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Advance and Reunion.

THE turn of the half century has confronted Baptists with the painful dilemma of two apparently contradictory challenges. One comes to us from denominational headquarters; the call to Baptist Advance. It is essentially domestic, internal, immediate; a challenge to throw off the last excuses and confusions of wartime and address ourselves to our still unfinished task, to face up to developing denominational responsibilities, and rally to the Baptist flag. The other is the much wider and bigger challenge that comes to us, not from denominational headquarters, but from the very heart of the world Church of Christ. It arises from the whole trend of recent historical developments, and not least from the success of the missionary enterprise which we ourselves inaugurated, and it is underlined by all the urgent, terrible dangers of our time. As Rev E. A. Payne has finely said: "It is clearer to Christian people today than at any previous period . . . that the followers of Jesus Christ should be in the closest possible fellowship with each other. A world divided by racial, national and economic antagonisms looks wistfully to Christians to show it the path to unity and to give it the power to walk along that path. But already apart from this, Christians have felt resting upon them the eyes of One who prayed for His disciples that they might be one. However ancient and deep-seated the divisions, they cannot be accepted as final by one who ponders these words." We are, of course, only at the beginning of this movement toward Reunion; the second half of the twentieth century may well complete what the second half of the fifteenth century began, and the era of Reunion prove as epochmaking as the era of Reformation.

Thus on the one hand we are called to be better Baptists: on the other we are charged to explain, "Why Baptist?" Keen Advancists might ask with Rushbrooke: "Is the way of Advance for Baptists that of retreat from their historic and distinctive positions? Is their idea of the gathered Church out of date? Must they revise their witness as to relations with the State? Is ecclesiastical fusion the necessary expression of Christian unity?" Keen Reunionists might reply that the Baptist position is mainly negative; that Baptists have never emerged from nineteenth century individualism, and are hopelessly ill-prepared,

ill-informed, and ill-organised to face the age of collectivism; that the desperate need for a united front must override all narrow sectarianism and hair-splitting theological contentiousness.

In this situation there lies upon us the clear duty of defining our attitude and vindicating our place as Baptists in the modern Church, of justifying our continued existence, either as a clearly defined group within a reunited Church, or as a separate denomination outside it, if that must be. For this purpose it has to be remembered that the familiar lines of defence of Baptist Principles will not serve us in these days. The appeal to Scripture will not by itself carry us far, for it is precisely the authority of Scripture over the Church in so changed a situation that is in dispute. The appeal to history, again, does not at all prove that when the situation that created the Baptist Churches had passed any reason remained why the Baptist Denomination should persist. The only way of vindicating our claim to retain our identity, either within or outside a reunited Church, must rest upon the permanent spiritual value of the things we stand for; we must be able to show that our principles are the expression of essential Gospel truths; we must demonstrate that the polity which applies these principles is a polity which is effective in producing the kind of Christians which the Church ought to produce. We may be convinced that our position concerning Believers' Baptism, the supremacy of personal experience and spiritual liberty, is alone consistent with the Scriptures, but that will not suffice unless we prove it is justified also by its fruits; and that the World Church of Christ would be poorer if we and the things for which we stand ceased to exist.

This is especially true concerning Believers' Baptism. The Scripture basis will always be our starting point, and for many of us that will be quite sufficient. But in the new Baptistal debate which is already raging, and which all talk of Reunion is bound to stimulate still further, the question of origins is less important than the question of value. What value is there, then in the rite of Believers' Baptism to justify its continuance in the Church, and our continuance to defend it? The practice of Believers' Baptism, like that of the Lord's Supper, serves to anchor the Church firmly to the fundamental historic facts upon which her age old message is based. At the Pool as at the Table the Church is repeatedly reminded that she sprang from a definite historic, concrete and unalterable act of God, in her faithful witness to which lies all her authority and power. At the Pool as at the Table, she is reminded that the grace that saves is mediated through One Who died, was buried and rose again, that her present fellowship and future life centre in that risen, living Saviour, to Whom the baptised is personally committed in conscious faith and obedience. At the

Pool, as at the Table, every incoming member is faced with the heart of the Christian Gospel, on the very threshold of Church life. Baptists have no creed, but that does not by any means imply that they have no Gospel, or no theology. More effectively than any form of words, worn smooth by use and made mysterious by ancient phrasing, the Baptismal act recalls us to the foundation of the faith in the dying and rising Saviour, while leaving believers free in successive generations to interpret afresh, in living terms, the meaning of His redemptive work. Believers' Baptism thus preserves the Church from mere subjectivism, from shallow, vague, "religiousness," and from spiritual decay, and it sends us back, again and again, to the Scripture pages to discover anew the real meaning of our message. The practice of Baptism is bound, in this way, to nourish the love of the Bible, and loyalty to the evangelical faith.

The second value for the modern Church preserved in Believers' Baptism is the belief in Conversion. Believers' Baptism declares with almost offensive bluntness, that no man is born a Christian, nor can he ever be made a Christian by others, not even by his parents, certainly not by the Church, but only by his personal, free response to the truth that confronts him in Christ, and his own voluntary obedience to the demand Christ makes upon him. Those who affect to despise the idea of conversion as outmoded emotionalism would do well to ponder the implications of the newer schools of philosophy, the Existentialists and the Personalists, who contend that truth is only discovered in encounter; not in abstract systems and theoretical logic, but in the actual, concrete, individual contact with Reality—which is what the Christian doctrine of conversion has asserted through the centuries. Of course we Baptists are not alone in our belief in conversion, but our practice of Baptism keeps it to the forefront, and we do not, like many, obscure the doctrine by a rite of admission that denies its necessity. It is noticeable that even those churches which profess to give great place to conversion, in their doctrine, their campaigns, and their commissioned reports, always retract when discussing infant baptism, and proceed to disparage the need for conversion, talking instead about the unity of the family, "covenanted communities" and "unconscious faith." But we ourselves are not above reproach. It would bring a great deal more power and a great deal more hopefulness into our Church work if we believed, as consistent Baptists must believe, in the ever present possibility of conversion.

Even more far-reaching and important are the implications of believers' baptism for Christian Ethics and the doctrine of grace. Ours is the only form of baptism which is strictly and primarily an ethical act on the part of the baptised. Baptists

alone in the Christian Church can make that moral appeal to the implications of having been baptised which the New Testament repeatedly makes, for no really moral appeal to the adult person can be based upon that which others did to him, by force, as an unconscious infant. Believers' Baptism consciously commits the candidate to the mastery and ownership of the Christ into whose Name and possession he is being baptised; the faith he is confessing is expressly a faith in a Master whose ethical demand and perfect example are before him, and Whose right to command is already being acknowledged in the act of Baptism itself. This obviously has supreme importance for the whole meaning of Christian discipleship and, in a day when a revival of moral standards is long overdue outside the Church, and when the greatest need inside the Church is for people who will take the Lordship of Christ seriously, the deliberate practice of a baptism that has neither moral conditions nor moral significance is both dangerous to the character of the Church and disloyal to the whole revelation of the will of God that runs through law, prophets, Gospels, and Epistles alike, and is nowhere more clear than in the moral earnestness of Jesus.

In the same way our Baptism preserves for the world Church an indispensable element of the true doctrine of Grace. That God's power, wisdom, forgiveness and love are available to hearts that seek them and that both the will to seek and the knowledge where to seek are themselves gifts of the gracious mercy of God, all Christians believe. The supernatural inflow of saving and enriching resources into hearts conditioned by faith in the Gospel to receive it, is something we can with complete intellectual honesty maintain. But that this, or anything remotely resembling it can be the experience of an infant, or can be induced, manipulated or conveyed by any rite whatever, seems just incredible. John Oman's definition of grace as "God's gracious personal relation to His children, response to which must be won and cannot be compelled" is the only one that accords with the New Testament and with spiritual experience. Any form of Baptism which removes the conception of grace from that personal realm where God and man meet in spiritual communion, and replaces it by a magical or mechanical "something" which is conveyed or imposed by ceremony or priestly operation, must inevitably corrupt the Gospel. A true doctrine of the grace of God finds expression and defence only in a form of admission to the Church where voluntary faith and surrender are expressed in conscious obedience to the Master Himself. We need not be afraid, then of the challenge to justify Believers' Baptism by its fruits and intrinsic worth. Involved in it are some of the deepest and most urgent doctrinal and practical issues that face the Church in our

generation, and will still face any united Church which our century may produce.

Behind our insistence upon Believers' Baptism there lies of course our conception that everything in Christian life depends at last upon that personal experience in which the individual soul confronts the living Lord. That emphasis possesses far-reaching implications not only for the individual Christian but for the Church. We are not alone of course, in holding to it: where we are alone, or almost alone, is in making this principle of the primacy of personal experience the governing principle of the nature of the Church, the nature of authority, and the nature of worship. Baptists, Congregationalists and a few smaller groups are the sole consistent defenders of the truth of the regenerate Church, with a convinced, committed and confessed membership possessing spiritual competence, under Christ, to direct its own life and work. This conception of the spiritual community has a far older lineage than that of Rome: it runs back through the New Testament to Jeremiah and Isaiah. It is part of the whole evangelical position that life comes before order and faith before organisation. As Dale put it: "Only those who are in Christ have any right to be in the Church." When John Smyth reasserted this principle of the "gathered Church" against that of the Parish Church, which granted her privileges to wealthy patronage, and counted as members all who dwell within the parish boundaries, and assumed as many do still, that all educated and christened Englishmen are already Christians at heart, doubtless he was told that the new idea was bigotted, narrow, dangerous and impracticable, that the Church should throw her net wide and gather into her membership all sorts and conditions of people at all stages of spiritual life or none, with no questions asked, no interviews or conditions of any kind. But our Fathers saw that only a converted Church could hope to convert the world, that only a membership based upon personal experience of Christ could safeguard the character, message and influence of the Church, and justify her claim to be the body of Christ. In days of persecution this principle looks after itself: only a Christian wants to be in the Church. But in days of nominal Christianity it needs constant reassertion. But some modern Baptists seem to want to return to the Parish Church idea, with its vaguer boundaries and its provision of something for everybody. Whatever happens about reunion, we must go on insisting that you can never obscure the spiritual nature of the Church without in the end obscuring the truth of the Gospel, and the world Church will need our witness to the truth of the Gathered Church set humbly but firmly over against the world.

None the less will the World Church need our witness to the

true nature of spiritual authority and the true nature of worship. We know how the basis of authority has shifted in the past from the priesthood to the Bible, and in the last century from the Bible to religious experience. The ultimate ground of our confidence is that we have seen and do know: that which we have seen and heard declare we. We believe in the intrinsic authority of the Gospel, witnessing to itself; the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit in the heart. Compared with this all pretensions to external and more imposing authority appear to us utterly false, whether actually claimed, as by Rome, or assumed as by some Anglicans, or just hankered after. The trend towards authoritarianism infects the Church as it does the political scene, and we must continue to stand where we have always stood, contending that no priestly order, and no array of ecclesiastical dignities can ever guarantee for us the truth of the Gospel that glows in the pages of Scripture and rings in our heart and conscience. Whatever authority they possess is derived from it: not its authority from them.

No one who has considered Reunion can doubt that one of the major practical difficulties will be over the forms of worship. We face, in more than one church, a strong trend towards liturgical revival, a demand for more colour, music, form and poetry in worship. With that demand many of us are, or ought to be, in deep sympathy: we feel a little ashamed of our plainness, our simplicity, our frequent irreverence and carelessness. Yet we must not lose sight of the fact that the first function of our public worship is to express the individual's own praise and prayer and aspiration. The loveliest forms of worship can serve to obscure the simplest truths, leaving no disturbing, haunting challenge to awaken the conscience, no new, provoking ideas to stimulate the mind, nothing to vex the soul to decision. Elaborate forms of worship are certainly described in Scripture, but the line of advance is towards increasing simplicity, and the worship of Jesus was above all utterly natural, the direct approach, the language of the heart, and the unselfconscious attitude. It was said in a recent Anglican conference that, "the real reason for the existence of Nonconformity was the unwillingness of the Church of England layman to tolerate articulateness." That is, of course, the whole point. The formal prepared prayer has value, and we claim freedom to use it on occasion; but the soul's inner life cannot find adequate expression without spontaneous, free worship, the welling up from the heart of unpremeditated praise and prayer. The pity is that even we, whose principles should be our safeguard, fall far too easily into habits of worship that amount to watching the preacher perform. That in itself, quite as effectively as the most formal and elaborate

liturgy, denies the principle that worship must be the natural expression of the believer's personal faith and experience. The worship of the World Church will need to preserve this "non-conformist" truth.

Once more, the reverse side of this insistence upon personal faith and experience, is the demand for spiritual liberty. One could wish that our Baptist young people were far better acquainted than they are with the heroic story of the Baptist fight for freedom, from Thomas Helwys down to Knibb, Clifford, Rushbrooke, for it is a great story, and the freedom we prize is a great and manifold thing. We contend for the liberty of the churches within the State—the principle of Freechurchmanship; for the liberty of the Church within the Churches—the principle of self-government; and for the liberty of the Christian within the Church—the principle of individual responsibility. As to Freechurchmanship we do well to remember the words of Mr. Payne: "Not a few of those standing within the succession of Independents, and of those Presbyterians who became one with them, are nonconformists not of choice but of necessity. They would gladly join a comprehensive national Church were the act of uniformity repealed and were there adequate safeguards. They are not averse to a national Church as such and would be ready for considerable sacrifices to secure the union of English Christianity in one visible fellowship." It is certain that many Methodists too share this feeling. On the other hand our own Helwys and Bunyan link us with the Pilgrim Fathers and the Roman Martyrs, with Peter before the Sanhedrin and John confronting Herod, with the Prophets of Israel and Micaiah the son of Imlah, the first of all free-churchmen, and with the whole brotherhood of the unconsenting conscience who despite all danger and contempt uncompromisingly insist that the Church at least must not be nationalised, and that the State shall never silence, bribe or intimidate the conscience of the man of God. Here for once it would seem that we are on the side of reunion and the world church very definitely, for it would seem obvious that reunion and establishment are incompatible; no national Church can ever be a World Church. The World Church will have to be a free Church whether it likes it or not.

Our idea of self-government, the freedom of the Church within the Churches, has suffered tragically from being confused with independency, the isolation of the Church from all the Churches, an idea that never was Christian, Baptist or practical. We stand, not merely against domination by others, but for the competence of the local fellowship to discover the mind of Christ about its own affairs. We stand for the presence of Jesus with the two or three; we would jealously defend the

supreme, effective and continuing Headship of Christ over His own Church. Everyone knows the weakness and dangers inherent in this idea, though it is certain that we very often ascribe to the supposed weaknesses of our system troubles and failures that are really due to our personal failure to live up to the high churchmanship which our system requires. But before we give up trying, or surrender the principle of theocracy to some highly organised ecclesiastical council, we would do well to consider whether other weaknesses, or perhaps the same ones, may not lurk beneath the Cardinal's robes, the bishop's cassock, and even, despite the Presidential Address, beneath the Methodist Chairman's chain. Some envious Baptists might remember that no-one ever pretended that faith confers infallibility, and no system of organisation can ever be adequate to express the life of the Spirit incarnate in the Church. We may not be very worthy representatives of the principle of spiritual autonomy, but we shall serve the ideal better by persistence than by sacrificing the ideal to expediency.

Personal freedom and responsibility, the right to form a private judgment and follow the truth as God and conscience reveal it, is equally difficult to acknowledge, and equally essential to maintain. Some words of Kagawa are both strong and wise here: "Christ was a Carpenter, He was not a graduate of the Jerusalem theological seminary; St. Francis just missed being a jockey, he was not of the priestly line. When faith is committed to professional leaders, religion inevitably starts a downward course. Genuine religion will therefore only be discovered when professional religionists are cleared out of the way and a democracy of faith is established." A democracy of faith, in which there is no spurious claim to spiritual leadership, no two standards of conduct, one for the priesthood and one for the laity, in which the priesthood of all believers becomes again what it originally was, not a weapon of controversy but a truth of experience. We need to remember, all the same, that the personal freedom in Christ which we proclaim is a freedom to obey, not a freedom from obedience, that the claim to freedom automatically commits you to the granting of a like freedom to others, and that the exercise of freedom involves a moral earnestness not often to be found in our Churches.

The Gospel will achieve its finest results in spiritual character only when this complex freedom in Christ is rightly treasured, and the world Church needs our witness on the point. But one cannot help wondering sometimes whether even among us freedom is so secure. Some seem to long for the imposing again of theological and intellectual fetters that would bind our students to traditional and literalist ideas. Some seem quite ready to

capitulate to the planners and collectivists who worship mere uniformity. Sometimes even our own invaluable Home Work Fund seems ready to trespass with very clumsy feet, in the name of efficiency and economy, upon the spiritual liberty of minister and Church.

Discussions about Reunion seem often to proceed upon the assumption that no significant differences of principle now remain to separate the various Churches. Whether that assumption can be ascribed to conceit, charity, optimism or indolence it is difficult to decide. Whatever the reason, it is wrong. If it were true, than our immediate duty would be perfectly clear: we should at once begin conversations with a view to fusion or absorption in other bodies: our reason and our faith alike would demand it. But we have much that is distinctive and important. Behind all the central and vital things which we Protestants at any rate hold in common, there lie these practical and theological emphases which no honest thinker can ignore and which all advocates of reunion must sooner or later face with candour and realism. We must envisage the situation three or more generations ahead. We must remember, too, that the beliefs of any community are shaped more by its habitual practices than by its thinking. And while we also desire unity, we can have little faith in a unity that overrides genuine differences and so must sooner or later give place to new divisions in a second Reformation. In one respect our position is peculiarly embarrassing; just because the things for which we stand seem to us to be matters of faith and theology, not accidents of history or preferences of method, compromise seems betrayal. But no one can yet foresee the shape which the reunited World Church will take. As Latourette has said, it will be more a new growth than a building constructed with stones taken from the structures of the past. But whether we are really within it, as a distinct group in a fellowship of such groups, or whether we remain really outside, an intransigent and irritant appendage, who can say? All we know is that we have received a charge and a commission, and we must bear faithful witness and set faithful example. We would seek to deserve the apostolic commendation: "your zeal hath provoked very many; ye were ensamples to all that believe; your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world." But zeal, conviction and persistence will profit us nothing if we forget the Apostolic injunction: "Show ye before the Churches the proof of your love."

REGINALD E. WHITE.