

BHS Newsletter Spring 2008

Mission in the 50s and 60s. Part 4. Fred Stainthorpe

Many single missionaries, chiefly women, gave up the chance of marrying and having a family because of their obedience to Christ, although some did wed colleagues and lived together happily. Married couples enjoyed family life and their homes often gave the nationals a different idea of how to bring up children. They loved our children who played with their own. Improved health measures meant that children could grow up strong and well but at the back of every missionary parent's mind was the question of their education. In the pioneer days many missionaries, rightly or wrongly, had left their children in Britain almost as infants. They can hardly have been neglectful parents and the cost must have been tremendous, particularly to the mothers. Some children queried the correctness of this decision later. Of all questions, this was the one which burdened my wife and myself the most. Sometimes mothers educated the children at home in the early years but not every parent feels able to do this. Inevitably as children reached the age of primary school, their parents had to face the question of whether to resign, or spend some years at home with the children or leave them. Various English boarding schools were well able to take the children but we still found it hard to come to a decision. Did this indicate a lack of dedication? In the late Fifties, some of us were suggesting the possibility of having at least a primary school in Kinshasa. For various reasons The Mission was unable to set this up but some years later a British Association School was founded there which successfully educated many expatriate children, allowing them to rejoin their parents at least once a year if not more often. This must have helped many missionary families. Nowadays as the locus of mission has shifted more to European and "second world" countries such as Brazil, it has become more feasible to educate one's children locally. Even so, some degree of parting comes as a reminder of the cost of overseas service. Conversely, many of the Africans were probably impressed by the sacrifice which people made in this direction. They sometimes mentioned this to us. Not many people in local British churches were aware of the hardship involved and it was not easy to talk about this in public.

Thinking back, I never talked of any of these problems, unless in passing, to the home congregations one visited on "deputation". Reasons for this were somewhat mixed. The Society obviously wished us to maintain and increase support for its work. One sincerely wanted to show how the Gospel was changing Congolese life for the better. Congregations also needed to know that, at least, we were using their gifts wisely. Yet one had the uneasy feeling that they always wanted to hear success stories and that if we told the whole truth they might become disillusioned. Even if British churches were struggling, surely it was a different matter overseas, with conversions happening every week, churches starting up and growing all over the place! The missionaries did not meet the problems people faced at home, or at least they overcame them with ease!

We knew that this was not always the case. Human nature is the same the world over and in any case the church in Congo was in some instances only about fifty years old. We were living in sub-apostolic, almost first generation, days and the faults one reads about in the New Testament were as obvious in our day as they were then. This is why the New Testament was such a valuable help in identifying and dealing with them. Occasionally we used to warn colleagues, half seriously, not to speak about Congolese church leaders in too glowing terms. On their return from furlough, they might learn that So-and-so had fallen from grace and that the Church had had to discipline him! This did happen occasionally. Therefore, we tried to be as positive as possible and honest too. We welcomed the chance to discuss these matters sometimes with local ministers who might be more sympathetic, knowing that they too had similar problems and could pray for us with more understanding.

Many of these difficulties arose from the fact that we were working and living in colonial situations. While the Congolese did not identify us with the Belgian authorities, our white skins, education and general savoir-faire classed us with the latter. Somehow we were pig-in-the-middle, and enjoyed the access afforded us by our background. By the same token, this sometimes made it harder to identify completely with nationals. Perhaps missionaries working nowadays in Europe, for example, do not suffer from the same handicap. Yet "every man must bear his own burden" and at times they must wonder whether they are living in luxurious accommodation with greater financial resources than the local population, being able periodically to "get away from it all" on home assignment. They suffer relatively more isolation than we did; working on as we did on a mission compound, with the help this gave from colleagues (and the problems which occasionally arose too). No doubt, they face different apparently insoluble problems.

Our "whiteness" perhaps also hindered us from sharing our thoughts as completely with the African colleagues as with fellow missionaries. It was relatively easy for the Congolese, in conversation with us, to say what they thought we wanted them to say. After all this was probably the way in which they spoke to the Belgian administrators. I cannot recall ever discussing my doubts, problems or difficulties with any of our

pastors. Perhaps they thought that we knew the answers to all problems. No doubt, this was my fault in not being open enough with them.

In the end, of course, one had to get on with one's daily work. People generally used to imagine overseas missionaries as always "bright-eyed and bushy tailed", full of the zeal of the Lord, striding everywhere purposefully in faith and love and never suffering any crises. This was not always the case, unfortunately. Admittedly, we usually enjoyed good health. Advances in prophylactics meant that few of us ever suffered from a real dose of malaria, for example. When we did, we remembered it! John Garside, a senior colleague once told me that he had gone on trek into the interior one summer and had forgotten his paludrine tablets. The mosquitoes pounced on him and he returned home very ill. Yet there were times when one had a low-grade attack and "struggled up the heavenly hill with weary steps and slow" In particular I recall evenings, c. 5.45 p.m., when one had to start the Lister diesel engine which supplied our homes with electric light from 6p.m.to 9.p.m . (It also lit the operating theatre whenever needed, at all hours of the day and night). To do this, one had to spin the heavy flywheel and turn a lever at the right moment. If one was not feeling very well, it always seemed difficult to do this properly. As night fell very quickly out there, one would lean against the engine almost exhausted, hoping that a colleague might turn up like the Good Samaritan.

Likewise people suffered crises of faith at times. There was a period when my own wife felt that God was far away from her and it was difficult to know how to offer help. Surely this ought not to have happened to a missionary! Yet it did, even though the lapse was temporary. One could hardly mention this to supporters at home in case our image suffered and maybe more of us passed through experiences like this than we cared to own. Until the light broke through again we just struggled on. In many ways this, together with all the other problems mentioned above, illustrated Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4 where he says that we have this treasure in earthen vessels. God was pleased to use us despite our lapses, insensitivity, questionings and crises of conscience. Otherwise what does grace mean? And it was not all gloom and doom! We were making a positive contribution to the life of the Congolese Church. For many of us it was "the time of our lives" and Andrew MacBeath's words, from the early 40's summed much of it up. "I was amazed at the amount of laughter on the mission station", he once wrote, "I had expected much more of the minor key".

Paul's other words in 1 Corinthians 15:58 that "nothing we ever do in the name of the Lord Jesus in vain" were then and remain a great encouragement, enabling one to echo with thanksgiving, Horatius Bonar's hymn:-

"We thank Thee, Lord, for using us
For Thee to work and speak,
However trembling is the hand,
The voice however weak...
O honour higher, truer far,
Than earthly fame can be;
Thus to be used in such a work,
So long, by such as Thee "

TOWARD AN ITALIAN BAPTIST IDENTITY

Nuncio Loioudice

Introduction

Italian Baptists have always struggled for their identity. They have needed to distinguish themselves from the Roman Catholic majority whilst avoiding the danger of becoming sectarian. Other European Baptists face a similar identity crisis. Is there, in fact, a Baptist identity? Some Italian churches would draw their identity from their ecclesiological understanding, others would look to the ethical emphasis characteristic of their church, but it is not in theoretical ideas that the marks of Baptist identity in Italy are to be found, nor has a confession of faith been the foremost mark of the identity of Italian Baptists, since our confession of faith is only about ten years old.

Italian Baptist identity is constituted in the meeting of different Christian Baptist experiences which have subsequently been incarnated in a specific historical context.¹ Italian Baptists are diverse, embracing the pietistic and the liberal, the politically-minded and the fundamentalist. Yet they all make a profession of faith and they all baptize believers.

Historical Context

Extensive literature exists on the emergence of the first Baptists in England out of a world of political and religious oppression. This accounts for their insistence on freedom of conscience in spiritual matters, and the

limitation of the authority of the civil magistrate in matters of faith within the early confessions. The Italian historical context was similar. The period 1821-1870, called the *Risorgimento*, the struggle for the unification of Italy, is the immediate historical context for Italian Baptist origins. Italy at that time was divided into several states, some ruled by the French Bourbon dynasty and others by local dynasties. This gave rise to patriotic movements, inspired by the French Revolution, seeking liberation from foreign rule. The dream of unification spread very quickly, with some agents favouring republicanism, others a form of constitutional monarchy.

The dominant Roman Catholic Church was intolerant of liberal and revolutionary ideas which threatened the Church's temporal power. There were many who did not appreciate that power, among them the ruler of the Kingdom of Piedmont, who signed a petition in favour of Waldensian Church, the oldest Protestant witness in Italy. Persecuted for centuries, they survive in closed Alpine valleys and received recognition from Piedmont state and freedom to worship in 1848. Others, including some priests and monks, left the Catholic Church because of its resistance to liberal ideas and went into exile. Some became Protestants in exile and others were influenced in their political thinking by Protestant ideas, which led them to make a substantial contribution towards the unification of Italy. As in England two centuries earlier, some Baptists had become identified with the Fifth Monarchists and with the events leading to the 1661 rebellion, so some Protestants got involved in the Expedition of a Thousand Men which unified Italy in 1870. In this favourable liberal atmosphere a religious alternative to Catholicism began to emerge. In Piedmont, the Waldensians began missionary activity. Elsewhere liberation from foreign oppression included liberation from papal jurisdiction and the reactionary papal attitude to all kinds of reform. In some parts of Italy there was no religious liberty at all.

In many countries Baptists were part of a large Protestant community, with Bible and worship in the language of the people; in Italy, even by 1870, the Bible was not widely available, the mass was in Latin and many people were still illiterate. People's religious practice was a mixture of paganism and Catholicism, laced with superstitious practices. Homes had a saint or a Madonna over the great matrimonial bed. Every city had and still has a protective saint. Charms or religious medals were and are worn for protection against evil. The reformation in Italy had to start from scratch in the nineteenth century. Emphasis on believer's baptism helped to contrast personal decision and commitment to faith with Catholic deference to the church and its clergy.

With the unification of Italy, the papacy lost its temporal power and the new government brought political reforms and guaranteed religious liberty. Missionaries came from various parts of Europe and from the United States. They could point to an Italian tradition of religious reform seen in Arnold of Brescia, Peter Valdo, the Duchess Renata, Vergerio, Savonarola, Aonio Paleario, Bernardo Ochino, Vittoria Colonna, Giulia Gonzaga, Gavazzi.² They rejected such Catholic doctrines as baptismal regeneration, transubstantiation and the theology of the mass, the effectiveness of indulgences, auricular confession, Purgatory, the immaculate conception and the worship of the Virgin, others saints and their relics, and papal infallibility. Their American spokesman, Dexter Whittinghill says, 'If Christ or the Apostle Paul or Peter were to come to Rome today, they would certainly rebuke Romanism for its apostasy from the simplicity of the Gospel'.³ In contrast to Catholic understanding, Baptist missionaries taught the sole authority in religion of the Bible, baptism of believers only by immersion, independence of the local church, liberty of conscience and consequent separation of Church and State.⁴

Essential to Protestant missions was the attempt 'to restore the Bible to the Italians'.⁵ Thousands of copies were distributed, forcing the Catholics to publish their own Italian version. The population was exposed personally to the teaching of the Bible for the first time. Baptist missionaries sought to introduce everyone directly to the teaching of the Bible so that they could make a personal decision of faith.

Mission enterprise also focused on social concerns. Widespread illiteracy inhibited free access to the Bible so they opened free schools for the poor (Catholic schools were fee-paying and for the privileged). Economic problems resulted from successive wars and led to mass emigration. Baptist missionaries soon became involved in the everyday living conditions of working men and women, defending the lower classes from the injustice practised on them, proclaiming to them the liberating Gospel of Christ, lived here and now, in contrast to the Catholic emphasis on the hereafter. Instead of a monarchical God who struck terror into people's hearts,⁶ Baptists offered a God on the side of solidarity, freedom and justice.

Toward a Baptist Identity

The first English confessions were differentiating their beliefs from the Church of England, the Presbyterians, the Quakers and others, rather than from Roman Catholics. They sought to show that Baptists stood within the compass of the apostolic faith of the church, while emphasizing certain truths that had been lost over the years. Whilst separating from a corrupt national church, Baptists were not sectarian, although that is a widespread misapprehension. The approach usually adopted to describe Baptist principles in Italy is that these focus on aspects of the Christian message which have been overlooked by other churches yet are, for Baptists, of fundamental importance to the Gospel.⁷

As in English confessions, there is a concern for religious liberty. 'Up to 1870, no Evangelical work was allowed within the "Holy City"'.⁸ When the first Baptist chapel was inaugurated in 1878 in Rome, the

Vatican newspaper referred to 'the opening of an Infernal Hall'.⁹ Although from 1870 the Italian state promulgated laws which guaranteed the freedom of all citizens, Baptists and other Protestants only came to enjoy their freedom in the mid-twentieth century. Being a Protestant in Italy has been very difficult.

Catholics see the Pope as the link which unites all subject to this recognized authority. Italian priests also exercise a strong authority. The Protestants, and Baptists in particular, affirm that their unity stands in obedience to God and to Jesus Christ alone. Unity comes where the Word is preached and observed; trust in God is the condition of freedom. Christians are servants of Jesus Christ, free from any other masters, acknowledging Christ's Lordship alone. Against a dominant clericalism, Baptists asserted the priesthood of all believers.¹⁰

In campaigning for freedom of conscience, Baptists in Italy were not alone: political groups had also been persecuted for upholding the liberty of all citizens. After Italy was unified, every citizen was free to express ideas unless they were offensive toward the king. On the religious level, however, some ambiguities still remained. For example, when schools were made public institutions, only Catholics could teach religion in school.

The idea of the believers' church was gaining strength, as questioning the authority of the Catholic Church and its representative led to another model of church. 'Baptism was not the premise but the consequence of one's view of the church.'¹¹ The idea that people were called to form a church, rather than born and educated in the church, made a tremendous cultural impact. Catholics saw the church as a body mediating between God and man with power to act for him/her in all matters spiritual and moral. The citizen dealt with the state in the same way. As a consequence, neither the believer nor the citizen ever felt responsible for their actions. Delegation of responsibility detracted from any sense of political responsibility. Intellectuals and members of the new middle class were attracted to the Protestant view of the church, and that of the Baptists.

The Baptist view of the church seemed more democratic, seeing all believers as equal before God, regardless of social status or sex. Each member can make a significant contribution for the good of all: each member is a stone in the building of the church and the foundation is Christ. The first Italian Baptists built both metaphorically and materially. Although the first members were very poor, they erected churches by their gifts and their labours.¹² Such involvement is not imposed but derives from the free decision of each member, as service to Christ. All these free decisions come together to form the local church which has full power to determine its own mission. The church is a deliberate association but, more than that, as stated in the London Confession, the church 'is a company of visible Saints, called and separated from the world by the word and the Spirit of God ...',¹³ whose only head is Christ who gives it power and authority. Elders, ministers and deacons are called by Christ who gives them the gifts proper for their function. The church members confirm office by vote.¹⁴ Such signs of democracy were in marked contrast with the traditional hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church.

No confessional statement of the Italian Baptists deals with eschatology. Indeed, there seems to be some confusion in understanding such concepts as millennialism, apocalypse and eschatology. Some scholars observe in analysing the theology of the nineteenth century the lack of the eschatological element, which in the twentieth century re-appeared powerfully.. It is not by chance that the Jehovah's Witnesses emphasize this. The powerful eschatological element in the Christian message needs to be interpreted.

Italian Baptists have always regarded themselves as equal citizens, recognizing the state as an authority which preserves life and provides security for all its citizens, guaranteeing rights and calling for the fulfilment of duties. Unlike other denominations, Baptists sought no state financial support. The Italian state, whilst nominally neutral, in practice favoured the Catholic Church, as over the confessional teaching of Catholicism in public schools. There is a right to opt out of these Catholic lessons, but Baptists believe that the state should avoid confessional education; religion should be nurtured within the family rather than in school.

The church is sent into the world to love, to serve, to preach, to teach, to heal. In this sense, *all* Italian Baptists are missionaries. Italian Baptists are also active in evangelism, but do not have resources for mission projects outside the country. There is an Italian missionary in Albania, but he is supported by the Baptist Missionary Society.

Conclusion

Being Baptist Means Freedom, the title of the book edited by Alan Neely, neatly expresses Italian Baptist aspirations. Standing in the tradition of their fathers in the faith, Italian Baptists today appeal to free conscience when they interpret the Scriptures and when they have to decide on ethical issues. This is of great importance. They resist any credal statement.

We appeal to this freedom of conscience against the pretence that religious beliefs and practice could be imposed by external powers which call into question the sovereignty of God.

To be a Baptist for me is to be free from any religious domination. To be a Baptist is to be able to express my faith in freedom because Christ has set us free and recommends us not to become slaves again, Gal.5: 1-15.

- 1 Here I refer to the Italian emigrants of the nineteenth century, who came in contact with Baptists from the United States, Britain, Germany, etc. This would include the Baptist missionaries who came to Italy from various countries, including the Ukraine.
- 2 Dexter G. Whittinghill, *Italy and Baptist Mission*, Rome: Bilychnis Publication House, 1930, p.11.
- 3 Ibid., p.12.
- 4 Ibid., p.13.
- 5 Ibid., p.12.
- 6 P. Chiminelli, *The Baptists in Italy*, Nashville, Tennessee: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1923, pp.73-98.
- 7 Manfredo Ronchi, *Il Battismo*, Rome: Opera Evangelica Battista D'Italia, 1955, p.1.
- 8 D.G. Whittinghill, op.cit., p.16.
- 9 Chiminelli, op.cit., p.68.
- 10 Ronchi, op.cit., pp.15-16.
- 11 Paolo San Filippo, *L'Italia Battista*, Rome: Unione Cristiana Evangelica Battista D'Italia, 1959, p.50.
- 12 Whittinghill, op.cit., pp.34-5.
- 13 W.L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p.165.
- 14 Ibid., articles 4 and 8, pp.2867.
- 15 Alan Neely, ed., *Being Baptist Means Freedom*, Charlotte, North Carolina: Southern Baptist Alliance, 1988.

'The Plain and Literal Meaning of the Text:

A 17th Century Particular Baptist Perspective on Revelation 20.1–7'

One of our members has recently had an article relating to Baptist history printed in a book of essays; Woodman, Simon, 2008, 'The Plain and Literal Meaning of the Text: A 17th Century Particular Baptist Perspective on Revelation 20.1–7', in *The Way the World Ends? The Apocalypse of John in Culture and Ideology*, William John Lyons and Jorunn Økland (eds.), Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press
It is always encouraging to see the study of our history spreading more widely.

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