Baptist Basics

BAPTISTS TOGETHER

8 Leadership in the Local Church

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Early in his ministry Jesus called to himself twelve others whom he had chosen, and appointed them to be with him, to have authority to preach and to cast out demons. He called them 'apostles' (Mark 3:13-19) which basically means 'messengers'. He sent them out to represent him in the villages and to do the kinds of things that he himself was doing (Mark 6:7). The apostles, with the exception of Judas who was replaced, were later to be the core witnesses to the ministry and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:21-26). They were later joined by the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 15: 3-11). As the church grew, they appointed or affirmed other leaders who carried forward the work of the church in different contexts (Acts 6:1-7; 14:23; 18:24-28; Titus 1:5). It is clear that Jesus, the head of the Church, makes provision for the needs of his Church, by enabling those whom he calls to exercise ministries. This is why Paul says in Ephesians 4:11-12, 'The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ'. Through verses such as these we are able to understand the nature of Christian leadership.

Every movement or community that wishes to achieve its purpose and objectives very quickly discovers that it needs properly recognised leaders who will guide it forward, serve its continuing life and act as spokespersons for its points of view. The Christian Church is no exception.

All are called to minister

It is clear that in the Christian Church, all are called to share in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. When Jesus was baptised, the Holy Spirit came upon him to enable him to fulfil the mission on which he had been sent (Matthew 3:13-17). When people repent, believe and are baptised in his name they too become partakers in the Holy Spirit and receive power to live and witness for Christ (Acts 1:8, 2:1-2). Mission and ministry are not therefore the activity of some in the church but the responsibility of all, each in the calling they have been given. In a Baptist church these callings might take the form of contributing in acts of worship, sharing in worship leading, using musical abilities, leading house-groups, visiting people, teaching in educational programmes, evangelising, serving in administration or in finance, caring for the young, preaching, acting as deacons or elders or any one of many other forms of service. This shared approach to the work of the Christian Church is consistent with the Baptist approach to church life in general. However, it is not the whole story.

Some are called to special ministries

Other special ministries are given 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry'. Notice this is not a call to do the work of ministry so the rest of the saints don't have to, but to equip them all to serve one another. The special ministries most easily recognisable are those of the teacher, pastor and the evangelist. All of these roles may flow into each other with some people being gifted to function as all three and others more obviously gifted in specific areas. In the New Testament, Philip in particular is described as an evangelist (Ephesians 21:8) but many others worked evangelistically to add to the church. It is wise therefore not to separate these roles too rigidly from each other. Evangelists act as recruiters, drawing new people into the life of faith and often functioning on the edge of or beyond the local congregation. Teachers act as the interpreters of the scriptures to enable people to grasp their content and the ways they can be applied today (2 Timothy 2:24). Pastors act as healers, exercising oversight over people and, like shepherds (which is what the word pastor means), care for the well-being and spiritual growth of those entrusted to them.

The New Testament gives evidence of the foundational role of the apostles

and prophets in establishing the church (Ephesians 2:20). We still benefit from their witness each time we study the bible. But there are ways in which some aspects of these roles continue in the life of today's church. The apostles were the early entrepreneurs who crossed cultural barriers and broke new ground in the growth of the church. They were not always located in one church but travelled across the ancient world. We still have such spiritual ground-breakers today and we still need them to push forward the mission of God. The prophets were inspired listeners to God who were able to speak God's word, raise questions about the way things are and alert people to the needs of the times. In Acts 21:10, Agabus is specifically identified as a prophet, and modern prophets might be identified in voices such as that of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, the great American civil rights leader and Baptist minister.

Ordained ministry

A common feature of all the special ministries is that their essence is in bearing the word of God to people. This is true in the roles of evangelist and teacher, apostle and prophet and in that of the pastor who enables God's people to understand their individual Christian journey, in the light of the ways of God revealed in Christ and scripture. Although many in the church may preach and teach and all may bear witness, the churches have the authority to recognise and appoint particular people, as those it believes God has specially chosen and gifted to make this their first priority. This ministry has often been called 'the ministry of Word and Sacrament'[1], which need not imply that only ministers can preach and administer the sacraments (although they usually will), but that in their oversight of the church they have particular responsibility to ensure that the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly celebrated. Churches support them as they first gain an extensive education in the scriptures and how to interpret them in the modern world, and then devote themselves (usually, but not always, full-time) to the communication of the faith, and to the oversight and growth of the church. It is essential that the churches should be able to call upon those who are well educated in the faith, for their wisdom and advice. Since it is of the highest importance that those who speak officially for the church can do so with authority, all who are thought to be called to these roles are tried and tested in various ways before being allowed to assume them. The churches authorise them as trusted representatives by means of ordination.

Ordination involves the formal setting aside of tested people, for special ministry in the name of Christ and his Church. It is normally done with prayer and the laying on of hands (Acts 13:1-3; 1 Timothy 4:14). The word 'ordination' recognises that such people are part of the way Christ orders his Church and that therefore, those ordained are necessary for the well-being of his Church. They belong to the gifts of ministry described in Ephesians 4:11-12. Ordination recognises them as faithful teachers and witnesses and is not understood by Baptists to grant any special powers to offer sacrifices at the Lord's Supper, as is the claim of some traditions. It is rather a ministry of preaching, communicating the faith and exercising oversight. Because Baptist churches practise congregational government[2], ordained ministers can only ever serve in a pastoral office if they are elected by the local congregation. It is this call, by which the church receives them as a teacher, pastor or evangelist, that authorises them to care for a particular congregation. In other words, they cannot impose themselves or be imposed by anybody else but only freely called by a congregation.

It is the responsibility of the whole church to identify and recognise those who are emerging as its future ministers (2 Timothy 2:1-2). Specialist training is normally given in the theological colleges that are a part of the respective Baptist Union. After training and testing, those who have been approved, are ordained at the beginning of their ministries and are then inducted to specific posts of responsibility. Ordinations and inductions are conducted by regional ministers or others who are able to represent the wider community of Baptist churches because of the trust in which they are held.

Enabling ministry

To be ordained by the church to exercise special ministry is a considerable responsibility but its purpose is 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry' (Ephesians 4:12) and not to give the saints a reason for avoiding it. The goal is to create a fully functioning church in which all members are working harmoniously and creatively as they are supported in the stewardship of their gifts and abilities. When this happens a church is at its most effective, producing a synergy of life and effort from which all may benefit (Ephesians 4:15-16). Ordained ministers are given by God, in order to be enablers of the whole congregation. They do this by teaching the faith, by helping people identify their God-given gifts and by supporting and mentoring people as they grow in confidence. They also take a leading role in engaging with the

surrounding community and leading in mission. The focus of ministry is not only upon the church but on the mission of God and the world beyond the church, in the belief that the Christian community exists for the glory of God and the salvation of the world.

Ministries – local and regional

Generally speaking, ordained ministries should be seen as having a wider scope than the local church alone. People called to such ministry are making themselves available to God. This means that although they serve locally they are always open to the call to go elsewhere in the exercise of this ministry, as God wills. It may also be the case that some are called to exercise regional ministries, that is, to care for a group of churches and their ministers, giving support and offering leadership in regional mission. In former times Baptists have called these 'messengers' and 'superintendents'. Their primary purpose is to support local congregations and to provide a focus of unity for ordained ministers and churches alike, within a Regional Association.

Ministry as male and female

Within the Baptist Union of Great Britain, ministry has been open to both men and woman for many years. It is clear in the New Testament that women have an honoured place within the life of the church. Mary was the mother of Jesus. Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection (John 20:11-18). Women were prominent in the first community of Christians (Acts 1:14). Priscilla was active with Aquila in the early mission (Acts 18:18, 24-28). Phoebe was a deacon (or minister) and a benefactor of the church in Cenchreae (Romans 16:1-2). Junia was described as prominent among the apostles (Romans 16:7). Although there are some passages in the New Testament that restrict the ministries of women (such as 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 and 1 Timothy 2:1-15), this appears to be for particular reasons in their context and goes against the emerging trend of the New Testament which favours the full participation of women in accord with the gifts bestowed on them by God. Galatians 3:28 states the principle, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all you are one in Christ Jesus.' Women and men may therefore both participate fully in the leadership of the churches according to their faith, their gifting, their calling from God, and the confidence that their fellow church

members have in their ability to be faithful servants and representatives of Christ (2 Timothy 2:2). What counts most of all is not the gender of the person who carries the message of Christ but the content of the message they carry.

Deacons and Elders

Local congregations also need local leadership ministries and this is usually in the form of 'deacons' and 'elders'. Such roles are not normally stipendiary, unlike most ordained ministries. The offices of deacon and elder are described in 1 Timothy 3:1-14 and high standards are set for both of them. An elder, for instance, must be 'above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money'. Deacons are described similarly as 'serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; and they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience'. It is clear that to be a leader in the local church a believer must be a good example of Christian discipleship and able to serve it well.

Baptists have traditionally appointed deacons to share in the oversight of congregations and to manage its affairs. Many also have elders who share with ordained ministers the task of overseeing people's spiritual well-being and pastoral care. It would be unhelpful to draw the distinction between the two roles too sharply and it is very unhelpful to say that one is practical (deacons) and the other spiritual (elders). Everything in Christ's Church should be seen as spiritual since we seek to bring all its affairs into relationship with God. The distinction between 'organisation' and 'pastoral care' might be more helpful. As with ordained ministers, deacons and elders are elected by a church. This is normally for a limited period with the possibility of reappointment, whereas ordained ministers are normally appointed for an indefinite period and may stand down when called elsewhere, when they retire or when the church deems this to be in their best interests. Ministers, deacons and elders (or churches may use more general titles such as 'leaders') have responsibility and authority that is appropriate to their role, but it is important to understand that they always serve with the agreement of the local congregation. The only Lord in the congregation is Christ himself.

[1] Sacraments refer to baptism and communion

[2] For more information see Baptist Basics: The Church Members' Meeting

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Baptist Basics

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