

Recollections of a General Superintendent.

IT seems but yesterday since I was being exhibited as an abnormally young superintendent, a precocious child unwisely allowed to sit up and share the activities of his elders. Alas! I am now solemnly described as "the doyen", presumably because there is no honest Saxon word adequate to portray the effect of twenty-six years spent in this exacting duty. The period has yielded a store of happy memories and witnessed a remarkable alteration in the denomination's appraisal of the Superintendency. Here I can only select a few outstanding recollections:

As the youngest superintendent ever appointed—still in the thirties—I was the natural target for advice when emerging from the shelter of a generous church into the exposed ground of denominational office. I was urged to concentrate upon the important people; to give my time to the small churches; to remember that the ministry existed for the churches; to realise that the ministers held the key to all our problems; to wear clerical dress; to remain human; to endeavour to keep my soul alive in spite of the deadening effect of administrative duties, etc., etc. It was all very bewildering, but I soon discovered that it took more wisdom to decide between conflicting advisers than to make up my own mind in the secret place. One minister solemnly assured me that his church would never invite a superintendent to conduct worship or to advise on policy; but he hinted that if I attended his week-night service as "an ordinary person," he might invite me to lead in prayer. It seemed strange counsel to one who was perforce refusing about three engagements a night, and the strangeness was not lessened when, a few years later, that particular church and minister were appealing for the superintendent's help. The advice which recurs most frequently concerns the temptation to preach old sermons. "If I were a superintendent", said one of my ministerial friends, "I should discipline myself by preparing at least one new sermon each week." In due course that counsellor became a superintendent, but I do not remember that he repeated the advice after his appointment. With an area comprising over two hundred churches and covering four counties, repetition is inevitable and need not be vain. Surely the late E. G. Gange would have been unwise had he destroyed the manuscript of his famous sermon on "Somebodies and Nobodies" after its first delivery! It must have been preached hundreds of times to the great advantage of his hearers. Of course, discretion is necessary, especially at Anniversary seasons when gipsying is popular, but a message

worth preaching is worth repeating. A generous chairman, who introduced me by saying that he had never heard me repeat a sermon, was unconsciously paying tribute to my book-keeping rather than to any extraordinary versatility. It is significant that the advice tendered to superintendents today has ceased to be trivial and now generally takes the form of suggesting that they should exercise more authority and give corporate spiritual leadership to the denomination.

In the early years the Superintendency was suspect. Dr. T. R. Glover spoke for many Baptists at Cardiff, in 1924, when he referred to the superintendents as "men who had taken a step down from the pulpit" and expressed the view that the office was a danger both to the denomination and to the men who held it. This opinion is no longer prevalent and is in striking contrast with the tributes paid by recent Presidents of the Baptist Union. What has caused the change? An answer may perhaps be found in the Reports submitted to the Council by successive Commissions, appointed to consider matters of polity. The report of 1926, necessitated by criticisms of the Scheme and its administration, stated :

"The General Superintendents as a body are strongly concerned for the spiritual well-being of the Churches, and in view of the heavy administrative tasks laid upon them it is no slight achievement to have accomplished so much . . . Nor do we hesitate to affirm that our General Superintendents, in the spirit and quality of their manhood and service, are deserving of the confidence and support of the entire denomination."

The Polity Commission, reporting in 1942, went further :

"The General Superintendents have now been at work among our churches for twenty-seven years, and we have no hesitation in saying that they have abundantly justified the institution of their office . . . The original conception of their office was primarily one of spiritual leadership . . . We believe the time has come to take more seriously this view of the office, and to give our General Superintendents larger opportunities of exercising such a ministry.

During the period under review the denomination has raised great funds, established numerous departments and undertaken ever-widening service in the interest of churches and ministers. In all these activities the superintendents have taken a leading, if not always a conspicuous, part. It is significant that in the last Council Report tribute is paid to the unostentatious nature of their contribution :

“ The regular work of the Superintendents has become more rather than less difficult . . . Much of their work is known through our papers but by far the greater part of it consists of doing good almost by stealth . . . Their mutual confidence and helpfulness as a body are a great asset and the Council look to them for guidance.”

Those who ask the superintendents to think corporately on denominational problems may rest assured that this is their constant practice. On the other hand, those who think the superintendents should make authoritative pronouncements on questions of faith and order will, I hope, continue to be disappointed. While an impressive catalogue could be compiled of the contributions made by the superintendents to the achievements which have marked recent decades, this would convey a mistaken conception of their aim and purpose. They are proud to serve, but have no desire to rule. They do not wish to be regarded as a bench of bishops or a spiritual cabinet, for their increasing influence depends upon contact with back-benchers, and they believe that

The game is more than the players of the game,
And the ship is more than the crew.

The superintendents have unique opportunities to feel the spiritual pulse of the denomination, to diagnose its ailments and prescribe remedies; but they prefer to serve as general practitioners rather than to advertise as proprietors of a panacea. I leave the board with grateful memories of its team-work: a perfect camaraderie has bound us together in the fellowship of service and our relationship with the General Secretary has been ideal. Dr. Aubrey, Mr. Ball and Rev. O. D. Wiles have enriched our fellowship, contributed to our discussions and helped in the solution of our problems; and we have given to them a loyalty which has ripened into affection. The machinery of the Baptist Church House runs smoothly because Diotrephes is unknown at 4, Southampton Row.

One of the perils of Independency is the scope it provides for individualists to go off at a tangent. Though we have our share of rebels, Baptists have remained steadfast to essential principles and their history is one of steady unfolding. It is significant that the latest statement on the Doctrine of the Church, adopted by the Council in 1948, quotes with approval the Baptist Confession of 1677. Limiting our view to the present century, it is remarkable that the necessary changes in organization have been developments rather than new beginnings. This continuity is not always recognised and some of our brethren have regarded

the Scheme of Ministerial Settlement and Sustentation as a subtle undermining of Independent principles. When it was first introduced, the Rev. J. Moffat Logan was inclined to think that it was "the abolition of Congregationalism," but experience has proved such fears to be groundless. In his invaluable *A History of English Baptists*,¹ Dr. A. C. Underwood rightly says that Dr. Shakespeare, "who was not enamoured of the old Independency, went on tightening up the organisation," and he quotes Dr. Carlile's comment: "The old guard of the denomination were afraid. Could they have read all that was in Shakespeare's mind they would have been more afraid. The scheme went through and for the first time in their history the Baptists became an ecclesiastical body." I had my own idea as to what was in Dr. Shakespeare's mind, but the scheme finally adopted by the Assembly was no departure from principle, but simply a development, a "tightening up" of organisation to serve expanding life and changed conditions. When Dr. Underwood further suggests that the Scheme "led to Lists of Accredited Ministers being drawn up and to the adoption of a scheme to make sure that after leaving college they continued their studies," he seems to be overlooking the fact that Accredited Lists and a scheme for post-collegiate study were in existence before the Settlement and Sustentation Scheme was drafted. In fact an examination for Collegiate candidates was required by the 1907 Regulations for Ministerial Recognition and relaxed in 1911 owing to the strenuous opposition of collegiate probationers. Writing in 1946, the Rev. R. C. Walton, in *The Gathered Community*,² says,

"In 1915 the Baptist Union inaugurated a scheme of Ministerial Settlement and Sustentation, and this was amended in 1921. An entirely new scheme was adopted by the Annual Assembly in 1926 and confirmed in the following year."

As a matter of fact the alterations were comparatively slight and the report of the Commission, which suggested the amended scheme of 1926, expressly stated:

"It is, nevertheless, not a new scheme which we commend to the Council, but essentially the old scheme with certain improvements dictated by experience. Indeed, the more precise directions which we incorporate in our recommendations are in large measure merely explications of a procedure which has gradually taken form during these experimental years."

It is a great tribute to those who drafted the original scheme that it has required so little amendment to meet the changed conditions

¹ pp. 249, 250.

² p. 153.

created by two world wars. Mr. Walton also expresses a prevalent misconception when he states that the Superintendents "have some legal authority over churches and ministers which receive help from the Sustentation Fund." The position was correctly stated by Dr. H. Wheeler Robinson in *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*³: "they have no semblance of authority over any congregation, however small." Nothing in the scheme impairs the autonomy of the local church and the superintendents have no right even to attend a church meeting, save by invitation of the members. An Anglican bishop once asked me wherein a Baptist superintendent differed from a bishop. When I replied, "We have no authority," he made the facetious admission, "Between ourselves, neither have we." I refrained from the obvious retort that we *claimed* none. The latest adaptation of machinery to changing conditions—the Baptist Home Work Fund—though drastic in its method of co-ordinating the financial resources of the denomination is merely another example of administrative development and does no violence to the principle enunciated by John Smyth: "Christ onelie is the King, and law-giver of the church and conscience."

Statistics should neither be worshipped nor despised; but rather interpreted. They show that British Baptists made consistent progress until 1905 and have since declined in numbers. It is curious that the arrested progress synchronised with the adoption of improved methods in Sunday Schools and more efficient denominational organisation. Questions and answers at once suggest themselves, but most of the answers are too obvious and should be distrusted. It is at least worthy of notice that the decline commenced *before* the appointment of superintendents, so one tempting answer can be ruled out. In 1932 the superintendents presented a Statistical Report re the Ministry to the Baptist Union Council and this was brought up to date for the use of the Polity Commission in 1938. It revealed that, from 1905, there had been:

- (a) A serious decline in the number of members and scholars.
- (b) An increase in the number of churches.
- (c) A persistent decrease in the number of accredited ministers.
- (d) A steady increase in the number of unaccredited ministers.
- (e) A growing number of churches without any pastoral oversight.
- (f) A tendency to shorter pastorates.

³ p. 110.

In presenting these statistics, the superintendents endeavoured to reveal causes and to suggest remedies. The loss of 90,943 members and 79,634 scholars in forty-two years was due to the general drift from religion in an age dominated by materialistic considerations; but disillusionment had set in, youth was already in revolt against the irreligion of parents and the number of scholars was increasing. Owing to the movement of population and other causes, the average membership in Baptist churches—already fallen from 145 to 105 since 1905—might continue to decline along with financial resources. In consequence, many churches would find it difficult to maintain single pastorates with accredited ministers. The number of accredited ministers had fallen by ten per year, and the increased output promised by the colleges might be negated by more ministers exercising their vocations outside the pastorate or denominational office. The inadequate number of baptisms recorded in recent years could be explained, to some extent, by the disturbing fact that more than a quarter of our churches were without pastoral oversight. Perhaps it was not surprising that in the dislocation caused by the first world war an element of restlessness was observed in the ministry, which was manifest in shorter pastorates, a tendency to criticise the Settlement Scheme and resentment against the imposition of time-limits to pastorates.

While not unmindful of the economic factors, the superintendents were convinced that the problems were essentially spiritual and likely to persist until Great Britain enjoyed another evangelical revival. Meanwhile, they sought to encourage the churches to put first things first and thus fit themselves for the Master's use. In addition, they made the following suggestions:

(a) *The Adoption of Fellowship Schemes*, varying in size and constitution to meet local circumstance. In this way the benefits of co-operation could be secured without surrendering the historic Baptist doctrine of the Church as a spiritual autonomy. Advantages would accrue to all concerned. Every church could secure some measure of pastoral oversight at a cost commensurate with its resources, avoid the dangers of long pastorless periods, and enjoy a varied ministry. Ministers would also benefit by the fellowship of colleagues, increased opportunity to exercise special gifts, reduced sermon preparation and, in many cases, increased stipends.

(b) *The Substitution of a Settlement Covenant for a Time-Limit*. There is value in the term "Covenant" which suggests mutual trust in contrast with the fear which demands the safeguard of a time-limit. On examination, the new method was found to secure all the advantages of the old without the necessity for the statutory Church Meeting which often needlessly disturbed

the harmony of the fellowship. The Covenant is finding increasing favour.

(c) *The Urgent Need for an Increase in Ministerial Stipends.* Since the adoption of the Settlement scheme in 1915 the stipend for an accredited married minister, without children, has risen by successive stages from a minimum of £120 to a standard of £312 per annum. In this connection mention should be made of the tireless efforts of the Officers of the Baptist Union to improve the financial position of ministers. It is an open secret that Dr. Aubrey will advocate this just cause during his Presidential Campaign, and he will have the enthusiastic support of the superintendents.

Although conditions are still difficult, a remarkable change has taken place in the denominational outlook. Depression has lifted. Morale is higher. Greater emphasis is being placed upon our distinctive principles and Baptists are increasingly conscious that they have come to the Kingdom for such a time as this. In the ministry, restlessness has given place to a new sense of vocation. The urge to evangelise has stifled querulousness. The tide is turning at last and we are ready to embark.

I shall carry into retirement an album of sacred memories. It contains fadeless pictures of churches and their members; schools and their children; homes and their families. There are sad scenes: a funeral service when we laid the burnt bodies of five brothers and sisters in one grave; the havoc of sin, manifest in wrecked homes and broken lives; and the pathos of industrial depression and war-time anxiety. Yet most of the views are brightly coloured: men who recovered from mistakes and turned defeat into victory; deacons who refused to believe that the cause was lost and maintained the witness of the church through the lean years; crowded Anniversary gatherings when sinners were converted and young disciples gained; and thrilling baptismal services—especially one when twelve young people professed faith in a Saviour Who enabled their minister to face disabling sickness with dauntless courage. Then I treasure the memories of such leaders as John Clifford, rousing vast assemblies to enthusiasm for righteous causes and responding to the call of God in the Council Chamber on November 20th, 1923; Charles Brown, expounding the Word of God and keeping the morning watch when travelling in a railway carriage; T. Reaveley Glover, confounding the organists and choirmasters by changing the hymns and deleting the anthems; H. Wheeler Robinson, teaching us to make more of baptism and insisting upon a College at Oxford; and my own beloved minister, J. H. Rushbrooke, defending the weak, resisting oppressors and uniting isolated groups in the Baptist World Alliance. To have lived and worked with such

men has been a great experience. There are also some very varied interiors in my album: mansions and cottages, wherein I have received gracious hospitality and enjoyed enriching fellowship. Finally, I cherish the picture of manses, screening the hardships of the bravest of the brave, both men and women. Often have I marvelled at their skill and courage; their ability to make bricks without straw, and stews without meat. To have made their burden a little lighter has been a privilege, but to have won the confidence of these brethren is an abiding satisfaction. I lay down my task with regret that I have not made fuller use of abounding opportunities, yet finding hope in the words of Bayard Taylor: "Epimetheus, the after-thoughted, receiveth access of vigor in looking backward, and groweth reversely from age to youth."

H. BONSER.

Oedipus at Colonus: *Sophocles*, translated into English rhyming verse with Introduction and Notes by Gilbert Murray. (Allen and Unwin, 5s.)

"Oedipus at Colonus," like "King Lear," presents us with the spectacle of an old and dethroned king, driven out by the baseness of his own children and exhibiting a strange mixture of regal pride and pathetic helplessness. Yet whereas Lear's downfall is in part due to his own presumption and self-will, Oedipus is a victim of the inexplicable malignance of his gods. It is through repentance that Lear comes to achieve the beginning of his own redemption, but Oedipus feels no need to repent. Having unwittingly committed the two most heinous sins possible, the infectiousness of the untouchable stays with him all his days; he is ἀπαῖος, charged with a curse. It is because of his unquestioning endurance of the consequences of this that he ceases to be an unclean outcast and becomes an object of reverence and awe to friend and foe alike.

Dr. Murray's translation into English is pleasing, and the Introduction and Notes he provides will be of particular value to those reading Sophocles for the first time. Although many will feel that blank verse would have been a more suitable medium for Greek tragedy, there is nevertheless great strength and dignity in the rhymed couplets which are used almost throughout.

K. J. CLARK.