

A Baptist Oxford Movement.

"I WOULD say quite deliberately that Baptists need an 'Oxford Movement' of *their own order*, so as to give their truth of an individual relation to God its complementary truth of a social relation to Him."¹ So wrote Dr. Wheeler Robinson when analysing the strength and weakness of the Baptists. To-day, this deliberate judgment is receiving so increasing an endorsement from many Baptists that it merits serious consideration.

The Oxford Movement reached goals far beyond and higher than its original objectives. The Established Church was considered to be in danger. The Roman Catholics had been emancipated by the Act of 1829. Three years later the Reform Bill created a new electorate in which Dissenters were numerous. In the following year ten of the twenty-two sees of the Irish Protestant Church, then considered a constituent of the Church of England, were suppressed. This suppression Keble denounced as a "direct disavowal of the Sovereignty of God." Soon after, he joined with John Henry Newman in the production of the "Tracts for the Times." The immediate intention behind these and other efforts was the defence of the Established Church which was erroneously considered to be imperilled. But the Movement survived this negative purpose and ultimately gave to many Churchmen, especially the clergy, a much greater and higher conception of the Anglican Church. The Church was not a department of the State but a Divine institution—the body of Christ.

This was not the only period creative of great Churchmanship. The first half of the seventeenth century witnessed a galaxy of strong Churchmen such as Richard-Hooker, Jeremy Taylor and others who, by their writings, awakened in others a great conception of the Anglican Church and a deep and ardent love for it.

A parallel movement in the Roman Catholic Church is seen to arise in the person of Ignatius Loyola. He won from his followers for the Catholic Church a most rigid discipline and absolute obedience. Much in this is alien to our conception of individual freedom and responsibility. But Loyola and the Jesuits inaugurated a great revival of Churchmanship within the Roman Church.

Are such periods to be for ever alien to Baptist history? Is

¹ *Life and Faith of the Baptists*, page 174.

a Baptist Oxford Movement of our "own order" foreign to our genius and distinctive principle? Certainly Dr. Robinson does not think so. Much could be said for the relevance of such a movement. One of the issues of the great ecumenical conferences held at Oxford and Edinburgh in 1937 was a new and higher conception of the Christian Church. We shared in the deliberations of these Conferences and their agreed findings belong to us as well as to others. Such findings brought to sharp focus and forceful articulation the growing thought and feeling of many Christian souls everywhere. The report of the Oxford Conference as given in *The Churches Survey Their Task*, is indeed a modern Tract for the Times. Its relevance is indisputable.

Here we see the necessary spiritual parallel to the collectivism of our days, and the latter is never adequately conceived if considered only as a convenient tool of the Dictators. In the pre-war world of the continent furious economic blizzards blew and political earthquakes disrupted great communities, and before these the individual was so piteously helpless. He craved for the strength of the whole and sought the means of deep integration in it. Professor Baillie says: "The age of rationalistic individualism is now for the most part behind us, and men are seeking new forms of solidarity in their social life. In one part of the world after another there emerges the spectacle of men yielding up their individual liberty, including their liberty of thought, with apparent relief, gladly sinking their lives in the corporate life of this or that party or totalitarian movement."² Whatever error or excess is to be found here, so vast a movement is more than the manoeuvres of one or two dictators; it is obviously the inauguration of a new age.

Are there no parallels to this in the spiritual world to-day? We do not minimise what man can do in religious isolation, "when the door is closed." But that does not prevent us from recognising that there are tasks he can perform and truths he can comprehend "only with all the saints." Spiritual individualism, so necessary and valuable in its proper place and degree, can, if made exclusive and absolute, be impoverishing and even perilous. Thus we must not oppose to totalitarianisms, which have something inevitable and something unnecessarily pagan in them, the individualistic ethics of the Christian faith, for in that faith the individual is never seen *per se* but in a community: and individualistic ethics are only half of the Christian ethics. The Christian ethic, too, was never intended to be "unclothed," but "clothed upon" in an adequate community. Thus Professor Baillie continues: "The only community that is likely to be stronger than totalitarianism is a community which is universal,

² *Invitation to Pilgrimage*, page 125.

and there is only one such community—that Body mystical, the Church of Christ.”³ This implies for us as Baptists not that we abandon the polity of our fathers, but that we complete it. The commended Oxford Movement would ‘give to their truth of an individual relation to God its complementary truth of a social relation to Him.”

But it will be asserted that Baptists get their marching orders, not by keeping their ears on the ground, but by fixing their eyes on the Book. True, and may it ever be so. Yet while it would be erroneous to expect to find in the New Testament any proof-text support or refutation of a particular polity, we are not without guidance, and in the light of that it can safely be said that in so far as we can find justification there for the independence we have, we can certainly find justification for a fellowship we do not yet have. In the New Testament Church, the individuality of the part never weakened the solidarity and interdependence of the whole. Paul insists that the members of the body best serve the whole by keeping their distinctive functions inviolate, the seeing of the eye and the hearing of the ear. But these have no meaning, function or life in isolation from the whole. So is it in the Church. Individuality and interdependence are interwoven and inseparable. A single human soul is certainly of infinite value but that justifies no spiritual atomism. God who made the soul also “maketh the solitary to dwell in families.” The more deeply we abide in the Vine, the more vitally integrated are we in the life of the other branches, which also abide in the Vine. Whatever may be the implications of this for the Church Universal, our first duty is to recognise and honour what it involves for our own denomination. Does not this plainly call us to a higher conception of and greater loyalty to the local Church and to *those wider fellowships* of which the local Church forms part? Is there any reason or scripture which compels us to believe that there attaches to a local Church in its isolation a sanctity and spiritual authority that does not belong to a hundred such Churches met in prayerful deliberation and sacred fellowship at a County Association Meeting or to two thousand such Churches so met in an Annual Assembly? We have unintentionally built up an assumption that once a Baptist leaves the four walls of his own Church for a meeting place where many other fellow-believers from other Baptist Churches meet, he has left the Communion of Saints for the mechanism of administration. The cohesion which makes a County Association or a Baptist Union one is supposed to be of a lower order than that which makes one the members of a local Church.

Is not this partly responsible for the loneliness often felt by the Minister and for the feebleness which afflicts the local Church?

³ Page 128.

The former may carry burdens he should never bear in isolation, and the latter requires insights and powers which can be apprehended only with other Churches. Amid the social and economic changes of recent years, what strength and protection have our Sustentation and Superannuation Funds provided to many a Minister and local Church. But amid the deeper and more pagan changes in the community to-day, we need the strength and protection which a spiritual equivalent to the above funds could give—not a unity in finance but a communion in the Holy Spirit. This would be a real contribution to that Baptist Oxford Movement of which Dr. Robinson speaks.

Some implications and requirements of this are clear. We must stop disparaging existing unities, denominations, in the interest of bigger, non-existing unities. We do not necessarily retard any God-intended deeper spiritual unity by a greater loyalty to our own Church, whether local or national. A denomination is itself a measure of achieved union, and we shall awaken no deeper loyalty to it, especially in the young, if we speak of it only as one of "our wretched divisions."

Baptists must develop a churchmanship "of their own order." Our revolt from a formal and unspiritual Church-manship is only the negative movement which still awaits its positive counterpart. At present we know far better the kind of churchmanship we should repudiate than the kind we should promote. Yet if our conception of a regenerate Church membership has any reality in it, then we should have the highest regard for the Church so constituted.

This conception of the local and the national Church or Union involves that issues may arise which demand that individual freedom should sometimes be subordinated to spiritual solidarity. The momentary advantage of the part may have to be sacrificed to the permanent good of the whole. Reference is sometimes made to the fact that a Baptist minister or church secretary can throw every communication he receives from County or National Headquarters into the waste-paper basket. He can, but what he cannot do is to assert his freedom in that way and at the same time maintain his spiritual solidarity with others which he so badly needs. This freedom, however, is being more and more questioned. Many would say:

As in the social world there is a craving for a deeper solidarity: so in our Churches there is a yearning for a deeper fellowship even at the cost of extreme independence.

The value and the glory of our denomination consist both in what we hold in distinction from others and in what we share with others, and we cannot neglect the one without ultimately

"Me this unfettered freedom tires."

imperilling the other. The Church has come to an age of massive organised paganism which can be effectively attacked only by a united spiritual front. Unfortunately this issue is obscured by questions of organic reunion and new divisions unnecessarily thus arise. One group fears that the maintenance and assertion of our distinctive witness will certainly impair unity of fellowship and action with others. The other fears that increasing collaboration and joint action with others will inevitably weaken and ultimately suppress our distinctive witness. Both assumptions are false. We have to seek that spiritual synthesis which will honour both what we share with others and what we hold in distinction from them, and within the Free Church Federal Council and the British Council of Churches we have enormous opportunity for ever greater united witness and joint action without prejudice to what is distinctively ours.

The Forces to-day offer an excellent parallel. There we see ever increasing differentiation of parts with ever deepening unity. New units with distinctive functions are formed, but never to the detriment of the whole. What pride there is in the different regiments. Tell Jock that his famous "51st" should be merged and lost, what indignation would arise. What a tradition the Navy has built up and what pride the sailor has in it. The Air Force has made for itself a name it shares with no other. Yet with all this pride and sectional loyalty, we have

One army strong,
One steadfast, high intent;
One voice to raise the warrior song.

Why should not such a description be actually true of the "One holy Church," and why should not all local loyalties remain intact and still be subservient to "one King Omnipotent"?

"Baptists need an Oxford Movement." What are the Baptists? What is our denomination? Among the many replies made by others to these questions are the following: "The denomination is a treasury from which contributions for our work can be secured." "It is a body of respected influence whose signature would enhance our policy." "It is a reservoir of potential leadership so badly needed for our cause." "It is an arena which provides excellent scope for our movement." The value and legitimacy of these claims are not in dispute. But what is indicated is that amid the pressure on the Church of so many organised secondary movements, the Church itself needs a well-organised movement that has no interest but the power and glory of the Church itself, both local and national.

Thus the first draft of the Oxford Conference report submitted to Commission 5 on "The Universal Church and the World of Nations," speaks direct to our situation. It says: "Let the

Church be the Church. Let the Church know herself, whose she is and what she is. Discerning clearly her own status as the Community of Grace, the organ for God's redemptive purpose for mankind. She must, by a process of the most merciless self-scrutiny, become what God intended her to be." A movement that has that one great objective is a most urgent requirement for us. So our last word is our first: "I would say quite deliberately that Baptists need an 'Oxford Movement' of their own order, so as to give to their truth of an individual relation to God its complementary truth of a social relation to Him."

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The Economic Consequences of the Church, by Reginald T. Brooks. (Independent Press, 2s.)

This book bravely comes to grips with the social and industrial questions which the Church must face if she is to command the attention of the working population. As the title suggests, there is an emphasis upon the importance of the Church meeting which ought to be congenial to Baptists. It is to be hoped that Church members will heed the call to missionary work in the industrial sphere and in local government. The writer argues that "the powerful and highly individual corporate life" of the Church must be brought into "ever closer touch with the life of society as a whole, so that the harmonies may be appreciated, and the discords sharply felt." Chief of these discords the author finds to be the demand for personal responsibility within the Christian community, and the shelving of moral responsibility which appears inevitable within a system of capitalism, even capitalism controlled to a greater or lesser degree. A social and economic order must be achieved in which a Christian worker, manager or director finds it possible to exercise moral judgment and share democratically in the planning of production.

One cannot quite see the point of the attack upon those who say "politics but not party politics." The writer does not specify the party which he favours, and surely implies that the Church might give general support to a progressive programme without committing her members to support of one political party. However, he is surely right in foreseeing a situation in which the Church might need to "throw her weight behind some political organisation which is willing to fight for the cause" which has commended itself to the Christian conscience.

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