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# The Importance of Denominational History

*Address to the Assembly of the Baptist Union on Tuesday, April 29, 1958, to mark the Jubilee of the Baptist Historical Society.*

I HAVE been puzzling to find a good reason why a Methodist should address you on the importance of your own denominational history. I think I have found one, sufficient and important. For the Baptists and the Methodists are the two great Protestant Free Churches who in our time have to decide whether they will be either World Church—or World Sect. And one of the safeguards against our making a wrong decision is the appeal to history.

Of course the decision to have a sectarian or a catholic spirit is not a conscious one. And of course, a sectarian spirit will produce sectarian history. Faith and loyalty are always engaged when we study our own past, good virtues but in themselves too easily able to twist the pattern of the facts :—

> Ah! love couldst thou and I conspire
> To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
> Would we not shatter it to bits and then
> Remould it nearer to the hearts desire?

There has been so much Church history of this kind, Catholic and Protestant, Puritan and Anglican, that there are some great questions—concerning the Reformation, for example in which the historians' material is so rooted in a polemical setting as to make it extremely difficult for him to view it from another perspective. And that is where the Church historian needs to have the corrective of the secular historian, and where the Protestant or Nonconformist needs to take the large view and to set his own particular theme against the history of humanity, and of the whole Church. There is Church history penny plain, all black and white, whitewashing our own side, denigrating the other. But the coloured kind is better, and more costly, where faith and loyalty are controlled by the discipline of an imaginative charity and love of truth, and this has its eye for shades and twilights and fading colours, and changing perspective.

I said our own story must be set against the wider background. There is a "mistletoe" and an "oak" tree view of our history as Free Churches. The mistletoe theory would dissolve the history of the Church into isolated pockets of purely spiritual religion, to a pedigree picked rather choosily from out the centuries, the Early Church, the "Reformers before the Reformation," and our own spiritual ancestors, Puritan and Methodist leaders. The "oak tree" view on the other hand sees the Church as a "Church of pardoned sinners," always rooted in earthly and often very earthy history, often nearly submerged by secular pressures, here on earth always wearing the Cinderella like, ambiguous garments, the form of a servant. I am for the oak as against the mistletoe. And yet that is not perhaps the true choice. We need to remember what Professor Rowley has helped you to remember, that we belong to that one continuing People of God which stretches back into the mists of ancient history—we need to remember, (tell it not in Manchester, whisper it not to Professor Rowley) that Old Testament studies ought properly to be regarded as a sub-department of Church history.

On the other hand within this continuing great Church there have been raised up again and again prophetic voices and prophetic companies of men and women to remind the Church that she is a pilgrim, that her true abiding city is yonder. So it has been said of Thomas Helwys and the English exiles in 17th-century Amsterdam that they were too inclined to unchurch 99.9 per cent of Christendom, as though the "catholic Church could be equated with an upper room in a back street in Amsterdam." And yet we remember, and it was their witness to recall to the Church by their very existence, how long ago at Pentecost, the whole of Catholicity came down upon an upper room in a back street, and upon what was also a very bourgeois company.

Now behind the generalisations and the interpretations, there lies the appeal to facts. There is in the end no substitute for archives. And this is where your own denominational historical society is so important. We must have the local historians, the local records, we need more men and women, laymen with a hobby, working parsons with a concern, to be aware of, interested in and working at these things. I say this is our own denominational business. Let us mind it, for if we don't do these chores of investigating our own denominational story, nobody else is going to do it for us. It is one of the dangers that often generalizations and views run ahead of the facts. There is, for example, the well-known saying that "the Methodist Revival saved England from revolution"—a half-truth which is often defended and often criticized, but about which the historian ought to say that the full sociological setting of early Methodism has never yet been explored,

that we still lack essential details, and that we must wait until we have more scholarly monographs and that the monographs must wait on detailed records. I stress this, because nowadays there is a tendency to despise this kind of thing as "antiquarian." But let us not be ashamed of this, what Professor Butterfield once called the one "monkish" thing in Methodism, the one piece of austere historical excavation which recalls the great Roman historians like the Bollandists. So I am a little sad that the austere, Victorian looking "Transactions of the Methodist Historical Society" have in recent months been given a new look, with a view to being more up to date, more ecumenical. And I gather that something of the same may have happened with your own Transactions. I was interested to find that Cambridge University Library does not take the *Mennonite Quarterly* but does take *Men Only*. I wouldn't suggest that your *Baptist Quarterly* is a cross between the *Mennonite Quarterly* and the magazine *Men Only* and I think in these days when parsons can only afford one quarterly magazine it is right to blend modern theology, book reviews and denominational history. All I would plead is that the denominational archives be not swamped or undervalued. For those are the only things in your *Quarterly* that the rest of us cannot find done as well—perhaps even better elsewhere. How important this may be is illustrated by two extremely interesting and able articles which appeared in the *Baptist Quarterly* in 1957 on "Signatories to the Orthodox Confession, 1679." In them the author discusses the tension between the Baptists of Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire and those of the Caffynites, the General Baptists of Kent, Sussex and the Eastern Counties. What is exciting is the link which the author traces between the 17th-century Baptist congregations and the mediaeval "Lollards of the Chiltern Hills," that formidable underground movement of the later Middle Ages which we glimpse mainly through the records in John Foxe. Mr. Baines in his article shows that this Lollardy, the strength of which was centred in certain families, included families like the Hardings, the Durdants, the Dells, who are to be found in later Baptist chapels in that area; that a Richard Monk led the Lollards in 1428 and a Thomas Monk the Baptist in 1654. Here again, we need to check. We should want to know what wider parish records say, to decide whether in fact these names are to be found all over the community and in other churches. We must not over-rate the orthodoxy of this later Lollardy. At least there is one glimpse of them reading at a wedding the "Gospel of Nicodemus" which suggests a whole underworld of late mediaeval gnostic and apocalyptic which may have infected the movement. And we need to remember that this Lollardy was also very strong in the Eastern counties. But there is an excellent illustration how local history can illuminate a most important problem of spiritual pedigree.

The mention of pedigree reminds us of the importance for Reformation studies of the origins of the Anabaptist Movement and of the need for the work upon it of English Baptist scholars. The universally hostile verdicts upon the Anabaptists of three centuries of historians and theologians have now been completely reversed. Fundamental to this revision is the publication of the facts, mountains of them, in the printing of masses of documents in Switzerland, Germany and Austria which is proceeding massively apace. But facts must be interpreted. And here we must pay tribute to the American Mennonite historians under Dr. Bender who in a few years have made their *Mennonite Quarterly* an almost indispensable tool in Reformation studies, and whose *Mennonite Encyclopaedia* abounds with information not available elsewhere in the English language. Of all these things a convenient account can be found in the recent volume, *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* a *Festschrift* to Dr. Bender. But we have the defects of our virtues, and I hope it is not ungrateful or hypercritical to say that there is about the work of American Mennonite scholarship a certain uncritical exuberance which is perhaps partly Mennonite but mainly just American! There is the tendency to make the Anabaptists altogether too tidy, too respectable. Now if it is true, as Dr. Payne says that the Anabaptists produced more martyrs than all the other Protestant bodies, it is also true that they were associated with more genuine fanatics, more really wild men than any other body. They had some queer fellow-travellers, like the Christian pacifists marching to Aldermaston or like the Underground movements in France and Greece at the end of the war just because what they were doing was really revolutionary. One of the sad things about the Mennonite Encyclopaedia is the way in which, in one article after another, the eccentricities and aberations of many of the radicals are toned down. How much more striking are the facts. The fierceness of Conrad Grebel and his "angry young men" of Zurich burns out of Grebels letters more clearly than from the pages of Dr. Bender—and it is when we listen to the authentic note of storm that we feel that here is something at least as important as the angry middle-aged men of Wittenberg were saying, and rather more excusable! Or we read the story so vividly retold by Professor Blanke in that article translated by Dr. West, in the *Baptist Quarterly,* 1953, of those first Baptists outside Zurich and that meeting in the house of Ruedi Thomann, January 25th, 1525, where the Communion was celebrated with evangelical simplicity, while one of the onlookers, Heinrich Thomann glared suddenly and fearfully on, while he sweated with fear and anxiety at these revolutionary and dangerous and—authentically apostolic proceedings. The American view of the Anabaptist vision is too exuberant, claims far too much for the Anabaptists. The original

Anabaptist vision was bi-focal. There was a picture in *Punch* recently of an AA-man reading the letters off on the wall at an opticians. The top letter is a single A, but the AA-man saluted. Ah! says the doctor, I see you have double vision. Now there is an ancient and primitive division between the early Anabaptists about duty to the State and the office of a Christian magistrate. There were the "stave" Anabaptists, the apolitical pacifists and the "sword" Anabaptists of whom the most distinguished was Balthasar Hubmaier. But for Dr. Bender Hubmaier and the "sword men" represent a "transient aberration in the Anabaptist movement," and in the same volume it is Professor Blanke of Zurich who has to put the opposite view, that it was Hubmaier who saw the important and fundamental truth about Christian politics.

There is also an over-anxiety to dissociate the Anabaptists from Thomas Müntzer the Saxon false prophet of the Peasant War of 1525: understandable as a reaction from the legend started by Bullinger which made Müntzer the first Anabaptist (he could more plausibly be called the first Methodist! He would have been more at home further down Kingsway than Baptist Church House). Müntzer was an original, a genius of whom you could say what Chesterton said of H. G. Wells that "you can hear him growing in the night." It may be true that Müntzer never received the letter which Conrad Grebel wrote him in 1524, but that doesn't close the question of Müntzer's possible contact with him in the next month, still less the question of Müntzer's ideas. There is a sermon attributed to Hans Hut, and printed as his by Lydia Muller in her collection of Anabaptist writings. Hans Hut was a publisher, and though very far from a 16th-century Hugh Martin, Dr. Martin would share with him an experience of the difficulties of war-time publishing, for Hut got entangled in the battle of Frankenhausen and gave as his alibi that he had come to see a man about a book. And I think there is a possibility that this sermon is one of Müntzer's, copied and perhaps edited (it was never printed) after his death. Like Müntzer's other writings it bears the strange address "From the Cave of Elijah": it has an amazingly high proportion of Müntzer's technical vocabulary, higher than any other radical document: above all it expounds a striking natural theology, about which there are many hints in Müntzer but which he nowhere fully expounds, a "gospel of all the creatures" which Urbanus Rhegius says was Müntzer's doctrine and which this sermon sets forth. But it is a sermon on *Mark* xvi. 15, and it expounds a doctrine of baptism. It is a thing I dare not press and there is much to be said on the other side, but I do think that the current Müntzerophobia would be likely to hinder a frank examination of this and other questions. That is

why it is so important for British Baptist scholars to take their place in this field. I rejoice in these days that Dr. Ernest Payne has become an ecclesiastical statesman, who knows that making history is even more important than writing it, but I sometimes grudge the fact that we have turned our most eminent Free Church historian into yet another ecumenical inter-continental missile! I hope that Dr. Morris West who has given us more than the promise of fine scholarship will be allowed a few years of reading and writing and that he will be joined by many others. And here again is a field where, if your denominational historians do not make their contribution, against the background of a sympathetic teaching Church, the whole field of Reformation studies must suffer.

Finally, there is the ecumenical importance of your own history, and your own understanding of it. I have read and re-read as I hope you have all done, Dr. Payne's fine oration to the Free Church Federal Council. I am so very glad that the Free Churches can stop talking about their claims and speak about their prayers, about their penitence and about their thanksgiving. I am sure the way of claims and counter-claims is the bad old way. That kind of ecumenical argument began with the Fall of Man, and it is the way of the Old Adam. At least Milton said so :—

> " Thus they in mutual accusation
> Spent the fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning,
> And of their vain contest appeared no end."

I earnestly hope that his suggestion may be taken up if theological discussions should begin between the Free Churches. Too long have we thought of this alliance between us in ethical and it would seem in 19th-century evangelical terms. But there is much to be gained, and not least in our conversation with the Anglicans, if we could consider together our common heritage of truth about conversion, about justification and sanctification, of the sacraments and the Holy Spirit. These are days, as Dr. Payne reminded us, when the world situation is leading men to consider notions which are peculiarly our inheritance. Only let us not assume too easily that in our time these historic platitudes, enormous and magnificent are what God wants us to say. It may be that the Continental state churches under the Cross can say these things more sharply than we can—that Karl Barth and Dr. Niemoller are more important than Dr. Littell or our English Free Church leaders. Two trains may be in the same station at the same point, but going in different directions. So, for example, it may be that this great truth of the witness of the laity—which is so important a contribution of Methodism to 19th-century social and political history, is something which the Church of England is about to discover in a new, fresh and visible way, much more real than anything that

Methodism can say in 1958 having sent so many laity into the secular spheres in the past, but whose children have cut their spiritual lines of communication. Indeed, we Free Churchmen must stand in amazed admiration, at the boldness of the Anglican project for a House of Laity which can meet separately, by itself. For as Gilbert so nearly said:

> "But then the prospect of a lot
> of leading laity in close proximity
> all thinking by themselves
> is what no clergyman can face with equanimity."

It may be that God has other things for us to learn and say, the other side perhaps of our familiar half truths. It is only too easy for German Methodists to say: "Ah! yes, the state Churchmen are coming to see things our way," and yet themselves to become sectarian at that very point.

Our faith is something we share with the whole Church of Christ. Our history is something God has given us. I remember going into the Kingsgate Press some years ago, and being shown a book called "What the Baptists Stand For." It was so interesting and important yes, but I wanted to say: "Have you perhaps another book called "What the Baptists Won't Stand For" for those things are of the very vitals of Christian and English liberties. These great positive negatives are not written in our confessions, but they were written in flesh and blood in real story, by men and women sinful and foolish and fallible. There is always a high content, therefore, of non-theological factors in the story. You know how in the war the battle raged around the strong point of Monte Cassino until at last there came the break through and the armies poured out and the war went past and Monte Cassino became a name on the map and no more a point to dig in and die. There are some Monte Cassinos in our Free Church History which we must not fight in our time, and it is your task as Christians in this age to try and disentangle what was vital from what was transient in the past. Church history is the Church remembering. And I think I agree with Dr. Manson that there are some things we all might agree to forget: and others about which we must be penitent in the presence of God. The rest is a living witness to the communion of saints, the path along which God has led us. Not only dare we not forget this, but it is the very thing we have to give, our most precious contribution to the coming great Church.

Not long ago I went with the secretary of the Methodist Historical Society to an auction sale which included a large tea chest full of Wesleyana. After the sale we went to the West End bookseller who bought it and he very kindly tipped the contents

out on to the red carpet in his showroom. What a jumble it was, early Methodist sermons and printed hymns, old class tickets, engravings of chapels, photographs of bewhiskered Victorian divines and their overflowing quiverfulls of offsprings—and I heard somebody say in the shop: "What a lot of old junk. Sectarian, antiquarian rubbish?" And then I thought how long ago there was a box, very ornate and very elaborate I know, but still a box, a frame of wood for putting things in: nothing very impressive inside it, for that matter, some bits of wood and stone, and a jar of sticky stuff—a pot of manna, Aaron's rod, tablets of stone—just little items of denominational history, just a church remembering, that here and here and here in the past the Living God had touched this earth, "and it came to pass that when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, O Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered. And when it rested, he said, Return, O Lord, unto the ten thousands of the thousands of Israel." The Church which will possess the future will be a Church which has learned to remember, which finds in past mercies the sure ground of future hope.

"We shall not in the desert stray
We shall not full direction need
Not miss its providential way."

E. G. RUPP