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EDITORIAL

Dr Thompson devoted his 39th Friends of Dr Williams's Library lecture [*Denominationalism and Dissent 1795-1835; a question of identity*, Friends of Dr Williams's Library, £1] to an exploration of a theme that has recently also been the subject of comment in the *Quarterly*: namely, the relationship between a wide evangelical front for engagement in the missionary task of the church both at home and overseas and the emergence of denominational organizations also charged with that same missionary task in the years between the French Revolution and the reform era in England. Starting with those authors who have seen the cooperation in Christian action in the years following the Evangelical Revival as some foretaste of the concerns of the modern ecumenical movement, Dr Thompson argues that the denominationalism of the next generation should not be seen as a reaction against the undenominational endeavour of the earlier period. Both were concerned with the single focus of evangelism - at home and abroad, and the undenominationalism of the earlier period can, following Dr Lovegrove's researches, be exaggerated. In the new world that was coming into being in the early nineteenth century,

"Editorial," Baptist Quarterly 31.6 (April 1986): 249-251.

denominational action was favoured by the diminishing market for converts in each community which made competition more severe: 'there were', affirms Dr Thompson, 'limits to growth in religion as in other aspects of life'. At the same time the scale of the enterprise and national needs put a premium upon organizational efficiency which itself was reflected in a change of language from descriptions like the 'Presbyterian Perswasion' or 'Congregational Way' of the Declaration of Independence of 1672 to something approaching denominational consciousness with Wesley's Conference of Preachers and the New Connexion of General Baptists of 1770, a process which, of course, developed still further after 1800. In that context, Dr Thompson notes that the inter-denominational organizations which survived were those that 'did not challenge the essential churchly functions of the existing denominations'. He concludes by arguing that 'because the underlying theological differences of an earlier age had not been resolved, the form of the newly expanding Churches (of the first half of the nineteenth century) exposed those divisions once again. This was the "new denominationalism" of the Evangelical Revival'.

Like Professor Ward's article published in this journal more than ten years ago, Dr Thompson's lecture is timely in putting the nature of the church, denomination and interdenominational action in historical context. The time is ripe for such historical consciousness to feed into current debate when there is once more a convergence of evangelical and ecumenical concerns as witnessed by for example increasing evangelical participation in the life of the World Council of Churches. It is timely when documents like the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document ask us to look at our differences rather than ignoring them and leaving them unresolved.

Another set of issues thrown up by the world dimension would be the world-wide boundaries of denomination: clearly such a bureaucratic fencing as defining this in terms of membership of a World Alliance would be inadequate. How then do we as Baptists relate to others who might be thought by their polity, their evangelistic thrust and their sacramental practice to be close cousins? I think historically of the Mennonites who are doing so much today to articulate a Biblically radical discipleship, the Disciples, with their deep concern for unity, and the Brethren, who in our own day have supplied so much of the manpower of undenominational missionary endeavour. Within our own country there is the question historically of our ongoing relationship with the Strict Baptists and other smaller groups made more acute in recent years by the existence of Baptist Churches not in fellowship with the Baptist Union which increases our consciousness that the Baptist denomination represents a larger entity than membership of the Union. In developing countries there are 'independent' churches which confine baptism to believers, see the church as essentially the body of believers gathered around God's word in each local community and who might well teach us something about contextualisation and effective gospel-preaching within a given culture. And may be the same question is posed within our own country by the growth of some para- or neo-church organizations. Is there in this respect theological significance in the co-operation between the London Baptist Association and the Ichthus Fellowship that needs to be worked out on a larger canvas? In short, is there a Baptist denomination which is larger than

all our associational forms and how do we locally, nationally, internationally relate to that larger reality?

What is the future for denominations? Are they, as the prophets of Restoration and house-church predict, irretrievably doomed to extinction in the last years of the twentieth century? Or are we all, however we regard each other, in part at least signs of the coming of the Kingdom?

* * * * *

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The Baptist Historical Society offers a prize of £50 for an essay on any aspect of the theme

BAPTISTS AND AUTHORITY

The essay may be an historical or contemporary study. It should be an original, unpublished composition, based on personal research, that has not already been awarded another prize. The text should not exceed 10,000 words, but the submission should also include whatever footnotes and bibliography are considered necessary. It should be presented in typewritten form.

There is no restriction of academic qualification, place of residence or religious profession on candidates. The winning essay, and any other deemed worthy, will be published in the society's journal, *The Baptist Quarterly*. The Society reserves the right to make no award if an essay of sufficient merit is not submitted.

Candidates should send their essays to arrive on or before 30th September 1987. Envelopes should be marked 'Payne Memorial Essay Competition' and should be addressed to

The Secretary
Baptist Historical Society
Bristol Baptist College
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BRISTOL BS8 1UN

Note: The Payne Memorial Essay Competition commemorates the life and work of the Rev. Dr E. A. Payne, C.H. (1902-80), General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, a Vice-President of the World Council of Churches and President of the Baptist Historical Society.