am prepared to accept." The offer was renewed and Willie became a Home Mission evangelist in October 1947.

His first mission was in the Grange church where, after a difficult beginning, the power of prayer was manifested both in the work of the church and an ingathering of the lost. Missions in Portavogie, Lurgan, Lisnagleer, Windsor (Belfast), Newtownards, Portadown, Banbridge were followed by a lengthened period in Monkstown. A work of grace was evident in all these places - "Consequently, many are rejoicing ... in the assurance of sins forgiven, are growing in grace and in the knowledge of the truth".

At the People's Hall in Portavogie the building "was packed to capacity every night. We believe he is a man sent from God. His messages were delivered without fear or favour. He was assisted by the Ards Trio." After three weeks there was a breath of revival in the district. In the Portadown tent campaign in June 1948 many were converted. A mission in the Irish Evangelical Church at Knock, Belfast, was judged the best since the inception of the church with attendances rising from 60 to 244 on the final night. Carrickfergus church after a mission early in 1949 wrote, "He keeps himself and nonsense out of his preaching, sticks to the Word and exalts the Lord."

In the summer, 1949, he paid a second visit to the Tent Hall, Glasgow. Attendances rose from 1800 at the start to 2500 at the close of the mission, with conversions almost every night. Mullan featured special subjects in his

preaching and this stimulated the interest of many Christians. Because of his popularity, churches and halls outside Baptist circles began to request the Home Mission committee for his services. These presented the committee with a difficulty as the Baptist community also wanted Mullan. The committee proved to be very understanding and accommodating as time allowed. The evangelist held eleven three-week missions during 1948 with a week's rest between each and one month's holiday, which was the pattern followed by the other Home Mission evangelists.

Mullan was in great demand as a conference speaker and found it difficult to refuse. He claimed to have preached on 364 days in one year! God very graciously blessed his ministry. On the closing night of a mission in Grove, Belfast, 550 people were present to hear the final address.

Many people are of the opinion that Mullan did not use sermon notes, others that his notes were concealed in the pulpit. Neither view is true. He had outline notes for every message but he did not bring notes into the pulpit, nor even into the meeting. His notes were always written on one side of a sheet of paper and then carefully and meticulously memorized.

His notes for a message on "I am the door" John 10:7:
1 What a powerful ilustrationa door - the official door
2 What a simple illustrationa door - an open door
3 What a clear illustrationa door - the only door

I. The Persons Christ preached to:"if any man"
"all ye that labour"
"him that cometh to me"
"whosoever shall call"
"sinners"

II. The Principle Christ proclaimed:
"enter in"
"by FAITH" - the principle NOAH preached
- the principle hymn writers preached

III. The Promise Christ published
"he shall be saved"

Preaching from the text "Without me ye can do nothing" he had five points by way of introduction and then a detailed explanation as to the meaning of "without me" and finally seven main points, each subdivided several times. There are thirty-five lines of notes and these were all memorized in a photographic way before going into the pulpit to preach.

Mullan loved to work and just before receiving and acceptng a call to the Bloomfield church he indicated to the committee that he was happy to continue on the staff as long as he was needed. After three years at Bloomfield he was called to the Lurgan church where he was to spend twenty-seven years. His long and distinguished ministry was notable for the weekly Bible Class that was attended by people from all over the Province. His untimely death in strange circumstances in December 1980 is something that I do not understand. His headstone in the Movilla cemetary in Newtownards bears the inscription

> In memory of a dearly loved husband, father and grandfather
> Absent from the body, present with the Lord.

In conclusion, I have been speaking of men who were imperfect in many ways, as indeed we all are, men whom we do not judge because "... at the judgement seat each of us will give account of himself to God" [Romans 14:12]. It is best, therefore, that we leave an evaluation of their work and worth until then.

HENRY DERWENT GRIBBON, B.COM. SC., PH. D. (1917-2000)

We regret to announce the death of the President of the Historical Society on 27 April.

A founder-member of the Historical Society, he was its energetic Secretary from 1968 to 1978 and its President from 1984-2000. His leadership and his contributions to the Society's Journal were of a consistently high standard and will be greatly missed by all the members.

A civil servant by occupation he was a Principal Officer in the Ministry of Agriculture for Northern Ireland. His Ph.D. thesis on "The History of Water Power in Ulster" was published in 1969 by the Institute of Irish Studies (Queen's University Belfast). It is an example of the meticulous research and**credible historical analysis he used in all his work.**

As a youth Harry was taught the truths of the Scriptures by loving, godly parents, and soon trusted the Lord Jesus for salvation - and for life. That faith permeated the whole of his life and produced in his character, for all to see, the graces of the Holy Spirit - love, joy, peace. patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Harry's family is well-known in Baptist circles - his grandfather, Henry A Gribbon, was President of the Baptist Union of Ireland in 1915. His father, Henry C was elected to the same office in 1930. His mother, Ada, was a much-loved leader among Baptist women of her generation. His sister Mary was for many years on the staff of Baptist Missions in Peru. He himself was esteemed among Irish Baptists for his Christ-like spirit and for his valuable services to the churches.

We cherish memories of one whose long life adorned the doctrine of God his Saviour in all things.

BOOK REVIEW

By Divine Coincidence (Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland, Belfast, 2000) pb. £6.99 plus p & p £1.60)

The story of how Irish Baptist missionaries pioneered gospel outreach in South America told in an easy, readable style but well-researched and documented. It deals with the triumphs and challenges of establishing churches in a difficult physical and spiritual climate in Argentina and Peru from 1925 to 1977.

This book provides valuable insights into spreading the gospel in south Peru, particularly among the Aymaras of the high Andes and the economically-deprived people in the towns of the coastal area around Tacna. It sheds light on the current operations of Baptist Missions in Peru as part of the Irish Baptist overseas programme.

Written by Andrew Reid, a grandson of one of the first missionary couples to work with the Irish Baptist Foreign Mission in south Peru, this book should be widely read by all who have an interest in mission and is a must for every Irish Baptist.

IRISH BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Report to Annual Assembly 2000

Reviewing the past year it is pleasant to note the continued interest in the meetings of the Society. Pastor Byers' second paper on "Some Irish Baptist Evangelists" at the annual meeting in May rounded off an enjoyable and nostalgic account of the Home Mission evangelists whose names were household words among Irish Baptists in the post-war decades. Their gifts and fervour for winning of others to faith in Jesus Christ mark a period of growth of our witness that was unique. A paper by the Secretary on "Some Early Baptist Emphases in Doctrine, Polity and Liturgy" was a reminder of the foundations laid by the Baptist churches in the seventeenth century. By contrast Pastor Rob Millar's excellent paper on "Recent Developments among Baptist Churches in the Republic" examined the spiritual movement there in recent years and its impact on the Baptist witness, for so long maintained with great courage and faith by the churches south of the border.

The turn of the century has prompted a series of papers to be delivered during the year 2000. Pastor John Birnie presented the first in March on "The Importance of Baptist Principles To-day". Others in preparation are "The Local Church in the Twenty-first Century", "Changing Patterns of Worship among Irish Baptists" , "Comparisons between the Baptist Community in 1900 and 2000".

We look forward to the publication of the history of the Irish Baptist Foreign Mission authored by Andrew Reid, who was awarded an M. Phil. by Queen's University Belfast for a thesis on this topic.

Members of our churches are invited to become members of the Society for a modest subsciption of £10 a year. Husbands and wives may be joint-members for £15. Included in the subscription is the Society's Journal published annually in May.

Irish Baptist Historical Society

(Formed 1968)

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Secretary: Dr J Thompson

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