

Sidelights from an old Minute Book.

THE substantial demy volume in which the early minutes of the church now worshipping in Spurgeon's Tabernacle are contained, was in use from 1719 to 1806. These years, eighty-seven in number, cover an important period in both national and religious life. Their beginning is almost coincident with the accession to the throne of the House of Hanover; their closing with the establishment of Britain's sea supremacy off Cape Trafalgar. The middle years witnessed the spread of the Evangelical Revival; the afterglow of this Revival brought with it various home and foreign Missionary Societies. Further, the period is noteworthy in the history of this London church, as it covers the whole of John Gill's pastorate of fifty-two years, and more than half the sixty-three years during which John Rippon ministered to the congregation.

This old minute book is, therefore, a valuable mirror of church life during more than eight decades. In it we find many pictures from which it would be possible to prepare an eighteenth century church manual or year book. Sidelights abound, and with these sidelights this article is concerned.

PRAYER AND VISITATION.

7th March 1721. "It being proposed to the Church by our Pastor, Mr. Jno Gill, That he thought it expedient that one day in every Quarter should be appointed and sett apart as a day of humiliation and prayer It was agreed That such a day be quarterly kept."

14th November 1721. "It being thought expedient for the preservation of that sweet Union and Concord that ought to be in the Church in sympathising with the afflicted, succouring the Tempted, relieving the Poor and Distressed, Rejoycing with them that rejoyce and mourning with them that mourn That some persons be appointed by the Church once in every year at the least to visit every member thereof, Ordered that a list of all the Members be drawn out with their place of abode in four divisions and that two of the Brethren be appointed for each Division once in every year to visit every member in their said Division."

7th November 1727. "It was agreed yt ye Quarterly Meeting of prayer should be for ye future on our Church Meeting days and to begin the next Church Meeting at one o'clock."

It is evident the church meetings were movable feasts. The last minute mentions one o'clock, but in February 1731 it was agreed to hold them on Mondays at five o'clock, and in the following November two o'clock was appointed for the next "in order to spend some time in prayer."

COMMUNAL BAPTISMS.

14th November 1721. "Bro. Crosby from the Proprietors of the Baptisterion upon Horselydown informed us of an Assessment upon all the Churches concerned there of thirty shillings. Each Church to defray the Deficiency of building and finishing the same Agreed that Bro. Crosby do pay the said thirty shillings and place it to the Churchs accmpt and also that Bro. Gill be Trustee in behalf of the Church for the security of their property and management of their affairs there."

Another thirty shillings was paid in 1725, fifty shillings in 1729 and forty shillings in 1735. Apparently baptisms at the Baptisterion took place on weekdays, as one was arranged for Friday, 21st June 1733, at six in the evening.

27th September 1779. "Sister Martha Tipping, by her Will, left £200 South Sea Annuities towards erecting a Baptistry in the Meeting house" [then in Carter Lane].

In the following March it was decided that the new baptistry should be "for the use of this church only" and that candidates should "pay 2/6 towards expense of preparing, and not less than 1/- to the attendants."

OCCASIONAL CONFORMITY.

26th September 1737. "Bro. Miller & Bro. Henry Fauntleroy were appointed Messengers to Bro. James Hart, to require his attendance at ye next Church Meeting to answer for himself, he being charged with occasional conformity to ye Church of England."

24th October 1737. "Bro. Turner & Bro. Anderson were added to ye other two Messengers to Bro. Hart to acquaint him yt ye Church insists upon his personal appearance to give public satisfaction for his offence."

19th November 1737. "Bro. Anderson & Bro. Davis were appointed messengers to Bro. Hart to admonish him & urge him to appear before ye Church in order to give satisfaction for his offence."

12th December 1737. "Bro. Anderson & Bro. Davis were continued messengers to Bro. Hart to admonish him again to appear before ye Church in order to give satisfaction for his offence."

9th January 1738. "Bro. Anderson reported that Bro. Hart expressed a great concern for ye offence he has committed, ye

evil of which he is sensible, but could not tell whether he could conveniently attend this present church meeting. The Messengers were continued to put him in mind of coming to ye next church meeting & to stir him up to it."

6th February 1738. "Bro. Davenport & Bro. Millar [probably the same as Bro. Miller of the 26th September 1737] were appointed messengers to Bro. Hart to inform him that the church insists on his personal appearance in order to give satisfaction for his offence at our next church meeting or give a satisfactory reason why he cannot appear, or expect to be proceeded against."

6th March 1738. "Bro. Hart personally appeared & gave an account of his repentance, which was agreed to be genuine."

Resolutions at six successive church meetings! These men were not Nonconformists for nothing. They could give a reason for the faith that was in them. The grandparents of some may have lived in the Laudian regime; the parents of many had know the days of active persecution which preceded 1689; they themselves were living under the shadow of the Toleration and kindred Acts. In their estimation this erring and prevaricating Brother was false to a great history and to vital principles. Small wonder that they pursued him until he was "stirred up and put in mind" to face the church.

10th January 1743. "A question being sent by ye church under ye care of Mr. Flowers whether a person ought to be continued in fellowship who shall take ye sacrament in the Church of England to qualify himself for executing an office of trust & profit, when at ye same time he does not incur any penalty if he refuses to accept ye place he is elected to, agreed yt such a person ought not to be continued & yt such an answer be returned to ye question."

This question concerned one Baskerville, a member of the church at Unicorn Yard, who, at their church meeting on Sunday, 14th February 1742, was charged with "walking disorderly in taking the sacrament in the Church of England, in order to execute the Office or Trust of a Common Council Man of the City which thing Bro. Kenward [who brought the charge] apprehended to be a profanation of that Sacred Institution." Baskerville declared he "would not have taken the Sacrament had not the Laws of England required the same; and that he took it purposely to execute that trust." By twelve votes to six his action was declared an offence to the church, and four messengers were appointed to admonish him in private. To these messengers he expressed sorrow that his action had given offence, but refused to recede from his position. Desiring to continue in membership, he assured them that he would "not use money or friendship to secure re-election to the Council, that he would be

open to conviction, would reexamine the arguments and pray for further illumination; and would not commune with the established Church again without first acquainting his own Church." Unicorn Yard somewhat reluctantly accepted this reply and the matter stood over until the following January, when Baskerville reported he had been re-elected a Common Councillor, and that he proposed to qualify himself for the office. On this occasion the church unanimously "thought it unlawful to receive the sacrament in the Church of England to qualify for any place of Trust or Profit." Baskerville claimed "the right of private judgment and doing what he thought in conscience he ought to do; and that if they excluded him on this account, they offended him as much as he offended them. . . . He did not ask for dismissal because he thought the Churches who were Baptists and Calvinists would not receive him, when he should, as in Conscience he must, acquaint them with the reason and design." The church then resolved to make the above enquiry of the Board of Ministers and their Churches. All replied in the negative, and an official communication dealing at considerable length with the issue was sent to the church by Samuel Wilson, the Chairman of the ministers and deputies.

MUSICAL.

22nd February 1726. "It was agreed to allow Bro. Anderson one Guinea pr annum for setting ye Psalm & to commence from Christmass last past."

In 1730 this remuneration was altered to "a private collection among members about Christmas, which he is to have, be it more or less," and in 1732 it was agreed "yt Brother Fall have forty shillings per annum for setting ye psalm."

23rd March 1731. "It was agreed yt David's Psalms according to the best version, instead of hymns, be sung in the church."

6th July 1767. "Agreed the whole Psalm or Hymn or such verses as are app'd to be sung be first read & afterward every line separately."

ELECTION OF DEACONS.

21st April 1724. "Agreed that Tuesday next being the 28th of this instant be kept in fasting and prayer for the nomination & choice of two Deacons."

28th April 1724. "Being the day appointed for the nomination and choice of two Deacons the Church accordingly met & after some time spent in prayer and a word of direction given respecting the nature of that office & the qualifications of persons for it the church proceeded to the nomination of four persons, viz.,

Bro. Turner, Bro. Deale, Bro. Kelly and Bro. Whorley out of which the two former were chosen by a majority."

16th June 1724. "Bro. Deale and Bro. Turner having been chosen Apl. 28th Deacons of this Church were desired to accept of this office & serve the Church therein. The former of which assented to the Churchs request, the latter desired a months time to consider of it & then to give in his answer, which was agreed to."

14th July 1724. "Bro. Turner being called upon by the Church to give in his answer to their request viz. to take upon him the office of a Deacon, desired another month to consider of it, which was accordingly granted."

11th August 1724. "It was agreed yt Bro. Turner and Bro. Deale do officiate as Deacons next Lords day in attendance at ye Lords table."

16th May 1727. "It was agreed yt ye 30th of this instant be appointed a day of prayer for ye ordination and setting apart of Bro. Deale and Bro. Turner for ye Office of Deacons in this Church which was done accordingly."

Other entries indicate the serious concern with which the church always approached an election of deacons. Reference need only be made to two. In 1743 "both Brethren and Sisters were desired to signify their assent" to the choice of William Leppard [he remained in office until his death in 1799, aged 98], and, in 1751, two who were elected were given six weeks in which to consider their decision. They were then "solemnly ordained with prayer and a sermon."

MEMBERSHIP.

6th April 1720. "The church being informed that Hannah Cooper desired to be baptised and admitted a member of the Congregation, Bro. Smith, Bro. Jones & Bro. Crosby with some others were appointed to hear the account she could give of her Faith and Repentance, she being not able through Bashfulness to speak before the whole Church."

7th March 1721. "Mary Clark, a member of the congregation under the pastoral care of Mr. Foxwell [General Baptist, Fair Street, Horsleydown] desired to be admitted to full communion with the church. Bro. Smith and Bro. Crosby were appointed Messengers to the said Mr. Foxwell to acquaint him thereof & to know if he had anything with respect to her life and conversation to object against her being received."

17th July 1722. "Elizabeth Wilkinson desired to be admitted to Baptism and Communion with the Church, she gave a satisfactory account of her Faith and Conversion and having Testimonies of ye Regularity of Her life and Conversation It

was agreed that she should be Baptised and received and on the Lords Day following she was received accordingly."

31st March 1730. "Messengers from ye Church under ye Pastoral care of Mr. John Wilson attending this Church for ye dismissal of Bro. James Hawley, ye same was accordingly granted."

26th March 1739. "Agreed ye persons who desire communion with ye church for the future shall propose to the church one month before they give an account of the work of God upon their souls, during which time enquiry is to be made into their moral character."

The church would neither apply for transfers from a church whose pastorate was vacant nor grant transfers during its own pastoral vacancy, unless on grounds of removal to a distance, In January 1784, when three sisters who were "members at Rotherhithe, late under the pastoral care of the Rev. Mr. Rowles, desired messengers to ask for their dismissal," the church resolved "That it is not customary for this church to receive members from a sister church during their widowhood state."

DISCIPLINE.

This occupied an important place in the life of the church. In those leisurely days members had the "time to stand and stare" for which a modern poet sighs. They knew of the places frequented by Brother Brown and of the gossip of Sister Smith. Discipline therefore tended to be severe, but it must be remembered that, in an age when the outlook on social life and practices was different from that of the present day, our forefathers were striving for a pure church life. These records reveal that in the good old days of "loyalty to God's house and walking in the narrow way," the standard of conduct among a fair percentage of church-members was not on the high level that has sometimes been suggested. Non-attendance at the Sunday services was a constant cause of complaint, and various minutes record the appointment of a messenger to a member "to know the reason of his absence and to admonish him to his duty." One brother was admonished five times, and, he proving adamant, on the 14th July 1724, the church "observing yt all her admonitions to him were of no use to reclaim him, came to a resolution to withdraw from him as a disorderly person being guilty of immoralities viz: drunkenness, Sabbath breaking & non-attendance upon the publick worship of God, & he was accordingly withdrawn from."

At the church meeting on the 17th October 1785 it was reported that John Browning "did not by any means consider the consequence of Adam's transgression to extend any further than

corporal death." This was serious declension and merited stern discipline with the result that "The Church being of opinion that Bro. Browning had fallen into dangerous errors did agree to withdraw from him till such time as the Lord should convince him thereof and give him true repentance and he was accordingly declared to be cutt off from communion by our pastor of which Brethren Lepard and Misnard were appointed to inform him." Other reasons for discipline were: "Disorderly Practises in her house"; "Evil of Drunkenness"; "Slighting ye ordinances & indulging enthusiasm"; "Obstinate and incorrigible"; "Abusing of Church in general and several members in particular"; "Abusing his wife to ye great & open scandal of Religion"; "Imbided Antinomian principles"; "Church cannot agree to her attendance on the Methodists"; "Remiss in attendance and also guilty of idleness." These quotations afford opportunity for the reader to exercise his imagination and visualise the sustained interest of a disciplinary church meeting.

The replies of the admonished members are revealing. One member stated the cause of her absence was "darkness of soul and she promises to attend for ye future." Another "lamented his misconduct and hoped for future he should attend better." A third "expressed great brokenness of spirit & concern for non-attendance by reason of a bad husband but declared she had privately attended & hoped to do so more and more" which satisfied the church. Not infrequently the reply was far from respectful.

COMMUNION.

6th April 1720. "Saml Gill, a member of the church at Kettering, was admitted to transient communion with the church."

25th March 1729. "A motion being made, it was assented to yt ye hearers be desired to give us ye liberty of singing by our selves at ye Lord's table."

18th August 1783. "Three persons Members of the Church at Northampton under the Pastoral care of the Rev. Mr. Jno. Ryland haveing apply'd for transient communion with this Church, The Deacons were unanimously of opinion that it was inconsistent with the faith and practice of this Church to grant them that priviledge as that Church held with mixt communion, allowing unbaptised persons to sit down at the Lord's table with them, our Pastor being of a different opinion thought it proper to lay it before the Church declaring that as in the multitude of counsel there was safety he had applied to various Ministers of the particular Baptist Churches in town for their opinion on the subject that he had received their several answers in writing

(which was read) that it was not improper or unscriptural, and that his own conscience would be much hurt if they were not admitted to transient communion. After much debate it was mov'd by our Pastor and seconded That those Baptised Persons belonging to perticular Churches holding mixt communion upon their application to this Church for transient communion be indulged with that previledge. The motion was carried by seventeen for it against thirteen."

LAYING ON OF HANDS.

12th March 1721. "Jane Wiltshire and Sarah Pullen [elected earlier that meeting] having not at their first entrance into the Christian Church come under the Ordinance of Laying on of hands, it being not the practice of those Churches to which they gave up themselves Did now submit thereunto and had Hands laid on them according to the practice and example of the Holy Apostles."

3rd February 1729. "Bro. Gill declaring his dissatisfaction in using ye custom of laying on of hands at ye admission of members, it was agreed yt he be left at his liberty in ye point for ye future."

ETERNAL SONSHIP.

24th July 1768. "At a full meeting of the Church on Lords Day July 24th 1768. The Pastor reported that he had recd a letter from Ic. Harman, Member of this Chh, in wch he declared he had been long at enmity wth the Doctrine of the Eternal Sonship of Christ by the Generation of the Father. Upon wch a Motion being made, seconded & Thirded the Vote was put That Isac. Harman who now Stands a Member of this Church be rejected, removed & excluded from the Common of it for his declared enmity wth the Doctrine of Christs Eternal Sonship by the Generation of the Father untill he manifests a repentance satisfactory to ye Church. Which vote was Carried unanimously & wth out one dissenting voice or hand lift up when the Negative was put up. And accordingly he was rejected, removed & excluded from the Communion of the Church in the name & by the authority of the Church for the reason & for so long as expressed in the Vote And Bro. Collier & Bro. Hoffman were appointed Messengers to acquaint him therewith."

MORAL LAW.

3rd October 1791. The Messengers to Bro. Sadd reported . . . "that he did not look on the moral law as a rule of life to a believer. The same Messengers were continued to admonish him."

31st October 1791. "The Messengers to Bro. Sadd reported that they found him in the same way of thinking that the moral law was never design'd for the rule and walk of a believer but only made for the ungodly. Agreed that our Bro. Sadd on holding the above error be excluded from communion with this church & he was excluded by our Pastor in the name of the church. In consequence of the aforesaid prevailing error in this day, we as a Church of Christ do agree that the Moral Law as summarily comprehended in the Ten commandments is a rule for the conduct of men in general and for God's people in particular. Resolved: That no one after a first & second admonition by Messengers from this Church denying the moral law to be a rule for the conduct of Men in general, & for God's people in particular should be continued a member of this church which was unanimously agreed to."

PEWS AND COLLECTIONS.

26th January 1725. "A dispute arising about ye green pew in ye middle, it was agreed yt it belongs to Bro. Clarke he having bought two places therein & resigned two more in ye pew before it on ye account of ye same."

2nd November 1741. "Agreed for ye future yt no pews should be sold but that all such persons, members & hearers who are able & willing to assist in defraying the charges of publick worship, be accommodated with proper places if desired, & that they hold their right unto such places whilst they continue their usefulness & afterwards to be at ye discretion of ye persons appointed to take care of 'em.

Agreed yt ye Deacons be appointed to take upon 'em ye care of Regulating ye seats of persons in pews & keep a list of 'em."

7th March 1774. Two additional pew openers were appointed at a wage of £4 per year each "and it is expected of them that they do assist the women once a quarter in brushing the curtains & cleaning down such parts of the meeting ho. as the woman cannot reach."

4th August 1776. "Agreed that a Publick Collection be made at a convenient time for the church at Northampton under the Pastoral care of the Revd. Mr. Ryland towards the expense they have been at in inlargeing their meeting house." There are occasional references to collections for other country churches.

18th August 1777. "Agreed that only twelve monthly public Collections be made at the Doors for the use of the Church in the course of the year, & that the four usual Quarterly Collections made for Ground Rent & other expenses be added to & included in the said twelve monthly ones."

Other interesting minutes record letting the meeting house

to a Society in October 1783 "they finding their own coals and candles and satisfying the pew openers for their trouble in attending on them" and collections in January 1806 "to relieve distress of poor Protestants in Germany, occasioned by war," £128 14s. 0d. and in May 1806 for the Baptist Missionary Society, £252 5s. 0d.

DR. JOHN GILL.

His Portrait.

19th February 1770. "Bror. Robinson acq'd the Church that at a Meetg of a Number of the Members of the Church at the Kings Head Tavern [in the Borough] being the Day the Deacons was Ordained that it was the Unanimous request of the Brethren then prest & Application was then made Agreeable thereunto to our worthy & hond. Pastor that he would indulge them by Setting to have a Painting Drawn of his Person to be hung up in the Vestry from the great Love & regard they had for the Original. And the Doctor was then pleased to Intimate his readiness to Indulge them therein.

"And Accordingly the same has been Executed & that it had been thought Expedient likewise to have a Mezzotinto Print taken therefrom & the wch was now in hand. But as the same would be attended wth a Considerable Expence it was thought proper to lay the same before them, & to know their Minds: And at the same time it was Intimated their would be a Necessity of Borrowing some Mony on a Morgage on the place in order to pay the Workmens Bills for the repairing & Beautifying the same. And therefore it was proposed to their Consideration whether they would Approve of the Expences Attendg the Drawing & framing the Picture as also the Copper Plate Engraving, paper & Printg of the same be added thereunto, & so in Consequence thereof the said Picture & Copper plate become the Property of the Church & the produce Arising from the Sale of the Print be Also placed to the Churches Credit by the Officers of the Church. The wch motion being Seconded it was desired that Every one prest. would speak their Minds freely before it was put up to the Vote, & Every Member then prest having Separately Signified their Approbation it was put up to the Vote & it was Unanimously Agreed that the said Expence of paintg Engraving &c be defrayed by the Church & to be Included in the Amount of the Sum to be Borrowed for the repairs &c of the Meetg. &c & that they both become the property of the Church."

It is interesting to learn that the cost of the engraving of the learned Doctor which has been reproduced on so many occasions was originally included in a sum borrowed on mortgage

of the chapel buildings. Nowadays trustees would have something to say about the legality of such a transaction.

His Burial.

The deacons and several of the brethren met at the King's Head in the Borough on the 19th October, 1771, when they drew up the following for submission to the church: "Memorandum that we being Members of this Church Meetg. in Carter Lane in Southwk do Agree to joyn an intended Procession on Wednesday next for the purpose of interring our late Worthy Pastor Dr. Gill in the Burying Place at Bunhill fields.

"In order thereto, We design to Assemble at the said Meeting House in Mourning, at twelve o'clock on that day & thence proceed in Coaches & pairs, to the Turnpike at Newington, & there wait for the Procession that will Come from Camberwell. And that our Bror. Button provide as many Coaches as may be wanting, & also Cloaks for the Men, & Scarves & Hoods for the Women & Hatbands & Gloves for such as are not provided therewith. AND that the Pulpit & Clerks Desk in the said Meeting-place be hung wth black Cloth, & the fronts of the Gallery wth black-baize. It is also desired that the Members of the Church come in the Afternoon of Lords day the 27th of this Inst. Octo'r. very Early, when a sermon will be preached by Dr. Stennett & that they come in at the Vestry Door & take their Seats, the Men at the Table Pew & the Women in the Middle of the Meeting as Near it as Possible. As to the Expences incurred by the Church making Part of the said Procession. It is agreed that Each person going in the Coaches, do pay his proportion of the same, & for his Cloak &c. & in regard to those Members who are unable so to do, but yet desirous to go It was agreed that their proportion be born by the Church. It is farther recommended that the Brethren & Sisters, do put themselves into decent Mourning for the space of two Months & into Second Mourning for one Month in all three Months."

I have felt it unnecessary to make more than slight comments on these Sidelights, preferring that they should tell their own story.

SEYMOUR J. PRICE.