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ATTITUDES TO WOMEN IN BAPTIST CHURCHES IN THE MID 1980s

'In theory', it was said in a Mission Department statement in 1980, 'we believe in women ministers, women deacons and women taking part in leadership according to their gifts. In practice we deny that belief by widespread prejudice against women as ministers and leaders'.(1) In similar vein Dr G. R. Beasley-Murray, writing for the Ministry Department in 1983, concludes, 'Man and woman, created for partnership, have been redeemed for partnership in service. It is high time to make that partnership truly effective in the service of God in His Church and in His world'.(2) Both restate a position accepted by Baptists from as early as 1926 when it was affirmed that 'It would be contrary to Baptist belief and practice to make sex a bar to any kind of Christian service. The Church is within its rights in calling a woman to the pastoral or any other office, and this carried with it the right to accept such a calling'.(3) During the last decade there has been some convergence of belief and practice although these are still by no means co-terminous, whilst in a few places the belief has moved away from the official 'partnership of men and women' stance to a 'no women in leadership' position, and there the practice is all too close to the belief.

Slowly women are finding a greater place in the structures of the denomination. The first woman president was Mrs Nell Alexander in 1978, and in 1986 the present writer was elected to succeed to the presidency in 1987. In 1986 the Baptist Missionary Society elected its fourth woman chairman, Miss Maureen Sleeman. Female leadership of denominational committees has been small.(4) There has been no woman Head of Department, senior executive or Area Superintendent, although in those nominating committees in which the writer has been involved no woman has been excluded by virtue of her sex; one of these groups discussed the issue and affirmed that the appointment of a woman would be possible, although one person registered disagreement with this, and in fact no woman's name was suggested.

In the 1985/6 session there were 189 men and 25 women members of the Baptist Union Council. 13% are women, an increase of 2% over the last five years. Of the 134 Association representatives included in this figure, 17 are women, 14 Associations having one each and one, the West Midlands, having three women among their seven representatives. Reporting on the November 1985 Council, the *Baptist Times* noted about 20 women and 120 men present; four or five of the women spoke, one more than once, but the reporter found among the women a reluctance to make an issue of the place of women on the Council for fear of arousing antagonism. Factors mentioned by the women interviewed as reasons for the small number of women on Council included: the composition of the Council being mainly from Associations where not many women exercise leadership; issues are oriented to male ways of discussing so it is difficult for women to fit in naturally; and in a male-dominated system women have to outdo men at their own game. 'All is not right in the central body of our denomination', concluded the article.(6)

Among Association officers, in the current Directory (1985-6) in the 39 Associations there are five women as presidents, seven as vice-presidents, two as treasurers and two as secretaries. Of these sixteen Association officers, seven are in England and nine in Wales.

While the official position is that all offices are open to women, and that leadership by women is increasingly acceptable, it is still unusual. Women are less likely to be appointed than men since their gifts and style of leadership are to some extent different from those traditionally expected in such roles. However, it may also mean that the relatively few women who have been given the opportunity to fulfil some leadership role have scarcity value and are then given more opportunities than they would otherwise have had. The question is thus not only one of statistics, of how many more women council members or how many superintendents there should be: it also concerns expectations and styles of leadership. The denomination does not set out to exclude women. For example, when exclusive or patronising language is used, it is usually a slip of the tongue and when pointed out will be corrected. But the slips are so frequent that it betrays the underlying expectation that normally ministers and other leaders will be men. The style of leadership given by women is likely to emphasise openness, listening, sensitivity, consultation, compassion and intuition, whereas we all, women as well as men, expect leaders to be dominant, competitive, assertive and rational.

Within the structure of the Union there is the National Council for Baptist Women, serviced by a secretary for Women's Work, who is part of the Mission team. That there is no longer a separate organisation for women echoing that of the Union and providing women with a sphere where they could function within their own structure, represents an increased acceptance of women in the work of the Union. The very strength of the former Baptist Women's League implied that a woman's place was there rather than in the general affairs of the Union. In the current structure women are seen as one of the groups with particular interests and needs, but no more separate from the affairs of the denomination than are men or young people. Rita Milne, the Women's Work secretary, in her report on 1985 comments, 'Women's Mission embraces all aspects of the Mission of the church and the encouraging development over the past four years has been the increase in integration of women's work at local and Association level. Women are no longer seeing their involvement as just within the recognised women's meeting but are using their gifts and skills in the total work of the church'. However, it has to be said that the regret expressed by some at the demise of the BWL is due partly to the fact that they do not feel free to function fully and naturally in the wider affairs of the denomination.

The current Directory shows that of the two thousand ministers 3% or 60 are women. Of these, 33 are in a pastorate (20 on their own, 10 as assistants, 3 in teams), six are in other ministerial work and the remainder are retired, out of pastorate or on leave of absence. Thus 55% of the women (as compared with 60% of all ministers) are in a pastorate. Of the 60 women ministers ten are supplementary and thirteen (including some supplementary) are probationers. Of the 157 ministerial students in Baptist colleges, thirteen (8.3%) are women.

Applications from women to become ministers are understandably affected by current expectations. Women are not usually led to expect

a call to ministry. If a woman nevertheless feels so called, the reaction will probably be, 'Well, yes, of course, we do have women in the ministry'. This modified rapture is at least more encouraging than the previous 'I believe there are such things but it isn't usual, you know'. There is still, however, a lack of the positive encouragement usually experienced by a man. Moreover, the male stereotype of whom God is likely to call influences some members of Ministerial Recognition Committees.

Some women ministerial students experience problems sorting out their self-image as a minister if the role for which they are being prepared assumes a male figure. In the early stages of their ministry many women find it difficult to be accepted for themselves: they feel the pressures of attitudes expecting them to conform to the male stereotype.

There are still many churches who, in seeking a minister, either stipulate 'not a woman' or who, when offered a list of names including a woman, will decide not to consider her on the grounds of her sex. Other churches, while not willing to consider a woman as their minister, will occasionally invite one to take services, whilst some churches will not have a woman in the pulpit at all. It is not easy to generalise when the numbers are small and there are variations in different regions, but the current situation is that there are four women seeking pastorates, all of whom have been on the list for five or six months. One of the stumbling blocks is that churches prefer a married minister, whereas 35 of the 60 women ministers are single. A Superintendent comments, 'On average the women on the list do not have to wait any longer for a settlement than many of the men. I feel that the situation is improving, albeit gradually, and that women in our ministry are being looked upon as equally acceptable as the men by more and more churches'.

Once a woman has proved herself and established her style of ministry, there is a more ready acceptance, but it is based on what are perceived as her personal qualities and is affected by her ability to cope with other people's negative attitudes. Whereas men are acceptable unless they prove themselves unworthy, women are acceptable if they prove themselves worthy. As with women in the general leadership of the denomination, so with women ministers, while the official line is the acceptance of women, and while more churches are now willing to accept the ministry of women, they are still often regarded as the exception to the rule.

The Baptist Union of Scotland have made two attempts recently to approve the acceptance of women in their ministry but on neither occasion was it agreed. In May 1983 the Council considered a recommendation proposing the acceptance of women as candidates for the Scottish Baptist Ministry but it did not achieve the required majority. In October 1985 the Assembly of the Baptist Union of Scotland considered a similar proposition and that also failed to achieve the necessary majority. Some overseas Unions have women ministers but others do not. The Swedish Baptists have a woman General Secretary.

Within the Baptist Union there is a wide variety of practice in appointing women as deacons, elders, secretaries and treasurers of local churches. Most churches have a few women deacons, a few

churches have more women deacons than men, some churches will not consider women deacons and some women deacons have resigned when they found that leadership by women was not acceptable. In the current Directory, of the 1891 English churches 563 appear to have women secretaries.(7) Some churches will have a woman secretary but no other woman deacon. There are various types of elders in Baptist churches: those with the 'joint-elder-with-the-minister' type tend to be the churches which do not welcome women in leadership roles.

Both the World Council of Churches and the British Council of Churches are advocates of the co-operation of men and women. The WCC has been active in this sphere since its inception. One of the 'Concerns of the Churches' which was discussed at the first WCC Assembly at Amsterdam in 1948 was 'The Life and Work of Women in the Church', and since then there have been many commissions, resolutions, reports and conferences on the subject. The direct effect of these on Baptist attitudes has, however, not been great. Where its effect has been felt it has been mediated through the British Council of Churches. The BCC Working Group on the Community of Women and Men in the Church presented a report to the BCC Assembly in March 1984. There was a lively and helpful debate in the Assembly, but although there was general support for the work of that Group there was no great enthusiasm for funding it. The BCC makes conscious efforts to act in accordance with its beliefs. One of its three vice-presidents and one of its five divisional chairmen are women, and all chairmen, not only the women, are now called moderators. Women are always included among its Assembly speakers and its delegations. In April 1986 the BCC declared itself an equal opportunities employer. This concerns not only the sex of employees but also their race and physical disability. The support of the WCC and the BCC for the partnership of men and women in the church is an encouragement to those who believe in such partnership but it does not weigh heavily with those Baptists who are already convinced otherwise.

In 1983, in reply to an enquiry from the Baptist Union General Purposes and Finance Committee, the Free Church Federal Council stated: '... that any ordained minister, man or woman, was eligible for the Moderatorship and that ... a lay person might ... be selected from time to time'. No woman or lay person has been appointed so far. The situation may be complicated by an active Women's Free Church Council with its own President.

A second possible influence on Baptist attitudes is the feminist movement. Some Christian feminist writers find a liberating perspective in the Bible but their general image as sitting loose to the authority of Scripture has limited their influence among Baptists; indeed, strident feminism evokes a reaction against leadership by women.

One aspect of the charismatic movement is that in some churches influenced by it women have become less acceptable in positions of leadership such as pastor, deacon, elder or preacher. This is especially true of that strand of charismatic renewal which follows 'discipleship teaching' in which some Christians exercise strong authority over others: here women are totally excluded from positions of leadership.

This is not the position of the whole charismatic movement: for example, Michael Harper speaks of 'my strong conviction that women can and should be involved in both the policy-forming and

decision-making processes of the Church. That, so far as I can see it, is part of the elementary human rights that all women have; to deny it can only cause harm to women in general and loss to the church which stands to gain immeasurably from their gifts and talents'. Women, he argues, should share in a plurality of leadership, although he holds back from the ordination of women on the ground that a radical reformation of the ministry is needed.(8)

The Baptist ginger-group Mainstream, which includes many who have been influenced by charismatic renewal, also shows this double strand in its attitude to women. At its Swanwick Conference in January 1986 one of the questions put to a panel concerned the place of women in the denomination. Nigel Wright replied that the exclusion of women from leadership was not a necessary part of charismatic renewal but was due to the influence of many within the movement who came from a Brethren background. Nevertheless, it is surprising that a movement dedicated to reform and renewal should have so little place in its leadership for either women or non-ministerial Baptists. The executive council are, by design or accident, composed entirely of male ministers.(9)

The belief that women should 'take their part in leadership according to their gifts' has been variously implemented by Baptists. Most of the people involved in the leadership of the denomination seek to put into practice the principle of the partnership of men and women in leadership, but this is by no means accepted throughout Baptist life in this country. Many women, especially younger ones, would say that the change is too slow and that there is yet a long way to go before they are treated fully as partners. Nevertheless there has been a considerable change in attitudes to women which now more nearly approximate to that of partnership in the Gospel.

NOTES

- 1 *Free Indeed: Discussion Material on the Role of Women and Men in the Church*, Mission Department, Baptist Union 1980.
- 2 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Man and Woman in the Church*, Ministry Department, Baptist Union, 1983.
- 3 Deaconess Committee to the Baptist Union Council, cited by G. Hubble, *The Fraternal*, January 1961, p.13.
- 4 Mrs Alexander served as Chairman of *The General Purposes and Finance Committee*, Mrs M. Brown of the *Overseas Relations Committee*, and the Revd. M. Jarman of the *Ministerial Recognition Committee*.
- 5 General Secretary, Assistant General Secretary, Secretary for Ministry, and one Area Superintendent.
- 6 Revd George Neal in the *Baptist Times*, 5 December 1985.
- 7 Excluding those designated 'Dr' or 'The Secretary'. Excluding B.U. of Scotland and B.U. of Wales but including the South Wales Joint Board.
- 8 M. Harper, *That They May Be One*, chapter 11. *Let My People Grow*, chapter 8.
- 9 Editorial, *The Baptist Times*, 16 January 1986.

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