

EVALUATE YOUR DENOMINATION'S APPROACH TO MINISTRY IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Module: B2 Theology of Ministry

Date: 15/5/06

Outline:

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Overview of Baptist ministry
- 3 Congregational government
- 4 The role of the pastor
- 5 The role of deacons and elders
- 6 National organisation
- 7 Conclusion

1 Introduction

This essay assesses the key features of contemporary UK Baptist ministry in the light of the New Testament. Two key points to make at the outset are that Baptist churches do not have a single ministry structure, while the New Testament does not clearly endorse a single model of ministry.¹ Accordingly, any evaluation has to be cautious and preliminary.

2 Overview of Baptist ministry

The basic unit of the Baptist church is the congregation – the community of baptised members of the church. They take key decisions on the running of the church in church meetings. The church is typically self-financing and independent, albeit a member of the Baptist Union.

The leadership structure can be one of two models. It can be a pastor (male or female) and deacons or it can be a pastor, other elders and deacons. All the office holders are typically elected at church meetings. In the first model, the pastor (or “single elder”) is the leader of the church, while the subordinate deacons are responsible for practical aspects of running the church. In the second model the pastor is an elder who specialises in leadership but otherwise shares governance of the church and spiritual leadership with the “plural elders”. Deacons, who still run the church functions, are then subordinate to the elders.

In the 20th Century, the denomination developed a nationwide framework of regional superintendents who oversee local churches, as well as systems of financial redistribution to poor churches, and a system of accreditation for ministers (although many churches accept ministers who are not accredited).

¹ See the four essays in Engle and Cowan, *Who runs the church?*

3 Congregational government

The biblical basis of Baptist congregational government is the “priesthood of all believers” (1 Peter 2:9), also based on Hebrews 4:16, stressing access to God on the part of all believers. Old Testament priests are not needed as bridges from God to the people, and there is “ontological equality”² of the congregation. Second, there is the idea that the whole church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:17), with all members being sons of God and equally important (Galatians 3:28). And third, there is the distribution of spiritual gifts to all believers in the body as set out in 1 Corinthians 12, an aspect that was emphasised by the charismatic revival of the 1970s. Christ being the head of the body (Ephesians 5:23) and endowed with such gifts by the Spirit, the congregation does not need to submit to a human leader in its ministry.

The collective decisions the church body may take³ include appointing officers (Acts 6:1-7), administering finances (Acts 11:29-30), admitting members (Acts 15:1-35), commissioning for evangelism (Acts 13:1-3), administering discipline (1 Corinthians 5:1-5) and restoring the repentant (2 Corinthians 2:6). In the Baptist tradition, such decisions should be led by the Holy Spirit as stressed in Acts 13:2.

On the other hand, it is not clear that all of these decisions in the New Testament were taken by a “typical Baptist church-style meeting”. Some were taken by what resembles a body of elders as in Acts 15:6, or prophets and teachers as in Acts 13:1-3, so there is not a ground to say non-congregational approaches are unbiblical. Leaders still have to lead meetings as implied by Paul’s advice to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:25 “those who oppose him he must

² Patterson, ‘Single’, 140.

³ Tidball, ‘Biblical’, 11-12.

gently instruct”. And some decisions were clearly taken by one person as in Titus 1:5, where it is Titus himself whom Paul directs to appoint elders. This brings us to the role of the pastor.

4 The role of the pastor

The Baptist tradition is to have leaders of congregations, as did the New Testament church. This is shown by the appointment of the disciples by Jesus in John 1 and Mark 3, the role taken by James, Peter and Paul in the church of Acts, and Paul’s appointment of leaders in churches such as Timothy in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3). In Hebrews 13:17 Christians are told to “obey your leaders” although consistent with congregationalism; the latter are “to give an account”. As in the Baptist church, the leader, mirroring Paul, is to be a servant aiming to build others up (2 Corinthians 10:8) and not a dictator.

The New Testament role of the leader is, however, less clear than that of deacons and elders set out below. Passages such as 1 Timothy 5:17 and 1 Thessalonians 5:12 thought by some⁴ to apply to a sole leader talk in general terms of directing the church, being over the people, working and admonishing, which applies to Baptist churches as well as all others.

Ephesians 4:11-13 talks of the ministry of leaders as including apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers - a list which is functionally based. Although some Baptists talk of a person who could do all of these alone,⁵ in practice Baptist ministers often focus solely on pastoring - personal ministry - and being teachers - upholding God’s word.⁶ This narrows the leader’s role over 2 Timothy 4:1-5 which also urges him to “do the work of an evangelist”. Recently, specific appointments as evangelists (but not apostles or prophets) are being made

⁴ See Section 5 below.

⁵ Gilmore, *Pattern*, 134, reported in Tidball, ‘Historic’, 32.

⁶ Nicholson, *Ministry*, 27.

in large Baptist churches or areas, which may be consistent with the New Testament where evangelists were not always based in local churches.⁷

Any Baptist church member may preside at communion or baptise.⁸ There is indeed no New Testament basis for exclusive leadership of the sacraments, which is more consistent with the Old Testament priesthood. On the other hand, there is a strand in the church which argues the role of the pastor is to “normally preside”⁹, arguably contrary to the New Testament.

Ordination (related to laying on of hands for a minister by elders in 1 Timothy 4:14) has come to the fore¹⁰ in the late 20th Century after being virtually unknown in the 19th. Ordination of women in the Baptist church has taken place since the 1920s, justifiably in the light of Paul’s references to women as co-workers or apostles (Romans 16:3, 16:7), albeit a topic of controversy for other churches in the light of traditions and interpretations of passages such as 1 Timothy 2:12. A Baptist pastor may be financed by the church itself (as are the elders in 1 Timothy 5:18) or by other occupations as a way of providing financial support for ministry, as for Paul and tentmaking (Acts 18:3).

In recent years the Baptist Union has sought to make a clear distinction between pastoral oversight by the leader (*episkope*) and pastoral service by other church members (*diakonia*) where some of the latter are specifically called to focus service as deacons as discussed below. While acknowledging that there are overlaps, general pastoral ministry is said to be an “order of life”¹¹ and not just a function¹² as appears to be the main stress of the New Testament. Following the distinction of *episkope* and *diakonia*, the document “Forms of

⁷ Tidball, ‘Biblical’, 15.

⁸ Nicholson, *Ministry*, 5 quotes a 1948 statement on The Baptist Doctrine of the Church as saying “Any member of the church may be authorised by it...to administer Baptism, to preside at the Lord’s table...”

⁹ Baptist Union, *Forms*, 23.

¹⁰ Nicholson, *Ministry*, 15 suggests it “still is” rare in 1976.

¹¹ Baptist Union, *Forms*, 31.

¹² Contrast the earlier Nicholson, *Ministry*, 19 which states that “Baptists...regard the ordained ministry as an office or function rather than an order...”

Ministry among Baptists” seeks to distinguish the leading Minister from “other Ministries appropriate for recognition by the wider church”, as being inter alia the guardian of the Apostolic tradition and representative of the wider church.¹³

Tidball argues that there are only slender biblical foundations for the *episkope-diakonia* distinction and for ministry as an “order of life”, as for example *episkopos* tends to refer to a function and not an order in passages such as Acts 20:28.¹⁴ A “clerical” concept is arguably not consistent with congregational government as set out above, and a single leader concept may link more to Old Testament concepts of priesthood that were abolished in the ministry of Jesus (Hebrews 7:24).

5 The role of deacons and elders

The New Testament does not give significant support to a one-man ministry. The Jerusalem elders were plural, although James was their leader, and Paul always worked with a team. Ephesians 4:11-13 clearly refers to a group. Equally, among the “leadership passages” set out above, 1 Timothy 5:17 in talking of “directing the affairs of the church” talks of special honour for “those” elders whose “work is preaching and teaching”, consistent with the model where the leader is one of the elders on an equal basis rather than sole charge of the church. 1 Thessalonians 5:12 talks of “those who work hard for you” in the plural i.e. like a group of elders. Hence the Baptists are in line with the New Testament in having ministry teams.

Deacons are the older concept in the Baptist church. Functionally, they are related to the leaders appointed in Acts 6:1-7 to wait on tables. The word deacon occurs notably in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, which stresses character needs rather than functions (although it does

¹³ Baptist Union, *Forms*, 30.

¹⁴ Tidball, ‘Biblical’, 14.

mention to “keep hold of the deep truths of the faith”). They are seen to “focus” the *diakonia* of church members on practical tasks and service.¹⁵ As mentioned, a common model in the Baptist church is to have a group of deacons subordinate to a single minister.

Elders are named also in 1 Timothy 3 with similar personal qualifications but also needing to be “able to teach” (v2). The order of naming with elders first may suggest the deacons were subordinate, as is typically the case in Baptist churches.¹⁶ The pastor or minister is also seen as an elder in the Baptist church, consistent with the New Testament usage. Whereas in some cases the pastor is the sole elder, in many other Baptist churches he or she is an elder among others as “*primus inter pares*”, where elders may be elected for a period or for life.¹⁷ Plural eldership is consistent with passages such as Philippians 1:1 which talks of “overseers and deacons”.¹⁸

Since the New Testament does not endorse a single form of ministry-structure, the variable-geometry of Baptist ministry (plural elders or not, as well as accredited or not) is not unbiblical. This variation, as well as distribution of gifts of the Spirit, could also justify the way Baptists have been willing to step outside New Testament traditions by introducing new forms of church leadership in line with the needs of the times, such as Youth Specialists and Pastoral Assistants as well as Evangelists.¹⁹

6 National organisation

¹⁵ Baptist Union, *Forms*, 5.

¹⁶ Tidball, ‘Biblical’, 13.

¹⁷ Baptist Union, *Forms*, 25, does not seem to recognise this form of ministry as it seems to see other elders as subordinate to the minister (while noting in “many places” they share leadership).

¹⁸ Indeed, Waldron, ‘Plural’, 212 argues “we know of no church in the New Testament that had only a single elder”.

¹⁹ Baptist Union, *Forms*, 35.

The Baptist tradition of congregational government is firmly against the episcopal structures developed by the Catholic and Anglican churches. Indeed, there is no firm New Testament basis for the latter; the terms bishops, overseers and elders seem to be used interchangeably in the New Testament,²⁰ and none of them oversee groups of churches,²¹ suggesting that bishop is not a distinct office and the episcopal role is a later invention of Ignatius.²² But some form of wider ministry, including the form of regional superintendents, and accreditation for new ministers, as well as financial redistribution between churches, have been developed in the 20th century by UK Baptists.

Some of the functions fulfilled by the Baptist Union can be justified biblically. Redistribution to the poorer churches can be seen as based on Paul's collection for Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). The accreditation process can be seen as testing character and calling in line with 2 Timothy 2:22-26, and also allowing the wider Baptist church to recognise a minister, and aid settlement. The regional superintendent system is arguably alien to the New Testament to the extent that it resembles the episcopal structure of other churches, as argued above. But some Baptists maintain it is rather an extension of congregational ministry and not a third office.²³ It could also be seen as helping doctrine to be coordinated as the Jerusalem Council did.

7 Conclusion

The Baptist approach to ministry is, we suggest, not inconsistent with the New Testament, although we stress again that the New Testament does not provide a single model of ministry. There remain tensions which we have identified above, notably the tendency to elevate the position of the minister at the expense of the other leaders and the congregation, and also the

²⁰ Nicholson, *Ministry*, 24.

²¹ Patterson, 'Single', 143.

²² Waldron, 'Plural', 194.

²³ Baptist Union, *Forms*, 20.

growing superstructure of the denomination. The degree to which these are founded in New Testament principles is debatable and a matter of controversy among some Baptists.

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