

A Scottish Baptist Centenary.

NO year since the Reformation is so interesting in Scottish Ecclesiastical history as the year 1843. The most stirring event, of course, was the Disruption, when, at the end of a ten years' conflict on the subject of patronage, over 400 ministers and a vast company of elders walked out of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to assert the right of the Church to appoint its own ministers. This spectacle of 476 ministers sacrificing their livings for the sake of a principle became the topic which dominated over all other events in that day, and compelled the admiration of Christian people throughout the world.

This was on the 18th May. On the same day, at Kilmarnock, the Evangelical Union was constituted, the Rev. James Morison and his colleagues having been expelled from the Secession Church. In this instance the cause of the division was doctrinal. The Morisonians, as they were called, held to the belief in a Gospel of universal effectiveness as opposed to the widely accepted Calvinism. It is also worthy of note that the expelled brethren abandoned the presbyterian form of Church Government and adopted a congregational polity.

To these two centenaries there is to be added one of interest to Baptists. In the Kirkgate Chapel at Cupar, Fife, on July 5th and 6th the first Baptist Union of Scotland met for the first time to review the situation as it faced the denomination in Scotland, and to formulate plans for the further advancement of the cause.

There was ample justification for such a review. The work of the Haldanes was now almost completed. Robert had died on 12th December, 1842, in his 79th year, and was laid to rest in Glasgow Cathedral. His brother James continued his beneficent work till 1851, when he passed away at the age of 83. Under the guidance, and by the most generous financial help of the Haldane brothers, the cause of evangelical religion had been given a new lease of life in Scotland, and there were evangelical groups in every corner of the land, where, when they had begun their labours fifty years before, there was little else but Moderatism and Socinianism. The Haldanes fought the question of the right of Christian men to express themselves whether they were ordained or not. They were ardent supporters of Missions, Robert having been greatly influenced by the despatches of Carey from India. Being thwarted in their desire to become missionaries themselves, the brothers threw their wealth and energies into the revival of religion in their homeland, and

created an amazing organisation for equipping Scotland with a great team of evangelists. Until 1808 the Congregationalists received the main benefit of their labours. Thereafter, the Baptists were placed heavily in their debt.

There was, of course, previous to, and concurrent with, the Haldane movement, the Scotch Baptist Church witnessing to the principle of believers' baptism, and emphasizing the need of New Testament study, but by 1843 the force of this movement was almost spent.

In 1843 there were about 90 Baptist groups in Scotland, with some 5,500 members, these being in the main gathered in fairly small churches. About 30 of them had a membership of under 50, and some were very small indeed.

As a denomination, then, we were showing little signs of progressiveness. The curse of an extreme independency militated against co-operative effort and may be fairly judged to be one of the important factors which influenced adversely the progress of the denomination. The Congregationalists had shown a better organising ability, the Congregational Union having been founded in 1812.

Two societies had been founded among the Baptists. There was the Baptist Home Missionary Society created, in 1827, out of two existing societies and employing agents ranging in numbers from 20 to 30. James Haldane acted as secretary and principal supporter, and the Society did excellent itinerating work in the Highlands and Lowlands.

In 1835 a Scotch Baptist Association was formed, "It having been long felt", as the Minute Book of the Society puts it, "by many individuals and Churches of the Baptist denomination of Christians in Scotland that it was of much importance that this section of the Church of Christ should be more united and consequently more efficient." Fourteen Churches joined the Association and seven others gave a qualified approval. But from the beginning this Association was hindered by the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the larger churches, and its continuance was always difficult. The Minutes disclose a rather hand to mouth existence.

The dawn of a better day came in 1842 when Francis Johnston was called to Cupar from Carlisle, and put all his fine ability and rare enthusiasm into the work of reviving Baptist life in Scotland. Johnston was a man of singular gifts. He had erudition and preaching power. No one could doubt his gifts of leadership. Hence the Association decided in 1842 to change its name to that of "The Baptist Union of Scotland" and requested Johnston to prepare a paper on "the best method of promoting the interest of the Baptist Denomination in Scotland"

against the next meeting, which was arranged to be held at Cupar. At this stage there were seventeen Churches affiliated to the Association, the larger Churches being still outside.

The circular letter which Francis Johnston prepared was a rousing document, penetrating in its analysis of the existing situation, and setting forth detailed plans for further expansion. It was most comprehensive in its outlook, dealing with the creation of central funds, the advocacy of evangelism and evangelists, and the training of suitable men for the ministry. As the late Mr. Percival Waugh put it "our later conceptions of denominational requirements have gone little beyond Francis Johnston's recital of them for his day."

The Minutes of the meeting at Cupar record that, as a result of this new rallying call, "The oneness of heart and soul manifested by the brethren was truly delightful, and augurs well for the increased vigour, unity and prosperity of the Baptists in Scotland. We only wish that more of our brethren, especially from the stronger churches, had been present; but we hope that the appeals of the Circular letter, and the practical plans adopted by the Union, will, under the divine blessing, bring this about another year."

But Tobias and Sanballat were busy at their work of sabotage. Despite every appeal and entreaty little came of the hopes entertained in the Minutes. The succeeding years reveal the same uphill fight for co-operation and joint progressive effort. Three reasons at least, may be assigned for this frustration.

The first was that the Home Missionary Society was suspicious. James Haldane was against such a Union of Churches as unscriptural, and his influence was still important. And his strong views on toleration made him hesitant to promote Baptist causes as such. There was no doubt about his opinions on the significance of believer's baptism, but he was happier in general evangelistic work than in the promotion of internal organisation and strength.

The second reason that may be offered is most important in the light of the theological opinions then prevalent. The Union in its publications opposed Calvinism and preached the three Universals "The Love of God to all—the Death of Christ for all—the work of the Spirit on all." This was the position which Dr. James Morison had advocated, and for which he was expelled from the Secession Church. There were some in the Union who felt this was too strong a statement of doctrine, but there is no doubt that, because these beliefs were associated with men like Johnston and Dr. Landels, the Union was associated with heresy. The way of reformers is hard.

Then, thirdly, there was the inevitable financial situation,

which on account of the small membership of the Union was always a sore trial to the principal brethren. In 1843 a Minute states "No regular effort having been made last year to obtain funds, they are as yet small, amounting only to £34 4s. 6d., out of which £10 have been voted to St. Andrews." Little could be done with such a sum. It was pitifully inadequate in the light of the proposals for advancement. But the next year showed an improvement. The treasurer was able to show £200 in the accounts.

Yet, notwithstanding the setbacks, disappointments, and frank opposition, what were the accomplishments of this first Baptist Union?

(1) The Churches in the Union were inspired to undertake greater efforts within themselves.

(2) In due course a Theological College was begun. First at the manse in Cupar, and then at Edinburgh, to which city Francis Johnston removed in 1845. The training course provided was magnificent in the light of the difficulties, and certainly better than anything that had been attempted hitherto.

(3) Periodicals were created and widely circulated. Tracts were printed to the utmost extent of the funds, and freely distributed.

(4) Churches were aided with grants to sustain a pastor. This venture of faith can scarcely be better expressed than in the resolution in the Minutes of 1844; that "should any two pastors approved by the Union, undertake, conjointly, itinerating tours in the large towns of Scotland, the Union be prepared to defray their expenses." Surely an expression of sublime confidence!

(5) Whole time evangelists were chosen and employed for the work of helping existing causes and launching new churches. By 1845 we find the Minute "The salaries of the Evangelists having been taken into account, resolved, that in the meantime, brethren Henderson and MacKay be remunerated at the rate of £100 per annum exclusive of personal travelling expenses."

Of the Churches actually launched as a result of the Union's efforts, there were two in Glasgow, and others in Edinburgh, Galashiels, Hawick and Leith. In addition, St. Andrews, Airdrie and Dunfermline can also be put down to the credit of this virile attempt to do ambitious things for the Baptist cause in Scotland.

But efforts on such a scale could not go on for ever on the resources available. The forces arrayed against the Union were too strong for it. The time was not come when the need of co-operation was so strong and widely felt that a Union was deemed a necessity. Theological differences were still decisive forces of a most formidable nature.

When Francis Johnston removed to Cambridge in January

1856, the Union lost its dominating personality, and gradually diminished in strength until it disappeared as an effective instrument in Baptist life.

Whatever else may be said for or against this admirable movement this much, at least, can be credited to its activities, that without a Haldane to support it with prestige and finance it did more for the Baptist denomination in Scotland than any of the stronger churches who stood aloof from it. How different things might have been in our land if co-operation had been seen to be essential before the formation of our present Baptist Union in 1869. And what inspiration this small but ambitious body provides for us to-day with our larger resources, greater facilities, and a more united front.

ROBERT B. HANNEN.