

# THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

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#### FROM THE PRESIDENT: NINETY YEARS ON

This year the Baptist Historical Society celebrates its 90th birthday. On 28 April 1908, at the Baptist Union Assembly held in Bloomsbury, Dr W. T. Whitley moved 'on the instruction of Council' 'that the members of the Assembly of the Baptist Union cordially approve of the proposal to form a Baptist Historical Society and trust that this important denominational work will receive practical and general support'. The resolution was seconded from the Chair, that year occupied by Dr Charles Brown, and carried unanimously. Two days later, on 30 April, in the Baptist Union Council Chamber 'more than 50 ladies and gentlemen' met together and resolved to form such a Society. Before the day was out the Society had sixty founding members.

The aims of the Society were stated to be: (a) gathering all records of British and Irish Baptists, (b) holding meetings to discuss obscure points, (c) publishing Transactions of these meetings and other papers, (d) promoting safe custody for minutes, and (e) encouraging young students of history.

In his editorial to the first *Transactions*, Dr George P. Gould, then Principal of Regent's Park College, wrote:

By manifold signs it is evident that our denomination is freeing itself from the bonds of an excessive individualism and is rejoicing as never before in a sense of fellowship with brethren of like faith and practice the world over. Such a widened outlook cannot be restricted to the present; it will inevitably turn to the past and scan it also. Joy in brotherhood should not and cannot dissociate itself from the desire to learn what we may of our spiritual ancestry. There has been grievous neglect - to our discredit and loss. Reaping in joy we have been too heedless of those who sowed in tears. To endeavour to repair that neglect and to meet the desire for a knowledge - at once wider and more exact - of the past of our denomination, may our Historical Society, through its "Transactions", be enabled to render effective aid.

Ninety years on, looking back over the *Transactions* and the *Quarterly*, we can be encouraged by what has been achieved in fulfilment of this plea. But by definition history constantly moves on. The present quickly - all too quickly for some of us! - becomes the past. The agenda tasks of ninety years ago remain our tasks.

But this concern for history in general and for Baptist history in particular is not an optional extra nor a peripheral task. Our Christian faith has everything to do with history. God has acted in time and his purpose continues in time and will continue until the end of time - and beyond. Jesus the Christ, born in Nazareth, died in (or just outside) Jerusalem, raised from his grave and ascended from the summit of a mountain, incarnated the divine activity in history. God's history had led to that event and has led on from that event. It leads on still. That we know as much as we do about the Jesus event is due to the people of his time - historians in a real sense, who remembered that event and recorded it for posterity and arranged for its retention. John wrote letters to his church. In the first of them he says he shares his experience of the Cross with them so that they may experience his joy at God's action in history. Fortunately for us, his church retained the letter for posterity. Over subsequent centuries others have assured the retention of such records of Jesus, often against very great odds and at real cost to themselves.

But not only the account of Jesus, they recorded and retained the continuing story of his people the Church ever since - adding to it in each generation. How impoverished we should be if they had failed so to do. In a very simple sense, it may be said that still today the three 'Rs' of the historian are to remember, record and retain. Of course, there is a fourth 'R' and that is to research the past and learn from it, interpret it, argue about it and enjoy doing just that. We can do that only because we have records of the past, retained by the past and entrusted to us for our retention, enhancement and onward transmission.

We owe it to the future also to ensure that it receives from us, retained, remembered records of how we lived in God's history and tried, however falteringly, to be his people, responding to his will. For all too soon now our present will be our successors' past.