

Baptists and the Bible.

1. WHAT THE BIBLE HAS DONE FOR THEM.

FIRST, it has called them into being.

In Apostolic days, there was no doubt that the followers of Christ devoted themselves to His service in the act of baptism. And so long as the Bible was available to new peoples in their own tongues, there was no lack of new believers, who kept up the custom. Latins at Carthage, Syrians at Edessa, Armenians by the Black Sea, Copts up the Nile, all practised the baptism of believers. The Greeks, who had the Word of God in their own language, during centuries trained their catechumens for the great eves of Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, when they dedicated themselves in baptism. When they evangelised the Russians, and gave them the Slavonic Bible, again there were mass-baptisms of converts in their rivers. It was Western Europe, where the Roman missionaries did not translate the Bible, and where they did christen infants to save them from endless torture, which dropped gradually the baptism of believers.

As the Middle Ages closed, new versions of the Bible began to appear. John Huss revised the old Bohemian, and a New Testament was in print by 1475. Nine years earlier, the Waldensians had their German Bible at Strassburg. As the brethren inheriting the pious tradition of the past fed their souls with this rich food, some of them noticed how the Testament had nothing to say about infant christening, but much about believers' baptism. Gradually the importance of this became evident, and by 1526 the Anabaptists were known widely. We can trace the connection readily between the English Bible and English Baptists.

Our island was far behind the continent in having the Word of God available. Wycliffe's Bible was forbidden to ordinary readers; the earliest printed versions had to be machined abroad and smuggled in. Only in 1537 did the king license versions, only next year did he order that a Bible be placed in every Church, for people to read at will. Even so, there were ups and downs, and not till 1560 was a family Bible published which made its way into the home, where people could read, think, discuss, without being guided by ministers. A negro has said that unless someone "explains" the Bible, it is sure to make

Baptists. Now the Genevan Bible had abundant explanations, by followers of Calvin, whose attention was given to quite other points. The long custom of infant christening had engrained itself, and had fashioned theology, as a note on 1 Cor. vii. 14 shows:—

“They that are borne of either of the parents faithful, are also counted members of Christ’s Church, because of the promes, Act. ii. 39.” Nearly the only comment on a passage mentioning baptism is on Matthew xxviii. 19; and it seems somewhat humorous to us: “Men may not teach their own doctrine, but whatsoever Christ hath taught them.”

Elizabeth burned some Dutchmen for heresy. They were Anabaptists into the bargain, and were so called. It would be natural for someone to ask why they “baptised again”; and so the question was raised in English circles. Once the answer was given, “Because they find nothing in the Bible about infant baptism, and they do baptise a man who acknowledges Christ as his Lord,” then Englishmen could search the Scriptures for themselves, and reach the conclusion that infant baptism was simply a tradition of man, which made the word of God of no effect in this matter. English Baptists came into existence through the English Bible, when the Bible speaks for itself. It is an amusing coincidence that when King James ordered the new revision to have no note or comment, the Authorised version appeared in 1611, and the very next year a Baptist church appeared in London.

The second thing that the Bible has done for Baptists, is to focus their attention on two fundamental duties, which precede and follow baptism: Win disciples; Train them. Baptists are a perpetual nuisance to statesmen in Rumania, because they will propagate their views; they might be tolerated if they would be quiet, but they will preach, and preach even though their hearers are members in good standing within the Established Church. If Baptists ever slacken in this duty, Nemesis overtakes them, the churches shrink and die. It is no accident that the B.M.S. was first of the modern societies, or that the founder of the Bible Society was a Baptist. It is unfortunate that we are not so obedient to the second order, to teach whatever the Lord bade. Yet at least, while other denominations pay great attention to creeds, right thinking, Baptists have paid more to covenants, right doing.

A third thing the Bible has done for us is to nourish private devotion. In this we are not peculiar or exceptional or specially devout; but the Bible is our characteristic book. Maggie Tulliver found her help in the *Imitation of Christ*; Lancelot Andrewes drew on the writings of centuries; Bunyan’s Christian

had only the one scroll. In the days, not so long ago, when people carried their books to church, the Episcopalian took a prayer-book and a hymn-book, Baptists took Bibles. A dear old saint, whose eyesight was failing, had to get a companion to read to her; the companion was greatly puzzled when her devout search for good books was not valued, and when her old lady wanted nothing but the Bible itself.

Again, the Bible has fashioned our public worship. England owes much to Cranmer, who sought and winnowed, and brought together a number of beautiful prayers for common use; it owes him this, that morning and evening the worshippers say three or four psalms, hear fine passages from both Testaments. Baptists have laid aside his selections from the masters of prayer, believing rather in prayer directly springing from the experience of the worshippers; they have followed Cranmer in using the Bible. At least, they used to. To-day we are in grave danger of having the New Testament displaced in the morning by an address to children, even if hardly any are present; and having only one short lesson at night, because people don't want long services. Is the abandonment of this custom one of the causes contributing to a steady shrinkage?

The Bible has guided us in our organisation. The growth of centuries had evolved a most elaborate system; when the Tudor reformers had simplified much there still remained curates, vicars, rectors, archdeacons, canons, deans, bishops and archbishops. Baptists could find no such names in the Bible, nor easily people who under other names answered to them. It was easy to find pastors and teachers, bishops, elders, deacons; and after a great deal of discussion, Baptists settled down to have local officers called Elders or Pastors, and Deacons; with travelling officers like Paul called Superintendents or Messengers. They recognised what had to be done—Win, Teach; and they set their officers to see to these essentials, with deacons to manage business like the Seven at Jerusalem. It is true that as Baptists have grown, and fresh needs have arisen, other officers have been found necessary; but caretakers, organists, secretaries, committees, recorders, treasurers, presidents, have not often come to lord it over God's heritage, nor to claim that they hold office by Divine Right, so that there can be no true Church without them. The Bible has plain warnings against domineering, and a plain promise that where the Spirit of God is, there is liberty.

Once again; the Bible has largely guided Baptist thinking. For centuries we were shut out from universities and the ancient schools, and were thrown on our own resources. The one text-book available was the Bible, and this was used for all purposes. It is easy to see one or two ludicrous results, that the

geography of Palestine might be better known than that of England, that the names and dates of the kings of Israel and Judah were committed to memory, &c., &c. But it meant that even in literature, the finest English was embedded in the memory, and a style was fashioned that has made Bunyan a classic for the world. It meant that there was no mistake as to what was most worth while in life; the visible is temporary, the unseen is permanent; treasures that do not rust or rot are in heaven. Men whose thinking is rooted thus, may not be leaders in philosophy or poetry, but they have a wisdom available which concentrates on things worth while. The range may be narrow—though it need not be—but at least it is deep-rooted.

Such are some of the things that the Bible has done for Baptists. In return, we may ask what Baptists have done for the Bible.

W. T. WHITLEY

God Speaks to this Generation (Student Christian Movement Press, 2s. 6d. net.)

“Birmingham, 1937” was one in a lengthening series of Quadrennial Conferences of the Student Christian Movement which began with “Liverpool, 1896,” and thirty-seven different nationalities were represented. The programme contained three main sections, (a) “God speaks through the world,” (b) “God’s Good news,” (c) “God speaks to us.” The main addresses only are recorded in this volume, but they are quite sufficiently disturbing, for the speakers were ruthless in confronting the Conference with the unpleasant realities of our time. The volume will repay careful thought, and its value is increased by “Questions for Discussion,” which could profitably be considered by Study Groups.