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EDITORIAL

Two anniversaries of Baptist historical significance occur this year. In 1784 the Northamptonshire Baptist Association issued its 'Prayer Call', a venture seen by many as crucial to that renewal of Baptist life which took place in the later eighteenth century, and which eventually produced, among its most conspicuous and lasting fruits, the Baptist Missionary Society. Half a century later, in 1834, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Victorian England's most famous preacher, was born. Both events are receiving appropriate commemoration within the denomination - a renewed call to prayer after the example of 1784 is being issued by the leaders of the Baptist Union and the Baptist Missionary Society, and the Baptist Historical Society itself is holding a study weekend on Spurgeon this September (see p.340 for details).

Prayer and preaching: the twin anniversaries can be seen as focussing our attention on these central activities of church life, both in the past and present. 'The grand object in prayer', said the Northamptonshire Baptists meeting at Nottingham (*sic*) in 1784, 'is to be that the Holy Spirit may be poured down on our ministers and churches, that sinners may be converted, the saints edified, the interest of religion revived, and the name of God glorified'. This may have been said often enough before, and left to itself it could have sounded like yet another exercise in the conventional piety customary on such occasions, then as now. But it was the sentences following which struck a new note, and which in retrospect are so significant: 'At the same time remember, we trust you will not confine your requests to your own societies; or to your own immediate connection; let the whole interest of the Redeemer be affectionately remembered, and the spread of the Gospel to the most distant parts of the habitable globe be the object of your most fervent requests'. The phraseology is pregnant with meaning, not all of which was clear at the time. Indeed, one may wonder why the haunting words *the whole interest of the Redeemer* have not been exploited as fully as others in the Baptist phrase-book down the years. Certainly today it can embrace and stir the vision of the total context - Christian, human and cosmic - of the Christian mission and proclamation of the gospel. Nor should it escape our notice that the Northamptonshire Baptists in speaking of *the habitable globe* were using what could stand as an exact rendering of the Greek *oikumene*. The ecumenical and missionary movements of the present century should be seen as aspects of each other, so our church history students are told. The germ of that twin polarity can be discerned in the Prayer Call of 1784.

Also discernible, of course, is the implicit belief in the divine initiative in the Christian mission. When William Carey eventually uttered his call to action in the words 'Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God', he little realised how later generations of preachers, immersed in the activism of their day, would so easily and frequently quote his two injunctions in the reverse order. Nor was the vision of God's activity a narrowly ecclesiastical one. Baptists of the late eighteenth century dared to believe that in the revolutionary national and international events of the day they could detect the tremors of the kingdom. Now, as then, the most challenging missionary theologies are those which first look for what God himself may already be doing, before setting up an enterprise on his behalf.

If it was Evangelical Calvinism which nerved the missionary ventures of the eighteenth century, it was his own peculiar form of it which undergirded Spurgeon's pulpit ministry in the following century. To pray that God would save all his elect, and then elect some more, perhaps shows that humour is an essential ingredient in a usable Calvinism - as Karl Barth has also demonstrated in a later age. Of course, Spurgeon can still be a cause of some party spirit within the

denomination and beyond. But we hope that the ter-jubilee of his birth will prompt us to see more of the man, the Christian and the preacher that he really was. He is too big a figure to be either owned or dismissed by any partisan group. And whatever our particular theological standpoint, Spurgeon still has the ability to infect us with his own enthusiasm for preaching, and his insights into the means of communication: 'Sinners are quick-witted people, and soon detect even the smallest effort to glorify self. Forego everything for the sake of those you long to save. Be a fool for Christ's sake if this will win them, or be a scholar, if that will be more likely to impress them. Spare neither labour in the study, prayer in the closet, nor zeal in the pulpit. If men do not judge their souls to be worth a thought, compel them to see that their minister is of a very different opinion'.

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