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The **BASIS of REPRESENTATION**
in the **MISSIONARY UNION**

A HISTORICAL SURVEY

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THE BASIS OF REPRESENTATION IN THE MISSIONARY UNION

Improvement is asked for in the form of organization of our missionary societies and especially concerning the basis on which representation shall be expressed. Has the time come for any fundamental changes; and if so, what shall be the form of those changes? It is not our purpose here to discuss either of the questions raised on the merits of the case, but to refer to certain antecedents in our society history as it stands, in the hope that in the light afforded the main issues may be the better understood. These antecedents are associated primarily with the formation of the Missionary Union as our oldest society organization,—an organization which may serve as the type of all our societies, inasmuch as all were modeled after it. Accordingly, for the sake of clearness what we now shall have to say will concern only

the development of the Missionary Union.

There is a history in the case, which when known will throw much light on the matters under discussion,—a history with which the present generation as a whole is unfamiliar. Nor is it easy to get at that history, as it never has been published by itself, and it is only partially contained in the annual reports of the society. For the most part it is buried away in the files of our denominational papers of more than a half-century ago; and these are difficult to get at and to be made available to the general public.

Apart from an editorial article by Dr. H. S. Burrage in *Zion's Advocate* in the month of May, 1901, little or no use has yet been made of

the very significant data referred to.

It is important that the successive phases of the genesis and development of this oldest of our missionary societies be studied and their teachings grasped, if we are to reach intelligent and safe conclusions.

In the development of our society representation there have been four stages, corresponding to the dates 1814, 1820, 1846 and 1854.

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Stage I.

In 1814, when our Baptist foreign mission society was organized and known as the "Triennial Convention," the constitution made its membership to consist of "delegates, not exceeding two in number, from *missionary societies* and other Baptist *religious bodies*, contributing to the treasury of the convention annually a sum not less than one hundred dollars." The conception of a church as an ecclesiastical institution which then generally prevailed (dominated as the thought of the time was by severe hyper-Calvinistic ideas above which Protestantism had not yet been able to rise), was that

the church had no function

to engage in missionary operations to the heathen. Of course, the sentiment differed in degree and force in different sections of the country. As one evidence of the strength of this belief, we may refer to resolutions which were passed in the Miami Association of Ohio. In 1835 the application for membership of a church called Mount Zion and known to be anti-mission, was the occasion for a resolution looking to a rupture. The subject was deferred to the second day, and then the following was adopted by a vote of 42 to 21:

"WHEREAS, There is great excitement and division of sentiment in the Baptist denomination relative to the subject of the benevolent institutions of the day (so called), such as Sunday schools, Bible, Missionary, Tract and Temperance Societies, therefore

"*Resolved*, That this Association regards those said societies and institutions as having no authority, foundation or support in the SACRED SCRIPTURES, but we regard them as having had their origin in, and as belonging exclusively to the *World*, and as such we have *No Fellowship* for them as being of a religious character, but do hereby declare non-fellowship with those brethren and Churches who now advocate them.

"*Resolved*, That this Association grant to the Churches, friendly or opposed, the entire liberty of withdrawing and forming a new Association according to their own views."

In resistance of this resolution dissenting churches, however, went right on making their contributions to the obnoxious societies, including the Triennial Convention. So strong, however, was the feeling of the anti-mission stalwarts that the next year, in 1836, a crisis was reached. Several of the churches sent up requests that the association "drop from her minutes and fellowship all Churches now engaged in advocating or sup-

porting the societies and institutions against which the Association declared non-fellowship last year;" and it was

"*Resolved*, That we drop from our minutes the following Churches, viz., Sixth (now Ninth) Street, of Cincinnati, Middletown, Lebanon and Dayton." The resolution carried by a vote of 35 to 6, "the rest being neutral, except those criminated by the resolution."

Then apart from the question of whether or not the Church had a missionary duty to perform, on another side of its constitution it was believed that a Baptist church has

no right to delegate its powers

to an outside organization of any sort, even missionary, for doing work extraneous to the church itself. A complete deadlock against practical missionary operations could scarcely be conceived.

Now the only way in which the few devoted missionary spirits in our churches at the beginning of the last century who had come to entertain a different view of the function of the church in relation to the heathen, could circumvent the narrower notion prevailing, was to organize outside the church little missionary societies. They corresponded to what now exist among us and are known as Ramabai Circles. These little societies sprang into being at first mainly for the purpose of affording support to Adoniram Judson, the announcement of whose conversion to Baptist views proved so awakening to many of our fathers. Such societies sprang up in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia and elsewhere. From these several little

spontaneous, individualistic societies

the Triennial Convention was formed. Thirty-three delegates only appeared to compose the body at its first meeting in Philadelphia in 1814. This was the only form of representation that then was practicable, and yet would preserve the moral aims of the movement. It was a case in which the spirit, latent in a remnant of our churches, far transcended the letter of their formal constitution as viewed by the great mass of Baptist churches of the time. It was the expression of the church within the church.

Stage II.

In 1820 an amendment was adopted allowing constituent bodies a right to send an *additional delegate* for every two hundred dollars contributed

beyond the first one hundred. This was simply to extend the privileges. By this time, moreover, such was the improvement in the missionary sentiment, especially in the older states, under the stimulating labors of Luther Rice, that collections for the cause began to be taken in many of the churches and at associational gatherings.

Stage III.

In 1845, owing to the division of opinion among the Baptists north and south concerning the slavery question, the Baptists of the south withdrew from the Triennial Convention, and founded the Southern Baptist Convention. Simultaneously the Baptists of the north—that part of the convention that was left—adopted a new constitution, and gave to the new organization the name of

The American Baptist Missionary Union.

Membership was confined to Life Members, and such only. Former members of the old Triennial Convention who were present at the first meeting of the Missionary Union became constituent members. Besides these, other persons could become life members by the payment at one time of not less than one hundred dollars.

It was at this first meeting of the Missionary Union in Brooklyn in 1846 that for the first time the question was raised concerning a *church as such* representing itself by annual membership in the Baptist missionary society. The Rev. Alfred Bennett offered the following resolution:—

“That any church or other religious body choosing to represent itself in one annual meeting only, upon the payment of one hundred dollars shall enjoy for the time being all the rights and privileges of a member.”

This brought on an earnest debate which continued through the denominational press and at the annual meetings of the society for at least three years. Waiving for the moment the question as to the propriety of more than one kind of membership, it is important that

the reasons for conditioning membership

of either sort upon the contribution of a given sum of money, should be perceived. There was in this no thought or assumption of creating an aristocracy, a moneyocracy, a financial oligarchy. The money condition was included simply because it afforded the most feasible and indeed the *only available prima facie evidence* of interest in the work, of *loyalty to the ends* for which the society was organized. There was need of safeguarding the control of an institution which was so much in advance of the narrowness, prejudice, and even avowed opposition which characterized the

greater portion of our people, by conditions which required evidence of loyalty. The reason for this was that the people as a whole were supposedly, nay, certainly, not educated up to a proper estimate of the advanced undertaking.

“Why,” it was argued, “should individuals or churches who evince no loyalty to the purposes of a movement by contributing to its support be permitted to have a hand in its control, until they afford evidence of a different mind on the subject?” The balance which the fathers held was even; no church that loved the work and would work up to its worth and needs, undoubtedly a matter of slow growth, was excluded by either the life or annual membership principle, expressing as that principle did in its financial condition the best available and most

patent evidence of loyalty to the cause.

Returning now to Mr. Bennett’s amendment, it was urged by those favoring it that “life membership, which was the only sort of membership permitted by the new constitution of the Missionary Union, was a retrogression even upon the past policy of the General Convention. The older constitution permitted annual membership.” It was said that by permitting annual members to be appointed by churches year by year new people would be brought into touch with the work. This feature would supply an element both democratic and popular. There were many who favored the more popular representation, but there were also many who opposed the amendment and for most conscientious reasons. They were afraid of the representative principle, as generally understood, being brought into Baptist polity. They regarded it as a dangerous innovation. They feared it, as applied to a voluntary missionary organization, which the Missionary Union confessedly was.

The proposed amendment also presumptively provided for the exercise of an authority which, in certain exigencies that might arise, would enable a body thus constituted to embarrass the movement which at that time was believed in by only a limited number of our people. The fathers resisted the coming in of the representative principle to control the society for the same reason that a board of managers of an incorporated college or theological seminary among us today would resist the authority of any number of churches to come into its control in a representative way to legislate for it. It was said that “representation (in its full sense) includes legislation, and legislation includes taxation.”

Moreover, many of the fathers of that time did not believe that

a Baptist church was “a pure democracy,”

and hence a law to itself. They believed that a Baptist church on one side

of its constitution is democratic; no member could come into it but upon his own voluntary act, and no member could impose a law upon another member. They however believed that on another side of its constitution a Baptist church is monarchistic as well as democratic. Christ was its sole and sovereign head and final law giver, and to him it was responsible. "One is your Master,"—that was the monarchistic side; "and all ye are brethren,"—that was the democratic side. In their view it required the two halves to constitute the whole truth concerning the New Testament church.

It was not that the early promoters of the society would not welcome the most extended participation in the work and control of the society, but that they hesitated to do this at the expense and risk of sacrificing a great principle, as they believed, a divine principle, grounded in New Testament precedent, and therefore in divine law, for the maintenance of which they were responsible to its divine author.

These fathers did not believe that they could play fast and loose with New Testament precedent—precedent which implied divine law as concerns polity. They reasoned that their brethren who took the other view were really proposing to use a voluntary missionary organization as a *pon sto* on which the churches as ecclesiastical bodies could enact legislation for a confederacy of churches. In other words, by such indirection, logically, the outcome would be that

the denomination as such would take on visible and organic form,

a result unthought of by the early Baptist mind. This in the minds of the fathers would have been subversive of the very foundations of New Testament church polity. For three years our wisest men wrestled with the question. For a whole year it was in the hands of a very strong committee of nine members, consisting of William R. Williams, Morgan J. Rhees, Elisha Tucker, James H. Duncan, Adam Wilson, Greenleaf S. Webb, Pharcellus Church, John Booth, and John Stevens.

At the meeting of the Union held in Troy, New York, in 1848, the committee presented

an extended and careful report.

That committee reasoned as follows:—In any attempt to create for the churches, through voluntary associations or otherwise, a legislative power we are sinning against the first principles of our Baptist polity, and what is much worse, usurping upon the prerogatives of the Lord Jesus Christ. "Delegate" and "representative," it was said, are not equivalent terms. A delegate is not a representative, in the popular and right sense of the word. A representative (*e. g.*, a congressman of the United States), represents in some remote spot, as if in person themselves there, the body of people send-

ing him; and his presence binds on those sending him all the legitimate acts of the assembly to which he is sent. "If our views as Baptists are correct, our churches cannot give legislative power, because they have it not; and councils or voluntary societies have therefore no right to take legislative power as a gift from the churches, even should the churches assume to make such a gift. But, overlooking this fact,—forgetting that the legislation of the church was settled and closed centuries since, looking at the democratic side of the church organization in the voluntary character of its membership, and overlooking the regal side of that organization in the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ; then, on this false assumption that the church is merely and purely a democracy, building the inference that like any other democracy it should make and mend its own laws, on these false premises building still another false assumption, that the several independent democracies of the various separate churches may come together by their representatives, and make one joint democratic confederacy which shall legislate for its constituent churches,—and yet another false assumption, that the messenger or delegate of the primitive churches was what we call a representative, sent to similar confederacies;—thus, we say, heaping

baseless assumptions one on another,—

good men, loving freedom and Scripture, build up a system which is neither friendly to scriptural truth or practical freedom."

This report was sent by mail to the seventeen hundred members of the Union with the question: "Are you in favor of so amending the third Article of the Constitution that annual membership may be created (by the churches) by the payment of fifty dollars"? 831 members responded, 412 answering yes, and 419 no. The other members by not responding at all indicated their willingness to let matters stand as they were.

At the meeting in Philadelphia in 1849 a great majority of the members present voted to leave the constitution unchanged. Thus Mr. Bennett's amendment, after three years of consideration, failed.

Stage IV: A Historical Compromise.

In 1854, however, the conservative sentiment referred to above had become so modified that the privilege was conceded of sending annual members to the meetings of the Union on the part of churches which contributed. Thus we have seen that historically a compromise position was adopted, and with slight variations it has been since the accepted policy of the Missionary Union.

There are now four classes of membership possible, *viz.*, that of missionaries of the Union during their term of service, Life Membership, Honorary Life Membership, and Annual Membership. It should be observed, however, when the privilege of representation by the churches was granted, it was conceded not to all the Baptist churches in the Union's territory indiscriminately, but only to such as proved they were *en rapport* with the purposes of the society, by contributing to its work.

Again, let it be noticed, that memberships in all cases are still made upon

some prima facie evidence

that there is a loyal and sympathetic interest on the part of those who are to control in the affairs of the Union. The evidence of the missionary's interest is that he is personally in the service. The evidence on the part of others is that they support the cause,—not that they are wealthy. Any person however poor in earthly store, who has character enough to impress any given church that he or she would be a suitable *messenger* on behalf of such church, is as eligible to membership in the Union as the millionaire. Of course, the degree of ability to pay one's expenses for such service would enter into any given case, and in some instances would still debar the worthiest of people from attendance upon the meetings. But this should not be charged as a fault in the form of society organization.

We have seen that the principle of church representation was historically a compromise. The compromise itself was virtually this, that the individualistic principle on which the society was organized was not to be set aside, while in a modified sense representatives of the churches were to be welcomed to full privileges of the society. It was regarded as not unfitting that churches should be requested to send some one or more of their members to attend and participate in the deliberations and acts of the Union, and in turn bring back to the churches some of the inspiration received.

In this sense it has always been understood that "annual members," as they are termed, or "messengers," are sent. Such a conception and practice involved

the minimum of risk consistent

with the preservation of the individualistic principle in the society on the one hand, and with the limits of the ecclesiastical function of the body represented on the other!

This compromise was slowly reached, not because any member of the Missionary Union had any objection to a large and hearty participation

of the churches as such in the work: rather, in the belief of the founders and promoters of the Missionary Union, such work is a prime duty of every church, as the injunction, "Go disciple all nations," is the initial command in its charter, and it was hoped and expected that increasingly the churches would prove themselves

really eligible to representation

in such work. Historically, however, the church—the traditional Baptist church of the early times in this country—did not measure up to its high calling of extending the gracious offer of the gospel to the heathen world, and could not, at least while declining to contribute, fitly be invited to control in the work which exceptional, individual members in the church and far in advance of it, as a whole, had instituted. As things now are, on the basis of the several and gradual readjustments referred to, and as missionary sentiment has grown in the denomination, the churches generally for many years have had large privileges in the Union, and the privileges ever increase as the churches prove their real partnership in the cause, by actually supporting it. The old basis of life membership or honorary

Life Membership is properly retained as a conserving element

in a time-honored organization, with vast and ever-increasing responsibilities. Even now, on the present basis of interest and giving expressed by the churches, it is possible for, say, five thousand annual members at least to represent the churches at any annual meeting of the Union, if the churches entitled to do so would only act upon their constitutional privilege. Doubtless, as things even now imperfectly work, owing to distances which have to be traveled and the expense required for members to get to the meetings, as a rule fully one-half of the voting members at a given anniversary of the Union are annual members representing the churches direct. But more than this, those who are life members or honorary life members with scarcely an exception, are also

highly representative of the churches.

They come right out of their inner spiritual circles. Doubtless three-fourths of them are persons whom the churches by their own votes have desired thus to honor.* They are presumptively the fittest persons that could be chosen, and thus in the truest sense these life members represent the missionary churches of the denomination.

*The larger and wealthier givers in recent times rarely take the pains to constitute themselves or others Life Members. The churches do this by official vote.

Many are now reasoning that with the greatly increased participation of our churches as a whole in the work of our societies, the time has fully come when the churches as such, indiscriminately and exclusively, should be called in to take over the responsibility of managing and prosecuting what previously has been done by societies with a combined individualistic and church basis of representation. Whether or not this can yet be wisely done, whether we can find a way of doing it on the basis of our polity, without

creating more difficulties than we eliminate

is the question. Whether also this can be done without the risk of grief to the feelings of a great body of fast and proven friends of the Union, for the very uncertain advantage that might accrue from a less responsible and more nominal constituency, is a matter seriously to be weighed. Theoretically, of course, the time may come when churches as such will more ideally care for this cause, but have we the evidence that the time is yet? The Missionary Union certainly has long been laboring to enlist the rank and file of our people in supporting and extending missions to the heathen. Our churches and individuals without exception have been besought everywhere to come into the closest possible partnership and proprietorship under God in this work. Up to this time less than one-half of our Baptist churches have become sharers in the work to any degree. In that portion of our churches which do nominally contribute, we may reckon that less than one-third of the membership ever participate. Taken as a whole, among the nine hundred thousand Baptists of the North, the average annual gifts to the Missionary Union and its auxiliaries are at the most only about sixty cents per member; the bulk of our offerings comes from three or four states. Does this furnish sufficient evidence of loyalty on the part of our churches as a whole to foreign missions to justify the risk that would be incurred in suddenly revolutionizing even the generous basis of representation now possible and practicable, and substituting therefor a less responsible and less natural controlling authority over the vast and weighty interests involved?

As throwing a most valuable side-light upon the entire question of the genesis and nature of voluntary missionary organizations which have sprung up since the Reformation, we quote a few paragraphs from "The Outline History of Protestant Missions," by Prof. Gustav Warneck of Halle, Germany. This is a work of the highest rank on the whole subject of missions, translated from the German, and published by the Fleming H. Revell Company within the past year. Prof. Warneck in the opening chapters of his work brings out the strange, almost inexplicable, fact that

the reformers from Luther on till the time of A. H. Francke were in little or no practical sympathy with any plans for the systematic evangelization of the heathen world. He then goes on to show that with the work of Francke and the pietists of his time there sprang up free voluntary movements among spiritual and elect souls, quite apart from the official churches, even the reformed churches of the time. When we find Prof. Warneck, the greatest living authority on the history of missions, who is neither a Baptist nor a Congregationalist, but a Lutheran and a member of the state church, speaking as he does, no one will be suspected of mere partisanship in reference to the present question at issue concerning the place and function of the typical voluntary missionary society when these significant paragraphs are referred to. Prof. Warneck's testimony concerns not merely the status of the organizations of a particular denomination in America or Europe, but the weal of the entire missionary cause among all communions, in all countries and in all times.

Prof. Warneck uses the following striking language:

"In this exigency when the official church, having taken up an attitude to missions partly of indifference and partly of hostility, declined the service, no other course was open than to appoint representatives independent of the church organization to whose hands the work of missions might be committed. And thus of dire necessity there was born within the Protestant world that free association which was thenceforth to play in its history a rôle of eminent importance. That this forced birth did not happen *without the leading of Providence* is today readily acknowledged even by the official church itself, it having long ago exchanged its attitude of opposition to missions into that of friendship. For with the free association founded on the Christian principle of voluntaryism, specially in connection with the enlisting for service of the energies of the believing laity, there came into operation in the evangelical church not only a form but a *power of life* which, both as regards the work of salvation at home and the extension of Christianity among the heathen, has done a work which *the official church could not have done by its official representatives.*"

"The free alliance of believers in missionary societies has become an *inestimable blessing to the church itself*; it began in the church the removal of a social defect which was very materially to blame for the fact that until the end of the previous century there had been inside of Protestantism *so little of combined action*. These societies, which became more and more *naturalized outlets for the activities of love in the church at home*, supplied to Protestantism an *evangelical substitute* for the corporations which the Church of Rome possesses in its Orders. They had their starting point already in the *Ecclesiola in Ecclesia* of Pietism."

“It was a sign of the *soundness of the present constitution of missions*, that single individuals, who had been persuaded of their divine call to missionary service, did not go to the heathen as independent individuals, an error which in recent times has taken the place of a regular sending in the case of the so-called free (or independent) missionaries,—but that the beginning was made with *the founding at home of missionary institutions in the form of free societies*. Only by such regular missionary institutions—not to speak of other advantages—was it possible that missions could strike those deep roots at home without which they would have had no secure and lasting support.”

“The missionary duty of the church is (now) generally acknowledged by its officers, its synods, and its clergymen, and that not merely in theory. The church in its official capacity has become an active co-worker. Indeed it may be said that its office-bearers are its leaders in missionary endeavor. This fact has repeatedly suggested the idea of giving over the whole management of the missionary enterprise to be matter of (State) church administration; but with the exception of a single experiment of this kind in **Sweden**, *the conviction has gradually become clearer that the carrying on of missions by the free society is of divine leading, and is to be retained as a blessing both to missions and to the church; only the sound reciprocal attitude between the free missionary societies, and the official church must be wrought out into preciser form.*”

In the light of the above quotations and their bearing upon the foregoing historical presentation, will it not be evident to every thoughtful mind that the very kernel of the co-ordination question which for the past two years has occupied the Baptist mind in this country is reduced to this, namely: *What is the reciprocal relation that should exist and be fostered between the voluntary missionary organizations which have sprung up in the Baptist denomination in this land, and the ecclesiastical bodies known as independent Baptist churches, from which the constituents of these societies have been drawn?* There is doubtless a reciprocal relation to be considered,—a relation which has always been cherished. The societies unquestionably owe much to the churches, and in turn the churches owe perhaps even more under God to the societies, which have really been to them what Warneck calls the *ecclesiolæ in ecclesia*.

Shall the societies then now be called upon in a revolutionary way to abdicate the position, the standing, even the autonomy, as *responsible chiefly to the great Head of the church*, which in the providence of God has come to characterize them, in the interest of a more severe ecclesiastical control? Or shall the churches on their part continue more and more to foster the divinest ideals for which the societies stand, while the societies on their part seek increasingly to win and deserve the largest confidence of the churches out of which under God they have sprung?