OUR BAPTIST ADVANTAGE IN AMERICA.

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It is well to encourage one another in God. We have undertaken a great enterprise, comparable only to the conquest of the world by the apostles. We have set out to subdue this country to the Baptist faith. It is desirable to count the cost, and see whether with ten thousand we are able to meet those who come against us with twenty thousand. I propose, therefore, to consider "Our Baptist Advantage in America." Let us look at some of its elements, and then at the responsibility which it lays upon us.

First: It is our Baptist advantage that we rest our doctrine of the ordinances solely on New Testament prescription and example. Believing that Scripture is the supreme authority in matters of religious belief and practice, we go directly to the Scriptures and ask only what the Scriptures teach. Other denominations of Christians err, as we think, in recognizing other sources of doctrine in addition to this one infallible standard. The practice of the church or the decisions of church councils are regarded as binding also. But we care nothing for the fathers; we trust only the grandfathers—the apostles themselves. The written word, what saith it? It is a plain word, designed for common people; the wayfaring man may read even while he runs; he does not need commentaries or explanations in order to understand its essential teachings. It is a great advantage that our best campaign document is the Bible—the most widely circulated book in the world; in fact, all we have to do, and all we desire to do, is to get people to read and follow the Bible. There is our rock and our defense, and the rock stands "foursquare against all the winds that blow." Scholarship examines that rock, but only reveals more and more clearly how impregnable it is.

Lest these should seem unwarranted assertions, I quote some utterances from men of other faiths than our own, men of the highest rank in exegesis and in history, men who speak of what has been to them the study of a lifetime. Dr. Philip Schaff, of the Union Theological Seminary, in New York City, declares: "Respecting the form of baptism, the impartial historian is compelled by exegesis and history substantially to yield the point to the Baptists." "The baptism of Christ in the Jordan, and the illustrations of baptism used in the New Testament, are all in favor of immersion, rather than of sprinkling, as is freely admitted by the best exegetes, Catholics and Protestants, English and German." Professor George P. Fisher, of the Yale Divinity School, thus expresses himself: "Baptism, it is now generally agreed among scholars, was commonly administered by immersion." The latest and most brilliant investigator of early church history is Professor Harnack, of Berlin. He tells us that "*Baptism* undoubtedly signifies *immersion*. No proof can be found that it signifies anything else in the New Testament and in the most ancient Christian literature." No one can doubt the impartiality of the late Dean Stanley. Dean Stanley speaks of Immersion as "the primitive, apostolical, and till the thirteenth century the universal, mode of baptism which is still in our own church (the church of England) as positively enjoined in theory, as it is universally neglected in practice." "The change from immersion to sprinkling," he says, "has set aside the larger part of the apostolic language regarding baptism, and has altered the very meaning of the word."

Here is suggested the reason why Baptists can never consent to any form of administering the ordinance but that which Christ enjoined. Baptism, like the Lord's Supper, is a *teaching* ordinance. It is a pictorial proclamation and declaration of the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord. Equally with the preaching of Christ's atoning death from the pulpit, it sets forth the great sacrifice of Christ for our salvation. The first and most important thing taught by baptism is, not the spiritual death and resurrection of the *believer* with Christ, but rather *Christ's own* death for our sins and resurrection for our justification. And this meaning of the ordinance is just as clearly taught in Scripture, as that baptism is simply and only immersion. Said Luther, the great reformer, "Baptism is a sign both of death and resurrection. Being moved by this reason, I would have those that are baptized to be altogether dipped into the water, as the word means, and the mystery signifies." In the English church during this last century there has been no greater scholar and no nobler man than Lightfoot, the late Bishop of Durham. How significant are his words: "Baptism is the grave of the old man and the birth of the new—an image of the believer's participation both in the death and in the resurrection of Christ. . . . As he sinks beneath the baptismal waters, the believer buries there all his corrupt affections and past sins; as he emerges thence, he rises regenerate, quickened to new hopes and a new life." With these testimonies before us, I think it must be conceded that, Pedobaptists themselves being the judges, Baptists have the advantage of a clear New Testament foundation.

Secondly: It is our Baptist advantage that we make the relation of the believer to the church to depend on, follow and express his previous relation to Christ. We hold that men are saved, not by union with the church, but by union with Christ. We make Christ, not the church, central. The church is only the outward expression of the common life of believers in Christ. The new life in Christ comes first, and only then comes membership in the church. Baptism does not *make* people Christians, it is rather their profession that they *are already* Christians. Instead of baptism being a means of salvation, a man must be saved before he has any right to be baptized. Not baptism therefore, but a regenerate church membership, is the central and fundamental tenet of our Baptist faith. And this is simply to say that we admit to church-membership only those who give credible evidence of having been already spiritually united to Christ. The church is an outgrowth of Christ. Hence we dare not say, with the Westminster Confession, that the church "consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, *together with their children*." We dare not baptize those who, like infants, give no sign that they are regenerate. The church is Christ's body, and we can admit to its ordinances only those who show that they are one with Christ, that His Spirit is dwelling within them, and that they have with their Saviour died to sin and risen to newness of life. Only to such can baptism or the Lord's Supper be anything but an empty form.

This principle that the church is to represent Christ, and that it is to contain only those who are spiritually joined to Christ, is of immeasurable importance. The neglect of it in the times of Constantine almost destroyed the church. Infant baptism swept into it vast multitudes of the unregenerate, until its early spirituality was lost and it fell an easy prey to the Roman hierarchy. The neglect of it after the Reformation undid almost all the results of that great revival of religion. Infant baptism again flooded the church with godlessness, identified it with the world, and infected it in every part with a scepticism and formality from which it has not yet been delivered. Why is it, on the other hand, that Baptists, without any iron wheel of outward organization—a very rope of sand exposed at every moment to the rolling waves—have been able to hold the truth, and to hold together more perfectly than any other body of believers in Christendom? I give both the fact and the explanation in the words of men who are not Baptists, but whose utterances carry weight everywhere. In a recent letter which I received from Dr. William G. T. Shedd, that stalwart Presbyterian and eminent theologian says to me: "Among the denominations we all look to the Baptists for steady and firm adherence to sound doctrine. You have never had any internal doctrinal conflicts, and from year to year you present an undivided front in defense of the Calvinistic faith. Having no judicatures, and regarding the local church as the unit, it is remarkable that you maintain such a unity and solidarity of belief." There is the *fact*. And Dr. J. L. Withrow, of Chicago, one of the ablest of our Congregational brethren, gives us the *explanation*. He says to our credit: "There is not a denomination of evangelical Christians that is throughout as sound theologically as the Baptist denomination. There is not an evangelical denomination in America to-day that is as true to the simple, plain gospel of God as it is revealed in the Word, as is the Baptist denomination." I think, therefore, that we must fairly claim the advantage of a doctrine which binds the church and Christ indissolubly together.

Thirdly: It is our Baptist advantage that we have always stood for the absolute separation of church and state, and have done much to secure this freedom for America and for the world. From the beginning we have maintained that the church should be completely independent of the state. Our doctrine of civil and religious liberty grows directly out of our doctrine of the direct relation of the individual Christian to Christ. Christ is the only lawgiver, the only Lord of the conscience. There can be no rightful human lordship over God's heritage. Since each local church is directly subject to Christ, there is no jurisdiction of one church over another, but all are on an equal footing, and all are independent of interference or control by the civil power. Absolute liberty of conscience under Christ has always been a distinguishing tenet of Baptists. Again and again have Baptists suffered persecution, but they have never persecuted. In Switzerland, when Zwingli, following the example of Luther, turned aside from the simple faith of the New Testament and for political reasons subjected the church to the state, the Anabaptists, in 1527, issued the first published Confession in which Christian men claimed absolute religious freedom for themselves and granted absolute religious freedom to others.

In England, the confession of John Smyth, an indubitable Baptist, in 1614, was the first English declaration of faith in which complete separation of church and state is declared to be the law of Christ. And in Rhode Island, in the year 1636, the Baptist Roger Williams instituted the first government on earth organized upon the principle of absolute freedom to all belief and practice not conflicting with good order and morals. So Baptists first announced the principle of religious liberty in Switzerland; Baptists first advocated it in England; a Baptist first established it in America.

Here, too, I prefer to let others speak for us. John Locke, a hundred years before our American Independence, declared that "the Baptists were the first and only propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty." Of Roger Williams, George Bancroft says: "He was the first person in modern Christendom to assert the doctrine of liberty of conscience in religion . . . Freedom of conscience was from the first a trophy of the Baptists." John Fiske, referring to the views of Roger Williams, writes thus: "Such views are to-day quite generally adopted by the more civilized portions of the Protestant world; but it is needless to say that they were not the views of the seventeenth century, in Massachusetts or elsewhere." And Leonard Bacon says of Baptist churches: "It has been claimed for these churches that, from the age of the Reformation onward, they have been always foremost and always consistent in maintaining the doctrine of religious liberty. Let me not be understood as calling in question the right to so great an honor." And yet with a great price have they obtained this freedom. Their history is written in blood. Hundreds of Baptists have been hanged, drowned, burned at the stake, often leaving such testimony as Terwoort the Fleming gave in England in 1575: "They who have the one true gospel doctrine and faith will persecute no one, but will themselves be persecuted." In this land, which Baptists more than any other denomination of Christians have made a land of liberty, we have a great advantage in being able to point back to a glorious history of faithfulness in spite of persecution. Having brought the Christian world so far toward the acknowledgment of the principles of our faith, we may take courage as we look forward to the future.

Fourthly: It is our Baptist advantage that, in spite of small beginnings, frequent persecutions, and unpopular doctrine, we have multiplied more rapidly than any other body of Christians in America. The blood of the martyrs has certainly been the seed of the church. Exclusion from the privileges of the ruling order has thrown our people back upon the promise and power of Christ. When Hezekiah Smith was "warned off from God's earth" by the sheriff of Haverhill, Massachusetts; when Obadiah Holmes was whipped unmercifully in the streets of Boston; when Baptists who would not have their infant children baptized were fined two thousand pounds of tobacco in Virginia; these barbarities only made them more spiritual and more intent upon the salvation of men's souls. Their steadfastness and faith began to impress the whole population. After the great revival under Edwards and Whitfield there came a great reaction in New England, and the orthodox churches were in imminent danger of going over to Unitarianism. But though scores of orthodox ministers apostatized, not one Baptist minister forsook the faith, and not one Baptist church became Unitarian. On the contrary, the Baptist churches and ministers stood as an immovable rock in Boston, until the tide of heresy ebbed, and the danger was past.

Mr. Vedder, in his excellent "Short History of the Baptists," has called the years from 1776 to 1845 "the period of missions and expansion." It is doubtful whether any body of Christians ever grew so rapidly. In 1776, Baptists numbered not more than one in one hundred of the population; in 1892 they number one in twenty-one. At the close of the Revolutionary War we had only three churches west of the Alleghanies; now we have 21,550. Our 50,000 members have, in little more than a century, become 3,269,000. While the five millions of population which the country had in 1776 have increased twelve-fold, the fifty thousand Baptists have increased sixty-fold. Like our beloved and honored Methodist brethren, we have sought to win the people, and to preach the gospel to the poor. We have not often had an "apostle to the gentiles," but we have had many missionaries on the frontiers. And a blessing has attended our work. We stand next to the Methodists in point of numbers in America; but our ratio of increase during the last few decades has been nearly two per cent. greater than theirs.

We have multiplied marvellously, not only at home but abroad. This is the centenary year of Baptist missions to the heathen. Just a hundred years ago William Carey's zeal and energy led to the establishment of the English Baptist Missionary Society. It is not eighty years since our American Baptist missionary work began. And yet in these four fifths of a century we have reached a point where we count 74 mission stations, 417 missionaries, 2,030 native pastors and helpers, 1,450 mission churches, and 163,881 members—results more than twice as great as any other Protestant missionary body can show, and yet results achieved by contributions on our part amounting, alas, to not more than one-third to one-half what other single denominations contribute and expend. To estimate what has been accomplished we must remember also the marked decline in the number of Infant baptisms in Pedobaptist churches—amounting to a decrease of more than one-third in fifty years. Here is evidence that our protest against the unscriptural and pernicious practice has made deep impression upon our brethren in other folds; and that, as the separation of church and state has been effected in America largely by Baptist instrumentality, so the abolition of that infant baptism which ever tends to the merging of the church in the state may yet follow, if Baptists are faithful to their Lord. It is not too much to say that the remarkable increase of our numbers, where we have been thus faithful, and the gradual disintegration of our churches where, as in England, the Baptist principle has been compromised, gives us a great advantage in our proclamation of the unadulterated truth of Scripture.

Fifthly: It is our Baptist advantage that we have a polity analogous to that of our Republic, and therefore adapted to win the increasing favor of loyal Americans. What I mean is that we represent in the church that same principle of equality and freedom which we cherish so greatly in the state. Our church government is democratic or congregational. Since every member of the church is a member of Christ, he has a right to interpret Christ's will for himself, and to have an equal voice in the conduct of ecclesiastical affairs. It is not wonderful that Baptist church government should agree with republican civil government, for Baptists had much to do with shaping our national constitution. No man had greater influence in framing our fundamental law, and no man's word as to the other influences which made that law what it is, can be more authoritative than that of Thos. Jefferson. And yet Thomas Jefferson declared that "he considered Baptist church government the only form of pure democracy which then existed in the world," and that he "had concluded, eight or ten years before the American revolution, that it would be the best plan of government for the American colonies." Baptists had a large share in securing the adoption of that memorable article in our Constitution which provides that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." And finally, Baptists, more than any other denomination of Christians, by their persistent advocacy brought Congress to propose and the States to accept, just one hundred years ago, that famous first amendment to the Constitution which declares that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The priesthood of the individual believer and his sole responsibility to Christ, the right of every member to interpret Scripture for himself and to have a voice in the government and discipline of the church, and the principle that truth is to be put before unity and the church to be first pure then peaceable, all these are wonderfully analogous to the characteristics of our civil polity. That very tenet of faith which is so much spoken against—our tenet of restricted communion—is the precise parallel to a cherished principle of our government, the principle that foreigners cannot enjoy the elective franchise and other privileges of citizenship until they have been naturalized. Since baptism is the rite by which men are made citizens of the kingdom, we cannot grant to them the privileges of the kingdom until they have been baptized. He who claims that persons have a right to commune before they have been baptized should also hold that all emigrants from abroad must be permitted to vote before they have become citizens. I am glad to be able to quote Dr. John Hall, that staunch Presbyterian of New York city, in defense of this position. He expresses himself as follows: "If I believed, with the Baptists, that none are baptized but those who are immersed on profession of faith, I should, with them, refuse to commune with any others." And Dr. A. A. Hodge, in his Systematic Theology, declares that "the faith and practice of all the evangelical churches is that the communion is designed only for believers, and therefore that a credible profession of faith and obedience should be required of every applicant."

We claim that our church government resembles our civil government in cultivating the spirit of freedom. Ritualism and prelacy benumb and enslave, and you cannot make men spiritual without making them also free. The late Dr. Dexter, one of the most eminent Congregationalists of the country, said that "to spiritualize and evangelize Romanism or High Churchism would be to Congregationalize it." And since Baptists are the most Congregational of the Congregationalists, we may say boldly that, just in proportion as hereditary and ritualistic churches are spiritualized, will they approach the Baptist polity. Now I do not believe that America will ever be less democratic than it is to-day. Revolutions never go backward, and the Republican principle has come to stay. Instead of contracting our bounds, we are more likely to widen them, until British America, Cuba and South America have the flag of the free waving over them. The spirit of this Columbian year is the spirit of pride in our government and of gratitude for our institutions. I cannot believe that, with the world's progress toward the abolition of monarchy and the establishment of republican forms of government, we are ever to be seduced from our political creed by the glamor of despotism.

Sixthly: It is our Baptist advantage that we hold to a freedom of individual interpretation and opinion, which makes us capable of unlimited expansion with the expansion of the land in which we live. Monarchies need to be limited in extent. But it is not so with republics. Representation and freedom solve all difficulties. And what limit need there be to the growth of a denomination, so long as there is no common government and every member of it has the right of private judgment? With us there are no creeds which bind our faith and serve as a human standard to which we must conform. Our only standard is the New Testament, and that every member may interpret for himself. We have no church courts with their gradations and successive appeals; there is no hierarchy or authority superior to the local body of believers; there are no oaths of conformity or prosecutions for heresy. We recognize not only the right, but also the duty of a progressive knowledge of Scripture and of a more perfect statement of doctrine. With John Smyth, that excellent Baptist who died at Amsterdam in 1612, we say: "I profess I have changed, and shall be ready still to change, for the better"; and with John Robinson in his farewell address to the Pilgrim Fathers: "I am verily persuaded that the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth from His holy Word." While other denominations have difficulty in adapting themselves to new surroundings and new phases of thought, the Baptist denomination has no Catechisms or Confessions to bind it, but can freely adopt new measures or new ideas, as new study of the Bible and new needs of the times may require.

The Christian denominations may be likened to the runners in a torch-race, in which each contestant tries to replace his light when it threatens to go out, and so by successive kindlings bring his torch first to the goal. The runner who is fettered by precedents, or who has to go in beaten tracks, may be easily outstripped. But he who can bestow all his labor and pains on the preservation and dissemination of his light will get most quickly to the goal and will give out most of an illumination on his way. To us Baptists belongs, as we believe, the faith once for all delivered to the saints, and it is our duty to hand it down through the ages, and to increase its volume and influence as it goes. The absence of ecclesiastical and confessional hindrances gives us an advantage in this torch-race of the ages.

Seventhly, and lastly, it is our Baptist advantage that we hold to a principle that limits and safeguards this individual freedom—a principle of stability—the principle of direct and entire obedience to Christ. While we are an absolute democracy so far as respects the interpretation of His will, we are an absolute monarchy so far as respects direct obedience to that will itself. Freedom is not enough. Every institution that is to last must also have law. In our American revolution we won our liberty; in our great Civil War we made that liberty permanent by making it a liberty regulated by law. Here is the greatest advantage of Baptists—they hold first, last and always, to the supreme and absolute dominion of Christ. His word is our only standard of truth; His love is our only motive of action; His will is our only rule of duty. We recognize that all our hopes will be empty and vain except as Christ Himself, by His personal and omnipotent Spirit, dwells and reigns within us. External advantages will be as valueless to us as to the Jewish nation was the possession of the oracles of God, unless with the external advantages there be given to us grace to be obedient. My observations among our German Baptists in Europe have convinced me that they have made such astonishing headway, not simply because of the truth they have preached, but because of the spiritual lives they have lived. And so in America—we shall continue to make headway, if we are but faithful.

If we are but faithful! This suggests that there are responsibilities as well as advantages, duties as well as privileges. The question has, perhaps, occurred to some who have heard me whether I expect that the whole world will ultimately become Baptist. To this I have two replies: First, that Baptist doctrine is probably not the whole of truth, and therefore the final church and creed may be something more than what at present we call Baptist; but secondly, that Baptist doctrine is just as certainly an important part of God's revealed will, and therefore to be embraced without curtailment or diminution in that final sum of triumphant truth which is to be the heritage and confession of the church universal. If we do not believe this, then we have no right to be Baptists at all. If our doctrine be merely an indifferent or optional matter, a human opinion but not a Divine prescription, then it is schism, and a rending of the body of Christ, for us to maintain a separate existence. But, being convinced that we have the truth of God, it would be cowardice and blasphemy to doubt that this truth of God will triumph. There are indeed other communions that number more than ours. But in the words of Edward Johnson's "Wonder-working Providence of Zion's Saviour," written in the dark year 1654, we, too, can say: "The Lord intends to achieve greater matters by this little handful than the world is aware of." The kingdom of truth is sure to come—that is our confidence and comfort. But then it is equally sure that the kingdom is near or far, just in proportion to the faith and love and devotion of those to whom this truth is committed to keep and to propagate.

Faithfulness to Christ requires of us three things: Education, Union and Evangelization. I think of these three respectively as activities of the mind, the affections, and the will; and as tending to bring man's mind and heart and will into conformity with the truth, the love and holiness of God. As God is truth, it is our duty to know the truth, and that implies the obligation to educate ourselves and to care for the education of others. The educational revival that has marked the last quarter of a century is a proof that God is with us—it is an augury that God is going to give us the kingdom. The single new University of Chicago has a larger property than belonged twenty years ago to all our Baptist colleges and theological seminaries put together. But many millions more will be required to meet the needs of the growing West, and to educate the masses of our colored brethren at the South. In spite of our great growth in the country at large, we are still very weak in some of our great cities, and it should cause us shame and confusion of face that in the metropolis of the State and of the country, with its contiguous populations the second greatest city of the world and numbering three millions, Baptists have up to the present time not the vestige of any institution of learning!

The second thing which faithfulness to Christ requires is Union. We are to hold the truth in love. The love of God is to be shed abroad in us. And, as truth leads to education, so love leads to union. We are to co-operate with our brethren in every good word and work. The constant exhortations to unity in the New Testament proceed upon the supposition that Christ dwells in all believers. Baptist polity is the best possible polity for good people. Christ has made no provision for an unregenerate church membership, and for the Satanic possession of Christians. It is best that a church in which Christ does not dwell should by dissension reveal its weakness and fall to pieces; and any outward organization that conceals inward disintegration and compels a merely formal union, after the love of Christ has departed, is a hindrance instead of a help to true religion. How vast the change when that love takes possession of hearts that were once cold! The church becomes a Christian family once more, and all the world begins to say: "See how these Christians love one another." The host of God that had been scattered and ineffective, like soldiers bivouacked for the night, comes together and stands once more in battle array, mighty either for defence or attack. I can but think that the new impulse to come together in State Conventions, to form Social Unions, to organize our young people for Christian work, and to mass the strength and contributions of our women, is indicative of an increase of Christian love.

And the last thing which faithfulness requires—the thing indeed to which all my address thus far has been aiming to lead you—is Evangelization. That is the purpose of our gathering here. It is peculiarly an activity of the will, in bringing the world into conformity with holiness of God. We are set to save men from their sins, and to lead them to submit to Christ. It is our vocation on earth to promote God's cause. To it we are to give our money, our time, our personal effort. What motives urge us forward! A century of progress at home and abroad such as the world has never seen before, missionary enterprises crowned with blessing surpassing that of Pentecost, our churches growing in wealth and influence at a rate that would have seemed incredible to the fathers,—ah, these are things not to make us proud, but to make us humble! The little one has become a thousand indeed, but unless we do for God a thousand times more than the fathers did, our blessing will be our curse.

But let us not doubt that God will give us grace to meet the opportunity. We have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this. This Empire State, with its commercial supremacy and its almost boundless resources, is given us that we may make it Christ's empire, and a base of operations for subduing the country and the world to His sway. Methinks I see the Lord, once crucified for us. With hands that yet bear the prints of the nails, He holds out an immortal crown. He praises us that we have thus far kept His word and have not denied His name. He tells us that He has set before us an open door, which no man can shut. He bids us be faithful unto death as our fathers were faithful. As we have freely received, so He commands us freely to give. And to each one of us personally and individually He says: "Hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown!"

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