New Baptists, New Agenda

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Introduction

The title I take as my presidential theme is *New Baptists, New Agenda*. There are many things that could be said, and perhaps should be said, under this heading. Thirty minutes however does not suffice - but neither would sixty or ninety. To do greater justice to the topic I have produced a book of the same title to be read at leisure. I commend it to you. Tonight I want simply to concentrate on one thing. But I don’t want to make too many assumptions. Many delegates and visitors here today may for no fault of their own be only hazily aware that over the last six years and more Baptist Christians in this country have been passing through a period of re-thinking and re-structuring. On January 1st of this year most of those changes became solid reality. Some of them you have seen displayed and heard mentioned.

Yet those of us who have been involved in that process have been keen to stress all along that changes to the ways we organise ourselves are not themselves the point. Let us not therefore with a sigh of relief think we have done what needs to be done. We have simply prepared the way. What *really* matters is the spiritual renewal and spiritual effectiveness of our churches that such changes are meant only to serve. The real challenge is to do with being missionary congregations served by missionary ministers as part of a missionary denomination working for the changing of lives and the transforming of communities.

My hope in this address and in this year of service is to draw attention to what is at the heart of things. And here, lest I get ‘done’ under the Trades Descriptions Act, I confess straightaway that though the title of this presidential address majors on the word ‘new’ (*New Baptists, New Agenda*), in fact it isn’t new at all. Or putting it differently, it is only new in the sense that it is a re-newal of something that is as old as the purpose of God itself: God’s purpose to bring to pass a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

At the Assembly in 1977 at Nottingham I received the right hand of fellowship as a fully accredited minister from the then president Dr E.
A. Payne. I have always appreciated Ernest Payne’s writings. On several occasions he cites a quotation from Sir John Seeley which obviously meant a great deal to him and has come to mean much to me also. The quotation is: ‘When the power of reclaiming the lost dies out of the Church, the Church ceases to be the Church.’ Dr Payne calls this the Article of Conversion and describes it as the true article by which the church stands or falls. When the power to bring about in people’s lives the grace of conversion is no longer there we are no longer the church of Jesus Christ. Do we believe this?

I believe this. I also believe all the other things I am supposed to believe. In fact I believe them wholeheartedly. I believe that social action and the struggle for justice are all part of the total mission on which Christ sends us and we should not set asunder what the God of the incarnate Christ has joined. But supremely, ‘when the power of reclaiming the lost dies out of the Church, the Church ceases to be the Church’.

What does it take to be a converting church?

We cannot be agents of conversion unless we ourselves are experiencing the power of conversion. And here there is another quotation which has been consistently meaningful to me, although this time I don’t know from where it comes: ‘Every Christian needs to undergo three conversions: there is the conversion to Christ, there is the conversion to the church and there is the conversion to the world.’

**The conversion to Christ**

Of course - because Christ is the one who is sent from God to be the one mediator between God and humankind. And Yes, Christians are insistent at this point, that as far as they are concerned the love of God spelled out in Jesus Christ is for all and is universal. Christ is cosmically significant. In him God meets us, and God will meet any, with life transforming power. I suspect that all of us tonight are here because in some way at some time the light of Christ shone into our darkened hearts and in his face we beheld the glory of God.

All of this, our conversion to Christ, is expressed in baptism in which we proclaim that he died for us and therefore we will live for him. But baptism however much it speaks of an original and decisive encounter with Christ is more than that. It is a pattern of life. It expresses a continual process of dying and rising, of daily placing our faith in Jesus
Christ as our Lord and Saviour, of turning to God through Christ in conversion.

Now like me you may have pondered about the title for this Assembly: *Jesus in Widescreen*, which is a relief. The fact that people don’t understand what it means doesn’t seem to stop people from coming. I have never been very good at the cryptic. I don’t do cryptic. But let me tell you what it means. It means we need to have a big vision of Jesus Christ. The agenda for Baptist Christians at the beginning of this millennium is to think highly and to think widely about Jesus. After September 11th 2001 nobody can doubt that religion is potentially a dangerous commodity. We are not interested in religion. We are interested in the way that Jesus Christ can transform religion, and indeed everything else, to make all of life into a true devotion to the God who was in Christ and of whom Christ is the living image.

If we have a message to proclaim it is not about ourselves but about the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Our vision of Christ needs to be in widescreen – not a partial vision that focuses only on this or that. One which reckons with the whole Christ – the Christ who was and is and ever will be the eternal Son of the Father worthy of all honour and praise; the Christ through whom and for whom all things visible and invisible were made; the Christ who became a child incarnate of the Virgin Mary; the Christ who lived the lives we failed to live and so became the pattern for us all; the Christ who tasted death in our place upon the cross and was raised on the third day; the Christ who ascended on high and is reigning and while he is reigning is making intercession for us; the Christ who will come again and whom every eye will see; the Christ through whom heaven and earth will finally be reconciled to the Father so that God may be all in all.

If I might trouble you for a moment with some technical theology: the whole Christ is for us both *sacrament* and *example*. He is the one through whom God acts to do for us what we could never do for ourselves – the sacrament of our salvation. He is also our example who calls us to follow in his footsteps, to do what he did, to imitate him until by the power of the Holy Spirit we become like him. As our sacrament and as our example we need today, and not just today, to turn to Jesus Christ and to confess him Saviour and Lord. This is our Christ-centred, Christ-honouring agenda.

There is a second conversion
The conversion to the church

It follows from the first. Christ is not alone. He has a Body. He has a Company. He has a People to whom he is related as Head to Body. To be converted to Christ, especially the whole Christ, also means therefore being gathered into a community of those from whom he cannot be separated. Indeed it is almost invariably through this community that we heard of Christ and were led to him in the first place. Through this Body much of Christ’s work is done and when we are baptised into Christ we are also baptised into the community that bears his name. To be converted to the whole Christ means logically to be converted also to the Body of Christ.

But experience suggests that things are not always as straightforward as logic might suggest. Those who place their faith in Christ do not always, it seems, follow this through with a wholehearted desire to be members of his church. This too requires a conversion – a moment or a process of realisation that as we confess our faith in Christ so we also confess our faith in the church: I believe in one, holy, catholic church. The church is not only something whose existence we acknowledge and about which we might be sometimes glad and sometimes embarrassed. It is something in which we are called to believe. And at the other end the evidence is mounting that there are those who lose their faith in the church even as they retain and indeed develop their faith in Christ. Professor Haddon Willmer in an article entitled ‘the Collapse of Congregations’ has recently drawn attention to the fact that congregations are in danger of erosion from without as our culture chips away at the maintenance of congregational life, and also erosion from within as congregations fail to meet the legitimate needs of their members. If it is joyfully true that the number of Christians who die is being offset by the number of new Christians who are won, then the decline in congregational life comes not from our failure to sow the seeds of faith and to reap people for Christ, but from our failure to keep all those whom we have reaped. And even here it is not the case that people are turning from Christ but that they have never truly experienced in the first place or are unable to maintain over time their conversion to and faith in the church. Sadly we have to acknowledge that congregations are places where people are hurt and hindered as well as helped and healed. Sisters and brothers, if we kept everybody we reaped our churches would be far more populated than they currently are.

How do we respond to this? First of all by insisting that the church of Jesus Christ is not and can never be a dispensable option. The cause
of Christian faith is intimately tied up with the development of vital and vibrant congregations. Faith in the whole Christ makes faith in the church non-negotiable: On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. We will never see people being converted to the church unless we ourselves believe in it. Christians need to be solidly converted to the church. But secondly, we must rise to the challenge of what it means to be church at the beginning of this millennium. Some things are of the essence of church and we cannot surrender them without losing the heart of the matter – baptism, the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, prayer, communion. But there are other things, many other things, which are negotiable, which are non-essentials. My friend and colleague Dr Stuart Murray is right, I think, to call after the decade of evangelism for a decade of experimentation. But this must be theologically controlled experimentation, which understands what is of the essence, not a free for all. And it is one in which new ways of being church will be accompanied by the renewal of old ways of being church in a society and a culture which is sufficiently diverse to call for many strategies and approaches.

Then there is the third conversion

**The conversion to the world**

Is it not the case, you might say as an older generation certainly would have done, that the world is what we are converted from? Indeed it is, if by ‘world’ we mean, as the NT often does, human society organised in defiance of God: the world, the flesh and the devil. The NT however is subtle at this point. It never gives up the idea that the world is God’s world. The redeemer God is the creator God. Beyond human defiance of the creator the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.

There are several ways in which evangelical Christians need to reconsider their theology – not to make it weaker but to make it stronger, not to be less evangelical but to be more so. Probably the most important way is this: that we who have been so keen to stress the need for redemption need to re-embrace the doctrine of creation. This world and everything in it is God’s. Distort and vandalise it how we may, it remains God’s. And what is God’s has a future in God, should it embrace it, for God loves all that God has made. What has been created for a purpose – the glory of God – should see its purpose being fulfilled. This is redemption. Our emphasis on the whole Christ tells us this. All things were made through him and for him. It is for Christ’s sake that we insist that what was his in the first reckoning
must be restored to him in the final reckoning. It is indeed being restored through a process of judgment and grace. In God’s good time God’s will shall be done by means of Christ’s own participation in creation’s story and ours through incarnation and cross and resurrection by which he has brought life and immortality to light.

We are converted from the world to Christ in order that by him and through our conversion to the church the ‘world’ in this God-resistant sense might be taken out of us and so that we might then be converted again to the world. But this time the world is seen as God’s own creation, the theatre of God’s glory and the arena of God’s saving activity. By ourselves being incarnate in this world, its physicality, its communities, its commerce, its search for a better way, we work towards the better day already made known in Christ.

Which brings me to a last thing and actually a fourth conversion not envisaged in our quotation but equally necessary as part of our agenda at this stage of our story.

The conversion to the future

Yes, every Christian needs conversions to Christ, to the church, to the world and to the future. For this is how the NT writers thought. The resurrection for them was the arrival in the present of the power of the future, of the ultimate, of the final, of the unsurpassable. In the light of this future, now demonstrated and guaranteed, we are called to live. The future for the Christian is not something to fear but something to anticipate. Indeed in our worship we anticipate it all the time. And the future for the Christian is not something that we calculate by projecting forward a graph from the present. It is not the calculable future but the imaginable future. We reckon with God’s transforming surprises. We imagine ourselves as part of that great multitude which no-one can number standing before the throne and giving eternal praise to the one who was and is and is to come and to the Lamb. We imagine it when we think of all things being made new and the earth being filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. We anticipate it when we break bread and do so recalling a great memory on the one hand and yet savouring a great hope on the other – a hope that in that day we shall come with many from north and south and east and west to sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and to drink anew of the fruit of the vine with Christ in the kingdom of God. We anticipate it when in our feeble fellowship we know a foretaste of the communion with the Triune God and with redeemed humankind that shall be ours and that shall embrace the world. The
day that we are taught to imagine is a day towards which we also work, one which excites us and energises us and beckons us on when times are hard as well as when they are good. It is our future hope that invites faith and produces love. Its coming may be delayed but it can never fail.

We recall that the church of Christ of which we are part is named as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Few of us would dare to claim that any of these words is actually true of our own church or indeed of any church. We are conscious, and rightly so, of our failings and inadequacies. What we can say however is that they will be wholly true - on the day when we are properly the gathered church, gathered at the last before the Lord and his anointed. And these words that are not yet fully true but which one day will be fully so are an agenda for us, one to which we work, striving by God’s grace to be one in the Spirit, to be holy in our living, to be inclusive of all God’s catholic people in our embrace, to fulfil the apostolic witness and mission on which we have been sent. It is this future to which we also need to be converted, forgetting therefore what is in the past and reaching forward for what is yet to be, striving for it with everything that is within us.

These are the conversions that we need – a conversion to the whole Christ that leads to a conversion to his church that leads in turn to a conversion to the world created by God and awaiting God’s redemption, seen in the light of a future we already perceive in visionary form and which draws us on. And if we as Baptist Christians are truly a converted people we will embody the power to reclaim the lost, to change lives and transform communities in our generation to God’s glory and praise. This is our agenda.

What do we need to do? We need most of all to believe these things. We need to go beyond hearing them to believing them. What we believe will change us. What we hope for will empower us. We need to offer ourselves and our churches as candidates for conversion so that God may work in us what is well-pleasing in his sight.

**Conclusion**

Let me end with a prophetic postscript. I am by nature a pessimist. The long-term future I don’t have any problem with. I’m a theologian: the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. No problem. It’s the short-term future I have a problem with. And yet as a pessimist I have recently, especially as I have
travelled around the country, been having some strange experiences. I think they are called twinges of optimism. They derive from the fact that in church after church – and I speak here of Baptist churches – I find evidences of conversion, of changed lives and transformed communities. What I hear – from the statisticians, from the newspapers, from the chattering classes, might confirm my pessimistic tendencies. What I see leads me in a different direction. I dislike whistling in the dark to keep our spirits up. I also dislike big words and loud claims retailed for effect at conferences like this. But in my heart, and you judge whether I am a prophet – stone me if you wish, I believe we are in the very early stages of a sea-change which will see many of our churches growing gently but steadily. The key for us at this time is to pray, and work and believe God for converting power to reclaim the lost.

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