

MY BAPTIST HERITAGE

Rev. Dr. Frank Sinnott

* At the end of this article is a brief sketch of Frank's life.

I was brought up in a Baptist family. My father was a Methodist, who sensibly made the family one by coming over into the Baptist fold.

There were two Baptist groups in the town of Sussex where I grew up, a free Baptist Church where our family attended, and a Calvinist Baptist Church or as they were nicknamed, the hard-shelled` Baptists. From the history of Sussex we learn that the first Baptist preacher to come to the town was tied to a horse and the horse whipped out of town at a fast pace. The two Churches came into the Baptist Union in 1905, but it was not until 1914, when one of the pastors went to war as a chaplain, that the two bodies united into one and occupied one property.

My mother was what I call a strict Baptist in her beliefs, but I noticed as I looked back on my home life that her practice was much broader and better than her beliefs. She ministered to all who came to her door, and she was a good neighbour to Catholic and Protestant alike. As I sat in my New Testament class and listened to my professor, I asked myself what did he have that my mother did not have. I discovered that both of them had a vital experience of God's saving grace, and so both were equal on that score. However, my professor had more training and knew the background of the Bible far better than my mother.

I have often wondered what the United Baptist Church did about the Communion. Nothing was ever said in public about it as I recall, but no-one was ever barred from the Communion because he or she belonged to some other denomination. As I look back, I find that much of the religious life of the time was built on prejudice. Everyone was prejudiced against the other fellow who did not see eye-to-eye with one's opinions. All this was because we did not understand the other fellow nor his position. This prejudice was against races we did not know or understand, against religious bodies we did not know nor understand, and it also appeared in the different classes of society, the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots.

My mother earnestly desired a minister in the family, and out of four boys in a family of ten she hoped to get one. However, she must have become discouraged at one stage because none of the other boys seemed inclined that way, and I was the last of the ten in the family to join the Church. Mother never openly spoke to us boys about being a minister, but I think she prayed much about it. The method of evangelism in

that day was usually a series of evangelistic meetings with a strong appeal for individual decisions. Our seniors would urge us young people to make that decision. One, I remember almost the whole group of junior age children were herded into a Sunday School room and urged to decide to join the Church. These pressure tactics only served to turn me off. I did not make my decision until I was 19-years-old. It was a personal decision based upon the conviction that I must come to terms with Jesus Christ, my Lord. I thought there might be some special experience in baptism, but there was none. I decided shortly after I became a Christian to pray every day, to read my Bible every day, and to tithe my income. No one suggested that I do these things, I just felt I ought to do them.

The Baptist Church in my home town freely associated with the other protestant Churches in the annual Week-of-Prayer services, and there were united summer services with the United Church each year with a good feeling between them.

When I was 20, teaching school near my home town, there came to Sussex a young school teacher. We both worked together in the local B.Y.P.U., and there I got my first taste of leadership. We had a great group of young people in the Church and we all gained a lot of practical experience at that time. My friend was on his way to college, as he felt the call to the ministry since he was six years old. I believe he had some influence upon me toward the ministry. In our first year at college, I decided for the ministry, and together on January 1, 1928, we both received a license to preach from the Sussex Unite Baptist Church. My room-mate never went into the ministry because things didn't work out as he felt they should have. He had had an omen, he called it a premonition, that when he got to college, things would work out in a certain way. But they didn't work out as he felt they would and he reacted violently against the situation and did not even graduate from college. He said he did not want a Baptist yoke upon his neck, so he was not ordained. I told him I never felt a yoke upon my neck in the ministry. No-one ever told me what I should preach about in the pulpit. I have always felt a perfect freedom in the pulpit during my entire ministry. I think my association with my college chum and going through his experience with him, gave me a certain caution with respect to the will of God that has stayed with me all through my ministry.

I remember when we were to appear before the examining Council of Convention we were told we had to prepare a statement of our Christian experience, call to the ministry, and a statement of our beliefs. We had had our theology with our arts but none of us had any systematic theology. So what did we do? We simply referred to our theological books and whatever statements of belief we could find and we made up our own statement, echoing the going theological trend of the day, which was thoroughly

orthodox. I well remember making some statement about my complete freedom in the Convention. I was immediately asked by Dr. Boyer, General Secretary at the time, what I meant by that statement. I replied that I was satisfied with the state of convention at that time, but there might come a time when I would not be satisfied and I would take whatever action I deemed proper at that time. He was satisfied with my answer. Within the last fifteen years there have been times when I have felt like taking some action and maybe withdrawing from Convention. There have been times lately when I have been almost ashamed to be called a Baptist. I don't know why I made that statement to the Council in the very beginning of my ministry, but I have been glad ever since that I made it.

Almost as soon as I became a pastor of a rural field in N.B. I had to contend with Pentacostalism or the "Holy Rollers" as they were often called then. I met with British-Israelism, which was quite strong at the time. The Oxford Group Movement was at the height of its power at that time and I was pressured to take an active part in that movement, but because of the pressure of my own pastorate of six churches I could not take a more active part in outside events. So I had to take a hard look at my own denomination and somehow justify our existence apart from the others.

On my first pastorate there was no problem about co-operating with other denominations in the same area. I found union Sunday Schools in small communities. We had united Young Peoples Societies, and we co-operated with the United Churches and the Anglican Churches in the various ways open to us on a rural field. We had mixed families in our Churches, and the husbands or wives who were members of other denominations, we welcome in our churches and at our communion tables. We co-operated with other denominations in summer camping through the M.R.E.C. We co-operated in Sunday School Conventions. In my second pastorate in the suburb of a city there was even greater co-operation. The Presbyterian Church, the United Church and the Baptist Church used to combine each summer for July and August for united services. All the protestant churches united for the Week-of-Prayer services and exchange of pulpits.

Mixed marriages have posed a problem to our Churches through the years. Our Churches, generally speaking, have not faced up to this problem. We have tried to avoid it. Love knows no barriers; if we erect barriers as we have between the different denominations, love leaps those barriers and presents a problem to our people. Alexander Crawford, the first Scottish Baptist preacher on P.E.I., forbade his people to marry outside the Church fellowship, and prohibited his people from association with

other Church bodies, even other Baptist Churches. Gladly do I record that Baptist people did not put up with this attitude. Here in this situation I have noticed that our Baptist practice has been much better than its beliefs or policy. I have noticed that these people of mixed marriages have been received just as our own. They took part in all the Church activities, in Y.P.Groups, in the Women's and Men's Groups. Some taught in our Sunday Schools; they were welcomed at our communion tables, and to all intents and purposes looked like bona-fide members. The only difference was that their names were not on the roll. In one church where I served, four out of six deacons had wives who were members of some other denomination, but were received as above. The deacons would have received them into full membership without immersion, but a few prejudiced people blocked the path of that action. In this church

I found an 'open membership Church' and in New Minas I found an 'Associate Membership' Church – I accepted these things and found they worked well. In my last pastorate, which was on PEI, this problem of mixed marriages has reached an acute stage. In the beginning there was a pocket of protestantism at the east end of the Island, surrounded by Roman Catholics. In the religious realm there was complete separation between them. But in the business world they worked together. Now the situation has changed radically with the coming of the consolidated schools, the young people mingle in school and social life freely. There are many mixed marriages, and in many cases the husbands or wives are going to the Baptist Church and taking their families there. My attitude is that they must face up to the problem and resolve it in a Christian manner. If they can't at the present time have open membership, they can at least receive them into the fellowship, determine if they are believers and let them work in the Church.

Someone has said, "The Spirit of liberty is the spirit that is not too sure that it is right; the Spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women, the Spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias". It has been my experience that every denomination has a very strong bias toward its own opinions and beliefs, and a strong bias against the other fellow's beliefs where they differ, making it almost impossible to get together in some sort of agreement. Remember the talks between the Baptists and the Disciples of Christ. They were once quite close to union, but failed to come to complete agreement. Witness the recent talks between the Anglican and United Churches, they never took any definite action.

I heard recently a Radio Preacher, who is an ultra Fundamentalist, make this amazing statement: "We cannot sacrifice one attribute of God to another". He was right, so I felt, we must combine all the attributes of God and hold them in perfect balance if we are to see God's character clearly. The question that came to my mind was, why didn't this Radio Preacher do the same with doctrine? We cannot sacrifice one doctrine to another, we must so combine all the doctrines, i.e., the several doctrines of the Atonement, and hold them in perfect balance if we are to get a full view of all the work of God. Recently I have been perusing a book called "Dictionary of Protestantism" by Vergilius Ferm in which he outlines the various denominations in American Protestantism. Each Group has a strong bias to some particular doctrine which it treats almost as if it were the whole doctrine of God. All of them confess their belief in the Living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; all of them using the Bible as their Source Book, and all, or nearly all of them, acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. In my study of these various denominations I discovered that many of them grew out of the experience of one person. He or she had a special experience of the Grace of God which led that person to a certain course of action. Each one seemed to think that everyone should have the same experience. I understand that Henry Alline thought that way. Thus a new denomination was formed as if it were the latest revelation of God, or the fullest or final one. The Mormons feel much this way about their faith. Henry Alline didn't put much emphasis upon baptism, so he had in many of his congregations those who were Congregationalists and those who were Baptists or immersionists. I came across an interesting bit of history when researching the history of the Pereaux Church. Some of the churches on the North Mountain were union Churches from the beginning until the present time. In a history of the early days of the preaching of the Gospel by Henry Alline and his followers, there is found this interesting item. Edward Manning was converted under the preaching of John Payzant, brother-in-law to Henry Alline, a "New Light" Preacher at Canard Corner, or "Jaw-Bone Corner" as it has been called. In that congregation almost half were Congregationalists and the rest were immersionists or Baptists. All were converted under the preaching of the Gospel. Edward Manning continued in fellowship with this congregation for two years after he was ordained, then he came to the conclusion that immersion was the proper mode of baptism. In 1795, he went to Annapolis and received immersion at the hands of Rev. Thomas Hadley Chipman. He continued his ministry at Jaw-Bone Corner in the "New Light" Church until 1807 when he announced to the congregation "I can no longer, in conscience, commune with any unbaptized person who is not baptized by immersion". Only eight persons went with him when he withdrew and formed, up the road a few miles, the first

Cornwallis Baptist Church (1807). The question arises in my mind, what happened here? Did Manning believe in baptismal regeneration? Did he believe that the amount of water made a difference? As I understood it, all the congregation at Canard Corner were converted people, converted under the preaching of the Gospel as Manning himself was. I would take it they were born of the Spirit, and all were adults. Does he declare that the unimmersed people, who were his brothers and sisters-in-Christ before 1807, now were not saved? This has puzzled me ever since I discovered it. Is not the only valid baptism the baptism of the Spirit?

Early in my ministry as I was pondering the position of my own denomination with that of others, I came across a statement of Dr. E. Stanley Jones, world-renowned Missionary-Evangelist. In the beginning of the Round Table Conferences, which he so successfully conducted in India, Stanley Jones was confronted with many questions by easterners, some of the keenest minds in the Orient. He found himself trying to defend western customs, western civilization and all that, and he discovered he couldn't defend them as synonymous with Christianity. He began to feel that there was only one place upon which he could stand and be unassailable, and that was behind Christ. He likened his new stand to a soldier in the trenches in the First World War. One soldier could not defend a long line of trench, but he could hold one spot in the line. So Stanley Jones determined henceforth to take his stand with Christ. So amidst the denominationalism in which I found myself making the same determination. I felt here was an unassailable place upon which to take a stand. I knew I could stand with Christ for He was unassailable, and in Him I was secure.

Stanley Jones has brought to our attention something which has been too long pushed aside or forgotten, and which must be brought to the forefront of our day. He brings to our attention a saying of Jesus when standing in the temple in Jerusalem.

"One greater than the temple is here" (Matthew 12:6). The Temple represents to us the Church. So He is saying, "One greater than the Church is here". E. S. Jones goes further and says, "One greater than the creeds is here; One greater than rites or ceremonies is here. Christ is supreme and above all these things. The Holy Communion is a beautiful sacrament – behind Christ. But if it gets around in front of Christ, becomes the exclusive possession of exclusive groups, then it is good turned bad. If the Communion leads to communion with Christ and with all the others who belong to Christ, then it is the Holy Communion, but if it leads to exclusiveness and special claims about validities, then it is an unholy communion. One greater than the Communion is here".

The very same could be said about immersion. So with the visible Church on earth as an institution, the creeds and all other rites and ceremonies – Christ is all in all. I think the time is here when the whole Church of Christ on earth should shift its focus from the Church as an institution to Christ and the Kingdom of God. Then the various denominations or Churches would be able to cooperate more fully in the spread of the Gospel throughout the world. The institutional Church or the visible Church on earth is governed by men who determine who shall enter it and who shall not.

Recently I saw a book entitled, "The Battle for the Bible". I don't believe that is a relevant issue in today's world. We all love the Bible as the inspired record of God's revelation of Himself, but Christ, the living Word, the Word made flesh, is the issue. At the heart of my faith is a person, and that person is the Lord Jesus Christ, and love and loyalty to His person is the essence of the Christian life. We must focus upon Christ, the living Lord, who is our Master, and all of us are His brethren. We must obey Him and together seek to spread the Good News about Him to the ends of the earth. I hate to see us wasting our time on side issues.

I became a Christian in a Baptist Church because my family belonged to the Baptist Church. I entered the Christian ministry, not because my mother wanted a minister in the family nor because my Church wanted a minister in her ranks, but because God called me to this ministry within the visible Church. I have been a Baptist minister within the United Baptist Convention for fifty years. I still like the Baptist position as I understand it, and I have enjoyed the fellowship and freedom I have found here. I like a free Church in a free society. But I have come to the conclusion that I would rather be called a Christian first and a Baptist afterward. Sometimes and in some quarters the word Baptist stands for narrowness, exclusiveness and bigotry, and I want no part in that society.

I came across a definition of the Church at some time in my ministry which more recently has meant everything to me. Someone has said, "The Church is a fellowship of believers, bound together in loyalty to Jesus Christ, and organized to carry on His work in the world". Primarily the Church is a fellowship, and is only organized to carry on the work we do together in an efficient and effective way. When the organization gets in front of the fellowship, then the fellowship is hamstrung, and the Church becomes ineffective as His body. At this period in our history I feel that the organization is in the forefront and is causing us all the trouble we have had in the last fifteen or twenty years. Convention, too, is primarily a fellowship of believers. We meet for fellowship in Christ, and then we find there are certain things we can do together for Him that we cannot do separately and so we organize to do those things. If the organization gets in front of

the fellowship, then we play havoc with the fellowship. I set no limits to the fellowship. For example, I had in my congregation in this Church a Christian Scientist. She lived in this area, and found herself at home in our fellowship. Many a talk we had in her home on spiritual matters, and we prayed together. She derived her strength and faith from the same Scriptures that I used. Yet she found many things that I did not find in those same Scriptures. I found a rich fellowship in the Baptist Federation and the Baptist World Alliance. But I also found the same rich fellowship in the Canadian Council of Churches and in the Ashram which cut across all denominational lines. Some of my brethren in the ministry set definite limits to the fellowship, and I do not think they were justified in their action. William Barclay, in his book "By What Authority", speaks of the covenant relationship Israel had with God. He said that God initiated this relationship, and Israel took what God offered. So in the New Testament the covenant is between God and the individual, primarily. When I take what God offers and enter into covenant with Him, I find others in the same relationship to Him. Then I find myself in fellowship with His chosen ones, His people. Who am I to discriminate between them and say, "You are in the fellowship or you are not". That's exactly what happened in my home Church and it broke up the fellowship. That is what has happened in denominationalism. Would that we would seek to fulfil Christ's prayer as it is found in **John 17:20-23**.



Rev, Dr. Frank H. Sinnott (1907-1990)

Frank was born in Sussex, N. B. He graduated from Provincial Normal College, Fredericton, and taught school for three years prior to studying at Acadia University (BTh, BD). He was ordained to the Baptist ministry in 1931, served in Jemseg, N. B.; Lancaster, N, B.; Canning; Springhill; Port Williams; and East Point, P. E. I. He retired to Port Williams in 1971.

He served on the Board of Trustees of Acadia Divinity College, the Historical Records Committee of the Baptist Convention, and was a president of Nova Scotia Temperance Federation. He was honorary deacon and honorary trustee of Port Williams Baptist Church. He received an honorary DD from Acadia University.

Frank was a man of great wit and wisdom. He helped to steer more than one young minister through the snares of Examining councils. The writer of a tribute said that Frank was a gracious gentleman, a pastor and friend whose work was characterized by an abiding concern for the well-being of those who came under his pastoral care.

