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incorporating the Transactions of the
BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

EDITORIAL

AT two o'clock on the afternoon of Thursday, 30th April, 1908, more than fifty people met together in the Council Chamber at the Baptist Church House and "resolved that the Baptist Historical Society be formed." Much could be written of the activities of the Society over the past fifty years, of the volumes of valuable material for Baptist history published under its auspices; of the assistance given to churches and individuals on matters dealing with denominational history; of the countless articles of importance published first in the *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, and then, since 1922, in the *Baptist Quarterly*. But interesting as a review of the past would be, it is of more importance to consider the task of the Society in the light of present-day needs, and to formulate plans for the future.

On the invitation issued for the inaugural meeting of the Historical Society, the aims of the new Society were stated. These remain unaltered, but need interpreting anew in these days. We would suggest four tasks which challenge us now, yet which arise directly out of the aims of fifty years ago.

First of all, there is the need to initiate a drive to ensure the preservation of materials for Baptist history, both manuscript and printed. More than once in recent months we have heard hair-raising stories of church minute books either mouldering away in damp places, or coming to a more sudden end in a dustbin. A system needs to be devised whereby all churches of more than a certain

age are circulated requesting information as to what records are extant and their whereabouts. In this way it should be possible to build up a catalogue of sources available for the various periods in Baptist history. In addition, some of the older churches possess their own libraries. These vary, both in size and value, but there is a real need for the collecting of information as to what these libraries contain. In a similar way, the whereabouts of Association records need to be discovered and noted. A listing and cataloguing of such material would not only enhance the chances of preserving valuable documents but would also facilitate research work into Baptist history. Yet it is not only the older churches which must be considered. We owe it to those who will celebrate the Ter-Jubilee of the Baptist Historical Society to try to ensure that the many new churches now being founded keep full records of the adventures of their early years. Events which appear commonplace to us and therefore not worth recording may turn out to be the very things which interest people one hundred years from now. The phenomena of housing estates and New Towns and the religious and social problems of these could well be of historical importance in years to come. One further thing needs to be said about the preservation of records and that is the importance today of trying to write down some of the still existing oral traditions of events of bygone days. It is very interesting, for example, to note how Mr. C. B. Jewson in *The Baptists of Norfolk* makes use of oral tradition to describe the events of the 1680s in the church at Ingham. These traditions are normally handed down from generation to generation in the same family. In these days, sad to say, the family tradition is breaking down in our churches. It is therefore all the more important that we should consider whether in some way an attempt can be made to record the traditions before they are lost.

Then, secondly, the need remains today to encourage, not only the writing of general Baptist history, but also the teaching of it. We hear much today of the growth of denominationalism resulting paradoxically but understandably from the encounter with other denominations in the various manifestations of the ecumenical movement. It may be true that those people who are fairly regularly involved in actual ecumenical encounters are being driven to examine their own denominational beliefs, but it is open to doubt whether such examination penetrates to the rank and file of church membership who are, of course, ultimately, the Baptist denomination. If we are to proclaim firmly and confidently that Baptist thought and practice are relevant and necessary today, it is surely essential for us to see how and why the Baptist denomination came into being and how and why it has maintained a separate witness until now. Separate be it noted, not only from the State Church, but also from other Free Churches. In the early days, the Baptist Historical

Society encouraged and supported the publication of sources for the study of Baptist history. What is surely needed today is liaison between the Society and, for example, the Carey Kingsgate Press and the Visual Aid Departments on the production of suitable materials to stimulate thought on Baptist life and practice at all levels of church life. In this we must take care that we do not under-estimate our constituency. It is sometimes suggested that we are in danger of encouraging within the denomination what may be called "a pamphlet mentality" by serving up Baptist thought in a light and easily-digestible form rather than providing more detailed material which is real food for thought. No one would want to say that this suggestion is more than a half-truth, but that it does contain some element of truth cannot be denied. In recent months, stimulated partially by the Report on Ordination, there has been conclusive evidence of a fast-growing desire amongst a few to discuss and discover more of Baptist history and theology. Is it not quite clearly a challenge to the Baptist Historical Society to play a part in this discussion and discovery, that the interest of the few may provoke the thought of the many?

Following on from this point, there is, thirdly, the encouragement of research into specific aspects of Baptist history and theology. There are vast tracts of Baptist history which are substantially unexplored. Not infrequently would-be students of Baptist history, both ministerial and lay, express interest in doing some research work. Sometimes a probationer minister expresses a desire to work on denominational history for his probation work, on other occasions laymen speak of their intention to study it for relaxation (a most laudable desire!). There is clearly a need for the Society to draw up a list of the more urgent and relevant aspects of our Baptist life and thought which need to be worked upon. It might then be possible to consider the organization of research work. The founder members of the Society seem to have viewed the sharing in and directing of research as one of their prime objects. Much as they achieved, there remains still more for us to do.

Finally, there is the challenge of this journal, the *Baptist Quarterly*. We have been greatly cheered in past months not only by the increase in circulation, but also by the number of letters we have received. We are most grateful for them and only regret that neither editorial expenses, nor editorial time, permit us to reply personally! But it is our earnest desire to make this publication of the maximum use to readers and to Baptist life in general. We therefore invite suggestions and criticisms. We also invite readers to submit any manuscripts which they may feel suitable for publication. Above all, however, we ask you to do your best to discover new subscribers, for we face the usual story of rising costs. In this connection it should be noted that the *Congregational Quarterly* is,

in future, only to be published three times a year. It is requested, therefore, that all members endeavour in this Jubilee year to gain at least one new subscriber for the *Baptist Quarterly*. This is the sort of suggestion that one hears in so many contexts—so much so, perhaps, that it is no longer taken as seriously as it should be. But is it really asking too much? If we did take this idea at its face value and were successful, then indeed the Society's Jubilee would have been well and truly celebrated. If we believe in the Society it is surely the least we can do.

These four tasks, then, we bring before you. It is hoped that they will be discussed at the Annual Meeting on April 28th at the Westminster Chapel, and wherever else opportunity presents itself in the coming year. It has been said that the denomination cannot afford to be without the Historical Society. That was spoken with the past service of the Society in mind. It is our task to justify that confidence for the future through our work for the people called Baptists.

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It is good to know that the Baptist Union Council, in November last, received the Report on Ordination and that it is now published. It is to be hoped that the wider issues arising out of that report will receive unhurried and scholarly attention. The series of articles on "Baptists and the Ministry" which we intend to publish during the coming year opens in this current issue with a brief article introducing the questions which will be faced.

* * *

Members of the Society will want to offer good wishes to Dr. E. A. Payne, one of our Vice-Presidents, as he assumes the Moderatorship of the Free Church Federal Council. He enters upon his year of office at a time when it seems that the Federal Council, both at local and national level, does not command the interest and support it deserves. It may well be that it needs to re-examine its place in the pattern of the ecclesiastical life in this country. Of recent years the growth of denominationalism, to which we have referred above, the formation of the British Council of Churches and the ever-growing emphasis upon world denominationalism have combined to make its task more complicated. Yet, in spite of that, what surely is needed in Free Church life in this country is a strong lead in encouraging further evidences of the 'togetherness' of the Free Churches—both in thought and in action. It is certainly premature to talk in terms of a United Free Church, especially as that phrase no doubt means different things to different people. But it might well be felt that the time had come for further theological discussion, not only on the issues which divide the Free Churches, but also on those which apparently unite them. It is usually assumed that the

ministries of each of the Free Churches are mutually acceptable. This could be made more manifest perhaps at all Free Church ordination services by the more general use of invitations to ministers of every Free Church to share in such services. Then again, is it to be assumed that membership of one Free Church carries with it membership of another? If this is so, implicitly or explicitly, should it not be more generally known? If this is not so—and Baptists may prove the awkward squad on this issue—let us know why not. These and kindred issues need to be thought out together.

But not only is thinking desirable, surely action is also. We are familiar with the need for experiments in united Free Church witness on housing estates and in New Towns, but what of the rural areas? In many a village there are two, or even three, churches with total congregations and Sunday schools which would scarcely fill one. In these rural communities the need for 'togetherness' is perhaps as urgent as on housing estates. It is in the villages that the Anglican claims are often most strongly pressed and exercised, thus increasing the need for united Free Church witness. Certainly, in villages the problem of Free Church unity is often vastly complicated by non-theological questions such as family loyalties, but this does not mean that the issue should remain untackled. Part of the problem is that many of the local Free Church Federal Councils are situated in towns and cities and do not include the surrounding villages within their jurisdiction. Would it not be possible therefore for the Free Church Federal Council to encourage the three Free Churches chiefly involved in rural areas to initiate a survey of the village situation at what the Baptist would call either Area or Association level?

In all this work towards Free Church unity, however, one danger is ever present. This is what may be called non-denominationalism. It is sometimes said that there is little point in all the theological discussions, for a man moving to a new home will take himself and his family and settle in the Free Church in which he feels most at home regardless of denomination. Some may feel that this is all to the good. But it certainly does not follow that the problem of Free Church relationships is thereby well on the way to being settled. It just will not do to say, for example, that it is good that it matters not to this man, whether his children are baptized as infants or as adults, or whether the minister of the church is called by a church-meeting or placed by a central committee. To encourage such a non-committal attitude towards faith and order, not only betrays the past, but far more important, it seriously jeopardises any hope of a constructive and lasting solution to the problem of Free Church unity. No, there remains much to do. What is required just now, then, are firm and practical suggestions as to the next steps to try and then the courage to take them.