

Baptist Church Life in London, 1771

THE following account is based on a diary which was written daily from February 24th, 1771 to September 22nd, 1771 by a member of the Eagle St. Baptist Church, London. The writer was a very ordinary young man in humble circumstances. His diary is therefore a record of the interests, way of life, thoughts and activities which we may suppose to have applied to a considerable number of Baptists during the later part of the 18th century.

The diary is a curious document. Its entries are found in the pages of a large book, which was first used in 1749-50 as a schoolboy's exercise book. Many scores of pages are filled with the boy's efforts at arithmetic, geometry and trigonometry. Apparently the boy kept his book so that later on when he was a young man he was able to use all the blank spaces in the pages for his entries. He crowds these entries between the sums, or writes them in narrow strips down the edge of the pages. Presumably he wanted to keep a diary, but could not afford to buy paper so he made use of his old large exercise book which now belongs to the library of the Bristol Baptist College.

From this diary we may gain some impression of the writer. He was Isaac Staveley who was born in Nottinghamshire; who passed through an experience of having "the eyes of my soul enlightened by Almighty Love," and became a member of the Baptist Meeting at Sutton in Ashfield. On May 8th, 1767, he arrived in London. Soon after his arrival "unworthy Isaac Staveley was dismissed (from the church at Sutton) to that part of the dear family under the pastoral care of Dr. Andrew Gifford at Eagle St." He seems to have lived with his father who was a dyer in Gardiners Lane, Petty France; at times he helped "my dear old parent" with his business. There were five sisters, of whom one was married and the other four were in positions of domestic service. Grace was a housemaid at a place in Buckinghamshire, but sometimes came to the town house in London. Sarah was employed in a house at Charing Cross, and on one occasion she gave her brother guinea with which he bought silver buckles! Mary was a laundrymaid at a place in Oxfordshire, from which she sent her brother a goose; she had been able to spend a few days in London in July. Anne was an apprentice and Isaac always refers to her affectionately as "my dear Anne Staveley."

Isaac was a clerk employed by several people. He worked for a Mr. Hollins, Apothecary; for Messrs. Broorshoft and Musgrave, Coal Merchants, and one day a week for Mr. William Hoare, Coal Merchant; his wage appears to have been 2s. a day. His

writing is neat and clear, his spelling excellent and he was able to keep accounts. But his life seems to have been a poor one for he confesses that his married sister and her husband helped him, and every Sunday he spent the day with friends, clearly enjoying the meals which were provided. He tells us about the books which he was able to borrow and read—Luther on the Psalms, Young's 'Night Thoughts' which Abraham Booth lent him, Sermons by George Whitefield revised by Andrew Gifford, Sermons by Tobias Crisp; he read religious poetry too, sometimes writing out in his diary the poems, so recording Benjamin Francis' poem on his sorrow in the loss of his wife and three children within four months. Among these poems are some hymns including "Rejoice the Lord is King."

All this conveys the picture of a very normal young man with limited personal gifts, yet with sufficient education to enable him to keep a clear account of his way of life. In reading his diary we are able to accompany him to some of the chapels of London, to listen to sermons, to share in Church Meetings, to meet other similarly humble members; his diary is particularly a means of entry into the fellowship meeting at Eagle St. under "our dear, revered Dr. Andrew Gifford."

The centre of his life is the chapel in Eagle St. Holborn and his chief delight is listening to sermons. Each Sunday three sermons were preached in the chapel, sometimes by Gifford, who appears frequently to have spoken twice on the same text, but often with one of the sermons preached by another minister. Gifford's nephew J. Gwenapp, pastor at Saffron Walden, is mentioned several times. All the sermons were long and doctrinal in content, but the eager listener was able to give fairly extensive summaries of the sermons in his diaries.

Baptismal services were occasions of much rejoicing, and several took place during 1771. At the morning service on February 24th, Andrew Gifford preached on the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, showing "the becoming nature of the ordinance as it is in obedience to the command and in imitation of the example of our great Head, Christ Jesus the Lord"; then he went down into the water immersing the candidates "in the Name of our Triune, Covenant God, Father, Son and Spirit." Afterwards, standing by the water he addressed "the numerous audience." The following Sunday the three persons baptized were "received into fellowship by imposition of hands and prayer." The Lord's Supper was regularly observed with equal rejoicing and solemnity. After the evening sermon on March 3rd "we came around the table of our dear dying Lord to feast on the sacrifice of his offered body, show his death afresh, to claim and recognise our interest therein, to feast on the sacrifice of his

offered body as happy members of the same family of faith and love." At the next monthly Communion Gifford preached on *Luke xxii*, 19, 20, after which the members "came around the table of our ascended Lord." We are then given this attractive description of the service. "Our dear Pastor assisted us in this Agape, this feast on the sacrifice, according to the primitive pattern blessing and breaking bread and taking the cup with thanksgiving and calling upon the name of the Lord, leading our meditations to view Christ Jesus the Lord our Passover sacrificed for us, in a variety of heart affecting views, showing the unfeigned cause for joy on every survey of the love of our incarnate God. Closed with a cheerful song of praise for this instance of Almighty Love and a hearty prayer for fresh and continued instances thereof." So Isaac Staveley adds, after sharing this service: "May these precious seasons make me fruitful."

Church Meetings were held sometimes after one of the Sunday services, sometimes during an evening of the week, when the church assembled for prayer. At these meetings decisions were made upon applications for membership after hearing the personal testimony of the applicant. Thus on April 22nd, "our brother Standard who is a member of the church under the pastoral care of Rev. Mr. Towers at Bartholemew Close proposed himself as a candidate. After he had related the dealings of the Lord in bringing him to the knowledge of salvation by the remission of sin, he was cordially received by our dear revered Dr. Andrew Gifford." At a similar meeting on May 3rd, Brother Tottle gave an account of his spiritual experience in which he stated that "he was for some years a preacher among Mr. Wesley's but being further enlightened went from them"; he was baptized as a believer at Princes Risborough, and he brought from that church "a general commendatory letter testifying his life and conversation to be as becometh the gospel." He was received as a member, and at the same meeting "our Sister Owen was received as a transient member."

At these meetings members of the church might open their hearts about their spiritual state, asking for the prayers and guidance of the church. Thus on April 15th Isaac Staveley went to the meeting and "found our dear Brother Gale had related the present state of his soul, complaining of darkness, desertion, lightness of spirit and prevalent corruption." Several members addressed him and then Gifford "showed what is the cause of light frames and light views, of the dreadful nature of sin and not living as in the sight of God, hence arises darkness, doubts, suspicious and evil questionings with unbelief as the grand master of the horrid rout." On August 2nd, "our brother North who had

been many years a grievous backslider, related the goodness of the Lord in reclaiming him from his ways" and he was again received by the church. But "brother Farr was suspended from sitting down with us at the table of our dear Lord because of immorality"; Isaac Staveley and another member were sent to summon him to the next Church meeting. Another man told the church that he had been brought from the verge of Deism "to the knowledge of salvation by the remission of sin"; Isaac Staveley calls him "a very savoury, experimental person."

In addition to Sunday services and the weekly meeting for prayer Isaac Staveley attended a society of young men that met weekly in the vestry at Eagle Street; for a time he appears to have been a 'steward' in this 'society' with some responsibility for money. He tells us that on July 8th, Gifford "preached our anniversary sermon" after which he gave Gifford £1 1s. 0d.—"the usual present given annually by our dear Society"—and four people 1s. 6d. each. On other evenings of the week Isaac Staveley listened to sermons in other chapels, visited friends with whom he might share a meal, some conversation on spiritual matters and prayer, or fulfilled some service for the church, e.g. on September 25th, he visited Hannah and Susanna Wood "attempting to comfort them in their deep poverty and relieving their necessities"; he closed this visit with prayer.

The even life of the church was disturbed during this period by the illness of Gifford, who was 71 years of age. On May 31st, Gifford came into the weekly prayer meeting, supported by two brethren and obviously very weak. "After he was seated Brother Northern addressed the Throne of Grace for direction in the important matter that now lay before us as a church; after he had left speaking our dear revered Pastor, Dr. Gifford, informed us that he believed he should never be able any more to preach amongst us; that the glorious truths he had gone preaching amongst us were now his support in the near view of death, and an approaching eternity; that now having no anxious care for himself he was only concerned for our welfare as church and therefore requested that we would nominate a co-pastor with him." The church responded by nominating Gifford's nephew Joseph Gwennapp. Gifford recovered from this illness and lived another thirteen years! On June 3rd, the church at its prayer meeting gives thanks for mercies received, "the recovery of our pastor to health and usefulness, the blessing of an assistant, Zion the city of our solemnities, reviving seasons, success to the Word by the Ministry, our king, country, mankind, friends, relatives and enemies, the latter day glory in the coming and kingdom of Christ." There we must leave the writer of this diary conscious that

“merciful and gracious continues my covenant God to unworthy Isaac Staveley.”

The value of this diary seems to me to be threefold.

1. It is a vivid, personal record of the daily activities and thoughts of a young and ordinary member of a London Baptist Church during the year 1771. Religion is the main concern of his life, and he consciously pursues it every day. His religion is personal, yet it is sustained by fellowship. The part played by the Christian fellowship in his life both in its organised forms in the chapel at Eagle Street and in its informal expression in the homes of church members is quite significant.
2. It is a contemporary record of the activities pursued by a Baptist Church of the 18th century, and of the sermons preached by ministers. The life of the church was clearly well ordered; preaching was central and was used to instruct the congregation in the faith. The Communion Service was held regularly and was an experience of mingled solemnity and joy. Baptismal services were memorable occasions and carefully ordered. The church met during the week with much time given to prayer and spiritual concerns. The fellowship is warm and living; aged, sick and poor members are cared for, spiritual discipline is exercised, but there is no censorious spirit. We gain the impression of a happy, vigorous fellowship in Christ.
3. Its record of the fellowship at Eagle Street and of the place held by Andrew Gifford is valuable in view of the manner in which the Eagle Street Church began and of the attitude of some London Ministers to Gifford. This is not the place to record the unhappy events which made Gifford and many members leave the Little Wild Street Church and establish the Eagle Street Church, or the isolation in which pastor and people continued for so long. What is important is the obvious fact that Gifford was held in deep affection by his people throughout his long life, that the fellowship of his church was united and happy, that the fellowship steadily grew and that the Gospel was faithfully preached and its saving power continually experienced. On March 19th, 1771, Gifford led his people “in earnest prayer for the success of the Word, for the increase and usefulness of the Gospel Ministry in every part of Zion, peculiarly ours.” That was the central concern of a greatly gifted man, and this humble diary offers us the picture of a godly and deeply loved pastor of the Church.

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