

# Charles Williams of Accrington

## 1827—1907

CHARLES WILLIAMS' career and reputation, although by no means confined to, were definitely centred upon, the Lancashire industrial town of Accrington. It was from there that he wrought his life's work, and so, in effect, his ministry did not properly start until he was called to the Blackburn Road Baptist Church in 1851, and it was then that his formal training concluded. Despite his comparative youth, what was to follow in his fifty years of public life, had already been anticipated. Charles Williams of Accrington came to Accrington ready-made.

He was born in Bermondsey, London, on 15 July, 1827.<sup>1</sup> His father, an evangelistic deacon of the East Street Baptist Church, Walworth, who preached, not only in local villages, but also in workhouses and lodging houses, and who withdrew from the church because of its extreme Calvinism, gave to Williams a liberal and humane upbringing.<sup>2</sup> To this was added, in 1841, a commercial and administrative training in a six years' apprenticeship to an ironmonger in Farnham, Surrey.<sup>3</sup> It was here that his personal religious convictions were formed. Whilst serving as a Sunday School teacher in the local Congregational church, he was much disturbed by the faith shown by one of his scholars when dying, and a sermon on Justification by Faith later resolved his difficulties. It was this sermon that resulted in "my trusting the Saviour, and consecrating myself to His service," and in October 1846 he was baptized at the Church Street Chapel, Blackfriars. Immediately he entered the Newport Pagnell College for three years' ministerial training,<sup>4</sup> thus putting himself among those pastors of the Baptist denomination who had received formal preparation for the ministry.

The minister who finally emerged was thus a unique combination of various facets. Liberal in temperament, methodical in conduct, evangelical in experience, Baptist in conviction, and professional in training, he did indeed represent a new, and hitherto unknown, type of minister. His first pastorate indicated this. Aged only 23 years, he was called to Union Chapel, Hallaton, Leicester, in 1849.<sup>5</sup> He later recalled, "I was happier than a king or a millionaire in those days, though my stipend was only £50 a year, and I was minister of one of the smallest nonconformist churches in the county." The happiness came partly from the freedom he enjoyed, a freedom which permitted him to start lectures to workmen, and which allowed him to

pursue an energetic ministry. But it was not to last. So small was his stipend that from the beginning he had refused to be formally ordained, pleading that marriage would be impossible and would necessitate his removal. Progressively too he felt his sphere of activity was too narrow. Within eighteen months, his engagement, and a need for "more elbow room" made the termination of his temporary ministry inevitable. In 1850, he accepted a call to the industrial challenge of Accrington.<sup>6</sup>

The challenge, however, was not solely evangelistic. The denomination as a whole was struggling free from the restrictions of extremes of Calvinism and of Socinianism, which it had suffered in the eighteenth century. The revival of expansive religion was by 1850 well established in the North, but it was by no means complete, and Blackburn Road Baptist Church was the centre of one of the strongest pockets of resistance. A man of Williams' character and conviction was quite foreign to a congregation which, since 1825, had received a ministry with a Strict Baptist emphasis;<sup>7</sup> and yet the young pastor walked into the lions' den, fully aware of what he did. The church was in fact divided. A period of decline throughout the 1840s had seen the divisions gather round the former pastor, Joseph Harbottle, a convinced Strict Baptist, and David Griffiths, a local pastor and champion of open communion, both of whom served as the tutors of an experimental ministerial training academy in the town. Consequently when Williams was proposed as pastor, he received a deputation from the conservative members who requested that he allow Strict Baptist conventions to meet in the church, and that he refuse to mention open communion from the pulpit. Williams' resolute answer was that he would only follow the command of Christ and that the use of church premises rested with the church not the pastor. So unyielding was this reply that at a subsequent church meeting, a show of hands was inadequate to determine the resolution that his probation should be extended, and when, three weeks later, he was elected pastor, there remained a large minority opposed. There was strong advice that Williams should decline so inauspicious a call, but "on discovering that many . . . intended, if I did, to cease attending, I resolved to accept the office of pastor." His mission was thus not only to evangelize but also to liberalize.<sup>8</sup>

Inevitably, having set his hand to such a plough, Williams found for the next fourteen years that the ground was fraught with "difficulties and obstacles which seemed to block the way"; "it was a terrible time."<sup>9</sup> His troubles were various. The Strict Baptists resented his youth and his ministry alike. Typical of the constant humiliation and frustration he endured was the public accusation by one member that he was not preaching the gospel, and that God willed his instant dismissal. For seven years another member turned his back on him when ever he appeared in the pulpit; and another refused to shake hands.<sup>10</sup> There is also evidence of non-attendance and a refusal to continue monetary support.<sup>11</sup> Yet parochial difficulties took on a

larger context in 1858, when local churches, led by Harbottle, asked the county Association to condemn a sermon he had preached to it;<sup>12</sup> when the *Baptist Magazine* condemned him nationally because in his sermon "a theory is propounded respecting the atonement and sacrifice of Christ different to that of the denomination and association to which he belongs";<sup>13</sup> when sixteen members of his own church seceded to form a separate cause in the town;<sup>14</sup> and when a North Western Association was formed as a breakaway group from the rest of the Baptist churches, largely as a result of his ministry.<sup>15</sup>

Yet these embarrassments were not the wounds suffered in defeat, but were rather the price of victory, for during the years of relentless opposition, Williams was far from assuming a passive role. His aim was progressive and constructive. When his doctrine was criticized by the *Baptist Magazine*, he wrote an article in his own defence entitled "Human Consciousness and the Bible,"<sup>16</sup> and by this he reveals the substance of his personal campaign. He begins by protesting his own orthodoxy with regard to the Bible, in that "I fully concede to it an absolute supremacy" for "in the Bible we have the word of God." Further he asserts that human consciousness, by which he means human ability to perceive unaided divine truth, is inferior to Scripture as an authority, because biblical truths and facts are supernatural and natural intelligence "could not have found them out, and finds it difficult to understand them." Nevertheless, though subordinate, human consciousness is not to be eliminated; it supplements the Bible; "... consciousness and the Bible cannot be rivals. Alike speaking the word of God, each delivers a message peculiar to itself." It was this last hypothesis that enshrined the essence of Williams' mission. As he wrote in 1866, "We cannot believe without exercising reason. And if we could it would be folly to attempt to do it. We want no unreasonable beliefs. Heaven has no need to dread the light of earth; God and his word do not shun the searching eye of the keenest intellect. On the contrary, Divine revelation calls forth all our faculties, and finds employment for all our powers. When the understanding is strong and vigorous, when the imagination is active and bright, when the judgment is well informed and skilful, when the will is most under the dominion of reason, we are best fitted to form religious beliefs."<sup>17</sup> In short, Williams was campaigning for a further realization of human potential and responsibility. By doing so, he cut right across traditional thought and practice. Strict Baptist adherence to close communion and Divine election frustrated effective evangelism. Williams sought to overthrow such short-sighted dogma by establishing common-sense as an integral part of vital and expanding New Testament Christianity.

And despite the discomfort he was forced to suffer, he did not fail. The viciousness, and the extent, of the attacks to which he was subjected, were but a consequence of the success he achieved; they were the assaults of desperation, as Williams gradually won the day. Despite the insults of individual members and the secession of 1858, his church remained loyal. In November 1858, the majority of the Blackburn

Road church made a public presentation to him, "in estimation of the services he had rendered";<sup>18</sup> in July 1859, the church at Oswaldtwistle, taking up the cause of the seceders, was told that their allegations were "entirely false";<sup>19</sup> and at Easter 1860, when the church celebrated its centenary, Williams was so much master of his own house that, in a lecture on the congregation's history, he was openly critical of events under Strict Baptist ministry, and claimed that since 1851, all he had achieved was to recover ground then lost.<sup>20</sup> The Lancashire and Cheshire Association of Baptist Churches also remained loyal. The politics of the situation were largely responsible for the refusal to condemn Williams' doctrine,<sup>21</sup> but it is indicative that the Association, in the same session as criticism of Williams was submitted to it, appointed him as its new Moderator.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the denomination remained loyal. The *Baptist Magazine*, whilst it condemned his doctrine of the atonement, still defended him against more extravagant accusations;<sup>23</sup> the *Baptist Reporter* published details of a debate he held in September 1858 with the Rev. Dr. J. Baylee, Principal of St. Aidan's Theological College, Birkenhead.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the greatest testimony to Williams' triumph eventually came in 1864. A Presbyterian, T. Wallace, who had removed from Manchester, in applying for permission to join in communion, necessitated a revision of the Blackburn Road Constitution. Such a revision would have meant final recognition of Williams' teaching. However, the voting was exactly equal, leaving the decision with the pastor. Williams could not support the motion because no change ought to be made without a clear majority, nor could he oppose the proposal, for he believed it to be right. As a result, "that I might not be a party to what I deemed savoured of unfaithfulness to the Saviour," he resigned, without an alternative pastorate to which to go, choosing to leave his church, of its own volition, to respond to his teaching. Even before his new ministry was negotiated, the church had done so. The opposition had been overcome, and evangelism and liberalism accepted as the norm.<sup>25</sup>

Two facets of Williams' career had thus emerged by 1864, facets which marked him as a representative of contemporary developments in the nonconformist world. Firstly, he cut through traditional creeds and sought to replace them by an "aggressive" code which was geared to the evangelization of the country. Because the Victorian Era was the great era of dissent, it is too readily assumed that the existence of nonconformist churches was a prerequisite to power. In fact, social and political influence were simultaneous with an expansion in the churches, and dissenters played a part in a society which had not yet come to accept them, but which was in the process of doing so. Nonconformist power was the consequence of a growing, not an established, position. Williams' personal battles against the crippling dogmas of the Strict Baptists were an essential part of this general religious rethinking that produced the rise of dissent.

Secondly, Williams represents the independence and self-reliance of the Victorian dissenters. With nothing upon which to rely, other than

his own resources, he had to take action constructively, determinately, and resolutely. He had to badger his church into a recognition of the truths he preached, and he had to add to the numerical strength of the church membership, for that alone was his only hope of survival as a pastor. He had to ignore the difficulties with which he was confronted, for the local Association of Baptist Churches and the Baptist Union were too undeveloped to offer aid and encouragement to a beleaguered pastor. There was nothing Williams could appeal to for vindication, except success. His precarious circumstances rendered him perforce the epitome of Victorian liberalism, a self-made example of triumphant self-help. This was, of course, largely a matter of character with him. It had been so at Hallaton; it proved so again between 1864 and 1869 when he was pastor to the church in Southampton. There, after five years "joyous" and profitable service, he became "afraid lest I should become too self-indulgent, lest I should lose energy and spring, lest I should prefer ease to strenuousness." Consequently, thinking "the North a better field for vigorous and aggressive work," he resigned, again without a new pastorate to which to go.<sup>20</sup> Within weeks, Blackburn Road, Accrington, learned of his availability, and on 30 November, 1869, he was back as pastor in an environment that suited his personality.

This recall to Accrington was, of course, his final justification. It was a public acknowledgment that he had been right all along, and from this point his career becomes the implementation of his ideas. His church was made an evangelistic centre, as is evidenced by its expansion in the following years. Church membership grew. In 1850 it stood at 224;<sup>27</sup> in 1901, when Williams retired after 50 years' ministry, it had reached 625,<sup>28</sup> together with an independent cause established at Church in 1870,<sup>29</sup> and flourishing missions at Woodnook and Clayton-le-Moors.<sup>30</sup> In the first twenty-five years of his association with the church, the Sunday School increased from 74 teachers and 660 scholars to 133 teachers and 1,154 scholars.<sup>31</sup> To accommodate these growing numbers, constant changes were made in the church building. In 1855, renovations costing £322 put new open pews in place of the old square ones, built a vestry for weeknight meetings, and installed a new organ behind the pulpit.<sup>32</sup> In 1860, so great was the pressure on the Sunday School that it was forced to use the chapel for its activities, and in 1864, new premises were opened in nearby Willow Street. Even this was inadequate, and in 1874, a further infant-room and lecture hall were added.<sup>33</sup> In the same year, the whole church moved from the "old damp-looking chapel"<sup>34</sup> to new buildings on the school's site, thereby occupying an entire block of land at the corner of Willow Street and Cannon Street, and henceforth taking its name from the latter of these. The new premises were quite exceptional in their sophistication, and were architectural as distinct from merely functional structures, boasting a 131-foot spire, seating 1,000,<sup>35</sup> and costing altogether £12,000.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the greatest testimony to the significance of this expansion of Williams' church is that by 1894,

1,575 children attended its day school, using the Sunday School premises.<sup>87</sup> Numerical increase and improved facilities were witness of a successful pastorate.

But if Williams represented expanding nonconformity at the parochial level, he also reflected the emergence of organized dissenting co-operation. He played a large part in the effective construction of denominational machinery at county and national levels; while he built up his church, he also built up the Baptist Union and the Lancashire and Cheshire Association of Baptist Churches. The offices he held in these bodies are a measure of the influence he had within them. He was Secretary of the Association from 1871 to 1879, Moderator in 1882,<sup>88</sup> and the writer of three Circular Letters.<sup>89</sup> From 1868 to his death, he was an active committee member of the Baptist Missionary Society, visiting, on its behalf, India in 1901-2, and the West Indies in 1904. In 1886, he was President of the Baptist Union,<sup>40</sup> an office he declined when it was again offered to him in 1899.<sup>41</sup> Paradoxically, although honours came to him in the Union later, it was there that he pioneered co-operation, before applying the same principles to the Association.

Perhaps because Southampton failed to tax his ability, it was while banished there that Williams first showed his desire for collective action, in a denomination whose polity was based on congregational autonomy.<sup>42</sup> Having achieved no more than an annual income of £90 and a programme comprising only one annual assembly, at its Jubilee in 1863, the Baptist Union began a movement for reform by appointing J. H. Millard as its new Secretary,<sup>43</sup> and it was to this movement that Williams contributed reality and purpose. From 1867<sup>44</sup> to 1872 he established a Pastors' Income Augmentation Fund, which within five years was distributing £1,500 annually throughout the denomination, in a united effort to raise the smallest stipends.<sup>45</sup> Because of his success in pioneering this fund, in 1875, the Union elected to entrust him with the inauguration of a second co-operative experiment, an Annuity Fund, which was to provide for sick and aged pastors and their dependants.<sup>46</sup> This time the task was more complex, for it necessitated the amalgamation of such private funds as already existed, but within twelve months Williams had raised £30,000, and held out the promise of a further £20,000 before the current year ended.<sup>47</sup> Charles Williams thus figured prominently in the building of a purposeful denominational society.

It was as a direct result of his achievements in such collective enterprise that, in 1871, a London Baptist Association came into existence, after he had addressed the Union on the benefits of co-operation;<sup>48</sup> and so, with his recall to Accrington, it was inevitable that he should also assume an authoritative role in the local Association. Williams was largely responsible for turning the Lancashire and Cheshire Association of Baptist Churches into a flexible organization which at once both reflected the wishes of its member churches, and also integrated their separate activities. Because co-operation was foreign to Baptist polity, the Association, formed in 1837, had not drawn up any composite set

of regulations until 1851.<sup>49</sup> Even then, these quickly became unsatisfactory, and in 1861,<sup>50</sup> in 1864,<sup>51</sup> and in 1869,<sup>52</sup> serious efforts had been made to render the Association more acceptable. This problem remained unsolved, when, his reputation as a master of organization rising in the denomination, Williams returned from Southampton. Within two years he was Secretary, the only permanent office in the Association, and under his regime a solution was found. In 1872 he negotiated the reorganization of the central committee on a district basis,<sup>53</sup> thus giving the local churches direct representation and the united body local authority. In 1873 he succeeded in bringing all the diverse activities of the Association under the supervision of the newly-formed general and representative committee.<sup>54</sup> Again in 1880, at his instigation, this central committee was made yet more flexible and responsive to local demands by the creation of a small Council of Reference, elected representatively by each district and empowered to deal with matters arising outside normal routine.<sup>55</sup>

Here again Williams' career touches upon an essential element of contemporary nonconformist life, the emergence of strongly supported and effectively administered denominational institutions. But he was typical in a far deeper sense than this. Although the dissenting bodies were primarily concerned with evangelism and expansion, and although this found expression in new efficient denominational organization, between the various communions there was little faction and sectarian spirit. By 1872, nonconformists were acting and speaking as one, in Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool and London,<sup>56</sup> and Williams himself illustrates this tendency. He knew precisely what he believed, and was sufficiently sure of his convictions to challenge an Anglican theologian to a public debate on baptism,<sup>57</sup> and to produce a standard manual on Baptist teaching.<sup>58</sup> Yet in both these cases, any dogmatic statement of sectarian polemic is wanting. The public debate held in a large cotton mill at Church near Accrington, in September 1858, was opened by Williams with the statement that this was not a meeting of antagonists, but of two, who believing the Bible to be the word of God, wanted to elucidate and to follow its truth.<sup>59</sup> The sincerity of this was shown by Rev. Dr. Baylee in his reply, which began with the announcement that he and Williams had spent time together in prayer before the debate began.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Williams gives a preface to his Manual which upholds Scripture and not denomination as the authority in doctrine,<sup>61</sup> and he concludes, "Baptists are characterized by strongly marked individualism. . . . Each professes to receive from the Lord, as he speaks in the New Testament, his beliefs; and every man claims independence that he may by wholly devoted to the Lord his Saviour." Thus the basis of his ecumenical spirit emerges: the individual is all-important, and there must be freedom of faith and an absence of destructive contention. Very early in his ministry, he refused to be drawn into the theoretical differences of the Calvinists and Arminians.<sup>62</sup> In 1860, at his church's centenary, he told the congregation, "I am no bigot," and proceeded to list the Roman Catholics, the Episcopalians,

the Covenanters, the Presbyterians, the Independents, the Puritans, the Methodists, from whom he had learned.<sup>63</sup> In 1869, on his return to Accrington, his first task was to negotiate the reunion of the Lancashire and the North Western Associations,<sup>64</sup> which had parted for sectarian reasons in 1860. In 1871, he publicly rebuked the Bishop of Manchester for referring to religious bitterness in Accrington, and illustrated the inter-denominational co-operation of Anglicans, Dissenters and Catholics.<sup>65</sup> As President of the Baptist Union, in his first address from the chair in 1886, he issued a plea for union between the divisions of the denomination,<sup>66</sup> and as a result, in 1891, the New Connexion Baptists united with the Particular Baptists.<sup>67</sup> Because Christianity was a personal faith, Williams had no time for narrow doctrinal differences, but throughout his life worked for co-operation in the spread of the gospel to individuals.

Yet this ought not to obscure the reality of Williams' wholehearted devotion to his own denomination. Like so many Victorian nonconformists, he was at one and the same time, both catholic and sectarian. This was true of his early life. Before entering the ministry in 1849, he had been a Methodist Sunday School Scholar, a pupil at an Anglican private school in Bedford, a member of a Congregational Church, and a student at a college which he himself described as "pan-denominational." Yet, of conviction, and in spite of his pastor's opposition, he was baptised by immersion in a Baptist church.<sup>68</sup> Throughout life the contradiction continued. It is explained by the nature of his religion. For him, the Christian faith was personal and individual. As he explained in 1878:—

"I profess to be a denominationalist; I hope to God I may never be a sectarian. I love the Baptists, as well I may, but I love them far more for what I see of Christ in them than I do because they are Baptists; and when I see Christ in others I try to love them equally well, because love of Jesus demands that we love all alike."<sup>69</sup>

It was allegiance to Christ that was his motive force, and he learned of Christ through the Bible, obedience to which was the Christian's consummate duty. "Not man, but God, not human tradition, but Divinely-inspired Scripture, should direct and control the Christian in his beliefs and conduct. Religion should be wholly and exclusively Divine."<sup>70</sup> Thus in his Presidential Address to the Baptist Union entitled "A Plea for Puritanism," he said:

"I do not ask you to reproduce the Puritan of the seventeenth or any other century. Be yourself. All I ask is that we should be faithful to God and conscience, as heroic in life and faith, as devoted to duty, as real and spiritual as were the Puritans whom we delight to honour,"<sup>71</sup>

With this creed, he naturally welcomed, and co-operated with, all who sought to follow the teaching of Christ as found in the Scripture; and precisely for the same reason, he remained a determined Baptist, because, if he was not to betray his reason and conscience, he had to



admit that to him the denomination's interpretation of baptism was the one that reflected correctly biblical teaching.

What Williams called his evangelicalism united him with fundamentalists of all sects, and also made him a stalwart of his own denomination. This also explains how from being a successful Baptist pastor, his career developed beyond leadership in the Baptist world into a prominence among dissenters generally. As religion was a vital experience of the biblical Christ, it must be free, voluntary and purely spiritual; against this, establishment operated, and it frustrated the progress of Christianity in general. Williams, therefore, was duty bound to enter political life in the cause of disestablishment. In this he was at all times resolute.<sup>72</sup> The politics to which he devoted himself were centred upon this issue, and that because it was an extension of his own personal religion. His views, however, were also formed by the bitterness of his pastoral experience, which convinced him that the establishment of the Church of England was not so much unjust, but directly destructive of spiritual vitality. When he was at Hallaton, a service he was conducting at a mission station was interrupted by the local rector, who challenged his right to preach in the parish; and on another occasion, an Anglican landlord forbade a tenant to supply bricks for the building of a mission hall.<sup>73</sup> In Accrington, he witnessed the incumbent of Altham Chapelry resort to legal proceedings to exact his Easter Dues,<sup>74</sup> and later the clergy, fearing to levy rates, failed to rebuild the parish church by voluntary subscription.<sup>75</sup> During the 1868 campaign for the disestablishment of the Irish Church, he was subject to public slander, threatening letters, and, on one occasion, an attempt on his life.<sup>76</sup> To a devotee of biblical christianity, there was ample evidence of the invidious results of establishment.

So Williams became "the champion of Lancashire Liberationism."<sup>77</sup> From 1847, he attended annual meetings of the Liberation Society.<sup>78</sup> In 1856, he became vitally involved in the campaign against Easter Dues in Accrington. First by negotiation, later by litigation, and finally by blatant demagogic organisation, he attempted, ultimately successfully, to frustrate the clergy's imposition of their legal rights.<sup>79</sup> During the agitation for Irish Disestablishment that centred upon the 1868 election, he conducted a personal three year campaign in the form of public lectures,<sup>80</sup> to deliver which he periodically left Southampton and returned North.<sup>81</sup>

But, despite his vital involvement in this issue, Williams' conduct needs heavy qualification before it is fully explained. Strong as his convictions, and resolute as his actions, undoubtedly were, they nevertheless were not vindictive. Being part of his life work of increasing spiritual experience in terms of biblical faith, he genuinely sought, not the destruction of the Anglican Church, but its betterment. It was establishment, not the church, that he wanted to destroy. He admitted that as a youth he "became a convinced and thorough dissenter, a determined and enthusiastic anti-State Churchman, a pronounced radical, sympathetic even with the Chartist, and often wondered why

the people were not more resolved and active in their antagonism to the Corn Laws, the Established Church, and the domineering of the few over the many."<sup>82</sup> But this was before his conversion and call to the ministry. His deeds thereafter do not reflect his early extremism. Even the Tory *Preston Herald*, in a critical article of 1885, is not condemnatory. It began by stating, "He has borne the brunt of the battle on behalf of the doctrine of Disestablishment in Lancashire for more than twenty years. He has rested not day or night for a generation in working to overthrow the union of Church and State," but it concluded with an admission that he is no sectarian bigot.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, there were no grounds for such an accusation—he was too liberal and tolerant. At the ninth triennial conference of the Liberation Society in 1871, he carried a resolution which exempted from disestablishment any episcopalian churches provided by churchmen themselves. The argument upon which his case rested was that if this were not done, then Anglicans would be denied the principle of voluntarism which the Nonconformists wanted accepted.<sup>84</sup> Again when the Accrington parish clergy abortively attempted to build their church by voluntary subscriptions, Williams offered to raise contributions from dissenters to pay for the tower, clock and bells, if the Anglicans would provide the rest.<sup>85</sup> Thus, in precisely the same way as Charles Williams the Baptist was liberal in his relations with other denominations, so Charles Williams the Liberationist was equitable and liberal towards his political opponents.

From this discussion of his campaign for disestablishment emerge two further considerations which explain the nature of his other political interests. The first is that he sought in government the creation of equality and freedom, with its concomitant of personal duty and responsibility. The second is that these principles were derived directly from the religion which he practiced, and as such were but peripheral extensions of what was his main concern, personal experimental faith. As a result, the substance of his politics in general, outside of disestablishment, were vague and generalised. In the final analysis, he did not believe human problems were capable of political solutions; they could be resolved by the Christian Gospel, and politics were to be invoked only in so far as they encouraged and advanced the dissemination of faith. Christianity was of more immediate social significance than politics. In 1873 Williams wrote. "Only faith in a loving God can save you from overthrow in the battle-field of life."<sup>86</sup> In 1906 he stated,

" . . . however strong my conviction might be as to the supremacy of the spiritual in the work of a Christian minister . . . , I regard it as also his duty to help youth and even older people in the culture of their minds, the increase of their knowledge, and in their recreations. Indeed, I felt and feel strongly that, except the spiritual effects the intellectual and the social and purifies the pleasures of life, it necessarily leaves a large part of a man's soul in the possession of the enemy."<sup>87</sup>

Nor were these vague sentiments. He had seen the social significance of the Gospel. "I never fully realised the value of religion, what Christ

can do for the poor, until I saw the effect of faith, of hope, of charity in the Cotton Famine."<sup>88</sup> Hence it is not surprising that much of his ministry was devoted to education and to temperance.<sup>89</sup>

For Williams then politics were not of paramount importance. Equally though they were no mere optional extra. They could, if properly directed, be a crucial means of reinforcing the sociological mission of his biblical christianity, and, therefore, they became for him a matter of principle. Thus Edward Miall and John Bright were his political teachers, as from them he claimed to have learned "to apply principles fearlessly, and not to permit prejudice against, or unreasonable dissent from, others to prevent me from conceding to them the rights which I claimed for myself."<sup>90</sup> And the generalised principles to which he gave support were equality and personal freedom. For this reason he was a steadfast supporter of the Liberal Party, especially after Gladstone had joined the Palmerstonian ranks. In due course, he became, like the rest of his co-religionists, a disciple of the Grand Old Man, whom he described as "a sincere minded, high-souled and really gifted man,"<sup>91</sup> and from 1868 onwards, at elections, he gave his energies "above all things else to keep Mr. Gladstone in his present place at the head of affairs . . . so that the Queen may have an honest Premier to counsel her, and not a man without principle or a policy of his own."<sup>92</sup> To this extent, Williams allowed his political life to be generalised; and he was content to support policies of which he approved, but not to take the initiative, not to organise and direct.

If, however, his principles were betrayed, he did abandon this reserve. When Accrington was disturbed by Trades Union strikes in the 1850s and 1860s, Williams assisted the intimidated families of employers, but also organized chapel funds for workers who themselves suffered through industrial action; and in four public lectures, in the Town Hall in 1859, on "Labour, Capital and Wages," he castigated equally both sides in the disputes.<sup>93</sup> During the Cotton Famine, he lectured extensively in Lancashire on the emancipation of American slaves.<sup>94</sup> In November, 1868, at Haslingden, he summarised his personal campaign for Irish Disestablishment:

"The case of the disestablishment of the Irish Established Church lay in a nut shell. One eighth of the population of Ireland were Protestant Episcopalians, six eights Roman Catholics, and the rest Dissenters. He would ask any rational Englishman if he thought one eighth of the people should be the national church—the church patronised and supported by the State."<sup>95</sup>

In 1872, a General Conference of the National Nonconformist Association assembled in Manchester to consider what action to take in the light of its general disenchantment with Gladstone's first ministry.<sup>96</sup> Williams was appointed to read a paper on "State Grants to Denominational Day Schools," and, in it, he expressed no sympathy with the threats of rebellion that had been made, but contented himself with arguments in defence of equality,<sup>97</sup> showing that the Education Act

of 1870 had only served to continue a system favourable to Anglican schools, and insisting that state aid ought to be dispensed to schools offering secular education under public management.<sup>98</sup> He was active also in support of repeal of University religious tests,<sup>99</sup> and, in 1881, initiated the co-operation of the Baptist Union with the Dissenting Deputies and the Liberation Society, over further improvement of the Dissenters' Marriage Act.<sup>100</sup> Still, the fact remains that these sallies into political activity are the exceptions. For the most part, provided religious freedom and equality were progressively realised, as the Liberal tide advanced, he was passive in his acquiescence.

Charles Williams hereby illustrates succinctly an important facet of Victorian Dissent. Too eagerly have non-conformists been accredited with direct political involvement, and, as a result, a significant historical fact has been obscured. Dissenters were divided, perhaps not precisely into evangelicals and non-evangelicals, but certainly into evangelists and others; and it was the non-evangelistic sects which for the most part were the politically active Non-conformists. As R. G. Cowherd admits, "Unencumbered with dogma and lacking Evangelical enthusiasm, the Unitarians devoted themselves to the pursuit of those temporal rewards which the Evangelicals presumed to disdain."<sup>101</sup> To them could be added the Quakers, but certainly for the majority of Dissenters, evangelism was the prime concern, a conclusion borne out by statistics of denominational growth.<sup>102</sup> Among these Evangelicals, Williams takes a predominant place, and typifies them in so many ways—in his own church, in his denomination, and in his locality. Yet the heart of his whole career was his pastorate. Whatever else he did stemmed first from Blackburn Road Chapel and later from Cannon Street Church. In 1878, the Baptist Union made a presentation to him and to his church, for the services he had rendered to the whole denomination. At his request, the ceremony was postponed at the Union's autumn session, and instead took place on 24th October in the Cannon Street Church, when Hugh Stowell Brown as President, H. S. Booth as Secretary, Sir Morton Peto as lay leader, and the Rev. Dr. Alexander McLaren as a pastor, made up the deputation.<sup>103</sup> There could have been no more symbolic an occasion. The Baptists, in effect, acknowledged that Charles Williams was what he was nationally because of what he was in his own ministry. What happened in the church over which he was pastor grew into the tree of his whole public life. For him, theology, personal conduct, denomination, nonconformity, politics, social affairs, were all subordinated to the most important task of all, bringing men and women into a new or a deeper faith in the Bible and its Saviour. He told the students at Manchester Baptist College in 1886:

"More responsibilities and graver rest upon Christian ministers than upon sovereigns and statesmen, upon legislators or judges. The saving of souls of men from sin, the perfecting of men in the will of God, the preparing of men for the life beyond death, I take to be, whether looked at in the light of the present or the future, the greatest work in which anyone can engage."<sup>104</sup>

In these words he expressed the priorities of his own life, and his life was the epitome of Victorian Evangelical Dissent.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> R. J. V. Wylie, *The Baptist Churches of Accrington and District*, Accrington, 1923, p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> *Baptist Magazine*, Vol. LXXVIII (New Series Vol. I), 1866—p. 242.

<sup>3</sup> *Baptist Handbook*, 1908—p. 495.

<sup>4</sup> *Baptist Magazine*, Vol. LXXVIII (New Series Vol. I), 1886—p. 243.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2665, 9th March, 1906, p. 173 and No. 2671, 20th April, 1906, p. 283.

<sup>7</sup> There was no continuous ministry from 1825 to 1851 at Blackburn Road, but the presiding genius was Rev. Joseph Harbottle, who was pastor to 1840, and then remained greatly involved in the church as a Tutor of a Strict Baptist Academy in the town from 1841 to 1849. See Wylie, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> Wylie, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>10</sup> *Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2671, 20th April, 1906, p. 283.

<sup>11</sup> Wylie, *op. cit.*, p. 303-4.

<sup>12</sup> Manuscript Minutes, Lancashire & Cheshire Association of Baptist Churches, 27th May, 1858, 2.00 p.m.

<sup>13</sup> *Baptist Magazine*, Vol. XLIX (Series V. Vol. I), 1857, pp. 631-2.

<sup>14</sup> Wylie, *op. cit.*, pp. 302-304.

<sup>15</sup> Circular Letter, North Western Association, 1861, pp. 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> *Baptist Magazine*, Vol. L (Series V, Vol. II), 1858, pp. 15ff.

<sup>17</sup> *The Church*, New Series, Vol. IX, 1866, pp. 36-37.

<sup>18</sup> *The Baptist Reporter and Missionary Intelligencer*, New Series, Vol. XVI, Whole Series, Vol. XXXIII, 1859, p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> Wylie, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Williams, *The Baptists in Accrington, Lancashire: A brief history of the Church and Congregation worshipping in Blackburn Road Chapel*, Accrington, 1860, pp. 17-18.

<sup>21</sup> *The Primitve Church Magazine*, Vol. XV, New Series, 1858, p. 178.

<sup>22</sup> Ms. Minutes Lancashire & Cheshire Association, 26th May, 1858.

<sup>23</sup> *Baptist Magazine*, Vol. XLIX (Series V. Vol. I), 1857, pp. 631-2.

<sup>24</sup> *The Baptist Reporter and Missionary Intelligencer*, New Series, Vol. XV, Whole Series, Vol. XXXII, 1858, pp. 361ff.

<sup>25</sup> *The Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2688, 3rd August, 1906, p. 566.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 2704, 30th November, 1906, p. 872.

<sup>27</sup> A. H. Stockwell, *The Baptist Churches of Lancashire*, London, n.d., p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Baptist Handbook*, 1908, p. 496.

<sup>29</sup> W. T. Whitley, *Baptists of North West England, 1649-1913*, London and Preston, 1913, p. 325.

<sup>30</sup> *Accrington Times*, No. 380, 21st March, 1874, p. 5, and No. 620, 26th October, 1878, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Wylie, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153. It subsequently became a billiard hall.

<sup>35</sup> *Baptist Handbook*, 1872, p. 271.

<sup>36</sup> Wylie, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>38</sup> Circular Letter, Lancashire and Cheshire Association of Baptist Churches, 1882, p. 10.

<sup>39</sup> *Accrington Observer and Times*, No. 2483, 30th March, 1907, p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> *Baptist Handbook*, 1908, p. 496.

<sup>41</sup> Wylie, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Williams, *The Principles and Practices of the Baptists; A Book for Inquirers*, London, 1879, pp. 69ff.

<sup>43</sup> A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, London, 1947, pp. 211-13.

<sup>44</sup> *Baptist Handbook*, 1877, p. 165.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 1873, p. 59.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 1876, pp. 67 and 69.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 1877, p. 85.

<sup>48</sup> Whitley, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

<sup>49</sup> Circular Letter, Lancashire and Cheshire Association, 1851, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Ms. Minutes of Lancashire and Cheshire Association, Wed., 22nd May, 1861, 2.15 p.m., Resol. 6.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, Thurs., 19th May, 1864, 2.30 p.m. Resol. 5.

<sup>52</sup> Circular Letter, Lancashire and Cheshire Association, 1869, pp. 4-5.

<sup>53</sup> Ms. Minutes of Lancashire and Cheshire Association, Wed., 12th June, 1872, 2.00 p.m., Resols. 3 and 4.

<sup>54</sup> Ms. Minutes of the County Home Mission of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association, 12th June, 1873.

<sup>55</sup> Circular Letter, Lancashire and Cheshire Association, 1880, p. 15, Resol. 2.

<sup>56</sup> *General Conference of Nonconformists held in Manchester, January 23rd, 24th and 25th, 1872*, Authorised Report of Proceedings, Manchester and London, 1872, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Rev. Dr. J. Baylee and Rev. Charles Williams, *Discussion on Infant Baptism and the Scripturalness of the Baptismal Services of the Church of England*, Manchester, 1858.

<sup>58</sup> This book has been quoted above, viz., Charles Williams, *The Principles and Practices of the Baptists*.

<sup>59</sup> *The Baptist Reporter and Missionary Intelligencer*, New Series, Vol. XV, Whole Series, Vol. XXXII, pp. 361-2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Williams, *Principles and Practices of the Baptists*, pp. i-iv.

<sup>62</sup> Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Williams, *The Baptists in Accrington, Lancashire*, pp. 30-1.

<sup>64</sup> Whitley, *op. cit.*, p. 207. The full details of Williams' personal contribution to and responsibility for the reunion can be traced in the extant minute books and records of the local Baptist organisations.

<sup>65</sup> Wylie, *op. cit.*, pp. 162-3.

<sup>66</sup> *Baptist Handbook*, 1887, pp. 17ff.

<sup>67</sup> Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

<sup>68</sup> *The Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2659, 26th January, 1906, p. 57.

<sup>69</sup> *The Freeman*, 1st November, 1878, p. 551.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Williams, *The Principles and Practices of the Baptists*, p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> *Baptist Handbook*, 1887, p. 34.

<sup>72</sup> The year before he died, he was still writing, "Would not Episcopalians lose little more than corruption and feebleness and worldliness, and gain spirituality and strength and influence by Disestablishment?" (*Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2680, 22nd June, 1906, p. 449). And, in fact, he suffered the accident that caused his death, while attending a Liberationist meeting in the Manchester Free Trade Hall. (*Accrington Observer and Times*, No. 2483, 30th March, 1907, pp. 8-9.)

<sup>73</sup> *Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2665, 9th March, 1906, p. 173.

<sup>74</sup> Wylie, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-5.

<sup>75</sup> *Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2688, 3rd March, 1906, p. 568.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 2697, 19th October, 1906, p. 748.

<sup>77</sup> *The Freeman*, 13th March, 1885, p. 168.

<sup>78</sup> *Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2661, 9th February, 1906, p. 93.

<sup>79</sup> Wylie, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-7.

<sup>80</sup> *Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2697, 19th October, 1906, p. 748.

- <sup>81</sup> *Preston Guardian*, No. 1653, 10th October, and No. 1661, 7th November, 1868.
- <sup>82</sup> *Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2658, 26th January, 1906, p. 57.
- <sup>83</sup> *The Freeman*, 13th March, 1885, p. 168.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 5th May, 1871, p. 219.
- <sup>85</sup> *Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2688, 3rd August, 1906, p. 566.
- <sup>86</sup> *The Church*, New Series XXI, 1873, p. 283.
- <sup>87</sup> *Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2667, 23rd March, 1906, p. 203.
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 2684, 20th July, 1906, p. 528.
- <sup>89</sup> *Accrington Observer and Times*, No. 2483, 30th March, 1907, p. 8.
- <sup>90</sup> *Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2669, 6th April, 1906, p. 244.
- <sup>91</sup> *Preston Guardian*, No. 1661, 7th November, 1868, p. 3.
- <sup>92</sup> *Accrington Times*, No. 374, 7th February, 1874, p. 8.
- <sup>93</sup> *Baptist Times*, Vol. LII, No. 2682, 6th July, 1906, p. 494.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 2688, 3rd August, 1906, p. 566.
- <sup>95</sup> *Preston Guardian*, No. 1661, 7th November, 1868, p. 3.
- <sup>96</sup> *General Conference of Nonconformists, held in Manchester, January 23rd, 24th and 25th, 1872*, Authorised Report of Proceedings, pp. 181ff.
- <sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 147-9.
- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153-4.
- <sup>99</sup> *Accrington Observer and Times*, No. 2483, 30th March, 1907, p. 3.
- <sup>100</sup> *Baptist Handbook*, 1882, p. 99.
- <sup>101</sup> R. G. Cowherd, *The Politics of English Dissent*, London, 1959, p. 17.
- <sup>102</sup> This was particularly true in Lancashire; see *The Non-Conformist and Independent*, New Series, No. 274, Vol. VI, 26th March, 1885, p. 298.
- <sup>103</sup> *The Freeman*, 11th November, 1878, p. 551.
- <sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 16th July, 1886, p. 469.

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