

Dr. Ernest Payne: Thanksgiving Address*

IN the preface to his book *The Free Church Tradition in the Life of England*, Ernest Payne, writing of his own heritage said, "My deepest obligations are, first to a family tradition of non-conformity, stretching back to the opening of the eighteenth century, and perhaps earlier, and secondly, to a personal experience within the Free Churches which makes me increasingly sure that they are truly a part of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church."

These words were written 36 years ago in 1944. Within this quotation are contained the two principles upon which Ernest Payne based his life of service to the Church. They were, first his denominational loyalty, which was unswerving, and secondly his ecumenical commitment which was total. Both grew out of his basic Christian experience and he lived in the creative tension of these two principles all his life.

When I was about to leave Oxford to go abroad to study in Zurich, I went to see Ernest Payne in London, and expressed some apprehension of what lay ahead. He suggested to me that I should take particular note of Romans Chapter 12 and verse 12, which he said he had found true in his own experience. The New English Bible translates the verse thus:

"Let hope keep you joyful, in trouble stand firm,
persist in prayer",

but, Ernest Payne added, take the verse in reverse order, starting with persistence in prayer. At the heart of all Dr. Payne's work and witness, there was a deep God-consciousness, which derived from his own persistence in worship and prayer. He inherited from his own tradition, a godly discipline and a true piety—not a sentimental but a sturdy piety—nurtured in his home and chapel background in Clapton, and made his own through his personal experience of Christ. A Baptist document on the meaning of church membership which in the drafting owed much to Ernest Payne, says this: "There is, we hold, a personal crisis in the soul's life, when a man stands alone in God's presence, responds to God's gracious activity, accepts his forgiveness, and commits himself to the Christian way of life."

The source of Ernest Payne's God-consciousness, was that personal experience of God in Christ, discovered within his denominational heritage, which enabled him to travel quietly and confidently with his God, persisting all the while in prayer. Rightly did Dr. Coggan recently comment of Dr. Payne that he was one who walked with God.

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But his Christ could never be solely a Baptist Christ. Nor could his Church be simply a Baptist Church. His perspective of Christ, was Christ for the world, and the world for Christ. His perspective of the Church of Jesus Christ was of the World Church, and the Church in the World. Out of his personal experience, he developed a faith which authenticated itself in the broad sweep of his attitude to the Christian life, notably to the mission of the Church, and to the unity of the Church. His enthusiasm for both was in the tradition of William Carey, the Baptist pioneer missionary, whose memorial lectern stands within this great Abbey Church. William Carey, who saw the vision of a Christ to whom all nations of the earth could turn and look and be saved. William Carey, who called Baptists to expect great things from God and attempt great things for God. Ernest Payne's service to the missionary cause began with the Baptist Missionary Society in his student days and continued throughout the whole of his life. But he shared William Carey's realisation also, that if there was to be an effective mission of the Church, then that mission would be the more authentic if it were done by the churches together. For Carey had suggested that there should be called in 1810, a conference of all those societies involved in mission. This hope was fulfilled exactly 100 years later at the great Edinburgh Missionary Conference, seen by so many to be the true source of the modern ecumenical movement. Ernest Payne's experience of Jesus Christ taught him also that the intention of Christ was that his people should be one, in order that the world might believe. It was not simply the missionary motivation of witness to Christ which caused Ernest Payne to be a great ecumenical Baptist Christian, but also his sheer sense of obedience to the will and purpose of Christ. More than once he said that the Christ in Heaven must weep to see His followers in a divided state, unable regularly to share Christ's table. And so it was that Ernest Payne never sought to escape from the challenges of mission to the world, and of the unity of the Church. For him they belonged together. Christ in the world, Christ for the world, Christ's Church one in the world and for the world. The ecumenical movement was indeed at the heart of his understanding of the manifestation of the purpose of God. It has been said, perhaps rightly, that Ernest Payne in his own life and attitude illustrated the true ecumenical Christian who links denominational loyalty with ecumenical commitment and mission with unity.

After serving in the pastoral ministry at Bugbrooke and then as Young People's Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, he was teaching effectively and contentedly in Oxford, when in 1951 there came a call from the Baptist Union to become its General Secretary. It was not an easy decision for Ernest Payne to take, to leave Oxford, for there he was using his considerable gift of scholarship. His students found in him an efficient teacher, particularly in the one-to-one situation of a tutorial. There, he skilfully enabled students to begin to think for themselves and to find and to develop their own views and understandings of Christian Theology. He was always approachable, however

busy he was, to advise and counsel not only students but many others as well. This approachability remained with him all his life. It was a great wrench for him to leave that pleasant Oxford situation for the harder and, dare we say it, rougher life, of the General Secretary of the Baptist Union. He recognised also in that call, that although he was already a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, this appointment would take him still further, inevitably, into the ecumenical scene. For his predecessor, Dr. Aubrey, had been one of the founding fathers of the World Council of Churches.

I was a student at Oxford at the time when Ernest Payne accepted the call to leave for London. We asked him if we could congratulate him, and he said very simply, "You may not congratulate me, but you may wish me well." That perhaps, sums up his attitude to the responsibilities that came to him.

In the World Council of Churches he became a member of the Central Committee in Evanston in 1954 and was elected Vice-Chairman, remaining involved in that Committee's work, and in the Executive Committee until, as a President of the World Council of Churches, he finally retired at the Nairobi Assembly in 1975. And if ever a word was true of Ernest Payne in those challenging and difficult years within his public life, it is another part of the text of Romans 12.12: "In trouble stand firm."

From 1951 onwards he accepted the challenge of denominational office with all its tensions. He lived with the challenge of ecumenical office in both the British Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, and the tensions that that service brought, and what was more, he lived with the tensions between those two challenges, denominational and ecumenical. He followed his convictions. He held to his two principles, denominational loyalty and ecumenical commitment. And as he went, he was wounded from time to time, by those who misunderstood him. Indeed it would be true to say that he has carried his scars with him, to be a witness that he has fought the fight. But it was not in the nature of the man to bear any grudge. Dr. Visser 't Hooft in his memoirs, records how Ernest Payne was involved in the World Council in consultations and statements in so many of the flash-points of the 50s and 60s, in Suez and Hungary, in South Africa and the Cuban missile crisis. It was fortunate that he was there, for I think that many of us would say that if we could have chosen one person to stand with us in a crisis, it would have been Ernest Payne.

Seeing him in action at the Baptist Union Council, in the British Council of Churches which he served so remarkably, in the Committees and Assemblies of the World Council of Churches, one is reminded of Kipling's words on the making of a Real Man—"If you can keep your head, when all about you are losing theirs, and blaming it on you" Many of us will reflect on his chairmanship of those various Committees and not least one of his last chairmanship responsibilities, a difficult session in the Nairobi Assembly. He was a genuine con-

ciliator. He was fair to all points of view, consistent in judgement, and yet open minded. His decisions were to be respected and to be trusted. A distinguished member of the Russian Orthodox Church once said to me, that if he was on trial for his life, and could choose his judge, he would choose Ernest Payne.

Yet his service was not all challenges to be faced and scars to be borne. There was so much that reflects the other word of Paul in the text, "Let hope keep you joyful."

The first time I met him, was when I went as a student to Regent's Park College, and he greeted me with that familiar twinkle in his eye that so many people in commenting about him seem to have missed, and he said to me, "Don't believe those who say that Oxford is a home of lost causes, it is a place of new hopes."

In the Baptist Union he shared in the planning and carrying through of the Ter-Jubilee Celebrations to their successful conclusion, and during recent years in the Baptist Union, as President and Officer, he rejoiced at the signs of hope evident within that denomination. He saw the World Council of Churches grow from a relatively small membership to a vast one, he saw, as it were, the *oikumene*, turning to Christ in the fellowship of the World Council. More than once he reflected on the privileges that came to him and the joys it had brought. The privilege, for example, it had been for him, in 1961 at New Delhi, to be the one in the Chair to receive Russian delegates into the World Council.

Ernest Payne had a deep love for Russian Christians. As early as the Berlin Baptist World Alliance Assembly in 1934, he spoke of the challenge of the Anti-God Movement that was then so fierce against the Russian Christians and in other parts of the world. He was a great traveller to the Soviet Union and was always welcome. As one who was privileged to travel with him in 1977 on the last of his visits, it was remarkable to see him greeted with a truly brotherly embrace by Metropolitans of the Orthodox Church and by the Evangelical Christian Baptists who welcomed him and loved him as an elder statesman, known to be for a generation, a friend of Baptists in the Soviet Union. These were the things he lived for, and some of the things he gave his life for.

Honours came his way certainly, which he accepted with a sort of dignified surprise. President of the World Council of Churches, Honorary President of the British Council of Churches, Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council, the Council in which he played his full part, in addition to all his other responsibilities, Chairman of the Baptist Missionary Society and finally, President of the Baptist Union. From Her Majesty, he received an award which, by its very name, is so fitted to the man, when he was made a Companion of Honour.

The last time I saw him was at Regent's Park College, early in January of this year, when he chaired the Regent's Park College Council, the College to which he was devoted throughout his life, and he spoke that day to me of the great hopes that he still felt for the future of that

College in Oxford. In spite of all the challenges, all the tensions, all the difficulties, Ernest Payne was at heart a joyful man, because he was a man full of the hope of Jesus Christ.

One other thing needs to be said. We have spoken about his environment, we have spoken about his principles, we have spoken of the service he rendered to the Church, but we must remember that throughout his life he was sustained by the support of his home life. He would not have been what he was—we could not have had the Ernest Payne that we have had, but for the devotion and sacrifice of his wife and family, and as we honour him, we honour them.

And now we must move into the future without him. We have lost a friend, full of wisdom and of virtue. It is still difficult to think of him as no longer with us. Already we are beginning to miss the gentle persuasive voice asking probing questions, making relevant comments, offering the encouraging word. The heritage that he received, he has handed on to us, enhanced and enriched. The mission of the Christian Church and the unity of the Christian Church, the tasks to which he put his hand, are still tasks that are unfinished. We can do no better in honouring him than to set our hands the more firmly to these same tasks.

John Bunyan, of whom Dr. Payne was, of course, a great admirer, in his description, the well-known familiar description of Valiant-for-Truth's passing, comments that Valiant-for-Truth bequeathes his sword to those who shall succeed him in his pilgrimage. We are his successors. We can scarcely do better than to take up the sword that Ernest Payne hands on to us, continuing the service which he began, loyal to our own traditions and yet committed to the unity of the whole Church. For the trumpets have sounded for him on the other side. We must leave him there, and travel on without him, led by the Holy Spirit, holding to our own experience of Jesus Christ, serving God, allowing hope to keep us joyful, standing firm in trouble, and beyond all, persisting in prayer, and to God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, be all praise and honour, glory and thanksgiving, now and for evermore.

Amen.

W. M. S. WEST.