

Baptists and the Ecumenical Movement.

I

BAPTISTS are not all of one mind about the Ecumenical Movement. A number of Baptist Unions and Conventions have been prominently identified with all phases of the movement. Some have participated in certain activities and on some occasions, but not on others. A hesitant or critical attitude has sometimes been shown. At the present time ten Baptist groups are in membership with the World Council of Churches: the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, the Baptist Union of Holland, the Baptist Union of Denmark, the Baptist Union of Hungary, the American (formerly Northern) Baptist Convention, the two Negro Baptist Conventions and the Seventh Day Baptist Conference of the United States, the Burma Baptist Convention, and the Baptist Union of New Zealand. These groups comprise nearly one half of the Baptists of the world, but there remain outside the World Council the very strong Southern Baptist Convention of the United States, the Baptists of Canada and Australia, a number of European groups including the All Soviet Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, and all but a few of the Baptists of Asia and Africa, a number of whom have not yet reached the stage of being fully "autonomous" churches.

There are other world communions, which are similarly divided in their attitude. Some of the Orthodox Churches are in membership with the World Council; some are not. Certain of the Lutheran Synods have not followed the larger Lutheran Churches in joining the Council.

The reasons for these differences of attitude are varied. In some cases they are political. The Churches of China—including those associated with the China Baptist Council and the Church of Christ in China—were at one time in active membership with the World Council. All withdrew soon after the present Communist régime was established there. Though the World Council includes a number of Churches in Communist controlled lands, it has not proved easy for them to share fully in the Ecumenical Movement. In other cases the reasons why certain Churches have stood aside from the World Council may be described as ecclesiastical. Church relations in particular lands have not yet reached a sufficiently

friendly stage for it to be easy for all the Churches to associate themselves together or to grant one another the mutual recognition involved in membership of the World Council. In yet other cases theological and doctrinal difficulties and suspicions stand in the way. All these reasons have affected Baptists, as well as those of other Christian traditions.

Baptists are, moreover, a heterogeneous community, with considerable differences in theological outlook, polity and church practice and, though characterised by a strong sense of fellowship and brotherhood, have no central church authority. Each union and convention determines its own attitudes and standards. A Baptist World Alliance was formed in 1905 and now links together Baptist churches with a combined membership of over 21,000,000. But the preamble to its constitution runs as follows :

“The Baptist World Alliance, extending over every part of the world, exists in order more fully to show the essential oneness of Baptist people in the Lord Jesus Christ, to impart inspiration to the brotherhood and to promote the spirit of fellowship, service and co-operation among them; but this Alliance may in no way interfere with the independence of the churches or assume the administrative functions of existing organisations.”

At more than one World Congress Baptists have discussed together certain aspects of the Ecumenical Movement. They have agreed to differ about it and at a Congress in Copenhagen in 1947, on the eve of the formation of the World Council, it was clearly ruled that the Alliance would be exceeding its rights if it gave direction or advice to its constituent unions and conventions on the question of membership. Each must be free to decide for itself.

All these facts must be borne in mind in considering the part taken by Baptists in the developments of the last forty or fifty years.

II

The Baptists of Britain, the British Commonwealth and America have, since the days of William Carey, shown a notable zeal for foreign missions. The representatives of their missionary societies participated eagerly in the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910, which is now generally regarded as “the watershed between miscellaneous ecumenical stirrings and the integrating ecumenical movement of more recent times” (Rouse & Neill, *History of the Ecumenical Movement*, 1954, p.217). Baptist leaders in Britain and America, as well as Baptist missionaries in Asia, shared in the subsequent formation of National Christian

Councils and of the International Missionary Council. They accepted the principle of "comity," by which competition and over-lapping were avoided. They, and leaders of the "younger" churches, were present at the great missionary conferences in Jerusalem (1928) and Madras (1938). A number of Baptists have been on the secretariat of the International Missionary Council and have rendered outstanding service to it.

This sphere of inter-church co-operation presented few difficulties to Baptists for thirty years or more. Most of their missionary societies were ready, not only to support the movements which led to the federated Church of Christ in China and the Congo Protestant Council (with its aim of a Church of Christ in Congo), but also to co-operate in "union" institutions of an educational, medical and philanthropic kind. Only in the last decade or so have tensions arisen in certain places. These tensions have been largely the result of hesitations in regard to the association of the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches, and of the withdrawal of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention from the movement for missionary co-operation in the United States. To understand this new situation it is necessary to consider the Baptist attitude to other phases of the Ecumenical Movement.

Throughout the three hundred years of their history in Britain and America, Baptists have been generally sympathetic towards movements for political reform and the extension of democratic principles. They have sought to apply religion to life and have stood for a high standard of personal self-discipline and against privilege and exploitation in society. Most of the members of Baptist churches belong to the so-called working and middle classes. Baptists therefore found themselves generally in sympathy with the avowedly practical and non-theological aims which Archbishop Söderblom set before the Life and Work Movement and which found expression in the Stockholm Conference of 1925 and the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State of 1937. At the latter conference the Southern Baptist Convention was represented, as well as the Northern Baptist Convention and the National Baptist Convention of the United States, the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, the Baptist Union of Wales, the Baptist Union of New Zealand and the Baptist churches of China. One of the two delegates of the Protestant Free Churches of Germany—the only German group allowed by Hitler to attend—was a Baptist.

By then, however, divergent attitudes to the third main stream of the Ecumenical Movement—that dealing with Faith and Order—had become apparent among Baptists.

III

The initial call to the Churches to discuss questions of Faith and Order was issued in 1910 by the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States. It was primarily the result of the effect upon Bishop Charles Brent of attendance at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference. Much preliminary preparation was necessary, but both the Southern and the Northern Baptist Conventions in the United States promised to co-operate, and in January, 1914, the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland did the same. The war of 1914-18 broke in upon the plans, and the first World Conference on Faith and Order was not able to take place until 1927 in Lausanne. Many changes had taken place in the ecclesiastical scene in both Britain and America. The historian of the Southern Baptist Convention, Dr. W. W. Barnes, states that between 1911 and 1919 there was a complete reversal of sentiment regarding co-operation with other denominations. This he ascribes to the collapse of the over-ambitious programme for foreign missions sponsored by the Interchurch World Movement of North America (of which John R. Mott was a leader) and to the policy of the American War Department in regard to chaplains, which appeared to favour Roman Catholics in an unconstitutional way. Southern Baptists were entering a period of prosperity and expansion. They turned their energies into purely denominational channels and became increasingly suspicious of united activities. When the time came to appoint delegates to the Lausanne Conference, they withdrew their earlier acceptance of the invitation to participate. So did the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland.

The British decision was in part influenced by that of the Southern Baptists. The Baptist World Alliance was growing in influence and had undertaken a large programme of relief at the close of the war. Dr. J. H. Rushbrooke and other leaders were anxious that nothing should be done to offend the largest and strongest Baptist convention in the world. There were also other factors at work. The Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, Dr. J. H. Shakespeare, had become an eager advocate of Christian Unity, not only pleading for a United Free Church, but stating his own willingness to submit to some form of re-ordination, if thereby a United Church of England could be secured. His own denomination was not prepared for either of these steps and in Britain, as in America, a reaction set in against this phase of the Ecumenical Movement.

British Baptists were, therefore, not officially represented at Lausanne, though two individuals attended at their own expense. Nevertheless, five groups of Baptists sent delegates: the Northern

Baptist Convention, the Baptist Union of Ontario and Quebec, the Baptist Union of Germany and the two small groups of Seventh Day Baptist churches in the United States and Holland. Northern Baptists provided statements on Baptist beliefs for the composite volumes subsequently produced by the Continuation Committee, one of which was edited by the British Baptist, Dr. W. T. Whitley. His companion at Lausanne, Dr. J. E. Roberts, accepted membership of the Continuation Committee.

The British reaction against the Faith and Order movement was shortlived. It was soon felt that a mistake had been made in not sharing in theological discussions with those of other traditions. When Dr. Roberts died in 1929, no objection was raised to his place on the Continuation Committee being taken by the new secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, Dr. M. E. Aubrey. From then on, British Baptists have taken part in all the Faith and Order meetings. To the Second World Conference on Faith and Order, held in Edinburgh in 1937, they appointed a strong delegation of five leaders, the effect of whose presence may be seen in the official report. At Edinburgh there were also present delegates from the Northern Convention, the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec and the Baptist Union of Scotland, together with Dr. J. R. Sampey, of the Louisville Seminary, who had been appointed "the official representative and spokesman of the Southern Baptist Convention" to both the Oxford and Edinburgh Conferences. Seven Baptists were appointed to the new Continuation Committee, at the close of the Edinburgh Conference: three from the Northern Convention, three from Britain, and one (Dr. Jesse D. Franks), a Southern Baptist deeply interested in drawing churches and nations closer together.

Dr. Aubrey became a member of the Executive Committee of Faith and Order. He was also a member of the important Committee of Fourteen, charged with the task of drafting a constitution for the World Council of Churches. Both the Oxford and Edinburgh Conferences, representing the Life and Work and the Faith and Order Movements, had agreed that their interests and purposes were so closely inter-related that some common organisation was necessary. It had also become clear that differences of social approach were due to differences of theology and that the two movements had much to gain from one another. The time was not yet ripe for the full merging of the oldest ecumenical stream that of missionary co-operation—but there was general agreement that the proposed World Council and the International Missionary Council must be "in association with" one another. The second World War delayed the actual formation of the World Council until 1948, but a skeleton organisation was

soon in existence and rendered important service during the war years.

IV

The presence of Dr. Sampey at the conferences of 1937 and the election of Dr. Franks to the Faith and Order Continuation Committee did not represent any change of attitude on the part of the Southern Baptist Convention. When invited to join the World Council of Churches, the Convention declined on the ground that it had "no ecclesiological authority" (W. W. Barnes, *The Southern Baptist Convention, 1845-1953*, p. 286). There was fear of what were described as "totalitarian trends that threaten the autonomy of all free churches." From 1893 to 1919 the Foreign Missions Board of the Southern Baptist Convention had shared in the Foreign Missions Conference of North America. In the two decades following the first World War there was little or no contact. In 1938 membership was resumed, but when in 1950 the Foreign Missions Conference became part of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., Southern Baptists again withdrew. They were extending their own foreign missionary enterprises in Latin America, Asia, Africa and Europe. They had even begun to feel dissatisfied with the "comity" agreements of 1912 which defined the spheres of activity of the Southern and Northern Conventions in the United States. They were increasingly unwilling for any united institutions, any geographical restrictions, any consultation or co-operation with other bodies. If their attitude is to be understood, it must be remembered that in many of the Southern States Baptists have always been the strongest Christian community, possessing great material resources and having few contacts with those of other traditions.

At the Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948, at which the World Council of Churches was formed, eight Baptist groups were represented: the Northern and National Conventions of the United States and the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference, the Baptists of Great Britain, New Zealand, Holland and Burma, and the China Baptist Council. Baptists were appointed both to the Central Committee of Ninety and the Executive. Since 1948 the Baptists of Denmark and Hungary have joined the World Council, as well as the second of the two Negro Conventions of the United States. Though unrepresented at Amsterdam, the Baptist Unions of Wales and Scotland accepted the invitations to join the World Council. The Baptists of Wales have shown little active interest in co-operative movements outside their own territory save in the field of foreign missions. In 1955 the Baptist Union of Scotland withdrew from the World Council "for seven years,"

on the ground of dissatisfaction with its basis and with the avowed hope that this would be elaborated in such a way as to exclude some of those at present in membership.

The other Baptist groups connected with the World Council have shared in its developing activities and have both given and gained much in the mutual exchanges and united enterprises which make up its life. At the third World Conference on Faith and Order, held in Lund in 1952, in addition to the delegates of the American (formerly Northern) Convention, there were Baptist representatives from Denmark and New Zealand and from the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec. There are at the present time seven Baptist members of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council, two of them Asiatics, one from India and one from Burma. Baptists are to be found on all the Theological Commissions, which are continuing the work of patient theological discussion.

That the Baptists of Ontario and Quebec have shared in all three of the World Conferences on Faith and Order, although Canadian Baptists are not in membership with the World Council, is due to the fact that the Canadian Baptist community as a whole is divided in its attitude to the Ecumenical Movement. There is now a Baptist Federation of Canada, uniting the three conventions of Ontario and Quebec, the Maritime Provinces and Western Canada. General sentiment in the first of these is favourable to the Ecumenical Movement; in the second and third it is more critical. The question of joining the World Council has been shelved for the time being, lest it prove a seriously divisive issue. A similar situation exists in Australia. Each of the five states has a Baptist Union of its own, but there is also a Baptist Union of Australia, uniting all the Baptists of the continent. In South Australia and Victoria, sentiment is more favourable to the Ecumenical Movement than in New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia, and there is a general desire not to divide the denomination on this matter. The Baptists Union of South Africa has never had many outside contacts. It is, however, associated with the South African Council of Churches, some members of which have joined the World Council.

The divided state of Baptist opinion is due, in part, to their strongly evangelical emphasis and to the fact that in most lands Baptists have been a "minority church" and have suffered from social and ecclesiastical disabilities. The stronger Churches have not always treated them very generously or granted them full recognition. Many of the Baptist groups are without the resources of personnel and money necessary for full participation in the Ecumenical Movement. Some are influenced in their attitude by

the fact that the Southern Convention, with its more than 8,000,000 church members (more than one third of the world total), at present refuses all co-operation with other Churches. Southern Baptists have given generous financial support in a number of places, particularly in certain European lands. There Baptists are only slowly emerging from the days of active persecution. They have found it difficult to establish themselves in lands dominated by State Churches. Of recent years, however, in eastern Europe, where all the Churches have had to endure the pressures of atheistic communism, the Free Churches begin to find themselves in an unfamiliar position of officially guaranteed equal opportunity with those who formerly tried to suppress them. In Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Rumania, Baptists are now members of National Ecumenical Councils. The decision to join the World Council, taken by Hungarian Baptists in 1956, may well be followed by other groups. European Baptists are less likely than some of those in the British Commonwealth and in Scotland to succumb to the hostile criticisms of the World Council spread in the name of the International Council of Christian Churches. This body not only insists on subscription to a ten-point statement of faith of a "fundamentalist" kind, but would apparently accept the thesis of its leaders that "the Bible teaches private enterprise and the capitalistic system, not as a by-product or as some side-line but as the very foundation structure of society itself in which men are to live and render an account of themselves to God."

V

Baptist representation in the World Council increases. Those associated with it find new opportunities of bearing their distinctive witness and of sharing in united Christian enterprises. This becomes the more important as ecumenical discussion begins to turn to the subject of baptism and as "united churches" come into existence. Baptists stood aside from the United Church of Canada, which in 1925 drew together Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Methodists. Those who were the product of missionary work from Canada and the United States stood aside from the Church of South India, inaugurated in 1947. They have generally shown themselves chary of discussions aiming at "organic union," having a traditional fear of clericalism and of "uniformity" and a determined loyalty to believers' baptism, which they find clearly set forth in the New Testament. In Ceylon and North India, however, Baptists churches which are the result of missionary effort from Britain have joined in negotiations aiming at new and comprehensive Churches of the South Indian pattern, but recognising believers' baptism as an alternative rite to paedobaptism and

confirmation. The final issue of these negotiations is as yet uncertain, but they will clearly have an important influence in other parts of the world.

The constitution of the World Council of Churches provides for the representation of world "confessional" bodies "in a consultative capacity" at sessions of the Assembly and the Central Committee. The General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance has taken advantage of this opportunity, though his position is inevitably a somewhat difficult one in view of the attitude adopted towards the World Council by the Southern Convention and certain other Baptist groups. The Baptist World Alliance has not yet made clear what its attitude would be to Baptist churches which become part of the proposed Churches of Lanka (Ceylon) and North India, though the schemes of union provide for the maintenance of full fellowship with all those with whom the uniting churches are at present associated. This remains one of the problems of the future, as does the urgent necessity of bringing to a state of real autonomy the Baptist Churches of Asia and Africa, which are still dependent on or under the authority of missionary societies. Whether or not they afterwards decide to join the World Council, they need helping towards wider ecumenical contacts within and outside their own lands. The strength of the Baptist community throughout the world is not properly recognised nor does it find adequate expression.

Every Christian communion is subject to inner tensions. Those which affect Baptists are perhaps more open to the world than is the case with others. Divergent attitudes to the Ecumenical Movement spring, as has been shown, from many different causes. The most important is the variety which has always characterised Baptist life and witness, and which comes from the insistence that local companies of believers must seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the light of Scripture and then have freedom to act according to their convictions. Ever since the 17th century and the days of John Bunyan, some Baptists have been prepared for church-fellowship at the local level with paedobaptists, believing that "differences in judgment about water-baptism should be no bar to communion." There have always been those who have realised the inadequacy of a doctrine of the Church which rests solely on the autonomy of a local congregation. Baptists are only beginning to face together the theological implications of the rite of baptism as they practise it. The need for a more articulated theology, which takes account of the variety of opinion, polity and practice among Baptists and other Christians, is increasingly recognised. Whether or not they share actively in the Ecumenical Movement, Baptists are challenged by it. But the differences

among them are accompanied by a strong sense of brotherhood and fellowship. This has remained unbroken in spite of the political and ecclesiastical changes of recent decades.

The direct Baptist contribution to the Ecumenical Movement has been no negligible one. They have much to say to their fellow-Christians which can only be said from within, as well as much to learn. But, in the centuries to come, it may appear that, under God, good purposes have been fulfilled both by those who are within the World Council and are ready to co-operate with their Christian brethren of other traditions in seeking the will of God for His Church and by those who, for the time being at least, remain outside.

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