

The Edinburgh Conference :

What Was the Good of it ?

THE Second World Conference on Faith and Order met in Edinburgh, August 3—18, 1937. Since the First Conference at Lausanne in 1927 the movement has been kept in being by the labours of an appointed Continuation Committee, and by the work of various Commissions charged with the duty of preparing Reports as material for information and discussion when the Conference should assemble. During the decade intervening between the First and Second Conferences a vast amount of work has been done by a number of scholars and divines in Britain, on the Continent, among the Eastern Orthodox, and in America.

In the space at my disposal I cannot possibly give a full account of the proceedings of the Edinburgh Conference. But what is here set down shall be as accurate as I can make it. Moreover, as is natural in a denominational journal, I shall give prominence to the features especially significant or interesting to us as Baptists. Within these necessary limits I can only do my best, and refer those who desire a fuller account to the Report of the Conference (Document No. 90) and to a popular account of the proceedings under the title "Edinburgh 1937" by the Rev. Hugh Martin, M.A. (Student Christian Movement Press, 2s.).

I.

The Baptist Union formally appointed five delegates to the Conference: Rev. M. E. Aubrey, Rev. Hugh Martin, Dr. J. H. Rushbrooke, Mr. C. T. Le Quesne, K.C., and Rev. Gilbert Laws. Dr. W. T. Whitley, on account of special services rendered to the movement, had another qualification, but closely associated himself with the Baptist delegates. The Scottish Baptists were also represented, as were American Baptists, both of the Northern Convention and of the Southern Convention, and the Canadian Baptists. At some points all the Baptists were able to confer together, though this ought to have been done still more effectively, in which case both the genuine mind of the Baptists and the proper weight of their enormous numbers would have been more adequately felt.

The numbers and distribution of the delegates were impressive. It is stated that the delegates numbered four hundred and fourteen, that they came from forty-three countries, and that they represented one hundred and twenty-two of the denominations, sects, or communions of Christendom. The

Roman Catholic Church, of course, did not co-operate officially in any way. Nevertheless, among the preliminary papers was one from a Roman Catholic theologian setting forth the belief of Romanists on specified points on which accurate information had been desired. A courteous letter was also received from a Roman Catholic ecclesiastic in Scotland declining, on grounds given, an invitation to attend.

Officially the Conference opened with a service in St. Giles Cathedral, at which the Archbishop of York preached, other parts of this great act of worship being taken by representatives of the Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and Presbyterian communions. Dr. Temple asked in his sermon :

“ How can the Church claim to bridge the divisions in human society, divisions between Greek and barbarian, bond and free, between black and white, Aryan and non-Aryan, employer and employed, if when men are drawn into the Church they find that another division has been added to the old ones, a division of Catholic from Evangelical, or Episcopalian from Presbyterian or Independent? ”

He maintained that our divisions obscure our witness to the Gospel, which is one; and occasion the loss to each communion of some part of the full truth and full fellowship which can only come to a united Church. He made the point (which received impressive confirmation later from Bishop Azariah of India), that Christians on mission fields are impatient of our denominational differences, and are more ready to come together than their denominations are to let them do so. As helps to the attainment of unity he urged a larger faith in waiting upon God.

“ It is not we who can heal the wounds in the body of Christ. We confer and deliberate in this Conference, and this is right, but it is not by contrivance or adjustment that we can unite the Church of God. It is only by coming closer to Him that we can come nearer to one another. When God has drawn us closer to Himself we shall be truly united together. Then our task will not be to consummate our endeavour, but to register His achievement. ”

The Conference, after a preliminary full gathering or two, broke up into Sections, and these again into sub-Sections, meeting in private and discussing points of agreement and difference on the subjects committed to each Section respectively. These Sections were: *I. The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ; II. The Church of Christ and the Word of God; III. The Church of*

Christ: The Ministry and Sacraments; and IV. The Church's Unity in Life and Worship.

Our available resources for work in these Sections were divided thus: Dr. Whitley to the Section I, on which subject he had previously prepared an important composite volume entitled *The Doctrine of Grace*. For the Section II we had no one available. To Section III were assigned Mr. Le Quesne and Mr. Laws. In this Section came the matters most difficult for Baptists, as indeed also for others. For questions of church, ministry and sacraments are beyond all other questions those upon which Christians are divided. To Section IV went Mr. Aubrey, who was appointed Chairman of it, and with him Mr. Hugh Martin. Dr. Rushbrooke, who had been on the continent with the President of the Baptist World Alliance, was not able to arrive in time for work on the Sections, but took part in the last days when the whole Conference met together to revise finally and then approve the reports of the Sections.

The first two Sections, viz. those dealing with "Grace," and the "Word of God," were occupied with matters that occasion more differences on the Continent than amongst ourselves. And here may be the place to express regret that the German delegates from the State Church in that country were not able to attend, passports not being obtainable. German Free-churchmen, however, did attend. The loss of distinguished German theologians was a serious one in those Sections which dealt with matters upon which they have meditated far more deeply than ourselves. Nevertheless, other Lutherans, from Scandinavia, for instance, were present and represented broadly speaking the same point of view.

In the reports from those Sections there are many things I should like to extract, but space will not permit. I believe there is nothing in them that would cause any difficulty to an average Baptist. There are many things, however, about which I could wish that Baptists thought more deeply. Especially on the high matters of divine revelation, which are comprehended under the title "The Word of God," would it be well for us to be better instructed. The Baptist emphasis on the authority of Scripture would find a desirable reinforcement through a deeper knowledge of the way continental Protestantism approaches the matter of the self-disclosure of God in revelation. The report of Section II contains this:

"The function of the Church is to glorify God in adoration and sacrificial service and to be God's missionary to the world. She is to bear witness to God's redeeming

grace in Christ in her corporate life, to proclaim the good news to every creature and to make disciples of all nations, bringing Christ's commandments to communities as well as to individuals. In relation to those who belong to her fellowship or who are placed under her influence, the function of the Church is through the ministry of the Word and of the sacraments, and through Christian education, to make them into convinced Christians conscious of the reality of salvation. The needs of individual souls call for pastoral care and for a fellowship in the things of the Spirit through which the members provoke one another to good works, and to walk worthily of their calling, by true friendship, mutual help and consolation, and the exercise of loving discipline. She is to intercede for all her members, especially for those who suffer for their faith, and for all mankind."

The discussions in Section III were of special interest to Baptists, for there came up prominently the differences which divide. Nevertheless, when the discussions were concluded and the report presented, it was felt that an advance had been made. Concerning baptism the report said :

"The re-united Church will observe the rule that all members of the visible Church are admitted by baptism; which is a gift of God's redeeming love to the Church; and administered in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, is a sign and seal of Christian discipleship in obedience to our Lord's command."

To this the Baptists secured a note in these words :

"As regards the above statement which has been passed by their brethren who practise infant baptism, the Baptists could accept it as applying to the baptism of believers, i.e., of those who are capable of making a personal confession of faith. In practising the baptism of believers only they hold that they are maintaining the practice of baptism as it is found in the New Testament in the apostolic Church, and also the principle which is laid down on page 27 of the Report of Commission III" [one of the preliminary documents prepared for the Conference] "to this effect, viz. : 'The necessary condition of receiving the grace of a sacrament is the faith of the recipient.' They believe that children belong to God and that no rite is needed to assure His grace for them. This statement of the Baptists was accepted also by a representative of the Disciples of Christ on behalf of that body."

This note may prove of the utmost importance later on.

There had been expressed the hope that notes and qualifications would not often be added to reports, and there was indeed a minimum of such addenda. Nevertheless, the Baptist position had to be asserted sometime and in some place if other Churches were not to be misled, and we may well be thankful to those who represented us at Edinburgh for their persistence and insistence. This note, secured in Section III, was ultimately allowed to stand when the whole findings were finally approved by the full Conference.

The part of the Report dealing with baptism ends:

“In the course of the discussion it appeared that there were further elements of faith and practice in relation to baptism about which disagreement existed. Since the time available precluded the extended discussion of such points as baptismal regeneration, the admission of unbaptised persons to Holy Communion, and the relation of Confirmation to baptism, we are unable to express an opinion how far they would constitute obstacles to proposals for a united Church.”

To the foregoing paragraph on the admission of unbaptised persons to Holy Communion there is a note: “For most Churches this is not an open question, since baptism is regarded as the only and necessary means of admission to the Church.” On this note I may remark in passing that other Churches are puzzled by the fact that some Baptist Churches receive members without any kind of baptism whatever. It is difficult to refute the gibe that “Baptists are the people who are so strong on baptism that they dispense with it!”

Perhaps the greatest expressed divergence of belief was occasioned by what was submitted on the Ministry. Every variety of view was registered, from that of the Eastern Orthodox which was consistent in unvarying rigidity, down through Anglicans of more than one school, Presbyterians of all shades, to Independents and Quakers. No amount of adjustment of words could give even the semblance of agreement here. Nevertheless, there was a wonderful patience on the part of many who must have found patience no easy matter, and a truly humble desire to appreciate and to learn from one another. I have no space to copy out the actual words of the Report (and they are carefully used words which admit of no summary) I can only say that pages 23-27 of the Report (No. 90) contain the most succinct and authoritative account known to me of what is believed by various Churches on Apostolic Succession and the sanctions that are held to give validity to the ministry of

the Church. These pages might well be discussed in Fraternal, and should certainly be lectured upon in college classes.

Section IV: "The Church's Unity in Life and Worship" was humorously dubbed the "Practical Section." Its report reviewed the several conceptions of unity—as co-operative action; inter-communion; corporate union. It reviewed the possible bases of unity—as Likeness in Faith or Confession; Likeness in non-Sacramental worship; Likeness in Sacramental Faith and Practice; Likeness of Orders; Likeness in polity. It further reviewed the obstacles to Church Unity, and asked, What can we do to move toward the unity we should seek? The answers are set forth in the Report of the Conference.

It was after eleven o'clock on the night of Tuesday, August 17th, when the last section of the Report was passed, and the labours of a weary but still good-tempered assembly were finished except for the final session.

II.

An Affirmation of Unity was passed at the closing session with entire unanimity. It may become very important, and must be included here.

"We are one in faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God. We are one in allegiance to Him as Head of the Church, and as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We are one in acknowledging that this allegiance takes precedence of any other allegiance that may make claims upon us.

"This unity does not consist in the agreement of our minds or the consent of our wills. It is founded in Jesus Christ Himself, Who lived, died and rose again to bring us to the Father, and Who through the Holy Spirit dwells in His Church. We are one because we are all the objects of the love and grace of God, and called by Him to witness in all the world to His glorious gospel.

"Our unity is of heart and spirit. We are divided in the outward forms of our life in Christ, because we understand differently His will for His Church. We believe, however, that a deeper understanding will lead us towards a united apprehension of the truth as it is in Jesus.

"We humbly acknowledge that our divisions are contrary to the will of Christ, and we pray God in His mercy to shorten the days of our separation and to guide us by His Spirit into fulness of unity.

"We are thankful that during recent years we have been drawn together; prejudices have been overcome, mis-

understandings removed, and real, if limited, progress has been made towards our goal of a common mind.

"In this Conference we may gratefully claim that the Spirit of God has made us willing to learn from one another, and has given us a fuller vision of the truth and enriched our spiritual experience.

"We have lifted up our hearts together in prayer; we have sung the same hymns; together we have read the same Holy Scriptures. We recognise in one another, across the barriers of our separation, a common Christian outlook and a common standard of values. We are therefore assured of a unity deeper than our divisions.

"We are convinced that our unity of spirit and aim must be embodied in a way that will make it manifest to the world, though we do not yet clearly see what outward form it should take.

"We believe that every sincere attempt to co-operate in the concerns of the Kingdom of God draws the severed communions together in increased mutual understanding and goodwill. We call upon our fellow-Christians of all communions to practise such co-operation; to consider patiently occasions of disunion that they may be overcome; to be ready to learn from those who differ from them; to seek to remove those obstacles to the furtherance of the gospel in the non-Christian world which arise from our divisions; and constantly to pray for that unity which we believe to be our Lord's will for His Church.

"We desire also to declare to all men everywhere our assurance that Christ is the one hope of unity for the world in face of the distractions and dissensions of this present time. We know that our witness is weakened by our divisions. Yet we are one in Christ and in the fellowship of His Spirit. We pray that everywhere, in a world divided and perplexed, men may turn to Jesus Christ our Lord, Who makes us one in spite of our divisions; that He may bind in one those who by many worldly claims are set at variance; and that the world may at last find peace and unity in Him; to Whom be glory for ever."

III.

If it be asked, What was the good of a great Conference of this order, I would answer:

(1) A great deal of information was given and received. Men from different lands, and from different Churches, plainly told one another how they regarded Christianity, its doctrinal

content, its necessary order, its practical duty. In public discussion, in private conversation, in group talks, and in other ways it became manifest that more people than one had supposed dwelt in enclosures of the mind. But have they not been wont to read each other's books? It may be so, but there is a vast difference between reading a treatise and talking face to face with a man.

I suppose all of us are in the way of expounding our own views to those who in the main agree with us, or at least have the same point of view, and big areas of thought in common. But to try to make these views appreciated to those who have for centuries worked in quite other categories is another matter. It is not meant as a joke when I say that never did I so sympathise with missionaries as at Edinburgh. For if it be difficult to make oneself understood to fellow Christians of another tradition, what must it be to put before the heathen the truths of the New Testament! At Edinburgh, if one worked seriously, one just had to try to understand others with patience; and bear, with the best equanimity one could summon, the wide-eyed wonder of those to whom one was almost "as an heathen man and a publican"!

(2) A great deal of true Christian appreciation was put into circulation. This follows from what has been before said. It was bound to be so. When you have made demands on the attention of those who differ from you, and received it in full measure, your heart is sure to be won, whatever may have been the effect or non-effect of your arguments on them. It can truly be said, so far as my experience goes, and so far as I heard, that at Edinburgh there was no difference except in opinion—no division in heart, no wish merely to score points, only to understand and to appreciate. Sacerdotalism is the antipodes for me in religion, yet it was very charming to find a deep and tender humility of soul, and a passionate love for Christ in Orthodox and Anglican priests. Indeed, though this is scarcely the place to say it, I personally felt that if I had to choose between the cold rationalism that has done duty for Protestantism in some quarters and the reverent and adoring worship of Christ to be felt in the soul of the priest, I should find more to share with the latter. But this is a mere personal remark in passing.

We may hope that on the other hand those who had such a slight acquaintance with the views and spirit of Christians of our type might also feel that they had something to gain. I believe this was actually the case, and it is all to the good. Whatever continues to divide Churches, it ought not to be ignorance, prejudice, a closed mind, a sealed heart. If division there must

be till we see eye to eye on more points than at present, let it be only the necessary effect of sacred conviction in the mind, not insensitiveness in the heart.

(3) I felt that not every point of difference between the Churches as they stand need be a cause of division. In other words, there are differences which could be overcome, surrenders of portions of traditional assertion and practice which might be made without injury to truth, and with a great gain to the Kingdom of God at home and in the non-Christian world. Even so there would only be the uniting of Churches near in sentiment and faith already. Only a very great weight of feeling, far to seek at present, in the body of Church-members would raise a spiritual tide high enough to carry us over these bars; and even then it would be but a stage on the way to a distant and dimly seen goal.

(4) But when all has been said it remains, as the Report itself shows, that there are difficulties at present insuperable. In my judgement these difficulties lie mostly between the so-called Catholic, and so-called Protestant, or Evangelical Churches. The conceptions of church, ministry and sacrament are so different that it is hard to see how any union can ever be looked for while opinion remains as it is. One candid sacerdotalist in my hearing said, "There is no possibility of our coming together. If you are right we are wrong, and you must convert us. If we are right you are wrong, and we must convert you. Nothing else is any good." This outburst was deprecated, but its candour was as refreshing as its logic was consistent.

For us as Baptists the difficulties are enormous. There is no getting away from that. On the question of baptism our position is so distinct, and to the many so unacceptable, that I see no way of overcoming the difficulty short of equating believer's baptism with infant baptism. This would seem to me to make infant baptism the standard and believer's baptism a sort of tolerated exception. It is not likely that more than a very few Baptists would ever think of consenting to such an equation. It is a very painful thing to have to say to those who set store by infant baptism that we regard it as a perversion of an ordinance of Christ, a substitution of man's devising for a positive institution of the Lord. Yet nothing less than this is the true Baptist position, and as one who holds it I see no way, except at the cost of truth, of organic union with other Churches.

GILBERT LAWS.