

The Value of Baptist Witness To-day.

WHATEVER else the discussions on Church Union have done, they have certainly brought into prominence the distinctive contributions of the denominations to the common life of the Church. Again and again it has been said that no union is at all possible which does not allow for the full utterance of that particular emphasis for which each branch of the Church is historically famous. The possibility of our merging our life in the larger life of the whole has forced on us the question: what is the distinct witness for which we stand? And the minute we ask that question, we are compelled to go on to another: do we really need, in these modern days, to keep alive our independent testimony, that testimony which has made our Baptist Church what it is? And, without any prejudice to the question of Church Union, we venture to answer: the times in which we live call for a strong emphasis on that aspect of religious life which it has been the glory of Baptists to demonstrate in modern times.

What are the needs of to-day which call for a Baptist witness?

I.

Both modern thought and modern life call for an emphasis on and an interpretation of the principle of Authority. This principle is admitted to be necessary in every department of life. In the spheres of morals, civil life, and religion, it is the belief in some Authority which constitutes the greatest power to appropriate action. From this belief springs the binding power of morality, and the driving power of religion. Authority is real, is always present with men, and without it the true development of life and character cannot be achieved. Every religious man demands some authority, some eternal sanction, which can urge on all that is within him to advance towards God.

Now these modern days of ours have witnessed the discrediting of one kind of authority after another. The props on which men have been accustomed to lean have fallen away. This might be illustrated in the region of political theory, but it finds a ready example in religious life. It was perhaps inevitable that eighteenth-century rationalism should combine with nineteenth-century materialism, to undermine the traditional bases of our faith. In face of this double attack, many sought refuge in a closer following of that Church where the matter of authority is quickly settled. But for those who could not see their way to a blind acquiescence in either a series of Church Councils or the dicta of a Pope, the matter remained—and remains—a grave problem. "What *are* we to believe?" cry men and women all around us. "Give us some sure ground for our feet," they plead. And we believe that the Baptist, following, as he does, the New Testament as closely as it can be followed, is in a position to point the way to an Authority for life and thought.

We decline to rely altogether upon the traditional utterance of a Church, however hoary and reverend it may be. We are not committed to the sincere but antiquated statements of several centuries ago. We direct ourselves and others to the revelation of God in Christ: we present the essence of religion as the relation of the individual conscience and God: we disclaim any authority that is merely external: we trace all authority up to God, and believe that there the will finds purpose and energy, the heart passion, and the mind truth and reality. To God in Christ we owe absolute loyalty and obedience. And a world which is suspicious of mere tradition, which looks askance at the fiat of bygone ages, may well find its driving force in an immediate and personal contact with that Christ Who is God's everlasting Yea to all our problems. As a denomination we have affirmed the right of freedom from outward control. In this assertion the true aim has not been so much to establish the rights of individual congregations as to insist on that spiritual condition which alone can make the true spiritual Church. As far as the question of authority is concerned, it is a mistake to regard the Baptist position as merely that of men who cannot bear anything other than local independence. We have no genius for mere

separateness. Our aim is the emphasis on the principle of spiritual freedom as necessary to the true life of the Church. And we believe that this emphasis, which drives a man back to the New Testament will do much to meet the modern need. †

II.

A second great need of these days is the restoration of conversion to its central place in any religious life. There is no doubt that conversion has been discredited in many modern eyes by its frequent accompaniment of great emotionalism. It is, after all, not so very long ago that enthusiasts were stating that the only genuine kind of conversion was that of the instantaneous and emotional type. The attempt to force all religious experience along this line into one channel, and one channel only, was spiritually and psychologically a mistake. And the effect of the restricted outlook on conversion was that many were prompted to assume rather a cynical attitude in regard to it. There were those who said they would rather stand with the Emersons and Theodore Parkers and Walt Whitmans, the "once-born," than with the others who claimed to have an experience of a new birth. Happily, the careful investigations of psychologists like Starbuck and William James have done much to restore conversion to its true place in religious thought. They explain to us the experiences of both "once-born" and "twice-born." They point out that conversion is a normal adolescent phenomenon, and not something extraordinary, as many supposed. They say that not even backsliding can eradicate the good . . . "that it (the conversion experience) should, for even a short time, show a human being what the high water mark of his spiritual capacity is, this is what constitutes its importance—an importance which backsliding cannot diminish, although persistence might increase it" (W. James).

Especially in the minds of the young people of our Churches to-day does this need to take firm root. They have not escaped the cynicism which a too rabid emotionalism has produced. And no church can hope to maintain its spiritual life at the highest level which does not do justice to the place and power of conversion.

This, then, is a great need to-day. And the Baptist is well qualified to give to conversion all the emphasis it deserves. Our rite of Believers' Baptism can only justify its position in so far as it declares clearly its testimony to the reality of the New Birth. To regard Baptists merely as people who believe in immersion is to fail to understand them. Baptists do believe in, and practise, immersion, but the emphasis should fall, primarily, upon the word *Believers*. The fact that *only believers*, they who can of their own free will, and with a clear mind, declare their faith by immersion, is a clear testimony to the meaning of baptism in regard to conversion. There is no other kind of Baptism which does so clearly speak of the meaning of conversion. The candidate for Believers' Baptism is expressing outwardly what is a profound inner experience. His baptism means that there has occurred in his inner life a complete change of attitude. He has surrendered his will to Christ. He is a converted man. He has lost himself, only to find himself anew in Christ. Believers' Baptism, therefore, symbolises that complete surrender which, says Starbuck, is essential to conversion. Every time a Baptist Church holds a baptismal service, it is saying in plain words: "We believe in the necessity of conversion, and this rite is a symbol of that experience."

Nor should it be overlooked that the Baptist, in his distinctive rite, is expressing the individuality of conversion. There is no such thing as affecting the great transformation by proxy. There is no genuine faith apart from individual faith. Only when a man faces the great realities by himself, when he appropriates for himself the glory and power of Christ, can he be said to have entered the inner shrine of religious experience. And is not this the very thing for which our young people are clamouring? "Let us think it out for ourselves," they say; "let us test our fathers' views and our fathers' standards, and make them our own." And when they say this they are doing more than declaring again the inborn love of youth for independence: they are testifying to the great fact of all religious experience—that to be genuine, it must be individual. It is not here claimed that either in thought or practice the Baptists have always kept up to the high level of this principle. We are not free from the charge of trying

now and again to force the experience of our young people into the grooves we ourselves have made. This is a charge of which probably no section of the Church is guiltless. But it is claimed that in the Baptist emphasis on Believers' Baptism we do declare our conviction as to the supremacy and the individuality of conversion. And it will be difficult to find any other Baptismal rite which does that. We are not alone in our following of this principle, but we live as a denomination by our central emphasis on it. Without this, we might very well cease to be. With it, we are prepared to meet the needs of many to-day.

III.

If the religion of the Churches is to have any deep influence on the world to-day, it must have some reference to the social and industrial problems with which the modern world is beset. We are under no illusions as to the proper place of the Church in this matter. It is not for the Christian preacher or the Christian teacher to usurp the place of the economist or the politician. We have neither authority nor definite programme for that. But there is one thing we cannot fail to do, and that is to express, and express fearlessly, the social implications of the Gospel of Christ. The day is passing—we hope it is almost gone—when the Gospel can be preached as if it applied to the Sabbath delectations of the church-going minority, and to them only. We have outgrown the idea that Salvation is something which applies to the soul in vacuo. Divorce the Gospel from the common, everyday activities of mankind, and you have strangled it. Even the Apostle Paul had to remind some of his flock that there were other Christian duties than waiting for the Second Advent, viz. attention to work and play of every day, and bringing to bear on them both the spirit of the Master. It may be that in the history of the Church we have occasionally forgotten this: but the modern need has drawn our attention to it again, and the eyes of all are turned to the Church to see whether she has any word of enlightenment for the perplexities of our social life.

That the world needs enlightenment on this matter cannot be doubted. Who is satisfied with the tone and temper of,

say, democracy, to-day? Is there anyone who does not feel the abject spiritual poverty of so many of our social panaceas? Take a place in any crowd of men gathered together for the airing of grievances and the propagation of new ideas, and you will feel that the level of it all is, generally, materialistic. The practice of modern democracy has become less and less democratic. The apostles of freedom have become less and less tolerant. The opponents of class divisions have allowed themselves to be drawn into class warfare. And there has been a relegation of the claims of religion to a place far in the rear.

Now all this constitutes a challenge to every branch of the Christian Church. And if it be a general challenge to all, it is a particular challenge to us, whose witness is that of a spiritual democracy. We claim to take our stand upon the revelation of Him who laid down the very conditions on which democracy is alone possible. No one emphasised the supreme worth of every individual soul as much as Jesus did. No one set forth man in a nobler light. No one believed in men and women more than He. And if we deduce from His teaching certain principles which form the ideal of democracy, we must be careful to go as far as He did, and state clearly the spiritual basis of it all. Now the Baptist Church, in common with others, has emphasised the democratic side of organised church life. Our method of Church government is surely none other than that. And in the sacred sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we have as beautiful an embodiment of the democratic spirit as you will find anywhere. We are so constituted, therefore, and have such a tradition, that we may well claim to speak a word to the masses of men to-day.

What is that word? It is surely a word of warning. We shall not be true to our Master if we fail to point out the disastrous consequences of any policy that does not partake of the spirit of Jesus. We have no commission to supply theories of political government: we have no mandate to dictate to either side in the great struggles of industry. But we have a decided mandate to get into the pages of the New Testament, explore the mind of Christ, and then declare it with apostolic boldness and singleness of heart. If it is our proper work to declare the revealed mind of God about sin, it is no less our

proper work to declare His mind about sins—sins in the particular, sins as we find them in the common life of industry and social life. Doubtless any definite attempt to do this would arouse a storm of protest. There will probably always be those who are sensitive about a Gospel which descends from the general to the particular, but they have neither reason nor authority on their side. Any Church that has a passion for the following of our Lord's teaching, when that teaching has been correctly understood and practically interpreted, will draw the men and the women of to-day into respect and response.

The value of our Baptist witness to-day, consists, in a sentence, in our power to preach Christ Crucified as the solution of the enigmas of life. We can preach Him so that He is not hindered in His work. We can point men to Him, and tell them that they need no other. We can proclaim that, not by this outward ceremony, not by that priestly mediation, do men need to approach God, but in the Living Way, God's revealed Way, Jesus Christ. We can show religion to consist in the relation between the individual man and God. We can proclaim the necessity of conversion; and our distinctive rite, as we have seen, stresses the individuality of true conversion. We can point men to the New Testament, and never feel that when they get there they will be able to prove us wrong. We can stand before the world as a Church built upon the New Testament and the New Testament's Lord—a Church which exists to work the work of God in the world.

All this is said without prejudice to the matter of larger union. For whatever path church union will take when it comes, it cannot be that which ignores vital and conscientious witness on the part of any Church. That union will come, not by the sacrifice of any vital principle or particular emphasis, but by the widening of our religious horizon to make room for all contributions, be they vital and sincere.

One point more. There is truth in the statement that Baptists have not been distinguished by breadth of outlook or the spirit of tolerance. We who stand upon the principle of freedom have not always been careful to allow it in matters of religion. And if Baptist testimony to-day needs one thing more than another, it is this freedom as applied both to the interpretation

of the Scriptures and to the expression of Bible truth in practical terms. The policy of putting on dogmatic blinkers when we look into the Bible will assuredly fail to influence men to-day. We have been, perhaps, a little too fond of heresy hunts, and it has worked us harm. Let us open our minds to the truth of God from whatever quarter it may come. Let us rid ourselves of theological prejudice. Let us be willing to allow the light of any kind of learning to beat upon the sacred page, and be confident that the Word of God will speak all the more clearly if we are willing to listen to it with open minds as well as open hearts. If we spend our time in trying to understand those who differ from us, rather than in cursing them roundly for heretics, we shall be a little nearer the spirit of our Master, Christ. And if we, in His spirit, open our minds and hearts to the reception of His message: if we take our stand upon the teaching of Jesus intelligently understood: if we apply our principles fearlessly: if we do these things, we may safely claim to have a distinct message for these modern times.

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The Missionary Appeal for To-day.

WHEN William Carey one hundred and thirty years ago published his "Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens," the attitude of mind which he had to face in his readers was in many respects very different from that which confronts one who to-day commends the missionary enterprise to the conscience of Christian people. The evolutionary view of the history of the world, the comparative study of religions, the critical examination of the sacred literatures of the world, and a more general and more intimate knowledge of life in foreign lands, are all features of the modern situation which were absent from that in the midst of which Carey wrote.

One often hears it suggested that these new factors have greatly weakened the force of the old arguments in support of missions. The object of this article is to consider whether this is really true, and to set forth as clearly as possible the reasons for still believing in full view of the larger knowledge of to-day, that foreign missionary work is an integral part of the responsibility of the Christian Church. With the inevi-