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The BAPTIST QUARTERLY

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EDITORIAL

One of the most important and precious source-books for the study of Christian history is in the hands of every worshipper every Sunday: the hymn-book. Of course historical reflection is not the primary, or perhaps even secondary, purpose of any hymnal, which is to enable contemporary Christians to offer to God the richest and most appropriate praise and devotion through psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. But succeeding ages of the church find that many of the songs of previous generations continue to resonate within them, and any comprehensive hymn-book bears the imprints of hymnody down the ages. Inevitably, much of that hymnody reflects, not just the attitudes, beliefs and devotion of the particular authors, but the religious, social and theological contexts in which they lived. That is why it would be an interesting exercise to see just how much church history one could teach using a contemporary hymnal.

Using the *Baptist Hymn Book* (1962) it would certainly be possible, for instance, to add life and colour to the early christological and trinitarian controversies. It would be possible to open up the later Middle Ages, not as supposedly dark spiritual wastelands, but as an area of restless and passionate spirituality. The Reformation was sung as well as preached, even in its Calvinist expressions. The Evangelical Revival, the modern missionary movement, the Oxford Movement and even the beginnings of the modern ecumenical movement and the prophetic witness of the Church to the modern Caesars - all these and more were hymnified. That being so, such events and movements were not simply *recorded* for posterity. They were given the potential to become contemporaneous again and again with later generations. We sing John Ryland's *Let us sing the King Messiah*, and in that living act of communal worship the pioneering days of the early missionary movement meet our own. Equally of course, some historical awareness illuminates the hymn in question and its significance. At the time Ryland wrote that paraphrase of Psalm 45, Carey had not made a single convert nor was he to do so for some years to come.

Considerations such as these will not be the most immediate preoccupations of those who have been entrusted by the Psalms and Hymns Trust with the preparation of a new book to succeed the present *Baptist Hymn Book* by 1990. There is more than enough of recent history to make their task more formidable than that which faced their predecessors in either 1933 or 1962. The past two decades have seen changes in the patterns of worship and local church life generally, of a kind and degree probably unparalleled since the epoch-making introduction of hymnody itself in the eighteenth century. And the process is not over yet. Almost every aspect has been and is being touched: language, theology, musical style and taste, participation, order and spontaneity. There is, frankly, in a descriptive sense, no longer a Baptist pattern of worship, but many patterns in competitive confusion. In such a situation, a new hymn book might well be thought to be a sheep among wolves. But to eschew the challenge as impossible would be to concede too much to the uncertainties of the hour. Within all the diversity there are central convictions, amidst all the upheavals there are continuities. To say that it is impossible to combine coherence and diversity would be to deny over three centuries of Baptist history - or to say that that history has come to a full stop.

This is perhaps an appropriate note with which the present Editor can take leave of the *Quarterly* after six years at the helm. It has been a privilege to serve the Baptist Historical Society in a way which brings one into contact with so many writers and scholars from all over the world, and with readers who value so highly the study of our past - and our present. All will be delighted that Mr John Briggs of the University of Keele is taking over the Editorship, and that the *Quarterly* will be in the hands of one who is both a professional historian and a leading figure on the denominational and ecumenical scene. All good wishes are handed over with the editorial files.

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Review: **B. R. White**

ENGLISH BAPTIST RECORDS

1. CHESHAM

This is the first book in a new series of English Baptist Records. The Chesham Church Book has been transcribed by Dr L. G. Champion, and has a foreword by Dr Arnold Baines. It will be of particular interest to those following the history of the General Baptists, and to local historians interested in the Chilterns, especially the Chesham-Tring-Berkhamsted area.

Copies may be ordered from the Treasurer, Rev. T. S. H. Elwyn, 148 Greenvale Road, Eltham, London SE9 1PQ, at £8-00 (U.S. \$14-00) including postage and packing. It is a limited edition.