

## Baptist Beginnings in the West Riding.

THE local Church history of the West Riding of Yorkshire gives ample confirmation of the truth of the general statement that in seventeenth century England, Episcopacy was merely the formal state expression of religion, while Puritanism was its ruling force. Many of the clergy themselves refused to comply with the Book of Common Prayer. Robert Moore, Rector of Guiseley, near Rawdon, for over half a century, was notorious for his nonconformity, and is generally designated in the records as "Old Liberty Moore." Time after time he was summoned for disobedience before the High Commission at York, but although always condemned and threatened, he never was imprisoned or deposed, so high was his character and so strong his position in general regard. Although he publicly declared that the Archbishop of York "could not preach and was a doting fool" the Court dared not touch him. In 1601 he built the Rectory which is still in use, a beautiful specimen of Tudor architecture; and a Latin inscription over the doorway declares: "The House of a faithful Pastor, not a blind guide, and not a robber; Robert More was Rector of this Church and founder of this house. Woe unto the sacrilegious man. Woe unto the enemies of Levi. A.D. 1601."

Some fifteen years ago, when excavations were made in the Rectory grounds, there was unearthed a large stone trough, which the present incumbent, Canon Howson, frankly acknowledges must have been used as an open-air baptistery for adults—suggesting that our Baptist practices were not unknown even within the Episcopal fold. One of Moore's successors shrewdly "conformed" in 1662, but the puritan lord of the manor of Rawdon substantiated his claim to be the legal patron of the benefice of Rawdon, and secured its detachment from the parish of Guiseley, in which it had up till then been embraced.

The movement generally designated "Congregational," including Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists, was widespread and influential in Yorkshire from Cromwell's time. Among the ejected clergy in 1662, no fewer than twenty-one belonged to

the Leeds district, and sixteen in and around Bradford, a remarkable number when it is remembered that these towns at that time had populations of only about nine thousand and six thousand respectively. The Five Mile Act of 1666 drove them from their ministerial homes and hounded them from one locality to another. The parish Churches and subordinate Chapels were mostly deserted, and efficient preachers could not be found—even readers of printed homilies were scarce. One ejected clergyman, who had been a Rector in Nottingham, was a native of Rawdon, Samuel Cotes, and he came to reside with his father, Christopher Cotes, at "Crow Trees," a large house within sight of the famous "Buckstone Rock," refuge and sanctuary of harassed conventiclers. In 1672, he was registered as a licensed Presbyterian preacher, and held services in meeting houses throughout the district.

Independents, too, were numerous and active. Oliver Heywood, ejected from Coley in Lancashire, and whose "Life" was written by our Baptist Dr. Fawcett, was an ardent and eloquent evangelist over a wide area, and frequently preached in and around Rawdon. Several of his licensed meeting places were among the most important residences in the parish and are still extant: Rawdon Hall (home of the Lord of the Manor), Crow Trees, Ivy House (for which, in 1672, Josiah Collier, relative of the famous Jeremy Collier, obtained a license, and which later became a home for Quakers), and Rawdon Low Hall, whose owner, a substantial yeoman, John Hardaker, seems to have been the chief support and encourager of the brethren who, in 1712, built the first Dissenting Chapel in the Wood. For, when in 1672, the "Indulgence" was withdrawn, and services in these houses were no longer protected, it was in the large cave under Buckstone Rock, within John Hardaker's estate, which, sheltered by a "lean-to roof," he used as a cowshed, that the Conventicles were continued. Here large congregations met, and tradition says that watchers used to be posted on the heights above to give warning of the approach of constables armed with powers of arrest.

And now the circle must be more narrowly drawn, to describe the beginnings of the Baptist cause in the West Riding. There is some slight evidence that, as early as 1655, a Baptist church existed in Bradford, but it seems to have died out, and to have had no connection with the churches formed by William Mitchell a generation later. The first meeting place at Rawdon was built in 1712, but the church was not formally constituted till 1715, when a minister was ordained, and when written records began to be kept. This old Church Book has been well preserved, and indeed is still regularly used, not as

during the first 150 years for periodic entries describing the successive pastorates and the changing circumstances, but for the signatures of all who are baptised and added to the Church. The earliest entry in this Book traces the origin of the Church to the "ministry of several of Christ's ambassadors, who were providentially cast among us in these parts, especially William Mitchell. We stayed for some time, not being joined to any particular church, nor having submitted to the public ordinances of the Gospel, for which reason (we suppose) we would have been reproachfully called Antinomians—but far from deserving that character, the Lord further opened our eyes, and explained to us His mind and will revealed in His Word, particularly in the matter of positive worship—we cordially embraced and submitted to the same, being baptised upon profession of our faith and the manifest token of saving Conversion—and thereupon added to a people of the same principle and practise in Lancashire—there being no nearer that we then knew of, with whom we could conscientiously sit down. And we not being (as we then thought) a competent number to be set down of ourselves—but the Lord, having still more work to do in this country, had by His good Providence directed the above named W. Mitchell to make his abode among us in these parts, where he spent his ministerial labours till his last breath, till it pleased the Lord of the Harvest to order that faithful labourer from this Lower to His Upper House, which (though it was gain to him) was a smarting stroke to us, for in him we lost a minister, orthodox in his principles, pious in his life, indefatigable in his labours. And though that people in Lancashire (Rossendale) to whom we belonged was obliged by virtue of their relation to us, to take some care of us, which they did, so far as their circumstances would allow of, or we reasonably expect, considering their distance from us—and yet it came far short of what our necessity required—and after asking counsel and direction from the Lord, we thought it advisable that our Church relation with them should be removed, and we in Yorkshire orderly dismissed from them and set down as a particular congregated Church, so be we could find out a person competently qualified and cordially willing to take pastoral charge of us, after much enquiry, at last John Wilson came by way of trial for a considerable time. He was dismissed from a people in Furness, set down among us as a member and ordained on August 31st, 1715."

The most considerable personality, then, in the early days was this man of Apostolic zeal, William Mitchell. Converted in 1681, when nineteen, he only then began to learn to read while working at the loom, but three years later he was itinerating as a free lance evangelist, without license until the passing of the

Toleration Act in 1689. Haywood says he belonged to the Free Grace movement, and Crosley describes him as setting forth "the exceeding rich and free grace of the Gospel," while crowds from all parts flocked to hear him in the fields and woods—many out of curiosity and some to scoff,—but, powerful impressions were produced by his simple, sincere and fervent utterances, notwithstanding a certain "unpolished temper and harsh delivery." His religious experiences read like pages from Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*. He was long under deep conviction of sin, and for several years was seldom seen to laugh. Twice he was arrested, and once confined in York Castle, and only released a few days before the Liberty granted by King James was proclaimed. He and his cousin, David Crosley, seven years younger, a working stone mason, both belonging to Heptonstall, near Hebden Bridge, covered a preaching circuit of forty miles, with twenty meeting places and they lodged in about two hundred homes of their hearers. Bacup in Rossendale was an important centre of their labours, and there a Chapel was built for their special use. For some years they were simply evangelists, regardless of Church order or sacraments. Baptist principles and practice do not appear till 1692, when David Crosley, during a preaching tour in the Midlands, embraced the views of the Particular Baptists there, and on his return to the North won over his cousin, whereupon they both advocated the new discipline for the Rossendale Church and its branches. The change was accepted only gradually, but it is fairly certain that the Rawdon group was wholly Baptist before the erection of the first Chapel in 1712, and that they immersed their converts in the river Aire at Apperley Bridge.

David Crosley was a man of strong emotions, possessed of very considerable preaching gifts, but his character was erratic, and his behaviour frequently scandalous, leading to stern discipline and sometimes to excommunication. After his cousin's death, he published in 1707 a posthumous pamphlet by Mitchell—entitled "Jachin and Boaz," a compendium of doctrine, the rigid hypercalvinism of which is hard to reconcile with his fervid free grace evangelism. (It has been reprinted in the third volume of our *Transactions* by the kindness of Principal Blomfield.) The section on Free Will, incorporated from Charnock, subtly but unsuccessfully attempts to correlate that doctrine with Mitchell's high and dry Predestinarianism. The pamphlet enunciates a very strict conception of Church, Ministry and Sacraments—Order and Discipline being dealt with in no fewer than thirty-nine paragraphs. References to Teaching Elders suggest Presbyterian influences. "Where there are no teaching officers, none may administer the Sacraments, nor can the Church authorize any

transiently to do so." A modified Connexionalism is urged—Synods and Councils to deal with difficulties as to doctrine or Administration, but only for advice, not with power of jurisdiction over the several Churches.

Another Baptist pioneer of the West Riding deserves brief mention, John Moore, a convert of Mitchell's, who became to his leader what Timothy was to Paul, a colleague of most gracious disposition and abundant labours. In 1689, we find him acting as shepherd of Mitchell's flock in Rawdon, until in 1698 he removed to Bromsgrove, where Crosley had been baptized. Two years later he was ordained the first minister of a Church in Northampton, which subsequently became the important College Street Baptist Church. In 1711, Moore published a volume of sermons, *God's Matchless Love to a Sinful World*. These sermons are of very great length and show extraordinary power of analysis and allegorical interpretation—one having no fewer than ninety-five divisions and sub-divisions. They are admirable in spirit and sentiment.

By way of review the following points may be noted.

(1) There were baptized believers in the West Riding before the end of the seventeenth century, but apparently the distinctive rite was not made prominent in a sectarian way at the beginning. In the original Rawdon Trust Deed of date 1712, the term Baptist is not used, but "Protestant Dissenters from the Church of England, yet owning a Christian and sincere belief in the doctrinal part of the Thirty-nine Articles of the said Church, and usually known under the definition of the Congregational persuasion." Also, John Moore had no hesitation in taking the oversight of the Northampton Church, which was not strict but open on the question of membership.

(2) The Baptist cause here did not originate as a mere peasant or illiterate movement. Probably as in Corinth, there were "not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble," but there were *some*. Men of substance and public spirit, squires and landowners in the neighbourhood were at least sympathisers—and the Trustees in the earliest Deed were: two Yeomen (probably well-to-do farmers), one Batchelor (a subordinate degree of Knighthood), one Physician, and one Clothier (probably a weaver of cloth), and their well-formed signatures to the Deed suggest men of character and facility in penmanship. And the earliest records in the Old Church Book are admirably expressed in a beautifully artistic calligraphy. Some of the leaders of the Baptist cause were also pioneers in establishing the first public school in Rawdon.

(3) The terms Dissenter, Independent, Nonconformist are misleading if they are taken to convey a merely negative attitude,

as if the chief concern was to repudiate interference from without, and to refuse obedience to all authority. Behind the protest against certain forms of Order and Ritual there lay a positive testimony to the loftiest spiritual realities—an intense earnestness for scriptural and intelligent faith, and a passion for political liberty—not for anarchy and license, but for the building up of a better social order. And the spirit of toleration—of recognising the good in other Communion, was not lacking. In a local Church “Circular letter” of these early days there occurs the following: “Let not people indulge the narrowness of their minds, nor their rash and uncharitable censures of Christians of different denominations, perhaps wiser and better men than themselves.”

(4) Finally, there was a deep concern about the religious condition of the nation, and a conviction that the widespread degeneracy was largely attributable to the failure of Christian people to live up to their profession and privileges. Here is part of a letter issued from the Rawdon Church about 1720. “Nothing is more evident than that the vitals of Christianity in these our days are diminisht and grown small. Genuine religion is wearing out of the world, and many families whose fathers were pious, are grown prophane; and the rising generation are weary of Religion and a Church state. And even too many of the saints themselves make but an indifferent figure: some are ignorant, some negligent, some impudent, some contentious, some censorious, and even many that we hope well of, are in the main so degenerate and indifferent, and so like the men of this world, ’tis hard to distinguish ’em. God may have golden designs and gracious reserves tack’t onto the backside of these clouds. But it is clear that judgment must begin or end at the House of God. Storms make men prize their harbour, and they that neglect to mend their ship whilst in it, may see and lament their fault when too late any other way, than by becoming warnings to others who would take no warnings themselves. Build on the Rock. Learn to look with your own eyes. Get Faith. No reformation’s good but what reduces things to their first beginnings. Commend yourselves to God in well doing, as those that would have room in a royal breast, and a secret chamber till a stormy day be done!

DAVID GLASS.