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BAPTISTS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

SUMMER SCHOOL 1982

"Baptists in the Twentieth Century" was the theme of the Baptist Historical Society Summer School which met during 9-11th July this year at St Edward's Conference Centre, Malvern. To cover the modern period comprehensively in such a short time would, the Committee knew, be impossible, but the diversity of topics on the programme promised participants a wide-ranging tour over much of the scene, from local church life, worship and denominational leadership, to the wider involvement of Baptists in ecumenical, political and international issues.

On Thursday evening the first paper, given by Dr Morris West on "Baptist Participation in the Faith and Order Movement", set Baptists firmly in the world ecumenical context, where the issue of baptism has itself assumed greater proportions in recent years. On Friday morning Dr L. G. Champion offered his "Reflections on Baptist Church Life", dealing particularly with changes in congregational activities in the last fifty years, and repeating his plea made in his paper at the Annual Meeting of the Society in 1979, for a new coherence of theology and church structure today. This was followed by the Rev. Roger Hayden's study of J. H. Shakespeare, "Still at the Crossroads? J. H. Shakespeare and the Churches", in which he showed, with the aid of recently-acquired biographical material, how the pioneer of twentieth century Baptist life himself aimed for such a coherence. Mission was the overriding aim and presupposition of Shakespeare's vision both for the denomination (especially in the provision of Superintendents) and for visible church unity.

During the afternoon the school embarked on a coach tour to visit the historic Baptist churches at Upton-on-Severn, Westman-cote and Pershore. The evening was occupied by Dr Clyde Binfield's fascinating illustrated survey "Baptist Arts and Crafts". Dealing with that most sensitive and revealing subject, church architecture, Dr Binfield demonstrated how certain Free Church designers at the turn of the century combined artistic imagination and theological insight to a high degree.

Saturday morning turned our attention to Baptist concern with some of the sternest realities of the twentieth century. The Rev. Keith Clements spoke on "British Baptists and the German Church Struggle" as a case-study in the difficulties of making moral assessments of the attitudes of fellow-Christians in contexts very different from one's own. This was followed by Dr David Bebbington's paper "Baptists and British Politics since 1914", which carefully traced the breakdown in party political allegiance, both in Parliament and in the country, since the decline of the Liberal Party. This stimulated an interesting discussion on the kinds of public issues which most readily evoke a Baptist response.

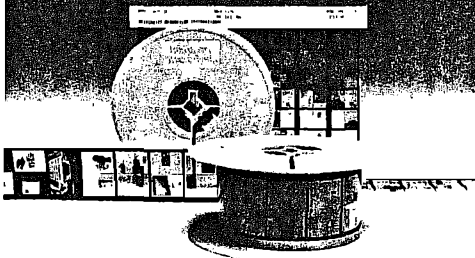
Saturday afternoon was left free for members to enjoy the idyllic setting of the Malvern Hills in perfect summer weather. Thereby refreshed, they returned for what was intriguingly billed as "an exercise in group participation" led by Mr John Briggs. Presented with some extracts culled at ten-year intervals from the *Baptist Union Handbook*, groups were made to deduce what they could from "bare statistics" and Assembly reports, about changes in local church and Association life in Worcestershire and London, and about leading "opinion-formers" in the denomination. Further variety was provided later in the evening by three short papers. The Rev. Peter Brewer spoke on "Baptists in the Caribbean", suggesting reasons for hindrances to Baptist advance in Trinidad as compared with Jamaica. Mr David Watts dealt with "Baptists in Glasgow - the 20th Century Challenge of Urban Growth and Decline". Finally, Miss Rosemary Taylor offered much useful advice on a peculiarly twentieth century preoccupation in "Tracing Baptist Ancestors".

Sunday morning was perhaps an appropriate time to hear the Rev. Michael Walker's pungent delivery on "Baptist Worship since the beginning of this Century", following which the school joined the congregation for morning worship at Abbey Road Baptist Church, Malvern, at which Dr Champion preached the sermon. Finally, in the afternoon the school went to the Old Baptist Chapel at Tewkesbury, where a service conducted by the Rev. Douglas Sparkes formed a very satisfying conclusion to what by general agreement had been a most informative, stimulating and enjoyable summer school.

The one disappointment was that, due to a combination of rail strike and a car break-down, Bishop Stephen Neill was unable to travel from Oxford to give his paper on "Christian Missions in the Twentieth Century".

Members felt that the papers which were given merited publication as soon as possible. It is hoped, therefore, that early next year they will be published by the Society as a single book, which will constitute the first study of such length on Baptists in the modern period. In the meantime, the thanks of all who attended go to those who planned and led the school.

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