

# 1792 and the Ministry To-day.<sup>1</sup>

## I.

THERE is already evident in our churches a rising tide of interest in the 150th anniversary of the B.M.S. All our hearts are stirred as we recall what was attempted and achieved by Carey and his friends, and all the consequences that have followed in the past century and a half. It is a great story—a great Baptist story—a story, as Mr. Aubrey said in his article in the *Baptist Times* at the beginning of the year, that shows Baptists stepping forward for once to the leadership of the whole Christian Church. It is right that we should want to celebrate it with flags flying and drums beating, with all the enthusiasm and ingenuity that we can command. "Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us. . . . Their glory shall not be blotted out. . . . Their name liveth to all generations." (Ecclus. 44.)

There is, however, some danger in days like these, when such an occasion is presented to us, of what the psychologists call "escapism"—of our finding here a convenient retreat from reality, a diversion of our thoughts from less attractive matters, a welcome outlet for pent-up emotions. How useful it is to have a good excuse for concentrating attention on events 150 years ago, instead of being teased, and well-nigh overwhelmed, by the perplexities, anxieties, dangers and sadness of our own epoch! We are all subject to this temptation—you as well as I, and the people in our churches as well—and we must be on our guard against it.

For, in truth, we live in times of the direst peril as a nation, and in most critical days for the Church of Christ, days when luxuries have to be set aside, days much too desperate for anti-quarianism, days when, it seems to me, it would be unpardonable to make this Pastoral Session a meeting of the Baptist Historical Society, or, in the coming months, to spend our energies in the churches in seeking opportunities for telling people what great men the denomination once produced, or in devices for raising money, even though it be for the B.M.S.

Only if we believe that 1792 has a message, and an urgent message, for 1942, can we afford to give much time to it to-day. Paper, time, energy—all are precious. There are so many

<sup>1</sup> An address delivered at Bloomsbury Baptist Church on April 29th, 1942, to the Pastoral Session of the Baptist Assembly.

problems facing the ministry to-day, so many complex issues facing the denomination, that one would hardly dare take a theme like this unless one believed it had something vital to say. And we must be very sure as ministers, with the responsibility of leadership resting upon us, before we call our people to these celebrations, that we are really justified in so doing.

## II.

One must ask oneself, then, whether the past is really vital and relevant to the present. Many people find history a dull subject—stories about those who are dead, learned from drab and dusty books. Even some of our pundits tell us it is purposeless. The *Baptist Quarterly*, in October last, reproduced without comment some paragraphs from Sir Charles Oman in which he said: "History is a series of happenings, not a logical process. . . . I can only see a series of occurrences—and fail to draw any constructive moral from them." "All the philosophy of history," said Dr. Johnson in 1775, just about the time Carey had to give up gardening and was apprenticed, a boy of fourteen or fifteen, to a Piddington shoemaker—"All the philosophy of history is conjecture." "Then, sir," said the faithful Boswell, "you would reduce all history to no better than an almanac, a chronological series of remarkable events" (*Boswell's Life*, chapter x.). If that is true, if there is no lesson at all to be learned from history, then there seems nothing more to be said. We may, of course, take our entertainment by way of history, reading an old almanac instead of a modern novel, arranging a pageant of B.M.S. history in order to keep our people from going to the cinema. But even amusements have to be curtailed in war time. We cannot afford twelve months of B.M.S. celebrations, which would, moreover, be very cloying to the taste of most people.

But great as are the names of Samuel Johnson and Charles Oman (and one might add to them the names of not a few modern philosophers, and even some theologians), their view does not seem a true or adequate one. H. A. L. Fisher, who confessed that he could not discern in history a plot, a rhythm or a pre-determined pattern, admitted the important part played by the contingent and the unforeseen, and was clear that the ground gained by one generation might be lost by the next, and that the thoughts of men might flow into channels leading to disaster and barbarism, or, of course, in the other direction (Preface to *A History of Europe*). The Hebrew prophets did not think of history as a calendar or almanac, a mere series of occurrences. Nor did Paul. Surely the central affirmations of the Christian faith imply that history has meaning and value, and that the past may speak powerfully and savingly to the present?

## III.

It is with such a conviction (which alone justifies the celebration of 1792 in the circumstances of the hour) that I invite you to look more closely at the story of the founding of the B.M.S., with a view to discovering its message for the ministry to-day.

The eighteenth century seems at first very distant and different from the twentieth, but one soon discerns some strange parallels between the years immediately prior to 1792 and those through which we have been living. Britain had been passing then through stormy and testing times. We had had to fight France, Spain and Holland. There had been formidable discontent in Ireland and costly struggles in India. The industrial revolution had begun, bringing with it rapid and extensive economic and social changes. Most disturbing and distressing of all, colonies in America which had been linked to the mother country for a century and a half had been lost—and after a revolt in which we had been fighting our own kith and kin. Then, in 1789, came the storming of the Bastille and the letting loose of the tremendous forces of the French Revolution.

And in this environment, how were the churches faring? Badly. Spiritual life among the Baptists and Independents, as well as other bodies, was at a very low ebb. We generalise, exaggerate and foreshorten in the vague impressionist pictures of the past which we keep in our memories. We associate the late eighteenth century with the Evangelical Revival, and imagine the Spirit at work as in Ezekiel's vision—"a noise, and behold an earthquake, and the bones came together bone to his bone . . . and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army" (xxxvii. 7-10). It was not like that in the little Baptist chapels of the midlands. Whitefield and Wesley had little, if any, direct influence on the men who founded the B.M.S. In April 1785, Andrew Fuller, aged thirty-one—he had been minister in Kettering then for three years—set down in his diary: "Feel much dejected in viewing the state of the churches" (Ryland, *Memoirs of Mr. Fuller*, p. 166). At Whitsun, having to write the Circular Letter for the Northamptonshire Association, he chose as his subject "The Causes of the Declension of Religion." That was the year after Sutcliff had persuaded them to issue their call to prayer. And in December 1785, Fuller's friend, sensitive young John Ryland, aged thirty-two, wrote to him: "Surely there is scarcely anything worth the name of religion left upon the earth" (*ibid.*, p. 180).

Take this quotation: "With regard to the deeper question of the spiritual life of the churches, the gravity of the situation should be squarely faced. . . . It would be false to suggest that

the picture is wholly dark. Some of our churches are experiencing definite blessing, but the majority see little to encourage them. The lack of conversions and baptisms, the smallness of our prayer-meetings, and, deeper than all, the apathy of so many, even of Christ's professed people, must constitute a challenge to all." <sup>2</sup> That is what the L.B.A. Council has recently said to the churches of London, but the substance, indeed the very phrases, might be found in many an Association letter in the 1780's and the early '90's.

It was a difficult time for Nonconformists. They still suffered certain civil disabilities and a great deal of intellectual and social ostracism. The temptations to conform, then as now, were strong and subtle, and not a few yielded to them. Thomas Secker, Archbishop of Canterbury when Carey was a boy, had been educated at a Dissenting Academy for the Nonconformist ministry; so had Maddox, Bishop of Worcester; so had the famous Joseph Butler, of Durham. They thought the day of Nonconformity had passed, as do some amongst us to-day.

#### IV.

There is no time further to elaborate and illustrate circumstances which suggest parallels to our own day. It is against such a background that we have to see the coming of new life and power, new zeal and confidence, the founding of the B.M.S., and then the upsurging of a mighty movement of missionary interest and enthusiasm, flowing gradually through all the churches and out to the farthest corners of the earth, giving us in a century and a half a great, world-wide Christian Church with living centres in Asia, Africa and the islands of the sea, the coming of a veritable Word of God to the Church.

As we think of this seeming miracle, let us note briefly five things :—

1. That it was an unofficial ministers' movement that began it. No one would wish to belittle the part that generous and far-sighted laymen took, but here we may well remind ourselves—we ought to remind ourselves—that it was a group of ministers who began this mighty transformation in the life of the church. The real nucleus of an eighteenth century Baptist Association was the Ministers' Meeting, held three or four times a year. The ministers spent a day together, preached to one another, prayed together, discussed some practical or doctrinal theme. There were only some twenty ministers in the whole Northampton Association, and it covered so wide an area they could not possibly all meet together regularly. Usually it meant that eight or ten

<sup>2</sup> See *L.B.A. Record*, March, 1942, p. 14. Cp. Northampton Letter, 1785, Kent and Sussex, 1794.

of the more active and accessible gathered. And in those meetings in the late 1780's, and at ordination services where they met also, gradually Sutcliff, Ryland, Fuller and Carey discovered one another, and became bound by the strongest ties of friendship and common concern for the state of the churches, ready as a group of ministers for God's Word. And when they heard it they passed it on to ministers in London, in Yorkshire, and in other parts.

2. Note that they were young men. I make this point with no desire to be critical of the older generation, but by way of challenge to those of my own age and those who are younger. The significant years of preparation for the formation of the B.M.S. were those from 1784 to 1792. Sutcliff, Ryland and Fuller were then in their thirties, Carey in his late twenties. Pearce, who was drawn in towards the end of the time, and who made a most important contribution of his own, was only twenty-six when the B.M.S. was founded. The older generation had had a hard fight of it during the eighteenth century. Most of them hesitated and excused themselves when the young men not only dreamed dreams and saw visions, but proceeded to organise themselves to translate them into deeds. That was not surprising, nor need we condemn them. As I read the early B.M.S. story I think with some concern, however, about how little my own generation, now middle-aged, seems to have done, and I beg those of you who are younger to seek more intently God's Word for our day and to go forward boldly in obedience to it, not paying too much attention to the caution and the fears of those of us who are older. Seventeen-ninety-two suggests (and this is surely confirmed by all Christian history and by secular history, too) that creative leadership must come from the young.

3. Note that these young men were busy wrestling with great theological issues. After Fuller's death, Ryland called him "the most judicious and able theological writer that ever belonged to the Baptist denomination." It is doubtful (though one is somewhat troubled to confess it) whether there is even yet any name from our ranks worthy to set beside his. But Fuller's decisive theological thinking was done in the years prior to 1792. It was as a young man that he wrestled with the great themes of Calvinism, and that he faced the plausibilities of the humanism of his day. Wrestled is the right word, for Fuller, like Carey, had had no technical academic training. These were honest, vigorous minds, not afraid to deal with big subjects, not afraid to argue and cross swords with one another. These friends read Jonathan Edwards together, and Joseph Priestley and Tom Paine—dare one suggest, as rough and ready parallels, Emil Brunner, W. E. Hocking and Aldous Huxley? They were not

afraid of stiff reading. They set themselves seriously to make up their minds on the great doctrinal issues, and then to build out of their convictions a bold Christian apologetic for their own day. Fuller prayed as a young man: "O let not the sleight of men, who lie in wait to deceive, nor even the pious character of good men, who yet may be under great mistakes, draw me aside." In 1785 (note the date again; he was then nearly thirty-two) he wrote in his diary: "Pretty much taken up of late in learning something of the Greek language" (*op. cit.*, p. 181). Five years later, when Carey had moved to Leicester and was increasingly insistent about the duty of carrying the gospel abroad, Fuller puts this down: "I felt this effect—a desire to rise earlier, to read more and to make the discovery of truth more a business" (*op. cit.* p. 190). Is there not a word for us all there? To rise earlier, to read more and to make the discovery of truth more a business. That passage in Fuller's diary helps to explain a sentence in Carey's *Enquiry*. He is giving an account of the good things which have come out of the special meetings for prayer—an increased membership, a deepened spiritual life, new churches formed, the beginning of the attack on the Slave Trade—a deeply interesting list from many points of view—and he includes this unexpected item: "Some controversies which have long perplexed and divided the church are more clearly stated than ever" (p. 79). We have grown frightened of theological controversy in our religious journals and in our fraternal. Are we really any the better for this?

4. This passage from the *Enquiry* leads us to note, fourthly, that the important step forward which was taken in 1792 came very certainly out of the prayer movement of the preceding years. This group of friends had learned to pray together. It had not come easily to them. Read Fuller's diary and you will see that. At first, almost unwillingly, these men, not only in their special church prayer-meetings, but among themselves, three or four together, began to pray, and gradually found themselves led to a fellowship which had ever deeper levels in it, and were thus prepared for what God wanted them to do. It was because this little group of friends had so often prayed together that they were able to venture as they did, and depend upon one another in the long years afterwards when were separated—Carey thousands of miles away in India, Ryland in Bristol, Sutcliff and Fuller still in Northamptonshire—not always agreeing, but able to speak frankly to one another, because absolutely sure of one another's sincerity and loyalty.<sup>3</sup> They had discovered one another in those Northamptonshire days, not only because they were of the same generation, not only because they had keen intellectual companion-

<sup>3</sup> See Ryland, p. viii. and *First Generation*, p. 30.

ship with one another, but because they had overcome their self-consciousness and now in this manse and now in that had prayed together—reaching the place where (as a wise and saintly man said in my hearing recently in South Wales) you “transact business with God”<sup>4</sup>—not just the alone with the Alone, but two or three with Someone else in the midst.

5. It was some time before this little company became clear what it was that God would have them do. They were only gradually led on, step by step. Sutcliff and Fuller met first. Then Ryland became their friend. Later, and not till after the Prayer Call had been issued, Carey—at first on the fringe of the group—advanced steadily to its centre. It was the spring of 1789 before Pearce arrived in the midlands. There was among these friends an increasing sense of something big about to happen, but though each had his special interests, they had no certainty as to the line along which the Spirit would have them move, or in what manner God would revive the churches. This uncertainty continued throughout 1791. “Towards the end of this summer,” wrote Fuller, “I heard of some revival of religion about Walgrave and Guilsborough; and that the means of it were their setting apart days of fasting and prayer. From hence I thought we had long been praying for the revival of God’s cause, and the spread of the gospel among the heathen, etc., and perhaps God would begin with us at home first” (Ryland, p. 192). Then came Carey’s pamphlet and his sermon, and then the evening of October 2nd, 1792. Even then, long as they had hesitated and great as was their faith, they could not realise the full significance of the step they had taken, nor how Carey would have to go to Bengal, and the B.M.S. grow into a great society with four hundred missionaries in China and Africa as well as India; nor how the B.M.S. would play a decisive part in provoking the formation of the L.M.S. and the rousing of all the churches to their missionary obligations; nor how, 150 years later, in a day of darkness and storm, men would be able to take comfort from the sight of the world-wide Church, a Church planted in the Far East, as it now appears, only just in time.

All these five points seem to me relevant to our situation to-day, and to have a message for us. A little group of younger ministers, close friends, intellectually alert, earnestly praying for God’s guidance, were used by God in 1792 as bearers of a message to the whole denomination, to the whole Church of Christ. And as you trace L.M.S. and C.M.S. beginnings the story is similar. As you trace the origin of all the great creative spiritual movements the pattern is the same. Therein lies the essential message of 1792 for our own day.

<sup>4</sup> Ambrose Hopkins at Cardiff Fraternal, March 23rd, 1942.

## V.

We find ourselves in a grave situation to-day. Many are dispirited. There is much to fill us with concern. Should we not, as ministers, be seeking much more earnestly than we are to discover the will of God for ourselves, our churches and our generation? Two hundred years ago, in 1742, Philip Doddridge pleaded for better ordered ministers' meetings; but his appeal fell largely on deaf ears. But Carey and his friends, when they met in the years between 1784 and 1792, came together with high seriousness of purpose. What of our modern fraternalists in the light of this old story? How many of them are thought of as opportunities for a little social relaxation with kindred spirits, or as the meeting of the local branch of a trade union, a mutual benefit society, not even a mutual improvement society. Is it not something deeper even than a Baptist Ministers' Fellowship that we need? And if younger and more enthusiastic newcomers are sometimes disappointed, what do they do? Stay away, and gradually turn in upon themselves, or seek out kindred spirits and begin on their own to share their deepest concerns? Is not that what is wanted? We express astonishment at the little group in Widow Wallis' parlour that October evening—thirteen or fourteen in all, and the really important ones only four or five—Carey, Fuller, Ryland, Sutcliff and Pearce. But in truth has not God always found it easier to speak to a little company like that, rather than to a larger number? Marvellous indeed would it be if He were to give some new creative Word to the 200 members of the Baptist Union Council or to this assembly to-day. It is to a few of you, who will pay the price of the costliest and deepest human fellowship, that God may speak a word of life and power for this needy age. It may come again from the midlands, or from the north, or from Wales, or from London, or from a group scattered all over the country but bound together by the kind of ties that knit the men of 1792.

When the word comes it will be a new word—a word for the Baptists of the twentieth century, for the Church of the twentieth century, not the mere echo of something said before. Perhaps already there is in our midst another Carey with the flame alight in his heart, seeking companions with whom he may share his secret and try out his strength. Perhaps the word will be a theological one, or perhaps, as some in other branches of the Church think, it will be a sociological one, pointing us to a more broadly conceived and boldly applied Christian ethic. Perhaps we shall be shown a new technique and vocabulary of evangelism for the many no longer in direct touch with the Christian tradition. Perhaps we shall be led in a crusade for a new Baptist polity.



Perhaps we have to be called to entirely new relationships to other Christian bodies. Who knows?

## VI.

Are we really seeking the Word of God for our generation? Are we ready to respond to it? Mr. Griffith showed in his Presidential address that the phrase "great things" goes back behind Carey's famous sermon to the first of Andrew Fuller's publications. But that being so, it becomes clearer that the first part of Carey's sermon was a recalling of what was already agreed among them. Expect great things. Yes, said Carey; but what we need to do is to attempt great things.

Let me close with three brief glimpses from the period of which we have been thinking. (1) One of the most attractive of the younger figures of that first B.M.S. generation was Christopher Anderson of Scotland. He should have succeeded Fuller as secretary, and much trouble might have been avoided thereby, but that is another story. There is a letter of his to two Bristol College students, written in 1822, which emphasises one of the main points I have tried to make. For much good to be done it is necessary, he says, for there to be the closest co-operation between a little band of men, sincerely attached to one another, of the highest personal integrity and of the deepest religion. He tells the students about Carey, Fuller, Sutcliff, Pearce and Ryland, and what seem to him to be the reasons for their achievement, and he begs his friends to set before themselves some such joint ideal. (2) There is on record a revealing account of a ministerial meeting in Northampton, when the following question was broached: To what causes in ministers may much of their want of success be imputed? Three main suggestions, Fuller says, were made: (i) want of personal religion, particularly the neglect of close dealing with God in prayer, (ii) want of reading and studying the Bible more as *Christians*, for the edification of our own souls, and (iii) want of being emptied of self-sufficiency (Ryland, p. 173f). What different causes, if any, should we suggest to-day? (3) At the Northamptonshire Association in 1785, the year after the Call to Prayer, it was resolved, "without any hesitation," to continue the special meetings on a Monday evening. "May God give us all hearts to persevere," so ran the announcement at the end of the annual Letter. "If our petitions are not answered by any remarkable outpourings of the Spirit, they may by a more gradual work; or if not in our own time they may in time to come; or if not at all, there is profit enough in the exercise itself to be its own reward. But God hath never yet said to the seed of Jacob, seek ye My face in vain."

If we can rediscover these truths, the celebration of 1792 will indeed be worth while.

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