

The Baptists of Greenwich.

THE origin of the Baptist Church in Greenwich is very obscure, but we have contemporary evidence that one John Knipe, if not the founder of the Cause, at any rate helped to build the first Baptist Church in the ancient and royal borough. We learn that in 1760 the Church at Rushden, in Northamptonshire, sent him a gift of £2 17s. 4d. to help him to build. This earliest building was apparently somewhere in London Street, and there, under several leaders, the Church continued until 1823, when the old Huguenot Chapel was rented by the Baptists.

In 1827, William Belsher became pastor of the Church. He had held previous pastorates at Worcester (Silver Street, now Sansome Walk) and at Burton Street, St. Pancras, a new Church which had "split" from Keppel Street. In both places he wielded a great influence, and at Worcester built a new church in the second year of his pastorate.

It seems as though he was responsible for the new chapel in Bridge Street, for though the new building was erected in 1827, it is recorded that Mr. Belsher was recognised as minister of London Street on April 13th, 1827.

William Belsher retired from the pastorate in 1841, and in 1844 resigned from the Baptist Board "owing to age and infirmities." After this he is lost sight of.

During William Belsher's later years, a Rev. Joseph Belcher (apparently no relation and the name spelt differently), by a strange coincidence became the first pastor of a cause which, under the name of Lewisham Road Church, exists to this day. The work was started in 1835. In 1838 "Bunyan Church" was founded by Joseph Belcher, and on March 20th 1844 the stone was laid of the present building in Lewisham Road. Belcher was secretary of the Baptist Union from 1832 to 1840, and held the degree of Doctor of Divinity. He removed to Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1843, just before the building of the new chapel. He died in 1859.

A succession of able ministers has maintained a strong cause at Lewisham Road until the present time. Of well-known ministers of the past might be mentioned Campbell Gray (father of Mr. Milner Gray), E. D. de Russett, W. E. Lusty and Andrew Wright (present and first secretary of the Evangelistic Committee of the London Baptist Association). The present pastor is Rev. R. H. Philpott.

To return to Bridge Street. The building erected in 1827 still stands, and services held there are still recalled by some, and we come to a pastorate within the memory of some still

living with the settlement of Jesse Gwinnell, who came from Bethesda, Trowbridge, in 1847.

After four years at Bridge Street, he went out and formed another cause in London Street, which later removed to Stockwell Street. Meanwhile, the Bridge Street Church continued under successive ministers, until Benjamin Davies, from Bethel, Leighton Buzzard, accepted the pastorate in 1858.

There is no doubt that many of the secessions and new causes recorded in this brief outline of Greenwich Baptist history were occasioned by the rise of the Gospel Standard movement. The *Gospel Standard* is a periodical which was first published in 1835. The adherents of the movement it represented, in order to make a distinction between themselves and others of strict and particular Baptist views, afterwards adopted the name of their periodical as their denomination title. Jesse Gwinnell seems to have held *Gospel Standard* views, and the present cause in Devonshire Road, Greenwich, to which reference is made later, was established under *Gospel Standard* rules, the secession from Zion apparently resulting from this movement.

To return again to Bridge Street, less than a year after his settlement Mr. Davies, owing to a change in his views regarding the presentation of the gospel, felt it his duty to resign from the Church. He was then about to accept an invitation to a Church in Natal, when he received unmistakable proofs that his work in Greenwich was not done. At the request of a large number of people he took the Lecture Hall in Royal Hill, and there in February 1859 formed a new Church.

There prevailed at one time a very general idea that Benjamin Davies removed with his Church to Royal Hill. This notion undoubtedly grew with time as the result, after the passing of years, of a confusion between his first and second migration to Royal Hill. In his admirable history of South Street Church (1922), Mr. R. E. Kemp mentions only one removal from Bridge Street to Royal Hill. And in support of this Mr. Kemp had not only the general opinion of Greenwich Baptists, but the fact that in later years Benjamin Davies was inclined to say that it was the original 1760 Church that came out of Bridge Street with him.

That Davies started a new cause, however, is abundantly clear from his memoir which appeared in the *Sword and Trowel* of 1873, as well as by a statement of C. H. Spurgeon in 1859 to the effect that Benjamin Davies had started a new cause at Greenwich, which can only refer to Royal Hill. According to a note in a very old Bible at South Street Chapel, Benjamin Davies held the first Church meeting of his new cause in an

ante-room of the Lecture Hall, at which seven persons were present. This contrasts noticeably with a membership of two hundred a few years later, and with the building of a new church in South Street some twelve years afterwards.

While Benjamin Davies was ministering at Royal Hill, Jesse Gwinnell (who meanwhile had removed to Salford) returned to Bridge Street, where his following at Stockwell Street had apparently returned. In 1861, Benjamin Davies bought the building in Bridge Street, and Jesse Gwinnell and his Church, dispossessed of their building, united with a cause from Shooters Hill Road and built a Chapel in Devonshire Road, Greenwich, dating the united Church 1842, the date of the founding of the Shooters Hill Road cause. This united Church finally ceased in 1871, and in 1872 James Bourne acquired the lease for a secession from Zion, New Cross. This Devonshire Road Cause is still in existence. While these movements were occurring, a new Church was started at Shooters Hill Road in 1866, and has maintained a strong cause for more than seventy years.

Meanwhile, Benjamin Davies, as one gathers from a little Church manual still extant, finding that the work did not prosper in Bridge Street, removed back to Royal Hill. Here the work prospered again so markedly that before long, as already stated, there was a membership of over two hundred. A deaconess or Bible woman was engaged and a weekly offering system adopted. Is there anything new under the sun? In addition, a prayer meeting was held every Sunday morning at 7 o'clock, a feature which was maintained regularly until a few years ago, and is held occasionally to the present day.

Encouraged by his success, Benjamin Davies began raising a building fund for the erection of a new church. A site was secured in the Blackheath Road and apparently relinquished, the new building being erected in South Street and opened by Charles Haddon Spurgeon on Thursday, March 21st, 1872. The enthusiasm and ability of Benjamin Davies and his fellow-workers compels our admiration. The building has stood from then until now, with hardly any signs of the effects of time. Though old-fashioned, it is roomy and comfortable, and is far more adequately supplied with vestries, classrooms and halls than many modern buildings; in fact, the building designed and erected by Benjamin Davies to-day houses the multifarious activities of a large and busy modern Church, which has something like forty different gatherings upon the premises between one Sunday and another.

The enthusiasm of the Church, when it entered its new sanctuary, very speedily received a serious setback, the beloved Pastor being called to higher service within two months of the

opening of the Church. There followed several years of difficulty and discouragement, until on the last Sunday of May, 1879, Charles Spurgeon, the elder son of C. H. Spurgeon, then a student, occupied the pulpit for the Sunday School Anniversary. Almost immediately a call was given to this young man, and from that time until to-day the work at South Street has never flagged.

Charles Spurgeon began his ministry in July, 1879. In that month the Church membership was dissolved as a condition of the help of the London Baptist Association. This dissolution was agreed to by eleven votes against nine. On July 25th, at a succeeding Church meeting, Charles Spurgeon gave the right hand of fellowship to two members as representing the newly formed fellowship.

This incident in the Church's history has been the occasion of a very natural confusion regarding the date of the founding of the Church. The cause was founded in 1859, the present building was opened in 1872, and the present fellowship formed in 1879. Hence the appearance of the latter date in the Baptist Handbook, while the Church popularly dates its origin from 1872, the previous date of 1859 being largely lost sight of.

On April 12th, 1903, Charles Spurgeon preached his farewell sermon, after a ministry of nearly twenty-four years. He was followed by the Rev. Frank Thompson, now of Hove, who after ten years' successful ministry was succeeded, just before the outbreak of the War, by the Rev. Roland J. French, now of Bethesda, Ipswich, who carried on a great ministry for nearly fourteen years. The writer of these notes has been privileged to follow in this succession.

In the 'eighties, South Street Church started three missions. Of these, the work in Roan Street and Caletock Street was continued under other auspices, but that at Azof Street developed into the present Baptist Church in Woolwich Road, where of late years Rev. H. M. Greenwood and his wife have laboured voluntarily, removing some years ago to Blackheath in order to be of service to a cause needing guidance and help in a district where we dare not let the Baptist witness die out.

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