

Baptists and Church Union

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THERE can be no useful discussion without a clear definition of terms. If words convey different meanings to different people, it is obvious that interchange of opinions and convictions becomes futile. The title of this paper contains three expressions whose meaning must be clearly grasped. Otherwise confusion must ensue. What do we mean, then, by the name "Baptists?" It will be observed at once that the title implies an aggregate of individuals characterized by some common belief or practice just as we might speak of soldiers, sailors, or airmen. This designation has been chosen on purpose in preference to such expressions as "The Baptist Church," or "The Baptist Denomination" for the simple reason that the administration of baptism constitutes a sharp line of demarcation amongst all who profess and call themselves Christians. The sacrament, or rite, or ceremony is one of initiation. It is always associated with admission into the Church of Christ. But there is a deep and vital difference of doctrine as to the fit subjects for baptism, and as to the proper mode. To obviate any charge of misrepresentation or unfriendliness, let me confine myself solely to the beliefs of those Christians who take what may be called the Baptist view on the subject.

That is concerned both with the subject of baptism and with its mode. Regarding the former the Baptist position is that only those who have intelligently and consciously surrendered themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour and Sovereign are truly qualified for baptism. The grounds for such a view are that the New Testament always regards baptism as the outward sign and seal of regeneration. It bears the same relation to conversion as his coronation to a king. He is not made more of a king by being crowned. There have been cases in history of uncrowned kings, and

they were kings none the less ; and yet there is a wonderful seemliness and significance in the ceremony of coronation which goes far to justify and sanctify it. The ordinance of believers' baptism, as Baptists love to call it, does not derive its value and validity from any such subjective grounds. It is the express command of Our Lord Jesus Christ from His own lips, and by the pens of those who were inspired by His Holy Spirit to expound His Gospel in the pages of the New Testament. The point on which attention must be concentrated is that, according to Baptist understanding of the New Testament Scriptures, the proper subject of the sacrament is the believer. That is irrespective of all question of age. The phrase, occasionally heard, "adult baptism" is a misnomer. Age has nothing to do with this matter. The sole factor is belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. With regard to the mode of baptism, it is held that the true and proper method is by immersion. The basis of that belief is again found in the phraseology of the New Testament.

Baptism of the kind just defined is practised by all churches of the Baptist persuasion, constituting a religious body of enormous proportions when it is realized that their followers are found everywhere, and, in some parts of the globe, such as the Southern States of America, they are exceedingly numerous. In passing, it may be remarked that their numbers surely constitute an answer to the possible criticism that there is here nothing more than a form of religious crankiness. It is an invariable rule that cranks of all kinds are so few as to render themselves conspicuous. On the other hand, the persistence of the practice of believers' baptism in unbroken succession for very many centuries, and its prevalence at the present day surely prove that it must be rooted and grounded in abiding truth, for otherwise it would have long since perished. Baptists, in the narrower sense of the term, explained as members of a certain religious organization, by no means exhaust the number of those who may be so described. Thus the "Church of Christ" practises believers' baptism, and so do the "Brethren," and there are probably other bodies, especially in the United States of America, who hold similar tenets.

Turning now to the word "Church." It can be said without fear of contradiction that all Baptists regard the church visible as a society, instituted indeed by the Lord

Jesus Christ, and acknowledging His authority in all things, and worthy of all honour and praise, but whose genius is economic rather than essential. It must be distinguished carefully from the church invisible which constitutes the mystical Body of Christ with its unity in variety, and variety in unity like that standing miracle, the human organism. That is the true church within whose ample confines there is a multitude which no man can number, even of those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. It must be obvious that the individualism, implied in the doctrine of believers' baptism, as just defined, makes such a view inevitable. Indeed, in the case of most Baptist causes, the local church is a self-contained and self-governing unit. All Baptist churches are congregational in policy, and it is necessary to add that the more thorough organization which has come to characterize the Baptist churches of recent years has not affected them in this particular. While there is more centralization in some respects, it is largely concerned with the financial assistance of the poorer causes. The same may be said with even greater force of all religious bodies which make believers' baptism a condition of membership.

In view of this historic and distinctive position, the question naturally arises as to the attitude of all such bodies to Church Union, interpreting the term as formal and organic co-operation. There has always been a certain measure of union and communion amongst all believers, and there will always be. There have been times and seasons when it has sunk to a very low ebb, as during those periods of religious persecution which flame out like volcanic eruptions from time to time in the history of the church and of the world. There have been other ages like that of the apostles, and this present time, when a wonderful spirit of brotherliness and fellowship has been abroad. But that is a different thing from union as the word is commonly understood in these days, and as it is exemplified in the fusion of the Methodist bodies within recent years, and the amalgamations of great Presbyterian Churches in Scotland. One rejoices to find the organization of councils for deliberation and common effort, but all these fall short of union in the full acceptation of the term.

It must be only too obvious that organic union is an

impossibility as long as Baptists maintain their distinctive views, and these go deeper than a mere matter of method in the administration of a sacrament. The keystone of the Baptist position is that the Church of Christ is constituted by those who have been born again of the Divine Spirit. These words are written in no spirit of religious snobbishness, or Pharisaism. Baptists are only too conscious of their failures and imperfections, but they humbly request that they may be judged by their ideals rather than by their actual practice, even if that be hard to reconcile with some preceding sentences, as this case will clearly show.

I refer to the question of church membership when the applicant's name happens to be already on the roll of another religious body. For argument's sake, let us cite the instance of a Presbyterian who has felt constrained to seek admission to a Baptist Church. It may be remarked that in Scotland the movement is occasionally reversed. Baptists unite themselves with one of the Presbyterian bodies. But our concern is with the exposition of the Baptist position. Such a candidate could not be received as a member until he had given satisfactory evidence that he had been genuinely converted to God in the evangelical sense of these words. He would then require to be immersed on a public profession of his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, although, in the case of some Baptist Churches, baptism is optional. But that is regarded as exceptional. It must be perfectly clear and plain that, as far as any scheme of church union goes, bodies of Christians, holding such views as those just indicated, could hardly participate in anything of the kind without surrendering almost all that is distinctive in their historic witness. As it is, Baptists are divided amongst themselves, and it seems to be impossible to draw them together into anything remotely resembling amalgamation. In every department of life, union with or without uniformity seems to be an impossibility as far as anything approaching a universal scale is concerned.

It has already been observed that, as far as general co-operation is concerned, Baptists are prepared to work hand in hand with all other believers, although some qualification must be made again. It stands to reason that the strength of conviction, implied in their characteristic tenets, is bound to make them narrow and intolerant in the best

sense of these terms. There is no lack of charity and humility and courtesy involved. On the contrary, it is but an illustration of a proverb which applies to every aspect of human life and experience. I refer to the saying that birds of a feather flock together. That is inevitable in view of their habits and constitutions. That analogy will serve to explain the reason why Baptists of the stricter sort hold aloof from their fellows in common effort. They are not prompted by any spirit of exclusiveness or superiority but by reason of radical incompatibility. Oil and water will not mix. These remarks do not apply to all Baptists by any manner of means. Very many are ready to live and labour with all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.

With regard to the question of Inter-Communion, there are some Baptists who demand as an indispensable prerequisite for participation in the Lord's Supper that the believer should have been immersed. Many others are prepared to admit all who can claim a saving interest in the Lord Jesus Christ to the Communion. I should judge that the tendency described in the last sentence is on the increase. As for other religious bodies, I should think that very few Baptists would refuse to join with members of other churches, provided that such a course were acceptable to those who were in positions of responsibility. The question is not one on which most Baptists feel very deeply. Their attitude to other believers is one of informal sympathy and good-will, the extreme individualism which is so characteristic of their system tending in that direction.

The general impression, conveyed by the foregoing, may seem to be that the Baptists represent an indigestible and unassimilable entity in Christendom, but that is due to their insistence on certain truths which they believe to be taught in the New Testament with sufficient emphasis to warrant their uncompromising attitude towards them. There is nothing to be gained by the sacrifice of conscientious conviction. Nothing is so expensive as compromise. But the last word must lie with Him Who is the Author and Finisher of the Church. It must ultimately conform to His plans and designs. When it does, we shall find still deeper meaning in the famous words that in Christ "there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free : but Christ is all and in all."