

“I throw away the guns to preserve the ship”

A NOTE ON THE SERAMPORE TRIO

AMONG Baptists the resolution of the question of whether to practice open or closed communion has almost always been left to the theoretically democratic decision of the local church. When the first Baptist church was formed at Serampore by the famous Trio—William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward—they and their missionary colleagues had to face the problem. It was a problem complicated by the fact that Ward, Marshman, Daniel Brunsdon and William Grant during the long voyage from England to India in 1799 had freely joined in communion with, among others, Captain Benjamin Wilkes, an American Presbyterian who commanded the ship which brought them to Serampore. Once in India, however, this practice aroused controversy with Carey and the matter was referred for arbitration to Andrew Fuller, secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society from the time of its foundation to his death in 1815. Ward, a strong advocate of open communion, had asked Fuller: “Do not the bounds of Scriptural communion extend to all who are real Xns, except they have embraced immorality, or dangerous heresy?” Back came the answer that anyone who was not “properly” baptized was not a genuine Christian. Therefore, at least as far as Fuller was concerned, there was no possibility of admitting non-Baptists to communion in the fledgling church in Bengal.¹ Fuller’s argument prevailed. He was supported by Carey who “jokingly” criticized his comrades’ “mixt (sic) business on board ship.”²

Ward rejoiced “in the remembrance” of the “mixt business” but the communion table at Serampore was initially closed to all but Baptists. Even missionaries such as Nathaniel Forsyth of the London Missionary Society and Church of England chaplains David Brown and Claudius Buchanan, who were extremely helpful to the newly-formed Serampore Mission in a multitude of ways, were debarred—as were Captain Wilkes and Ole Bie (Governor of the Danish Colony of Serampore), both of whom were fervent Christians. Ward, in the words of John Clark Marshman, “particularly deplored this rigid, and, as he thought, unlovely proceeding, though he considered it his duty not to disturb the harmony of the church and Mission” by engaging in controversy over the point.³

The matter therefore was held in abeyance until 1805 when it again came up for discussion. Brown, now head of the ecclesiastical department in Bengal (the first Bishop of Calcutta was not appointed until 1813) and Provost of the College of Fort William as well as being a warm friend of the Trio, moved near Serampore

and, with his wife, began often to attend the Baptists' services. Together with Ward, he convinced Marshman of the propriety—the duty—to change the policy of the Serampore church. Thus outnumbered, Carey acquiesced. On 31 May Ward with evident joy “rejoice[d] that the first Christian church in Bengal [sic] has shaken off that apparent . . . temper which has so long made Baptists appear unlovely in the Christian world.”⁴ Now Fuller was informed of the change. In a joint letter to the B.M.S. the Trio and the other missionaries then at Serampore—John Biss, William Moore, Joshua Rowe and Felix Carey—reported that following long and serious consideration they had resolved that “no one has a right to debar a true Christian from the Lord’s table, nor refuse to communicate with a real Christian in commemorating the death of their common Lord, without being guilty of a breach of the Law of Love, which law is addressed to us as Christians, and not as Baptists or Paedobaptists.” “We cannot doubt,” they continued, “whether a Watts, an Edwards, a Brainerd, a Doddridge, a Whitfield, did right in partaking of the Lord’s Supper, though really unbaptized, or whether they had the presence of God at the Lord’s table?”⁵

Fuller was disturbed at the news. In fear of offending those English Baptists who believed in closed communion, he deliberately refrained from printing in the *Periodical Accounts* of the Society any mention of the new policy adopted at Serampore. And, in a letter to Carey dated 1st November, 1806, he attacked the missionaries for the action which they had taken. Furthermore, Fuller asked them whether they were not off the grounds of Christian reasoning and “wandering” instead “in the mazes of carnal reasonings.”⁶ In a later letter he told Ward, who had added the name of John Wesley to those of Watts, Edwards, *et. al.*, that he was unsure of the Christian character of these. Specifically, Fuller stated that he doubted whether Wesley was a “good man”; and mentioned with approval the thoughts of others who considered him “a dishonest man” and “a crafty jesuit.”⁷ Ward was not convinced that the missionaries had committed an error. In reply to Fuller’s letter of 1806, he remarked:

Let men be first of one heart, & then there is hope that they will soon be of one judgment. That it is the duty of all saints (Christians) to hold communion together at the Lord’s table is as clear a truth to me as that all men are sinners. If this be not the spirit of the whole New Testament I was never in any thing more . . . mistaken.⁸

Unfortunately Ward’s arguments did not long withstand the combined opposition of Fuller and Carey. They eventually succeeded in winning Marshman to the closed communion position and

on 31st August, 1811, Marshman told Fuller "that the Church of Christ at Serampore has restored its primitive and scriptural purity (sic) in point of communion, and I think is not very likely soon to lose it again."⁹ Once more Ward reluctantly agreed not to fight the issue. Later he wrote to John Ryland, a prominent English Baptist who favoured open communion and who had criticized the Trio's reversal of their policy, that he "lament[ed] that my Brethren are mistaken in this point, and that they should not perceive that such a practice is a violation of the law of love: but I throw away the guns to preserve the ship."¹⁰

Thus Serampore's experiment with open Communion ended—not to be renewed in the life-time of any of the Trio. Disagreements were rare among this superlatively distinctive group of missionary pioneers but the question of open versus closed communion in the first of the many churches founded, directly or indirectly, by them shows that disagreements were not non-existent. Fortunately this quarrel was kept on a friendly plane and, basic though it was, was not allowed to mar their extraordinary labours in unitedly promoting the cause of the Christianization of India. There is little doubt that they would have been in accord with the anonymous author of an article in the *Friend of India* of 7th September, 1837, who exclaimed that in India a Christian should forget his differences with other Christians as they all had "one common object to pursue, the destruction of a debasing superstition, and the diffusion of Christian truth among the heathen." "Shame, indeed," the author concluded, "will it be for us, if we waste on the unimportant questions of party strife, those energies which ought to be employed against the common enemy."¹¹

NOTES

¹ Angus Library typed copy. Letter from Andrew Fuller to William Ward, dated Kettering, September 21st, 1800.

² B.M.S. MSS. Journal of W. Ward, I, September 6th, 1801.

³ John Clark Marshman, *Life and Times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward*, Vol. I, p. 214.

⁴ Angus Library MSS. Fragment of the Journal of W. Ward, dated May 31st, 1805.

⁵ B.M.S. MSS. Letter of William Carey *et. al.* to the B.M.S., dated Serampore, August 6th, 1805.

⁶ Angus Library typed copy. Letter of Andrew Fuller to William Carey, dated Kettering, November 1st, 1806.

⁷ Angus Library typed copy. Letter of Andrew Fuller to William Ward, dated Kettering, July 16th, 1809.

⁸ B.M.S. MSS. Letter of William Ward to Andrew Fuller, dated Serampore, December 15th, 1807.

⁹ B.M.S. MSS. Letter of Joshua Marshman to Andrew Fuller, dated Serampore, August 31st, 1811.

¹⁰ B.M.S. MSS. Letter of William Ward to John Ryland, dated Serampore, November 14th, 1815.

¹¹ "Union among Christians," *Friend of India*, September 7th, 1837, III, p. 283.