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English Strict Baptists

AS 1964 may prove, in the estimation of future historians, to be an important year in Strict Baptist history, it is perhaps timely to review the present state of the Strict and Particular Baptist Churches of England. A convenient way to begin such a task is to look at the three Strict Baptist monthly magazines which represent three distinct shades of opinion amongst Strict Baptists.

(a) *The Christian's Pathway*. Edited by Francis Joshua Kirby, the first issue was sent out in January, 1896 with the title, *The Christian's Pathway and Calvinistic Pulpit*. It superseded another magazine which had circulated for five years by the name of *The Calvinistic Pulpit*. In July 1911 a Supply List began to appear in the magazine "to meet the needs of Churches with the distinctive doctrines and ordinances maintained by Strict and Particular Baptist Churches." This List was made copyright and this copyright is still in private hands. At the head of this Supply List the following statement appears: "This Directory is for the use of Strict and Particular Baptist Churches, Preaching Places and Ministers holding and advocating the doctrine of the Eternal Sonship of the Lord Jesus Christ in His Divine Nature." (The reference to the Eternal Sonship was because of the controversy in Strict Baptist magazines of the nineteenth century on this subject.) The term "*Strict*" is said to mean that none but members of Churches of the same faith and order may be admitted to the Lord's Table. The term "*Particular*" refers to particular redemption. The 2,100 copies that are circulated each month are read in all parts of England for the Supply List has the names of chapels from most English counties. The usual contents are devotional and expository articles, news of chapels and events, obituaries and advertisements.

(b) *The Gospel Herald*. This was originally a Suffolk magazine begun by George Wright of Ipswich in 1833. In 1887 it was merged with *The Earthen Vessel*. (This had been a London magazine which had circulated since 1845. Its first editor had been C. W. Banks, a pastor and printer.) It became the property of the Metropolitan Association of Strict Baptist Churches, and it is now the official means of communication of the Churches that form this Association. Its contents are very similar to those of the previous magazine but perhaps not so conservative in outlook. Most of the 2,300 copies are read in the London area.

The basic difference between the two magazines is that *The*

Gospel Herald serves, in the main, Churches which would allow any baptised believer to partake of the Lord's Supper whereas *The Christian's Pathway* circulates, generally, amongst Churches which adopt the "same faith and order" rule or a slight variant of it.

(c) *The Gospel Standard*. John Gadsby began this magazine in 1835 to support and advocate the sentiments which were dear to his father, William Gadsby. One of the editors in the early years was J. C. Philpot, an Oxford graduate who left the Anglican Ministry. In 1878 the magazine became the property of the Gospel Standard Aid and Poor Relief Societies. (The Aid Society was founded in 1875 to help aged ministers. The Poor Relief Society was founded in 1878. The trustees of these Societies are usually termed the *Gospel Standard* Committee.) The chapels that make up the Supply List in the magazine account for the greater part of the 3,800 copies. The heading at the beginning of this List reads, "This list includes those ministers and Churches who have signified their adherence to the fundamental enrolled Articles of Faith of the *Gospel Standard* Societies. This embodies separation from all Strict Baptists who do not hold as essential those Articles, and it is expected that the solemn subscription and its implications will be honoured by all whose names appear, by loyalty to our distinctive position as a body of Churches." Apart from the news of chapels and events the rest of the space is taken up with sermons, devotional articles and obituaries.

A careful scrutiny of the three Supply Lists reveals much overlapping. The List or *The Christian's Pathway* contains 398 chapels. Of these 206 reappear in *The Gospel Standard* and 52 in *The Gospel Herald*.

There are three distinct Associations of Churches which must now be considered though it must be remembered that they account for only about one-quarter of the whole number of chapels.

(1) *The Metropolitan Association of Strict Baptist Churches*. In its present form this has existed since 1871. Between 1846 and 1853 two attempts had been made to form a London Association of Strict Baptists but both had failed. There are now sixty-one Churches in membership, thirty-nine of which have a pastor whilst the other twenty-two are served by itinerant ministers. There are forty-eight accredited itinerant ministers. The membership at the end of 1963 was 2,293, while 3,013 children attended the Sunday Schools. Until 1962 the area served by the Association was one of a thirty-mile radius from the centre of London. Now it has been decided to enlarge the area to include the counties of Essex, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex and Kent. It is hoped that more Churches will join the Association because of this. As has already been

noted, *The Gospel Herald* is the regular link within these Churches.

(2) *The Suffolk and Norfolk Association of Strict Baptist Churches.* This is the oldest Strict Baptist Association having been formed in 1829. There are forty-one Churches in membership, with 2,153 members, and 1,485 Sunday School children. Twenty-six Churches have a pastor and the others are usually served by the fifty-six itinerant ministers. (It is worth noting that the four Churches in Ipswich account for 1,014 members, 500 scholars, four pastors and twenty-six itinerant ministers.) As the names of twenty-five chapels appear in the Supply List of *The Gospel Herald* this may be taken as an indication of their attitude to admission to the Lord's Table.

(3) *The Cambridgeshire and East Midlands Union of Strict Baptist Churches.* In March 1927 a Union of twelve Cambridgeshire Churches was formed. In 1929 this became the Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire Union with thirteen Churches. In 1937 an extension took place again to form the Cambridgeshire and East Midlands Union having nineteen Churches in membership. The present number is twenty-one with two village preaching stations. There are 419 members, 459 Sunday School scholars, nine pastors and fourteen itinerant ministers. The names of thirteen chapels usually appear in the Supply List of *The Gospel Herald*.

In summary it may be said that the three Associations permit various rules concerning admittance to the Lord's Supper. Some Churches only allow members of Strict Baptist Churches to partake. Yet it is true to say that most of these Churches permit any baptized believer who is walking in the fear of God to partake.

Because they have subscribed to the Articles of Faith of the *Gospel Standard* Societies 228 Churches are usually thought of as a distinct grouping. To call them a group is rather misleading for there is no Association or Union and each Church is congregationally governed; also these Articles of Faith do not always appear in the trust deeds of the chapels. The tendency of these Churches to remain aloof goes back to the Sonship controversy in the nineteenth century when J. C. Philpot was editor of *The Gospel Standard*. This schism might have been healed by now had it not been for a meeting held in London in July 1934 when representatives of Churches that had subscribed to the above-mentioned Articles voted by a majority of 407 to 28, with some abstentions, to re-affirm their separated position.

The *Gospel Standard* Churches have sixty-three ministers, thirty-four being pastors, who have affirmed their adherence to the Articles of Faith. Four homes for old people are maintained in connection with the Aid and Poor Relief Societies as well as other Poor Funds. Individuals from these Churches tend to support

such organisations as the Lord's Day Observance Society, the Trinitarian Bible Society, and the Aged Pilgrims' Friend Society. A small proportion is willing to help the Strict Baptist Mission. For the young people the *Gospel Standard* Committee publish *The Friendly Companion*. This is a very conservative magazine having a circulation of 2,400.

The three regional Associations, together with the *Gospel Standard* Churches, account for 354 Churches. Of the remaining 102 Churches it can be said that their names appear in *The Christian's Pathway* and that they remain completely alone or that they support the Strict and Particular Baptist Trust Corporation. In 1958 this Corporation superseded the Strict and Particular Baptist Society which had existed since 1909. It enjoys sympathetic support from about 200 Churches, some of which are in the groupings already noted. The objects of this Corporation are to act as a corporate trustee for properties, to aid Churches financially, to give pensions and to promote the well-being of Strict Baptist Churches. Much influence is also exercised through the publication of the *Free Grace Record*, a quarterly magazine with a circulation of 1,400. This magazine seeks to advocate an evangelical Calvinism and shows little sympathy for hyper-Calvinism.

It is interesting to note at this point that the doctrinal basis of the regional Associations and the *Gospel Standard* Societies all deny Fullerism and "duty-faith." The Strict and Particular Baptist Society also had such a denial in its articles of faith but since the incorporation in 1958 this denial has been omitted. This omission perhaps indicates that there is a difference of opinion on this delicate matter within the Churches.

(1) There are three other Corporations set up solely to act as trustees of property and they are connected with the three regional Associations.

(2) There are two other small societies which help ministers and their dependents, the Strict Baptist Trust and the Strict and Particular Ministers' Help Society.

It has become clear that Strict Baptists have, as yet, no central organisation. Nevertheless there are at least four organisations that are helping to give a sense of unity to Strict Baptists because their activities are not limited to any one geographical area. To these attention must now be turned.

i. *The Strict Baptist Mission*. This was formed in 1861. The work is centred in Madras State although it is being extended to Tamil-speaking Indians elsewhere. The Mission staff comprises nine couples, six single women and one lady doctor. In England there are two full-time secretaries. The annual meetings draw a crowd of nearly two thousand people who come from all parts of

the country. One pleasing fact about the missionary work is that although the staff are from diverse Strict Baptist backgrounds they manage to work harmoniously together in India.

ii. *The National Strict Baptist Sunday School Association*. Founded in 1937 to give a sense of purpose to Sunday School work, it now provides teaching material, Scripture examinations, and other helpful aids, as well as maintaining a bookroom in London.

iii. *The Fellowship of Youth*. This has existed since 1934. Originally a London organisation it is now a national one. Regular rallies, houseparties, holidays and camps are held. Contact is maintained amongst the various localised groups through an attractive bi-monthly magazine *Floodlight*. It is helping to give a sense of solidarity to the young people of the denomination. Unfortunately it has little appeal amongst the very conservative Strict Baptists.

iv. *The Strict Baptist Historical Society*. This was formed in 1960 to encourage the study of Strict Baptist history. Representatives from all types of Strict Baptists sit on the committee. A useful library has been opened at Fulham to act as a repository for historical material. As very little research has been done in this history this library will be useful. The Society is now engaged in publishing a set of volumes entitled *Strict Baptist Chapels of England*.

Two other organisations also deserve a passing reference. They are the Strict Baptist Open-Air Mission and the National Strict Baptist Women's Fellowship. Though their appeal is confined to only a limited number on account of the nature of the organisations they are not limited to a single geographical area.

In this age of ecumenical feeling, when even evangelicals are feeling the need for unity in their own ranks, some of the nobler Strict Baptists have been trying to encourage unity in their own denomination. The National Strict Baptist Federation was formed in 1946 as a result of this desire for unity. It has now 110 Churches in membership, some of whom are already members of a regional Association. As an organisation it is separate from other organisations although it maintains cordial relationships with all. Though it has done a useful work in making representations on behalf of various chapels to Government departments, its work seems to be at a virtual standstill except that an annual meeting is held.

Though this Federation has not brought the desired unity, efforts have been renewed in recent years for the obtaining of such unity. At the invitation of the Metropolitan Association a prayer conference was held on September 11th, 1962, to which seventeen denominational organisations sent representatives. In November of that same year another meeting took place at which was

appointed a doctrinal panel whose task was to endeavour to formulate a doctrinal statement acceptable to all as a concise statement of Strict Baptist Beliefs. Another meeting took place in April 1963 when it was decided to call an Assembly of Strict Baptists to meet in London in 1964.

This Assembly took place on April 25th, 1964, in Angel Baptist Church, Chadwell Street, London. One hundred and fifty-two pastors and deacons assembled for the morning session, which was under the chairmanship of Pastor J. Thorpe. A paper was read by Pastor C. Sleeman entitled, "The New Testament Doctrine of the Local Church." He argued for the independency of the local Church but stressed the need for brotherly love to exist between Churches. In the afternoon session Mr. B. F. Ellis of Caterham read a paper which dealt with the practical application of the doctrine outlined in the morning to the present state of the denomination. Lively discussion followed and eventually it was agreed to call another Assembly to meet in April 1965. A panel was appointed to prepare the matters to be raised at this forthcoming Assembly. Most men present felt it had been a very useful day.

Various general statements may serve as a conclusion to this survey. The terminology used by all Strict Baptists may be described as Calvinistic yet one rarely hears sermons of really systematic doctrinal content, and because of this all sections are poorly instructed in the Calvinistic Faith which the term "Particular" implies. This may be due, in part, to an untrained ministry but may also be because recent years have seen a dearth of outstanding men in the ministry. If these Churches are to give the world a valid reason for their separate existence outside the Baptist Union, and to halt the decline of congregations and closure of chapels, something very drastic needs to happen. The prayer of those of all generations who are genuinely concerned about this sad state of affairs is that there will be a wholesome return to the doctrines which were held dear by the Particular Baptists who formulated the 1677 and 1689 Confessions of Faith. It is believed that by a return to such doctrine there will come reform, renewal and unity amongst the Churches.

A short book list of recent Strict Baptist historical literature.
R. Chambers. *The Strict Baptist Chapels of England.* Four volumes have been published.

Vol. I. Surrey and Hampshire.

Vol. II. Sussex.

Vol. III. Kent.

Vol. IV. Industrial Midlands.

London. n.d.

S. F. Paul : *Historical Sketch of the Gospel Standard Baptists.* London 1945.

S. F. Paul : *History of the Gospel Standard Baptists.* Four volumes have been published.

Vol. I. Some London Churches. 1951.

Vol. II. Some Sussex Churches. 1954.

Vol. III. Some Midland Churches. 1958.

Vol. IV. Some Northern Churches. 1961.

Published at Brighton.

J. K. Thorpe : *Other Sheep of the Tamil Fold.* London 1961.

H. A. Hyde : *The Warboys Baptists.* Warboys 1963.

R. G. Martin : *History of Zion Chapel Bedworth.* Bedworth 1955.

George Rose : *Remembered Mercies Recorded.* n.p. 1953.

All the above are available in the Evangelical Library, Chiltern Street, London, or in the Strict Baptist Historical Library, Fulham Strict Baptist Church.

P. TOON