

The Influence of Whitefield on Baptists.

GEORGE WHITEFIELD'S field-preaching extended from 1737 to 1770. What he did for the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, the Calvinistic Methodists of Wales, aristocratic circles influenced by the Countess of Huntingdon, is well known; the New Light in America was carried broadcast by him. It is worth while studying, from Tyerman's biography, how Baptists profited. And 1737 happens to be not far from the zero line: to put it another way, Baptists (like all others) were steadily shrinking and dying till this new force appeared.

The first contact was when Whitefield, at the age of twenty-three, was going out to his missionary work in the new colony of Georgia. As he was becalmed off Deal, he went ashore and preached at a private house. The Elder of the General Baptist church came to see him, but was challenged as to his "taking the ministerial function without being called." They did agree, however, as to the need of regeneration. No result can be traced; the annals of the Deal church are blank from 1727 till James Fenn helped found the new Connexion in 1770, by which time Whitefield had found light on calling to the ministry. Yet there was a John Doble who went out in the same convoy, who became master of a school at Highgate: it would be interesting to trace if he were related to the Dobels who were Baptist leaders round Cranbrook from 1736.

At Badsey, near Evesham, there lived a family named Seward. Henry, the eldest, married a Baptist wife, and this led to the strengthening of the Baptists near, so that in 1732 they built a meeting-house at Bengeworth. William was a churchman, who after good work at charity schools in London had met some of the earliest Methodists and had been converted. Early in 1739 he was at a conference in Islington where he met Whitefield, and in February he joined him on a preaching tour. A third brother, Benjamin, had also been won by Charles Wesley, to the rage of Henry. When Benjamin fell ill at home, Henry tried to isolate him from his Methodist friends, and actually wrung the nose of Charles Wesley who came to call. But William took Whitefield to see Henry, who offered him the use of his yard for preaching,

as the clergy would not lend their churches. For three days the young evangelist preached in this village, as well as in Evesham street and town hall. He returned in July and preached again in the same way, then with 120 friends rode to Pershore, but there the church was put at his disposal before the cavalcade rode on to Tewkesbury, singing all the way. He does not mention Baptists in these places. Mrs. Seward is well known as a great supporter of Baptists in Worcestershire; and in 1754 bequeathed £3,600 to continue work in the district.

In June, 1739, Whitefield was asked to come and preach at Hertford. The Baptist minister sent a horse to London that he might ride down. This would appear to be Jonas Thurrowgood, who lived at Bendish, and who in 1736 had registered a Baptist meeting-house on Castle Street, Hertford. He preached three times in the open air, to thousands of people; then went to Hatfield Broad Oak in Essex, where Baptists had had a little meeting from 1672; but while he preached at Saffron Walden, Thaxted and Bishops Stortford, and William Seward seems to have been with him, there is no mention of direct influence.

Seward was not the only wealthy man who linked old Baptists with new Methodists. The Blackwells of London used to entertain the Baptist ministers every week, and Ebenezer this year became a steady supporter of Whitefield. The evangelist wrote to him from Cirencester that same June; he had been preaching in a field to about 3,000 people, and the Baptists afterwards brought him five guineas for his new Orphan House in Georgia. Next month he preached in Tetbury to some 4,000 people; many of divers denominations came to meet him, and he visited Mr. O., the Baptist teacher, before riding on to preach in the evening at Malmesbury: this gives a pleasant glimpse of Nathaniel Overbury, a relation of Mrs. Seward's minister at Alcester.

In that same July he was preaching to thousands around London on Hackney Marsh, Kennington Common and Moor Fields: one amazed beholder measured up that a Sunday congregation covered 2,827 square yards, standing close; and an editor allowed, with bad arithmetic, that there might have been 11,338 persons. Yet no allusion to such events seem made by Baptists, though they had seven churches within half a mile: nor is there any evidence that they went and did likewise. Of them all, only two are known except to the antiquarian; Brine had no gospel for the unconverted, James Foster gave his magnificent thought and oratory to stemming fashionable infidelity.

If London was thus stagnant, Philadelphia was the same.

A Presbyterian minister wrote, "Religion, as it were, lay a dying, and ready to expire its last breathe of life in this part of the visible church." Baptists had a brick building, from which they had bought out the episcopalians. Whitefield rode thither four months later, 150 miles of rough country from Lewis Town, went to church Sunday morning, 4th November, preached in the afternoon, went to Quakers' meeting at night, preached again on Monday, was called on by the Presbyterian minister, called on the Baptist, spent the evening with two loving Quakers, preached again on Tuesday, spoke at a Quaker funeral, entertained the Presbyterian and Baptist ministers in the evening. On a tour next year he went to hear "Mr. Jones the Baptist minister, who preached the truth as it is in Jesus." And when the Presbyterian Synod met there in May, 1740, the Baptist meeting took an honourable part in a great revival due to Whitefield. The minister was Jenkins Jones, who had migrated from Llanfair Nant in Pembroke, and was in charge not only of Philadelphia but of the older church at Pennepek. There had been an Association since 1707, but this revival quickened it. It drew up a Confession, for hitherto there had been great variety of teaching, endorsed it as standard, and sent out missionaries to rally old churches and plant new ones. The influence of this Association from 1742 all along the Atlantic was great; and the impulse was Whitefield's.

Even more friendly relations were established southwards. At Charleston he went to the Baptist meeting and preached. The church was in extreme low water, owing to a General Baptist church having been recently planted at Stono, which had appealed home for a minister, and had just received Haywood: Whitefield revived the original church and spoke well of its minister, apparently Thomas Simmons, but possibly William Peart. William Tilley, from Salisbury, had been ordained here for home mission work, and was down in Savannah in 1740. There Whitefield met him, on one of his rare visits to his own parish, and twice invited the Baptist to preach in the church. So far as Tilley had a home, it was on Edisto Island, where a meeting-house had recently been built; his church built a new one at Euhaw in 1751, which was opened by Whitefield. At Ashley River there was another church, branched off in 1736, with Isaac Chanler as its pastor, a Bristol man. Whitefield visited him also, and in a letter home testified "there are some faithful ministers among the Baptists."

At Boston, two months later, he found things very different. The population of New England was dense, for America; and a revival was already proceeding. But the Baptist church had just called a Harvard graduate, who was quite opposed to

enthusiasm. After the converts of the revival had vainly sought to move the church, they founded a second in 1743, and even then found most of the former churches too prejudiced to countenance them. Whitefield was in close touch with Jonathan Edwards, but there is no evidence of any direct contact with Baptists here.

His proceedings had brought about an official condemnation from the Episcopal authorities, and this took him back to England in 1741. He paid several more visits to the colonies, which are not detailed at length, and it may be convenient to sum up the American results of his influence on Baptists.

In Georgia, Whitefield had built an Orphan House, which was also an academy, and was intended to be a university; its erection, maintenance, chartering and endowment were a main object of his life. From Thornbury in Gloucestershire he took over in 1751 Nicholas Bedgewood to be his agent there. Bedgewood became Baptist, was baptized by Oliver Hart at Charleston, and was ordained in 1759. From the Orphan House itself he baptized many, both staff and inmates, rather to the chagrin of Whitefield. One of his converts, Benjamin Stirk, planted a church at Tuckaseeking. And from these beginnings arose the great community in Georgia, which to-day is more numerous than all the Baptists of England.

Whitefield's journeys in the South and Middle provinces resulted largely in stiffening the existing churches, and quickening them to home mission work. For example, New York had known occasional ministrations from a General Baptist church in Connecticut, then a branch headed by a brewer from Wiltshire, which had disbanded in 1732. But the old church at Piscataway, New Jersey, was stirred to plant another at Scotch Plains, which in its turn planted one in New York city. It was the same group which in 1756 founded the first Baptist academy, and from Scotch Plains went James Manning in 1764 to Rhode Island, where he became head of the chartered college; Whitefield's friend Benjamin Franklin subscribed to it, and the first class was graduated before the great evangelist died.

In New England the old churches were too conservative, and many of them too General, to be influenced directly. What happened was the origination of many new separate churches: and the story of Backus is typical. He was converted in Connecticut in the Whitefield revival of 1741, and four years later he, with others, united in a new church. In 1748 he moved to Middleborough and organized a Separate church of which he was ordained pastor. The Halfway Covenant was now recognized as inevitably swamping a church in the second generation with unregenerate men, and in 1756 he took the

final step of organizing a Baptist church. Scores of such cases occurred.

Once more. Whitefield died at Newbury Port on 30 September, 1770. The news converted a young man who had heard him two days earlier; Benjamin Randall. He took up the mantle that fell from the ascended saint, became a great itinerant evangelist, and began a new movement which spread over New England and into Canada. His churches were all Baptist, but they were Free-Will Baptist, and it is only within living memory that the barriers were taken down. One of their leaders is to-day Associate Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance.

We may now return with Whitefield in 1742 to England, to note his influence in Britain. His friend Seward was murdered at Hay for field-preaching, and we do not observe any further effect in the Evesham district. But at Minchinhampton there were similar risks, in which the mob coupled Whitefield with the Baptists—well-known at Shortwood since 1715. Whitefield indicted the ringleaders, who were found guilty and had to pay damages. The incident gave renewed courage to the evangelists near. Long before this happy issue, Whitefield had challenged the rioters at Wednesbury, and then went for a rest to Bromsgrove. Here he was welcomed by two or three Baptist ministers, and after field-preaching in the afternoon, preached in the Baptist meeting at six o'clock. This sort of riot was everywhere: in 1744 F. Pugh was threatened with a drawn sword at Braintree in Essex.

Another of Whitefield's friends, John Cennick, toured Devon that year. At Wellington he used a Presbyterian meeting, and had Baptist hearers; at Kingsbridge he used the Baptist meeting; at Plymouth his converts borrowed the Baptist meeting for singing almost every night. At Bristol, Thomas Olivers was converted by him, and his first Sunday he spent, at six in the cathedral, at eight hearing Whitefield, at ten in Christchurch, at two church again, at five Whitefield again, and in the evening the Baptist meeting.

In London, Whitefield's admirers had built him a wooden structure at Moorfields: "I have called it a Tabernacle, because perhaps we may be called to move our tents." He never needed to take it down and shift it, though when it grew old a larger building was put up all round it, and it was then demolished. But the name became popular, irrespective of a building being of wood, and portable; wherever a Tabernacle arose, the Surrey or the Metropolitan, we can trace the Whitefield tradition. To this Tabernacle in 1752 came a hair-dresser's apprentice, originally to jeer; but he came back again and again,

and after three years was converted. He went to Norwich in 1758 and began preaching, when for the first time he wrote to Whitefield. There was some question of his coming back to supply for the great preacher, but he went to Cambridge instead. The building up of an insignificant congregation there by Robert Robinson was due to Whitefield.

Riots in Cork excited the evangelist's indignation, and as the juries would not convict, he sought executive interference. The channel he chose was Andrew Gifford, Baptist pastor at Eagle Street, a man out of favour with other London ministers, but well known to the Speaker, the Lord Chancellor, the Archbishop and other people of rank. Their friendship deepened, and Whitefield got his introduction into similar circles, so that quite a new turn was given to his own activities, and he became a chaplain to the Countess of Huntingdon.

Whitefield went over to Dublin, and one result of his labours was that the moribund Baptist church was greatly reinforced and quickened to new activity. He toured in Yorkshire; one Sunday at Bradford he preached in the morning to 10,000 people. In that vast assembly was a lad of sixteen, John Fawcett, who trudged over to Birstal where twice the number stood on the hill slopes to listen to the preacher again on a platform at the foot. When the service ended, and hundreds rode away to Leeds, singing all the way, they left a lad behind destined to lead the Baptists of two counties for fifty years, inspired by that day's work.

Twelve years had passed since David Crosley, the evangelist of that district, had interchanged letters with Whitefield; the stone-cutter, the ale-drawer, the shop-boy, were in one great missionary succession. And Fawcett had a partner, another disciple, of a very different kind.

Whitefield was now realizing the importance of steady work among the aristocracy, as well as field-preaching to the masses. Andrew Gifford had led the way in his suburban meeting-house on Eagle Street. Whitefield copied him, and leased from General Fitzroy some land half a mile further west, in open fields, on a road leading to the pleasure gardens at Tottenham Court. When the stone was laid in 1756, Gifford came to show his friendship. Three years later, a young naval officer recovering from a wound was staying with his learned grandfather, a deacon with Gifford; his father had been librarian at Montague House, soon to become the British Museum, where Gifford was sub-librarian. Under the ministrations of Whitefield and Gifford, he was converted; after conducting schools in the neighbourhood and at Watford, he went to Liverpool as pastor. Thus were brought together two converts,

Samuel Medley and John Fawcett, of most complementary character, who between them greatly developed the Yorks. and Lancs. Association.

On another tour, Whitefield preached from Bunyan's pulpit, and later on he wrote a preface for the third edition of that other field-preacher's works, highly appreciating his catholic spirit; for lack of this, Baptists had held aloof from Bunyan, as Episcopalians from Whitefield. "All the world is my parish" said the latter, and was echoed by Wesley, "I will preach wherever God gives me an opportunity." This was in one of Whitefield's latest sermons.

Those sermons were taken down in shorthand by a Baptist, and after Whitefield's death were prepared for the press by Gifford. Another London minister preached a memorial sermon, while from Bromsgrove John Fellows published an Elegy.

And once more, in England as in America. His friend, Benjamin Ingham, had converted David Taylor, a servant of the Countess of Huntingdon. Whitefield encouraged him to preach, and he did excellent work in the midlands and on the Pennines. He also inspired others as early as 1745, who had a milder theology, and did fine work in Derby, Leicester, and Nottingham shires; they found their way to the Baptist position; and in the year Whitefield died, they organized the New Connexion of Free-Grace General Baptists. Their leader, Dan Taylor of Yorkshire, had, at the age of fifteen, been accustomed to trudge twenty or even thirty miles to hear Whitefield or the Wesleys. We may ask what the Baptist world would have been without the Separate churches in America, the Free-willers of New England, the New Connexion of old England. Whitefield's life yields interesting anecdotes of personal intercourse; his example and inspiration re-kindled many flagging churches; but it is hardly too much to say that three new streams sprang forth where he smote the rock, and richly replenished the river fed from so many sources.

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