

Three Hundred Meetings of a Ministers' Fraternal.

THE West London Suburban Baptist Ministers' Fraternal came into being in May, 1909. Since then there has been an unbroken sequence of monthly meetings which have afforded to the ministers of that area times of relaxation and mental stimulus, friendship and fellowship, guidance and inspiration. Minutes of the meetings have been faithfully kept by a succession of secretaries, and to turn over the pages is a source of great interest. One only wishes that some had been a little more generous with their notes and a little more legible in their writing.

The first minute tells us that "A meeting of local Baptist ministers was held at 1, Floral Villas, Lower Boston Road, Hanwell, on Monday, May 9th, 1909, attended by Gibbs, Smith, Clarke, Davies, Wells, Burnham and Allan Poole, the object of the meeting being to consider the question of a Baptist Ministers' Fraternal. After the reading of Psalm 122 and prayer, the question was fully discussed." The minutes conclude, "It was generally felt that a Fraternal of a helpful character had been successfully launched, and would have a prosperous voyage." The years have passed, and the hope has been realised. On June 3rd, 1940, the present members met at Jordans, Buckinghamshire, for the three hundredth meeting of the Fraternal, and under the genial chairmanship of the Rev. T. G. Pollard many happy memories were recalled. It is interesting to note that two who met on that first occasion have been members throughout—the Rev. W. E. Wells, who still maintains his ministry at Sudbury, and the Rev. Henry Smith, who now lives in retirement at Cowley.

Many great and honoured names have been inscribed on the roll of the members, that of John Clifford being the greatest. During the years of his retirement, which were spent at West Ealing, he was a loyal and faithful friend to his brethren, and gave of his best to the meetings and the discussions. Other Doctors who have been in membership are Townley Lord, E. J. Tongue and John Pitts. Professor Farrer, of Regent's Park College, has long been in connection, and was at one time secretary; whilst G. Henton Davies, now Professor of Hebrew at Bristol College, belonged to the fellowship during the period of his ministry at Hammersmith.

The meetings during this long period have varied greatly, both in character and subject. There have been the grave times and the gay, the serious and the light-hearted. The topics for discussion have ranged over a wide field. Politics—national,

denominational and international—have all been argued; theology, as one would expect, constantly cropped up; questions of worship and service, with one whole meeting given up to the children's address, find a frequent place; whilst outside subjects like the Brotherhood movement, the work of a Police Court Missionary, Psychology and Healing, Amusements, Freemasonry, Russia and Bolshevism have all been discussed; and often settled, at these gatherings!

There has always been the keenest interest in denominational matters in the Fraternal. At the present time the question of the polity of the Baptist Denomination is being discussed in a series of meetings; which takes us back to the first meeting, at which "it was agreed that Mr. Wells should deal with the new B. U. Proposals re ministerial settlement and sustentation at the next meeting." At this meeting, in June, 1909, it is recorded that "a most enjoyable afternoon was spent on the grass under the trees, the brethren listening to an admirable paper by the Rev. W. E. Wells on the B. U. Ministerial Proposals re settlement and sustentation, and a general discussion of the salient points. A majority of the members seemed to be in favour thereof, but there was a strong opposition to the proposed changes." Apparently Baptist ministers do not alter much in the changing years. Again, we find that some of the vexed questions that are before us to-day were discussed by the Fraternal long ago. On February 5th, 1923, "the Rev. Henry Smith introduced a very valuable paper on the value of Connexialism, or, Would a measure of Connexialism help our Denomination to-day? . . . Mr. Smith, who evidently felt that connexialism conferred benefits, acknowledged the value of our denominational liberty, but asked, 'Is our freedom a compensation for the weakness of our smaller Churches and the isolation of many of our ministers in remote places?' . . . An interesting and profitable discussion followed, in which the sentiments of all were expressed by a veteran minister . . . who said, 'Despite all the difficulties and disadvantages of the way and the work, thank God I am a Baptist minister.'"

The note of the Church Militant has been struck on occasion. For instance, in December, 1909, we are told that "the secretary was instructed to write to the Press in the name of the Fraternal, protesting against the Nonconformist Anti-Social Union, stating that it in no wise represented the attitude of Nonconformists to social reform. The following resolution was unanimously passed, 'That we, the Baptist Ministers' Fraternal of Ealing and District, protest against the Jesuitical plot against the Government of the Nonconformist Anti-Social Union, founded by the Rev. G. Freeman, and assert that it totally misrepresents the attitude of Baptist

ministers to the policy of the Government.' " At the same meeting, "after considerable discussion, eloquent and fervent, of election proposals, the Fraternal adjourned for tea."

Dr. Clifford was welcomed to the Fraternal at the meeting on May 8th, 1916. His gracious personality meant much to the Fellowship, and the records reveal how frequently he added to the discussion, and by his light and wisdom brought new truth to bear. He first addressed the Fraternal at its meeting in the following July, when he spoke on Sunday School decline and its remedies. It is worth while noting the Doctor's points to-day. "Amongst some of the causes of decline, he named (1) Sunday afternoon Scout Movement, (2) The growingly sporting character of Sunday afternoon, (3) The want of enthusiasm on the part of the teacher. Some of the remedies suggested were—we must generate a keener sense of responsibility for the child life of the nation by personal endeavour. . . . The grading of the Sunday School and the preparation of teachers were both strongly recommended." A few months later, in January, 1917, he spoke on the Gospel for the present day. Here again, the minutes give us some of the Doctor's points. "The despair of people is lifting . . . sacrifice was bringing out the best in men. . . . The spirit of the times must be met by (1) finding a faith in the God of the Gospels and emphasising a complete triumph of religion, (2) by stiffening the wills of the people and burnishing their weals, (3) by preaching a gospel of gladness and by seeking to comfort those who were cast down." In January, 1918, to the great delight of the brethren, Dr. Clifford spoke on "Fraternalism I have known." These experiences covered a period of nearly sixty years and fellowship with men in every denomination. At one of them Cardinal Manning was a fellow member, although, the Doctor recalled, he always stayed outside whilst prayer was offered. Reminiscences of Dean Stanley, Joseph Parker, William Chalmers, Gladstone and Disraeli were also brought forth on this occasion.

In September, 1918, the topic for discussion was, "Our Autumn Campaign." The secretary of that time gives scant place to the record of the paper, but much more room to Dr. Clifford's contribution. He writes, "Dr. Clifford crowned the conference." Again, there are words worth reading now. ". . . it is not a question of methods, but of personalities. He had always found the three months from October to December to be the best time for reaping. It was time for winning definite persons to discipleship, or to the avowal of discipleship, especially those between thirteen and sixteen, before the life got into the clutches of doubt. . . . Let the minister see what elements of truth have been missed in the course of his preaching during the

previous year. . . . Give special teaching on international fellowship. God is looking for the conversion of Germany and Turkey, and expecting them to co-operate in the extension of His kingdom. We ought to be. We ought to hold the convertability of nations as a fact of history that may be repeated. Get our people to expect it and pray for it. Without it a League of Nations will fail." "So," those minutes conclude, "our beloved campaigner, out of the rich stores of his own ministry, braced us for our fight."

Re-union was discussed in March, 1919, but here much of what Dr. Clifford said is left unreported. There is, however, this note: ". . . a message from Mr. Shakespeare to the effect that the Church of England knows it won't get re-ordination." At a later meeting the Lambeth proposals were considered. Then, Dr. Clifford said, "There were three types of piety. Autocratic, of which the Roman Church was the chief example; Aristocratic, which was the Episcopal, with its rule of bishops; and Democratic, which was illustrated by the Free Churches. The latter was not without its defects, but it was the type which was going to be successful. To go back to Episcopacy would be a terrible mistake, and new denominations would be undoubtedly raised up. . . . Whatever might be the result of the Lambeth proposals, he hoped that one would be a re-statement and a new declaration of Free Church principles. Then the occasion might yet be for the advancement of New Testament Christianity." In November, 1919, Dr. Clifford related his impressions of the Brotherhood Congress which had recently been held. He summed up by saying, "It was a sincere attempt to get the Churches out of their grooves and to realise some of the ideals of the true Church. . . . Jesus cared everything for souls, nothing for ecclesiasticism. Let us copy Him in His passion for the outsider."

It is not surprising to learn that at the last two meetings of the Fraternal attended by Dr. Clifford the subject discussed was "Personal Evangelism." As that was the subject of his last words to the Denomination in the Council Chamber, so also it formed his last message to his brother ministers in a more homely way. This great apostle of modern personal evangelism, as the minutes record him to be, utters a note of warning. The last words of his that were written here say, "The efforts of the Churches have been after bigness and quantity rather than quality . . . and there has been the consequent depreciation of the value of the individual Christian."

On December 3rd, 1923, the Fraternal recorded, "with deepest love and appreciation the great soul of our friend who has so recently been called home . . . the inspiration he always was, and especially when it was our privilege to hear him pray."

The graciousness of this revered leader is further borne out in the minutes of the next meeting, on January 7th, 1924. "A letter was then read from Miss K. Clifford, stating that Dr. Clifford had desired that the brethren of the Fraternal should each have one of his books." On several occasions it was the privilege of the Fraternal to pay tribute to the Doctor. His eightieth and eighty-first birthdays, his diamond jubilee as a minister, and the occasion of the conferring of the C.H. were all times that called for especial remembrance, congratulations and good wishes.

One good brother, who shall remain anonymous, since he is still with us, has always brought to the Fraternal's meetings something that was bound to excite lively discussion. On May 3rd, 1915, he "referred to a Holiness Campaign being held in his locality, and the 'Holiness' movement was thereupon analysed, criticised and anathematised to the general satisfaction of the company." Later on, he was bold enough to introduce a talk on *The Baptist Times*. This was in March, 1920. "He (the speaker) found that opinions about the paper varied considerably. Some thought the war occupied too large a space . . . others would welcome more about things outside the Denomination. . . . He thought it was not sufficiently representative of our traditions and history. He recognised the difficulties in the way of controlling the editor in these matters. The Council did not meet sufficiently often to be effective in these matters; and as for the Assembly, everyone knew how impossible it was to get anything done there." Other comments arising out of the discussion were: "*The Baptist Times* is neither representative nor distinctive." ". . . congratulated the reader of the paper on his handling of a very uninspired subject, and in criticising the conduct of *The Baptist Times* condemned the editor for refusing to publish a protest against the buildings of the Baptist College in Bristol being sold to the Christian Scientists." ". . . objected to *The Baptist Times* altogether. Neither lock, stock nor barrel satisfied him. The stories by Samuel Horton were feeble, and the language unchaste. For the cookery recipes, spiritual recipes would be a better substitution. The advertisements of such things as tobacco and humorous recitals were unworthy." ". . . strongly objected to the theology in the Sunday School lessons helps." "We then left *The Baptist Times* to its fate and adjourned for tea . . . and we afterwards departed our several ways with sunshine on our faces and in our hearts."

Apparently another burst of liveliness was raised by this same good brother on February 1st, 1932. ". . . introduced the subject of Freemasonry, giving the outline of a book published by the Rev. G. Percy Hunt, B.A. Apologising for introducing the subject, he said he had been amazed by the revelations made

by the writer, and felt he would like to unburden himself to his brethren and seek their opinion on the mysteries of the Craft which was making such great progress in England, and to ask if it was compatible with the Christian faith. . . . Unfortunately, no brother was present who was a member of the Craft, and to most it was a revelation new and surprising. Had our Brother Hoare been present he would have thrown floods of light on the subject, and dispelled the clouds of suspicion the subject had created." Brother Hoare was, however, present at the next meeting. "Mr. Hoare said he could not really reply to the attack that was made on Freemasonry by the book published, as he was bound by the rules and regulations as a Freemason not to divulge its secrets; but he would say that from all he had read of the attacks there was no truth in them, and that Freemasonry was distinctly Christian and not in any sense incompatible with Christianity. He ventured to confirm this statement by reading two rules for initiates which demanded faith in God and a righteous life. Several questions were then put to Mr. Hoare, and the discussion created a lively debate." We cannot leave the records of this member without noting one entry in the minutes regarding him, which seems to be full of either conscious or unconscious humour. On May 5th, 1913, "he was asked to provide a feast of reason for the next meeting."

The present minister of Bloomsbury Central Church, Dr. Townley Lord, added greatly to the fellowship of the Fraternal during his ministry at Acton. Unfortunately, the secretary of that period was very brief in his recordings, and much of what Dr. Lord said has been lost, apart from the titles of his talks. These make us yearn still more that the secretary had been a little more generous. On January 10th, 1921, he spoke on "The Spirit of Jesus and the Ideals of Democracy," and here we have something of what he said. "Three foundation principles were laid down. (1) Every man is valuable, more so than gold or other material property; (2) Every man is born free and entitled to freedom; (3) Every man has a right to a voice in the organisation of the society of which he forms part, non-possession of property notwithstanding. . . . The ideals of democracy find their real basis and chief emphasis in the teachings of Jesus Christ. . . . He discovered the real value of man, making him superior to institutions . . . but the Churches have often clouded the message of their Master; yet the failure of the disciples in no way invalidates their Lord. . . . The call of the hour is the presentation of these root principles of our Master's teaching with their application to present-day conditions. . . . Theology and speculation are subsidiary to these. There is no need to lower the flag of the Church, only to be true to our Lord's

words. . . . Democracy without Christ is a peril. . . . Ours is the opportunity to preserve the connection between Christ and the masses."

H. E. Stone, a veteran to-day of nearly a century, has long been connected with the Fraternal and still is a member, although advanced years preclude his attendance now. He has been very helpful in talks and discussion, and in February, 1933, he recalled "The Days of my Youth." "The memory of the past kindled his heart, we read, till it glowed with the old enthusiasms, and we all listened with the keenest delight and pleasure, also profit." He closed with these words :

Labour and sorrow, the Psalmist said, was the gift of fourscore years; And he almost envied the sleeping dead escaped from this vale of tears. But the Psalmist's heart was overwrought and his harp was out of tune, For the fourscore years have brought to me the sunny days of June.

The social side of the fellowship has figured largely in its history. Time and time again there appears a note in the minutes about the glorious teas that have been provided, and which, in one instance at least, more than compensated for other things. On July 2nd, 1934, "the brethren present awaited eagerly, but in vain, the arrival of the secretary with the minutes and the Rev. H. G. Hoare with the paper. Through a chapter of accidents, for which no one could be held responsible, neither of these gentlemen, nor their deputy and the relevant documents appeared. The Fraternal therefore proceeded to good-humoured conversation, and ended in a blaze of glory with a strawberry tea, generously provided by our host and hostess."

In recent years an annual outing has added to this side of the proceedings, and a happy day spent in the country has proved a means of grace and the cultivation of the spirit of friendship and fellowship; while the substitution of an autumn "Retreat" for one of the monthly meetings has proved of great worth in preparing for the work of the winter.

So the good ship, launched in 1909, still sails on its prosperous voyage, and the hope of the members of those days is still the fervent wish of the present brethren. May this monthly opportunity long continue to refresh and cheer our hearts!

F. C. M. PERKINS.