

THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

JOURNAL OF

THE BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOLUME XXXIV

JANUARY 1991

No. 1

CONTENTS

EDITORIAL: NEXT OR LAST CHAPTER	1
BAPTIST PEACEMAKERS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY PEACE SOCIETIES Paul R. Dekar	3
THE BAPTIST CONSCIENCE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY D. W. Bebbington	13
NOW IS THE TIME: Baptists and Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation Erich Geldbach	25
TOWARDS A THEOLOGY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT John Biggs	33
THE BARKLY-WEST DECLARATION Donald D. Black	43
SOCIETY NEWS and REVIEWS Michael Collis, J. H. Y. Briggs	12, 46

NEXT OR LAST CHAPTER?

It is perhaps appropriate for a new volume of the *Quarterly* to pose this question about human history. In 1990 the World Council of Churches organised a major convocation which met in Seoul, South Korea, on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation which provides the focus of the articles in this issue. Under this headline the WCC sought to cluster the major aspects of a practical programme of Christian discipleship: a commitment to peace over against all that destroys or puts life at risk, but peace with justice, for the Biblical concept of peace is not simply an absence of violence but a concern for wholeness of life for all humankind, with opportunity to develop the fullness of life God intended. The third dimension, the integrity of creation, is not just a baptism of green politics but a thorough-going working out of God's creative mandate to Adam and his offspring in the context of a world which, rather than the fruit of random accident, is God-created and to be respected as such.

Thus God's plan of redemption is not just for humankind but for the whole created order, which today seems to be as much under threat from human agency as the weakest members of human society seem to be from their fellows. To the classic list of social injustices now need to be added our sins against creation: the 'greenhouse effect', the devastation of the world's forests, the production of acid rain, the

THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

pollution of the seas, the exhaustion of finite resources, and an unbridled biotechnology, which unless subjected to proper discipline does not always provide the improvement of life that it promises. With reduced tension between the superpowers, the threat of nuclear holocaust may have retreated. But the disposal of nuclear waste and the stability of nuclear plants remain major problems awaiting resolution. Chernobyl may yet prove a turning-point in history.

All this is not simply the consequence of management failures in handling technology. Christians believe that the cause of this crisis is essentially theological and poses questions about the exploitative age in history which is probably just now coming to its end. Taken together, the Enlightenment and the experience of industrialisation led humanity to believe that material progress was the goal of society and that, therefore, humanity had a right, and even a duty, to dominate and exploit creation to this end. Thus a secular world view was legitimised which made no reference to the creator or his purposes in creation, which was instead viewed 'as a receptable for raw materials which are only given value through exploitation'. Since such a philosophy increasingly puts the world itself at risk, Christian thinkers are now properly calling for a reassessment of the exploitative ethic and the world-view that underlies it.

Such a task is intellectually necessary to make sense of a world in crisis. Indeed it gives to the biblical theology of creation and man's alienation from both the created order and its creator a new and heightened relevance. It is also socially urgent in terms of the appalling destitution suffered by the poor in many parts of the world today, not to mention the time paupers of coming generations threatened with the legacy of a polluted and denuded cosmos.

Because of this, within such a programme lies an evangelistic strategy through which people of all ages and all classes are alerted to the demands and the hope of the Christian gospel. Without the biblical perspective the world of today is a world without sense or meaning. Only the Bible message - of a good creation destroyed by man's sin which causes ambiguity within human history at every stage of its development; of a God who is passionately concerned for peace and justice for all his creation; of a world redeemed by the sacrificial death of God's only Son putting into reverse both for creation and for individual men and women, if they will only respond in faith, the processes of sin - makes sense out of the non-sense of the human condition as now experienced. Thus as the structural problems of a threatened creation are positively addressed, so the personal needs of the individual to be reconciled to the Creator God who has made us, become revealed. Thus, alongside the concern for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, and complementary to it, are the many churches and mission agencies which have identified the last decade of the twentieth century as a decade of evangelism.

This means that the crucible of history in the last decade of the twentieth century will take on a new dimension, for beyond the history of nations and their citizens, it will have to embrace a history of the created order. Have destructive processes been set in train which mean that its fate is already sealed, at least for some aspects of life that we have known hitherto? Is there time left for a vital change? Can a new sense of responsibility for nature save not only threatened species, and threatened landscapes, but life itself? And where lies the salvation of individual men and women in all this? These critical issues must be embraced within the next chapter of history. Their profound nature will challenge all shallow pragmatisms and drive men and women back to asking fundamental questions about the world and about themselves, about purpose and reality, about life and eternity. If the Christian church fails to meet such questioning with answers of sufficient depth and conviction, it will have failed at a vital turning point of human history.