HOW A CONCERN FOR CONVERSION STOPPED US FROM BEING MISSIONAL

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In 2017 I completed MPhil research at Bristol Baptist College, exploring the failure of Baptists in the city to engage with the white-working classes, in particular on the estates around the edge of the city, one of which is where the church where I minister is located. This paper emerged out of my research and my ongoing reflections on this issue.

In his recent exploration of Baptist theology, Stephen Holmes explores the practice of believers' baptism and how it witnesses to an important distinctive of Baptist belief. And then he says this:

> In Baptist theology, God deals directly with each particular human being, summoning him or her to respond in repentance and faith to the gospel call, and to take his or her place within the active community of the redeemed, living a life of visible holiness and committed to the evangelisation of the world. Believer's baptism is an expression of this intensely individualist strain within Baptist theology: the faith of the church or the family is of no moment in the story of a person's journey to faith; only his or her own response counts.[1]

In this paper I will explore the possibility that this emphasis may actually be an inhibitor to, rather than a driver of, mission.

Many of us here will be familiar with the historical background which in part explains this emphasis, our emergence from Separatist groups who sought religious liberty and who defined themselves in opposition to the idea of a state church, placing a high value on the purity of a community set apart from the institutionalised nominalism of established religion.[2] The historian B. G. Worrall records the evolution of Baptist belief and practice by the time of the 19th century, describing a people who felt that "they were the ones who took their religion seriously," with their "abundance of meetings and the fact that they practised extempore prayer,"[3] setting themselves apart from what was perceived as the soft-peddling convenience of Anglicanism. Worrall notes that even though it came from an earlier age, the most popular book which expressed their understanding of faith was Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which speaks of an individual making their journey through the world characterised by a battle against temptation and a determination to make it to the Celestial City untainted and unscathed.[4] He also observes that, "Chapel

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[1] Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 95.
[2] See Christopher R. Ellis, "Spirituality in Mission," in *Under the Rule of Christ*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 173.
[3] B. G. Worrall, *The Making of the Modern Church: Christianity in England since 1800*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1993), 137.
[4] Ibid., 137.

could absorb the whole non-working life of a family, effectively cutting them off from any other activity and giving an impression of narrowness,"[5] a view reinforced by their strict moral outlook.[6]

The early years of the twentieth century saw Baptists facing up to the reality of numerical decline.[7] Baptist Union General Secretary John Howard Shakespeare attempted to arrest this trend through the creation of new structures to encourage interdependence, an approach which, in retrospect, was always unlikely to succeed in "a denomination which owed its past vigour and growth to the local and spontaneous."[8] To this day, a stress on the independence of the local congregation continues to be an important feature of Baptist ecclesiology, cited by Holmes as 'the other major ecclesiological distinctive shared by Baptists'[9] alongside believers' baptism.

But to what extent does that understanding accurately reflect the values of our forebears?

Paul Goodliff, in a paper written in 2012, has pointed out that the earliest Baptists: "were not individualists in the way that modernity privileges the atomistic and autonomous individual, but rather . . . they understood the nature of discipleship as both a personal choice to follow Christ, and a commensurate commitment to the community of those who have done likewise."[10]

In the same article, he cites the work of American Baptist Theologian Philip E. Thompson, who uses the term *paramnesia*[11] to describe Baptist's distorted reading of their own history. Viewing the story of the early Baptists through lenses which are coloured by the modern obsession with individualism, contemporary Baptists see their forebears as people driven by a pre-occupation with their rights to believe and worship on their own terms, a version of history which overlooks the central importance given by early Baptists and Anabaptists, to mutual accountability between members for whom Sunday worship often included discussions on practice and discipline, connections between churches[12] and congregational hermeneutics.[13]

Of course, an understanding of Christian faith which gives primacy to the beliefs of the individual is not a perspective unique to British Baptists. David Bebbington has famously defined conversionism, "the belief that lives need to be changed," as one of four hallmarks of modern evangelicalism.[14]

A helpful overview of the roots of this conviction can be found in William Abraham's book, *The Logic of Evangelism*. Abraham describes the way in which the eighteenth-century marked a watershed in evangelistic practice, when influential preachers such as John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards began to focus their sermons on the affections of listeners and the provocation of a personal, heartfelt response from the congregation.[15] Abraham notes that Wesley and Edwards both had an understanding of the Gospel which

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[5] Ibid., 138.
[6] Ibid., 138.
[7] See Roger Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage* (Didcot Baptist Union, 2005²), 170.
[8] Ibid., 177.
[9] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 95-96.
[10] Paul Goodliff, "Baptist Futures: Networks," Unpublished paper 2012, 21.
[11] Ibid., 20.
[12] See Hayden, English Baptist History, 32.
[13] See Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000), 167.
[14] See David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2.
[15] William Abraham *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 58.

included a deep commitment 'to the coming of the rule of God on earth as well as in heaven.'[16] However, a course had been set which would lead to an increasing focus on personal conversion and renewal, typified by the preaching of evangelists such as Charles Finney, D. L. Moody and Billy Graham. Ultimately, the result has been the proclamation of a diminished gospel where crucial elements of the story, such as the coming of God's kingdom and its announcement to the world in "the worship and ministry of the church are all treated as a kind of scaffolding or backcloth to the salvation of the individual sinner."[17]

Why might this focus on individual conversion and piety be a problem with regard to mission? The initial stimulation for this paper came from Mark Mulder's recent book, *Shades of White Flight*. The book is a study of seven Christian Reformed Churches (CRC) in Chicago who relocated to different suburbs in direct response to demographic changes which led to an influx of African-Americans to the areas where they were previously situated. He observes that, "white evangelicals have been opposed to individual racial prejudice while failing to understand the structural/institutional character of racism."[18]

Mulder attributes this 'antistructural'[19] outlook to an understanding of faith that makes believers responsible for their personal piety but fails to challenge their collusion with systems which perpetuate deprivation. In this school of thought, a priority for Christians is the sustaining of a personal relationship with God, to the exclusion of wider social issues. Individual members of these churches insisted that their personal morality allowed no room for racist attitudes, but collectively they colluded with migration patterns which sustained racial segregation in the city.

A variety of reasons are offered to account for this problem. The history of CRC congregations is described by Mulder as "rife with schism."[20] The breaking of a relationship or departure from a place came to be regarded as a legitimate response to challenges which may arise. The primary relationships for many church members were located within the congregation, thereby de-emphasising the importance of physical location. "Those communities tended to be largely spiritual—there was no emphasis on community being connected to 'place."[21] Finally, Mulder reflects on problems arising from CRC ecclesiology, noting that power is located primarily at the level of congregations who are free to resist strategies for mission which are developed regionally by the denomination.[22]

I came across Mulder's book during the course of my research and I was struck by a number of parallels might be drawn between these factors and the spirituality which characterises British Baptist life. I'd like to suggest that Mulder's assertion that individualism can lead to an 'anti-structural' faith seems especially relevant when we consider Britain's recent history.

A brief digression. Imagine the scene: it's 1981, and in a speech in the parish of St Lawrence Jewry in the City of London, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher outlined her understanding of Christian

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[16] Ibid., 58.
[17] Ibid., 59.
[18] Mark Mulder, *Shades of White Flight: Evangelical Congregations and Urban Departure* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 7.
[19] Ibid., 7.
[20] Ibid., 6.
[21] Ibid., 78.
[22] Ibid., 98-99.

faith and its relationship to social change ". . . the New Testament is preoccupied with the individual, with his need for forgiveness and for the Divine strength, which comes to those who sincerely accept it. Of course, we can deduce from the teachings of the Bible principles of public as well as private morality; but, in the last resort, all these principles refer back to the individual in his relationship with others."[23]

In her recent book, *God and Mrs Thatcher,* Eliza Filby comments that, "this was in essence Margaret Thatcher's theology: the individual positioned at the centre of the spiritual and the temporal world."[24] It is no accident that such a faith was formed within Non-conformism. From an earlier age, the most influential figure in Margaret Thatcher's life was her father, Alfred Roberts, shopkeeper, president of the Chamber of Trade and the Rotary Club and also a Methodist lay preacher.[25] This was an understanding of faith which placed a heavy emphasis on discipline, personal propriety and hard work, but also one which encouraged deregulation, allowing for rising levels of debts from the 1980s.

During the 1980s, one of the most vocal opponents of the changes brought about by the Conservative government were the Church of England, with Bishops often voicing their concern about increasing unemployment and social division. One such example is the acrimonious Miners' Strike of 1984-5, when David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, spoke out in defence of the coal workers. However, Filby notes the, "comparative silence of the non-conformist churches, once the moral heartbeat of the mining villages."[26] One is tempted to ask what goals Baptist and other non-conformists were pursuing in the same period.

One possible answer to such a question might be found in a brief consideration of the Protestant work ethic. As recently as 2015, 96% of Evangelical Alliance survey respondents affirmed their belief that, "Everyone has a duty to work to support themselves and their family if they can,"[27] while 11% agreed with the statement that, "if we are faithful we will prosper materially."[28] In the same survey, evangelicals were asked about what they considered to be the top causes of poverty in the UK. Only 33% saw "educational inequality" as an issue, and only 37% believed "inequality or social justice" to be a factor. However, 75% of evangelicals considered "laziness" to be a problem, and 84% cited "welfare dependency."[29] Perhaps, we see the blindness of privilege speaking in these responses, but I suspect that they also bear witness to a set of assumptions which underpin evangelical attitudes, the belief that God has a plan for *me* and *my* life, that he leads *me* to the one he predestined me to marry, that he opens the doors to the job he wants *me* to do, that my rewards for working hard and going along with his purposes come in the form of financial and material comfort given by the One who is ordering the world to work on terms which are favourable to his chosen ones.

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[23] Eliza Filby, *God and Mrs Thatcher: The Battle for Britain's Soul* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2015), 125.
[24] Ibid., 125.
[25] Ibid., 4.
[26] Ibid., 188.
[27] Evangelical Alliance, "Good News for the Poor? A Snapshot of the Beliefs and Habits of Evangelical Christians in the UK," Summer (2015): 7.
[28] Ibid., 7.
[29] Ibid., 14.

Another criticism of individualist faith cited by Mulder is the way it can separate belief from place. In my own experience of Baptist ministry in Birmingham, I am frequently struck by the number of Baptists who commute from one suburb to another on a Sunday morning, with ties *within* their congregations apparently stronger than those to the places where people live. The choice of where to worship for Baptists often appears to be predicated more on churchmanship than location. People will consider whether or not a church is sufficiently evangelical, charismatic or liberal, according to their tastes, ahead of where it is situated.

Commuter worshippers, inevitably, fail to connect with a neighbourhood in the same way as those who reside there. At its most extreme, those travelling to churches in areas of deprivation may even feel an ambivalence or disdain towards such places. One minister of a church I interviewed during my research, based in a deprived ward in Birmingham spoke about a member of his congregation who had told him: "I don't like coming to [this area], I only come here for church."

A considered reflection on this issue needs to account not only for Baptist ecclesiology and practice, but also for wider changes which have taken place in British society in recent decades. An increase in individualism has been caused by a number of factors including a "greater proportion of leisure time at home"[30] for families enjoying television or on the web.

Another reason has been the advent of widely-available personal transport. Those with access to cars commute in privacy from their communities during working hours, and then spend their evenings at home. The car also allows people to shop, play (and worship) away from the neighbourhoods where they live.

Not all sociologists regard the rise of individualism only in terms of the loss of previous patterns of community life. Elliott and Lemert suggest instead that it is a natural human reaction to the continual and fast-paced change experienced by many in modern society, that "a sense of detached engagement"[31] is a survival instinct of those under pressure. However, this analysis is not supported by a 2010 UK charities report which suggests that "individuals and cultures that attach greater importance to self-transcendence and openness-to-change values,"[32] are more likely to show "greater concern about bigger-than-self problems, and higher motivation to address these problems."[33] In other words, self-preservation and detachment are not inevitable human responses in times of crisis; we can be conditioned to act towards others in a spirit of generosity and vulnerability. I wonder to what extent those sorts of values are being encouraged in our churches.

One final sociological insight should be considered. In his seminal study of individualism, *Bowling Alone,* Robert Putnam notes the emergence of groups which offer opportunities to participate in various types of support or self-help. Examples include Weightwatchers, keep fit classes and support groups for

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[30] See I. Jones, *The Local Church and Generational Change in Birmingham 1945-2000* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), 141.

[31] A. Elliott and C. Lemert, *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalisation*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), xx.

[32] T. Cromton, *Common Cause: The Case for Working with our Cultural Values* (Godalming: World Wildlife Fund, 2010), 32.

[33] Ibid., 32.

those with shared interests or problems, issues which Putnam notes are, "not nearly so closely associated with regular community involvement such as voting, volunteering, giving to charity, working on community problems, or talking with neighbours."[34] Putnam draws on the insights of fellow American sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who offers the following analysis of such groups:

> People feel cared for. They help one another. They may share their intimate problems . . . But in another sense small groups may not be fostering community as effectively as many of their proponents would like. Some small groups merely provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others. The social contract binding members together asserts only the weakest of obligations. Come if you have time. Talk if you feel like it. Respect everyone's opinion. Never criticise. Leave quietly if you become dissatisfied.[35]

It is tempting to consider how Wuthnow's critique could be applied to the home groups which have become the locus of church life in so many evangelical congregations. It would be wrong to discount the obvious benefits offered by these groups which provide opportunities for deeper fellowship and discussion about how faith is lived out in everyday situations. But to what extent have such groups moved the focus of discipleship from public witness to private opinions and inward-looking relationships?

In her most recent book Lynsey Hanley, reflecting on her journey from a working-class background to middle-class respectability, suggests that, "Put crudely, the 'middle-class idea of the person' is that you are a project: you are nothing without external input, matched with personal effort."[36]

Hanley's remarks hold up a mirror against much of the practice which constitutes evangelical spirituality: the courses to be completed, the books to be read, the meetings to be attended, the knowledge to be acquired. Inherent in such an approach is the danger that faith becomes one more part of an overall process of self-improvement and self-actualisation.

In the early days of the Baptist movement, a focus on individual discipleship and taking personal responsibility for one's faith represented a strength, a distinctive position to adopt during a time when membership of the established church was assumed and uncritical adherence to faith was a cultural norm. But is there a time when a denomination's strengths become its weaknesses? In a society where individualism is now rife, there is a danger that this emphasis on personal salvation is no longer counter-cultural but actually represents a diminished understanding of the Gospel, one which demands less of us because it fails to ask questions of the ways we might collude with social and economic structures that de-humanise and marginalise others. My argument is not that we cast aside our theology of conversion, but that we think afresh about what we are converting people from, and the purpose for which we are discipling them. And at a time when many congregations are engaging more with their communities through social projects such

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[34] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 151.

[35] Ibid., 152.

[36] Lynsey Hanley, *Respectable: The Experience of Class* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 99-100.

as Christians Against Poverty Debt Advice or Foodbanks, do we have a theology which actually equips them to make sense of the kingdom work they are undertaking?