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A Village Pastorate, 1847-1856

IN a minute book of the church at Great Ellingham, Norfolk, under the date December 3rd, 1852 an entry reads:—"The Pastor—in conjunction with the younger deacon remarked on the folly of adhering to the superstitious usage of carrying the corpse of deceased friends into the chapel; persuading the members to discountenance the same and to advise others to abandon it as superstitious and injurious to the property." An entry headed "Died September 26th 1856" continues "With humiliation before God and pain as a church we here record the sudden and lamented death of our beloved Pastor the Rev. James Cragg who, during nearly ten years, faithfully and affectionately laboured amongst us." A grey stone slab lettered—

Beneath this Stone
Rests the Body of
JAMES CRAGG
Who died Sept. 26th
1856
Aged 40 years.

is in the floor of an aisle and a white marble tablet¹ is on the wall opposite under the gallery, inscribed—

In memory of
The Revd. James Cragg
Who for nine years was the beloved Pastor
of this church
Who died 26th September 1856
Aged 40 years
"A faithful servant of Christ"

So far as is known this is the only intra-mural burial in the Meeting House, as early records correctly call the building.²

Why was it that in less than four years the strongly expressed views of James Cragg should be so markedly ignored? Was it the wish of his widow? Records show that she took her place in the work of the church. One cannot think it was his own desire. The tribute already quoted goes on:—" . . . may our future steps be guided . . . in the choice of another Pastor who, as a faithful and affectionate under-shepherd, shall lead us into the green pastures of the Gospel and by the refreshing waters of salvation, and likewise be the honour'd instrument of calling many to the fold of the Church." Two other ministers have mural tablets to their memory;

¹ An account of renovations in 1884 refers to "a new Tablet to Mr. Cragg's memory".

² Except for one entry 1817 "to build a new Baptist Chapple (sic) or Meeting House" the word "chapel" is not used until 1847.

in 1806 £2 : 12 : 6 was "paid for the grave-stone of Mr. Ewing." These, with others, were buried in the Burial Ground more than a mile away. Why, then, was James Cragg buried inside?

The first church book, a treasured document, contains "The Covenant and Articles of the Faith³ of the Baptized Church of Christ" followed by five pages of admissions with deaths subsequently noted. Pages have been cut away; on a scrap remaining we read:—"A just register of the succeeding." The last entry on a vertical half-page records "March 9th 1789 the Revd. Mr. John Sparkhall Dyed, Pastor 21 years." The next book opens:—"John Ewing from Worstead in Norfolk, took the Pastoral care of this church July 20th 1790." There follow six pages; mostly admissions, but including the entry:—"February 1st 1805 Departed this Life, John Ewing after a Faithfull Discharge of Fourteen years and Six Months of the Pastoral care of this Church."

Page seven begins:—"Received the Dismission of Charles Hatcher from a Particular Baptist Church at Horham in Suffolk, was Admitted a Member April 3rd 1806. At the same time Mr. Hatcher was Unanimously called to take the Pastoral Charge of the Church, which He Accepted, And was Publicly Ordained."⁴ There follow admissions with notes of deaths and "seperations"; regular entries cease in 1823, there are two entries for 1829 and one each for 1832 and 1834. The next is dated November 3rd 1844 and is a "Mem" initialled A. P. It says:—"Mr. Charles Hatcher resigned . . . on Sunday the 13th of October 1842 after faithfully sustaining his office . . . for 37 years being incapacitated by growing infirmities . . . the pulpit was supplied by several kind friends from Norwich particularly by Mr. Jas. Cozens . . . at a Church Meeting held 4th August 1844 a unanimous invitation was given to Mr. Alfred Powell, then of Norwich and late Pastor of the Baptist Church, Salhouse . . . he acceded to our request."

From that point minutes were kept, implementing a resolution, ". . . that the Pastor be requested to make entries in the church minute book of those events necessary to a faithful record of its proceedings." "A careful examination of Church books" was made and a list of March 1846 shows 31 members. On November 22nd the same year Alfred Powell "gave notice that he should resign . . . at the end of the year in consequence of an affection in the throat."

The Rev. James Cragg of Blakeney supplied for four Sundays

³ Hyper-calvinist and dated "upon ye 29th day of ye ninth month 1699"; its "pedigree" is under investigation.

⁴ An account book records:—"Do for the Dinners of Twelve Ministers Mr. Hatcher's Ordination £1 10s. Do for Tea for part of the above 7s. 6d."

in January 1847 and an unanimous invitation was sent to him. ". . . The pecuniary prospects of the Situation . . . the Minister will have the house . . . free of Rent, the Income of the Property . . . will be about £25 per year and we hope to raise by subscription from £9 to £10 per Qr."⁵

The Baptist Magazine for 1838 records that James Cragg "was set apart to pastoral office over the Baptist Church at Shaldon" (Devon). He was then 22. In 1841 the Norfolk Association appointed him to the newly formed church at Holt, Norfolk, where Thomas Owen, a city missionary of Norwich, had been working for seven years. On January 1st, 1843, Cragg "baptized eight in a stream, most of them elderly," on the 18th he was married in the Independent church at Dawlish to Miss E. W. Dench and eight days later a new gallery was opened. "His attention was directed to Blakeney, five miles from Holt." Soon "his services were solicited by several pious people who had taken a place and fitted it up as a chapel" (*vide* Maurice Hewitt MSS., Norwich Central Library). An assistant was appointed with responsibility for Thornage, two miles from Holt, and Cragg became Pastor at Blakeney in 1844 when the church joined the Norfolk Association. The work flourished and a building was erected to seat 200. Cragg preached three times each Sunday and on Wednesdays when the service was "followed by instruction for members." In addition two prayer meetings were held weekly. He was, indeed, a young man with a mind to work.

His acceptance dated February 16th 1847 shows him a pious man, "my prayerful, anxious and deliberate thought"; an earnest man, "that thro' our relationship the Church of God may be enriched, souls saved, Christ honoured and God glorified." He is also frank, "allow me to remind you that the duties of Pastor and People are mutual and only so far as they are understood and evangelically carried out can our union be happy and profitable." Gently, but firmly he demands, "I earnestly ask and scripturally claim your continued prayers, co-operation and support, that in every effort to be useful I may have the confident sanction of a beloved and affectionate people." He and "his beloved partner, Eliza Wood Cragg" are dismissed by Blakeney with the prayer, "may you live to enjoy that sweet communion together which it was our felicity to share."

The first church-meeting with him presiding was on May 2nd 1847 and he is at once ready with a new project; it was unanimously agreed to seek union with the Norfolk and Norwich Association of Calvinistic Baptist Churches—"to assist in spread-

⁵ This entry numbered "Min. 1" is in Cragg's writing as are all records during his pastorate with the exception of an entry dated May 25th, 1856. The last number in this book is 70.

ing the Gospel among the benighted Inhabitants of our County." In his study is a new book labelled outside "Members' Names," inside is a nominal roll. It remains a model of neatness and detail.

The new broom begins to sweep, the chapel must be re-painted, there is need for "better accommodation as to horses, gigs, etc.;" a new palisading in front of the chapel ground is put in hand. He persuades the church to discontinue examination in meeting of applicants for membership—" . . . for the future persons desiring Christian fellowship be proposed at one meeting and their eligibility considered at another, thereby affording opportunity for all to converse privately with the candidates." He "announced a list of subjects for the winter months."⁶ A prayer meeting is held "to seek a divine blessing thereon."

At the 149th anniversary on Friday September 29th 1848 "at the close of the social repast . . . the Pastor gave a short report of progress." There have been ten baptisms, "a jarring thing unknown and the Pastor's health re-established . . . a stable has been erected, the chapel registered for marriages. Near £30 collected towards the new S. School galleries. Congregations and School increased; a Reading Society commenced and in connection with other Christians an Auxiliary to the Religious Tract Society formed, the loan tract System commenced in 5 parishes."

"A Standing Law" is passed:—"absence from the Lord's Table without satisfactory reason will be dealt with by erasure."⁷ At the same meeting it was resolved that the church "become one with" the churches at Attleborough, Kenninghall and Carlton Rode "in their Christian friendly association on the day known as Good Friday." On the proposal of the Pastor a member from the Independent church at East Dereham had been received for Communion although it was not until January 1854 that "almost unanimously we become an open Communion church."⁸ Earlier the Pastor had innovated a monthly observance of the Lord's Supper instead of once every eight weeks.

On September 27th 1849 "it was reported that during the year eleven had joined by baptism." The ter-Jubilee has come and the Pastor writes on a clean page "See New Church Book for future information. September 29th 1849." It is Saturday and the Pastor comes out of his cottage Manse, walks under the Walnut tree and into the chapel to lead a "public prayer meeting." He notes "the Anniversary Day" and looks towards the morrow.

On the Thursday previous the church had met for special

⁶ The following February he prints a list "distributing them generally through the parish".

⁷ A copy of a letter sent is inserted.

⁸ In 1855 "other churches have dis-satisfaction with our open communion".

prayer; it is good to know that "a good number of members (were) present and an excellent feeling." On his study table is the "New Church Book" in which for seven years he is to sketch in, all unconsciously, more details of his self portrait. The minutes are again numbered. The opening heading runs "Jubilee Celebrations and Church History."

"On the Lord's Day the Pastor preached in the morning and the Rev. J. G. Pigg (Indept.) of Wymondham afternoon and evening." On the Monday afternoon the Rev. G. Gould of Norwich gave an address on "The Past and the Present," the Rev. J. Alexander (Indept.) of Norwich on "The Present Duty of Christians." About 140 had tea. Jeremiah Colman presided over the evening meeting and the speakers were Revs. Alexander, Gould and Pigg, Cousins⁹ of Norwich, Hatcher of Gt. Ellingham, Dann (Indept.) of Hingham, Smith of Foulsham and Breasted of Blakeney. A plea was made for a Jubilee Fund of £200 to build a new Manse.

During the day—a crowded one—the Pastor read a historical sketch. He told how "312 members only have been connected with it during the past 150 years; 56 are now in Christian fellowship, 28 of whom have joined within the last 27 months and 13 in the last year." He was pensive—"our fathers . . . are entombed in our graveyard, their spirits are before the throne of God . . . pastors, deacons, members . . . five generations are gone." He became outspoken—"A twofold evil has been painfully prominent . . . impeding religious progress, destroying spirituality . . . hindering Christian exertion. The first is the leaven of Hyper-Calvinism denying the universal provision of the Gospel, the duty of the sinner to believe in Christ, expelling benevolence from the heart, cultivating harsh and censorious selfishness, carrying with it the very coldness of death. May its dying knell be heard in all the churches before long. The second evil is that of religious endowments, the nursery of indolence, the opponent of healthy Christian willinghood and the parent of much that is contrary to Christ. The former evil we can rejoice over as extinct being purged out by a sounder and more scriptural theology. The latter we seek to paralyse and destroy by Gospel teaching and frequent calls to Christian liberality."

The Pastor never minced matters—"A suitable residence for the Pastor is absolutely needed, the present (one) carrying with it the imperfections of age and the antique absence of domestic comfort; is unhealthy, inconvenient, repulsive and unsuitable." He is not, however, concerned only for himself—"A Day School for the education of many without denominational peculiarities,

⁹ So spelt, but should it be "Cozens"?

baptized with the religion of the cross, as the elevater (sic) of mind and a helpmate to the Sabbath Schools is an essential." He called for "A healthier piety in the church, its members exemplifying the earnestness, the spirituality, the prayerfulness, the self denial, the noble mindedness of the Son of God."

He has now been in the village for nearly three years; congregations have grown, conversions followed by baptisms have encouraged him and heartened the church; the chapel has been cleaned, he is leading his flock to co-operate. "The Pastor stated that he had acceded to a request from the Wesleyans to close our chapel this evening as it was their School Anniversary."¹⁰

But how right was Matthew Arnold—

"We cannot kindle when we will
The fire that in the soul resides."

After the elation of the Jubilee celebrations signs of reaction appeared. On July 1st 1850—"the present state of the church was again pressed on the solemn attention of those present, with its claims urged by the Pastor." At the annual meeting in January 1851 a decrease of five was reported, "the Pastor's salary £4 less." Yet new ventures have emerged—"A Christian Mutual Provident Society" and "A Juvenile Auxiliary to the Missionary Society." In June "The Pastor pointed out indications of the decline of religion and want of co-operation on the part of some of the members with himself." He is in his third year; often a difficult, if not critical, period and, maybe, the shepherd is travelling too fast for the sheep. By October the church considers whether "to supplicate the reviving of God's work . . . by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit." It was resolved to hold cottage prayer meetings "wherever doors may be opened."¹¹ In December he asks for a collection for Blakeney and he exhorts members "to abstain from countenancing (communal) baking on the Lord's Day . . . the practice being immoral."

His courageous leadership shews again in April 1852—"In consequence of members not keeping their own business to themselves he should . . . for the future baptize candidates previous to naming them to the church." At the same meeting "some brethren gave expression to strong thoughts and feelings as to . . . two or three members who were sowing discord." The following month a member is excluded, in June another, "a frequent visitor to the Alehouse and Skittle Alley." The Pastor's letters of admonition to these and other disciplined members are models of faithful firmness and affectionate concern. He does indeed watch over his flock. Two months later preaching on alternate Thursday evenings

¹⁰ This—a mutual courtesy, still operates.

¹¹ By January four opened.

is started in Bow Street, an outlying district of the parish; "a station occupied for preaching at Deopham," three miles away. At the end of the year the Pastor moved into the new house and the old cottage "is reserved for chapel purposes." His depression has not lifted by February 1853—"the Pastor and several members . . . lamenting the smallness of success." The conclusion of "his six years' pastorate (finds him giving) a short address on the design of our existence as a Christian church, mutual Edification and Evangelisation." In May he "intimates his intention of preaching in the open air during the summer," later "associating with the Wesleyan friends." The services were "encouraging as to attendance and attention." Cottage services are again arranged for the coming winter. He was always well ahead with his plans.

1854, when the deacon's report to the annual meeting was "on the whole, favourable," sees the *Baptist New Selection* take the place of *Rippon's* and "a new Ordinance Set inclusive of a flagon for the wine." On July 10th new Vestries were opened and two days later "the Pastor went from home to recruit his health." He was back by the middle of September and asks for "an increase of Deacons . . . it would relieve him of social things that he may give himself more to God's Word and prayer . . . it would be a preventitive to confusion should death hastily take away himself." At the same meeting he "stated his own gloomy impression as to the want of vigorous piety among us" and asks "would it be well to have special services for prayer for the Holy Spirit?" "He hinted at the desirableness of having a female prayer meeting"; were some remembering St. Paul's "let your women keep silence in the churches"?

At the October meeting his health is again mentioned, he "proposed to institute a singing class for the winter, to promote congregational singing" and "In consequence of the singing class, conjointly with the Pastor's health, cottage and special services be deferred for the present. Having noted his readiness to work with Wesleyans we are, perhaps, surprised that he tells the church he has "refused Communion to a Christian member of the Establishment. At present we only admit members of Christian¹² churches, the Establishment not being such, as faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is not a term of membership." Further, he "has fully resolved to abstain from burying on the Lord's Day." Not, it seems, because of any strain upon himself but, because of "many kept away from God's House thereby."

January 1855 opens with "special prayer meetings for a week to seek the outpouring of the Holy Spirit." In March the Pastor reads a letter prepared for the Association. It "elicited remarks

¹² This word is underlined.

of a sombre character." Long enough he has dreamed of a day school, now a British School is materialising, the church "cheerfully agrees to a portion of the orchard . . . being appropriated for the building and playground." At the April meeting he is again concerned about the state of the church and Sunday school and announces "a course of sermons this summer instead of open-air services."

The annual meeting for 1856, his last, was brought forward to December 24th "when 23 partook of tea."¹³ There are shadows, from the membership "three removed by death, one ceased by non-attendance." There is a deficit in the finances. There is a bright spot, "Day School erected on our own land." The Pastor is weary, sad and doubtless, ill; he speaks of "difficulty in his own mind as to going on with the Pastorate except he was more thoroughly sustained and the factious spirit of some was laid aside and the apparent opposition of others to progress ceased." "The Lord's Supper was administered. The meeting was solid and solemn."

On April 10th the Pastor "gave an address on the close of his nine years Pastorate." A member "has avowedly joined the Mormons"; there "are reports of an unfavourable character respecting" another. The leader of the singing class wishes to resign. On May 25th he "referred to the aggressive movement of certain persons of the Establishment on our Day and Sabbath Schools." At the church meeting on September 14th "the Pastor stated he had drawn up a list of addresses for special prayer meetings and a list of sermons to be preached."

They were never delivered. On Sunday September 21st he baptized one, five days later he was taken suddenly away. It shook the church, did it affect the village? Over twelve months passed before any move was made to fill the place vacated by this "faithful servant of Christ."

We see him as exactly that. "Ill and o'erwork'd" he never allowed his village pastorate to be a sinecure. All we know of him we learn from records written by himself in the church books. He was only 40 when he died, but "an unspotted life is ripe old age."¹⁴ At Abingdon, even Daniel Turner, who was Pastor there for nearly fifty years, was buried outside. At Great Ellingham they buried James Cragg inside the walls. Was it thus he was honoured for the great man they judged him; was it their way of showing love for the good man they knew him to be?

J. A. SMALLBONE.

¹³ There were now 45 members—an increase of fourteen in ten years.

¹⁴ *Wisdom*, ii. 9.