

OUR BEST HERITAGE

Sermon by Dr. J. Clyde Turner, Greensboro, North Carolina, at the Joint Meeting of the Southern and Northern Convention in Washington, D. C., May 23, 1933.

The Psalmist of old, as he contemplated the goodness of God in bringing him to his high estate in Israel, said, "The lines are fallen to me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage." And as we Baptists of America think of the goodness of God in leading us through the years, and establishing us in this fair land, we, too, can say, "The lines are fallen to us in pleasant places; yea, we have a goodly heritage."

There are two phases of our Baptist Heritage that I present to you on this occasion:

1. The Contents of our Baptist Heritage

Of what does this heritage consist? It does not consist of material wealth. Our Baptist fathers were not rich in this world's goods. It does not consist of social influence or the power of position. Those who have walked in the Baptist way have been an humble people. In what does this heritage consist? I mention two things.

1. Principles.--I realize that talking to this audience about Baptist principles is like carrying coal to Newcastle. But in this day, when there is an insistent demand from some courses that denominational differences be forgotten and evangelical bodies be brought together in one great organization, we need to go back and think of those principles which have made us what we are as a Baptist people.

Perhaps the outstanding characteristic of Baptists has been their devotion to the Bible as the authoritative revelation of God's will. Every religious group has sought for some source of authority. Some have located that authority in an institution. Others have found it in the individual consciousness. But our Baptist fathers found it in a book

which contains God's revealed will to men. And out of this loyalty and devotion to the Bible have come some principles that are dear to the heart of every true Baptist. These principles center around three heads.

(1) The individual. The Word of God puts emphasis on the individual. Salvation is primarily an individual matter, and not social. Individual responsibility to God is the note that is sounded all through the New Testament. And Baptists have always majored on the supreme worth of the individual. Centering around the individual are two great principles.

The first is Soul-competency. This is perhaps the fundamental Baptist principle out of which other great principles emerge, the competency of the soul under God to achieve its own religious destiny. The individual needs no official interpreter of God's Word; he is competent to interpret its message to his own soul. He needs not the aid of institution or person in his approach to God. He is competent to deal directly with God without the aid of man. Sponsors in religion, or proxy-religion, is in direct conflict with this principle. The individual needs no sponsor, neither parent nor priest, as he approaches God for himself.

The second principle centering around the individual which is closely akin to the first, is soul-freedom, the right of the individual to come to God without interferences of God's Word for himself, and he has the right to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience. No person, and no institution, has a right to step in between a soul and God, and dictate to that soul how he must worship God, or must not worship God. For this principle Baptists have always contended, and for this principle they have sacrificed property and person. They have contended, not only that they may have this right for themselves, but that every other man may have that right. There is to be no coercion in religion.

I read somewhere that when the Americans first occupied Manila

they found many persons in prison for what was called "political offenses." One of the crimes for which men were imprisoned was that of reading the Bible. Soon after the Stars and Stripes were raised over that land, these prison doors were opened and men were set free. One day a man came to an American missionary and asked to see him in strict privacy. When they were alone he asked in a whisper if it were true that he could now read his Bible without fear of imprisonment. The missionary took him to a window and pointed to the American flag floating from a near-by building, and said to him, "So long as you see that flag floating over your country, you can sit on the ridge-pole of your house, if you want to, and read your Bible, and no one can molest you."

I need not say that it was largely through the efforts and sacrifices of our Baptist fathers that this privilege was gained for all who live under the Stars and Stripes.

(2) The church. Of course by "church" I mean the local church. Baptists believe that the church is a divine institution. It is divine in its origin, having been conceived, not in the brain of man, but in the mind of God. It is divine in its organization, governed, not by the whims and fancies of men, but by the laws of God. It is divine in its mission, having been commissioned by our Lord for a holy task.

Centering around the church we find two important principles.

The first has to do with organization. The church is a spiritual democracy. It is spiritual in that it is to be made up of individuals who have been born of the Spirit of God. Baptists have always stood for a regenerated church membership. Many of the ^{which}ills/have afflicted the church can be traced to a violation of this principle. Of all the anomalies under heaven, there is none greater than of an unregenerated church member. "The church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood," is to be made up of those who have been born again.

But, in organization, the church is not only spiritual, it is a democracy. It is composed of redeemed men and women banded together in a democratic organization, and governed by democratic principles. That means equality of privilege and standing for everyone in the church. There are to be no overlords in the church of Christ, for Christ himself is the Lord of the church.

The story is told of the Duke of Wellington, that on one occasion when he was kneeling to receive the Lord's Supper in his parish church a poor old man came up the oppositedside and knelt down close to the Duke. Someone came and whispered to the old man to move farther away, or wait until the Duke had received the bread and wine. But the great man who had heard the whisper, reached over and clasped the old man's hand and held it tight, and said to him, "Do not move; all are equal here." In those words the great commander announced a Baptist principle, not only for the Lord's Supper, but for all the rights and privileges of the church. It is a spiritual democracy.

As a spiritual democracy, the church is an independent organization. It recognizes no authority but the authority of Christ. It will cooperate , but it will not be coerced. In the denomination of which it is a part it is an independent unit. In the government under which it lives it demands complete separation of church and state. It recognizes the right of no official to interfere with its affairs, and it has no desire to interfere with the affairs of the state. In some of the moral questions which have been before the people of this country in recent years, the churches have been accused of getting into politics. Preachers have been accused of dragging politics into the pulpit. The churches and the preachers have no desire to get into politics, but God forbid that the time shall ever come when the churches and the preachers will not have the courage to stand up that "nothing can ever be politically right which is morally wrong."

The second principle centering around the church deals with the ordinances. There are two New Testament church ordinances which have ever been dear to the heart of Baptists. For their loyalty to the Word of God in observing those ordinances Baptists have been severely criticized. They have accepted them as church ordinances, to be administered by the church. Because of their loyalty to Christ who gave these ordinances, and because of the truths which these ordinances proclaim, Baptists have insisted that they be observed as they were in the New Testament days. They are not sacraments that save, but symbols that set forth gospel truths. The heart of the gospel message centers around the death and resurrection of Christ. "He was delivered up for our trespasses, and raised for up for our trespasses, and raised up for our justification." These gracious truths are set forth in two ordinances of the church.

And there are other vital truths which these ordinances proclaim.

The ordinances of baptism declares that the old man of sin has died and that a new man has been raised up ~~in~~ in Christ Jesus. The ordinance of the Lord's Supper suggests that growth in the Christian life comes through constant feeding on Jesus Christ and his Word.

Baptists have insisted that these ordinances must be kept in their New Testament simplicity. To change them is to set aside the gospel truths which they proclaim.

(3) The denomination. The principle centering around the denomination is that of cooperation in the work of the kingdom. It is evident that God intended that Baptists should have a leading part in the missionary enterprise. When he was ready to arouse the church from its sleep of indifference and set on foot the modern mission movement, he went to a cobbler's shop and laid his hand on William Carey, a Baptist. When he was ready to fire the souls of the people in this land with missionary interest, he laid his hand on two men, sent out by another denomination, and made Baptists out of them. These men called together the Baptists

of the United States and welded them together in cooperative work for the evangelization of the lost world. This is our heritage as a Baptist people, the great missionary enterprise.

2. Personalities. Our Baptist heritage consists not only in great principles, but also great personalities. Time would fail to call the names of those leaders who have carried the Baptist banner through the years, those who have suffered and sacrificed that Baptist principles might prevail. But as we look at these men we see several characteristics.

(1) Character. Men who stand for great principles must be men of great character. What a man stands for is interpreted in terms of what a man is. Our Baptist principles could have prevailed if our Baptist leaders had not been men of outstanding character. Standing like lofty mountain peaks, they have cast the shadow of their lives down the pathway of the years. They were men of character.

(2) Conviction. They believed something, and they believed it with all the conviction of their souls. Not all the ridicule of men, nor all the threats of their enemies, could turn them from their faith. With them truth could never be a non-essential. How easy it would have been for those who suffered imprisonment for their faith to have gained their freedom by one word of recantation. How easily Judson and Rice might have settled the question of Baptism by casting it aside as a non-essential. Thus they could have gone on their way and continued their fellowship with the people who sent them out as their missionaries. But these men could not so easily dispose of their convictions. They felt that they must be true to the truth as God had given them to see it, though it meant a break with sacred associations, and the facing of difficulties that seemed insurmountable. They were men of conviction.

(3) Courage. These men not only had convictions, but they had the courage to stand for them. For his convictions Hubmaier was not afraid

to stand at the burning stake. For his convictions, Bunyan did not hesitate to lie in prison for twelve long years. For his convictions Roger Williams had the courage to turn his back upon civilization and strike out into the wilderness to live with the savages. For his convictions Obidah Holmes stood at the whipping post and was lashed until the blood flowed from his wounds. For their convictions our Baptist fathers in Massachusetts and Virginia, and in other sections, faced prison and lash without wavering. We gather here today not far from soil made sacred by Baptist blood which was shed for the truth. These were men of courage.

(4) Consecration. They dedicated all they had in powers of personality and in material possession, for the establishment of truth in the earth and the ongoing of the kingdom of God. Like that one of old, they counted all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus their Lord; and they suffered the loss of all things, and counted them but refuse, that they might win Christ.

Surely we would not lightly esteem this portion of our Baptist heritage, these great personalities with their character, and convictions, and courage, and consecration.

II. The Obligation which our Baptist Heritage Imposes

What are we going to do with out Baptist Heritage. Sometimes men do not fully appreciate that which others have made possible for them. The Rich man's son does not always recognize the value of the fortune which the hard work and sacrifices of his father had made possible for him. And there is a danger that we Baptists of today will not fully appreciate the worth of the heritage which the sacrifices of our fathers had made possible for us.

The worth of anything is determined by two things, its cost and usefulness. What did our Baptist Heritage cost? Go back to the burning stake, the whipping pose, and the jail cell, to find the pages of Christian history with their stories of persecution and ridicule, and let them answer. Our heritage bears

the marks of blood. Like our redemption, it is blood-bought. So long as we value Christian heroism and the martyr spirit, we will place a high estimate on our Baptist Heritage.

But the answer to another question will help us to appraise properly our heritage. What has it been worth to the world? It would take pages of history to answer that question, and they could answer it only in part. Eternity alone, with its perfect revelation can give the full answer. What would the conditions be in this country today had it not been for the triumph of certain Baptist principles? It was Baptists' Love of freedom that helped to kindle the fires of the Revolution and win American independence. History declares that in all America there was but one Tory Baptist preacher. It was Baptist democracy that helped to shape the Constitution that created our democratic form of government. It was Baptist effort that wrote into the Constitution the amendment which granted religious liberty to men of all faiths, and of no faith. Surely when we think of what our Baptist Heritage cost, and of what it has meant to this land and to the world, we will put a high estimate on its value.

2. We must earnestly guard our Baptist Heritage. "Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward." "Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown." We shall prove ourselves unworthy of our heritage if we allow it to slip away from us. We must hold fast to our principles, and catch the spirit of these great personalities which made those principles regnant in the hearts of men. The temptation to compromise is pressed upon us, but there can be no compromise where truth is concerned. Compromise truth in the field of mathematics and you destroy all mathematical standards. Compromise trust in the realm of geography and you destroy all standards of place and distance. Compromise truth in the realm of religion and you destroy all religious standards. There is no place for com-

promise in the Baptist program. To compromise in our loyalty to the Word of God is to be untrue to Him who gave us his Word. To compromise in the realm of soul-competency and soul-freedom is to "put a yoke on the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear." To compromise in the principle of regenerated church membership is to destroy the power of the church as a spiritual democracy. To compromise in the realm of ordinances is to desert the truth for which those ordinances stand. To compromise where the lordship of Jesus the necessity of atonement are concerned is to deny the Lord that brought us. We must earnestly guard our Baptist Heritage.

3. We must enrich and enlarge our Baptist Heritage. Each generation has some contribution to make to the Heritage which comes to it. This generation is no exception. We are facing conditions which open up new fields of service and call for wider applications of Christian truth. Our fathers emphasized the worth of the individual and the supreme importance of personal salvation. And the religious denomination which drifts away from that position is doomed. But we are facing conditions today which remind us that "no man liveth to himself. Isolation is impossible in this modern world. Science and invention have brought all parts of the nation into closest proximity, and have made the nations of the world our next-door neighbors. The individual is a world citizen today. Life is not the simple thing it once was. We are living in a complex age, an age of industrialism, and age of class consciousness. All of this means that there must be a social interpretation and application of the gospel. All the problems of the world which affect human welfare are primarily religious problems, and the Christian church must speak an authoritative message in the midst of world confusion and uncertainty. The question of war is not primarily a political question, but a religious question, and the time is here when the church of Christ ought to speak out on the subject of war. The industrial problems are

not primarily economic problems. They can be settled aright only as they are settled according to the principles of the New Testament. There is no solution of the race question apart from the Christian religion. And so it is with all the problems that confront the world. They can never be settled until they are settled according to the teachings of Christ. It is our privilege and obligations to enrich and enlarge our glorious heritage as we pass it on to those who come after us.

4. We must share ^{our} ~~of~~ Baptist Heritage with the world. There is no escape from this obligation. The world needs the principles for which we stand, and the living Lord has commanded us to us to share them with the world. Orthopraxy is just as important as orthodoxy. Some of us have been so intent on listening to Jude as he exhorts ~~us~~ to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints," that we have not given heed to the command of our Lord to "go and make disciples of all the nations." Some have been so busy contending for the faith that they have had no time to campaign for souls.

Our Primitive brethren received their heritage and refused to share it, and as a result they have well-nigh perished from the earth. But all Primitive Baptists are not found in the churches of that name. Many of them are in our Miss onary churches and are stifling the missionary spirit. For the past few years we have been on the downgrade in our missionary work. We have closed mission stations and called home missionaries. We are giving less to send the gospel to the ends of the earth than we gave twenty years ago, And this is not due entirely to economic conditions, as bad as they may be. The missionary spirit of the churches has been stifled with selfishness and indifference. We have built our fine houses of worship to minister to our pride, and have spent millions to perfect our organizations.

When Cuba was fighting for her freedom, a New York publisher donated

\$3,000 to purchase a beautiful gold-handled sword to be presented to General Gomez. A newspaper correspondent was commissioned to make his way through the Spanish lines and deliver the sword. When the sword was handed to him, General Gomez was standing in the midst of his poorly-clad, badly-equipped army. As he held the sword in his hand, and realized something of the amount of money that it had cost, he burst into tears; and flung the golden gift from him. "To think, he cried, "that Americans have spent money on ~~that~~ silly ornaments like that when my army is starving and in desperate need of clothing and am-munitions."

When the Christian people of this country cut down their gifts to Missions, and spend princely sums in the erection of church buildings, and present those buildings in dedication to Christ, I wonder if he does not feel much like the Cuban General. I wonder if he does not turn away and say, "To think that my people have spent all of this money on them-selves while my soldiers on the far-flung battle line are breaking under their burdens, mission stations are being closed, and a lost world is dying without a saviour."

I think of those first verses in the 12th chapter of Hebrews. In the preceding chapters the author has been calling the roll of the faithful men and women who served their generation by the will of God and fell on sleep. He thinks of their immortal spirits as hovering like a great cloud of witnesses above the Christians of his day, and he says, "Therefore let us also, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us."

We cannot meet on this occasion without thinking of those men and women who have lived and served and passed on to take their places among the

the redeemed. If it is given to those who have gone on to another world to look down upon the scenes of their earthly labors, then surely the eyes of a great company are turned this way today. We would clasp hands with them across the great divide and pledge our devotion in the words of the old hymn.

"Faith of our fathers, living still,
In spite of dungeons, fire and sword,
Oh, how our hearts beat high with joy,
When'er we hear that glorious word—
Faith of our fathers, holy faith,
We will be true to thee till death..

Of one thing we may be sure, the face of our living Lord is turned this way. The author of Hebrews describes Jesus as having completed his redemptive work on earth, and having taken his place at the right hand of God, "henceforth expecting till his enemies be made the footstool of his feet." As we gather here under the searching gaze of the living Christ, we are conscious that we have failed him in the holy task he gave us to perform. But, in this holy hour, we would rededicate our lives, and say to Him who sits at the right hand of God, "O thou expectant Christ thou shalt not look in vain to this, thy people."