

St. Mary's, Norwich.

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II.

ANTECEDENTS: THE GATHERED CHURCHES IN NORFOLK 1642—1667.

THE exiles who returned from Holland about the year 1642 did so not merely in hope of enjoying peace and freedom, but also with the intention of gathering churches on the model they had learned in Rotterdam and of witnessing for the truth among their own people. The story of their return is graphically told in the contemporary record of the Great Yarmouth church book.

“After y^e glad tidings of a hopefull Parliamt. called and convened in England was reported to ye Church in Rotterdam, divers of y^e church whose hearts God stirred up to further ye light (they now saw) by all lawfull meanes in their native Country, not without hope of enjoying liberty there: After much advising with y^e Church and seeking God for direction, they returned with y^e assent, approbation, and prayers of ye Church into England, with resolution to gather into a Church with all convenient speed, where God should please to direct them, ye Church also promising to give their assent under handwriting, for their inChurching whensoever notice should be given of y^e present probability of y^e same to y^e sayd Church.”

The returned exiles met with considerable hindrances in gathering their Church. Neither King nor Parliament contemplated freedom of religion: each side desiring to enforce that order and form of worship which it favoured. Nevertheless, the conflict of the two parties, with the consequent loosening of the reins of government, made the establishment of Congregational Churches possible without effective opposition from the authorities. After many meetings, the brethren felt that the time was ripe and applied to the Church at Rotterdam for its assent to their inchurching. This was presently received:

“Whereas severall members of our English in Rotterdam, whose names are hereunder written, have desired dismissions y^t they may incorporate themselves into a Church in Norwich or elsewhere, these are to certify whom it may concerne, y^t in a Church meeting, there is granted liberty and leave unto them to joyne together into a body in Church fellow-

ship, trusting upon their faithfulnes y^t they will joyne and walke according to y^e order wch Jesus Christ hath left to be observed in y^e Churches, wherein likewise they have walked in their fellowship with us. Commending them to y^e sweet guidance of y^e Spirit of Christ, with or earnest desire and prayer y^t truth and peace may be their portion. Amen. By me, Robert Parke, in y^e name of y^e Church."

In November, 1642, the brethren met at Norwich to begin their inChurching, which is thus described :

" Christopher Stygold freely offered himself to y^e work of y^e Lord in building a house to his name, and made a motion to John Eyre to agree and to joyne with him in y^t service, who gladly imbraced it. And they moved John Leverington who also agreed with them, and they further moved the same thing to Daniel Bradford, and then to James Gedney, and also to Samuel Clarke, to William Staffe, Samuel Alexander, John Balderston and to Francis Olley, who all agreed to in y^e same matter."

Nine sisters also agreed to come in and help in the work.

" Some brethren scrupled at y^e gathering together into a body unlesse Mr. Bridge (upon whom their eyes were for an Officer, and of whose abilities and faithfullness they had full experience) did also joyne with them."

Bridge accordingly sent for his dismissal, which came to hand in April, 1643. After discussion as to the relative safety of Norwich and Great Yarmouth for the settlement of the Church, it was decided that Great Yarmouth was safer in view of the dangerous times. The Norwich brethren acquiesced on condition that there should be at a later date a full debate as to which place promised greater liberty and opportunity, and that the issue of the debate should determine the domicile of the Church.

In June, Bridge, with those who had " offered themselves to ye work " met in Norwich. One of their number was absent—" Daniel Bradford was in y^e Armie." He was, however, admitted to the Church in the following October, by virtue of his dismissal from Rotterdam. His name is of particular interest, as he later appears as leader of the Baptists when they parted from their paedobaptist brethren to form a separate communion. The brethren entered into covenant in these terms :

" It is manifest out of God's word y^t God was pleased to walke in a way of Covenant with his people : hee promising to be their God, and they promising to be his people. . . . We being in gt fear of God, desirous to worship and feare

him according to his revealed Will, doe freely, solemnly, and joyntley Covenant with y^e Lord in y^e presence of his Saints and Angels.

1. First : That wee will for ever acknowledge and avouch God to be our God in Jesus Christ.
2. Secondly : That we will always endeavour through y^e grace of God assisting us, to walke in his wayes and ordinances according to his written word, wch is y^e onely sufficient Rule of good life for every man.
3. Thirdly : Neither will we suffer ourselves to be polluted by any sinful wayes, either Publicque or Private, but will abstaine from ye very apperance of evill : giving no offence to y^e Jew, or to ye Gentile, or to ye Churches of Christ.
4. Fourthly : That we will in all love improve our Communion as Brethren, by watching over one another and as need be to counsell, Admonish, reprove, comfort, relieve, assist and bear with one another, humbly submitting ourselves to ye government of Christ in his Churches.
5. Lastly : We doe not promise these things in our owne, but Christ his strength, neither do we confine our selves to y^e word of this Covenant, but shall account it our duty at all times to imbrace any further light or truth yt shall be revealed to us out of God's word."

This Covenant is noble in its simplicity. It owes much to the Rotterdam covenant, and also echoes the words of John Robinson to the Pilgrim Fathers : "The Lord hath more light and truth yet, to break forth out of His holy word."

The Church being now duly constituted met on September 10th, 1643, to ordain William Bridge as their pastor, and "did comfortably partake in both Sacraments, ye children of some of ye members, and members' children of other Churches Baptised."

Bridge was soon called to London to the Westminster Assembly of Divines, where, with the support of Burroughes, his late colleague at Rotterdam, and Simpson, Nye and Goodwin, who had been fellow-exiles in Holland, he championed Independency against the Presbyterian majority. He gave a letter of recommendation to the Church to the Rev. John Oxenbridge, M.A., who came to Yarmouth in November and assisted in the ministry.

Up to this time the desirability of having a church established by law had scarcely been questioned. The support

of religion by public funds and its protection and enforcement by the civil magistrate were taken for granted. William Bridge had come to Yarmouth as Town Preacher, appointed and paid by the Corporation of the borough. He thus occupied a legally established position. The town did not, however, recognise the Congregational Church of which he was pastor, though they must have been aware of its existence and were content to give tacit consent to the situation. Oxenbridge was employed simply by the Church. The Corporation were not prepared to extend their patronage to him, but they sanctioned his ministry provided he preached before the ordinary time of service and completed his exercise by half past eight in the morning.

The Norwich members were far from satisfied with an arrangement under which they had to journey twenty miles to enjoy Church fellowship. Now that the Church was domiciled at Yarmouth, and had added to its members many residents in that neighbourhood, it was plain that its removal to Norwich was no longer practicable. The Norwich members therefore requested permission to gather into Church fellowship in their own city. The Church assented and gave a dismission to the nine Norwich brethren (among whom was Daniel Bradford) in these terms :

“There is granted liberty and leave unto them to joyne together in a body in Church fellowship, trusting upon their faithfulness that they will joyne and walke according to that order which Jesus Christ hath left to be observed and holden forth in his Churches.”

A meeting was held on June 10th, 1644, to incorporate the Norwich Church, Mr. Oxenbridge and several of the Yarmouth brethren being present.

“They spent the former part of the day in prayer: and then one in the name of the rest made a profession of faith. Whereunto all the rest gave their consent.”

The Covenant, practically identical with that of the Yarmouth Church, was then read and subscribed by the nine foundation members. Thirteen women, including Elizabeth Bradford, were subsequently transferred from Yarmouth.

The Yarmouth Church continued in strength. During the persecuting years of the Restoration period it numbered so many adherents, including prominent townsmen, that it was able to a considerable extent to defy the repressive laws aimed against Nonconformists. This fellowship is still represented by the Middlegate Street Congregational Church, Great Yarmouth.

A year after its foundation, the Church at Norwich num-

bered over a hundred members. By 1646 it had become sufficiently important to arouse jealousy and opposition, which resulted in the publication of a derogatory tract entitled "Hue and Cry after Vox Populi."

"Surely," says this anonymous opponent, "your Independent Ministers have not had so good fortune here to lead them? Neither Mayor nor one Alderman member yet; your two lectures and constant Sabbath sermons and double weekly exercises and publicke insinuations and private tricks have not found Norwich such a lob-cocke citie as you would have it. Are only the thirty men and four score women of your Church, and the best of them scarce a Common-Councill man, with the rabble of poor mechanicks and silly women entrapped in your snare, the only men in Norwich that will examine the Scriptures for Paul's doctrine?"

In 1647 the Church chose one of the City Ministers, the Rev. Timothy Armitage, to be their pastor. Armitage was "Wednesday Lecturer" at the Church of St. Michael Coslany, an office which he continued to fill for a year after his election to the Congregational pastorate. The Church now wrote to the Yarmouth brethren about Armitage's settlement, seeking advice

"Concerning ye manner of ordination, how they shall proceed in it, whether by imposition of hands or other ways."

They received reply that :

"if laying on of hands was signicative as the ceremonies were, and for ye conferring of some immediate gift, it was not to be done. But if merely demonstrative before ye Church, noting ye man set apart for ye worke and office unto wch hee is set apart then it might well be done; onely with this caution yt such as were against it would not be offended with ye thing done."

The Norwich church book gives some information about church life and customs during Armitage's pastorate. It was not judged essential that candidates for admission to membership should render an account of the hope that is in them for salvation publicly before the Church, though it was considered most desirable that they should speak something tending to edification. The Lord's Supper was observed on the first Sunday in each month. In regard to singing :

"It was judged fitt that the ordinance of singing psalmes be exercised in publicke by the Church and that the pastor direct such psalmes in the vulgar translation as are most agreeing with the original to be used at the hearing of the

word, and upon other occasions to sing according to such other translations as shall be thought fit."

In 1651 eight "lay preachers" were appointed to "exercise their gifts in a publicke way" when requested by the Church. Daniel Bradford was one of these. Three years later he was "made choise to be a Deacon," which office he accepted, declaring that "he did give up himselfe to the service of the Lord and the Church in that Office."

Churches of the Congregational order were now being formed in many Norfolk villages. Deputations were sent from the Church to consult with "the godly" at a place as to the desirability of their incorporating themselves into a Church. If the Conference was favourable a second deputation would go to assist at the inChurching. Daniel Bradford served as one of the Church's messengers in this connection to Beccles, North Walsham, Tunstead, Stalham, Edgfield, Godwick and Swanton Worthing.

Armitage died in 1655. A volume of his sermons was published by his successor in the pastorate, who describes him in the preface as "that gracious and sweet-spirited man." The sermons disclose very advanced views on religious liberty. To suppress error, he writes, is a good work, but it must be done in God's way, not in man's way. The sword of the spirit will be more effective than any sword of man. He points out that Paul, before he was brought home to God, used carnal weapons, but after his conversion he said "our weapons they are not carnal but spiritual, and so they are mighty through God." He is persuaded that it glads the devil when he sees men so violent against error as to draw the sword. Men being fallible may suppress truth for error, as in the times of Popery truth was persecuted :

"Our great truth, our main truth of justification by the free grace of God and the blood of Jesus Christ, without works, without merits."

Does all truth come into the world at once? And may we not persecute that which afterward may appear to be a truth?

The Church now sought the services of another City Minister, the Rev. Thomas Allen, M.A., parish minister of St. George Tombland. Allen was a native of Norwich, educated at Caius' College, Cambridge, and had been Rector of St. Edmund's, Norwich, until silenced by Bishop Wren in 1638. He went to New England, where he exercised his ministry at Charlestown, returning home about 1651. In December, 1655, the Church invited him to relinquish his work of preaching to the city in order to assist with its ministry. This he was probably

unwilling to do, but a year later he was received into membership and unanimously chosen pastor. An arrangement seems to have been reached whereby the Church attended Allen's preaching services at St. George's, so that like Bridge at Yarmouth, he acted in the dual capacity of Public Preacher and Congregational Pastor. The congregation which gathered in St. George's was much too large for the old parish church. To provide accommodation a gallery was erected over the chancel, which remained till 1680. The Commissioners who then went to view it before its demolition reported :

"Wee were credible informed (the gallery) was built and erected there in the times of the late Rebellion, before the hapie restoration of the King's Matie that now is, for the more ample receiving and conteineing a sort of people called Independents who in these times flocked from all pts of the citie to heare such preaching there as best suited the humours of that sort."

In their Covenant the members of the Church had promised

"to imbrace any further light or truth yt shall be revealed to us out of God's word."

Such light came to some of them concerning the ordinance of Baptism. They went a step further than their brethren—the logical outcome of the steps already taken, discarding the Baptism of Infants and replacing it by the Baptism of Believers as it was practised in the days of the New Testament and the Primitive Church. They had been brought up to accept the Baptism of infants as a matter of course, but all those who had lived in Rotterdam must have become aware of another view on this matter, for the Mennonite Brethren in Holland had practised the Baptism of believers for several generations. Among the earliest gathered churches in Norfolk there was one at least which was frankly Baptist. The Church at Pulham dissented from the "administration of Baptism unto Infants." This congregation was in being before 1646, for in February of that year they consulted the Norwich Church about the removal of their minister, Mr. Wildeman, who had received a call to Beverley.

In 1646 the Christians at Wymondham, who were meeting for worship under the ministry of John Money, a member of the Norwich Church, consulted Yarmouth as to the desirability of inChurching. They mention several difficulties, one being that they were divided on the subject of Baptism :

"some looking upon the baptising of infants the way of God; and others, questioning the truth of it, therefore suspend it."

The reply from Yarmouth was :

"We think there ought to be on both sides a full knowledge and experience of one another's affections and judgements, how far they can bear in point of practice, lest differences should be more sad than Church fellowship comfortable."

From this it may be seen that the paedobaptist Congregationalists did not consider Baptist opinion and practice to be any insuperable bar to the fellowship of their Churches. It was within these Churches that the Baptist movement developed, and apart from Pulham, there is no evidence of the existence of any separate Baptist society in Norfolk for the next twenty years.

As early as 1646, "Hue and Cry after Vox populi" describes the Church as "a church of Independents, that is to say Brownists, Anabaptists and Antimonians." The term Anabaptist might be applied merely by way of abuse, but it is probable that there were facts to suggest it. That there were Baptists in Norwich in 1646 is further evidenced by a letter written by the Rev. Hanserd Knollys, then pastor of the Baptist Church in Great St. Helen's, London, to a Mr. John Dutten at Norwich. He ends the letter :

"Salute the bretheren that are with you. Farewell. Your brother in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel."

Since there is no evidence of the existence of a separate Baptist fellowship in Norwich at this date, it is not unlikely that those brethren referred to were Baptists in communion with the Congregational Church.

The Baptist movement in Norfolk received a new impetus about 1656, when Baptist principles were advocated by some whose main interest was in the political activity of the Fifth Monarchy party. These held the doctrine, based on an interpretation of Apocalyptic scriptures, that the Fifth Monarchy, in which Christ would come to reign with His saints, was imminent. Some held it merely as a matter of passive expectation; others were prepared to go to any lengths to overthrow Cromwell's government in order to assist the fulfilment of the prophecies.

In March, 1656, the Fifth Monarchy was debated in a meeting of messengers of the Norfolk Churches. An invitation, signed by Daniel Bradford and John Tofte, was sent out in the name of the Norwich Church, who had been incited thereto by "some bretheren of neighbouring Churches." They were asked to send messengers to meet at the house of Timothy Norwich, in Tombland, Norwich, at 10 a.m. on the 12th of March, to compare their thoughts together concerning :

"The visible reign of Christ and the duty of the Saints towards the Govments of the world."

The general vote of the Messengers was :

“That there should be in the latter dayes a glorious and vissible kingdom of Christ, wherein the Saints should rule. And to the second question whether we should be subject to the present powers of the world—that it was our dutie to give subjection, and if any should doe otherwise it should be a matter of grief and great offence unto them.”

There were some in the County who were not content with this passive attitude towards the Government, and these were watched by Major-General Haynes, who reported to Secretary Thurloe on their proceedings. From his reports we learn that many Norfolk Fifth Monarchy men became Baptists. In April, 1656, he wrote :

“Truly the Churches here are very free from such practices save that at North Walsham and some few, I thinke seven or eight, members of several Churches, that are breaking from their several relations uppon the account of anabaptisme, some of them have already taken up that ordinance, and all the rest engaged in that principle, as well as the 5th Monarchie.”

In July he reported :

“At Norwich—our fifthe monarchy party there have many of them turned anabaptists and submitted to the ordinance.”

And later in the same month :

“Our North Walsham fifth monarchy bretheren who weare lately dipped, are synce growen exceeding high in their expressions, and that tending to bloud, as by the enclosed your honour will perceive: and Buttephant of the lyfe guard, Ruddock, and Pooly the Chieftances of them. Its not conjectured they are able to doe any considerable thing to a disturbance heere—.”

The Baptists were a source of anxiety to their paedobaptist brethren in the Congregational fold. Early in 1657 the messengers of the Norfolk Churches met to confer about :

“Those who had not onely forsaken the Churches for want of the Ordenance of Baptisme as they say, but also judged all the Churches no Churches that were not of their minde, or came not up to their practise.”

Such were judged to be makers of divisions, and therefore to be withdrawn from. Despite these hints of differences on the baptismal question, another ten years passed before a Baptist Church emerged as a separate and lasting entity, distinct from the paedobaptist Congregational Churches.

After the Restoration, blow after blow fell upon the Churches. The Act of Uniformity excluded them from the Anglican Establishment, while the Conventicle Act made their own worship illegal. The Norwich Church was ejected from St. George's Tombland. Regular meetings could scarcely be maintained. The Church book records no meetings between 1664 and 1667, and it seems probable that fellowship was maintained by meeting in small companies, keeping so far as possible within the law. During this time the Baptists in the fellowship drew together under the leadership of Daniel Bradford, one of the veterans of the exile.

By 1667, Daniel Bradford and his group had come to regard themselves as a separate "Baptised Church," and on October 23rd in that year he declared to the messengers of the Congregational Church

"That he could not hould Communion any longer with ye Church."

This event formally marks the separation of the Baptists (later to become St. Mary's Baptist Church) from the paedobaptist Congregationalists. The separation, in fact, may have taken place some time earlier. Throughout their long history as separate bodies the relationship of the two Churches has remained a cordial one: The Congregationalists have a stirring history, and still worship in the Old Meeting House erected immediately after the Glorious Revolution had brought freedom to Nonconformists. Their Church takes its name from this building, which is one of the noblest monuments of English Free Church architecture.

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(To be continued.)