

St. Mary's, Norwich.

(Concluded from p. 346)

VI. THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM.

ON the death of Joseph Kinghorn the bereaved Church found itself confronting a world rapidly changing. Railways were being built. The government was beginning to take an interest in the popular education which the Churches had instituted. The textile trade was leaving Norwich for the north, but enterprising citizens were introducing the manufacture of boots and shoes in its place. The factory system was growing up, and small workshops were beginning to disappear. All these things were changing the habits of society, and had the Church been merely an organisation within human society, its days might well have been numbered. But the Church is the Body of Christ, and, animated by His Holy Spirit, has a message for every age. Habits of life change, philosophies pass away, but the Word of God abides, and as the Church is faithful she learns how to present that Word to the needs of ever-changing generations.

It is a tribute to Kinghorn's greatness that the Church did not seek an exactly similar man as his successor, but rather looked for someone who would be able to give a fresh presentation of the gospel to a changing age. They applied to Stepney Academy for a student, although they knew that the prevailing sentiment there was in favour of open communion, the practice against which Kinghorn had so long and learnedly contended. Dr. Murch, the principal, sent down his young kinsman, William Brock. Brock was a large, broad man—"a plough-man" said some in contrast to Kinghorn's slender figure; but he was eloquent as Kinghorn had never been. His ministry found favour, and the Church invited him to occupy the pulpit for six months. The invitation was sent him by one of the deacons, who travelled to Devonshire, whither Brock had gone to recruit his health, in order to press it on him. Brock was hesitant, but Murch insisted on his paying another visit to Norwich, and this time the Church, waiving the customary formalities, invited him to accept the pastorate forthwith. Out of respect to Kinghorn's memory, the invitation stipulated that he should not preach against strict communion. Brock accepted, and settled in Norwich in 1833, at the age of twenty-six.

One circumstance of his prior history is of special interest. Before entering Stepney he received some months of preparatory

training under the Rev. William Hawkins at Derby. Hawkins was the son of Kinghorn's leading deacon, had received his early education from Kinghorn, and had been his life-long correspondent and friend, though he frankly differed from him on the communion question. Thus Brock, at the beginning of his training, came under the influence of the Kinghorn tradition.

William Brock, though robust in appearance, was never so in health. He had settled in Norwich only a year when a disease of his throat prevented him preaching. It was clear that the trouble would take some time to heal, and he felt obliged to resign his pastorate. The Church, however, believed they had had the guidance of the Holy Spirit in calling him, and that with care and patience his weakness would be overcome. They sent him home to Devonshire to recuperate, paying his expenses, and requesting him to place himself under the care of the best local physician. Presently one of the deacons, Jeremiah Colman, was sent down to visit the pastor and his medical attendant, and to see that all possible was being done to facilitate his recovery. After an absence of some months Brock returned in good health.

The new ministry attracted a number of non-Baptists to the fellowship of St. Mary's, as well as many more who accepted the Baptist position. Thus the question of Open Communion became a very practical one. Brock felt that he could no longer endure the restriction of the pledge he had given. In 1838 he raised the matter at a Church meeting, and stated that he was ready to leave St. Mary's rather than be bound hand and foot. The Church determined that he should have liberty to do anything save only the actual introduction by himself of the practice of Open Communion. After this he made a practice of administering the Lord's Supper to unbaptised Christians of his congregation at meetings held regularly at his own house.

An important development now took place in the practice of the fellowship at St. Mary's—the introduction of the tea-meeting. The Church decided to drink tea together at the Assembly Rooms at five o'clock one evening in December, 1840. More than 200 members were present, "all appearing resolved to be happy." The pastor gave a sketch of Baptist history, and a number of leading brethren also spoke. "It was a most pleasant meeting," records the Church book. St. Mary's had always contained men belonging to many different strata of Norwich society. Now that the growth of industrialism was widening the gulf between the classes, the opportunity of social intercourse for all members of the Church provided by the tea meeting was especially valuable. This first tea meeting so rejoiced the heart of good Jeremiah Colman, that he proposed it should be repeated next year; since when frequent excuses for such meetings have been found.

St. Mary's had always taken an interest in the work of the B.M.S. Now, for the first time, one of its members served on the field. William Newbegin belonged to a family closely connected with the Church. He had qualified as a doctor and surgeon, and spent a year or two in Jamaica, where he rendered valuable service to the missionary community. He returned to England in 1844, with the intention of entering the ministry and volunteering for missionary service in Africa. He was accepted by the B.M.S., and a service was held at St. Mary's designating him for his new task. He settled at Bimbia in West Africa. For a time he and his wife were the only Europeans in their neighbourhood; yet, despite constant attacks of sickness, they met with some success in their work. He fell seriously ill in April, 1850, and was taken aboard the ship *Dove*, on which he died at sea. He is honoured as the first member of the Church to undertake work abroad, and indeed he was a martyr, for he faced conditions of life in a fever-ridden land where no European could hope to survive for long.

In 1845 Brock once more declared to the Church his great sorrow at the exclusion of non-Baptist Christians from the Communion, and proposed that, while the celebration on the first Sunday of the month should continue to be confined to Baptists, a second celebration should be held monthly, open to all Christians. This arrangement was put into practice, the Strict brethren agreeing to be content that their protest against it should be entered in the Church Book. Some, however, had written to the Trustees asking them to prevent the practice of Open Communion in the Chapel. The Trustees met and approved a case for submission to Counsel as to the legality of the action, having regard to the Trust Deed, which stated that the Chapel was for the use of a "Particular Baptist Church." The opinion of the Counsel was that the second Communion service was not a violation of the Trusts. The Trustees accordingly decided that they were not called upon to interfere further; but one of their number, the Rev. W. Norton, an ardent Strict Communionist, continued to pursue the matter, and later warned the Pastor, Deacons and Members of "serious legal liabilities" if they continued the practice.

Up to this time the action of Nonconformists in public affairs had been limited by legal disabilities. The reform of Municipal Corporations which came into operation in 1836 opened to them the chief civic offices, and from that time they have generally taken their public responsibilities very seriously. The second Mayor of Norwich, under the Reformed Corporation, was Thomas Brightwell, who was intimately associated with the Baptists. He was himself a Congregationalist, but his wife and

daughter were members of St. Mary's. Two of Brock's deacons served in civic offices, Jeremiah Colman as Sheriff and Mayor, and his nephew, James Colman, as Sheriff. The realm of politics was full of danger. Bribery was rife, and was so much a recognised practice that there were even Church members who had no scruples about buying and selling votes. Brock set his face against this practice, and won the support of his fellow Free Church ministers. In 1846, on the Sunday before the election, the ministers preached against bribery. Brock had the satisfaction of learning that his sermon prevented several members from taking, and at least one from paying, bribes. The Church took disciplinary action against others who had been guilty. It was many years before political bribery was finally stamped out in Norwich, but this campaign awakened the Christian Conscience to the evil of the practice.

The gathering of the Church for worship must always be the centre of its activities. William Brock, the younger, remembering his childhood's impressions, has left a picture of this—

"The Congregation are gathering in their spacious meeting house, and about them there is a look of leisure and much friendly speech and greeting as they enter, and a general sense of being at home with one another. All classes, or nearly all, are represented, from the worthy old pensioners in the almshouses, to city manufacturers and magistrates. Farmers and millers from the country round muster strongly; they have driven early to town and rested awhile in their Sunday lodging-rooms, and now they sit in their family pews with their children round them, like patriarchs. They sit with a certain grand air, as of people to whom Joseph Kinghorn has ministered, and who still expect to be fed with 'the finest of the wheat.' But it is half past ten now, and the quiet whispers are hushed. The well-trained choir are in their places round the table pew, and into the little box under the pulpit good Mr. James Cozens has just stepped—senior deacon of the Church, and charged with the reading of the hymns. Then the red baize door behind the pulpit opens; the preacher is in his place. Service begins—perhaps with the simple announcement of the line, 'Welcome, sweet day of rest.' All know the hymn, and can sing it without a book. Everything that follows is fresh, flowing and vigorous."

During his fifteen years' pastorate Brock won the love of all his people. The Church prospered exceedingly. The membership rose from 150 to more than 400, and the Chapel had to be

enlarged to accommodate the increased numbers. He might well have made this pastorate his life's work, but Providence decreed otherwise. Sir Samuel Morton Peto, then Member of Parliament for Norwich, attended St. Mary's during his sojourns in the City, and formed a close friendship with Brock, whom he urged to come to London to take charge of the new chapel he was building at Bloomsbury. Probably Brock would never have left Norwich, had not his weak health, which was sorely tried by the biting east winds, decided him in favour of removal in 1848. In the following year the Church at Bloomsbury was formed. St. Mary's gave dismissions to the pastor and his wife and two other original members, and transferred four more during the next year to the new Church. She thus considers herself the mother of Bloomsbury Central Church, and is justly proud of her offspring.

The office of Church Secretary had not yet come into being as an indispensable part of Church organisation. To meet the difficulties of an interregnum the Church appointed deacon Josiah Fletcher, the printer, to be "recording and corresponding secretary." He and Jeremiah Colman went up to the 1849 meetings of the B.M.S. with their eyes open for a suitable candidate for the pastorate. They were introduced to the Rev. George Gould who, after studying at Bristol, had held short pastorates at Dublin and Exeter, and they invited him to supply the pulpit. He came, and shortly received a call to the pastorate, which he accepted. Again his call is powerful evidence of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As Brock was not the sort of man whom one would have expected the Church to put in Kinghorn's place, so one would not have thought Gould a likely successor to Brock; he was shy and reserved, did not easily make friends, and lacked the pulpit eloquence in which Brock excelled. Yet both these men proved to be eminently suited for the work that came to their hands.

The first years of George Gould's ministry were years of quiet and patient work. His conception of the pastoral office was that the pastor's duty was primarily to instruct, inspire, and build up the members who, equally with him, should be responsible for evangelising the world outside. His labours to this end were untiring, and later bore splendid fruit. All the time the Communion question, still unsettled, hung like a cloud over the Church. The calm of these years was the calm before a gathering storm. It was not until 1857 that matters began to come to a head. One Elizabeth Bayes had been accepted for baptism and membership, but for reasons of health could not be baptised. The Church resolved to receive her at the Lord's Supper on the first day of the month on the grounds of her willingness to be baptised. This revived the whole question, and at the next Church meeting J. De Carle Smith, a deacon of the Church, proposed

“ That the Constitution of this Church remain unaltered ; but that as Christians are bound to receive one another, as believers in the Lord Jesus, and to partake of the Lord's Supper together, to show forth His death until He come, we agree to receive believers at the Table of the Lord.”

After the rejection of an amendment, this resolution was passed *nem. con.*

The Strict Communion minority now withdrew from the Church and instituted worship of their own, entering into consultation with the Rev. W. Norton as to what steps could be taken to enforce their practice. Correspondence passed between Gould and Norton with a view to the settlement of the dispute by arbitration, but the terms of reference could not be agreed. In May, 1858, Norton commenced an action in the Court of Chancery. Some felt that the Church should not defend the action, but should vacate the premises and find a new home where she would not be hampered by legal limitations. The action, however, involved far-reaching consequences. Had it succeeded it would have meant that every Church in the country having a Particular Baptist Trust Deed would have been permanently debarred from practising Open Communion in its chapel. It was therefore determined to defend the suit. This lasted two years, during which George Gould devoted almost all the spare time he had to collecting evidence of the practice of Baptist Churches in relation to the Communion question. His wide researches, besides their importance as evidence in this case, considerably enriched our knowledge of Baptist history. His untiring efforts were rewarded, and in May, 1860, the Master of the Rolls gave judgment, dismissing the Information, and leaving the Church free to decide for themselves their terms of Communion.

This judgment finally freed the many Churches of the Denomination which had Calvinist roots, and had been known as “ Particular Baptist Churches,” from an intolerable legal restriction.

The victory was not won without heavy cost. The Church had to meet legal expenses of more than £1,500, and much more serious was the decline in its own strength and membership resulting from the unhappy dissensions of the law suit and the expenditure of the pastor's energies in it. Pastor and officers now bent their energies to the recruitment of their own Church.

The year 1863 saw a revolution in worship, when, for the first time, a musical instrument—a harmonium—was introduced into the Chapel with consent of the Church. Thirteen years before, when the Pastor had offered to present such an instrument, Robert Tillyard, a deacon and a leading shoe manufacturer,

had raised a strong objection to the introduction of an instrument as "imperilling the rights and spiritual interests of the Church." The idea had been dropped, and James Colman appointed to lead the singing instead. In speaking of the worship of the Church, it is interesting to note that the deacons twice attended to the ordinances without ministerial assistance during Mr. Gould's absence through illness—in 1854 James Cozens presided at the Lord's Supper, and in 1873 Dr. Roche baptised two candidates who had been accepted by the Church.

The Sunday School had, in Brock's time, numbered a hundred and fifty children, and seems to have been accommodated in the Chapel and adjoining small rooms. The need for suitable premises was pressing. James Colman, who had the matter much at heart, purchased cottages adjoining St. Mary's and offered them as a site for a schoolroom. The Church, however, did not feel able to face such a commitment while the Communion question was still unsettled, and their property might be alienated. When James Colman died he left the cottages to St. Mary's, but it was not until 1868 that the Church had sufficiently recovered from its legal battle to undertake a building scheme. In that year the cottages were demolished, and Mrs. James Colman laid the foundation-stone of the new premises—a school hall capable of seating 400 adults, with many small class-rooms round it. These premises cost £3,700, and have abundantly justified the expenditure. Besides the growing home school, St. Mary's carried on Sunday School and mission work at "Sayer's Street Chapel," a mission hall which had been built by Sir S. M. Peto during the construction of the new Norwich railway, in which he had been interested. From this work Dereham Road Baptist Church later emerged.

The tradition of public service which had grown up in Brock's time was fully maintained during George Gould's pastorate. Two of his deacons served as Mayors of Norwich, J. J. Colman in 1867, and J. De Carle Smith in 1877. The Pastor himself took a notable part in civic affairs. He served on the School Board for many years, and was its Chairman at the time of his death. The whole Church bent its energies to the service of its neighbours in the disaster of 1878, when a sudden flood one Saturday night inundated the lower parts of the city. George Gould decided to hold no services that Sunday. He called together the young men of the Church and set them about going to the assistance of those whose homes were endangered. He himself went to consult the Mayor about the provision of shelter and food for the homeless. The new schoolroom at St. Mary's was opened as a refuge. Members of the Church provided meals in the hall, and sleeping accommodation for women and children

was arranged in the classrooms. Mr. Gould's work in organising relief in this emergency was long remembered with gratitude.

If the pastor of St. Mary's had won a high place in the regard of the city of his adoption, his labours on behalf of all Churches, and his powerful advocacy of the rights of Nonconformists had also won him the esteem of his Denomination, which was expressed by his election to the Presidency of the Baptist Union in 1879.

His own Church did not, in his pastorate, ever recover the numbers it had boasted before the time of the Chapel Case, but when he passed away, in 1882, he left magnificent material for his successor. His ministry made for quality rather than quantity. His son wrote of his preaching :

"Thought might be sometimes too closely packed, but was never conspicuous by its absence. . . . None could listen to him without receiving the impression that the speaker was a man 'mighty in the Scriptures,' deeply impressed himself with the truth of the message he had to deliver, and wholly fearless in his declaration of the truth."

St. Mary's has not ceased to benefit from the Christian character moulded by such a ministry. It needs but to mention a few of those who were baptised by George Gould and received their early training under his ministry to vindicate its value.

There was George White, whose unexampled labours for his church, his denomination, his city and his country well earned the honour of Knighthood. He was for thirty-four years a deacon of St. Mary's; he championed Nonconformity in Parliament during the stormy years of the education controversy. He served as Sheriff of Norwich and as President of the Baptist Union. John William Jewson was for twenty-eight years devoted Church Secretary of St. Mary's. Dr. E. E. Blyth combined with a distinguished legal career a passion for education. A lifelong worker in the Sunday School, he was also many years Chairman of the Norwich Education Committee, and benefactor of educational institutions in the City. He was the first Lord Mayor of Norwich. Besides these should be mentioned George Gould's own children. His eldest daughter, Mary Helen, married the Rev. Albert Williams, pastor of Lower Circular Road Church, Calcutta, and died in India, forging another link between the Church and the mission. His son George entered the ministry. He was a distinguished scholar, and became President of Regent's Park College and President of the Baptist Union. Alfred won fame as a surgeon, earning a knighthood. He was Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, and Treasurer of

the B.M.S. Harry stayed in Norwich, serving St. Mary's as a deacon for over forty years. He was a Justice of the Peace and Sheriff of his city, and he succeeded his brother as Treasurer of the B.M.S. All these were of outstanding Christian character and lifelong loyalty to the Baptist cause. Many more could be mentioned, and those who know St. Mary's intimately will think of others who have never achieved fame, but whose witness has been no less bright—some who have borne long years of adversity without complaint, maintaining through all the buffets of outrageous fortune a Christian cheerfulness and a real delight in the blessings grace bestows. The faith in God that had its beginnings in Gould's ministry was equal to the tests of triumph and disaster.

The character of one old lady who entered upon her Christian life during this ministry may serve for an epilogue, for she seems to typify the spirit of St. Mary's. For many years of her old age she lived alone in a tiny cottage at the end of the garden of the house where Joseph Kinghorn had lived and died. Suffering from a painful rheumatism, and poor in this world's goods, she was rich in spiritual resources. To visit her was a tonic to any one depressed. She would say that she owed everything to St. Mary's—her friendships and mental training as well as her spiritual growth. She used to tell how, as a girl, she had listened to George Gould's sermons, carefully noting the hard words she could not understand, to look them up in the dictionary when she got home. She had a great experience of the presence and providence of God. "Sometimes no one visits me for days," she once said, "and I feel a little lonely—but then I know that I am not alone . . ." and the radiance that lit up her face told more than words could tell of the unseen presence. Her needs were laid before her Father, and she would joyfully recall how often He would supply them by the agency of her fellow Church members. From her humble dwelling she exercised a powerful ministry of prayer. To the end she loved the young people of the Church. She watched them, prayed for them, rejoiced to see them entering on their discipleship, and delighted in their visits to her cottage. She could tell grand tales of the "good old days," but no one ever heard her complain that "things are not what they were." Her deep faith in God, firmly grounded in her own experience, insisted on an unflinching confidence in the future.

C. B. JEWSON.