

BAPTIST POLITY IN THE NEW ORDER.

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There is one church that has taken as its motto *semper eadem*. It has recently canonized a girl, whom it burnt as a witch five hundred years ago. Happily for itself, the Church of Rome has been obliged to change, though slowly, with the changing times. How much more naturally will our own free churches, unhampered by ecclesiastical restrictions, modify and develop their polity in the new order as they have constantly modified it in the past.

We have faith that the Lord has not tied his Church to a form of life unfavorable to adaptation to the changing conditions of the world. Our history abundantly demonstrates the facility with which we have been able to meet new conditions. A score of times our leaders saw that something new was to be done. Timid men feared for our cherished polity. But the advance was made and it was found that the polity had not suffered in the process.

Thus we came to have an ordained ministry, associations, ecclesiastical councils, missionary societies. Thus we moved forward to a genuinely denominational body, the Triennial Convention, then to the Southern Baptist Convention. Then we came to have officials with titles dangerously near to that of diocesan bishop (what else does state superintendent mean?). Latest, we have proceeded to such a highly organized body as the Northern Baptist Convention.

To the early Baptists these developments would have seemed passing strange. Yet the local Baptist church today is evidently essentially what it was in the beginning. It is animated by the same democratic spirit, with

the same passionate faith in spiritual freedom that inspired the pioneers.

We need not, therefore, be afraid to look forward and to conjecture the probable lines of development as Baptists go on into the great new era that is before us.

It is interesting to realize that our cardinal doctrine, the independence of the local church, is likely to be reaffirmed equally by those who favor a more centralized direction of the affairs of the denomination and by those who are opposed to the tendency. The centralizers, if I may use the term without in any wise suggesting a party name, are concerned for more efficient missionary and educational organization. But they know very well the danger of a bureaucracy. Safety is only to be found in the complete independence of the local congregation. The minister and his church must be entirely beyond the control of the denominational officary. And the local church holds in its hands the money supply. Thus, however strong for purposes of practical efficiency we may decide to make our denominational directorate, we shall keep it near to the people by our unalterable determination to leave the local congregation completely free.

There is, of course, already a very marked modification of this local independency, a modification which is likely to be accentuated. A missionary church is not independent. We have tried to maintain the fiction of its independence by insisting that the particular congregation is at any moment free to refuse aid from the denomination and to pursue its own way. This would in many cases involve the surrender of the building in which it had been worshiping and the release of the minister whom it would be no longer able to support. But it would then cease to be a missionary church. The statement would still be correct that missionary churches are not completely independent.

This is not only inevitable but, on the whole, desirable. The fact that the distinction is, of necessity, made

upon a financial basis is after all incidental. If a church becomes independent because it becomes self-supporting, yet it becomes self-supporting because it has attained the maturity of a membership of men and women of sufficient ability to manage its affairs. Until it reaches such maturity there is every reason for the exercise of a kindly and firm direction.

We have given up in politics the doctrinaire position that all peoples are capable of self-determination. We recognize that a certain tutelage is necessary. So the little churches organized by our missionaries, whether at home or abroad, need a certain advice and direction until they are strong enough for complete self-government.

It is probable that there will be an increasing number of large churches of the so-called "institutional" type working in city centers, where the population is shifting and thus incapable of self-direction. Some form of denominational control will naturally be developed for these churches.

The problem of the very small church, incapable of self-support but eking out a precarious existence in a settled community, where there are conditions calling for independence, is one which has not yet been worked out. If it is not to be met by some form of interdenominational federation, there must be devised some other statesmanlike solution. I am concerned at this point simply to make clear that the fiction of complete independence apart from the maturity and strength which self-support indicates cannot and should not be maintained.

Our Baptist polity will continue to be democratic. To be sure, there is no term more loosely employed to-day. Oftentimes to denounce something as undemocratic is simply to say that we do not like it. Fundamentally, democracy is a great faith—faith that human society is

capable of self-direction and that all the members of that society may be progressively contributory to that self-direction.

It has often been pointed out that the simple organization of a Baptist church is typically democratic. It has not generally been recognized, however, that there has been a serious failure to carry out the principle to its logical conclusion. Women have never had equal recognition with men in our churches. Instead of following the spirit of the New Testament, we have followed the letter, and have supposed that a Christian woman in America in the twentieth century must have the same position in the church to which she was restricted in the Mediterranean world of the first century. In the new order women will eventually come to an equality with men. They are beginning to have places on our national boards. There is no reason why all the offices of the church should not be open to them, including the pastorate and the deaconate. We have had a few women in the Baptist ministry. Women have many qualities which adapt them to the pastoral office. Their exclusion from the deaconate is based upon a sacerdotal conception of that office which has no place in Baptist theory. There will be much prejudice to be overcome, but the trend is manifest and the larger place of women in the government of the church will be altogether healthy.

A more difficult question of democracy is that which relates to the great denominational bodies. In our national politics we are discovering that democracy for a hundred millions of people is a very different matter from democracy among the early states. Problems of representation are much more complex.

A Baptist association is a very natural development from the independent local church. It is simply a fraternal gathering of the messengers selected by the churches. It is representative in the truest sense. If

the association decides to undertake some definite evangelistic, missionary, or educational work, it is able to carry out the project in truly democratic manner. The state convention is not so representative. Inasmuch as it has no power to take important action that might affect the well-being of the churches, there is difficulty in securing the attendance of representative men and women. A Baptist state convention rarely represents the strong leadership of the denomination in any such sense as the Presbyterian synod or the Methodist conference represents those bodies. And it must never be forgotten that representation of the strongest is necessary to democracy. One of the perils of our national life is that our political system enables astute men to neutralize the efforts of the more thoughtful people. We do not have much of that kind of thing denominationally, but we do suffer from the neglect of our ablest people to take effective part in the state conventions. The remedy for this will be to increase the significance of the state work. In those states in which important educational and missionary enterprises are carried on the churches have a consciousness of the significance of the state convention, which is quite impossible where the enterprises are comparatively small.

But the most important difficulty of democracy is in our greatest denominational bodies. We have shrunk from the idea of closely delegated bodies in our anxiety to preserve the fundamental significance of the local church. The Northern Baptist Convention has put associations, state conventions, and national conventions all in the same relation to the local church. That has seemed the inevitable logic of our polity. But it defeats the very end it has in view. It actually disfranchises a large majority of the churches. The Law Committee has pointed out how unsatisfactory in practice this must necessarily be. If every church should exercise its prerogative and

send the number of representatives to which it is entitled no hall that has ever been built could hold them. Only in the expectation that the greater number of the constituent churches will not be represented at all is it possible to have the convention. The Southern Baptist Convention has kept nearer to the delegation plan in its provision for representation of district associations, but the financial basis of its primary membership is against its formally denominational character. Churches located near the place of the meeting of the conventions have a wholly disproportionate part in the activities of both the Northern and Southern bodies.

It is quite impossible that the Northern Baptists will remain at this stage of their evolution and unlikely that the South will be satisfied with their present condition. The logic of the rigidly delegated body is inevitable. We shall greatly increase the significance of the association and of the state convention if we make those the bodies through which our representation in the national bodies is organized.

This suggestion is, of course, in no wise new. It has often been considered and as often rejected. Yet we are moving definitely toward it. Objection will at once be made that this is exactly the Presbyterian system. Put presbytery for association, synod for state convention, general assembly for Northern or Southern Baptist Convention and Baptist polity has become Presbyterian.

But this is to overlook an important difference. Presbytery, synod, general assembly are courts of the church. Baptist churches will have no courts. None of the Baptist representative bodies will have the slightest authority to bind either the pastor or the membership of any church at any point. They will be purely executive. To be sure, they will decide questions of denominational policy, and the more representative they are the more effectively will they make such decision, but they will

have no power to make any decision that will affect the local church in its own life.

This suggests a very important distinction, which is only just coming into recognition among us. It is the distinction between denominational authority in the realm of denominational enterprise and the same authority as exercised over a local church. The latter will never be allowed, the former is rapidly becoming a necessity.

At present, half a dozen enthusiastic Baptists can decide that a Baptist hospital is needed in a certain locality. They collect some money to start the enterprise, carry it on for a little while, then come before the churches with the plea that here is a Baptist institution which loyalty calls all Baptists to support. Colleges, orphanages, missions are started in the same way. They are not denominational institutions at all. They have no right to appeal to Baptist loyalty. They have no denominational standing. They are private institutions organized by individual Baptists and foisted upon the denomination. Let me hasten to add that many of our noblest institutions have thus been inaugurated, simply because there was no other means of procedure. But there is a definite demand on the part of our people for a more orderly method. The old way is independency run wild. If a local church desires to establish a hospital and to maintain it, well and good, but it ought not to be able to establish a hospital for the denomination.

Who, then, is to decide upon such matters? If the institution operates within the boundaries of an association, that body should have the authority; if the institution is state-wide in its operation, the state convention should determine; if the institution is national, it should be authorized by one of the national bodies. I am not here suggesting a reorganization of our polity, but pointing out what seems to be the direction in which we are moving, namely, an articulated system of denominational

representative bodies to have authority in denominational matters. There never will be any authority whatever in these bodies to legislate for the churches, but there is likely to be very much increased authority to legislate for the denomination.

The evolution of this distinction between local church authority and denominational authority is very interesting. The fathers implicitly recognized the principle in drawing up those great declarations of faith, which have had so important a place in our denominational life. The New Hampshire and the Philadelphia declarations were prepared by denominational authority, although the term was not used and would doubtless not have been acceptable. But they were the corporate voice of the Baptist churches in stating the generally accepted views of Baptists for the enlightenment of people who misunderstood our position. They were never intended to be binding upon the churches or upon Baptist individuals. No denominational council has ever required the acceptance of either of these statements of doctrine for the recognition of a church or for the ordination of a minister. The statement of a Christian's belief must be his own. But if hostile people outside our churches are misrepresenting us, it may be very wise for the denomination to make a clarifying statement of what is most surely believed among us.

We shall preserve this historical attitude in the matter of declarations of faith. Both the Northern and Southern Conventions have recently made pronouncements that have something of the confessional character, the former in answer to the Presbyterian overture, the latter with reference to participation in the Interchurch Movement. The denomination in each case was called upon to state its attitude on an important question of Christian order. Naturally, the denomination did so through its most representative bodies. The purpose of

those declarations, as of all others that have been made in Baptist history, was to give information to other people concerning our views. It was not, and could not be, to set up a creed that should be binding on Baptist themselves. Those declarations have not the slightest authority upon the local church or upon the individual Baptist. If a Northern Baptist church chooses to appoint a committee to discuss terms of union with a Presbyterian church, if a Southern Baptist church chooses to co-operate with the Interchurch Movement, each has the perfect right to do as it thinks best. No action of the Convention could limit its freedom.

It is therefore in the highest degree unlikely that we shall ever have an official statement of Baptist faith. Indeed, there is no one to make it. It would be entirely contrary to our history and to the genius of our organization. The mere idea of a resolution containing the articles of Christian belief, which would be subject to amendment, and would be adopted by a majority vote, is so repugnant to our conception of spiritual liberty that it needs only to be stated in order to be dismissed. Somebody suggested that the question of open communion should be brought before the Northern Baptist Convention "in order that it might be settled". It is difficult to think of any way in which a matter would be more unsettled than by passing a vote which should endeavor to bind the churches. In a day when other denominations are chafing under the yoke of their creeds we shall not violate our unbroken tradition by undertaking to fasten one upon our membership.

There is one direction in which our practice needs stiffening in the future. We are too lax with reference to our ministry. We still proceed on the theory that a Baptist church sets apart one of its own members for the gospel ministry, doing so, however, with the counsel of the churches in the vicinage. In fact, churches gen-

erally call a young man from the schools for the purpose of ordaining him. And to all intents and purposes, it is the council that ordains. In the smaller churches, especially in the country, the former practice still prevails. In a few of the larger cities there has been appointed by the association a permanent ordination council, in which there is virtual authority to give the candidate ministerial standing. Whether this will become a general practice it is difficult to say. The independence of the congregation involves its right to choose its own minister, and experience shows that it is generally possible, sooner or later, to secure a council to ordain almost anyone thus chosen.

There is an increasing sense that entrance into our ministry should be more carefully guarded. While no one would suggest that godly men of meager training should be entirely excluded, there is a general realization that our times demand the best possible educational equipment. There ought to be some standards for our ministry.

Will our new pension system be of help in the standardizing process? It might not unfairly be required that a man should have some degree of training before becoming eligible to the pension, and further that, in the case of those inadequately trained, definite courses of study should be carried on by correspondence and through institutes under the direction of some educational authority.

The great educational foundations have, through the power of the purse, had great influence in setting standards for schools and colleges. It is not impossible that a similar result might be attained for our ministry. Whether any degree of educational training, even the most meager, can ever be required for ordination it is difficult to say. This may be one of the instances in which we must endure the weakness of our polity in

order that we shall preserve its glorious value in that freedom of soul, which no superficial efficiency can ever be allowed to impair.

We are likely to see many denominational expedients tried, some of which will be abandoned as undesirable and some of which will become permanent Baptist practice. In the more complex work which the Christian church must face in the coming years the denominations must be able to move with vigor and decision. Baptists will probably meet these requirements with much more thorough denominational articulation than has yet been seen. That they will not lose that essential genius of liberty, which is so dear to us, is sufficiently evident from the invariable reaction which has followed any attempt at autocratic or bureaucratic control. We face the future with an adaptability of polity highly promising for effective results.