

## Baptists and Disciples of Christ.

**I**N spite of its modest size and price, *Baptists and Disciples of Christ*, by E. Roberts-Thomson, M.A., B.D.,<sup>1</sup> is of more than ordinary importance to the Christian denominations with which it deals, and it deserves to be widely read and pondered by the members of both. Since the author's purpose is to set in a clear light the relationship to one another of Baptists and Disciples of Christ, he sketches briefly in the first two sections the origins and development of these two Movements. Part III is devoted to a discussion of their distinctive convictions upon such matters as the authority of Scripture, the nature of the Church, the Ministry and the Sacraments, and so on. In the closing section Mr. Roberts-Thomson notes the emergence of forces which are tending at the present time in various countries to bring about a "rapprochement" between Baptists and Disciples of Christ, and he tries to estimate realistically the prospects of success. The whole is written in an eirenic spirit, and forms a most helpful introduction to a subject which is likely to become of increasing importance as time goes on.

Of particular significance to Baptists is the author's account of the stages by which Thomas and Alexander Campbell (who may be conveniently described as the chief founders of the Churches of Christ in America) were first attracted towards the Baptists and then later withdrew from them. In Scotland, an earlier offshoot from Presbyterianism which was associated in varying degrees with the names of the Haldanes, John Glas, Robert Sandeman and Archibald Maclean, exercised an influence upon Alexander Campbell as a young man. It was itself in turn affected later by the growth of the Campbellite Movement in America, which by the 1830's had broken with the Baptists and entered upon an independent existence under the title of the "Disciples" or "Christians." These twin movements, known in America under the name of the "Disciples of Christ" and in Great Britain and elsewhere as the "Churches of Christ," subsequently maintained increasingly friendly associations with one another and in 1930 they came together officially in a World Body with a membership just short of two million.

The question now is: What is to be the future relationship

<sup>1</sup> Recently published by the Carey Kingsgate Press (3s. 6d.).

of this considerable Christian group, with its many affinities with Baptists, to the world-wide Baptist Movement which now numbers some thirteen million members? The answer is not easy to give, as this little book will indicate, and the merit of Mr. Roberts-Thomson's study is that it helps materially to bring the question into sharper focus. The real difficulty about his treatment, excellent as it is, is that, in the absence of universally accepted standards, statements about the views and practices of the denominations concerned are apt either to be so general in character as to be jejune, or alternatively to draw from particular illustrations of what Baptists or Disciples believe conclusions which assume more than can safely be granted. For example, we are told that "with the Baptist view of the Church, the Disciples of Christ are in substantial agreement" (page 97). But when this bald proposition is scrutinized in detail, it leads on to further statements which at once make one pause. Thus the author quotes the following words of Alexander Campbell as representing the views of Disciples. "The standing and immutable ministry of the Christian community is composed of bishops, deacons, and evangelists" (page 105). This statement, however true it may be in America or elsewhere, would certainly not be easily accepted in Britain. Yet the author's comment is, "In this they (i.e. Disciples) are at one with the Baptists." Similarly, Mr. Roberts-Thomson discusses the teaching of the two denominations about "man's salvation from sin, and redemption unto eternal life," and says that "the old antagonisms have ceased to have any meaning in reality" (page 108). Yet he concludes by noting as "the one great dividing factor between the two peoples" the fact that—to quote a leading Disciple—"the Disciples have emphasized the teaching, that in the New Testament no promise of remission of sins, or acceptance with God, is given, until after baptism" (page 114).

No doubt there is much truth in the author's contention that the difference between the two bodies is "more one of emphasis now, than of definite divergence of views" (page 123). Nevertheless, differences of emphasis can be extremely important as Mr. Roberts-Thomson virtually concedes when he says: "With Baptists it has been truth, freedom, unity. With Disciples it has been truth, unity, freedom" (page 133). The moral seems to be that, certainly as far as Britain is concerned, greater accord between the two denominations is unlikely to be achieved until much more intercourse has taken place between them than has so far been the case, and until painstaking efforts at mutual interpretation have enabled the exact character of each other's views and practices to be thoroughly grasped. That this is needed even in the case of so competent and sympathetic an observer as this

author shows himself to be, is evident from such statements as that Congregationalists "do not place any importance on baptism" (page 163), and that "the overwhelming majority of Baptist churches are what is called 'closed membership' churches" (page 166). (What, by the way, does Mr. Roberts-Thomson mean precisely when he says that "whereas Baptists assimilate easily metaphysical explanations of Bible doctrines, Disciples tend to content themselves with 'Bible names for Bible things' "? (page 139).

To conclude: the fate which has attended the attempts made during the last half century to bring Baptists and Disciples nearer to one another certainly does not warrant the expectation of any spectacular success in our own time. But more recent efforts do suggest that while progress towards closer relationships has varied in different parts of the world, a new spirit is stirring in the Northern States of America, while in Britain the existence of a joint committee of representatives of the two denominations encourages the hope that experiments in joint action may do something to promote fuller understanding and fellowship. As an essay in that direction this little book is to be warmly commended, although one cannot but regret that it is marred by not a few typographical and literary faults which ought not to have been passed by those who corrected the proofs.

R. L. CHILD.

*The Glorious Liberty*, edited by John Eric Fenn. (The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1s. 2d., post free.)

In this, the Bible Society's Popular Report for 1950, the editor's theme is that the world is involved in a struggle between the Marxist and Christian conceptions of liberty, and that if men are to enjoy Christian freedom they must have access to the sources of the knowledge of God which are found in the Bible. The Report shows how in country after country the Society is seeking, often in the face of tremendous difficulties, to place the Bible in men's hands in their own tongue. Six-and-a-half million volumes of the Scriptures in 798 languages were published by the Society in 1950 and eight new languages were added to the translation list. (The Translations Secretary, Rev. W. J. Bradnock, was formerly with the B.M.S.) All concerned about the spread of Christian truth throughout the world will be glad to read these stimulating pages. There are some useful maps and excellent photographs.