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COHERENCE AND DISINTEGRATION

A North American View

By contrast with Dr Mcbeth's 850pp magnum opus (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, Broadman Press, 1987*), Dr Brackney's study at 325pp is a model of brevity (W. H. Brackney, *The Baptists*, Greenwood Press, 1989, £35.95). Both provide important North American overviews of Baptist history. Brackney's contribution is in three parts: a 100 page essay on The Baptist Tradition, some 125 brief biographical sketches of Baptist leaders, and a series of helpful aids - a Baptist chronology, a table giving the contemporary geographical distribution of Baptist churches and membership, and a twenty-page bibliographical discussion.

The introduction by the series editor is not encouraging when he speaks of Baptists as those who have a reputation for 'ideological squabbling and institutional splintering'; which is quite a let-down from the introductory text from the pen of Thomas Crosby: 'Christ's Church is founded by persuasion and by the compulsion of Christ's Word, not by the agencies of temporal force. It

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is a voluntary company of saints separated from the world by the fact of regeneration and by the symbol of baptism which practices in mutual agreement the ordinances of its divine master'.

Brackney argues that there have been three seminal events in Baptist history. Two of those events will be familiar to British readers, but the third probably not. The first event was the publication of the London Confession of the Particular Baptists in 1644, which fairly may be made to stand for our Puritan origins and the early emergence of associational action. Secondly, the founding of the B.M.S. in 1792 witnesses eighteenth-century Baptists, having taken the evangelical revival into their own system, responding to William Carey's plea for world evangelism, and in so doing, baptising the societal model of how Baptists should unite for common action - educational, evangelistic, political or prophetic. The third watershed is seen as the establishment of the Baptist Bible Union in 1923, marking fundamentalist reaction to the inroads not only of modernism but of modernization in American life, and signalling denominational disintegration in a process apparently self-destructive.

It is perhaps significant that among British Baptists, whilst the importance of 1792 would be very widely comprehended, and our Puritan roots, if not the particulars of 1644, fairly generally recognised, 1923 would need a lengthy tutorial for its significance to be understood; for in Britain disaffection from the Baptist Union has been of individual churches or ministers rather than of groups of churches continuing in existence in an alternative association. This only serves to underline the importance of Brackney's book, for I fear that British readers today are profoundly ignorant of the development of Baptist life in North America to the extent that ignorance sometimes impairs our working together as fruitfully as we might in matters of common concern. This is quite contrary to earlier times when 'discussions of polity, piety, and politics were frequent and detailed between British and American Baptists'.

Five themes receive special attention. First the Bible, and here Brackney notes that, whilst in the last hundred years 'the Bible was transformed among Baptists from a source of unquestioned authority to a battleground for scientists and theologians and finally into a nursery of hybrid Baptists', it remains 'the sole fount of revelation which speaks to both the intellect and the experience, the Church and the individual'. Baptist views of the church, 'autonomous but interdependent', are related to developing patterns of membership and ministry, and lead in to a chapter discussing sacraments/ordinances as signs of faith. Finally, Christian discipleship is discussed in two chapters on voluntary religion and religious liberty.

The selection of the elect to appear in the Biographical section is bound to promote debate; both Billy Graham and Jesse Jackson are present but not Maclaren or Rushbrooke. In like fashion, your editor has to confess a little disappointment that this journal was not listed amongst the tools for research. But this is essentially an American perspective, and all the more valuable on this side of the Atlantic for being such.

**The Treasurer still has a few copies of McBeth's book available, price £20.*