

# The Baptist Union—Looking Back.

## I.

IT is dangerous to let any one interested in history "look back." He may look too far. So in the letter in which Mr. Aubrey conveyed to me the President's invitation to speak this morning, he wisely suggested that I say something about the development of the Baptist Union in the last fifty years. That is a long enough period to compress into twenty-five minutes, and, as I hope to show, there is a very good reason for concentrating attention on the story of the past half-century. It is a great story, and the story of a creative, spiritual movement within the denomination.

Let us begin, then, with 1897—the year of the great Queen's Diamond Jubilee. That year our grandparents were charmed by Barrie's *Margaret Ogilvie*, excited by H. G. Wells' *Invisible Man* and rather shocked by Marie Corelli's *Mighty Atom*. How many, I wonder, who are here this morning, were present at the Baptist Assembly in 1897. One could make a very entertaining "Baptist Scrap Book" of 1897, after the manner of the B.B.C. Turn back the denominational pages and what do we find? For those coming to the 1897 Assembly the L.B.A. arranged a "Soirée" (the word has dropped out of our vocabulary and will mean little to the younger generation). There was also a banquet at the Holborn Restaurant, at which 600 people were present. And, as if that was not enough for one year, there was also a Home Mission Centenary Bazaar.

Over the bazaar there was, I believe, some shaking of bearded and top-hatted heads, but its occasion suggests one reason for this morning's special theme, for in 1897 our grandparents were celebrating a hundred years of Baptist Home Missions. Another fifty years have passed. Why leave terjubilees to the B.M.S.?

For the 1897 centenary a young man—one of the rising stars of the Baptist firmament—had written a book of which the delegates were able to buy copies for a shilling—*The Story of Baptist Home Missions* by Charles Brown. It tells how in 1796 the infant B.M.S. initiated an evangelistic tour in Cornwall and how in the following year, it was decided there ought to be a special society for this kind of enterprise and how "The Baptist Society in London for the Encouragement and Support of Itinerant

<sup>1</sup>Address delivered at the Baptist Union Assembly, Bloomsbury Church, April 29th, 1947.

and Village Preaching" came into existence. There was no Baptist Union then. This was to be the Home Evangelisation Society, the B.M.S. the foreign. And when, in 1813, the B.U. was at length established its avowed aim was "to increase the spirit of missionary zeal and brotherly affection in the churches of our denomination"—deeply spiritual aims, mark you, which would issue, it was believed, in increased support for (1) the B.M.S. (2) the Academical Institutions—that is, the Colleges, (3) Village and Itinerant Preaching. It was hoped also to establish "a school for the children of our poor ministers." The increase of missionary zeal and brotherly affection, expressing itself in those or kindred ways, was, has been, is and must be the true *raison d'être* of our association together. By 1897 the Village or Itinerant Preaching Society had, by union with the Baptist Irish Society, become the Home Missionary Society and its direction and support was the special responsibility of the Baptist Union.

But what of the B.U. Assembly itself? What must have been an almost entirely male company met here as we do. The leaders were all crowded together on the platform below, for the pulpit had not then been reconstructed. Samuel Harris Booth (who had been Secretary for twenty years) was in charge of the proceedings. E. G. Gange was president and at the Assembly Samuel Vincent was elected Vice-President. How many of you could correctly guess the number of votes cast? Samuel Vincent had 117 votes and the other candidates 36, 32 and 13 respectively—they announced all the figures in those days—a total of 188. Two of the defeated candidates, James Spurgeon and William Cuff; were called in due course to the Presidency. The runner up in 1897 was destined for another office and a more remarkable service. I shall speak of him in a moment.

There was of course no Church House in those days. The B.U. had its offices in the Furnival Street Mission House. The income that passed through its hands (including, I think, Annuity Fund premiums), was then only £18,400. Mr. Strugnell estimates that it was last year about £200,000. The 1897 Assembly was told that a very important step had been taken during the previous year; a Central Ministerial Recognition Committee had been set up and had had its first meeting. I have mentioned the young minister of Ferme Park. Only one other still active amongst us had a leading part in 1897—another young London minister—J. W. Ewing.

## II

I have spent some time on the 1897 Assembly because the details may help to make more vivid the transformation that has

taken place. The past half century falls into two almost equal periods, the first dominated by John Howard Shakespeare, the young man who in 1897 came second in the ballot for the Vice-Presidency. It is now nearly twenty years since he died and the spell of his personality has largely vanished, but our denominational life is still largely conditioned by his dreams and his achievements. He became Secretary of the Union in 1898 and was compelled by illhealth to lay down his office exactly twenty-five years later.

What can I say about Shakespeare that will recall the man and what he did to the older ones of you and help the younger ones to some picture of him? Let me first quote some words—written, I believe, by T. R. Glover, who by no means always agreed with him. Shakespeare it was who “taught all Baptists to form large ideals for their church, to conceive of it as a great society, where differences of tradition should not outweigh the fact of a common faith, and where women should have their function as well as men; and to realise it in its worldwide range and significance; and to live more consciously as members one of another.” Fine words those, and every phrase justified. I am old enough to have seen Shakespeare many times. Strangely enough, my most vivid memory is of travelling in the same tram as he up the Lea Bridge Road. My mother spoke to him and there came to me then, schoolboy as I was, the sense of being in the presence of an unusual personality who somehow at once dwarfed his physical surroundings. It was the same feeling that came to me, years later and more powerfully, in the presence of Albert Schweitzer. Shakespeare had his measure of that rare quality, a compound of vision, energy, spiritual authority and outstanding capacity.

What did he do? I can only list a few of the more important things. First—and this was first in time, and the means to much else—the Baptist Union, acquired the privately owned *Freeman* and turned it into *The Baptist Times*. I must not stay to comment on that, and it would perhaps be dangerous. We are all eagerly anticipating the day when you, Mr. President, will appear as a witness before the Secretary and his colleagues when they inquire into “the financial structure” of the *Baptist Times* and “the monopolistic tendencies in control”! Next Shakespeare carried through to triumphant success the Twentieth Century Fund which gave the B.U. a finely placed headquarters of its own, and provided money for church extension and for the sending of picked ministerial candidates for post-graduate study. Then came the first *Baptist Church Hymnal*—a new book for a new century. The brief reign of Edward VII is often interpreted as an appendix or epilogue to the slowly dying Victorian era. But this

was not the spirit in the new Baptist Church House. Fresh enterprises and schemes followed one another in swift succession—the reorganisation of the Baptist Deaconess Mission; a new Training College for Women; a Fire Insurance Company; the Baptist Union Corporation; the Baptist Women's League (one of the most daring and successful plans); then the great Sustentation Fund (Nehemiah's wall our fathers called it), which for the last thirty-five years has made it possible for us to maintain our witness in literally hundreds of places; then, as a necessary, though at first much suspected accompaniment, General Superintendants, men who should be at once the guardians and the expression of the new sense of denominational fellowship—the first group were appointed in 1915 to what has proved to be a most gruelling life, but one the spiritual significance and value of which has become increasingly apparent. Then, in addition to these major developments in denominational polity, Shakespeare pressed forward with a Young People's Department and a Publication Department. He got Charles Joseph to care for the Lay Preachers. He brought the Total Abstinence Association into closer contact with the Union. It was a great co-ordinated programme, conceived and directed with statesmanlike vision, with a deep spiritual purpose, and with sufficient momentum for it to withstand the shock of the 1914-18 war.

Shakespeare was the outstanding personality, but of course all these things were not achieved by him alone. Laymen like Henry Wood, Judge Willis, George White, John Chivers, John Horsfall, Dale Shaw, Herbert Marnham—and, not least, two taken from us during recent months, Ernest Wood and Cecil Rooke—by their loyal and generous service made possible these developments. An older generation of ministers—princes of the Victorian pulpit like McLaren, Charles Williams and J. R. Wood—had launched the young secretary on his career. A somewhat younger group—of those no longer with us, John Clifford, F. B. Meyer, George Pearce Gould and J. C. Carlile may be mentioned—carried the burden of the enterprises Shakespeare initiated. The modern Baptist Union is in great measure the memorial of men like these, and of women like Mrs. C. S. Rose and Mrs. Carey Bonner, and of officials of associations and churches up and down the land who co-operated in these striking developments.

### III

I said that the fifty years fell into two equal halves. Several friends have assured me that Mr. Aubrey and I are wrongly cast for this morning's programme. He should be speaking on this theme and I on his. At the end of the morning you will

know the chief reason why he was given the second topic. But a hardly less important one is that the last quarter of a century is his period. It was at the Assembly in 1925—twenty-two years ago—that the minister of St. Andrew's Street, Cambridge was appointed Secretary of the Baptist Union. What a different position it was that Mr. Aubrey inherited from that which Shakespeare received from S. H. Booth! The last years of Shakespeare's régime were shadowed ones; there was the 1914-18 war and its aftermath, there were differences of opinion on politics and on Reunion, there was his illhealth. But all Mr. Aubrey's secretaryship has been exercised in a time of national and international confusion, strain and conflict. The first Assembly for which he had responsibility was that held in Leeds during the General Strike. Six of the others have been "War" Assemblies. To have remained on the bridge during the storms of the past two decades has demanded physical, intellectual and spiritual resources such as few possess.

That Mr. Aubrey has carried the burden without breaking under it has been due in considerable measure—he, I am sure, will agree—to one of the most remarkable and respected men in our midst, one who has been a masterbuilder of the B.U., one who himself incarnates its best spirit and purpose and that of lay folk throughout the denomination. You know who I mean: W. H. Ball. I am told he entered the B.U. office in 1892, though it is hard to believe. Shakespeare trained him, or did he train Shakespeare? Certainly he has guided M.E.A. And the reward of his extraordinarily efficient and self-effacing service is this (and let us tell him so now) that when we go to the Church House, whatever our business, of all the great ones there, there is no one we would rather meet on the stairs.

But think of what has been achieved since Shakespeare's resignation.

- (1) The steady development of the lines of service he inaugurated, e.g. the extension of the Women's Department, the reorganisation of the Deaconess Order and the reconstruction of its College, the remarkable expansion of the Young People's Department, the growing recognition of the Lay Preachers Federation.
- (2) Important new enterprises, symbolised by the Baptist United Fund (which during lean years made possible the continuance of Sustentation Fund grants), the Super-annuation Fund, the Forward Movement, the War Emergency Fund. These funds were more than mere money-raising. Each was the expression of a spiritual impulse. They have made churches and ministers a fellowship and

brotherhood as never before, and the Baptist Union would have failed disastrously had it not embarked on each of them.

- (3) The consolidation and unification of the varied enterprises in which the B.U. is involved, shown for example in the transfer of the Psalms and Hymns Trust to the Church House, in the linking of departments, but most strikingly in the plans for the new Home Work Fund.

The volume of business transacted in and from the Church House has increased enormously in the past twenty years. The war was responsible for the growth of the Chaplaincy Department and for work connected with the War Damage Commission. Quite apart from that the day by day work of the Union has multiplied two or threefold. It could not have been undertaken but for great devotion by the staff and but for much generous voluntary service.

#### IV.

There are some things in the story of the past 50 years which one regrets. Here I tread perhaps on delicate and debatable ground, but these things should, I think, be mentioned if we are to get the picture into perspective.

At the beginning of the period bold and statesmanlike plans for College amalgamations collapsed. Fifty years ago and again ten years ago schemes to bring the Baptist Union and the B.M.S. together under one roof failed to win approval. The consequences of those failures are—and will, I think, continue to be—serious for they touch issues which will have increasingly to engage our attention.

Then there is the matter of our numerical strength. What about those statistics? From 1897-1906 there was striking growth in the total membership of churches affiliated to the Union. It was a largely fictitious advance due to the linking on of churches not formerly in membership. The *Daily News* census of 1903 revealed the extent to which the mass of the population was drifting away from the churches. From 1906-21 there was gradual decline in our numbers, then from 1921-26 an unexpected and shortlived upward trend, followed by twenty years of serious and unbroken loss. Neither B.U. evangelists, nor Discipleship Campaigns have stayed the drift: We are all in this together and so are all the Christian communions in this country. On paper our Baptist Church membership is again just about what it was in 1897.

Lastly, as we look at this darker side of the picture, let us be honest and confess that in certain quarters there remains unfortunate and unworthy suspicion of the Baptist Union and

all its work. There are some amongst us who ought to have been its leaders who have held aloof and have sometimes criticised. The organisation has of course still many imperfections. No one would claim that all the decisions arrived at in the Church House are wise or right. They are, however, the best decisions that can be arrived at by those there to make them.

But who can doubt that the modern Baptist Union is a great creative experiment and that it has real spiritual and theological significance? It is not a business concern but a living organ of churchmanship, an instrument forged and shaped for the purposes of the gospel, an essential expression of our fellowship in Christ, something that should constrain us to support and service as does the local Christian Church, as does the Association, as does the missionary society.

## V.

As we look back over the period we see a number of new movements and tendencies, discerned only dimly if at all in 1897, which condition our life today. They make a Baptist Union essential. If our fathers had not created one for us, we should have to be starting on the task ourselves—and with how many more difficulties! Let me mention three things.

(1) Changed social and economic conditions—the new planned society of the twentieth century, with all its technical and scientific devices. I cannot elaborate that, but how obvious it is that it makes imperative a representative and authoritative central organisation for our denominational life.

(2) Changed Baptist relationships. In 1897 memories of the "Downgrade" controversy were still painfully fresh. As recently as 1915 it had its echoes in public discussion in this Assembly. There have been other cases of mutual theological suspicion. But there is wider and deeper Baptist brotherhood and fellowship today than ever before. It is symbolised in the fact that last year we had at Regent's Park as senior student a man sent on to us by Spurgeon's College and that Spurgeon's College has been training one of our men. There are still differences of opinion and emphasis among us—and rightly; but it is all that now knits us together in the Baptist Union that is the surest safeguard against misunderstanding and division. There has been a striking growth of interest and confidence in the Union, shown in the greatly increased attendance in the Assembly. The Baptist scholarship of the past half century (and other people's scholarship) has given us a new status in this country. The Baptist World Alliance—another of Shakespeare's visions—made a reality by the notable life work of James Henry Rushbrooke—

has made us conscious that we are part of a great world communion with links with America, the Continent of Europe, Russia and other parts of the world.

(3) Changed ecclesiastical relationships. A resolution was passed in 1897 welcoming the setting up of the National Free Church Council. Think of all that that, and the Federal Council and now the Free Church Federal Council have meant in the last half century. Think of the changed relationships between the Free Churches and the Anglican Church. The fifty years opened with the conflict over the Balfour Education Act and a Norwich by-election which was freely spoken of as a fight with the gloves off between Nonconformity and the Church of England. It ends with a bishop preaching the B.M.S. sermon. It ends with conversations regarding intercommunion. It ends with the British Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. Some of these developments have caused heart-searching amongst us. But what lies behind them all? A re-discovery of what is meant by Christian fellowship, by the Body of Christ, by the holy Catholic Church—not a congregation, nor all the congregations together, not a denomination, nor all the denominations together, but that great historical and supra-historical community which unites all who call Jesus Lord. That we may have our part in this rediscovery—which is surely one of God's greatest gifts to this generation—we need the Baptist Union to foster and express our own witness and fellowship.

Said Dr. Shakespeare once: "I feel it to be profoundly true that the Divine Spirit moves upon our Free Church Assemblies, constituted by prayer, as upon the Apostolic Church on the Day of Pentecost." I feel it to be profoundly true that this Divine Spirit has been at work in the history of the Baptist Union during the past fifty years.

ERNEST A. PAYNE.