

Notes on a Recent Hymn Ballot.

DURING the early part of last winter the writer of these notes endeavoured to elicit from his congregation an expression of opinion on their favourite hymns. His primary purpose was to discover to what extent his general choice was meeting the needs of his people. Ballot sheets were issued, with space for the titles of six favourite hymns, with the tunes preferred. About two-thirds of the papers were returned, and from these a careful analysis of the selections was made. By restricting the choice to six we were able to get a real expression of the preference of our people, and one was led to feel that not only did the ballot serve its primary end, but that it also provided food for much further thought. Hymns may be favourites for a variety of reasons, the melody or dignity of the tune, the beauty of the words, the appeal to changing moods, the link with old associations, or familiar aspects of truth—but, most of all, because they express, more or less adequately, the needs and aspirations of the worshippers. Thus we may be justified in assuming that in such a free, collective expression as the results of a ballot would give, we have the spiritual outlook of the congregation made articulate. It is on this assumption that the following notes have been written.

Not the least interesting feature was the range of the choices. Votes were cast for 235 different hymns, although of these 112 received only one each. More than ten per cent. of the total number chosen were children's hymns, a sufficient indication of the value of the little people's portion in the morning service; possibly also a hint that any addition to the Baptist Church Hymnal might profitably include more of this kind of hymn. A few of our great hymns were entirely passed over by the voters, as, for example: "Now thank we all our God"; "Let us with a gladsome mind"; "O God of Bethel"; "Glorious things of thee are spoken"; "Awake my soul and with the sun"; the last omission, perhaps, being due to the later hour, or the greater honesty, of our modern worship. Conversely, some hymns not at present included in our book were chosen, notably Luther's great "Ein feste Burg."

The argument from silence is said always to be precarious, but one could not help feeling that the ignoring of hymns which had a strong theological emphasis or colour, was not accidental. For instance the absence of those which realistically describe the Atonement in terms of blood, such as "Jesus, Thy blood and

righteousness," and "There is a fountain filled with blood," seemed to present a clear reflection of the modern mind in this respect. The lack of interest in hymns descriptive of the Lord's Day in the phraseology of the Jewish Sabbath was also significant. Their place seems to be taken by hymns of worship. The particular type of appeal in the evangelistic hymns apparently drew little response from the congregation. The uncertainty that prevails in some minds as to the efficacy of prayer, with the consequent neglect of it so common to-day, was reflected in the complete omission of such hymns as "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire," and "My God, is any hour so sweet." The eschatological hymns, so popular in a previous generation, found no supporters, which was true also of those which express the evanescence of this present life. The small place taken by missionary hymns is perhaps accounted for by the nature of the ballot, while the absence of those expressive of the passion for social righteousness and service is due to their absence from our hymn book, with one solitary exception. One of the most significant things on the negative side was the movement away from the martial hymns which bulked so large in popular pre-war worship. Does this reflect the changing outlook on war itself, or only a weariness of martial music in general? Precarious as the argument may be, there is food for thought in the silence of a congregation on these matters.

To turn from the omissions to the positive choices made by the voters is reassuring. A glance through the list of the chief favourites shows the heart of the congregation to be sound, and confirms the view expressed with regard to modern religion, that, while we believe less, we hold what we do believe with greater sincerity. The following is a list of the hymns chosen as the six favourites, in order of choice:—

1. "O! Love that wilt not let me go."
2. "Lead, kindly Light."
3. "Jesus, Lover of my soul."
4. "Still, still with Thee."
"Rock of Ages."
5. "Beneath the Cross of Jesus."
"The day Thou gavest."
"Dear Lord and Father of mankind."
6. "At even ere the sun was set."
"Abide with me."

It will be seen that, while these hymns are non-theological in phraseology, they clearly express the essential elements in the Christian faith. Through them, as through those also that tied for the next six places in the ballot, there run those notes with which the human heart has vibrated down the ages; the sense of sin and

the need for forgiveness; the assurance of Divine grace as greater than human failure; the glad acceptance of the redeeming FACT of the Cross; the expression of personal aspiration and faith; while men hold fast to these there can be no doubt as to the future of religion. At the same time we cannot but feel that the religious experience reflected in these chosen hymns indicates a certain wistfulness of spirit. There is missing the note of virile assurance, which blends individual aspiration with a burning zeal for the salvation of men. What, for example, would be the characteristic note in the hymn singing of Fuller's congregation at Kettering, one hundred and twenty years ago; or of the Methodists at Wesley's Chapel about the same time; or, later, of Binney's at the Weigh House; or of Spurgeon's at the Metropolitan Tabernacle? Would not a comparison reveal these very elements, so evidently lacking in the spiritual outlook of to-day?

As regards the musical aspect of this ballot, it will be observed that each of the favourite hymns chosen is linked to one appropriate, if not in every case fine, tune. There can be no doubt that the appeal of a hymn is helped or hindered by the tune with which it is associated. "When German hymnody was at its height," says a writer on this subject, "hymns and tunes were treated as one and indivisible." One cannot but feel that some of our finer hymns do not take their rightful place in congregational singing because they have been unfortunate in this respect. For instance, "Praise to the Holiest in the height," may, in our book, be sung to any one of four tunes, whereas in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, the principle of one hymn, one tune (almost invariably followed, except in the supplements), has linked Dykes's "Gerontius" inseparably with the great words of Newman. The Free Churches might do well to re-consider the value of the old German principle. To-day one may worship in a Baptist, Congregational, Methodist or Presbyterian Church, and sing the same hymn in each, but every time to a different tune! The further consideration of this subject, however, would lead beyond the limits of the present purpose.

To return to the question of the tunes selected in our ballot, it need hardly be pointed out that the compass, in every case among the favourites, was well within the range of the average singer in the congregation. Our people do not like tunes in which they have to leave the top notes to others more musically agile than themselves. Where definite opinions about tunes were expressed, conservatism, as would be expected, predominated. There may be a danger in conservatism, but there is no disguising the fact that congregations do become wedded to tunes. Innovations should therefore introduce themselves with better references

than mere impatience with the customary or time-honoured. It would seem, also, that tune books are not so much used in the congregation as formerly, and that there is less part singing. Possibly this may be due to the tendency of choirs to usurp the place of the congregation in hymn singing, or to the practice of some organists, who introduce eccentric harmonies, and so drive the congregation back on unison singing, or sullen silence. Whatever the cause, the revival of community singing throughout the country, and the publication of four part community song-books has its challenge for the churches. We must encourage part-singing in congregational worship, in spite of the more fastidious musical critics. The average worshipper probably knows more about music and singing than did the previous generation, and there is little danger to-day that free congregational singing will be merely "making a joyful noise."

In conclusion one feels that the result of such a ballot as this offers more challenge to the preacher than to the musician. The broad-principles that make for success in congregational singing remain unchanged, but the task of leading men and women into a fuller, richer, more expansive spiritual life, demands constructive thinking, creative preaching, and a quality of life in the preacher himself, which shall keep him ahead of his people in spiritual passion and achievement. Out of this may spring creative hymn writing, to give modern rhythmical expression to that larger truth which has still to break forth from God's word.

A. J. KLAIBER.

THE FREEDOM OF THE FREE CHURCHES.

DR. SELBIE has published at Memorial Hall a sixpenny pamphlet of 39 pages, re-stating for this generation what the Free Churches hold as to the Church, its Ministry, the Sacraments; and pleading that they move toward a wider Catholicity. We entirely agree with his statement: "All the members of a Church should be Christians: this principle is now accepted by all Churches, but very few of them carry it to its logical conclusions."

JOSEPH FOULKES WINKS. 123-825. *The General Baptist Juvenile Magazine*. Volume I. Loughborough, pp. viii, 164, iv.

This volume, hitherto uncatalogued, is in the hands of R. D. Dickinson & Co. It appears to be the first form of what appeared next year as the *Baptist Children's Magazine*, 50-826. Winks had just settled at Melbourne, and was beginning his career as author and publisher.