

Strict Baptists in the 1970's

LAST YEAR marked the centenary of the Metropolitan Association of Strict Baptist Churches and for this reason, if no other, it is timely to take a look at recent developments among Strict Baptists. For a more basic historical treatment of this group of churches readers are referred to P. Toon, "English Strict Baptists," *The Baptist Quarterly*, January 1965.

One of the major changes on the Strict Baptist scene has been the significance attained by the National Assembly which first met in 1964 and has continued to meet annually. All pastors and deacons of Strict Baptist Churches are invited to attend and representatives of all shades of opinion, other than the Gospel Standard Strict Baptists, are present. This latter body continues to remain distinct, having a focus in their magazine and societies of the same name. However, an advance is seen in that lines of communication are open between this group and other Strict Baptists and in that they share in the comprehensive *Strict Baptist Directory* of churches and ministers issued quarterly with *Grace* magazine.¹

The National Assembly has been responsible for producing a number of documents and papers which give a fair representation of the current beliefs and thoughts of Strict Baptists. The first publication was *We Believe, Strict Baptist Affirmation of Faith 1966*.² In content and emphasis the affirmation largely aligns itself with *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, which was produced by Ministers and Messengers of Baptized Churches in England and Wales (denying Arminianism), being met together in London. In an attempt to relate to the present problems the Affirmation contains a section headed *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, which includes *Christian Behaviour*, *the Law of God, Marriage and Family Life*, *the Christian's Attitude to Material Things*, *the State and Daily Work*.

The Committee of the National Assembly has also recommended two papers to the churches for their study and reformation. The first of these is entitled *Christian Fellowship* and deals with Christian unity and the implication of restricted communion upon it. Perhaps the most interesting feature is the attitude expressed toward other Evangelical Christian groups consisting in summary as follows:

- (1) The attitude to so-called "like minded" churches (e.g. Evangelical Association of French-speaking Baptist Churches or French Baptist Association, the Irish Baptist Churches and the Regular Baptist Churches of Canada) is warm and seeks to encourage mutual confidence and give evidence of unity in the Lord.

- (2) To churches seceding from what are called "mixed denominations," for reasons of church government and conviction concerning the reformed faith, the paper advocates the provision of bridging positions providing fellowship with a view to possible full adoption of the Strict Baptist position.
- (3) With Evangelical churches not "like minded" problems are envisaged in regard to different attitudes to restricted communion, believers' baptism, the ecumenical movement and the reformed faith. While co-operation is seen to be possible at individual level (e.g. ministerial fraternals) and association level (co-operation exists already on Sunday School Association work with the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches), full local church commitment in fellowship, e.g. joint evangelism, is seen as unlikely to be possible. Encouragement is given to pray for such occasions and in no way hinder them.

It is evident that the main thrust of this paper is to unite the previously divided Strict Baptist ranks.

Regarding the Lord's Table, the restriction of participation to baptized believers is still delineated but with a different emphasis. It is the baptized church which receives the emphasis and in consequence a baptized communion follows because it is for those united in fellowship to a local church. The suggestion is made that this is better achieved by preaching than by the imposition of external rules or the reading of a short invitation statement prior to the communion service. It is advised that transient communicants who have been baptized as believers and are in good standing with their church shall also be invited.

The second paper, entitled *The Ministry and Administration of New Testament Churches*, sets out the duty of Christians to unite in independent churches whose officers shall be Elders to attend to spiritual matters and Deacons to administer secular concerns. It is foreseen that both offices shall be plural in nature with one or more full-time elders. The latter may be regarded as first among equals but not of necessity.

I understand it is the intention to publish shortly a series of essays as a form of manual for guidance in faith and practice amongst Strict Baptist Churches. It is beyond dispute that the National Assembly has in recent years provided a focus and lead, so uniting many Strict Baptists, who in the past have been divided into splinter groups.

Those who have usually found their way in the intricacies of this denomination by using their time-honoured magazines will now find that many of the familiar landmarks no longer exist. *The Christian's Pathway*, *The Gospel Herald* and *The Free Grace Record* have all ceased publication. A new monthly magazine called *Grace* largely takes up the readership with a circulation of 3,200. As previously mentioned a list of churches and ministers is supplied each quarter with

the magazine. A further magazine *Reformation Today* is edited by a Strict Baptist minister but is aimed more generally at the world movement for recovery of the reformed faith among Baptists. The advent of *Grace* magazine is a further evidence of the development of solidarity amongst Strict Baptists.

The Strict Baptist Historical Society has been active in publishing through the Fauconberg Press. The best-known work is J. H. Alexander's *More Than Notion*, London 1964, which from diaries and letters traces the faith of a group of people touched by the revival of religious experience which began in the eighteenth century. This book gives an understanding in that experimental religion of the heart which is still one of the main streams of emphasis among Strict Baptists.

Familiar organizations have also disappeared within recent years. The Strict Baptist Open Air Mission no longer exists and the functions of the National Federation of Strict Baptist Churches have been absorbed by the National Assembly.

No longer having its own theological college, ministerial and missionary candidates are directed to the Irish Baptist College, the South Wales Bible College or the London Bible College. Scholarship has also been added to the Strict Baptist ministry in that amongst their ministers are found some trained in Congregational and Methodist colleges, Spurgeon's College and a Scottish Baptist.

A significant move is also developing in the exercising of a consistent church discipline. For this reason comparison of numerical membership with past years may be misleading, many church rolls having been carefully sifted. However, bearing that in mind, during the period November 1964 to November 1969 the Metropolitan Association of Strict Baptist Churches shows an increase in number of churches from 61 to 63 but a drop in membership from 2310 to 2063. The comprehensive list produced with *Grace* magazine lists 437 churches in England of which 228 also appear on a separate Gospel Standard list. 412 ministers are also listed in the comprehensive list, consisting of pastors, stipendary and otherwise, and itinerant preachers.

A feature of Strict Baptist life in the last few years has been the relationship with groups of churches in other countries. This has led to the formation of the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Europe. In addition to the English Strict Baptists, the fellowship includes churches of the French Baptist Association, the Baptist Union of Ireland and churches from Germany and Spain. An attempt was made to create an even wider international Baptist fellowship on a similar basis, but this did not meet with success. The European Fellowship, which has no formal constitution, has produced a fundamentalist type confession in the form of a declaration of fellowship. A publication broadsheet³ which is produced annually, described some of the activities, including the regular conferences held. At the sixth con-

ference held in 1970 at Mulhouse, France, the theme was, "Baptist Heritage and Responsibility." Two papers entitled, "Baptist Responsibility" and "Conrad Grebel and the Emergence of Anabaptism," were given by French ministers, Pastors Guy Appéré and Etienne Huser respectively. The British contribution was made by Principal D. P. Kingdon of the Irish Baptist College whose subject was "Baptist Heritage," and Mr. B. F. Ellis, the Secretary of the Strict Baptist Mission whose paper was entitled, "William Carey and the Modern Missions."

Foreign missionary activity commenced for Strict Baptists in their participation in the work of the Particular Baptist Missionary Society formed in 1792. Due, however, to the desire for a renewed emphasis upon restricted communion and also partly due to lack of news from the field, a division ensued and the Strict Baptist Mission was formed in 1861. The work began near Poona, India, then continued later in Madras with further activity in Ceylon. Subsequently two of the three fields were left for concentration upon Madras. In the years 1956-1963 work was also undertaken among Tamils in Southern Malaya.

In recent years the policy of the Mission has changed from a one-field view to a world vision incorporating both home and foreign work. In addition to having its own specific missionaries, it will act in an umbrella capacity for members of Strict Baptist Churches serving, or training to serve, with other Evangelical missions. Among its twenty-two missionaries are four Australians. Six missionaries are working in Europe, two each being in France, Belgium and Spain. The Mission will always reflect the movements in the Strict Baptist Churches and so one is able to take the pulse of the denomination from its heartbeat. The emphasis is still upon the responsibility of the individual churches to send forth the missionary with the Mission providing the co-ordination.

Strict Baptists are now largely free from the series of controversies and suspicions which have dogged their past and they are exhibiting a new solidarity which is enabling them to consider and expound their faith in a more positive way. At a time when neither authority nor distinctives are popular in some quarters of the Christian Church, it may be that this group of churches will provide a rallying point for those who desire a clearly defined Calvinistic Baptist Community. While they are united in opposition to the modern ecumenical movement and stand for separation, there exists among them a spectrum of doctrine, including in soteriology, orthodox Calvinism, Fullerism and the hyper-Calvinism of John Gill, with some churches paying little attention to dogmatics.

Although it is no longer an embarrassment to be known as a Strict Baptist, only the future will show whether the way ahead for them lies strictly within that concept, or in a modern counterpart of the early Particular Baptist Fellowship which would allow liberty in the matter of transient communion.

NOTES

¹ *Grace Magazine*. Obtainable: The Manse, Bradfield St. George, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk.

² *We Believe: Strict Baptist Affirmation of Faith 1966*. Obtainable: 61 Breakspears Road, London, S.E.4.

³ *F.E.B.E. Broadsheet*. Obtainable: The Manse, Cransford, Woodbridge, Suffolk.

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HISTORICAL REGISTERS OF SCOTTISH BAPTISTS

IN CONNECTION with the centenary of the Baptist Union of Scotland (1969), a questionnaire was sent out to every Baptist Church in Scotland. This requested details of extant Minute Books, the exact dates of each book, and where they were kept, also anything of historical interest to the Church. It is three years since these questionnaires were sent out. The results and the discoveries that have been revealed have been most interesting. These have now been collated into five registers or files. No. 1 file deals with Church Minute Books and things of historical interest in the keeping of the Church House; No. 2, things of historical interest in the churches arranged according to Associations; Nos. 3, 4 and 5, Register of Title Deeds in safe keeping with the Law Agent of the Baptist Union of Scotland.¹

All of the one hundred and fifty-nine churches in the Baptist Union of Scotland have now returned the questionnaires. Part of the success of this venture was due to the wise decision of the committee concerned² to approach one person in each Association, to distribute and collect the questionnaires, and then to send them to the person collating³ the details into the registers.

This article is largely concerned with the things of historical interest. Keiss Baptist Church, Caithness, is the earliest known Baptist Church in Scotland. It was founded in 1750 by Sir William Sinclair of Dunbeath House, Caithness. It is said to have first met in the Castle of Keiss. It was disappointing to discover that no minute books of this church are extant prior to 1951. In the *History of Baptists in Scotland*⁴ one of the contributors was Mr. Percival Waugh, the then Secretary of the Home Mission.⁵ In his contributions Mr. Waugh gives fairly full notes. There were, however, some strange omissions from his notes. He refers to letters from Home Mission Agents concerning their arduous journeys in the Highlands⁶ but gives no indication as to where these letters are to be found. Also his references to Keiss Church are sparse. For some years those interested have won-