



THE MESSAGE BOARD
A Newsletter from
A. Roy Medley, General Secretary



Personal Reflections

Volume 41 – November 4, 2009

Lessons from Ireland

Part 3

Christianity entered Ireland quite early via small monastic communities founded by followers of the ascetic desert traditions that flourished in the early centuries of the church.

While in Ireland we visited the rudimentary ruins of several of these monasteries, such as Monasterboice, that were founded in the fourth and fifth centuries. These early Christian communities each consisted of a small number of religious people who devoted themselves to prayer and work. Each community created its own rules and governed itself while remaining in contact with other such communities.

By the twelfth century, these had deteriorated to the point that Malachy, who was the Archbishop of Armagh, invited St. Bernard to establish a Cistercian community in Ireland. The first monks, including Irish disciples who had been studying in Clairvaux, arrived in 1142 to found Mellifont Abbey.

The Cistercians represented a reforming influence in the life of the church in Ireland. Though they brought with them a different form of communal religious life than that represented by Monasterboice, Malachy's goal was to restore a truer form of Christian faith and devotion than what had come to mark the life of the church of his day.

It would be five centuries later that the same urge would guide the founding of Baptist life in England. At the heart of this reform was a desire to move from a Christianity that had for many degenerated into form without substance to an expression of faith that was rooted in personal experience of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ and visibly evidenced in the life of the Christian community.

Their vision of church was drawn from their reading of the New Testament, not from their experience of an institution that had commoditized God's grace and forgiveness into sacraments to be dispensed by the clergy of the church. Access to grace through faith in Jesus Christ as God's free and abundant gift had led Baptists to another corollary: the church was not an institution that controlled access to God and God's grace through its sacraments; it was a divinely instituted community of those who had professed Christ and were living in the power of his death and resurrection.

Their vision was of a living, covenanting community of those who had experienced God's free gift of grace in Jesus Christ, with authority vested in the people of God. Hence, Baptists adopted a congregational ecclesiology that was democratic in nature because each was gifted by the same Spirit and each was equally responsible before God for their life in Christ.

Over the years, the cherished principle that the church belongs to the people of God as the covenanting community of believers has come under varying attacks. Among some fundamentalist Baptists, the idea of "ruling pastor" was promoted. Such an idea in Baptist life is an oxymoron and smacks of the abuse of power that Baptists sought to curtail in their theology of the church. Others have sought to elevate certain "spiritual" members of the congregation to the role of ruling elders.

(continued)

Lessons from Ireland – Part 3

(continued)

Several years ago, a non-ABC pastor who had been called by one of our congregations came to me distressed that his deacons were not spiritually mature. He informed me that he would be selecting spiritual deacons in the future to govern the church. We had quite a conversation. My parting caution to him was, “Pastor, be careful that your deacons don’t become so ‘spiritual’ (perhaps prideful and judgmental were more accurate descriptors) that they come to see you as insufficiently spiritual.” Within a year, that pastor was back in my office wanting me to intervene and save him from the deacons he had chosen who now wanted to oust him because his preaching was not spiritual enough. Lately, others have touted the Carver model which invests the governance of the congregation into the hands of a few persons with the rationale that it is more efficient.

Congregational life, and indeed the larger life of the churches, cannot be entrusted to a model that removes responsibility and authority from the community as a whole. Inevitably, placing power into the hands of a few without final accountability resting in the covenanting community removes the power for discerning and responding to the will of God from the people of God and institutes a form that is contrary to the communal nature of Baptist life.

There is wisdom in Baptists investing authority in the people of God as a whole. It removes the danger of divisions of pride and the abuse of authority that sin, preying upon our human weakness, inserts into the power dynamics that inevitably emerge when power is placed in only a few. When the body gathers as a whole with each equally empowered, it is a strong antidote to the divisions and distinctions that fallen human nature succumbs to so quickly.

Living as a covenanting community of believers who own responsibility for the discernment of God’s will for their life together is essential to the fulfillment of the Baptist vision of the church.



American Baptists Serving as the Hands and Feet of Christ

Office of the General Secretary
American Baptist Churches USA • PO Box 851 • Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851
800-ABC-3USA, extension 2274 • Roy.Medley@abc-usa.org
www.abc-usa.org