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Open and Closed Membership among English and Welsh Baptists*

QUESTIONS concerned with "open" and "closed" membership among the English Baptists are closely related to, but are also separate from, those concerned with "open" or "closed" communion. Indeed, many churches which still practice "closed" membership open their communion table to Christians who have not been baptised as believers and hence practice "open" communion.¹ Furthermore, historically, the arguments of those Baptists who only practice "closed" membership have been very similar to those used to justify both "closed" membership and "closed" communion.

Dr. Payne has pointed out that it is important to realise² "that since the 17th century there has been difference of opinion among Baptists on the legitimate limits of local church fellowship". Some of the earliest of these differences were discussed in a recent article in *Foundations*,³ but the most systematic survey of the matter was that provided for the 17th century as a whole some years ago by E. P. Winter.⁴ In addition, George Gould's book, *Open Communion and the Baptists of Norwich*,⁵ if used critically, has a great deal of information relating to both the early period and to that in which he was writing.

Unfortunately, even without the deliberate mixture of General Baptists and Particular Baptists by Thomas Crosby in his *History* (1738-1740), it has proved difficult to identify and to evaluate the contribution of the various groups whose stories together compromise our corporate Baptist tradition in this country. In the early years, that is, at least up to 1660 and, probably, effectively to the close of the 17th century, there were *three*,⁶ not two, significant groups. The first, and earliest, was the General Baptist community, this stemmed directly from John Smyth and the older Separatism. Their tradition in the matter of "open" and "closed" membership was simple and consistent: they all practised "closed" communion and, hence, "closed" membership. They tended not even to make acceptance of the Arminian position a condition of membership but in some cases they seem to have required that the newly baptised should receive the laying on of hands as a further condition of church membership.⁷ The practice of "closed membership" continued with the foundation of the New Connexion of General Baptists in 1770:⁸

"We believe that it is the indispensable duty of all who repent and believe the gospel, to be baptised by immersion in water, in order to be initiated into a church state: and that no person ought to be received into the church without submission to that ordinance". This continued to be their policy and their practice down to 1891 when they joined the Baptist Union.

* Originally written at the request of the Baptist Union for a survey initiated on the subject of Open-Closed membership.

The second group was that of the "closed" membership Particular Baptists who originally broke away from the Independent or Congregationalist tradition represented by the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church but whose closest ecclesiological links and sympathies were undoubtedly with the Separatists.⁹ The third group, a rather loosely linked company, tended to believe Calvinistic doctrines, to share an Independent churchmanship and also to argue for believer's baptism while not excluding from church fellowship those who held infant baptism to be valid. This group is represented by Henry Jessey, John Tombes, John Bunyan, Vavasor Powell in Wales and others such as the members of the congregation at Broadmead, Bristol. They could almost equally easily be represented as "open" membership Particular Baptists or as Independents who tolerated diversity of view in their congregations about the right and proper subjects of baptism.¹⁰ The difficulty in Baptist historiography, and hence in evaluating their importance for Baptist tradition, has been threefold: first, the intimate, aggressive, group identity of the "close" membership Particular Baptists in the years prior to 1660 has only been realised quite recently;¹¹ secondly, the "open" membership leaders are comparatively better known than the "closed" and, hence, the opinions of the former are given greater weight; thirdly, their practice has been given greater stress than is their due by such writers as George Gould for controversial purposes.

In fact, a sober judgment would support Gould's view that the Particular Baptists, especially since 1689, have tolerated differing opinions among themselves about "open" and "closed" membership and communion but it would also stress that the identifiable Particular Baptist body which co-operated together before 1660 was, on principle, "closed" membership. Their position was put very clearly by Benjamin Cox in 1646 and (with local and temporary variations) was firmly maintained with "closed" communion also by the group responsible for their early evangelistic programme and the foundation of their first associations: "We . . . do not admit any to the use of the Supper, nor communicate with any in the use of this ordinance, but disciples baptised, lest we should have fellowship with them in doing contrary to order"¹² i.e. the order, they believed which was laid down for the Church of Christ in the new Testament. In 1652 Thomas Patient, another member of this group, expounded the position more fully when he remonstrated with some Baptists who had joined in membership with an Independent congregation in Dublin: "We hear that you do not walk up orderly together, but are joined in fellowship with such as do fundamentally differ in judgment and practice; to wit, such as agree not with you about the true state of a visible church, nor the fundamental ordinances thereof . . . the very end of church fellowship is the observation of all Christ's commands . . . but this your practice crosseth in that you agree to walk with such as have not, nor practice, the ordinance of dipping believers". "If", the letter continued, "you admit one that walks in disobedience to the ordinance of baptism whether through ignorance or error, you may

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admit all manner of disobedience into your society upon the same ground, which is a total destroying the end of church fellowship, which is to bring up every member to a visible subjection to all the laws of Christ their King, or else cast them out of that society as old leaven".¹³

This strict position was modified at the Assembly of 1689 which met to plan for the renewal of the churches after almost a generation of persecution and to issue the most influential of all Particular Baptist Confessions. Representatives came from both Broadmead and the "closed" membership church at Pithay, Bristol. Two statements from the records of that Assembly indicate the changed attitude of the men who were the lineal successors, and in the case of some such as William Kiffin and Hanserd Knollys the actual leaders, of the "closed" membership Particular Baptists of the era of the Great Rebellion. They affirmed that, "in those things wherein one church differs from another church in their principles and practices, in point of communion, that we cannot, shall not, impose upon any particular church therein, but leave every church to their own liberty, to walk together as they have received from the Lord". Furthermore, they made explicit their recognition of differences among themselves: "The known principle and state of the conscience of divers of us that have agreed in this confession is such that we cannot hold church communion with any other than baptised believers, and churches constituted of such; yet some others of us have a greater liberty and freedom in our spirits that way".¹⁴

The great majority of Particular Baptist churches remained "closed" communion and hence "closed" membership for another century and a half if not longer. Nevertheless, after c.1770, it became widely known that such leaders as Benjamin Beddome of Bourton-on-the-water, Robert Robinson of Cambridge, John Ryland of Northampton and Daniel Turner of Abingdon tended to favour "open" membership. It was Daniel Turner, whose church had led among the "closed" membership congregations of the 1650's, who was a guiding spirit in drawing up the covenant of 1780 which linked together Presbyterians and Baptists in what has come to be known as New Road Baptist Church. Recognising their differences over baptism the church agreed that, "because we can find no warrant in the Word of God to make such difference of sentiment any bar to communion at the Lord's Table in particular, or to Church fellowship in general; and because the Lord Jesus receiving and owning them on both sides of the question, we think we ought to do so too".

But the movement was not all in one direction: the influence of such men as Andrew Fuller in the Northamptonshire Association moved some churches which had practised "open" communion to a stricter position. Furthermore, in London, Abraham Booth of Prescot Street had made a strong defence of the "closed" communion position and Joseph Ivimey, the Baptist historian, followed in his footsteps declaring (in 1830) that among the Particular Baptists' chief weak-

nesses were "open communion", "ignorant ministers" and "tyrannical deacons".

When Robert Hall published *On terms of communion* (1815) he admitted,¹⁵ "Strict communion is the general practice of our churches" though he claimed their opponents "are rapidly increasing both in numbers and respectability"(!). He wrote to answer Booth's arguments because his supporters believed him,¹⁶ "to have exhibited the full force of their cause". Hall summarised the chief arguments in defence of "closed communion" and, hence, of "closed" membership as follows: (1) the priority of the institution of Christian baptism to the Lord's Supper; (2) The implicit priority of baptism to the Supper in the Apostolic Commission; (3) the apostolic practice of baptising prior to allowing believers to partake of the Supper; (4) the united practice of all Christian Churches. In answer he argued: (1)¹⁷ baptism "as a Christian institution had no existence during the personal ministry of our Saviour"; (2)¹⁸ it is unjustified to deduce an invariable rule from an implicit priority; (3)¹⁹ circumstances alter cases and the two ordinances "do not so depend one upon the other that the conscientious omission of the first forfeits the privilege, or cancels the duty, of observing the second"; (4)²⁰ this plea assumes the impossibility of the "universal prevalence of error" and ill becomes "the members of a sect, who upon a subject of much greater moment have presumed to relinquish the precedent, and arraign the practice of the whole Christian world". His positive arguments in favour of "open" communion were: the obligation of Christian love, the toleration of disagreement on secondary matters, paedobaptists *are* part of the Christian Church, paedobaptists should be encouraged to share in the supper, correct views about baptism are not necessary to salvation, reception of paedobaptists to communion furthers mutual understanding.

After Joseph Kinghorn of Norwich had replied to this and Hall had answered Kinghorn the heat went out of the controversy for a generation until fanned once more to flame at St. Mary's, Norwich when, in the late 1850's, both the large majority of the members and the minister, George Gould, wanted to open their communion table (but not, at this point, church membership) to those who had not been baptised as believers. The minority, whose solicitor was a Mr. Ivimey, "a near relation" of the historian, took the matter to court and, after lengthy arguments from Baptist history had been adduced by both sides, the Master of the Rolls gave his judgment. He held that Gould had established that Particular Baptist congregations had had in each case²¹ "from the earliest time" liberty to regulate their practice "either to the Strict communion or to the Free or Mixed Communion, as it might seem best to such Congregation".

Although some had feared that this judgment would open the floodgates to "open" membership (as it certainly encouraged the change to "open" communion) all over the country this did not, in fact, happen. One notable influence was that of C. H. Spurgeon

who practised "open" communion but "closed" membership and this had its effect in the churches in and around London formed under his inspiration. Similarly, outside such areas as Bedfordshire where the Bunyan tradition continued, churches, particularly in the North and in Wales, tended to be founded as, or to become, "open" communion and "closed" membership.²²

In the twentieth century the move has been for more and more of the new churches to be "open" membership in type. This has especially been so in new areas where, by agreement, the Baptist church has been the one Free Church. This has resulted in churches where a number of members and, sometimes, deacons have not been baptised at all. Such a situation may be less a witness to a wide charity than to a general carelessness and to the breakdown of conscientious churchmanship. As Dr. Payne has written:²³ "if the rite may not only symbolise but convey to the faithful the grace of God, and if a part of its meaning lies in its outward linking of men and women with the visible historic church, then clearly much is lost by those who observe one of the gospel sacraments, but are content to ignore the other, and much is lost also by the local fellowship itself".

NOTES

¹ R. L. Child *et al.*, *The Lord's Supper: a Baptist Statement*, London 1951, 28-35 provides a useful discussion of many of the issues involved in the perspective of recent practice.

² E. A. Payne, *The Fellowship of Believers*, (2nd Edn.) London 1952, 78.

³ B. R. White, "The frontiers of fellowship between English Baptists 1609-60", *Foundations*, July-September 1968.

⁴ E. P. Winter, "The Lord's Supper: admission and exclusion among the Baptists of the Seventeenth century", *Baptist Quarterly*, XVII, 1957-58. Since this article is the only systematic treatment of the subject available it is necessary to warn that its assertions must be treated with great care. For example, it linked Christopher Blackwood wrongly with the *General* Baptists and, more seriously, was quite unaware of the importance of the *threefold* distinction made in this survey, and depended uncritically upon Gould, *vide infra*.

⁵ G. Gould, *Open Communion and the Baptists of Norwich*, London 1860.

⁶ If we include the Sabbatarian Baptists, the Seventh Day men, who were also divided into Calvinists and Arminians, there were five groups: but the numbers of Seventh Day Baptists were always small. See, E. A. Payne, "More about the Sabbatarian Baptists", *Baptist Quarterly*, XIV 1951-2.

⁷ E. P. Winter, *op. cit.*, 267f.

⁸ E. A. Payne, *The Fellowship of Believers*, *op. cit.*, 80.

⁹ B. R. White, "The doctrine of the church in the Particular Baptist confession of 1644", *Journal of Theological Studies*, (N.S.) XIX. 1968.

¹⁰ G. F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints: the Congregational way 1640-60*, Oxford 1957, 118-21.

¹¹ B. R. White, "The organisation of the Particular Baptists 1644-1660", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XVII. 1966.

¹² Cited in G. Gould, *op. cit.*, 266.

¹³ J. Rogers, *Ohel or Beth-shemash*, London 1653, 300-8.

¹⁴ Cited in G. Gould, *op. cit.*, cv.

¹⁵ Robert Hall, *The works of Robert Hall, A.M.*, London 1851, volume 3, 12.

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