

Records of Salem Baptist Church, Burton-on-Trent.

THE Records of the Church open quietly: "In the year 1780, by the all-wise Providence of God, Richard and John Thomson, natives of Lancashire, and members of the Church at Accrington, removed to Burton." With this quiet opening the records proceed to say that the brothers Thomson found Burton "in an unhappy situation with respect to the Gospel—there being none, in or near the town." This is a sweeping statement, and one wonders what the other churches were doing. The Parish Church and the Independent Church were there. But our two brothers had come from sturdy folk in Lancashire, Calvinist in doctrine, with whom religion was a matter of vital importance; and it would seem that the brothers failed to find what they would consider "soul-nourishing" Gospel preaching. This mattered to them, and in search of it they journeyed to Melbourne, a distance of ten miles. But the distance was such "that we were prevented from attending so constantly as was necessary in order to keep the life of religion in our souls." They evidently felt their condition keenly, for they record that "we had no Christian friends to converse with, and so we became barren in our souls." Now and then they attended Ashby Chapel, to hear Lady Huntingdon's preachers, and likewise occasionally to Derby. But as all the places were too far for regular attendance, "in this dreadful situation we shamefully departed from God, and continued in this unhappy condition until 1789."

Being now "under much concern of mind," the two brothers went to Shepshed, a distance of eighteen miles, to lay "their unhappy case before Mr. Mills, the minister of the church there." They were well received, and much encouraged by the promise of Mr. Mills to preach in a small house of Richard's at Burton Mills, "in Derbyshire, a mile from the town." The river Trent divides Staffordshire from Derbyshire, and formerly the whole town of Burton lay in Staffordshire. It would seem that the brothers were millers, and in a comfortable position. Burton Mills lay just over Trent Bridge, and here apparently Richard Thomson lived.

Richard Thomson looked out for a house, "with strong desire to introduce Gospel preaching in Burton, and some kind Providence led him to some old premises at the bottom of New

Street." This was purchased by Richard, together with a good house, "which is rare in Burton; although it took all he had to purchase it." Part of the premises was certified "for Public Worship" on January 14th, 1790; and on January 26th, public worship was conducted for the first time by the ever-faithful minister of Shepshed, Mr. Mills. Services were conducted once a month, and by "supplies."

1792—1868.

We now come to the formation of the Church. Having a place of worship, the friends invited one of the "supplies," a Mr. Biggs of Codnor, to "remove to Burton, to labour stately among us." Mr. Biggs complied and began his ministry in October, 1791. The services were well attended, and in September 1792, twelve persons were baptised. It was then decided to form a church, and in October of the same year fifteen were enrolled as members. Five were added in November, and the church started on its way with twenty members.

Trouble soon began, and no wonder when so small a number accepted the responsibility of supporting a minister. In July, 1793, the church was called together "to compromise matters with Mr. Biggs and all who thought he paid too much attention to his worldly belongings to the neglect of the ministry of the Word." It seems likely that Mr. Biggs had to give time to his "worldly belongings" in order to live, for what the church could give must have been small. The matter was not "compromised," for the next month Mr. Biggs left, having served the church for two years. This seems to have been the first chapter of a whole book of troubles with ministers. The church was worried for many years about money matters, and the result was a continuous strain on the part of the church to find enough money to offer a minister anything at all like a salary; and a similar strain was placed on the minister to try to live on what he got.

In January, 1794, the church "called out and set apart by prayer and supplication, our dear brethren" to the office of deacons: Richard and John Thomson. As they were not in a position to buy the pick of the fruit when it came to a minister, the members had to be wary what fruit they had, and so they took plenty of time about it. It was their practice for a time to invite likely ministers for a *probation* period of 6 months. But this worked both ways, for after 6 months the likely minister had had enough, and as often refused the invitation; or on the other hand the fruit was not good enough and no invitation was given at end of the time of trial.

In February, 1794, Mr. Tift was invited to the pastorate, after the 6 months trial; but he had evidently had enough, for he

declined the invitation. The next year Mr. Mills, a student of Bristol College, served the church for the 6 months' probation, and then received an invitation to the pastorate; which he declined. In November of the same year the Rev. William Upperdine, of Birmingham, received an invitation after his probation period was over; but he also declined acceptance. The church was in a feeble way, but something was done, for there was an increase to 30 members.

Trouble now arose in another direction. In February, 1796, the church was called together "to admonish Thomas Bowler and his wife, for the practice of visiting their friends on Wake Sunday." The offence was evidently brought home to their consciences, for they "promised never to do it again." After that cleansing the church went forward, and in October of the same year, the Rev. William Baldwin, of Bond Street Church, Birmingham, received an unanimous "call," and accepted it. The salary was £30 a year "and what could be publicly collected." The same month the "first public collection was made for the support of the Gospel." The next year the church considered fixing the minister's salary at £35 a year, "and the produce of the quarterly collections." By this we learn that the collections were quarterly, and the final decision of the church was to give the minister £40 to "cover all."

The church, however, seemed unable to keep some of its members up to the mark, for Brother Bow was admonished "for working on the Lord's Day." It speaks well for the authority of the church that Brother Bow confessed that he had done wrong, and like the Wake Sunday offenders, promised "never to do it again." But they were born to trouble, for in the year 1798, matters went badly. There was "shameful conduct on the part of two members," and the members of the church say of themselves: "Our zeal for God and love of one another is abating." The church now "dragged on unhappily," and the members were evidently in difficulty with the minister's £40, for they met together to decide what to do, and decided to "ask the minister to lay himself out for the Lord elsewhere." In what manner Mr. Baldwin laid himself out for the Lord elsewhere, is not recorded; but in June, 1800, he left, after a ministry of three and a half years.

Then came a sad blow to their hopes, for on Mr. Baldwin's departure the church "came to a stop, and was dissolved." This must have been a grievous disappointment, for less than three years before, just after the minister's settlement, the members "were on the eve of building themselves a chapel."

There was yet some life in the broken fellowship, for only three months after the church "came to a stop," a few of the

members began with a prayer meeting in a friend's house, and the next year opened the Meeting House again "in the forenoon;" where Brother Fletcher exercised his gifts so well in reading and speaking that he was invited to the pastorate and accepted, remaining with them for six years.

A period of prosperity now lay before the restored church. The year following the minister's settlement, in 1802, the members began to think of building a chapel, and so well did they move that in the September of 1803 the new chapel was opened. Two of the leading preachers of the denomination were the special preachers for the occasion: Andrew Fuller and John Sutclif; so that the light that so nearly went out now burned brightly. In the next year a Sunday School was started, with 40 boys and girls, who were taught from "10 Testaments and 40 spelling books"; evidence that the scholars were taught to read. But the sun was shining too brightly, and clouds gathered. One member was expelled for "intoxication and swearing," and one of the two deacons was excluded for "adultery and other crimes." Then two members were brought before the church for "seeking to bring the minister into disgrace"; and were expelled. This so disturbed the minister that he left soon afterwards, and a good ministry of six years closed under a cloud. This was the first ministry of any length, and during the ministry the new chapel had been built.

In 1808 there is a record of the "death of a valuable member, Mrs. Harrison, who for years kindly entertained the ministers who came to dispense the Word of God." It is good to find this early mark of recognition of the quiet service, rendered in all generations, of gracious hospitality.

In 1809 John Smith was ordained minister, but later on he "developed curious speculations in preaching, verging on Unitarianism." Then he openly confessed "the Arminian scheme of Divinity"—and a little later, "he actually went over to the General Baptists." It must be remembered that in those days the church members were not only "sermon-tasters," they could also taste the quality of the doctrine preached, and did not hesitate to say so when doctrine disagreed with digestion. Brother Smith was evidently too advanced for members of the 1812 Salem Church, and in that year he separated from the church, and as it is recorded, "he actually went over to the General Baptists." The Rev. John Moss was invited next. He came on trial for three Sabbaths from Bishops Burton. The members were so satisfied with him that they invited him to come again on trial a second time. But Mr. Moss was equal to them, and told them that if he returned to Bishops Burton, there was no hope of him coming back. This decided the members, for

they invited him "forthwith." He settled in 1813, but in 1814 there was disagreement amongst them and he left—not this time "actually going over to the General Baptists" but "he took refuge among the General Baptists."

The next year two members were excluded from membership for "defrauding their creditors." In all cases of discipline and exclusion, the names of the offenders are given. In 1815, the good minister, Brother Fletcher, who had served the church so well for six years, but had left because of the gossiping tongues of some of the members, was invited again; and began his ministry in December. There is now the record of "gracious seasons," and also the record that "the ways of Divine Providence are very mysterious, for in April, 1820, our worthy and esteemed Pastor, Thomas Fletcher, died." The funeral sermon was preached in the Methodist Chapel by the Rev. B. Brook, of Tutbury, before a "crowded congregation."

After this the church "tried" Mr. West of London, for six Sabbaths, and then gave him an invitation unanimously. But Mr. West was unanimous also, for he declined their invitation. During the year the church was called together "to consider the inconsiderate and inconsistent conduct of a member in taking his child to the Established Church to be christened." After being severely reprimanded, the brother promised not to do it again. There may have been little virtue in the promise, as the christened babe may have been his last child. The Rev. Samuel Jones, of Addlestone, Surrey, was now asked to come on trial for two months; after which he received an invitation for three years at a salary of £80 a year. The salary is an indication of the growing strength of the church. The three years of Mr. Jones' ministry seem to have been successful, for the records are of "increasing congregations," and in 1822, the consideration of "erecting a gallery." The question of conduct came before the church during Mr. Jones' ministry, and one member was excluded for "gross immorality."

In June, 1825, the Rev. E. E. Elliott became minister, and remained four years. Cases of "immorality" and "intoxication" occurred among the members, and the minister resigned; "troubled by the low and declining state of the church." But before his term of notice expired there was a revival of interest, and he was asked to stay longer. As, however, "some thought his strain of preaching unsuitable," he did not stay. Mr. Davis then became minister, after six weeks' probation; but he only stayed one-and-a-half years. Events occurred of an "extremely unpleasant nature"; and as members of the church did not approve of his ministry, there were "several altercations" between the minister and the members. He left in 1851. The

next year the church invited a student from Stepney College; but he did not accept "owing to the low situation of the town not being suitable to his health."

In January, 1833, Mr. William Stokes, of the Baptist Home Missionary Society, began his ministry. When invited, after four Sundays' trial, the salary offered was £70 a year, but he refused the invitation, and the church felt that the refusal was due to the salary not being sufficient. They increased the offer of salary to £90 a year. This did it, and Mr. Stokes began his ministry with such fervour that nine months afterwards the church "testifies to the zeal and activity of the minister." But he was evidently a sprinter and not a long-distance runner, for the next year records "much less promising appearance, and congregations declining." The minister was now charged with advocating "the Hyper-Calvinist" scheme of doctrine. A spirit of controversy was aroused in the church, and trouble was imminent. Then he married "a young person of the church who had not made a profession of religion"; so that there was trouble all round. But Mr. Stokes was accommodating in matters of doctrine if not in matters of love, for he changed his preaching, and as the records say: "he veered right round and preached the universal doctrine." This was too much for the church, and the minister was told that he "was exceedingly vacillating in his ideas of Divine truth." The minister's personal circumstances now became embarrassed, and he was told that he must go at the end of the year. He then "got very personal in his preaching," and the breach widened. He left in February, 1835. There must, however, have been binding ties between minister and people, for two years later, apparently having settled in Burton, Mr. Stokes asked that he might join the fellowship of the church, and he was welcomed—each saying to the other, "Let by-gones be by-gones." During his ministry the church had been called together to consider whether they should keep in membership those "who consorted with a lodge of Odd Fellows." This matter took two or three church meetings, and the final decision was that those already in membership with the Odd Fellows may continue, "but they were to frequent such meeting of the Odd Fellows as little as possible; and no other members of the Church might join" the offending Odd Fellows.

In 1837, a Mr. Owen of Monmouth began his ministry. Decline soon followed, and he began to think of going as soon as he came. In the next year, Mr. Leese of Manchester, who had contributed £20 a year for twenty-five years, informed the church that he could no longer continue his support. This settled the matter for the minister who left in August, 1838. The year 1839 opened with "very gloomy prospects." But during

this year some property left by the will of James Douglas, "to our late deacon, Francis King," came into possession of the church, and the clouds began to lift; for in the next year a considerable debt was cleared off and the income of the church increased; and on the day the debt was cleared off the church, by resolution, "opened the fellowship of the Church to the Communion of pious Pædo-Baptists."

"Believing that the practice of Free Communion is more in accordance with the Word of God, as well as more in unison with the spirit and the genius of the religion of Jesus Christ, we heartily resolve that the fellowship of the Church shall henceforth be free to every man and woman who make a creditable profession of their faith in Christ, though their sentiments may not accord with the sentiments of those now composing the Church on the subject of Baptism. We in fact regard ourselves as not to refuse those who, in the judgment of charity, we think God hath received. And we further resolve and agree, to prevent any disputes in choosing a minister, he shall invariably be of the Baptist Denomination, holding that believers in Christ are the only proper subjects, and immersion the only proper mode of Baptism."

Then followed a succession of very short pastorates. In 1841, Richard Morris, a student of Stepney College, became minister, and after twelve months was succeeded by James Pulsford, who also only stayed one year. The Rev. A. G. Aitchinson managed to remain for two years, and left in 1854. The Rev. Samuel Davis began his ministry in 1856, with sixty-one members. The congregations were "small when he began, and they grew less." At the end of his first year's ministry, he suddenly resigned, "owing to his connection with the British Bank affair." He is said to have been a good pastor, and the church "parted with him in sorrow." Mr. Davis went to America. During his ministry the church enjoyed the unusual experience of having a balance on the right side; it was only 2/6, but it "elicited applause." The next minister was the Rev. J. Jenkins. The only deacon resigned his office immediately upon the appointment of the new minister, and went "over to the Independents." This unsettled the minister, who resigned after two years' service.

A very successful pastorate now began. The Rev. Alexander Pitts became minister in June, 1858, and remained five years. During his ministry a new chapel was built at Walton by Mr. Tomlinson, and a good work was carried on there. The choir was also "allowed to govern themselves." The secretary

was able to report a balance of £30, and £10 of this was voted to the minister. At this time also, Evan Jones was received into the church, "although he could not speak a word of English." In 1860, the first record is made of one of the members being sent to College from the church to prepare for the ministry—"our young brother Arthur Mason being recommended to Rawdon College." On June 10th, 1859, Charles Haddon Spurgeon visited the church, and preached in a tent put up on the premises of Messrs. Bass & Co. There were four thousand present at the service. Tea was held in the Malt room belonging to the firm.

In 1860, two friends offered £20 each to start the liquidation of the debt of £350 on the chapel, if the whole was raised in a given period. A Debt Committee was appointed to deal with the matter, and to get out plans for heating the chapel with "hot air." But on Sunday, January 6th, 1861, the chapel was destroyed by fire, and "The congregation worshipped this day in the Lecture Hall, Guild St., and in the morning and evening services, pastor and people wept." The spirit and vitality of the church is clear from the fact that the members decided to erect a new chapel on the same spot as "it is in the midst of a dense population." It was further decided to buy a hundred and eighty-eight square yards of land at the back of the chapel for the sum of £155.

The opening services of the new chapel were held on Sunday, October 20th, 1861, with services on the following Tuesday and Thursday, and the next Sunday. The preachers were James Acworth, Principal of Rawdon College, James A. Spurgeon, Arthur Mursell, and J. Lord. It is worthy of note that the Railway Company allowed travelling on the Tuesday at a single fare for the double journey; from Birmingham, Tamworth, Leicester, Coalville, and Derby.

The members now numbered a hundred and eighteen, and there were a hundred and twenty scholars in the School. Special thanks were passed to the minister, and William Rushton was thanked for his "attention to the comforts of the place." A Chapel Keeper was also appointed at a salary of £8 a year, "with perquisites." In the difficulty of raising money for the new chapel, the minister "ever came to the rescue, preaching, pleading, begging, so that the work went on, and the treasurer was never without the money required." But other influences were at work. Some of the members, not profiting by the minister's preaching, absented themselves from worship; and were good enough to say that "should the church choose another minister," they would return. Other matters had to be dealt with. The deacons were called upon to see Mr. and Mrs.

Green, who, although they attended the services, "would not consort with the members because Mr. Green had not been recognised as a deacon." Then Mr. Rushton resigned, leaving only one deacon. The minister now said that he too would resign: he had hoped to see the debt cleared, this had been his "cherished desire;" but the "unkindness of some of the members" caused him to take this step. In October, 1863, he left for Rochdale.

The Rev. D. B. Joseph settled in 1864, at a salary of £100, "and something extra at the close of the year." A quiet and steady ministry followed, until in the third year of the ministry the treasurer resigned owing to reports respecting Mr. Joseph "attending the Odd Fellows Dinner." The minister cleared himself of the "grosser charges," and went on with his work. But rumblings about the Odd Fellows Dinner affair continued, and the ministry closed through this matter in 1868. In this year eight houses were bought in Moor Street, and one thousand six hundred square yards of land, from money remaining from the Guild Street property which had been sold in 1864. The year 1868 completes the first part of the records of the church. During the seventy-six years eighteen ministers had served, the longest pastorate being that of Thomas Fletcher. His first period lasted six years and his second period nearly five years. Founded in 1792 with fifteen members, there were now a hundred members.

1869—1939.

After Mr. Joseph's departure the church pulpit was "supplied" for twelve months, and then the Rev. Thomas Hanson became pastor. He did not have a promising start, for Joseph Mason, the senior deacon, who had resigned through ill-health, died before his settlement. The records speak of the deacon as a "valued friend and brother in Christian fellowship"; and his death would be an important loss to the new minister. In addition the finances were in an unsatisfactory condition, and seventeen members were erased for non-attendance. The pastor's stipend was £70 a year, with an increase to £100, "if justified." The church kept faith, for an increase of £5 each quarter was voted during the first year, and he commenced his second year at the £100.

A proposal to elect deacons for a term of office, and not for life, caused considerable contention, and resignations flew about. The pastor, however, was "very conciliatory," the old method stood, a breach was averted, and the resignations were withdrawn.

Continued deficiencies on the funds worried the church, and finally the minister resigned, having served three years.