

Baptist Ecumenicity.

“NEVER before in human history have the world and mankind been such a close unity, and never before have they been such a discordant unity.” Many factors have contributed to the unity. Among them one is unique, i.e., the Christian Church. It is ecumenical, the others are international. The difference lies in this, that in the ecumenical the unity is prior in time and importance to its parts, e.g., Jesus, who is the life and unity of the church, was, and is, prior to any of its sections.

This is of more than theoretical significance. Vital practical issues hang upon it. Before the unprecedented “discordant disunity” of the world, the ecumenical church has stood solid as has no other international institution. Strong testimony to this has been borne by such men as Lippman and Einstein, who certainly have not been supporters of Christianity.

Here is something that is impervious to the malicious acids of nationalism. Indeed, the gates of Hell are not prevailing against it. It is not surprising that the great Oxford and Edinburgh conferences laid stress upon the church, especially upon its ecumenicity. We, too, must examine our own witness in the light of this great fact. We consider, then, Baptist ecumenicity. This brings us first to :

OUR ORIGINS. The ecumenical church will have one life with many forms. Pentecost gave one message in many tongues, and in the church that issued from it Paul saw one spirit with a great diversity of gifts. The variety of the parts did not impair the unity of the whole, and no one part was allowed to dominate the rest.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the spirit was imparting new life to the church here. It issued in unprecedented manifestations which did not conform to prescribed forms. An attempt was therefore made to suppress the Protestant and then the Free Church Witness. This implied a refusal to recognise the one Spirit in new forms; it was an attempt to make one form the standard for all others, and to sacrifice diversity of gifts to external uniformity. It was as if some Roman horticulturalist in the fifteenth century had decreed that naught but Roman plants should grow in England; that trees natural to this land should not only be proscribed, but condemned as unnatural. Would such a despot be serving the interests of nature or of England? Should the Wistaria say to the Honeysuckle, or

the Palm to the Oak, thou art not of nature? Nay, and God's work in grace, as in nature, is manifold. He is the author of diversity as well as of unity, and those who are ecumenically-minded will be concerned for the former as well as the latter. It was for the validity and freedom of the former that our fathers fought. That was a real contribution to ecumenicity.

It is generally recognised that we must foster in foreign fields forms of worship and service not only true to the Gospel, but also indigenous to the mental and social life of the people there. That is precisely what our Baptist ancestors did here. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, in its phraseology and style, was indigenous to English thought as well as vibrant with true genius. In like manner the simple forms in which Bunyan's religious life found expression, if not in conformity to prescribed liturgies, were true and native to the soul of England, and charged with the Holy Spirit. Without this particular gift of the Spirit shared by so many others the whole of Christendom would have been poorer—a fact generously recognised by the Lambeth Conference of 1925. Thus our forefathers made a contribution to ecumenicity by freeing and nurturing this indisputable manifestation of the Spirit. That contribution was further enhanced in :

OUR PRINCIPLES for which our spiritual ancestors stood. Apart from these, Baptists travel very lightly : no prayer book, no doctrine as such, no form of government is essentially ours. We are not even pure independents except in so far as we can, when necessary, be independent of independence. We have been connexional, and could be again. In fact, we have no "esse" apart from the life of Christ (and such simplicity is a great contribution to ecumenicity). This explains the tenacity with which we hold to one feature of our distinctive witness, i.e., believers' baptism. Were this the heritage of one of our pioneers, it would, perchance, be something with which we could bargain. But this is a charge prior to them all. It is not an historic accretion which history has the right to modify, but something we have received of the Lord Jesus.

But with the ecumenical obligation to recognise and defend diversity, comes also the duty of promoting spiritual fellowship. We seem to need a doctrine of the church. We have stated with unmistakable clarity what are the conditions of church membership, and repudiated any State control. But more is required. What relation with the State is valid? What spiritual unity should exist between the different sections of the church? The preservation of our distinctive witness need not conflict with a wide range of effective, united witness and service with other

denominations. This is happily commended in the report of the Baptist Union Council on the question of Union between Baptists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Thus, in the simple and scriptural witness that we bear, and in our spiritual fellowship with others, we make a contribution to ecumenicity which is further enhanced in :

OUR HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT. Baptists, I have said, in one sense travel lightly, and for that reason they travel far and quickly. They carry little impediment. Dr. E. P. Alldridge has estimated that in the century 1825-1925, whereas Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants in general increased by 200%, Baptists alone showed an increase of 2,216%. Moreover, those who know the conditions of entrance into our church will not consider such increase superficial. And what diversities of people have come into that membership: backward, as well as advanced races, totalitarian and democratic, orient and occident, people under Catholic and Eastern Orthodox domination, the bond and the free! What ecumenicity, what unity in diversity!

This is probably not unconnected with the spiritual simplicity of our witness. Our missionaries travel lightly; they carry no system, ritual or dogma, which are, after all, children of time and place. We claim the right to be free in these matters, and grant that freedom to others. The ecumenical value of this should be appreciated. Merle Davies, in his Tambaran report on "The Economic and Social Environment of the Younger Churches," says: "The Church of Christ has a twofold duty with regard to its social environments. The first is the necessity of transforming the environment by making its institutions and practices conformable to the will of God, and a suitable place in which the Christian life may be lived. The second is to use those forces in the environments that are not opposed to God's will as instruments for building His Church."¹ He adduces as excellent examples of this the Church of Korea, the Batak Church of Sumatra, and our own Karen Church in Burma—all splendid instances of the Christian ideal gathering to itself forms indigenous to the community to be served.

In our historic development this insistence on spiritual simplicity has in places accidentally resulted in aesthetic bareness. This we do not wish to justify. If we travel lightly it is not "that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon" with what becomes local custom and requirement and is best suited to the service we have to render there. For this reason we see the need for real ecumenical life in :

¹ Page 28.

OUR PRESENT OPPORTUNITY. Great as are the accomplishments of the Baptist World Alliance, with its membership of over twelve millions, it is still more a promise than an achievement. As it realises opportunities, it creates new and bigger ones. While we rejoice in our world-wide membership, we also feel the solemn obligations it brings. Baptist ecumenicity is not a comfortable distinction permitting relaxation, but a disturbing obligation that stings to action. In the diversities of our membership are deep creative tensions. Friends of the West come with a spiritual humanism: Barthians from the Continent bring a new puritanism and fundamentalism. We have ardent democrats and totalitarians in membership, and we must refuse to identify the Kingdom of God with any one form of democracy, still less with any existing totalitarianism. In the Kingdom of God both the individual and the community are rightly appraised and realised because each is subordinate to One more ultimate, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings. Freedom is imperilled in many parts of Europe and of Asia. The struggle for religious liberty so valiantly led by Dr. Rushbrooke in Rumania is directed against a menace raising itself in various ways in many countries. We are known as the champions of religious liberty, and it looks as if God has called us for such a day as this. This we do not consider theoretically in detachment, for part of our membership is in the very storm centres themselves. So we can witness and fight from within the oppression as well as from the outside.

What opportunities! What obligations! How closely related to these is the problem of world peace and evangelisation! Most people come first to ecumenicity as a doctrine, and hope in time to know it as an experience. But for many young people this process is reversed. They have had frank and amicable discussions, on our international tours and at our conferences, with Christians of other lands: they have seen Christ's sway over the lives of young people of an entirely different background, outlook and social life—and on several occasions youths and maidens have admitted that in such international fellowship they have seen a new vision of Christ, and have been moved to surrender their lives to Him. Here they saw a unity that can transcend all national distinctions; a unity that is deeper than blood and race; a life in which not only can man be at one with man, but also at one with God. Such ecumenicity is not a theological abstraction, but an actual experience with a profound evangelistic appeal. *There* surely is some measure of the unity for which Christ prayed, and the result:

“That they may be one.” “That the world may believe.”

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