

LEONARD CHAMPION AND A CALL FOR CLEARER, MORE COHERENT AND WIDELY ACCEPTED THEOLOGY AMONGST BAPTISTS

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Leonard Champion was an influential figure in Baptist life through much of the 1950s to 1970s.¹ He was Principal of Bristol Baptist College (1953-72), and President of the Baptist Union (1964). He was involved in several important Baptist Union Council reports on ministry, ecumenism and associating.² He had also represented the Union in the World Council of Churches and the British Council of Churches.³ In 1961 he was asked to address the Denominational Conference and he gave a statement on 'The State of the Denomination.' One of things he said on that occasion was that Baptists were in danger of a 'theological slum.' In his view, Baptists were being "neglectful" with regard to the work of theology and what was needed was "a prolonged process of positive, evangelical thinking, teaching and writing" and a "more manifest theological cohesion."⁴ The rest of that decade produced a flurry of theological reports, which in many ways only served to highlight the tensions within the Union. In 1979 he gave the Baptist Historical Society Lecture.⁵ It is probably not unfair to say that the annual BHS lectures generally do not live long in the memory, but Champion's did and has. Following the lecture a small group of Baptist ministers took up his challenge and began to work on providing what he had called "a clearer, more coherent and more widely accepted theology."⁶

Champion's lecture sought to be a timely word into the situation of changes taking place within the Baptist Union and in wider society. He understood the task of historical studies to be an opportunity to "offer a measure of illumination and guidance" on the present. He argues that the half-century between 1775 and 1825 was a helpful place to look. It was during these years that a new evangelical Calvinism emerged which gave new life amongst Baptists. It was this period that saw the beginnings of BMS, the Union itself and a number of the Baptist colleges.⁷ Champion's argument is that in these fifty years 'a

¹ Roger Hayden, "The Stillness and the Dancing: An Appreciation of Leonard G. Champion," in *Bible, History, and Ministry: Essays for L. G. Champion on his Ninetieth Birthday*, eds. Roger Hayden and Brian Haymes (Bristol: Bristol Baptist College, 1997), 1-8; Roger Hayden, "Leonard George Champion 1907-1997," *Baptist Quarterly* 37.5 (January 1998): 211-12; Brian Haymes and Morris West, "Rev Dr L. G. Champion," *Baptist Times* 18/25 December 1997: 12.

² He was a member of groups that wrote *The Meaning and Practice of Ordination* (London: Baptist Union, 1957), *The Doctrine of Ministry* (London: Baptist Union, 1961), *The Report of the Commission on the Associations* (London: Baptist Union, 1964), *Baptists and Unity* (London: Baptist Union, 1967).

³ He was a member of the WCC's Faith & Order committee (1954-71) and Chair of the Mission and Unity Department, British Council of Churches (1967-9).

⁴ Leonard Champion, "The Statement of the Denomination," in *The Denominational Conference* (London: Baptist Union, 1961), 25-26.

⁵ Leonard G. Champion, "Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life," *Baptist Quarterly* 28.5 (January 1980): 196-208.

⁶ Champion, "Evangelical Calvinism," 206.

⁷ One of which was Regent's Park College, on which see the new history by Anthony Clarke and Paul Fiddes, *Dissenting Spirit* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2017).

renewed theology led to a rediscovery of mission and the creation of organisations for the fulfilment of mission.⁸ What happened then, he claims, shaped Baptist theology and life up to the present, but he asks whether “different patterns” might now be needed. If they are required, Champion argues that what must be learned from the history is threefold. First, “proper structures of church life need a coherent theology,”⁹ that is, it was theology, a widely shared theology, which made possible a new emphasis on mission and structures.¹⁰ The theology of Evangelical Calvinism was one that was “increasingly congenial to the majority of Baptists,” it laid the ground for the later amalgamation of Particular and General Baptists.¹¹ The new theology now needed is “an urgent task” says Champion, perhaps recognising it was easy to talk growth and reforming structures without giving attention to a theology beneath them.¹² It was a renewed theological imagination that changed the fortunes of Baptists in the late eighteenth century; growth and structures flowed from there. Champion calls on a younger generation to take up this challenge.¹³ Secondly, Champion suggests that we revisit the theology of evangelical Calvinism, not to simply repeat it, but to explore whether it has a new relevance today. He points to the examples of the emphasis on the sovereignty of God, the divine activity of grace through Christ by the Spirit as salvific, and the language of obligation and responsibility. How might these doctrines be restated in a fresh way in order to capture the vision and commitment of Baptists again?¹⁴ Champion’s third suggestion is to see that any new structures are a means of demonstrating that mission is a “corporate activity.”¹⁵ New structures must bring people together. This was the achievement of the evangelical Calvinism of the eighteenth century and something similar was needed again in an increasingly fractured Union.¹⁶

Ten years later, Champion contributed to a festschrift in honour of former BU General Secretary David Russell, with an article titled ‘Whither the Baptists?’¹⁷ Champion takes the opportunity to reflect on “the changes occurring among us” and again argues that there is a need for “a prolonged process of careful thought, leading to fresh theological formulations.”¹⁸ The call for theological engagement remained as

⁸ Champion, “Evangelical Calvinism,” 197.

⁹ Champion, “Evangelical Calvinism,” 206.

¹⁰ In a later article Champion says this need for theology is “not a plea for more academic theology,” Champion, “Baptist Church Life in the Twentieth Century – Some Personal Reflections,” in *Baptists in the Twentieth Century*. Papers Presented at a Summer School July 1982, ed. K. W. Clements (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983), 12. It is a theology grounded in and for the church.

¹¹ Champion, “Evangelical Calvinism,” 201.

¹² In the background here is the 1979 Baptist Union report *Signs of Hope*, which was a state of the Union type of report. Its origins lay in the intervention by Douglas McBain and Paul Beasley-Murray to the news of church decline at the 1977 Baptist Assembly. The response of the Union was *Signs of Hope*.

¹³ Champion was already in his seventies when he gave this lecture and so saw this as an opportunity to pass on the baton to a new generation.

¹⁴ In this argument to revisit evangelical Calvinism, we might see Champion’s dismissal of the theology that emerged in the 1960s onwards, with the likes of John A. T. Robinson’s *Honest to God*.

¹⁵ Champion, “Evangelical Calvinism,” 207.

¹⁶ Issues of ecumenism and Christology had witnessed some churches (those associated with the Baptist Revival Fellowship) leaving the Union in the early 1970s.

¹⁷ Leonard Champion, “Whither the Baptists?” in *Bible, Church and world. A Supplement to the Baptist Quarterly Published in Honour of Dr. D. S. Russell*, ed. J. H. Y. Briggs (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1989), 64-68.

¹⁸ Champion, “Whither the Baptists?” 64.

strong as ten years earlier, despite acknowledging the work towards this end of those who wrote *A Call to Mind* and *Bound to Love* (on which we will return).

Ten years on Champion identified four positive trends and three concerns. Positively he says that the mood among Baptists is more positive and optimistic with regard confidence in the gospel and the response to change. He also sees a greater acceptance among Baptists towards each other and this is paralleled by a recognition that as worship, structures and relationships with other denominations was changing, this was seen as an opportunity rather a matter of dissension. Lastly, he believed that the majority of Baptists were more open to ecumenism and the recognition that the gospel is “greater than the Baptist interpretation of it.”¹⁹ At the same time he is concerned that some acceptance of change was ‘superficial’ and merely ready to go along with ‘social fashions’, without an adequate theological engagement, what we might be called faddism.²⁰ Secondly, the diversity of the Union also led to “formation of competing groups,” which was generating a rivalry rather than a shared oneness in Christ.²¹ Champion’s last concern is that of a short-termism, that changes beget changes.

These positive and negative notes all require says Champion a “more adequate and thorough-going exploration and exposition of the theological foundation of the Baptist position.”²² Champion regards much of Baptist life as theologically-lite, with not enough attention being given to the creation of a shared theology, the like of which had underpinned earlier generations. Baptists might have grown numerically during the 1980s, but there remained still a lack of a theological centre in which the majority of Baptists could gather around.²³ For Champion without a commitment to the task of theology a Christian community “loses direction and purpose, and dissipates its energies in superficial enterprises.”²⁴

Re-reading Champion, nearly forty years on from that Baptist Historical Society Lecture, his challenge, in my view, remains prescient. Theological thinking remains low on the Baptist agenda; pragmatism and faddism remain largely the order of the day.²⁵ We have not established a theological foundation that holds Baptist together in purpose. We do little to champion or encourage the work of theology. This is not that some have not tried. A younger generation did seek to offer the beginnings of a theological foundation, in the two already mentioned books *A Call to Mind* and *Bound to Love*. Authored by Paul Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard Kidd, Keith Clements and Roger Hayden, this was an attempt to reflect theologically and in the later *Bound to Love*, to retrieve a theology of covenant as a means of grounding Baptist church, ministry and mission in the kind of theological foundation Champion was asking for. This theology

¹⁹ Champion, “Whither the Baptists?” 64. In 1989 Baptists voted to join the new ecumenical structures that replaced the British Council of Churches, despite the fact that Roman Catholics were joining.

²⁰ On faddism see Ian Stackhouse, *The Gospel-Driven Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 3-42.

²¹ Champion might have in mind here groupings like Mainstream and the Alliance of Radical Baptists, both active through the 1980s.

²² Champion, “Whither the Baptists?” 65.

²³ For examples the debate over Baptist identity, see Brian Haymes, *Questions of Identity* (Leeds: Yorkshire Baptist Association, 1986) and the response from Mainstream members, David Slater (ed.), *A Perspective on Baptist Identity* (Ilkley: Mainstream, 1987).

²⁴ Champion, ‘Whither the Baptists?’, 65.

²⁵ Brian Haymes, following Champion, has been a constant voice calling for the importance of theology. Haymes also followed Champion as both Principal of Bristol Baptist College (1994-2000) and President of the Baptist Union (1993). See Andy Goodliff, “Brian Haymes: Doing Theology for the Church,” *Baptist Quarterly* 50.1 (2019): 30–38.

of covenant was further developed in the 1990s in documents like *The Nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain*,²⁶ *Transforming Superintendency*,²⁷ *Something to Declare*,²⁸ *On the Way of Trust*²⁹ and found an expression at the millennium in *Covenant 21*,³⁰ a liturgy that all Baptists were encouraged to share in, locally and nationally. The key thinker in this has been Paul Fiddes, who has continued to argue for the importance of covenant as an organising concept for Baptists, see in particular his collection of essays on Baptist ecclesiology, *Tracks and Traces*.³¹ In addition a theology of covenant has been re-championed recently again in the Baptist Union's magazine, although without any apparent recognition of the work done in the 1990s.³² We might assess this theology of covenant, against Champion's description of what was needed, as follows: whilst it has been coherent, it has not always been clearly understood or received, and so has not ultimately found wide acceptance. This is noted in *Something to Declare* where the authors (Fiddes, Haymes, Kidd and Quicke) note that covenant, as it had been used in *The Nature of Assembly*, was "one clear source of disagreement" within Baptist circles.³³ It goes on to acknowledge that the "objections were voiced with energy and commitment" and therefore *Something to Declare* is partly a new attempt to argue for the place of covenant to those that had been unconvinced.³⁴ *On the Way of Trust*, which followed, is also another effort, by the same group, to demonstrate a coherent, clear and widely accepted theology of covenant through the language of trust. The use of *Covenant 21* shows that there was at least some desire (or perhaps mollification) by the Union to think covenantally about Baptist life and structures,³⁵ however it has not taken deep root into the way Baptists talk and think beyond small circles.³⁶

In parallel with the covenant track, Nigel Wright has argued repeatedly from the 1980s and onwards for Baptists as a particular kind of evangelical.³⁷ To be Baptist is to be evangelical. Baptists are a kind of evangelical, but with certain ecclesiological convictions around baptism, governance and politics. Wright was not inspired by Champion, (or if he was he never mentions it), but he is an example of a Baptist seeking to provide a coherent, clear and widely accepted theology. In many ways we might say Wright has been the

²⁶ *The Nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union Great Britain* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 1994). A report produced by the Doctrine and Worship Committee.

²⁷ *Transforming Superintendency* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 1996).

²⁸ Richard Kidd ed., *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 1996).

²⁹ Richard Kidd ed., *On the Way of Trust* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 1997).

³⁰ *Covenant 21* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 2001).

³¹ Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003). Fiddes was Chair of the Doctrine and Worship Committee (1992-1995) and was Principal of Regent's Park College, 1989-2007.

³² *Baptists Together* (Spring 2016), with articles by Lyn Green, Paul Fiddes, Catriona Gorton and others.

³³ Kidd ed., *Something to Declare*, 12.

³⁴ Kidd ed., *Something to Declare*, 12. In a review for the *Baptist Times*, Rev Dr Ted Hale remained unconvinced.

³⁵ The origins of *Covenant 21* were a challenge by Roger Hayden to the Baptist Union Council to mark the millennium with a fundraising effort. *Covenant 21* arguably was less about covenant and more an opportunity for the Union to gather people round the new structures that were implemented in the 2002.

³⁶ For example see Sean Winter's 2007 Whitley Lecture, *More Light and Truth?* and a paper by Dan Sutcliffe-Pratt, *Covenant and Church for Rough Sleepers* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies, Occasional Papers Vol. 14, 2017).

³⁷ Nigel Wright, *The Radical Kingdom* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1986); Nigel Wright, *Challenge to Change* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991); Nigel Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002); Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005); cf. Nigel Wright, *The Radical Evangelical* (London: SPCK, 1996). For more on Wright, see Andy Goodliff, "Nigel Wright's Radical Theology," *Baptist Quarterly* 48.2 (2017): 69-77.

more successful.³⁸ Baptists, are generally now more consciously evangelical, and this has been especially true in terms of the Union's leadership from David Coffey to Jonathan Edwards and now Lynn Green. This embrace of evangelicalism have left some asking what has happened to Baptist identity. Brian Haymes has said "Baptists are often now just part of some general non-denominational evangelicalism"³⁹ and one religious journalist to Keith Clements commented that Baptists 'have opted for a "soft evangelicalism" rather than any theology with a real cutting edge.'⁴⁰ Our rich theological heritage has yielded to a basic middle of the road evangelicalism.⁴¹ Stephen Holmes acknowledges that there is some truth in saying 'Baptists are evangelicals with a different practice of baptism and church government', but that this is also 'misleading, because it misrepresents the extent of difference in theology and practice that our distinctive ecclesiology suggests.'⁴² Holmes himself has argued that we should understand Baptist theology as living around "two foci": the individual believer and the local church, both are necessary to Baptists.⁴³ Holmes summarises the heart of Baptist theology as follows: "God, through the Son and Spirit, calls individual believers into covenanted relationship in the local church, and equips them to build up one another within the local church, and to hear and obey the ongoing missional call to make every other human person a believer. This is Baptist theology."⁴⁴

Champion's call for Baptists to discover a coherent, clear and widely accepted theology remains still to be done, although arguably it is now an even harder task as the structures of the Baptist Union, when they were reformed in 2002 and 2012, in addition to changing patterns of society in terms of institutional belonging, have seen the ties that have bound Baptists together becoming more frayed.⁴⁵ There is a need for a new generation to heed Champion's call, although whether they will be heeded remains to be seen.

³⁸ He notes in *New Baptists* that his earlier book *Challenge to Change* had 'made a modest impact upon a process of rethinking and reforming' and that *New Baptists* was written to "give Baptists a new steer," 1.

³⁹ Brian Haymes, "The Communion of Saints," *Baptist Quarterly* 49.2 (April 2018): 10.

⁴⁰ Cited in Keith Clements, *Look Back in Hope: An Ecumenical Life* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2017), 374.

⁴¹ This is perhaps highlighted by the way Baptists have engaged with the vexed issue of same sex relationships. Some have argued from the position of evangelical theology, others from a position of Baptist theology.

⁴² Stephen R. Holmes, "Beyond a Bath and a Book: Baptist Theological Commitments," *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* 9.2 (November 2014): 17.

⁴³ See Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 6-8.

⁴⁴ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 7.

⁴⁵ Brian Haymes, "Still Blessing the Tie that Binds," in *For the Sake of the Church*, ed. Anthony Clarke (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2014), 91-102.