

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

## The Tasks of the Baptist Denomination in Germany.<sup>1</sup>

GERMANY finds herself in a critical situation, suffering shocks from within and from without. Old things have been shaken, and the new do not yet stand out clear and certain. A complete change has taken place among the people within the last hundred years. Till the beginning of the nineteenth century Germany was an agricultural land. In the middle of the century capitalisation and industrialisation began, and by the time of the last three Emperors had reached to such an extent that even farming was affected, and in north and east Germany the peasant had to give up more and more of his land to the large agriculturist. The lower classes moved to the industrial centres and this change was a dangerous uprooting for large numbers of people. Formerly the children had grown up on the land on which their father worked, to a certain pattern, and with an accepted outlook on life, but now the boy went into the town to the factory and entered a completely new world. He lost his connection with his native place and became spiritually homeless. He married a similarly uprooted girl, and their children had hardly anything of the old habits and outlook. The lowering of wages and unemployment drove the family hither and thither, from Silesia to Westphalia, and from there to Saxony. Everywhere new customs and thoughts and men met them. Something unstable and distracted seized people.

Against this background let us look at the historical development of the German Baptist movement. In its first period, which reaches to about 1870, the main field of missionary activity was the country. The first congregations, leaving aside Hamburg and Berlin, which at that time were themselves only small provincial towns, were in Oldenburg, Hessen, Holstein, Lower Pomerania, Prussia, that is, in the agricultural districts. This is the more remarkable because to-day we find it so difficult to win

<sup>1</sup>Translated with considerable abridgment, by E. A. Payne, B.A., B.D., B.Litt., from notes of an address delivered at a Conference of the German Baptist Young People's Union, Whitsuntide, 1927. The full text appeared in the *Jungbrunnen, Monatschrift des Jugendbundes deutscher Baptistengemeinden*, August, September and November, 1927. The author has since been appointed German secretary of the World Alliance for the Promotion of International Friendship through the Churches.

the deeply-rooted country people. In Rhineland and Westphalia, for example, there are proportionally few in the congregations who are natives of those parts. In most cases either the members themselves, or their parents, have come from other districts, that is, are folk who have been "uprooted," in the sense already explained. It is the same in other parts of Germany. In the country, among those who are really attached to the soil our work progresses only slowly, or goes no more forward. The main field of activity in the second period of German Baptist history, which stretches to the present day, shifts from the country to the towns. Our work has taken on quite another complexion from that which it had in the time of our fathers.

What type of people have we in our churches to-day? We are considering the question in no unpleasantly critical or superior manner, nor with individuals in mind. When the self-conscious peasantry in Germany, as a result of the general industrial and capitalist revolution, began to disappear, new divisions showed themselves among the people, and created their own peculiar self or class-consciousness. On the one side the conscious bourgeoisie arose, as we have it in the civil service, in the educated and professional classes, and in commercial and industrial circles, and on the other side the class-conscious workers, the Proletariat. Three clear, distinct, and in part warring social divisions are to be found in modern Germany, the peasants, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The aristocracy was already before the Revolution a part of the upper bourgeoisie.

We no longer reach the peasants from among whom the first Baptists drew their strength. The higher ranks of the middle-classes have nothing in common with us, know, most of them, nothing about our existence. That also separates us from the times of our fathers, when the State and the general public were often occupied with our affairs, though in a hostile manner. The typical bourgeoisie stand far from us, and equally so, on the other side, do the class-conscious proletariat. There is left only a small section of the lower middle-class. Modern Baptists in Germany are there to be located from the sociological point of view.

That the average German Baptist belongs to the lower middle-class does not mean that we have not also in our ranks many factory workers. We have, but they are no longer members of the class-conscious proletariat. They are being themselves transformed into bourgeoisie, and it is because of this that pious working-men often receive so little sympathy from their acquaintances, being looked upon as traitors. The ideal proletarian is a revolutionary, who devotes himself not to his own little ego, but hears the call to bring salvation to his class, his

people and to mankind. He consecrates his life to a great ideal. Among the bourgeoisie also, there is concern not only for the little "I." The scholar and artist give themselves wholly to an ideal. The official lives not for himself, but for the State. The ambition of the great industrial magnate is often not occupied with personal advantage, but struggles towards the organisation of an idea. On the other hand everything for the typical, lower-middle class individual turns about his own ego. The man is a Philistine, living an ego-centric life. He has indeed an ideal, but it is the possession of a warm stall and crib. His "I," at the most the wider "I" of the family, is the content and aim of his life.

This class of the spiritually homeless and ego-centric we to-day reach, in contrast to our fathers, to the Anabaptists and to the early Christians. The reason can only lie in the way in which we proclaim our message. Our fathers were revolutionary, and were on that account persecuted. The Anabaptists died as rebels. The early Christians were put to death as a public danger. The modern Baptist, however, enjoys hearing pious stories in chapel, and is happy as long as he has his peace—a typical little Philistine! In religious matters he thinks only of his little unimportant ego, feeling himself a child of God with the certainty of one day reaching Heaven, if only he is quiet and well-behaved, and ignorant that in religion he concerns himself with anything other than the blessedness of the individual soul.

For what is our message to-day? To put it crudely, one is told, "You must be converted! If you are not, you will go to Hell! Therefore be converted, and you will go to Heaven, the place of perfect well-being." The result of the proclamation of such an ego-centric Christianity is the attraction in the main of those people already naturally inclined to an ego-centric life. And this leads easily to an egoistic one. How much selfish religious enjoyment there is, how many people who want only "edification" and emotional enjoyment, and who have no idea that Christianity involves surrender and sacrifice! How few developed and responsible folk we have! Such we cannot reach with the "I-emphasising" kind of Gospel, for they want a message of responsibility and action. The conversion of the individual soul is certainly a part of the Gospel, but it is not the whole, only a small part. Why ought a man to be converted? That he may reach Heaven? Conversion is not in itself an end, only the means to an end. Through conversion God selects His instruments, and the really important things come after. The aim is not that one's own little ego may be sharer in another world of eternal bliss, but the honouring of God and the building of His Kingdom. Jesus sought to free men from the fetters of

their little egos, to raise them above themselves, to bring them into relation with the Absolute, the Eternal, the Divine.

Our fathers adopted that expression of Christianity which had been created by Pietism. Pietism had deliberately and, in relation to the age, necessarily concentrated on the salvation of the individual soul. It renounces the task of penetrating to every part of life with the Gospel. One must separate oneself from the world, and if possible avoid all contact with it. That attitude is contrary to the teaching of Jesus, who spoke repeatedly in a collective sense of the light of the world and the salt of the earth, of the field, which is the world, of the will of God on earth, and of the Kingdom of Heaven as a tree which spreads its branches everywhere. Pietism draws in this all-embracing horizon, and makes the salvation of the individual the central aim of religion. Christ becomes only the means to the salvation of the individual, and is thereby given a lower place.

None of the early Christians dared to call Him "Brother." They called Him "Lord!" But Pietism speaks of "the little Brother," "the little Lamb," "the Sweet Bridegroom." How really insignificant and empty of content are the hymns about Jesus which the more recent Pietism popularized, in comparison with the robust hymns of the Reformation, or even the Old Testament Psalms! In the latter God and His Kingdom are praised; in the former in significant fashion God retreats into the background. From such a narrow and "I-emphasising" type of religion we must step out if we want the complete and full Gospel.

Although our fathers during the Hamburg fire opportunely set aside the chapel as a temporary lodging-place, and although privately Deaconesses' Homes and Temperance Societies have been founded, our denomination as a whole has not recognized the social implications of the Gospel, as did the Anabaptists. We run away from the world and are indifferent to culture. A few are even its enemies, and describe all spiritual movements which do not appear in religious garb as inspired by the Devil. We must follow the example of Jesus in regard to the "Law," which was the soul of the Pharisaic culture of Palestine, placing ourselves in the life of our time, and spiritualising and sanctifying it. Our task must be not to "destroy" our culture, but to "fulfil" it. We ought no longer to draw back from the worlds of Art and Poetry and Music. On the more practical side, in so-called work for the Kingdom of God a process of capitalisation and industrialisation has set in. We possess to-day a recognised technique of Christian charity. How many thousands of missionaries are yearly supported among our people! What a flood of Christian magazines and tracts there is! Countless con-

ferences and courses are held. There are organisations for the young and the old, for women and children, for laymen and preachers. Everywhere there is more and more organisation, which threatens to choke the real life within. Christian leaders become increasingly scientifically trained and specialised officials. The really worth-while work, however, and that acceptable in the sight of God can only be done through personal contact with a brother man. Only then does power go out from us, and it is as if a spark from our soul jumped across to another, and another life is illuminated.

There must be reform of our personal lives, and also a striving after truth, justice and responsibility in society. The loudest voices on these questions must be those of Christians. Often in the history of mankind, God has selected an individual, or a family, or an entire nation to build His Kingdom. He gives them a certain time, and if they prove themselves unfit then they are cast aside, and other instruments are sought. It was so with the Children of Israel. They were the people of God for fifteen hundred years, but in the end they failed to rise to their opportunity, and their inheritance was taken away and given to the Gentiles. There is danger of our suffering a like fate to-day, if we do not faithfully carry out the will of God. His Kingdom is not something only other-worldly and future, above all it is not something circumscribed, something limited to church or chapel. In the thought of the old prophets and of the poets of the Psalms the Kingdom of God is not equivalent to the Jewish people, but embraces mankind. It signifies a new mode of life in personal, social and political relations here on this earth. So also declared Jesus: it was this that the early Christians expected. Only a later Christianity has so remoulded the conception that Catholics teach that the kingdom is the Church, and Protestants that it is something completely other-worldly and future.

This kingdom does not suddenly enter the world as something completely other. Struggle, work, fighting are the thoughts in connection with it that receive emphasis in the pages of the Bible. Not concern for the Ego, but sacrifice of the Ego, self-surrender that one may become a "grain of wheat," is the mark of a Christian.

Let us face the question honestly: Who are they who to-day stand for righteousness in public life? Who ask that everyone be treated as a brother and not degraded into a means of personal gain? Who concern themselves that the sun may come into the lives of the poor and the down-trodden? Who fight for freeing from the fetters of mammon as he appears in the guise of modern capitalism? Who stand for peace and mutual understanding among the nations instead of threats and sabre-rattling? Can

we who call ourselves the children of God honestly come forward and say: "We are the people!"? Must we not rather creep away ashamed and say: "Of such things we have not even thought. Are we all our brothers' keepers?" It is not implied that Socialists and Communists are necessarily better men than we. It is, however, certain that Socialism draws its power from roots which are religious. Extraordinarily strong in Socialism is the thought of solidarity, fellowship, the sharing of life's burdens, the equal responsibility of all for the individual, and of the individual for all. The right of the stronger and the survival of the fittest may be the law of the animal world, but for the right relations between men, between classes, between nations, and even between men and living creatures in general, this gives no ruling principles. The deepest meaning of righteousness is not the striving after one's rights, but an all-embracing love, and this those whom the spirit of Christ urges should express and spread without wearying.

In the last few years the increase in our numbers has been comparatively slight. Last year the increase amounted to only a third of that of previous years. Is one reason for this perhaps the fact that we are resting on the laurels of our fathers? They were given certain tasks for their own age by God and they endeavoured to fulfil them. They proclaimed the message of the need for the personal decision of the individual for God, of the unconditioned freedom of personal conviction, and of the ideal of the early Christian congregation. This message is to-day accepted in all Christian circles. Has, then, the German Baptist movement completed its work? Are we a dying tree, which has borne its fruit? God grant that it be not so! But we must seek new paths. Instead of habits and customs we need a faith like that of Abraham. What really is faith, as it is demanded by Jesus? The word is difficult to translate. It stands for the exalting and at the same time humbling experience of the call of God to service in the building of His Kingdom. Woe to us if we show ourselves useless! Happy are we if we recognise our tasks and accomplish them!

H. PETRICK.