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The Story of Methodist Union.

THE parallels between Methodist and Baptist history are not so close as might have been expected, at any rate so far as this country is concerned. Perhaps the United States of America would give closer comparisons in the growth and changes in the sister Churches, but in England it was the Methodists who showed the divisive tendencies of the nineteenth century in a more marked manner than the Baptists. The marked individualism of that great period in British history was expressed in Methodism in a series of divisions from the death of Wesley to 1850 that could be equalled by no other large communion of Christians. None of these divisions (with the exception of one of very minor local importance) were concerned with questions of doctrine; it was always a question of organisation or administration that caused the trouble. This was due to the fact that the Methodist system was eclectic since Wesley had built up his wonderful machine partly out of Presbyterian material, partly out of Moravian and Pietistic components and partly out of customs that were Anglican or that can be traced back to the Primitive Church. The whole aim was practical and the control of the whole organisation was centred first in Wesley himself and afterwards in the Conference, which had greater power than Presbyterianism gave to the General Assembly. The Methodist people in general knew little of Wesley's long study of ecclesiastical systems and for the most part did not share his devotion to the Established Church. The majority had been gathered from outside all the churches and of the rest in all probability there were as many converts from homes with some heritage of dissenting tradition as from the Church of England. It was only natural, therefore, that there should be a reaction against the authority both of the Conference and the ministry, and this showed itself in the secessions that led to the founding of the Methodist New Connexion in 1796, Primitive Methodism in 1812, the Bible Christians in 1815, the Protestant Methodists in 1827, the Grand Central Association of Dr. Warren in 1835, and the Wesleyan Reformers of 1849 that led to the fusion of several groups into the United Methodist Free Churches in 1857.

It may be said that the revival movements which accom-

panied the beginnings of Primitive Methodism and the early growth of the Bible Christians were independent developments rather than secessions, but they manifested the same critical attitude towards ministerial authority as the other divisions, while they were more concerned with preaching the gospel than with the heated discussion of connexional questions. They cherished most of the customs of early Methodism, and declined to join forces with the "Reformers." After the unfortunate agitation of 1849, the tendency towards consolidation began to set in. It must have become apparent to thoughtful men that the assertion of individual rights and prejudices had gone dangerously far, and men of peace began to dream of re-union. It is, however, an easier matter to break up the organised fellowship of Christian men than to restore that fellowship to its original unity, and the process of re-union has been a long and difficult one. The period of unification may be said to have begun with the first Ecumenical Conference that was held in London in 1881. These Ecumenical Conferences, meeting every ten years and representing world-wide Methodism, have played a most important part in the work of re-union. That of 1881 was followed by Methodist Union in Canada, that of 1891 by Australian union, that of 1901 by the union of the Bible Christians, the Methodist New Connexion and the United Methodist Free Churches into the United Methodist Church of Great Britain. The Ecumenical Conference of 1911 was followed by the action of the Wesleyan Conference which has led on steadily to the great re-union of 1932, and this latest achievement, in its turn was welcomed with great enthusiasm by the Ecumenical Conference that met last year at Atlanta, Georgia.

If the nineteenth century was marked by a strong individualistic tendency so far as the English-speaking people were concerned, the twentieth century has seen a marked tendency towards consolidation and unification. This is seen in the growing power of the State as a highly centralised and omni-competent entity. It is also seen in the fusion of great business concerns and (if one may be permitted to compare the body of Christ with secular enterprises) in the closer co-operation of the different branches of the Christian Church with each other. Church union has been under discussion all the time, however great the difficulties that challenge its achievement. Edinburgh, Lambeth, Stockholm and Lausanne Conferences have dreamed dreams and discussed possibilities. The Scottish Presbyterians have actually joined forces. In Canada Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists have come together. In England Baptists, Congregationalists and

'resbyterians are once more re-opening the discussion. Three ıain sections of Methodists joined together in 1907, leaving ıe Wesleyan Methodists, the Primitive Methodists and the new Jnited Methodist Church as the chief groups. The Wesleyan :onference meeting at Plymouth in 1913 passed a resolution to ıe effect that the time had come "when a serious effort should e made to unite in one church organisation the different branches f British Methodism." A committee was appointed to collect ıformation and to report and it is from that beginning that ve have pressed steadily forward until the consummation of ıat ideal in this present year. Nineteen years seems a long ime to be spent on such an undertaking, but the difficulties f the task must be remembered. The first report was received ust on the eve of the outbreak of the war. Those tragic years t once delayed and helped forward the cause of union. They elayed progress in the actual negotiations because the churches ad to concentrate all their energy on the task of carrying on. ıt the same time the mere fact that thousands of lay preachers vere drafted into the army made it absolutely necessary for Methodist chapels that stood side by side with each other all ver the country to learn to work together as they had never one before.

In the passage of the years these three denominations had ome closer together. Extreme radical and conservative endencies had both been modified. The Wesleyans admitted ıymen to their Conference as long ago as 1878, the "Ranters" ecame as respectable as the Wesleyans, and the "Reformers" radually modified the dissidence of their Dissent. The rganisation of the three groups was almost identical and their ifferences in tradition were matters of emphasis rather than f principle. The official church meeting for the congregation ı each of the three Churches was the Leaders' Meeting; all rouped their churches together into Circuits which were overned by the Circuit Quarterly Meeting; the Circuits were rouped into Districts meeting annually or twice a year in ynods, and the Synods of all three Churches sent their epresentatives to the Annual Conference meeting in June Primitive), or July (Wesleyans and United Methodists). The ne point of real difference was that the Wesleyans found it onvenient to have a Pastoral Session of the Conference which onsisted of ministers only. Here ministerial discipline, dmission to the ministry, ordination, appointments to Circuits, nd doctrine came under review, and the advantages of this pecialised division of labour between two sessions of a crowded ortnight were so great that the arrangement is to continue into ıe new Church. There was some hesitation over this on the

part of the Churches that were not accustomed to it, as there was on the part of the Wesleyans to the occasional administration of the Lord's Supper by laymen, but in the end both the Ministerial Session of Conference and occasional lay administration were accepted.

We are, however, running too far ahead with the story which is the unromantic tale of years of Committee Meetings and Conference resolutions. Immediately after the war a large Committee, representing all the three Churches, was set up and a scheme of union was drawn up. This was not really a difficult matter since the family resemblance was so close. Moreover the centralisation that is so characteristic a feature of a Connexional system and the authority of the Conference over all the ministers and churches made the problem still easier. It would, however, have been foolish to have put the scheme into operation in 1920 when it was drawn up. General opinion lagged far behind the convictions of the leaders. The local churches were not ready for it. A fairly long process of education was necessary. The scheme first went to the Synods for amendment and then back to the Conferences for further suggestions. This meant discussion in eighty different Synods as well as in the three Conferences, but no vote on the general question was taken. In 1922 and 1923 every Quarterly Meeting throughout the country and every Wesleyan Trustees' Meeting voted for or against the scheme of union. It was then that the size of the opposition became manifest and in one of the Uniting Churches nearly a third of the Circuits and rather more than a third of the representatives gave a negative vote. Further delay was prudent and meetings were held in many parts of the country to expound the scheme and to persuade the waverers to bring overlapping and rivalry between the Churches concerned to an end. Many who had opposed the change began to say that the wish of the majority must be respected and it was found to be very difficult to argue in favour of continued disunion. A further reference to Synods and Quarterly Meetings produced better results and it was decided to ask Parliament for an Enabling Bill to put the scheme of Union into effect whenever all the Conferences (including the Wesleyan Pastoral Session) should give a vote of seventy-five per cent. in favour. It was in 1928 that this decisive vote was secured and since then the arduous task of adjusting the relations between the churches in departments and districts has been carried on. In the summer of this year the three Conferences met separately for the last time, and in September, in great gatherings at the Albert Hall and elsewhere at the Uniting Conference, the Union was consummated.

It is a long and tangled story if told in detail. The co-ordination of Sunday School work, of the Theological Colleges, of the Foreign Missionary Societies, of the Young People's Department, of Temperance and Social Welfare work, to say nothing of financial arrangements for stipends and super-annuation of the ministers, and the many funds of a very complicated organisation, is a difficult piece of work. All that, however, together with the grouping of the Circuits into new Districts can be carried out within a short space of time. The local fusions of Circuits and congregations will be a very much slower business. Here and there tentative beginnings have already been carried out but it may well be that another fifty years will have to pass before the old divisions are completely forgotten. The splendid family spirit of Methodism and the still finer temper of Christian good-will has already accomplished much and may be relied upon to go the whole distance. Above all, the over-ruling hand of the Divine Providence is still lifted in blessing over Christ's Church, whenever it is loyal to its high privileges and responsibilities. This movement is not the end but the beginning, and that spirit which is drawing the world closer together in a recognition of our common needs and common dangers is also making Christian men and women all over the world see the urgent necessity of co-operation and concentrated effort. How far these aims will be realised in new fusions and new groupings within the Church itself remains to be seen, but it is clear that there is a strong reaction to-day against the excessive sub-divisions that were left us as an inheritance by our forefathers. This story is not one of emotional enthusiasm such as might have been expected in Methodist circles, but of calm, sensible and undemonstrative action. It might have been a union of the Scottish Presbyterians so far as the temper in which it has been accomplished is concerned. Who knows if the Methodists may not be turning into Presbyterians to serve some further purpose of Christian unity?

A. W. HARRISON.

LONDON BAPTISTS IN 1638.—Edward Barber lived in St. Benetts Finke, in a house rented at £8. William Adis had a house and shop rented at £22 on the north side of Thames street, west of London Bridge. John Norcott rented a shop in the parish of St. Botolph, Aldgate, at £2. These facts were published in 1931 by T. C. Dale, in an official directory showing the Inhabitants of London in 1638.