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Baptists and the Reunion Movement.

THE term " Reunion Movement " may be roughly defined as the attempt to reduce or transcend denominational distinctions so that the Church may function as one universal Christian Society. But the one definition covers many different varieties of activity. First in importance is the remarkable Ecumenical Movement, which has gone from strength to strength since the Edinburgh Conference of 1910, and has culminated in the recently formed World Council of Churches. Purely denominational movements towards reunion have resulted in the new Methodist and Scottish Presbyterian Churches respectively; while Canada, South India and China furnish examples of inter-denominational efforts towards closer unity. All these are part of the " Reunion Movement " in the largest sense of the words, and probably few people would deny that, whatever criticism may be made against any particular scheme, their general effect has been greatly to strengthen the Christian cause. The Reunion Movement as a whole has indeed real and lasting achievements to its credit. It has improved out of all recognition the relationships of Christians with one another; it has conserved and multiplied the resources of the Christian Church at home and abroad; it has enriched Christian worship and fellowship; and it has unquestionably given to the Church a position of greater influence amongst men of discernment. A recent distinguished contributor to the *Times* expresses this when he says: " Our century has its sad features. But there is one feature in its history which is not sad. That is the gathering tide of Christian union."

We should do well to notice in passing that in many of these developments Baptists have played a conspicuous part. True, the Baptist Denomination, as such, has never taken kindly to official movements towards Church union—witness its refusal to be formally represented at the Lausanne Conference of 1927, a distinction which it shared with the Roman Catholic Church. But, speaking generally, Baptists have been, and still are, among the first persons to join with their fellow-Christians in united action for the common good; and some Baptists in particular—of whom the late Dr. J. H. Shakespeare was an outstanding example—have had great influence upon the Reunion Movement.

The United Missionary Council, the National Federal Council and the Student Christian Movement—to mention only three forms of Christian co-operation—have all owed a great deal to Baptists, who have also played no small part in the development of inter-denominational scholarship.

In spite of the marked progress made in recent years by the Reunion Movement as a whole, particular efforts towards the organic union of Churches have been an almost complete failure. There have been exceptions, of course. Great Britain has witnessed, as has already been said, the re-uniting of different sections of Methodists and Presbyterians. In Canada, too, a new denomination has been formed from a proportion of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches. But in general, corporate reunion has made little or no headway. The Lambeth Appeal of 1920, which seemed to mark so epoch-making an advance in the relations of the Established and Free Churches of England, gave rise to innumerable conferences and discussions, from which have even emerged detailed schemes outlining the pattern of a United Church. Yet these schemes have been still-born, and it is extremely doubtful whether the Anglican and Free Churches are to-day one step nearer corporate reunion than they were in 1920. Similarly, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists all seem agreed that nothing further can usefully be done at present to promote union between their denominations.

Why has the movement towards corporate reunion of the Churches so signally failed? Various answers may be given, including, of course, the important consideration of the effect of the war. One reason is the defective character of the proposals put forward by the negotiating parties; another is the fact that tensions within the denominations have made their leaders naturally cautious about proceeding with negotiations which were obviously exacerbating divisions within their own ranks. The position of fellow-denominationalists in other parts of the world has helped to slow down the cause of reunion at home by reminding the members of all denominations of their responsibility towards those who live outside Great Britain. All these causes —and others not enumerated—have played a part in holding up corporate union. But there can be little doubt that the deciding factor has still to be mentioned, and that is, the almost complete absence of interest and conviction amongst the rank and file of Christian people. The average church member, whatever he may occasionally say about the mischief of denominational divisions, is, in fact, supremely apathetic about the whole question. He is not convinced that it would be right or desirable for his own denomination to sacrifice its separate identity by uniting with another. He is not gripped by the kind of overmastering passion

which would make reunion not only possible but inevitable. He is simply not interested in the question; and in the face of such indifference corporate reunion remains impossible. Experience bears out J. A. Froude's dictum: "Spiritual institutions can be remodelled only at high temperature. When the metal is cold they can be broken, but they cannot be altered."

The conclusion to which we seem driven is that corporate Church union of the kind which has given rise to so much thought and discussion in the last twenty years is impracticable, apart from two eventualities, either of which would transform the existing situation and open up new possibilities. One of these would be the breakdown of the present social order in this country. I do not wish to imply that I regard such a breakdown as imminent. But we are living in a time of world revolution, when the structure of great nations, and with it their attitude towards Christianity, has radically altered almost over-night. It would be folly to ignore the possibility that some great and unexpected change might even come over our British life, profoundly altering the position of all the Churches, and making imperative a quite new relationship between them. The other and more inspiring eventuality is that such a time of spiritual revival might be given to the Churches as would lift them out of their present isolation and exclusiveness, and draw them irresistibly into a new unity. A period of spiritual quickening might, indeed, as someone has justly remarked, result in the birth of a new denomination rather than the reunion of the old ones. But we have no means of predicting with assurance what would happen in such a case. "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible."

So far as Baptists are concerned, then, it would seem that the Reunion Movement has reached a very critical phase. On the one hand, further attempts to urge the cause of corporate reunion will almost certainly lead not to any fruitful result, but only to such an increase of friction and disunity as must condemn such a course in advance. "We are all agreed," says the Report of the Special Committee on Union between Baptists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians, "that, if this question of union with Congregationalists and Presbyterians were forced to an issue in England now, it would split our denomination. We are agreed that the majority of our people would probably decline to have anything to do with it, and if a scheme of union were attempted, would not come into it, but would retain a separate existence apart from it." On the other hand, it is daily becoming more clear that the need for a closer alignment of the Christian forces of this country is urgent and imperative in the last degree. One aspect of this need is revealed through what can only be

described as the widespread decay of denominationalism. Lament it or not, as we may, the plain fact is that to a great many of our people—and particularly of our young people—denominational distinctions no longer mean what they once did. Every working minister knows this from his contacts with his people day by day. The dividing lines do not follow the old frontiers, as may easily be seen, for example, in the religious books which are written and read to-day. Members moving from one town to another change their denominational attachment quite freely. Many young Baptists marry outside the bounds of their own communion, and seem quite unaware that this will create any special problem for their future home life. A leading Free church can call to its ministry in succession a Congregationalist, an Anglican, a Baptist and a Methodist, and obviously find great profit from the variety thus represented. "It would matter very little," wrote Dr. Shakespeare in his book, *The Churches at the Cross-Roads,* "and indeed it might even be a great incentive, if the churches were fortified by an intense, unyielding conviction that the perpetuation of denominational distinctions was worth any cost, and that it was a Christian obligation. But the failure is at the heart of the system. *The separations stand for a decaying idea.* They make less and less appeal to the professed adherents; that is, to the very people upon whom their continuance depends." These are strong words, but it is doubtful if they are a whit too strong to describe the real situation.

Further, the forces beating upon the Christian Church from outside compel a reconsideration of the traditional denominational attitude. The issues raised in the modern world are so tremendous, and the power of the currents at work so subtle and compelling, as to rule out of court any idea that the Christian denominations can hope to operate successfully in isolation. The need is everywhere the same—in education, in moral and social questions, in politics and economics, in evangelism: the Churches must stand together and act together, not necessarily along identical lines, but certainly with understanding of each other's plans, and a large measure of unified effort. Moreover, such a work as Dr. Newton Flew's striking book, *Jesus and His Church,* makes it plain that the Churches are committed to common thought and action not merely by the pressure of circumstances, but by the deep law of their own inner nature and being. The picture of the Church which meets us in the New Testament is not that of a congeries of competing denominations, but of one Christian society owning one Head, inspired by one Spirit, and engaged in manifold and diverse ways upon one great task—the service of mankind for Christ's sake. In the light of that vision we know now that, just as "patriotism is not enough," so

"denominationalism is not enough." The servants of Jesus are friends who must learn to live and work together.

What, then, is the way forward for Baptists? If the path of corporate reunion is blocked, what other ways are there of realising our unity as Christians? I suggest three, the first of them being the familiar way of self-education. If we Baptists are to take our rightful place in the great Church of Jesus Christ we need to understand and appreciate better our own history and principles. Our colleges can help us to this; so, too, can ministers' fraternals, young people's societies, and indeed all manner of groups and meetings, not forgetting those whose purpose is to study and discuss books. In particular, there is, in my judgment, a great call for Baptists to examine further their doctrine of the Church. Both the sacrament of Baptism and the place and authority of the individual church-meeting (upon which we rightly lay such stress) are bound up with the fundamental idea of the Church, and it would do us all good to think these things through together afresh.

Secondly, we must play our part in the creation of a common mind among Christians. The major obstacle to reunion has been proved to be the state of people's minds. They are not ready for it. They lack an understanding of each other's point of view, an appreciation of each other's traditions and gifts, an interest in each other's welfare and doings. And the only way in which they can be given these things is by the multiplication of opportunities of fellowship in worship, study and service. In my own city we are constantly being told by visitors that they find a spirit of harmony and co-operation between the Christian denominations which is relatively rare. The secret of this, if there be a secret, is an open one. It is that through constant intercourse with one another the Churches have increasingly affirmed their unity, and have developed in some measure the common mind which makes co-operation easy and fruitful. What has been done in one place can be done in others.

Finally, I believe that a new and hopeful field of development has been opened up through the recently consummated union of the Free Churches of this country in the Free Church Federal Council. This is a sphere of action in which Baptists carry a particular responsibility. The original Federal Council of the Free Churches was largely inspired by the vision and efforts of the late Dr. Shakespeare when he was Secretary of the Baptist Union. And when the Baptist Union replied officially to the Lambeth Appeal of 1920, it specifically indicated its preference for federation over other proposals for Church union. Let us make no mistake; the task of implementing the ideal of Free Church Federation will not be easy. The new Federal Council

begins its work (with a Baptist as Secretary) handicapped by war conditions. It is confronted by all that lack of vision and enthusiasm which, as we have seen, characterises public opinion on questions of Church union. Further, in the existing Free Church denominations, the balance of power as between the local church and the denominational Assembly is differently poised; and the way of Federation, if realistically pursued, will involve constitutional issues as stubborn as they are vital to success. But these and other difficulties ought to attract and not repel our interest, for their very magnitude suggests the possibility of achieving something new and important in the story of the Christian Church. What if it be true that the other paths to reunion had to be tried and exhausted before this could receive the attention it deserves? The time is ripe for the Free Churches to show that they intend to take Federation seriously, and, by grappling as they have never done before with the problems which it raises, hammer out together a federal constitution not unworthy, we may hope, to serve the Church of the future as a genuine product of the Mind of Christ, and an effective instrument and vehicle of His Spirit.

R. L. CHILD.