

VISIBLE UNITY

IN

LIFE AND MISSION



REPLY BY THE COUNCIL OF THE

BAPTIST UNION OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

TO THE

TEN PROPOSITIONS OF THE CHURCHES' UNITY COMMISSION

12 JAN 1978

PREFACE

At its meeting in November 1977 the Baptist Union Council unanimously accepted this document, "Visible Unity in Life and Mission", as its definitive response to the Ten Propositions of the Churches' Unity Commission. The Council believes that whilst there may well be some local churches which would have wished to go further in Church relationships and others which would not want to go so far, the document itself undoubtedly represents the views of the majority of Baptist churches. The reply was prepared by the Advisory Committee for Church Relations of the Baptist Union on the basis of:

- i) The responses received from local Baptist churches earlier in the year to the Baptist Union Council's questionnaire on the Ten Propositions. In all, 962 responses were received.
- ii) The documents produced by the Churches' Unity Commission subsequent to the Ten Propositions, notably those on Propositions 5, 6 and 7.

In understanding the Baptist response it is important to take the document and its thinking as a whole and not to read individual sentences out of context. As the response makes clear, the Baptist Union Council is unable to make an unqualified recommendation to accept the Ten Propositions but there is a careful attempt to offer some constructive indications as to the understandings upon which it might in fact be possible to make a more positive recommendation to Baptist churches for Covenanting. This involves asking questions of other members of the Unity Commission, notably relating to baptism (section B), the historic episcopate (section C), freedom of conscience (section B) and the doctrine of the Church (section E). The questions are not rhetorical; they invite discussion and reply. This is in line with the final section of the document which underlines the clear determination of Baptists to remain in close fellowship and consultation with other Churches. The positive achievements of the Churches' Unity Commission must not be lost. It is in this spirit that the Council's document concludes: "It is our hope that the questions we have posed and the reservations we have tabled will promote discussion and responses which will assist that movement into visible unity in life and mission to the advancement of which the Commission has set its hand".

NOVEMBER, 1977

VISIBLE UNITY IN LIFE AND MISSION

The Churches' Unity Commission seeks from those Church bodies that created it definitive answers to the Ten Propositions tabled in 1976. The Baptist Union Council, as one such body, has had to consider what its response should be and – equally importantly – how that response should best be framed. At the outset, two controlling factors require emphasis.

In the first place, it must be recognised that the Council cannot of itself commit any church in membership with the Baptist Union to entry into the proposed Covenant. Local congregational decision is finally decisive. The responsibility of the Council is to recommend to the churches of the Union a response.

It is our clear judgement that at present no unqualified recommendation to accept the Ten Propositions can be made. We have formed this judgement in the light of provisional responses from our churches and of certain issues elaborated later in this document.

In the second place, it is arguable that any seriously qualified recommendation or response would not only be difficult to frame but also fail to serve the serious enterprise on which we are engaged. We recognise that the Propositions alone contain the questions to be addressed and that it is open to us to react negatively to some and affirmatively to others. Yet we cannot judge such a procedure to be finally helpful in charting possibilities for the future. We further recognise that the 'commentary' and other clarificatory material issued by the Commission do not strictly belong to the questions posed. Yet it would be unrealistic to return a response that failed to give very serious weight to all such background understanding.

It is our clear judgement however that, rather than attempting isolated reactions to each individual proposition seriatim, some constructive indication should be offered as to the understandings upon which we might in fact feel it possible to make positive recommendations for 'covenanting' to our churches.

A. UNITY

We gladly reaffirm our belief that *the visible unity in life and mission* of all Christ's people is the will of God (*Proposition 1*) and recognise that the search for such unity must involve action both locally and nationally (*Proposition 3*). We are aware that there are those who believe that to embark with seriousness on this road is properly and inevitably to plot a course for 'organic union'; and within the flexible framework of covenanted commitment there is clearly and rightly room for two or more denominations to negotiate a 'union' should they at any point judge this to be their Christian obedience. We are also aware that some suspicions of organic union may on the one hand merely reflect the mood of our time

and may on the other hand be used to sanctify withdrawal from costly, meaningful and effective action. Yet we are alarmed by the apparently inexorable way in which (not only outside our own ranks) discussion and debate have failed to give controlling weight to the significant phrase 'in life and mission'. Therefore:

It is our conviction that as much hard thought needs to be given to the implications of defining the goal of visible unity in terms of the phrase 'in life and mission' as has been devoted over the decades to drafting schemes of organic union.

In this connection we would make our own the words of the C.U.C. commentary on Proposition 1:

'Structures must faithfully express such unity as already exists, foster and facilitate the fuller measure of unity we may come to recognise as ours, and set us free to undertake our common mission in and to the world.'

We believe that these perspectives must increasingly challenge us all and dictate the *shape* of any movement into visible unity. It is in terms of this understanding that we would interpret and assent to *Proposition 9* which speaks of agreement 'to explore such further steps as will be necessary to make more clearly visible the unity of all Christ's people'.

B. MEMBERSHIP

1. Mutual recognition of communicant membership is fundamental to any movement into visible unity. The implementation of it (in terms of *Proposition 4*) in some of our churches, were they to desire it, would require legal changes to be made. In itself, however, this proposal would and should command widespread acceptance provided only that as much serious thought be given to the request that a member should be 'in good standing' as is clearly being given to the requirement of the practice in the future of the 'mutually acceptable rites' of initiation.

2. Such 'mutually acceptable rites' are set forward (*Proposition 5*) as necessary requirements of the post-covenant situation. The C.U.C. 'explanatory note' indicates the basic elements of the total initiatory process and the way in which any temporal division of that process should be structured. We are invited to recognise that no supplemental initiatory rite should be required of those seeking to move from one covenanted Church to another.

We do not believe that such a requirement necessarily provides any finally insuperable barrier for Baptists. It must, however, be made clear on what grounds and within what context progress might at this point be made. Most Baptists would approach the issue of the recognition and reception of members of paedobaptist Churches by reference to whether or not a faith response to the Gospel of the grace of God in Christ had in fact been made. The 'mutually acceptable rites' as outlined by C.U.C.

all make essential provision for such a response. That being so, reception and recognition might readily be envisaged. This is the positive side of the situation.

Yet it would be dishonest to pass over the negative side, namely that no automatic recognition of infant baptism as true baptism is necessarily being given. We do not understand *Proposition 5* as requiring such a recognition. We do however believe that it would be costly delusion to imagine that the creation of mutually acceptable rites of initiation indicates profound theological agreement on the baptismal issue. The Faith and Order Commission of the W.C.C. has recently come to recognise that the extent of emerging consensus here may have been overestimated.

We judge that acceptance of Proposition 5 will lack integrity unless all are clearly committed to a continued grappling with the real theological divergences that remain.

3. It is in this context that we take up the matter of 'rights of conscience' (*Proposition 7*). Questions relating to baptism point to but one of many areas in which difficulties may arise. Since, however, it is an area of special concern to Baptists it may usefully constitute a test case. We are assured in the Commission's extended comments on *Proposition 7* that no diminution of existing individual freedom of thought and conscience is envisaged. We are also reminded that covenanting Churches are bound by the terms of the covenant entered. How might this apply on the baptismal front?

Within limits the answer seems clear and coherent. If the terms of the covenant include the practice of mutually acceptable initiatory rites, then covenanting Baptist churches must observe the unvarying practice of baptism. Such a requirement may expose existing tensions among Baptists, but it seems wholly reasonable to claim that a community must come to terms with its own 'corporate' conscience *prior* to covenanting. It may not as a community expect freedom to breach commitments freely accepted.

Where so-called 'rebaptism' is concerned, however, the answer is not obviously as clear-cut. We judge that, whilst any Baptist church which covenants would remain free to preach believers' baptism, a claim of freedom, on grounds of conscience, to urge believers' baptism on individual paedobaptists seeking transfer of membership would negate the covenant relationship itself (as in the case of other Churches wishing to present their customary rites) and that therefore such an issue of conscience must be faced and settled prior to entry into covenant. However, we could not commend to our churches any covenant which involved a bar to the administration of believers' baptism in the case of a paedobaptist whose conscience might lead him or her to the conclusion that fidelity to Scripture and the Gospel required such baptism.

We are clear that the exercise of responsible pastoral freedom must be preserved at this point and possibly others precisely because the covenant is not based on real theological agreement on the baptismal issue.

C. MINISTRY

1. Mutual recognition of membership finds its inevitable counterpart in mutual recognition of ministries. At this point mutual recognition of existing ministries is seen as indissolubly tied to a movement into the future involving for all Churches in the post-covenant situation ordinations 'according to a Common Ordinal which will properly incorporate the episcopal, presbyteral and lay roles in ordination' (*Proposition 6*). As to the Common Ordinal, it is plain that what is envisaged is not a total uniformity of practice but rather an Ordination Service which, on the basis of agreement on its intention, would contain reading and proclamation of the Word of God, a common Ordination Prayer, and a common form for the Presentation and Examination of candidates. Even this measure of verbal inflexibility would present problems to some Baptists and would need to be a matter of careful and open discussion. It is clear, however, that the basic issue arises in connection with the requirement of proper provision for 'episcopal, presbyteral and lay roles' in ordination. The introduction of the word 'episcopal' poses the central problem. The Commission's document 'The Meaning and Implications of Proposition 6' makes clear that it is speaking of the 'historic episcopate' and, in this connection, tables Method A and Method B as alternatives.

Method A involves for the Churches conventionally described as 'non-episcopal' the creation of an episcopal ministry distinguishable from the presbyteral ministry already possessed. The setting apart of such episcopal ministers (bishops) would begin within the Service of Worship which contained the act of covenanted commitment and would be an action in which representatives of 'episcopal' churches would share. In any subsequent ordination to the presbyteral ministry of word and sacraments, an episcopal minister of the denomination concerned would be centrally involved.

Method B involves the participation of a bishop from one of the covenanted 'episcopal' Churches in the ordination of presbyters within 'non-episcopal' Churches — with appropriate reciprocal participation in ordinations within 'episcopal' Churches.

History, tradition, and conviction combine to render such proposals extremely suspect in Baptist eyes. The inevitable introduction of the word 'bishop', laden as it is with the controversies of the centuries, prompts a negative reaction which must be imaginatively understood. More serious still is the felt lack of weighty and convincing argument for the attaching of such overriding importance to the existence or establishment of an episcopal order of ministry. In this matter, the New Testament scarcely speaks with a clear and decisive voice; the argument from antiquity is one that defenders of an episcopal order of ministry might be reluctant to apply on other issues; the claim of 'proven worth' depends upon a particular and contestable reading of history.

2. It would therefore be easy for us to return a simple negative to both the Commission's proposals. To do this, however, would neither assist

the Commission nor do justice to some of our own deepest convictions. There are affirmations we need to make. We are wholly mindful of the importance of an apostolic succession for the health of the Church of God. The unity of the Church is a unity in space and time as well as reaching beyond. Links with apostolic foundations must be plain and enduring. Yet exactly in this connection Baptists will join with others in pointing to an apostolic succession in scriptural faith, proclamation, life and mission.

Equally we are mindful of the significance of the exercise of episcopal functions for the health of the Church of God. The truth of the Gospel must be safeguarded and maintained. Caring oversight of the People of God must find proper expression. A focus of continuity is important. Yet exactly at this point Baptists will see the realities of episcopacy manifested *in corporate fashion* in church meeting, associations and councils, and *focused* for particular purposes in an honoured presbyteral ministry of word, sacraments and pastoral care. They will acknowledge that such understandings have sometimes been obscured. They will not conclude that the essence of episcopacy is lacking among them.

What then is lacking? Contemporary voices urge us to believe that it is the historic episcopate understood as 'the fulness of the sign of apostolic succession' (see W.C.C. Faith and Order Paper No. 73, *One Baptism, One Eucharist, and a Mutually Recognised Ministry*, p. 56 and *passim*). Whatever meaning is to be read into this somewhat ambiguous phrase, the question has to be asked as to whether the recovery of this 'sign' is an indispensable prerequisite not merely for organic union but for the mutual recognition on which we are in fact engaged. The Faith and Order Paper referred to above concludes:

'Churches (with episcopal succession) should also consider the desirability of recognizing some ordained ministries that exist apart from an episcopal succession but which embody a succession of ordained ministers who combine in their ministries the functions of both bishop and presbyter. It may also be possible to recognize some ministries that do not claim a formal episcopal or episcopal-presbyteral succession but that in fact exist with the express intention of maintaining a succession in the apostolic faith' (p. 56).

We desire to press this question upon the Commission and through it upon our episcopal brethren with a view to obtaining a considered and argued response.

3: It may of course be the case that in the last analysis we have to face a conviction that the essential role of a bishop, whatever else may be finally dispensable, is that of 'ordainer' and that, provided that this function is exercised, the minimal condition for 'recognition of ministries' has been fulfilled.

It is because Method B, whatever its expressed intention, lends itself so readily to this understanding and suggests too easily the severance of the episcopate from its whole churchly context and from the rich texture of meanings and relationships that alone give it life that

we cannot recommend it.

As a temporary measure in limited local situations a case might be made for it. In the context of a national covenant we believe it does justice neither to 'episcopal' nor to 'non-episcopal' convictions.

4. We do however detect the Commission speaking with a more meaningful and persuasive voice. The significant elements of episcopacy already present in the life of 'non-episcopal' Churches are explicitly recognised. In Method A, the establishment of a distinct and distinguishable episcopal ministry is commended to 'non-episcopal' Churches on the ground that the health and life of the Church has been found to require, beyond corporate expressions of episcopacy, the setting apart of some to a unifying office of particularly wide and heavy responsibility calling for special gifts of mind and spirit. No dogmatic theory is argued. No fixed pattern is prescribed. To such an emphasis Baptists are not strangers. In recent decades they have found themselves recognising something of this need and setting aside men to meet it. In many fundamental respects, episcopacy in this personalised sense, far from being a foreign body, can lay claim to recognition as a prized and familiar feature of Baptist common life.

If these things are so, it may fairly be asked why we are not able to recommend our churches to covenant on the basis of Method A. Three reasons at least must be noted:

In the first place, we have already indicated that we are not yet convinced that mutual recognition of ministries must or should depend upon the existence or creation of a distinct episcopal order, and therefore seek a considered response on this issue.

Secondly, we are acutely aware that there is here opened up a complex area of discussion which we and our churches have scarcely begun to consider in the more open terms in which the issues now confront us.

Thirdly, it is important to make clear in what context such consideration would for us be pursued. We are not convinced that we lack some unchanging feature of church order. Rather do we remember that the visible unity being sought is a 'visible unity in life and mission'. We have to ask ourselves what, in the purpose of God, will best serve 'life and mission' in the coming days. We have to discern whether or not we are being called to pioneer from and within our Association life a distinguishable form of episcopal ministry which the existing 'episcopal' Churches would be able to recognise as such yet which, at the same time, would both contribute to the health of Christ's People and serve their missionary calling.

It will be clear that there are too many uncertainties and matters needing further clarification to allow of an immediately positive recommendation.

D. COVENANTING

We are invited by the Commission to move towards visible unity in covenant relationship with others (*Proposition 2*). That might seem an

unexceptionable step to take. Yet it would be agreed that it must lack meaning given the reservations on other points we have felt it necessary to table. It may, however, still be relevant and important to explore and expose certain realities implicit in such covenant commitment and to comment upon them. The nature and content of the Service of covenanting therefore demands attention.

Prior procedural, even legal, steps are implied. Yet the heart of the matter lies in a solemn act of covenanted commitment before God which, for the partners sharing in it, both involves a specific pledge to continue together in movement into that visible unity which Christ intends for his Church, and signalises, seals and expresses mutual recognition and acceptance of one another as true Churches and, in particular, mutual recognition of membership and ministry. Acceptance of one another as true Churches must in this context be expressive of a thankful recognition that, in sufficient measure, a common Faith is shared.

Given these things, we still judge it important that two further points be made. On the one hand, we see mutual recognition of membership and ministries as in the last resort contained within the mutual acceptance of one another as true Churches. 'Ministry' must not be sundered from 'membership' nor either from 'Church'. There are not three separate 'recognitions' based on three separable agreements and requiring three separable reconciling acts.

The act of covenanted commitment must itself portray and not obscure this wholeness and interpenetration.

On the other hand, we see a danger that covenanting may too easily be framed in terms that suggest it is essentially a matter of human decisions — though made in the presence of God. We therefore judge it important that the centrality of the action of God be stressed. Covenanted commitment is a decisive happening profoundly affecting the past, present and future of the partners involved. All recognise and are recognised. All receive and give. All are ushered into a future in which each is mandated to foster, continue and express a new measure of fullness and universality. Yet such high claims can surely have integrity and reality only if they are rooted in submission to the surprising grace of God. Our 'mutual recognition' is but the echo of His recognition of us all. Our 'giving and receiving', rightly understood, is *his* condescension to our *common* need. To take such a perspective seriously may be the surest way to discipline over-anxious concern to establish what one possesses and another lacks.

We conclude therefore that the act of covenanted commitment can only bear the weight attached to it if the primary emphasis falls upon what God has done and is doing to us all. Thus the act should in tone as well as context be doxological rather than declaratory.

E. THE LOCAL AND THE UNIVERSAL

What we are bold to believe God may do for us and with us is one thing. We have indicated our belief that it is this perspective that must

explicitly control the framing of any act of covenanted commitment. It is another thing to make concrete and specific progress in unity within any situation of mutual commitment into which the Churches may move.

Here the Commission speaks in terms of encouragement of local ecumenical projects and development of methods of decision-making in common (*Proposition 8*). Local ecumenical projects may be seen as one expression of the search for visible unity in life and mission; and the test of any such project remains whether it has promise of serving this goal. Common decision-making similarly presents itself as a realistic indication of the genuineness and effectiveness of covenant commitment. At these points, however, more basic questions intrude. Methods of common decision-making are important. Yet for their development there is required some measure of common understanding with regard to decision-making itself.

Probably most Christians would be in broad agreement that the Church is to be understood theologically as both universal and local, that the Church universal is not an aggregate of local churches, that there is the one universal Church which 'in locality' finds visible concretion. Certainly there will be variations of understanding and practice in the definition and expression of the term 'local'. For some it will suggest the word 'diocese', for others the word 'congregation'. Already potential divergences as to the essential place of decision-making begin to appear.

The much more serious problems, however, emerge as the movement away from the 'local' takes place. Some may be found speaking of 'higher courts' of the Church as centres of authority to which decisions may or must be referred. In so far as legal sanctions are characteristically attached to national bodies it might seem that the 'Church national' is being accorded a theological significance equal to or greater than the 'Church local' or the 'Church universal'. Because we sense that in this whole area of decision-making significant issues are not far from the surface, we judge it important to affirm the ground on which we stand.

We believe that to give primary significance to the 'Church universal' implies giving primacy to its visible embodiment the 'Church local'. We understand the lineaments of the true Church to be discerned in the local Christian community met week by week for corporate worship, where the pattern of the Cross and Resurrection is displayed by the baptised community as she subordinates herself to the apostolic Scriptures, proclaims the Word, celebrates the Supper, accepts the ministries of oversight and service, and lives out the atonement in travail of love for the world.

Yet in the final analysis the Church is one, whatever the number of its local manifestations. The essential nature of the Church, including the imperatives of mission, presses the local community towards regional, national, international organs for common life, common decision, common action. This pressure is valid and inescapable. Nor should such wider 'conciliar' forms and organs be denied their 'churchly' character. Yet the factor that theologically differentiates the 'Church local' from wider

conciliar expressions of Church life remains. It is the regular gathering for corporate worship. Where the common life of a continuing Christian community is regularly subjected to Word and Supper, there is the Church most truly and profoundly manifested. Wider conciliar forms are not *in themselves* the fulness of this reality. They live from it and by it. That is why they need to be understood by reference to the conciliar form of the 'Church local', which Baptists know as the Church Meeting.

Herein lies the clue to Baptist attitudes to wider conciliar forms. In their own limited and derivative sense they are precisely 'church meeting'. They are not some higher level of Church order. They are not some superior or more ultimate piece of decision-making machinery. They are means by which the oneness of the Body may find wider expression and prompt united action. In so far as they are truly subject to the Word and truly open to the Spirit they may become means by which the Lord of the Church speaks to the churches.

It is however for the churches to recognise his voice. Any authority which the wider conciliar forms may possess is given to them by the Lord of the Church. Yet because it is *his* authority it cannot be imposed without in the end contradicting its own nature.

Authority is not simply a matter of decision-making at some appropriate point or level. It is also a matter of the recognition and reception of decisions through the whole range of the Church's life.

In this as in other areas, theology and practice do not always coincide. Baptists have not always been faithful to their best insights. Equally, sociological factors have properly to be taken into account where decision-making is concerned. Further, it may be objected that all the Commission is proposing is the creation of adequate machinery for common decision-making, and the will to use it. It is however our conviction that no meaningful response at this point can evade the raising of the difficult issues of power, authority and ecclesiology to which we have tried to draw attention.

We believe that the model of diversity in unity adopted by the Commission constitutes the most promising avenue of advance offered in this generation. We would wish to remain in close fellowship and consultation with our partner Churches (Proposition 10), though this cannot be the limit of our Christian relationships. It is our hope that the questions we have posed and the reservations we have tabled will promote discussion and responses which will assist that movement into visible unity in life and mission to the advancement of which the Commission has set its hand.