

## The Baptist Contribution to the One Church.

IT will be observed that, whether deliberately or not, the subject on which the Editor has asked me to write has been given an ambiguous title. It is not clear whether the "One Church" referred to is the Christian community as it now exists, scattered throughout the world and functioning in manifold forms: or whether it is some as yet non-existent Church which is conceived as about to come into being by the re-uniting of its divided branches. The ambiguity is not, however, very important, after all. For, in the first place, the prospect of a re-united Christendom—apart, that is, from some remarkable outpouring of God's Spirit—is exceedingly remote. And also we may take it as certain that, if and when a United Church does come into being, it will not be by the disappearance of everything distinctive in its separated members, but rather by the gathering-up and incorporation in a new form of what is truly vital and worthy in the various denominations. "Christians," says Bunyan, "are like the several flowers in a garden that have upon each of them the dew of heaven, which, being shaken with the wind, they let fall their dew at each other's roots, whereby they are jointly nourished and become nourishers of each other." If that be so, the garden's beauty will be enhanced by variety, rather than uniformity, in the character and scent and colour of the flowers which grace it.

In considering the Baptist contribution to the Church, we recognise at once that there are some things which Baptists possess and believe which are not peculiar to them, but which they hold in common with other Churches. This is, of course, true in regard to our relationship to the State: but it does not end there. For example, there is, so far as I know, no distinctively Baptist doctrine of the Person of Christ, or of the Atonement, or of the Lord's Supper; and the same might be said of many other practices and beliefs which we share with other members of the Christian fellowship. We are apt, indeed, as Denominations, to emphasise our differences from one another. But, in actual fact, the things which we hold in common are far more interesting and more important. Of these, also, we ought to make time to speak. In this paper, however, I necessarily

confine myself to those features of Baptist life which we may fairly claim are in some sense peculiar to us, and which constitute such special contribution as we have to offer to the Church Universal.

The first item in our contribution is a *particular kind of Christian life and character*, or, if you prefer it, a particular Christian "tradition"—meaning by that, not merely doctrines and customs, but a certain quality of life passed on from generation to generation. I should not like to suggest that there is always so distinctive a quality about Baptists that it acts as a kind of hall-mark and makes them recognisable on sight. But I do suggest that the contribution of any Christian community to the Universal Church ought never to be calculated merely in terms of the things which they possess in the way of beliefs or rites, but always primarily in terms of the quality of personal life which they are evoking and fostering. No one who has ever worshipped in King's College Chapel, Cambridge, or, for that matter, in his own parish church, could deny that the Anglican ritual of worship can be a very impressive and inspiring experience. Yet, surely, the finest contribution of Anglicanism to the Church Universal is not its ritual nor its creed, but the gift of such saintly Christians as F. W. Robertson, Josephine Butler, Henry Martyn and Temple Gairdner. Similarly, the greatest contribution of Baptists is the men and women whom they have produced and are producing, whether they be the Denomination's giants whose names are known throughout the world, or the countless humble souls, here and abroad, who are members of our communion and who are sustaining the fabric of its work and witness by their lives. It is safe to say that no other contribution we may make will ever be comparable in importance to this one, of producing men and women bred in a high tradition of Christian Churchmanship and discipleship, and able to take their place as citizens in building up the Kingdom of God.

The question then arises: what constitutes the Baptist tradition in particular? Are there any special features of Baptist life which we can point to as characteristic—any family likeness, so to speak, which we can distinguish in such different members of the Baptist family as, say, John Bunyan, Adoniram Judson and J. G. Oncken? It used to be said of Arnold of Rugby that his boys might be known in any part of the world. Could we say the same of Baptists? Put in that way, the question is indeed difficult, and we might find it very hard to agree among ourselves upon the answer. But I would go so far as to say that I think there are at least three features which are sufficiently common among Baptists, as to make them in some sort characteristic of our tradition. These are our love of liberty, our

experience in self-government, and finally our interest in evangelism. I should not, of course, claim that we have any monopoly of these qualities. But it is surely not accidental that the first claim for freedom in worship ever published in English was put forward by the Baptist, Thomas Helwys, and that we have had among our number such outstanding apostles of liberty as John Bunyan, Roger Williams and John Clifford, to say nothing of many less famous souls who have suffered silently in the same cause. Certainly no people have more determinedly borne witness than Baptists to the truth that the Christian must be free to obey the voice of God as He speaks in the conscience, and that the State has no authority to coerce the Church in matters of religious faith.

It is characteristic, too, of our Baptist tradition to believe not only in the competence of the soul for immediate fellowship with God and responsiveness to His Will, but also in the right (nay! the bounden duty) of the individual to work out the substance of his religious faith and obedience in equal fellowship with his Christian brethren. The Church Meeting may unhappily be a very much neglected institution among Baptists: but even so it stands as a witness to the fact that a body of believing men and women may have experiential contact with the Spirit of God in the ordering of their corporate life, and that, under His guidance and control, they are competent to interpret the mind of Christ without further permission. It would indeed be difficult to over-estimate the importance of the contribution made by such worshipping communities to the general life of the nation, as well as to the Church, in furnishing ordinary men and women with the opportunity of bringing their varied gifts into the common stock, and of learning to co-operate for unselfish ends.

Finally, I believe that the zeal for evangelism at home and abroad displayed by such men as William Carey and C. H. Spurgeon is not an isolated phenomenon. The distinctive Baptist doctrine of the Church—according to Dr. Whitley—is that “it must consist wholly of people who have pledged themselves to Christ Jesus to live the life He desires, to win and train more disciples for His service.” And the fact that the Baptist community now numbers something like 11,000,000 members in all parts of the world gives ground for thinking that, in this matter of evangelism, the beliefs of our people have inspired some measure of practice. The great names I have mentioned stand for an interest in the spread of the Gospel which, I think, is never wholly absent from our Baptist communion and which is capable, at times, of breaking forth with great power.

Honesty compels me now to admit that the good traits to which I have been calling attention do not form an entirely

convincing picture of the typical Baptist. Some touch of ugliness is said to be necessary in order to lend interest and vitality even to perfection, and candid friends have no difficulty in supplying elements necessary to complete a faithful Baptist portrait. In particular, the zeal of the good Baptist for the principles I have mentioned has often bred a ruggedness of temper which is hard to define, but easy to recognise. Indeed, the Baptist insistence upon liberty, and upon the supreme importance of evangelism, may produce, with perilous ease, a narrowness of outlook and a jealousy of interference which are very unlovable, and from which we may well pray to be delivered. Perhaps one of the strongest arguments for closer co-operation and fellowship between the various Denominations is the fact that we all need such contacts if our own special gifts are to be kept sweet, and if their value is not to be largely impaired by the absence of others which are no less admirable and necessary for the full Christian life and witness.

The second great contribution of Baptists to the One Church is *a particular conception of Christian Discipleship and Church Membership which is expressed and fostered by a special Rite, namely, that of Believers' Baptism.* I put it in that way because I want us to recognise that the real gift of the Baptists to the Church Universal is not so much a rite as the kind of outlook and temper which is fostered by that rite, both as truth and as power. The real issue between Baptists and Paedo-Baptists is often grievously misrepresented as being simply a matter of the quantity of water used in the administration of the rite. It is difficult to imagine how any intelligent person could suppose that a great Christian communion could arise upon so trivial a basis. The fact is, of course, that the real distinction between us is upon the question as to who are the fit subjects of Baptism. And the justification of our separate existence as Baptists is that the rite of Believers' Baptism expresses and fosters, as Paedo-Baptism can never do, certain truths which we believe are vital to the life of the Christian Church. Those truths may be briefly summarised as follows:

- (1) The personal meaning of Faith and Grace.
- (2) The moral change which takes place in conversion.
- (3) The spiritual nature of the Church.

In the first place then, Believers' Baptism is vitally important because it stresses the personal meaning of Faith and Grace. Infant Baptism may and does have beautiful meanings of its own, with which no one would wish to quarrel. But history and experience alike show how easily the use of the rite with an infant lends itself to mechanical and quasi-magical conceptions of Faith and Grace which are repugnant to a truly Christian

outlook. Believers' Baptism has, no doubt, its own special temptations, and may easily come to be wrongly regarded as an end in itself, rather than as the beginning of a life of service to Christ. But at least no rite is rooted more securely than this one in New Testament conceptions of God and man and their mutual relationship. Here, at any rate, is visibly set forth the truth that God and men come together through Jesus Christ in a relationship which is wholly personal. On the one hand, the rite demands of the candidate such an individual apprehension of, and assent to, the gracious purpose of God as no one but he can show. On the other hand, Baptism is his way of testifying to the fact that, in the exercise of personal repentance and faith, he has actually met God as Father and experienced His saving power. From both points of view the relationship between God and the believer is seen to be entirely personal, and one in which Faith and Grace are spiritually complementary, the one to the other.

Further, the rite of Believers' Baptism testifies to that identification of the believer with Christ in His filial attitude to God which is of the essence of conversion. The baptism in water, with its double activity of descent and ascent, expresses, with incomparable fidelity, the inward surrender of the heart and will to God through Christ, and it is surely this which constitutes the moral change by which a man enters into his inheritance as a child of God. The baptism of the Spirit, of which the New Testament speaks, is no external outpouring upon a man of quasi-physical power. It is the inward realisation of the Spirit of Christ which comes about by "Dying and rising again" with Him. This is a moral act, or it is nothing. And there is abundant testimony to show that the following of Christ obediently in the waters of baptism, even at the cost of much fear and trembling, does bring to the believer an effective assurance of fellowship with Him in the Spirit of the new life which He imparts.

Finally, there is in Believers' Baptism a constant and much-needed testimony to the spiritual basis upon which the Christian Church rests. It is our way of saying that the Church is neither a social nor a political but a religious community, which is grounded in a spiritual relationship to Christ and answerable finally only to Him. Few people would now think it necessary to deny that some measure of orderly arrangement and continuity are necessary for the health and well-being of the Church, or that an ordered statement of its beliefs is desirable. (Indeed, it would be a great step forward in our relations as Denominations if we all recognised that our main differences do not centre around the desirability of these things, but about the form and relative importance which we respectively assign to them.) Nevertheless,

there will always be room for the affirmation by Believers' Baptism that the real foundation of the Church is not in its orders or creeds or sacraments, but in a personal relationship to God through Christ, and that a Church is nothing unless it is a voluntary association of believing men and women who have accepted the gift of God in Christ, and know themselves called to serve Him as brethren with undivided loyalty and obedience.

Such, then, is the Baptist contribution to the One Church. I would not claim even of this that it is a contribution which is wholly peculiar to ourselves. I rejoice in the fact that, once these convictions of ours are clearly stated, they have about them that air of universality which is one of the marks of truth. Yet it is dangerous to assume that truths will continue of themselves to make their power felt, apart from the co-operation of living minds and consciences through which they may find utterance. And I hazard the opinion that if the truths which I have mentioned are still living and weighty amongst us, the reason is because, to a greater degree, perhaps, than we ourselves are always aware of, the rite which gives our Denomination its distinctive name has kept them alive and powerful, and has prevented them—in Coleridge's phrase—from becoming bedridden in the dormitory of the soul.

My former College Principal, Dr. Wheeler Robinson, to whose stimulus I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness for very much of what I have written, used to tell the story of one Samuel Chandler who had been regretfully admitting the existence among Dissenters of various failings which greatly offended him. Upon being asked, however, by a certain bishop why, then, he did not leave the dissenting people, he replied: "My lord, I would: if I could find a worthier body of people." The story is perhaps worth repeating, not as an incentive to self-complacency, but as a reminder that a true appreciation of one's own heritage is neither a hindrance to self-criticism nor an obstacle in the rendering of real service to the Church of Christ. I should rather say that such appreciation is a necessary condition of the best kind of service. Perhaps the first duty that Baptists owe as individuals to the One Church is to understand, cherish and develop whatever is highest and best in their own particular tradition, and seek in the spirit of humility and love to make it a worthier offering to the Cause of Jesus Christ.

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