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EDITORIAL

How do Baptists deal with conflict? In one sense, it may be held against them that rooted in their very existence and in their understanding of the church, is a presupposition of conflict. They dissent - from the equitable marriage of church and state, from the equation of Christendom and Christianity, from the bland confusion of citizenship and discipleship. A century ago they were not averse to being in the front line of militant nonconformity. Yet today, in Britain at any rate, it is the 'gospel of reconciliation' with which they wish to be identified. In a world groaning under fateful inequalities and overladen with the capacities for mutually assured destruction, no other emphasis than reconciliation seems either relevant or credible as gospel, good news. To be a 'reconciling influence' within their own society, is how many British Baptists would describe their vision of the wider application of their faith. Racism and industrial conflict present themselves as two of the most obvious running sores which cry

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out for healing. Indeed, as far as the latter is concerned, the long-running coal dispute (the outcome of which is still far from clear at the time of writing) has provided a searching test, and perhaps a humbling one, for the British churches who aspire to 'reconcile'. Church leaders, no less than newspaper magnates, have found themselves helpless advocates of 'getting people to talk together' in the face of what is, at root, a struggle for power as much as a problem to be solved by 'reason'. Could it be that 'reconciliation' is being spoken of too quickly, without the full depth of the issues being discerned, and that Christianity is being tempted into providing anodynes rather than genuine diagnosis and treatment?

The historical perspective does not supply any cheap or easy answers either, but it can contribute a measure of wisdom. In this issue of the Quarterly we provide an interesting juxtaposition of studies of Baptists and conflict on the international level. First, S. D. Henry writes of the reactions of Scottish Baptists to the First World War. Studies of this subject are still rare in nonconformist historiography. It is exactly ten years since the present editor's similar study dealing mainly with English Baptists appeared in this journal. That conflict retains paradigmatic significance for those concerned to know how and why Christians who in 'normal' circumstances are opposed to war and nationalism can quickly be driven by events into the most bellicose of attitudes - for which religion provides the justification rather than the criticism. Nor was this a merely academic point of interest to the writer, who prepared this paper during the early stages of the South Atlantic conflict in 1982. Readers may wish to assess for themselves what parallels in attitudes and public opinion there may be between the two conflicts, for all the vast differences in time, circumstances and extent.

Of the Baptists in this country, however, it has been the young people who attended the Baptist World Youth Congress in Buenos Aires last summer, who have been made to face most directly the issues of conflict and 'reconciliation' arising out of the events of 1982. We are very grateful, therefore, to Paul Weller for his account of the British-Argentinian discussions at the congress, and of the resolution that was framed. There is discernible here a recognition of the reality of the total reconciling scope of the salvation offered in Christ, to nations as to individuals, but equally a recognition that the realisation of this reconciliation can only be by identifiable and realistic stages. Reconciliation is a process, or (perhaps better) a journey, not a thing which, either God-given or man-made, is complete and ready in an instant.

It is one of the ironies of Baptist history that, having become among the most widespread of Protestant denominations, and as a consequence liable to find themselves on both sides of the line in international conflicts, they have nevertheless been theologically ill-equipped to work out what reconciliation between peoples, as distinct from individuals, means. It is not simply that their understanding of baptism can tend towards an individualism - dare one say privatization? - of Christianity and its application. It is that their history, for reasons which are not at all bad, has bequeathed them an understanding of the state which is largely set out in negatives. The

insistence on the distinction and separation between church and state has all too often in practice led to a neglect of society and the state in Baptist thought. In their laudable insistence (from Helwys onwards) that the king 'is but an earthly king', and that Christ alone is Lord of the church, the gathered fellowship, they have not always recognised (as does the New Testament) that earthly kings and powers nevertheless require a theology. Ecclesiology is not all. Theology cannot stop at the church door.

And inside the church door? The gospel of reconciliation, it is well-known, can seem to meet as much resistance there as in industry and in international affairs. At least our forbears were honest about this, as can be seen from Dr L. G. Champion's account of the Chesham and Berkhamsted Church Book of the 18th century. No glossing over human failings here in the interests of the outward glow of fellowship. Sister Butler and Sister Mary Hill see to that. Yet, precisely in recording such failings, the church revealed its commitment to the gospel. The church, we read, 'laboured to set them at peace, by showing there were faults on both sides'. Grace and realism, even then, were no strangers to each other.

* * * * *

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

S. D. Henry, M.A.

Assistant Principal Teacher, Social Subjects, Inverkeithing High School,
Fife

Paul G. Weller, M.A.

Community Relations Officer, Greater Manchester Ecumenical Council

L. G. Champion, B.A., B.D., D.Th.

President-Emeritus, Bristol Baptist College

Neville Clark, M.A., S.T.M.

Tutor, South Wales Baptist College, Cardiff

Geoffrey F. Nuttall, M.A., B.D.

Formerly Lecturer, New College, London

Review: Marjorie Reeves