

“The Baptists of London.”

By W. T. Whitley, M.A., LL.D.¹

IN this book Dr. Whitley has made a valuable addition to the historical library he is building up for the Baptist Denomination. It represents long and painstaking research and furnishes a store-house of information which will be invaluable, not only to the student, but to the practical worker. The facts of the past which Dr. Whitley brings out enable one to view with a new understanding the problems of to-day.

Dr. Whitley does not attempt to tell the London Baptist story continuously, but he selects epochs during the past 300 years, taking as key-years 1641, 1691, 1741 and 1841, and giving pictures of Baptist life at these dates in relation to current London conditions. A very helpful feature of the book is its linking up of Baptist with general history, showing how denominational progress has been affected by events in the life of England, and especially of the capital.

In the chapter of beginnings, we are carried back to the early 17th century when the few little Baptist churches had no chapels of their own. We see them meeting in private houses or in warehouses. As they grew stronger, they would look out for better premises—a derelict mansion or play-house; or they would hire a school or a city company's hall for Sunday services. Not till the end of the century did the churches really begin to erect buildings specially for worship.

It is interesting to note that when chapels became usual, for some time they had no baptisteries attached to them. Dr. Whitley tells how for many years baptisms were carried out in the Thames or its tributaries, and describes parties being taken up stream in wherries to the quiet banks of Lambeth and Battersea. Then the churches put up a building here and there to which they could resort for the ordinance. The first of these seems to have been at Horsley Down, in South London, “and satirical writers spoke of the tub of salvation, up Dipping Alley.” It was as late as 1784 that “the aristocratic West End church at Eagle Street” led the way in providing a baptistery on its own premises.

The upgrowth of our services is traced, with a special reference to the hymn-singing controversy. The propriety of using hymns in worship was hotly debated, causing a pamphlet

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war and even the splitting of churches.

The officers of a church, Dr. Whitley points out, were always of two kinds, corresponding to the modern pastor and deacon. There was at first, however, a tendency to have two pastors—possibly owing to the fact that the chief pastor might be often away, in prison or in exile, and it was desired to have one ready to take his place. These early pastors were usually men who supported themselves in other ways—school-masters, tailors, shoemakers, silk-weavers, butchers. Gradually the need of fuller teaching than such men could give led to a desire for ministers specially trained for their holy calling.

The development of “Co-operative Life” forms the theme of a valuable chapter. The writer shows how from the beginning Baptists have tried to maintain fraternal relations between churches. “In 1644 the seven London Particular Baptist churches issued a joint confession.” By 1677 they were holding regular meetings. In 1691, two years after the accession of William and Mary and the passing of the Toleration Act, they re-organised themselves, and in that early fellowship it is interesting to find included—in the city, Devonshire Square; across the river, Horsleydown and Maze Pond; in Surrey, Richmond; in Middlesex, Turnham Green; in Essex, two churches near Harlow; and in Herts., a church meeting in the old palace of Theobalds. The General Baptists also had their association.

After the defeat of the Stuarts in 1715, a stir took place in Dissent, and some of the Baptist leaders formed the Particular Baptist Fund, with a view of helping brethren in the country; this being followed by a second Baptist Fund, for the training of young ministers in study, as well as for the supply of cash or books to older men. About this time London ministers drew together in the Fraternal, which was to become known as “The Baptist Board.” It is clear, however, that at this time the London churches, like others throughout the land, lacked spiritual enthusiasm.

Then Whitefield arose, to achieve with Wesley the wonders of the Evangelical Revival. Much of Whitefield’s work was in London. How far did it influence the Baptist churches? “Strange to say,” writes our historian, “the London Baptist churches seem to have been less touched by his influence than the colonies of Georgia, Virginia, Pennsylvania and New England.” Still they were not wholly insensible to this spiritual movement, and we hear of twelve of our churches in 1748 resolving to resume monthly meetings, which had been dropped, for prayer and the preaching of the Word.

One significant cause of the weakness and slow progress of the London Baptists at this time evidently lay in the inadequacy of their ministry. Dr. Whitley even alleges “that they had on the

whole been a drag on the denomination; many were illiterate, many had to be expelled for immorality, most were terribly conservative." There were of course shining exceptions, but taking the rank and file it is clear that a new standard of ministry was urgently demanded, and out of this demand arose the London Baptist Education Society, and ultimately Stepney Academy, in later years Regent's Park College.

Another event which told deeply on London Baptists, though at first they gave it scanty welcome, was the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society. At first this was a country movement, with Carey, of Leicester, and Fuller, of Kettering, at its head, but gradually the appeal of the mission told, and London opened its heart to the new enterprise, becoming its headquarters and receiving from it a new spiritual incentive.

When we approach the modern era Dr. Whitley's guidance is full of light. He shows how with the growth of London, closer organisation was felt to be a necessity in civic as well as in spiritual affairs. He quotes Sir Lawrence Gomme, who pointed out that by 1862 London had expanded "from one square mile to 120 in the county." As a consequence old arrangements were breaking down; new systems of control were needed; and soon the School Board and the County Council were created to unify effort. In the Baptist realm the same need was felt. Churches were being multiplied; yet others were needed in new suburbs; but there was no common mind. At this time there was no association; the last of the earlier ones had been dissolved in the despondent time of the Crimean War and Indian Mutiny. Who would start a new and greater one?

The impulse came in 1865 from C. H. Spurgeon, then in the heyday of his great ministry. In visiting Yorkshire, as Dr. Whitley tells us, he had been struck with the chapel-building policy of the Association there, and on returning took counsel with Dr. Brock and Dr. Landels, with the result that on November 10th, 1865, the London Baptist Association, as we know it, was formed—though as Dr. Whitley says, it might be called "the eleventh" L.B.A. The unfolding of the Association and its work during the past sixty-three years are not traced by Dr. Whitley. Many will regret this, as there is a story well worth the telling, and the "Baptists of London" have reached a strength and influence in modern times such as they never touched, or even approached, in the earlier centuries. However, Dr. Whitley had to define the scope of his book, and the limits he has set to it leave room for another volume which it may be hoped he will some day produce.

After describing the origin of the London Baptist Association, Dr. Whitley goes on to tell of the Metropolitan Association of Strict Baptist Churches, the Home Counties Association, the

Gospel Standard Societies, the Old Baptist Union, and the London Property Board; a further paragraph being also given to the Baptist Board in its later and wider fellowship. At this point Dr. Whitley indicates what he feels to be a missing element in our present-day equipment. He finds no such “Social Union” among us as he sees at work across the Atlantic. We have the Church House and the Mission House, but Dr. Whitley suggests the need of “a Milton Club,” where town members might spend their leisure and country members find a bed. Perhaps the historian’s suggestion may lead to the expression of a demand for such a social centre.

The tour de force of the book, however, remains to be named. This is the Chronological List of the Baptist Churches in London, with their homes, and successive pastors. About 856 churches founded since 1612 are catalogued here, of which some 440 have ceased to exist as separate entities. This list must have involved immense research, and its interest and value are beyond estimate. It will be a standard for reference in all coming years.

Another fine feature is the Topographical List of present churches, classified according to Boroughs and Urban Districts, and indicating the Associations and Groups to which the churches belong, as well as the Missionary Societies to which they subscribe. This list is full and carefully drawn up, though there will no doubt be here and there a correction for future editions. For example, in the Camberwell Borough list, one of the largest London churches—Rye Lane, Peckham—is omitted. The book closes with a Street Index “to every place in the whole area . . . where Baptist worship is or has been conducted.”

As the above review will have shown, Dr. Whitley has produced a work of singular importance, not only brimming with historical interest, but charged with practical guidance for to-day. We see in these pages the mistakes which have caused trouble in the past—beacon-lights for to-day; and in the survey of present-day London with its imperfect Baptist provision, we detect the weak points in our armour now. Dr. Whitley turns his searchlight on a central “City of London” from which, as he says, “the Baptists have fled”; on “nearer” Boroughs in which Baptists are but a handful; and on outlying districts, opened up by tube, tram or ’bus, in which we need at once to plant churches.

These problems are not new to us, but they are brought out in this book with figures and facts which give them a new and vivid reality. Above all, Dr. Whitley places the present opportunity in London in historical perspective, and in his pages one may believe that many a London Baptist will hear the challenge, “Who knoweth whether thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

JOHN W. EWING.