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H.H. ROWLEY ON 'ASPECTS OF REUNION'

Some years ago I purchased in Blackwell's, Oxford, a second-hand copy of *Aspects of Reunion* by Harold H. Rowley.¹ It lay, unread, on my bookshelves until two recent articles in the *Baptist Quarterly*, the first on Rowley's biblical scholarship,² the second on the contribution of British Baptists to ecumenism,³ stimulated me to take it down and read it. This article is the result.

The book was published in 1923, so is probably Rowley's first published work.⁴ It was presumably written in the months before he sailed for China for missionary service with the Baptist Missionary Society.⁵ It is in part a response to the *Report of the Conference between Representatives of the Church of England and the Federal Council of the Free Churches* (1922).⁶ These conversations arose out of *An Appeal to All Christian People*, issued by the Lambeth Conference in 1920. They lasted for four years until 1925 and aroused considerable controversy amongst Baptists.⁷ This was not helped by the fact that one of the Baptist representatives was the General Secretary of the Union, Dr J.H. Shakespeare, whose book *The Churches at the Crossroads* (1918) had been condemned by a number of leaders within his own denomination.⁸

Rowley does not refer directly to this controversy, but he does at the beginning of his chapter on 'The Sacraments' express surprise that any Nonconformist could agree to a statement on the sacraments which 'is a declaration that the Society of Friends is not a part of the Church of Christ'.⁹ Later, regarding the statement that the baptism of infants was ordained by Christ Himself, he comments, 'Apparently the Baptist members of the Conference were not able to make effective protest against it. It is to be assumed that they disagreed'.¹⁰

The first chapter of Rowley's book is entitled 'The Goal', and in it the author sets out his own position. He acknowledges that present divisions are 'a scandal and a disgrace',¹¹ and then comments, 'If we truly have found Christ, and have been possessed by His Spirit, not merely *ought* we to be one fellowship, but we *must* be ... In so far as we fail of fellowship with His disciples we repudiate Him'.¹² He then rejects, however, what he calls 'the way of compromise' because it does not concern itself with the spiritual condition of the Church, and likewise 'the people of principle', because their only principle is prejudice, commenting, 'Compromise is of the world, but prejudice is of the Devil'.¹³ He pleads for co-operation between those who 'really desire a genuine unity, but fear a counterfeit' and the 'many who believe heartily in reunion, and who earnestly long for the Church to be not only one but reborn'.¹⁴ Such allies 'will seek first of all, not what is practicable, but what is ideal. They will be prepared to think everything out *de novo*, absolutely without prejudice. They will be prepared to be led anywhere by the Spirit of God, even to the creation of a totally new organization with marks that are not found in any existing Church'.¹⁵ This is Rowley's thesis. It is little wonder that it disappeared without trace in subsequent ecumenical discussions!

Nevertheless, his book is exciting reading because some of his suggestions ring contemporary bells, certainly in our denomination seventy-five years later. Take, for example, his chapter on 'Orders'.¹⁶ He proposes no less than eight Orders of Ministers: (1) evangelists, (2) preachers and teachers, (3) pastors, (4) prophets, (5) scholars, (6) organizers, (7) Salvation Army type social workers, (8) advisers to train Sunday School teachers. Each group should be under a Board which would examine and test fitness to be enrolled. An individual could be a member of more than one Order, but would have to be passed for each. Orders 2 and 3 would be needed in each local church; orders 1, 6, 7, and 8 in groups of churches (dioceses if they were smaller than at present); orders 4 and 5 would have a national role. To counter the arguments that such a scheme is too complicated and too expensive, he points out that under Reunion some existing churches would be redundant (thus releasing resources of money), and also that many of these ministers might be part-time or non-stipendiary.

Equally radical is his chapter on 'The Sacraments'.¹⁷ He argues for three. The first he calls 'Presentation', rather than 'Dedication'. He claims that this should be a sacrament, because it involves 'a solemn vow on the part of those presenting the child'. He rejects infant baptism unreservedly, but also stresses the importance of Spirit baptism over water baptism. On Communion he pleads for the restoration of the full meal as its context, because there is such a need for fellowship in every church. Throughout this chapter he stresses that these three sacraments are of the *bene esse*, not of the *esse* of the Church. His reason for saying this arises from his defence of the Friends at the beginning of this chapter: 'The Quaker realized that the Christian Religion is an inner and spiritual one, and that the possession of a vital experience of God through Jesus Christ cannot be determined by rites and ceremonies'.¹⁸

Rowley makes a number of points in other chapters which are of contemporary relevance. He agrees that there are advantages and disadvantages in each pattern of church government - episcopal, presbyterian and congregational. He pleads for a revitalized church meeting, but also for Diocesan Boards which 'should be generally responsible for the spiritual condition of all the Churches of the Diocese', with a Bishop or Overseer, who 'should have free right of visitation in all the Churches, and his task should be to promote in all ways possible the spiritual welfare of the Churches'.¹⁹

On 'Finance' he argues 'we believe the great inequalities in the remuneration of Ministers are unhealthy ... but, on the other hand, we do not advocate flat equality in Ministerial remuneration'.²⁰ He suggests the Missionary Society system of maintenance allowances rather than salaries. He would like to see Missionary Societies ceasing to be voluntary societies but becoming an integral part of the Reunited Church.²¹

How far were these visions of a young man carried forward in his subsequent ministry? I am not aware that Rowley wrote or spoke on Reunion again. Indeed, as

his minister for several years in the early 1960s, I had conversations with him on many subjects, but do not recall any on ecumenism, even though at the time I was becoming involved in the Manchester, Salford and District Council of Churches.

After reading his chapter on 'The Sacraments', I turned to the last chapter of his Whitley Lectures, *The Unity of the Bible* (1953). Were there any traces there of his thinking of thirty years earlier? Certainly there was the same rejection of infant baptism as true baptism. I was struck, moreover, by his conclusion:

Here, as everywhere, the symbol is worthless without that which is symbolized ... we have traced ... the fundamental conception of the nature of religion which belongs to the whole Bible. Everywhere it is man's response to the achieved work of God, his yielding to the constraint of grace, his fellowship with God and obedience to Him, his reflection of the Spirit of God in every aspect of his life, and the lifting of his life into the purpose of God.²²

Compare this with the conclusion of his first book:

We have had but one guiding principle throughout. The true Church must be such that it has a place for every genuine follower of Jesus Christ, that it will welcome all who are members of the Kingdom of God, and that it must neither welcome nor receive those who are not.²³

Rowley made the same point in his Presidential Address to the Baptist Union in 1957:

Ultimately everything goes back to the measure of our consecration to Christ and the measure of our experience in Him.²⁴

Is not this truth the clue to Baptist contributions to the ecumenical movement? It surfaces whenever in ecumenical discussions we have to affirm that for us the basis of our unity is not our common baptism, but our common faith in and experience of Jesus Christ.²⁵ It means that, like Rowley, we are committed to seeking God's will for His Church, although, unlike him, few Baptists now talk of a Reunited Church.

NOTES

- 1 It was published by George Allen & Unwin Ltd. The author is described as Harold H. Rowley, BA BD (late Dr Williams' Divinity, Elmslie Memorial and Baptist Union Scholar, and Houghton Syriac Prizeman). His subsequent books are by H.H. Rowley.
- 2 *BQ* XXXVIII, No.2, April 1999: R.E. Clements, 'The Biblical Scholarship of H.H. Rowley (1890-1969)', pp.70-82.
- 3 *BQ* XXXVIII, No.3, July 1999 - Anthony R. Cross, 'Service to the Ecumenical Movement: The Contribution of British Baptists', pp.107-122.
- 4 Clements, *op.cit.*, p.70, note 6 states that the first of his writings was published in 1929.
- 5 *ibid.*, p.70.
- 6 See E.K.H. Jordan, *Free Church Unity*, 1956, chapter 11. There are 17 (out of 39 altogether) notes in *Aspects of Reunion* which refer to this Report.
- 7 *ibid.*, pp.172f. Jordan quotes T.R. Glover writing in the *Daily News*: 'If reunion depends on artificial fog, I for one am for daylight, for straight thinking

- and straight speech.'
- 8 See R. Hayden, 'Still at the Crossroads? - Revd J.H. Shakespeare and Ecumenism' in K.W. Clements (ed.), *Baptists in the Twentieth Century*, 1983, pp.47ff.
- 9 Rowley, *Aspects of Reunion*, p.66.
- 10 *ibid.*, pp.67f.
- 11 *ibid.*, p.8.
- 12 *ibid.*, p.10.
- 13 *ibid.*, p.14.
- 14 *ibid.*, p.18.
- 15 *ibid.*, p.19.
- 16 *ibid.*, pp.35-57.
- 17 *ibid.*, pp.66-88.
- 18 *ibid.*, p.67.
- 19 *ibid.*, pp.143f.
- 20 *ibid.*, pp.163f.
- 21 *ibid.*, p.170.
- 22 Rowley, *The Unity of the Bible*, 1953, p.186.
- 23 Rowley, *Aspects of Reunion*, p.174.
- 24 Rowley, *Our resources and our task*, 1957, p.31.
- 25 See, for example, *Believing and being baptized: A discussion document by the Doctrine and Worship Committee of the Baptist Union of Great Britain*, 1996, chapter VIII, Faith, not baptism, is essential for salvation, p.35f.

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