

Is a Union of Various Baptist Bodies Feasible?

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The question is indefinite at several points : a statement of it is therefore important.

I. Statement of the question.

(a). Baptist Bodies. The first item of uncertainty relates to the expression "Baptist Bodies." There are differences of judgment regarding this point. In much of our literature, especially of the historical and sensational kind, positions are assumed that are sometimes combated. If a Pan-Baptist Council should ever be convened, a place on the Committee of Credentials would be no sinecure. That committee would be required to give attention to discussions of a doctrinal, practical and historical nature. Whatever decisions it might make would be sure to encounter opposition.

(b). Union. Few words could be more vague. There are unions of every possible shape and every possible grade of coherency. What type of union is here proposed? Is mere Christian union intended—the friendly sympathy and religious respect of persons who belong to different camps? That kind of union is not only feasible; it actually exists, and flourishes to a considerable extent. No ideal condition of affairs prevails; but the ideal always eludes our grasp in this world. Possibly there is now more of Christian fellowship and respect than would obtain if all parties were consolidated into a single organization upon any kind of platform.

Of late the notion of federative union has come into vogue. It appears to have taken its origin in Germany, where the aggressive policy of the Roman Church has induced leading Protestant fraternities to conclude that some kind of concerted action would be desirable. Even under stress of the perils that encompass them there, the enterprise of accomplishing any closer organization than a simple federative alliance is considered to be hopeless.

Federative unions may be of almost any shape and shade. They may embrace only those Christians who bear a given family name and likeness; or it is conceivable that they might include Christians of different family names and descent. It is likely that on two of them would be of the same pattern, or devoted to a like purpose.

Am I at liberty to conclude that the query with which I have been entrusted, takes for granted that the aggressions of Romanism have become sufficiently alarming in America and in other countries where Baptists are numerous to suggest the propriety of a

federative union among various Baptist bodies ; and that it requires me to express an opinion as to whether a federative union of any color would be feasible ? These might be entertaining topics ; they would perhaps be more attractive than the issue which I am disposed to believe has been submitted to my judgment. But the notion of a federative union is so new and unsettled that I can hardly believe the Committee expected it to be discussed on this occasion.

I fancy that the topic I have in charge relates to a union of all Baptist bodies in a single organization, with a single set of officials, and a single organ of opinion and authority in matters of faith and practice and propagandism. At any rate the query that I shall discuss is, whether an organic union of various Baptist bodies is feasible.

Let it be observed that the word "feasible" is employed. I am not required to express an opinion upon the question whether an organic union of various Baptist bodies is desirable. That issue is sometimes raised and hotly disputed. On this side all the evils of separation are duly arrayed and insisted upon ; on the other side the evils of consolidation are illustrated with glowing eloquence, from certain well-known examples that are widely familiar. This investigation, however, is not before us ; the question is whether an organic union of various Baptist bodies is feasible.

It would be useless to inquire whether a union of this color is feasible at the present moment ? Certainly not ; no preparations have been made for an immediate consummation ; the views of the great body of Baptist believers, whether in this country or other countries, have not yet been formed by discussion. The business is, comparatively speaking, new to the rank and file ; years of familiarity and perhaps of compromise would be required before even the initial step could be taken. Our associations in the faith have become so numerous that we should be compelled to move slowly. Is an organic union of various Baptist bodies feasible, in the sense that we might hope to accomplish it after years of consideration and exertion ? This is a full statement of the question I shall handle in the brief time at my disposal.

I shall not indulge in any decided statements ; the event of which we are treating belongs to the future ; and none of us is infallible to foretell coming events. No man is entitled to declare that an organic union of Baptist bodies can never be achieved ; just as little are we entitled to affirm that it can be achieved. The matter is one of probabilities ; we can hardly see the end from the beginning. Let us endeavor to weigh the probabilities of the case.

II. Discussion of the question.

I am disposed to conclude that a union of various Baptist bodies in a single organization is not feasible. In my humble judgment

the prospect of achieving such a result is not now sufficiently encouraging to justify earnest men in giving much labor to promote it. The reflections that have inclined me to embrace this conclusion will be briefly stated.

(a). The first of these relates to the deliverance of history; no kind of exertion that has ever been bestowed in the history of Christianity has been more unfruitful than the efforts to promote a reunion of bodies that had once become sharply separated. Here is not the place for minute details, but none will deny that labor of a high order has been expended on many different occasions. Prior to the Reformation, plans were often formed to unite the Eastern and Western Catholic Churches. At the Council of Florence it was fancied that these were at least successful. To this day the expressions of joy are both touching and amusing. The leaders were almost utter strangers to the temper of the people.

Likewise there were enterprises to comprehend different minor sects, but the success was not often commensurate. Since the Reformation these projects have sometimes been renewed, but the labor and solicitude employed have yielded surprisingly meager results. Attempts that have been made to unite different Protestant organizations have in general been crowned with little better success.

Therefore, I conclude that the deliverance of history is against the feasibility of the enterprise. Whether that conclusion is grateful or grievous to our feelings, I suppose it must still be allowed to stand firm. The leading instance of union upon an important scale is that of the Lutheran and Reformed bodies in Prussia and certain other sections of Germany. It was effected not by any initiative of ecclesiastical authorities, but by the decree of a temporal sovereign, and a candid survey of the movement will not afford great encouragement to the friends of organic union. Possibly it would have been fortunate if no such enterprise had been attempted.

We cannot afford to undertake a concern of so much magnitude as an organic union of various Baptist bodies without taking counsel with history. Its voice on this subject is clear and indubitable. Numerous sects have quitted the larger communions in different ages. The instances where these schisms have been cured by reunion with the parent stock have been few and far between. Commonly the smaller parties, having run their course, have ceased from lack of momentum, where they have not been crushed by violent means. In brief words, the experience of Christian men in past ages speaks loudly against the project to effect a union between different Baptist bodies. The labor that might be devoted to such an enterprise, if one may conclude from the light of history, would conduce more to the glory of God and the happiness of mankind,

if bestowed in some other direction. Whoever rushes incontinently into the work, may fairly be charged with scouting the voice of God in his providences.

(*b*). Many have a conviction that the present is a remarkable age. We shall be told that enterprises that could not be undertaken in any previous time may be easily performed in this age. The present is indeed a notable period; a larger number of religious parties are now in existence than ever were known before. The current of the time is more strongly set against organic union of churches than in any previous epoch. Probably the century that is now coming to a close has witnessed the birth of more and stranger sects than any two centuries that have preceded it in the history of Christianity. That remark applies not only to America, but to several other countries of the civilized world.

The tendency against organic union does not appear to have lost a jot or tittle of its momentum; on the contrary, it appears to be stronger in the present year of grace than in any previous year. Of the vast number of sects that have sprung up within the present century I suspect that more have taken their origin from the second than from the first half of it. This is nothing better than an estimate, and it may not be in all points confirmed by statistics. However that may fall out, there can be no question of the fact that the drift of the period is not friendly to consolidation. It is conceded that there have been one or two instances in America where consolidation has been achieved; but these have been nothing better than exceptions that prove the rule.

It would be a noteworthy experience to discover a denomination of Christian people that has produced no schism of any kind within the present century. The record declares against almost every one from the highest to the lowest. An indisputable fact of history and experience like that conveys its own message; an apparently irresistible tendency adverse to the organic union of religious parties, and in favor of separation and division appears to be one of the marked features of the age. If one may conclude from the record, there is nothing so fashionable as separation. The century has been peculiarly subject to that weakness, and the malady increases as it advances in age.

Another marked peculiarity of the time is the increase of religious conflicts of every sort. This observation applies in a particular sense to theological duels, otherwise called public debates. In the early years of the century these were hardly ever heard of, and when one was announced it produced a sensation over a wide area of territory. During the last quarter of a century they have become so common as to attract little if any attention. They are rarely mentioned either in the secular or religious press. The code of honor has become disreputable, and duels with deadly weapons are considered

out of date. But in the domain of theological contention the code of honor is in its glory, and it has been almost as much as one's position and reputation were worth to decline a challenge. There is hardly a day in the calendar when a theological duel is not proceeding in some section of the country. Here is a notorious fact of almost daily occurrence. Numbers of these contests are waged every year between different bodies of Baptist people; is it then likely that these can be easily brought to accept organic union of any kind?

The facts are beyond dispute, whatever the explanation of them may be. Possibly this unwonted condition of affairs is due to the remarkable interest that is nearly everywhere felt in behalf of religious truth. When the mists are cleared away it is conceivable that our successors will record the nineteenth century as the age of religious fervor. The earth was never before planted with such a forest of church spires. A larger number of men have acquired fixed religious convictions than was ever known before in any former age. In the period of illumination, when indifferentism prevailed, it was not unusual for religious people to fraternize and to form projects for the union of their denominations. But that fashion is out of date; ours is not in the least an age of indifferentism. The convictions which people maintain are believed to be more precious and influential than has hitherto been customary. There is slight prospect that they will relax them until a marked change shall come over the spirit of their dreams. To sum up, many religious parties are being formed almost yearly, and the people who belong to them are more tenacious of their faith than they have ever been before.

I have endeavored to occupy the position of one who makes report of well-known facts and conditions. If I might be permitted to express a conclusion founded upon these facts and conditions, I should say it appears more likely that still other Baptist bodies shall arise within the next half century, than that we shall be able to effect an organic union of those that already exist. Centrifugal forces abound in every organization. These may not be strictly observed, but every thoughtful man is sensible of their presence. There is no church within my knowledge that is exempt from such phenomena. It is matter of common fame that an active schism is at the moment in progress among our excellent brethren of the old school Baptist body. The party of means is breaking away from the party that is opposed to the use of means in a number of the States in our country. If it should be conceded that the Disciples of Christ are in any sense a Baptist body, it may be said that the lines of still another schism appear to be somewhat clearly drawn in their communion. Between the two contending parties there has grown up a more lively sentiment of hostility than might be

entertained if the trouble had already come to a head and an open separation had been accomplished.

It is conceivable that similar conditions may prevail in still other bodies. Yet the religious interest is so active in many quarters that men will make unusual sacrifices for any cause that they embrace. Hence different religious bodies have less trouble to maintain their organization and to increase the number and influence of their adherents than in any previous generation.

Scarcely a religious denomination can be named that is on the defensive ; all of them are more or less aggressive. Individual believers will be met with in nearly every one, and sometimes their number is not small, who encourage themselves with the fancy that their particular sect is destined to prevail and to absorb every other form of belief. Among the various bodies of Baptists are found as many believers of that variety as in any other communion. I have lately heard a distinguished Doctor of Divinity assert before a crowded audience, that in the end religious men of every people and nation and tongue will embrace our Baptist sentiments. As a result of this hopefulnes and courage, almost all the various bodies of Baptists are more or less aggressive ; with the possible exception of the respected advocates of the Six Principles of the Doctrine of Christ, all are more or less prosperous. Certainly they are all able to keep open house, and willing to make sacrifices to live in credit. While a temper of that kind is abroad, hopes of union do not appear to be brilliant.

And even in those rare cases where a given body may be pronounced in a declining condition, it is likely that any exertions that might be put forth to comprehend them, would encounter serious obstacles. Possibly these might be successful if rightly managed ; but on the other hand they might involve more of toil and diplomacy than would be required to win an equal number of believers from the ranks of the outside world.

(c.) Every movement for an organic union among various Baptist bodies is handicapped by the circumstance that efforts in favor of union are more or less unpopular. As matters stand, the men of decided conviction and unswerving loyalty are the successful men. Few leaders of any religious party, even though they may sometimes indulge dreams of a golden, glorious period of organic union, will be bold enough to insult the temper of the organization in which their lot is cast by developing any special prominence in this direction. They regard it as criminally unwise to imperil their influence and position in what might prove a useless business. Self-preservation is the first law of life.

Every religious organization is employed in the absorbing labor of promoting its own prosperity and efficiency. Compromises are suspected and feared ; there is little patience with them anywhere.

Nobody is in a mood to try experiments ; all parties alike expect to subdue the whole world by the force of their peculiar principles. People who allow themselves to talk of organic union, and to suggest compromises that might be made to obtain it, will shortly find their loyalty suspected and their influence, whether for organic union or for any other cause, hopelessly crippled. Sober men must keep their feet firmly planted upon the earth ; they cannot afford to alienate the confidence and affection of their brethren in a common faith for the sake of a mere *ignis fatuus*. They are engaged to form a satisfactory conclusion regarding enterprises that may be possible or otherwise, and to avoid throwing themselves away to serve a mere hallucination. They must stand in their lot, and serve God with the means at disposal.

(d.) The peril I have just now described encounters every laborer within the limits of his own denomination ; there is still another peril that the friend of organic union must encounter outside the limits of his own denomination, within the limits of other denominations. If you are very eager for organic union you will be, perhaps invariably, suspected of cultivating a kind of Jesuitic morality. Almost without exception your fellow-Christians of other name, and likewise many among the people who belong to no denomination, will quietly assume that your motives are insincere. They will avoid making such a charge in plain words ; the smallest experience of life forbids that course. But their conviction is unalterable, and among themselves they do not hesitate to utter it, and to brand you as a false and contemptible character.

Sensible men consider that it is undesirable to incur that kind of odium, except when circumstances imperatively demand it ; they do not feel that they are called upon to forfeit the good opinion and sympathy of the Christian public without adequate cause.

Suspicious of this nature have been confirmed to the minds of many people by a much vaunted plea for Christian union, which is so evidently a plea for proselytism, that it declines to deal with other denominations as a whole ; and enjoins that only individual members shall be treated with and received to fellowship. ("Our Position." By Isaac Errett, Cincinnati, p. 12.) It avoids the theologians and thinkers and catches up the unprotected and helpless sheep of other folds.

The effect of this plea has been unhappy to the last degree, in relation to the interests, both of Christian union and of organic church union. Nothing has contributed so much, perhaps, to injure the enterprise. No union of any kind is conceivable, as long as Christian union is degraded to be a mere engine for proselytism.

The proposition more recently made by the Episcopalians is not so manifestly objectionable. These do not refuse to treat with other denominations in a collective capacity ; but the requirement

that we shall submit to the "historic episcopate," forms an impassable barrier. It is felt that in the end the exactions of the "historic episcopate" would be intolerable, and so the project has proved a hopeless failure. No serious attention has been given to it in any quarter.

(e.) A final reason why organic union among various Baptist bodies is not considered feasible, appears in the circumstance that hitherto Baptists have been less responsive to enterprises looking in that direction than almost any other religious people. Methodists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians have succeeded in organizing each a sort of ecumenical council, and these institutions have been conducted for some years with more or less of energy and success. Individuals here and there among the Baptists have been solicitous that we should organize a similar undertaking; but up to the present moment nothing at all has been done. Until a Pan-Baptist Council shall have been established and successfully operated for a series of years, it may be fairly claimed that in this regard we lag behind all the other large denominations of our country. These ecumenical councils have not procured organic union for either of the denominations mentioned. If the Baptists are not prepared to take even that initial step, it is clear that the time has not arrived when it would be in order for them to discuss the propriety of taking any other step, especially such a lengthy and radical step as organic union. In fact that kind of union appears to lie outside of the range of present probabilities.

In conclusion the circumstance is gratefully accepted that the discussion touching organic union among Christians has taken a new turn, and that it has become the fashion for advocates of union to have some concern about union among those of their own household of faith. This is a hopeful change. Here is work enough for every denomination; it would be a splendid achievement for each denomination to fetch home its own banished ones. If we have no stomach and no capacity to establish a union among those who are of our own kith and kin, we have no calling to strive for a union of all sorts and conditions of Christian people. It is seemly that judgment should begin at our own house; let every friend of organic union first make sure that his own house is in order. When our efforts are bestowed in this narrow circle, they are more likely to be of service than when they are given to more distant fields that are less familiar to us.

The different Methodist bodies of Canada have set a fine example by establishing organic union among themselves, and have contributed somewhat to revive interest in the subject. It has been suggested that possibly the different Methodist bodies of England and the United States may one day be in a situation to take this step. In Canada the close conflict with the Roman Church may have contributed to aid the consummation. The movement is in the right direction; we rejoice in what has been done, and shall be glad when it is possible to take further steps.