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A Nineteenth Century Revival in East Anglia.

IN the middle years of the 19th century the Strict Baptist Churches of the Suffolk and Norfolk Association—the majority of which were small village causes—passed through a time of gracious spiritual awakening.

The beginning of this revival was marked by the cultivation of the spirit of prayer. Not once only, but year after year the Association had urged the churches to observe quarterly Prayer Meetings. This was one of its resolutions:

"It was unanimously agreed to recommend to the Churches the continuance of the quarterly Prayer Meetings for the fuller outpouring of the Holy Spirit, on the several Lord's days, which in past years, have been devoted to this solemn and much needed intercessory service."

In this way there was a unity in the fellowship of prayer through the counties. On four Sundays in each year this special intercession linked the Associated Churches together at the Throne of Grace, the only place where nothing could break the bond.

But prayer was not limited to four Sundays in the year. The little church at Wetherden, with its 36 members, reported in 1857:

"At one time during the past year things seemed very dull, but some of our dear brethren were stirred up to unite in special prayer, and the next ordinance day we had the happiness of baptizing two, and receiving them into communion."

The next year Wattisham wrote:

"For several years past we think we have not discerned and realised so much of the spirit of unity, love, and prayer, as has late been manifested."

That same Church reported in 1859:

"The importance of deep searching of heart, and of earnest, importunate supplication have been felt by many of us, and a considerable time during the former part of the year, meetings for prayer and fraternal communion were almost daily held and sustained.

And this was how, on May 10th, 1859, Charsfield celebrated the Jubilee of its formation:

"A special meeting for prayer was held . . . when twenty of the brethren prayed. The service continued about two hours and a half. We sang short between every

prayer. This for unction, fervour, and heartfelt joy, exceeded all we ever before experienced; every heart seemed to vibrate 'truly God is in this place.'

Or again, Stoke Ash reported in 1860 :

"We have held prayer meetings in most, if not all of the villages in the winter, and they are still continued in some of them, one or two nights in the week, in others three or four, and in one village for several months they were held every evening except Saturday. These gatherings have generally been good, and we have found them times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord."

A second outstanding mark, both of this period of spiritual awakening and of that which immediately preceded it, was the honesty of the churches in regard to their condition. The veil was off their faces, and they saw their spiritual life as it was. There was no attempt to belittle the work of grace that was apparent, nor was there any desire to gloss over the ugly side. Indeed there was at times a terrible frankness. What, for instance, could be more outspoken than this short report from Bungay in 1854 :

"We regret to report the decrease and declension of this Church: the things that remain are ready to die."

Fortunately this Church shared in the rising tide of religious fervour and came again to prosperity. That was an extreme instance, but in all the churches there was searching of heart. In 1860 Beccles wrote :

"We have seldom if ever enjoyed a year of so much harmony, peace and love."

But Fressingfield in 1862 reported :

"Satan has been permitted to make inroads: differences, shyness, and want of brotherly love exist. One village station is thoroughly broken up."

This same frankness appeared in the letter from Great Yarmouth, Salem Chapel, in 1864 :

"The brethren in this ancient town express their regret that the preached word has not during the year been productive of the fruits of the Spirit in the conversion of sinners."

In that year, however, nearly all the churches reported great blessing, and the letter from Wattisham was far more characteristic of what was happening throughout the counties.

"For some few years past, a revival has been evident among the people here, and the present is characterized by hopeful signs of the continuance of the Divine Favour."

A third evidence of the working of the Spirit, not so clearly marked as the others, was seen in a wholesome re-action to the unpleasant experiences of Church life. Here are two reports made in that great year of 1864. The first, sent from Hadleigh, read :

"Our condition may be compared to a vessel at sea, sailing for a short time with a fair wind, but a few clouds gathering, which at first did not appear of much consequence, gradually a storm came on, and our little bark appeared in great distress. We, however, escaped with the loss of some of our crew."

The second was from Pulham St. Mary, which had been

"visited by many painful afflictions, which are acknowledged by the brethren to have proved salutary dispensations, all working for their good."

The working of God's Spirit was recognized in the midst of His people, so that they realised that "all things work together for good to them that love God."

There is no doubt that this spiritual awakening was in part the result of the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, for since then the sense of the responsibility of the Church for the unconverted had greatly increased, but this revival was not only the harvest of that spiritual sowing, it provided seed-corn for yet more sowing and a greater harvest, and its most important result was a renewed interest in missionary enterprise both at home and abroad.

In a resolution of the Association concerning the Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, the several churches were, in 1859,

"urged by their respective representatives to renew their efforts to augment the funds of the society, by public collection, at the earliest practicable period, and to promote a more general co-operation for the furtherance of objects, the accomplishment of which is believed to be the special mission of the Church of Christ, and a sacred obligation devolving upon every branch thereof."

In 1862, the need of the German Mission under the superintendence of brother Oncken, of Hamburg, was stressed. The American War had made the financial position difficult, and the Associated Churches were urged to raise enough for one missionary, at least, and, if possible, two,

"that the gospel of the grace of God may be sent into the benighted regions of Northern Europe."

This interest in the German Mission continued for a number of years. In 1866 Pastor Oncken spoke at the Annual Meetings,

and the Association appointed two of its members to go to Hamburg and see the work for themselves.

The work of the Home Missionary Society also claimed a great deal of thought and prayer. This society, founded in 1831 for Suffolk and Norfolk, had, in these years of quickened interest, extended its work to the counties of Cambridge and Huntingdon, and year after year its claims were put before the Associated Churches. This was their resolution of 1860 :

“ It being the imperative duty of every redeemed vessel of mercy to be devoted in all things to the service of the Lord ; and especially to use every means for the furtherance of the Gospel, the churches are urgently requested to give their prayerful and liberal support to the Home Missionary Society that the designs of this valuable society may be efficiently carried out, and its operations extended throughout the several counties for whose spiritual benefit it was formed.”

The most outstanding fact of this evangelistic spirit was the work of individual churches. Some of the smallest of them had regular preaching in the surrounding villages with well-attended services in cottage-homes and open air, so that the truth of God was everywhere spread abroad. Take, for example, the little Church at Hoxne. This Church was so small that the Association hesitated to receive it into membership. Its first application in 1845 was turned down and it was not received until 1859. Still the Association felt doubtful, and in 1862 told them bluntly that it would be better for so small a company to join some other Church. The Hoxne friends thought otherwise, and two years later reported that they had raised £100 toward the erection of a new chapel. The following year they reported its completion and debt reduced to £160. From that time, under the gracious influence of the Spirit, they prospered, and within a few years their reports spoke of five or six villages in which they held regular preaching services. The same spirit pervaded nearly all the churches, and large and small alike were enabled to bear a wonderful witness to the saving power of God.

One other result of this spiritual awakening, and possibly the most impressive was the amazing attendances at the Annual Association Meetings. The attendances rose from hundreds to thousands. The large tent, pitched in some field or park near the village chapel was crowded to overflowing. One year 2,000 were present, another 2,500, and another 3,000, until in 1870 at Occold it was estimated that 3,500 persons were within and without the tent, “ so mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.”

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