

DR CHAMPION

This tape was recorded in Minehead at Dr Leonard George Champion's home on 29 November 1996, by Roger Hayden, and subsequently transcribed by Mrs Pat Miles [15 April 2005]. The original tape is with BHS

RH [in italics] You grew up in Horfield, Bristol. When were you baptized?

LGC [in normal type] I was baptized by Griffin in 1915. I became active in Sunday School and a village Chapel with my brother in leading a little Sunday School.

Which Chapel was that?

It no longer exists. A few miles out from Bristol. My Bible Class Leader who came from the Quakers and was baptized in middle life in Horfield took a great interest in us as young men, and he on behalf of the Deacons approached me, because I'd led in prayer on one or two occasions as a young fellow, and suggested I might think of the ministry. This was an extraordinary thought to me.

What had you been planning to do?

I was an apprentice – a 3-year apprentice in retail furnishing. I went all through the furnishing trade and I was anticipating a move from where I was in Bristol to another firm when I finished the apprenticeship. I then began to prepare for College and so I entered College.

You went to College in Bristol and then you went to Germany to research?

I went to Heidelberg.

The doctoral thesis was on blessings in Paul's Letters.

It concerned the benedictions in the Epistles of Paul and it was a study of the background of the Old Testament and in Jewish and other literature and then an examination in the light of all that ground of the Benedictions and their meaning in the worship of the Apostolic Churches.

Who supervised that?

Martin Debelius, and I took the degree under Martin Debelius and I also spent a semester in Marburg? attending the classes of Rudolf Bultmann and his seminar.

Obviously from there you moved to Minehead, where we're talking today, and then to Rugby and then into College. When you came into College, that would have been ?

1951.

You also found yourself, from time to time, involved in some of the theological discussions that were going on in the Union and, as I understand it, you were involved in two reports, one on the meaning of Ordination and the other on the Ministry. They sat on the shelf,

and recently a few years ago they were republished in a new document book which I edited, and I think one would have to say that book largely goes to people who are not Baptists to find out what Baptists believe, but do you think the reports as such were significant for the denomination and its understanding of ministry. You trained Ministers, and have ordained, probably, more than most over the years. Were these reports really significant for the denomination.

I think the report on *Ordination* introduced, in some ways, a new theme to the denomination. When I started my ministry we had a Recognition Service, that was the phrase. We were recognised as Baptist Ministers and I accepted that.

That was in a sense a Victorian Way wasn't it?

Yes it was.

It changed in Victorian times. Another one of those things that changed then.

Yes, it just persisted. And then I became Principal of the College and involved in these reports when there was a measure of new thinking. I think R L Child had some influence and ministers now began to be ordained, instead of recognised. And there was a certain emphasis on the laying-on of hands which traditionally among Baptists was no new thing, but was not known when I was growing up among Baptists. So the idea of a group thinking about ordination was a bit new, and I think Ernest Payne initiated that.

To what extent would it have cut across, if you like – well certainly what Bristol trained people call the Dakin view of the ministry? Because Dakin's view, as I tried to interpret it from what he wrote, would certainly have been that you were called to be a pastor of a congregation and should you cease to be a pastor of a congregation in a local sense, you ceased to be a minister. Is that really a kind of summary of the recognised view? You know, using recognised as you just used it, or was it something different?

No, I think that would be a fair judgement. Ernest Payne, of course, dissented strongly from that point of view – hence his little book on the *Fellowship of Believers*. And so our group was set up to think about ordination – to me this was a new concept, I gave it serious thought, I accepted that it was a good thing from the point of view of the significance of the ministry that there should be a proper Service with the laying-on of hands, which I felt was biblical; we went into all that and I do not think the report met with a great deal of favour, or was particularly significant, but it was a move towards thinking about the place of the full-time ministry in the denomination. So it's faded out – it's an historical piece now.

But it would be true to say, though, wouldn't it that now anybody can suggest that if you were not ordained to ministry as a Baptist, Ministers would really find themselves, well, in a significant minority. In that sense it's really changed denominational thinking quite a lot.

But it's been overtaken by the more recent emphasis upon the ministry of the whole church and the place of every believer, which has led to participation and everybody doing the same things sometimes. So I still think we need a proper doctrine of the ministry and the place of the ordained full-time minister.

There's a book I've been reading recently by an Australian Roman Catholic lay theologian called Collins. But the summary of his major thesis is called Are all Christians Ministers? And in that book, from a Catholic point of view, he's really arguing very strongly that this has been a kind of major cul-de-sac for the Christian Church, in that it has accepted that the priesthood of all believers means that all are ministers to the detriment of there being a clear-cut ordained ministry. I was just interested in the way in which a good Catholic theologian has come to talk about ministry and developing ideas that, actually, this is a step in the wrong direction. Not surprising for a Catholic of course. But it does help, perhaps, to challenge us also.

And I think sometimes it's forgotten that there is a diversity of gifts from the Holy Spirit. And the diversity of gifts, as Paul makes very clear, means a diversity of function. Consequently, the evening out all the abilities of all the members in the ministry of the whole church seems to me to be ignoring significant New Testament teaching about the Holy Spirit. But that's another matter.

The other report in which you were involved was called the Report on the Ministry, and one of the things that report highlights is that from the two sources, the General and Particular Baptists streams come really quite different understandings of ministry. My own view is that this is a significance that's still relevant. But, again, as a report on the ministry, do you think it's another one really just lodged on the shelf or do you feel it had some spin-offs into our understanding and changing us as a people?

I think that's putting it too strongly. It was all part of the thinking going on in the late 50's early 60's. I don't think that thinking was very influential in the denomination because we were overtaken by other events, both theologically and in terms of organisation and administration. But it was the beginning of serious attempts to think about the nature of the ministry in the place of the church. And then later on the thought extended to the nature of the church and that led on to the emphasis on Associations, and all that followed in the 70's. So that while those reports were not terribly influential they do mark historically something that was happening; and I think Ernest Payne was a good deal responsible for it, though I think perhaps he felt some disappointment in that it wasn't more influential.

And in part of that discussion is whether once ordained a minister are you always a minister. I mean it's still part of that same theme isn't it, and there would be those, I've heard ministers say 'Well I've been ordained, therefore that's it', whereas I think from my own perspective as a Baptist Christian anyway, one would have said that isn't quite the order of permanence, and yet one doesn't want to deny anyone's ordination.

I think my judgement would be, thinking of my own experience and of some of my contemporaries, we felt called to be ministers and this was for life. Ordination was the Service in which denominationally we were recognised, not using that term too strongly, as now Ministers in the Baptist Denomination. We were called to be ministers and then we were ordained to function as ministers in the denomination.

And that functioning could be either in a church or in an Association role or whatever it might be

Well, and then the thought is extended a lot to Hospital Chaplains, Industrial Chaplains; all kinds of things have developed since then. But it doesn't affect the

sense of vocation which I think, and my contemporaries I think felt, was spiritual and basic. We were called to be something. Whatever other people did to us – with laying-on of hands and whatnot – we were Ministers of the Gospel.

And 'called to be' meant, in fact, that you could do whatever was appropriate to that calling.

Yes, quite, quite, and it was for life.

Yes, the 'calling to be' – to be for life.

We were Ministers and consequently you might have sabbaticals or be on holiday, but you were a Minister. This is what you were basically as an individual.

I think one of the things that arises out of, you know, those three reports: Ordination, Ministry – and then the Report on the Associations, which one has to say is – or was an attempt to deal, I would have thought, very clearly with the practical implications of Ordination and Ministry as it affected the organisation of church life, perhaps regionally and even nationally. I can remember myself the discussion in Council about how many Superintendents we should have, which did really seem to be more on that side of the discussion rather than what is the Association actually for. How did you feel about the report on the Associations?

I don't remember the report very clearly, frankly, but I do remember this, thinking about Associations, because I must confess I was not an enthusiast for Associations. When I was Minister in Rugby, all through the War years, I was very busy with a large Church, a large Sunday School, two or three village chapels associated with us, and the initiation of a Home for the Elderly which fortunately still runs and has prospered. And I found going to Association meetings I had to listen to long accounts of finance and dreary matters. I thought I haven't the time my people in Rugby need me; I'm dealing with people there; I'm doing things, I'm ministering to them in these War years in all sorts of ways and the Superintendent called on me. 'You're one of our significant churches, we wish you would take a greater share.' I was a Minister – you're back at this idea, I'm a Minister of the Gospel, and all this seemed to me dreary admin – necessary, but I thought why am I sitting here hour after hour after hour – I'm afraid that biased me about Associations. Then I became Principal and involved in the denomination, I began thinking more about the Association; I realised historically in the beginning how people associated with one another, those were different days, they needed the fellowship but it was part of their understanding of the church also. I began to think more about Associations and took my share in the Bristol Association as President and whatnot.

And you did, in fact, write a history of the Bristol Association.

I did write a history of the Bristol Association.

In which, when I look through that, you know, you identified certain kind of areas of common concern in Association life, so you obviously felt as you got more involved that perhaps there were things that were important in Association.

Oh yes, I'm giving you my personal account at the moment you see. This is how I came round to things and began to appreciate, yes the Association is a proper realm of fellowship; it should be promoted. But I don't remember much about the actual report – I just remember that in the Council this matter was raised and the significance of the Associations began to be stressed and we all began thinking more about it. Again it was this process of thinking together.

When we talked about Ordination and Ministry report you suggested that Ernest Payne was a significant figure in some of the views that were shared there that perhaps you didn't share yourself. Do you think that was again true of the Association report. I mean clearly it was in line with the theology of the fellowship of believers, but did you feel that, you know, he had a view on this? Because he was Secretary of the Union.

I have no clear recollection of him expressing a view. Ernest, of course, was an historian, basically. And tended to view things historically always. And I think was thinking while he was Secretary of the Union to urge the Union towards reflection on the nature of the church and its ministry. Whether he agreed with all the way in which things were developing I'm not sure. One of his main interests was the ecumenical side, of course, and there he did have to struggle somewhat. And he brought me into that side ..? as soon as I came into the whole ecumenical movement and supported him, which he appreciated – he was aware of my support in the Council.

Was that something – perhaps we could pursue that for a moment – was that something that you feel he introduced you to? I mean, one would have to say in Bristol in the 50's and the 60's, with [Rupert Davies, Oliver Tomkins and others].. you could say Bristol was the flagship of ecumenism at that stage – that's a phrase I've heard having coming back many years afterwards and people saying that it isn't that anymore, but I mean you were involved in that series of books that were published – you have one on Baptists and Unity.

..

Ah, that was later on.

That was later on?

Yes.

I was just thinking though that you felt Ernest really brought you more into those things at the beginning.

I got involved in Rugby a little in the old 'Religion and Life' weeks in the War which brought Christians, including Roman Catholics, together and we had a strong group in Rugby and then I shared one or two things at the request of Dunning – Dr Dunning from the denomination. And Ernest Payne brought me actually into the World Council; Ken Dykes was the representative but he went into a depression and I just took over and I went off to Evanston for the 1954 World Assembly.

Was that your first experience of a World Assembly?

That was my first experience of a World Assembly and I stayed in there, having come in, in that rather haphazard way. And I responded very much to the whole thing.

*Did you find yourself kind of more into Faith and Order rather than other things?
Or which part of the?*

It was Faith and Order and after that I was on the Faith and Order Working Committee so we met every year and Oliver Tompkins, the Bishop of Bristol, was the Chairman – the Chairman of Faith and Order, and Rupert Davies was also on it. So three of us from Bristol were on the World Council Faith and Order Working Committee. Extraordinary.

I think it's that that was in my mind when I raised this – I wondered if, in fact, that had preceded or if it was because you had stepped into someone else's shoes.

And then I . . . being there I came fully into it and obviously shared the discussions and so I was put on the Working Committee and until I retired in '72 and quietly got Morris's name worked in – he came in and you know it's maintained a succession.

It's quite a significant, well not quite but it's been a significant 'Bristol' contribution has it not?

I think so, yes I think so. Oliver Tompkins was a very good Chairman and then he got me in on the Chair of the British Council of Faith and Order for three years, which I didn't take to quite so kindly.

Is that because it became – well perhaps it's the wrong word, but it's an in word today – political? I mean did you find yourself as a Chair of BCC in a more of a political position than perhaps a theological position, if I can use those phrases, which is probably very unfair?

In a way I appreciated being in this wider Christian fellowship with all its diversity. I found that very enriching and to be the Chair trying to guide a discussion facing the criticism when you presented a report, wasn't quite my realm really. I was there for the fellowship, the opening up, the enlarging, one's understanding of the faith and meeting people. Again, I come back – my interest is in people, not in administration and reports. That's not my real realm though, as I say, I tried to do my bit.

Yes, I think those of us who've known you over the years would feel though that you have a real ability to grasp the essentials of a situation and equip it well, and I presume as Chair of any committee that's a good quality to have.

I suppose so!

The other thing I really just wanted to come back to – in what you've just said you've really made it a fairly clear statement that while at the College and through the World Council of Churches introductions and what happened through an unusual and significant group interdenominationally in Bristol, that's where you found fellowship and enrichment. Is there any sense in which you actually didn't find that, you know, within the larger Baptist community, or would that be a very unfair thing to say? I mean did the College Principals not meet year by year? Or did that tend to be a rather different kind?

No, that was fine – I shared in that fully and yes, there was some interesting discussions and we met different personalities and I've always been a Baptist, I've

taken it for granted and not questioned the fellowship. But I've not felt confined to being a Baptist. Partly because of all the opening of my mind in College. Historically the sense of the whole growth of the Christian Church - it was marvellous to me to come to College and have a library. I can't express it clearly enough - I had an elementary education, not grammar school, elementary, and I had to apply to College and I found myself going to night school for Latin and to an old parson for Greek, and studying English Literature, and the horizons were widening and they kept on widening, and they've kept on widening. But I've never as it were questioned being in the Baptist fellowship.

That's always been a given

And I've appreciated meeting lots of them - I've not agreed with some of them, and I'm not sure I feel quite as much at home now with all the changes going on.

Would you like to reflect on that a little?

Well that's difficult to reflect upon because it applies to our society as a nation and the whole - the influence of TV on the younger generation and the secularism, and I appreciate the experiments going on in the church to communicate the faith to a younger generation - it doesn't appeal to me often, but I realise that ministers and others are grappling with very real problems in communicating and in that sense they've got my support. But I also realise that my generation often isn't ministered to in the church because of this enormous change. Fortunately here we have a very good balanced ministry - things happen, well that's another story.

Yes, and that's probably not appropriate. But denominationally, I mean I would have to say to you that without doubt we've moved into what I think can fairly be called a managerial mode.

I know, I know.

And I personally have expressed this to David Coffey - I find this very difficult because I don't actually quite see its relevance.

No, I agree with that wholeheartedly.

Well, I mean I just want to say to you that I'm a different generation to yourself but I feel and that, of course, is very much part of the significant change which has come over our whole society as you say in the late 70's and 80's, and I don't think it's just that I'm getting towards retirement and therefore see it differently now I'm mellowing as one might say, but it's been quite a significant change hasn't it what has happened to society?

There is that change in our churches and I am troubled sometimes by the biblical fundamentalism which I find in our churches. Not blatant, a sort of assumption. So that it seems to me some of our approach now is so simplistic - when I remember the preaching with which I grew up, and I don't want to harp back to days I recognise we've moved on and there are values at present, real values - we were too rigid and so on sometimes, but the preaching was stronger altogether, more real doctrine related to real issues in a way that now there's a kind of retreat into the Bible and the sermon is almost a little Bible story and you quote lots of texts and it all sounds very pious

and nice – and it's not really wrestling with the great truth of Scripture and the great problems of our present day in bringing these together.

One of the things that certainly my generation in the College would thank you for, and I had mentioned it before we began, this phrase that was used, sadly by you but which now you're not sure about, that we were living in a theological slum; but whether you used it or not, there were those amongst us, and there still are, who feel very deeply the kind of thing that you've just been mentioning – that actually there is a fundamentalism around which is unwilling, or unable, to really deal with the hard, sometimes, issues in a way that takes theology seriously. As you know two or three of us have tried a couple of books of essays which arose out of an article that you wrote in the Quarterly. Really about Ryland and the change in Baptist life that came about at the end of the 18th, beginning of the 19th century, and you were arguing then that the mission of the church depended upon, to put it briefly, good doctrine. And you still hold to that?

Yes, yes, I do.

And in our contemporary situation of which you are well aware, where do you perhaps feel that the emphasis needs to be in terms of that presumption?

I am so impressed with the way in which Brian Haymes is making this emphasis. With all the changes in administration, managerial and all the rest of it, I've reflected recently on this question – why don't we emphasise more what we proclaim, not just how we proclaim it. And it seems to me that the emphasis is on how all the time; how can we reach young people; how can we appeal to them, not we have new songs and chat shows and all the rest of it. And we're ignoring but what are we really proclaiming? And to me we are proclaiming Christ the Word made Flesh, we're not proclaiming the Bible. Not the Bible says – but this living Word made Flesh. And not just the Holy Spirit divorced from the Word made Flesh, so that the Holy Spirit becomes an agent for the miraculous; but the Word made Flesh, God manifest in Christ who died and rose again as the core of what we proclaim.

Would you feel that in some real sense the Trinitarian doctrine is at the root of that kind of statement? You know, I'm always aware that if you use the word 'Trinitarian' most people would be . . . ? . . . – not listening to what you have to say, but it seems to me that the fundamental relationships of the Godhead have some bearing on

I'd like to add a phrase. I recollect very clearly a period in my life when I became aware of how the understanding of the Trinity developed as a practical concern in the mission of the church. And the Hebrew understanding of God, the living Christ, the experience of the Holy Spirit, and the Apostles had somehow to bring this together, and suddenly I awoke to it all and I realised, yes, the Trinity is a practical doctrine – not just a theological doctrine, it's a necessity for our proclamation that you've got to hold the three together. The understanding of God, the understanding of Christ, the understanding of the Spirit – they must be held together. In that sense we need the doctrine of the Trinity. But I do not take to these abstruse sayings about the relationship in the Godhead. I find that too abstruse – I don't understand it. Father, Son and Holy Spirit and how they're related – no: to me this is a practical thing, living as a Christian and understanding the meaning of the faith – I find I need these three. You see the point I'm trying to make?

Yes, I mean I wonder if we've gone full circle to the doctoral thesis – you know, it seems to me that one of the things that if you look at the New Testament you have to admit there is 'no doctrine of the Trinity', but when you look at the formal Benedictions, you just have to say that these things had to come together.

There's no developed doctrine but they adhere to all this and one can understand why – why it was necessary, and I find that important. I still find it necessary when I read some of the contemporary theological statements, and I don't read an awful lot but in Baptist Times report I see it, and there's talk about the relationships within the godhead I think this is a bit like astrophysics or something – it's not my realm. I live in this World and to me the Christian faith is a practical thing – again thinking of my own experience I remember the time in Rugby when I became very strongly aware that the Christian faith is all about relationships – personal relationships. I became very strongly aware of that through the church as a fellowship – we belong to one another, the body of Christ, all this kind of thing. But that doesn't lead to me to abstruse thinking about relationships in the godhead.

In that sense you stay within, well perhaps this is put too crudely, but you prefer to stay within a Biblical framework that takes it on board.

I'm pragmatic about it. I'm pragmatic – it belongs to being a Christian and sharing. And when I hear talk about the mission of God in the World, I'm not sure I understand that. I understand the mission of the church – that God sends us, that I understand. But I find a lot of these abstruse phrases these days bewildering and unhelpful. I'm a pragmatic Christian, if I'm a Christian at all.

You doubt then do you, like we all do I imagine?

We're on a pilgrimage.

That's right, that's right.

And I think . . .? . . would have something to say about it.

Well, I think the journey – I have to say that for me the journey language has become a little tarnished? . . ., because it's been overused, but I think used properly it's very helpful.

When I looked at the hymns for Walter Bottoms funeral, which I understand he chose, Elizabeth brought the Order of Service.

Yes, he'd chosen each one.

I thought that's the kind of hymn I would choose. 'Father Hear the Prayer We Offer', and 'Give me the Wings of Faith to Rise'. All this kind of thing I go along with.

I have to say, you know, that that was a very moving Service for Walter. Did you know him well?

I got to know him – we were contemporaries, of course, he was a year behind me – I got to know him well in his latter years because he came here for holidays several years, and we would go out in the car. I got to know him when he was editor of the

BT because he asked me to do all sorts of reviews and this kind of things. Walter kept sending me books for review, and I would drop in his office and he say, 'I've another book for you.' And we chatted a bit – so, yes, I got to know him pretty well, but not as a fellow student, other than

I always found him a very good friend. I didn't really know him well, but he was always a very good friend and sometimes – he's written me, since I've been Superintendent, more than once saying that he'd seen I'd been doing some work that had been going well. A very warm-hearted man. He once told me about, I think his father must have been minister up in Rossendale, because when I went up to Waterbarn he told me one or two stories.

I think Dakin knew his father – I always had the impression that Walter came to Bristol because Dakin had known Walter's father.

That would be around the time.

There would be no doubt that Walter would be accepted in Bristol, you see.

Well, I've been very grateful to you talking to me

You're welcome.

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