

The Nottinghamshire Baptists

POLITY

Denominational Organisation

IN THE seventeenth century, when the Baptists emerged, the main ecclesiastical systems represented in Britain were Episcopalianism, organised on a parish and diocesan basis, Presbyterianism with its presbyteries, synods and its General Assembly, and Separatism, emphasising the independence of the local Christian community, gathered out of the population as a whole. Baptists would, of course, be classed as Separatists, though the General Baptists show signs of a greater degree of central organisation than the Particular Baptists.

The Particular Baptists formed local "associations" at quite an early date. There was a Midland Particular Baptist Association in 1655 and the Northamptonshire Association, to which the Nottinghamshire churches belonged until 1835, was formed in 1764. In 1835 the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Association was formed and it was extended in 1860 to include Lincolnshire. The Association, covering three counties, remained in existence until the General Baptists and Particular Baptists united in 1891 and the East Midland Baptist Association was formed.

The General Baptists of the Old Connexion went further than the Particular Baptists in their denominational organisation, having a General Assembly, whose minutes begin in 1654, which exercised a degree of jurisdiction over local churches. In 1696¹ it claimed that its decisions were binding on local churches, though in 1711 it modified this to the extent of deciding not to legislate on its own initiative but only to decide appeals. In 1744 it ordered that the local associations should be consulted before an appeal was made to the Assembly. In their recognition of the office of "messenger", the Old Connexion General Baptists also displayed their closer denominational organisation. A messenger exercised jurisdiction over a number of churches. Whitley, quoting Thomas Grantham,² a messenger of the Lincolnshire Association, describes the duties of a messenger. The office succeeds that of an Apostle. "Though much inferior" he says, "messengers are to preach the gospel, to strengthen pastors and churches, to defend the gospel against heresy and pastors against usurpers". Messengers had jurisdiction only over churches which have appointed them or which they had planted. They had no authority over elders and did not have the sole right of ordaining them. A messenger was under the disciplinary jurisdiction of the church of which he was a member. Other associations allowed messengers greater authority. For example, Whitley quotes the Kent Association as maintaining that a messenger had the sole right of ordaining other messengers and that messengers

usually ordained elders. Only one Nottinghamshire messenger has been identified, William Reeve of Rempston, but the Lincolnshire messengers, Thomas Grantham of South Marsh, Joseph Hooke of Bourne and Hackenby, Gilbert Boyce of Coningsby and Thomas Ulliott of Killingholme, all played a part in the Nottinghamshire Baptist story in the eighteenth century.

In the year 1800 there were three Particular Baptist churches in Nottinghamshire, Friar Lane, Nottingham, Collingham and Sutton-in-Ashfield, all of them of 17th century origin and probably all originally Old Connexion General Baptist churches. There were four General Baptist churches, the Retford/Gamston Church, Kirkby Woodhouse, East Leake and Stoney Street, Nottingham. The Retford/Gamston Church was an Old Connexion foundation but the rest were comparatively young churches, founded by the rapidly expanding New Connexion which had been instituted thirty years before. It was the New Connexion that founded the majority of the Baptist churches which were to come into existence in Nottinghamshire during the 19th century. In the year 1900 there were forty churches in the county of General Baptist origin and ten churches of Particular Baptist origin.

The New Connexion, spreading from Barton-in-the-Beans, Leicestershire, was at first organised as one large church with several congregations in different towns and villages. As it grew larger and more widespread it was divided into constituent groups, each group being regarded as a single church incorporating the congregations in a certain area. This type of organisation had much in common with that of a Methodist circuit and it is likely that it owed something to Methodist polity as two of the early leaders of the denomination had travelled with John Wesley. This pattern continued when the movement spread into Nottinghamshire and its impress continued for most of the 19th century, congregations being grouped to form a single church. The earliest Nottinghamshire New Connexion churches were around Kirkby Woodhouse and were constituted into one church. Another such group centred at East Leake, later to be subdivided into two churches centred at East Leake and Wymeswold respectively. The congregations in and around Nottingham formed a single church of over 1,200 members with its centre at Stoney Street. This seemed very natural as they were almost all daughter or grand-daughter congregations of Stoney Street. In 1849, as a result of a disruption the Stoney Street Church divided, but the grouping still continued. One group then consisted of Mansfield Road Nottingham, Hyson Green and Ruddington, and the other included Stoney Street, Old Basford, New Basford, Carlton, Carrington and Lenton. By then four outlying congregations had separated from the original Stoney Street Church. These were Arnold, Beeston, Hucknall and Mansfield, though Mansfield was linked with its own daughter congregation at Warsop.

As the century advanced the tendency for each congregation to form itself into a separate church increased, a tendency which was

accentuated by the closure of 1888, of Stoney Street, the king pin of the group, and by 1900 grouping in the old sense of the word was at an end, the few groups in existence at that time being merely neighbouring churches temporarily linked together for the purpose of supporting the ministry.

Apart from these church groupings the Nottinghamshire General Baptist churches were linked together in "conferences". The Nottinghamshire New Connexion Baptist churches belonged to the Leicestershire Conference until 1803 when a Nottinghamshire Conference was formed.³ The two united to form the Midland Conference in 1810 which remained in existence until the East Midland Baptist Association was formed in 1891. The New Connexion General Baptist churches were also members of the nation-wide General Baptist Association.

These conferences and the Association from time to time exerted a degree of authority over their constituent churches. For example, when the schism took place in the Stoney Street Church in 1817 the Association offered to mediate. Feelings in the church, however, were too high for them to accept mediation and the church replied that although it would listen to the advice of the Association "out of respect for some of its members", it would not consider itself bound by any decision the Association might make.⁴ Subsequent events showed that it might have been wiser for Stoney Street to have taken the advice of the Association, and it is possible that a feeling that they were in the wrong, and that the decision of the Association might be against them, influenced their reply—a phenomenon with which we are not unfamiliar in national life today.

While in certain circumstances churches might not welcome mediation by the Association, this did not mean that Associations had no influence at all. The formation of the missionary societies illustrates their influence in different ways. The Particular Baptist Missionary Society was formed as a result of a plea brought before the Northamptonshire Association, meeting in Nottingham 1792 and this secured the support of a significant number of its delegates, though the society remained an independent society. The General Baptist Missionary Society, on the other hand, was formed as the result of a specific decision of the General Baptist Association meeting in Boston in 1816, made as a result of a resolution passed on to it by the Midland Conference which had met at Wymeswold early that year.⁵ It was, from the beginning, a connexional affair. The Particular Baptist Associations also influenced their member churches by means of circular letters, some theological or devotional and some organisational, issued with the authority of the Association. Some of the subjects of these letters issued when the Association met in Nottingham were:

1792 Holy Zeal.

1808 The Work of the Holy Spirit.

1816 The Regard the Christian ought to pay to his Principles

in the Education of his Children.

1869 Weekly Offerings and the Better Support of the Christian Ministry.

The Particular Baptist theological colleges were founded, like the Particular Baptist Missionary Society, by private groups of interested individuals. On the other hand the General Baptist College, like the General Baptist Missionary Society, was instituted as the result of a decision taken by the Association, meeting at Kegworth in 1797.⁶ A committee was formed with Robert Smith, minister of Stoney Street, as secretary and Samuel Heard as treasurer. In 1812 the college passed even more completely to the jurisdiction of the Association, the committee resigning. A second college had its beginnings as a private venture when a group of Leicestershire churches sent delegates to a meeting to consider giving instruction to lay preachers. The institution formed was not at first intended to train professional ministers, but it proceeded to do so fairly soon, largely because the existing college, now located in Wisbech, had lost the confidence of the denomination. The two colleges were amalgamated in 1838—by decision of the Association—and in 1857 the college was transferred to Nottingham, also by decision of the Association.

An example of authoritative action being expected was in 1846 when the Midland Conference requested the General Baptist Association to take steps to deal with apparent heresy at Boston.⁷ Certain decisions were made by the Association between 1794 and 1835 relating to church order, one of which, in 1835, was that church members should not belong to Friendly Societies.

Attempts at Union between General and Particular Baptists

At various times during the nineteenth century attempts were made in Nottinghamshire to draw both sections of Baptist life together, but for a long time both sides felt that the doctrinal differences between Calvinism and Arminianism were too great. The General Baptist Repository in 1840 contains a number of letters discussing union. One writer says that Baptists were then nearer to union than forty years before, but nevertheless he opposes union.⁸ Another writer supports a form of union but the union he proposes is a union in name only, the separate organisations, home and foreign missions, colleges, etc., of the two denominations are to be retained.⁹ The Lincolnshire Conference that year (1840) advocated union but nothing came of it.¹⁰ In 1842 The General Baptist Church in Broad Street, Nottingham, received an invitation from the George Street Particular Baptist Church proposing a joint celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Particular Baptist Missionary Society. Joint meetings were to be held, funds would be collected and medals sold to scholars, etc. Broad Street replied that although they rejoiced in the success of the Mission, they could not unite at that time to that extent.¹¹

Progress however was made toward a closer association of the two bodies over the next few years and in 1855, when the General Baptist

Association met in the Mansfield Road Church, the Rev. G. A. Syme advocated closer union and urged that the Annual Meetings of the Baptist Union be held in Nottinghamshire, near the centre of General Baptist life.¹² This suggestion was implemented in 1857 when the Baptist Union meetings were held in Nottingham, some of the meetings being at the Derby Road Particular Baptist Church and others at the Broad Street General Baptist Church. A session was held on June 30 to which General Baptists were especially invited.¹³ Closer relationships certainly resulted as within the next few years almost every Nottinghamshire Baptist church was a member of the Baptist Union, though there were periods in the next few decades when some of the smaller churches allowed their membership to lapse temporarily. The Tabernacle alone left the Union in 1887 when C. H. Spurgeon resigned as a result of the "Downgrade Controversy" but resumed membership in 1891.

In 1870 an attempt was made to draw General and Particular Baptists in the Midlands together in an organisation called the Midland Baptist Union, open to churches of both bodies. The Midland Union lasted ten years but as much of the work it could do overlapped the work of the General Baptist Conference and the Particular Baptist Association it is not surprising that it was discontinued. It could only succeed when separate General and Particular Baptist organisations were abandoned.

As late as 1889 the General Baptist Year Book published an address by the Rev. J. Fletcher, formerly of Lenton, Nottingham, in which he referred to a recent invitation to the Secretary of the Particular Baptist Missionary Society to take a seat on the board of the General Baptist Missionary Society, which had been refused, and a proposal that the General Baptist College in Nottingham should be the theological college for all Midland Baptists, which also had not been implemented. In commenting on these unsuccessful attempts toward co-operation he expressed a fear for the fate of the General Baptists if union should take place and urged a general amalgamation of all churches of the congregational order. Presumably in such a larger union the Particular Baptists would not be in such an overwhelming majority as to swamp the General Baptists.

Within two years union of General and Particular Baptists did take place and all the Nottinghamshire churches of both sides decided in favour of the union, many of them recording their decision in their minute books in most enthusiastic terms. The following year all East Midland Baptists united in the East Midland Baptist Association. In that year, too, 1893, a Nottingham Baptist Union was formed which did much to co-ordinate the work of Baptist churches in and around Nottingham. It encouraged the establishment of churches in districts where there were new opportunities, notably the growing suburb of West Bridgford, a church which became one of the strongest in the county. The Nottingham Baptist Union also played a large part in the formation of the Federal Free Church Council in Nottingham in 1896.

How the Churches were Constituted

The Nottingham Particular Baptist churches followed the common particular Baptist practice of constituting themselves into a church in a solemn ceremony in which the participants covenanted with one-another and with God to live in church fellowship according to the will of God as they saw it. The Covenant of the Friar Lane Church follows this pattern. It is the re-affirmation of an earlier covenant and is dated November 2, 1769, and begins: ¹⁴

“We a small handfull of the unworthy dust of Zion assembled together for the worship of God in Friar Lane, Nottingham, Holding the doctrine of Election . . . being now met together we agree to make a fresh surrender of ourselves to the Lord . . . to give up ourselves unto one another to worship God in spirit and in truth. . . .”

The Collingham Covenant which dates from about the end of the 18th century also begins by describing the sinful but redeemed state of those making the covenant and goes on similarly to state the covenant that was being made between themselves and with God. There then follows a lengthy Confession of Faith.

No record of the formation of any Nottinghamshire Old Connexion church has been traced but the procedure in the case of the New Connexion is well recorded. All the New Connexion churches in the county were originally branches of another General Baptist church, and all that was done when such branches broke away from the mother church was for the members forming the daughter church to be given dismissal and the minister to conduct a service at which the new church was formally constituted. Such services were conducted by Robert Smith of Stoney Street at the institution of the Beeston Church in 1804, and by William Pickering, minister of the same church, when the congregations at Basford, Bulwell and Hucknall united to form a church on December 25, 1837. Pickering's text, Ezra 10:4, “Arise for the matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage and do it,”¹⁵ is typical of the texts chosen on such occasions and the general tenor of the sermon can be judged from it.

Church Officers: Pastors

Churches of the Independent tradition have held that, in theory, there is no function that a minister may perform which a layman, duly authorised, may not also perform. There is, in reality, no laity, all believers are priests. In practice this has not always been carried to its logical conclusion, but the existence of this view explains many of the practices of Baptist churches at different times. In the early days, and indeed, until well into the nineteenth century, the minister would be chosen from among the members of the local congregation, or perhaps from another congregation. He would often have no special training though “academies” were established at a fairly early date, providing academic training for at least a proportion of ministers.

William Musson, who was ordained pastor of the Southwell Particular Baptist Church in 1811, was chosen from among the members of that church, and Joshua Burton, who came from Sawley in 1778 to be pastor of the Sutton-in-Ashfield Particular Baptist Church, was chosen from among the members of another church.¹⁶ When John Whitehead became pastor at Sutton in 1802, Burton did not remove elsewhere, but took his place as an ordinary member.

The term "minister" was used, especially among the General Baptists, to describe a recognised preacher, not necessarily ordained and not necessarily having a pastoral charge. A "pastor" was an ordained minister having the care of a church, though the term "minister" became more widely used during the nineteenth century to describe a pastor, following the custom of other nonconformist churches, though the term "pastor" is, of course, still quite common among Baptists. Among the Particular Baptists of Nottinghamshire the question of what an unordained layman might or might not do, does not seem to have arisen. As a rule each church had its pastor, even though he sometimes earned his living in secular employment, and he would normally administer the sacraments. Among the New Connexion General Baptists of Nottinghamshire the situation was different. For well over a century they were reluctant to allow an unordained "minister" to officiate at communion, though they were not completely adamant on the subject. Wood records that among the resolutions the General Baptist Association passed in 1794 was one expressing the opinion that "the scriptures are not express" on the question.¹⁷ In 1815 and 1828 the Association is quite clear that a pastor must be ordained. Individual churches made their own decisions in the matter but as a rule their decisions were in a line with denominational thought as a whole. In 1804 Thomas Rogers became minister at Beeston. He had been assistant minister at Stoney Street for ten years, though retaining his secular occupation. He was not immediately ordained and the question arose as to whether he should be allowed to officiate at the Lord's Supper. Although he was virtually the founder of the church and its undoubted leader, he was not immediately allowed to officiate. The problem was solved by his being elected "ruling elder",¹⁸ in which capacity he could officiate in his own church only. Two years later he was ordained and was qualified to administer the sacrament in any General Baptist church. A generation later, in 1838, Beeston again discussed ordination and "resolved that ordination is a scriptural practice. Bro. Smith be ordained 11 July".¹⁹ "Bro. Smith", incidentally, had been their minister for a year when that decision was made. In 1841 the same church had no pastor and a resolution was adopted that as they had not received the Ordinance of the Lord's Supper for several months, not having been able to get an ordained minister, "the church sees it right to receive it from an unordained minister. Frettingham to see Mr. Ferneyhough and get him to come some Sabbath afternoon to administer the Lord's Supper".²⁰ Ferneyhough was the ordained

minister at Broad Street and it is evident that, in spite of the resolution, Beeston still felt it better for an ordained man to officiate if possible.

In the Broad Street Church in 1851²¹ there was similar reluctance to allow the Rev. W. R. Stevenson to officiate as he had not been ordained, in spite of the fact that he had been in the ministry at Derby for two years. Stevenson argued that if he were considered fitted for the pastorate in other ways, lack of ordination should not preclude him from exercising any function of the ministry. He was, however, ordained shortly afterwards.

Later the practice among the Nottinghamshire churches was less strict though not exactly lax. An ordained minister was preferred, but a lay preacher might officiate if he were specially approved for this purpose by the church. Beeston invited "Mr. Ball", a layman, to conduct communion in November 1841, two months after the efforts to secure Ferneyhough. The Kirkby Woodhouse Church has a minute in 1858²² that "Mr. Richards be allowed to administer the Lord's Supper at his next appointment", and the following month, the name of "Mr. Briggs" was added to the list of those allowed to officiate. In 1908²³ we find the Retford deacons instructing the church secretary to obtain lay preachers during an interregnum "except on ordinance Sundays" when an ordained minister should be sought. The impression gained is that by the end of the century there was no absolute theological conviction that communion should be administered by an ordained minister but that it was preferable.

An explanation of this apparent contradiction between the practice of ordaining a person to the ministry and at times reserving to him the right of officiating at communion and at other times denying that he has any function that cannot be performed by an ordinary church member, may perhaps be found in the Baptist conception of the ministry combined with the reaction from sacerdotalism. A pastor is not a priest, but an "elder", even a "bishop", an "episkopos". For the purpose of orderly church life such an office was needed and its holder was expected to be mentally and spiritually fitted for the task, but he was still a minister, one who serves, and not a necessary intermediary between man and God. If ordination implies that the minister is set apart for special work, and if the prayers offered at ordination that he be given grace for his task are answered, then the minister has special functions and special grace to perform them. But how many Baptists would have claimed that these graces were solely bestowed at ordination? The Nottingham Baptists would not have gone as far as that but perhaps they were a little uncertain how far they should go. When later, lay preachers were allowed to administer communion "anybody" would not do. Fitness and acceptability by the church of the individual concerned were necessary.

Reaction from anything associated with sacerdotalism is also seen in the custom of referring to the sacraments as "ordinances", something which has been ordained, but implying no doctrinal interpre-

tation. "Sacrament", an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, could suggest a claim to priestly privileges and this was to be avoided. The custom of churches holding business meetings on Christmas day (Stoney Street) or on Good Friday (Southwell) also stems in part from a similar reaction from anything resembling ritual or festival days. Such days were holidays, convenient for getting people together, but they were not "holy days", of special religious significance.

The Appointment of Ministers

In the late eighteenth century and for much of the nineteenth century, a minister, especially among the Particular Baptists, was invited to a church for a trial period which might extend from a month to a year or even more if either party felt it necessary. For example, John Jarman was invited to Friar Lane, Nottingham, in 1804²⁴ "to stop with us for a time with a direct view to his being ordained over us as pastor" and his successor, James Edwards served from July 1829 to February 1830 before his invitation was confirmed. Catton, invited to Stoney Street as assistant minister in 1816, served for six months probation, then for a further year after which a local scandal resulted in him resigning entirely. The custom of a trial period died out about two-thirds of the way through the 19th century, when churches usually gave a minister a clear invitation once the decision to call him had been made.

Academic training was not very common among ministers at the beginning of the 19th century. The Particular Baptists had possessed the college at Bristol since 1679 and they founded two more colleges early in the century, Bradford in 1804 and Stepney in 1810, but neither Richard Hopper or John Jarman, who served Friar Lane at that period had received academic training. Andrew Gifford, who had been assistant minister to George Eaton at Friar Lane from 1727-1729, had been trained at Bristol, but his successors for over a century had no such advantage. Curiously enough the next academically trained Particular Baptist ministers in Nottinghamshire both came in 1822 to village churches. They were George Pope, who ministered at Sutton-on-Trent, and Clement Nott who ministered at Sutton-in-Ashfield. Both were from Stepney College. Derby Road Church acquired an academically trained minister from the beginning, in 1848. He was the Rev. J. A. Baynes, B.A., incidentally the first Nottinghamshire graduate Baptist minister. Thereafter it was unusual for any church to call a minister who had not been academically trained.

The General Baptist churches, with the exception of the larger ones, had as their minister men who also followed a secular calling. The ministers at Gamston were farmers for over a century prior to 1795—it may be remembered that there were Anglican clergy at that period who farmed their own glebe land. Joseph Burrows of Sutton-in-Ashfield, 1821-1833, was a lace maker. William Fox of Stoney Street, 1775-1779, was a framework knitter. Thomas Rogers of Stoney Street

and the virtual founder of Beeston, was a schoolmaster. Cutts of Whitemoor, 1861-1882, and Thomas Watkinson of Newthorpe, were pharmacists. Often such men regarded the ministry as their primary occupation. Like William Carey, they did a secular job "to pay expenses", and if they received a call from another church which they felt they should accept, they moved their occupation to the town of the new church. Well established churches like East Leake and Kirkby Woodhouse had full-time ministers from an early date, 1782 and 1760 respectively. Stoney Street called a full-time minister in 1784. John Bissill, called to East Leake in 1800, had spent a year with Dan Taylor as the first student of the General Baptist Academy and may be considered the first Nottingham General Baptist minister with academic training. The next was Richard Ingham, Broad Street, 1834-1838, who had studied at Cambridge but had become a dissenter and was therefore not allowed to take his degree. Pike of Beeston, 1845-1858, had studied at the General Baptist College. George Syme, M.A., was the first General Baptist minister in the county to hold a degree, coming to Stoney Street in 1848 and becoming minister of the Mansfield Road Church when it was formed in 1849. Thereafter the larger Nottingham churches usually had graduate ministers.

Church Officers: Elders

As far as the Nottingham churches are concerned, the duty of a Baptist elder was similar to that of a Presbyterian elder, to assist the pastor in the spiritual oversight of the community. The office existed only in a few churches and even in those churches its existence was intermittent, and as often as not seems to have been created to provide for the situation when a church had no pastor. Beeston, as has been mentioned, appointed Thomas Rogers ruling elder in 1804 before he was ordained as pastor. Additional elders were chosen in 1807 and in 1809, Rogers now being pastor, to provide the usual complement of two elders. The Scotch Baptists and the Johnsonian Baptists considered that two elders were necessary but their elders were, in effect, joint pastors, and in both cases the custom of having two elders soon died out and for most of their life those communities had a single pastor.

Some churches, Beeston, Broad Street and Mansfield Road, all New Connexion General Baptist churches, had a committee in addition to the diaconate, designated "helps" whose function was to "visit the sick and disorderly". Beeston appointed such a committee in 1807 and it continued for about half a century. Broad Street appointed two "helps" and six deacons in 1829, and in the 1860s onward Mansfield Road had a committee of six "helps" which continued under the name "helpers" into the 20th century. The office of elder gradually fell into desuetude as in many churches deacons, or at least some of them, performed the duties of elders, though without the title. This is clearly seen in the cases of Stoney Street and Derby Road whose arrangements are described below.

Deacons

The traditional function of a Baptist deacon is described by John Jarman, minister of the Friar Lane Church, Nottingham, in 1828 in a publication *The Duties and the Office of Deacons Explained and Enforced*.²⁵ In this publication, an address given at a service of ordination of deacons at the Castlegate Congregational Church, he deals with the duties of deacons, first as almoners—they are to see that the temporal needs of the pastor are met, to provide for the Lord's Table and to keep the place of worship in proper repair. He then deals with deacons as "fellow-helpers with the pastor in the advancement of the cause of truth". Deacons are to be concerned with both the material and spiritual affairs of the church.

Some of the larger churches, notably Stoney Street and Derby Road divided their membership into districts with one or more deacons exerting oversight in each district. The membership list of Stoney Street in 1848 shows ten such districts. In 1857 Broad Street divided the town into districts each under a deacon whose duty was "to visit cases of affliction and distress and distribute the poor's money". Derby Road did the same and continued this custom until well into the 20th century.

Until the end of the nineteenth century not only were female deacons unknown among Nottinghamshire Baptist churches, but, certainly in the Particular Baptist churches, women were not expected to take part in discussions. They were permitted to be present, usually to vote, but not to speak. In his description of a properly organised church, Nott of Sutton-in-Ashfield says in 1822, "every *male* member shall be at liberty to deliver his opinion" at the church meeting. The small Particular Baptist church at Sutton-on-Trent however decided at its first meeting on December 12, 1822, that "every member, *male or female*, shall have full liberty to speak at church meetings". At Derby Road, even in the latter half of the century, women were expected to withdraw from church meetings when financial business came up for discussion. Presumably this also prevented them voting on financial matters. Yet in another Particular Baptist Church, Eastfield Side, the deeds of 1867 make it clear that both male and female members are to be allowed to vote on one of the most important items of business, the appointment of a minister.

The records of the General Baptist churches are not so specific about male leadership, though church deacons were invariably male. The deeds of the Newthorpe Church, dated 1828, make it clear that in the event of services being discontinued, two-thirds of the remaining *male* members may sell the buildings and devote the proceeds to any purpose they choose—a remarkable concession to male supremacy as it seems to make possible a situation in which a group, however small, of two, or even one man, could over-rule the wishes of any number of women members on this issue without legal redress.

Membership

The customary Baptist procedure of appointing "messengers" to "wait on" prospective members was usually followed in Nottinghamshire. (Messengers in this sense have, of course, no connexion with the office of messenger recognised by the Old Connexion). At the beginning of the nineteenth century candidates were expected to appear before the church meeting to make a personal statement of their religious experience. The Sutton-in-Ashfield church book contains a number of verbatim reports of such statements. The Southwell church book also has such reports and one interesting example in 1840 is the testimony of a man who had lived a profligate life. He had been in a public house when another man was cursing and swearing. He asked the landlady if he himself was like that when drunk and received the reply, "You are all the same". He was taken aback at this remark and, as a result, was converted.

Gradually the churches ceased to require candidates to undergo what was for many of them, quite an ordeal. A correspondent in the *General Baptist Magazine* of 1810²⁶ draws attention to this and, though he considers that writing out a statement for the church meeting was preferable, he says that comparatively few candidates could comply with this. He suggests that the church's general knowledge of the candidate should be sufficient. It was a long time before churches adopted such a procedure. The Southwell Church adopted it in 1845 and the Derby Road Church did so in 1848, but as late as 1850 the George Street Particular Baptist Church required its candidates to reply to a printed questionnaire which included such questions as "What are the grounds and confidence of your hope as a sinner seeking salvation?"; "What are your reasons for desiring communion with us as a church?"; "What are your reasons for being a dissenter from the State Church?" etc. Long before the end of the century, however, probably all Nottinghamshire churches had dispensed with the requirement for a verbal or a written statement.

Open and Closed Communion

The requirement that all members should be believers, baptised by complete immersion, and that only members should be admitted to communion was rigid for the first half of the nineteenth century in almost every Nottinghamshire Baptist church. At a fairly early date members of other churches were admitted to occasional communion, and in the 1820s the Sutton-on-Trent Church went so far as to admit persons to membership who had not undergone believers' baptism.²⁷ This was an unusual relaxation and may be attributable to the comparative isolation of this church, or possibly to the views of George Pope, the minister who came there in 1822. Several unbaptised members were admitted between then and 1845. When Pope became minister at Collingham in 1835 the question of open communion was soon raised, though the church decided not to adopt the practice "for the present".²⁸ Collingham did however adopt open communion

about twenty years later when many other Nottinghamshire churches were taking the same step. Pope was minister there until 1856.

About the middle of the century many Nottinghamshire Baptist churches adopted open communion, Derby Road and Mansfield Road did so from their inception respectively in 1847 and 1849, Southwell in 1857, though that church reverted to closed communion ten years later with the advent of a new minister. Beeston adopted open communion in 1862, George Street in 1867, Palm Street in 1858, Newark in 1867 and Kirkby-in-Ashfield not until 1894. The trend towards open membership, the reception of unbaptised members, began about a generation later. Mansfield Road became an open membership church in 1881 after an hour's discussion, Beeston and Palm Street did so in 1889 and Derby Road in 1891. George Street did not do so until 1911 and that only after discussion over two church meetings. Many churches stipulated that the minister must be baptised and some churches such as George Street stipulated that a specified minimum number of deacons must also be baptised. It is worth noting that there is no indication that the General Baptist and Particular Baptist churches differed in their approach to this matter.

Baptism

At the beginning of the nineteenth century all baptisms took place in the open air in any suitable stretch of water. In some cases it was a stream such as the Idle at Gamston, the Leen at Basford, and Wysall Brook at East Leake. At Ilkeston and Newthorpe the River Erewash or one of the canals was used. The Nottingham, Newark and Beeston churches used the Trent. In 1786 Robert Smith of Stoney Street baptised thirty-two persons in the Trent "just above the bridge". The Retford Church used the River Poulter, Mansfield used the Maun or either the Old Mill or Kingswood Reservoirs while Warsop used the Meden. Fish pools were used; the Old Basford Church used "Mr. Woodward's fish pond" and Kirkby Woodhouse the "Lane End Fish pool" or the "Stable Pond". Baptism in such places was valuable publicity. A thousand were present at a baptism at Old Basford in 1838,²⁹ three thousand at East Leake in 1836 "in spite of it being a wet day" when twenty-four were baptised in the brook.³⁰ Five to six thousand were reported present at a baptism in the Kingsmill Reservoir in 1776 and eight to ten thousand at a Stoney Street baptism in the Trent on one occasion.³¹ Baptisms in these natural waters took place at all times of the year. One report of a baptism at "Tunnel End", Ripley, says that the ice had to be broken. In 1924 "four females" were baptised in the Erewash "on the first Lord's Day of the year".³² Baptists were hardy folk in those days, though it is not perhaps surprising to find regular entries in the Friar Lane accounts of ten pence or a shilling for a pint of rum, a teaspoonful of which was given to each person on emerging from the water.

Such open air baptisms were sometimes inconvenient and could

be dangerous, and although there is no record of mishaps occurring among the Baptist churches, a Mormon priest was drowned in the Trent while preparing to carry out a baptism at Beeston in 1852.³³ Occasionally, too, there was misbehaviour. At a baptism in the canal at Retford in 1826 boatmen created a disturbance and one lady undergoing baptism fainted, her husband going into the water to her assistance. About the middle of the century churches began to construct indoor baptistries. Derby Road and Mansfield Road constructed them when their chapels were built just before 1850. Hucknall constructed an indoor baptistry in 1852 and Mansfield in 1853. The last outdoor baptism in the county seems to have been in 1880 when George Taylor and three others were baptised in the Idle, recollecting that Dan Taylor had been baptised in the same stream a century before.

Church Discipline

Church discipline was firmly exercised in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, though after that it diminished in strictness. Any penalties were, of course, exclusively ecclesiastical, ranging from a remonstrance to suspension from communion or exclusion in serious cases. We do not find however anywhere such penalties as were imposed in the parish churches in the seventeenth century when girls guilty of sexual offences were required to stand on a form before the chancel covered in a white sheet, with feet bare and carrying a white rod and to utter words of confession and penitence. Exclusions were usually for moral offences, though exclusions for heresy or unorthodoxy did occur. The earliest example of the latter is when six persons were "solemnly excluded" from the Sutton-in-Ashfield Particular Baptist Church "for holding the Errors of Sandemanianism".³⁴ In 1841 James Hopkins was excluded from Broad Street for having embraced "something like Deism", though in his case there was also an allegation of "improper conduct towards a female". Many were excluded when they joined some sect such as the Joanna Southcott community or the Mormons or the Christadelphians. In 1847 Maria Wickers fell not far short of heresy when she joined the Established Church, of which her husband was a member. She was excluded. More serious was the case of half a dozen members who were excluded from the Wymeswold Church in 1813 for openly disseminating Socinian doctrines.

To exclude a person because of his opinions may seem contrary to the traditional Baptist principle of liberty of private interpretation of the scripture, the principle which made them dissenters in the first place. Perhaps this objection may be countered by saying that the Baptist Associations were associations of churches holding certain doctrines, those termed "evangelical" as distinct from "Socinian" on the one hand and "sacerdotal" on the other. Particular Baptist church covenants, as has been seen, usually stated that the church in question was a church "holding the doctrines of . . ." and then

followed a statement of the traditional Calvinistic Baptist position. The General Baptist New Connexion was more explicit. It was an association of churches holding the doctrines which were published as a "Declaration of Faith", reproduced in one form or another by the various "Histories" of the denomination. Liberty of interpretation must be permitted, but if this led to doctrines in total contradiction to those on which the denomination was based, there was no longer the same basis for fellowship. Excommunications, however, were carried out by the church of which the individual was a member and certainly not by the Association or Union.

By far the greater proportion of cases of discipline among the Nottinghamshire Baptists were for moral offences and of these sexual offences accounted for more than any other. Drunkenness followed next. In the Beeston Church, for example, between 1803 and 1837, there are records of sixty-four exclusions, about two a year. Of these, specific reasons are given in fifty-six cases. Thirteen of the fifty-six are clearly for sexual irregularities, and in twelve other cases, involving six couples, the wording leaves little doubt but that the offence is of the same character. Thus, at least one-third of the exclusions fell into this class. In addition several cases occur when the offence is "misconduct" or "immorality" when sexual offences may be, but are not necessarily, implied. In the same period there were five exclusions for drunkenness. The Broad Street records tell a similar story. Between 1818 and 1860 there were forty-four exclusions of which twenty-one were for sexual offences, five for "immorality" and five for drunkenness. At East Leake in the first quarter of the century fourteen were excluded, ten for sexual offences, one for debauchery and one for intemperance. The next twenty-five years saw twenty-three exclusions of which about half seem to have been for sexual misdemeanours.

Drunkenness

In the first half of the nineteenth century teetotalism was not considered an essential principle among the Baptists. Indeed, there were occasions when there was distinct laxity. A description of the coronation celebrations of Queen Victoria on June 28, 1838 in a recent book tells of a grand dinner given to the Stoney Street Sunday School scholars on tables in the churchyard. A liberal supply of beef and plum pudding was provided with sufficient ale to make some of the children intoxicated. "It was a sad sight to see such scenes with children of tender years feasting and drinking above the bodies of the dead with those who ought to have known better", says the writer.³⁵

Total abstinence was increasingly advocated and by the end of the century it became almost universal. The East Midland Baptist Magazine of February 1896, then edited by the Rev. John Douglas of Bulwell, says that "the number of abstaining Baptist ministers has augmented during the last few years and there are now close on 1,500". He says that all the students were abstainers and that "it

is difficult to find a minister who is not. Soon it will be impossible".³⁶ The Rev. T. Ryder, minister of Stoney Street in the 1870s was one of the most ardent local advocates of total abstinence and was secretary of the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Band of Hope Union for many years. Certain Nottinghamshire churches were particularly concerned about temperance, among them the Sutton-in-Ashfield General Baptist Church. It frequently loaned its schoolroom for temperance meetings and paid subscriptions to Temperance organisations. Its Sunday School superintendent in the 1880s, S. Fox, supported a paper called the *Sutton Blue Ribbon*, advocating temperance, and the pledge book of the church has survived. It may be that in the mining areas of Sutton and Kirkby the drink problem was particularly pressing as this degree of emphasis has not been discovered in any other church in the county.

Other offences calling for church discipline were persistent quarrels, attendance at the theatre, dishonesty, and at Sutton-on-Trent, Thomas Turner was excluded in 1830 for cruelty to a horse. Henry Cross of Beeston was excluded in 1821 for "baking on the Sabbath morning", Fred Botts from Kirkby in 1858 for playing cards. East Leake in 1838 and Retford in 1842 objected to members joining the Oddfellows, though none were excluded for this. The reason may have been that expressed in a letter to the *Baptist Repository* in 1835 saying "Oddfellows and Masons promote gluttony, drunkenness and improvidence"—though it is difficult to understand how the Oddfellows, a provident society, promoted improvidence. Later in the century we find a more tolerant attitude toward friendly societies, especially to those established on temperance principles. In 1872 the Kirkby Church loaned its schoolroom to the Good Templars and, in the 1890s, to the Rechabites. George Street had an Oddfellows' service in 1903 and Jesse Stennet, a senior elder at Newark, who died in 1912, held "every office in Court England of the Foresters, and was also an Oddfellow".

In 1842 East Leake considered that "visiting cricket playing or other worldly place of amusement" was "unbecoming and disorderly" and remonstrated with James Cumberland in 1863 for joining a cricket club. Kirkby in 1864 threatened with exclusion any who persisted in membership of a cricket club, but the threat was not carried out. The thought was doubtless not that cricket itself was objectionable, but that the young people might fall into bad company. Probably the same fear was behind the objection at Retford to two of its members joining a brass band in 1842, and at East Leake to some of its "singers" playing in a band on Whit Monday, 1863. John Hooley was excluded from Beeston in 1808 "for entering the King's service for his country", an action which seems strange, especially as the country was then in the midst of the Napoleonic wars. It evidently reflected the view that a soldier's life was hard and brutal and associated with loose living and excessive drinking, and it also perhaps reflected the view that warfare was

unchristian. In 1845 James Bratby was excluded from George Street for joining the army. Both he and Hooley had come under church censure for other misdemeanors and it is likely that they were young men of unsettled character, but it would have been pleasant to find some evidence that the churches tried to keep in touch with them during their life in the army.

A curious reason for exclusion in the first half of the nineteenth century was bankruptcy. In 1811⁸⁷ three Friar Lane members were deputed to investigate "friend Bestall's failure". They reported that his bankruptcy was due to bad trade and considered that "he has acted as an honest man, having given up all for the benefit of his debtors". He was, however, excluded some months later, some further evidence apparently having arisen. In 1815⁸⁸ William Leake was excluded, his failure being judged "due to great negligence and a want of industry and attention to his business and that he had been guilty of falsehood and lying to a great degree". Three deacons enquired into the failure of Mr. Keep in 1821 and four months later reported that though he had surrendered all his property to his creditors "there were things in his conduct which were very inconsistent with Christian character". He was censured by the church. In 1834 Mr. Bosworth was excluded for bankruptcy and in 1850 John Elmes "for having acted disreputably in business matters".

Several other cases were investigated but where there was no apparent blame attached to the individual, disciplinary action was not taken. The examples of "Bro. Marshall" and Mr. John Beardsley whose cases were brought before the church on October 29, 1826, may be quoted. That year had been a year of nation-wide trade depression and they were considered not to blame for their bankruptcy. At this period a tradesman going bankrupt was required to surrender all his property to his creditors and in return received a certificate of permanent release from indebtedness. For a trader to pay his creditors in full afterwards was going beyond what the law required.

Most of the cases of disciplinary action against bankrupts occur in the Friar Lane Church. This is not surprising as, above all Baptist churches in Nottingham, it was the church of the merchants and the early industrialists, whose businesses were individually owned or were partnerships and were vulnerable to sudden change of fortune. The Broad Street Church had fewer prosperous businessmen among its members, but it passed a resolution in 1865⁸⁹ that "in future when any friend fails in business an investigation shall be made of the circumstances". This could mean that hitherto bankruptcies had not been subject to church discipline, but more likely, it means that hitherto exclusion had been automatic but that in future regard would be paid to the degree of blame attached to the individual himself. The resolution was put into operation four years later when S. S. Sully, a deacon, became bankrupt. He resigned office but the church hoped that he would retain his connection with the church

and that his affairs would prosper in the future so that he would be able to meet the claims against him.

It might be argued that the attitude of the Friar Lane Church to bankruptcy reflects the value placed on industry, thrift and business prosperity which has been attributed to Calvinism. There is little sign of this. Industry and thrift were valuable assets in a community only a generation or so removed from poverty and at a period when violent fluctuations of trade might reduce an employer and his employees to poverty, but it is more reasonable to attribute this attitude to a concern for honesty and fair dealing. What the church condemned was not failure, but dishonesty and lack of responsibility when people other than the bankrupt were involved. It is an indication at least that Christian standards must be held to apply to the daily life of industry and commerce. How far these principles were applied to the treatment of employees it is hoped to discuss later.

Restoration

Some of the judgements described may seem harsh and below the standards of Christian charity. A persistent and unrepentant sinner might understandably be excluded, indeed he would probably exclude himself, but in other cases it would seem right for the church to have offered fellowship and sympathy rather than condemnation. The issue is not always easy to judge; on the one hand open sin cannot be condoned, yet on the other hand, every help toward redemption and reformation should be given. One difficulty would be that only the more open and obvious sins could be disciplined. The spiritual sins of pride and selfishness cannot be assessed or easily disciplined. In any case help and sympathy were actually given, very likely more frequently than church minutes record. Often there was an obvious reluctance to exclude. Cases remained before the church sometimes for several months before a decision was taken. Sometimes a defaulting member would not be subjected to any disciplinary action at all at first, then his name is found cropping up again a year or so later on a similar charge, and only then would suspension or exclusion be resorted to. Especially as the century advanced the decision to exclude was accompanied by expressions of sympathy and hopes of repentance and restoration which it is hard to believe were mere conventional pieties. Examples are given below. Restoration to membership was always possible and did indeed take place more frequently than might be supposed. Out of the sixty-four excluded from Beeston early in the century, records of eighteen restorations have been traced, almost a third of those excluded, and more may have been received into other churches. Some excluded under a maiden name may have been re-admitted under a married name, especially after a pre-marital pregnancy. One minister at least, the Rev. W. R. Stevenson, of Broad Street, felt very keenly on the question of care for those who had been excluded. In 1853⁴⁰ he made a list of those excluded from Broad Street during the previous seven

years with a view to seeking their restoration. In the same year five who had been excluded from the branch church, New Basford, were restored and the following year there are several indications of a sympathetic attitude. A girl was "in the family way before marriage"; it was their "painful duty to exclude her", but the church was pleased to hear of her repentance and if her conduct proved her sincerity, "would have great pleasure in receiving her at some future period". Similar resolutions were passed in the case of another girl, "late servant in Mr. Stevenson's family". In the case of another couple, "for the honour of religion" they must be excluded, but the church affectionately commended them to prayer and to the Christian sympathy of their friends "considering ourselves lest we also be tempted", and so on, including cases of other types of offence also.

In 1864 Broad Street passed a resolution that church officers should investigate the more painful cases in private and bring their recommendations to a church meeting which would either accept or reject them but would not discuss the cases in detail. Many years later, in 1883,⁴¹ after he had resigned from pastoral work and was editor of the *General Baptist Magazine*, Stevenson wrote an article on "Lapsed Members" in which he advocated more pastoral care for those under church discipline. Those with a weakness for drink should be invited into homes, taken for walks or drives and provided with alternatives to the public house. Those guilty of improper conduct before marriage should not be excluded but suspended for a few months, especially if they had made all atonement possible to each other and to society by marriage. Where business failure had occurred due to misfortune or lack of business capacity, they should resign office and remain quietly in the shade until their brethren request their resumption. Such more moderate views gained ground and for this reason and also no doubt because during the century personal moral standards generally rose, cases of church discipline became fewer and by the end of the century exclusion for any reason whatever had become extremely rare.

NOTES

¹ Organisation of the Old Connexion General Baptists from W. T. Whitley (ed.) *Minutes of the General Assembly of General Baptists* London 1909. Introduction Vol 1, p. xxi, *et seq.*

² Whitley, *op. cit.*, p. xxiv, quoting Thomas Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus*.

³ Organisation of the New Connexion General Baptists. J. A. Wood *Condensed History of the General Baptists of the New Connexion*, Leicester 1847, p. 300.

⁴ Anon. *Statement of Some Late Proceedings Relative to the General Baptist Church, Nottingham*. Nottingham 1817.

⁵ Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁷ *Baptist Repository* 1846, p. 242.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1840, p. 236.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1840, p. 205.

- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1840, p. 215.
¹¹ Broad Street Minutes, Sept. 28 1842.
¹² *Nottingham Review*, June 29 1855.
¹³ *General Baptist Magazine*, 1857, p. 310.
¹⁴ J. T. Godfrey and J. Ward, *History of Friar Lane Baptist Church*, Nottingham 1903, p. 7.
¹⁵ Basford, Bulwell and Hucknall Church minute book; introductory record.
¹⁶ Sutton-in-Ashfield Zion minute book, April 24 1776.
¹⁷ Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 281.
¹⁸ Beeston minute book, Mar. 11 1804.
¹⁹ *Ibid.*, May 13 1838.
²⁰ *Ibid.*, Sept. 26 1841.
²¹ Broad Street minute book, Jan. and April 1851.
²² Kirkby Woodhouse minute book, April 5 and May 3 1858.
²³ Retford deacons' minute book, Sept. 6 1908.
²⁴ Friar Lane minute book, Feb. 22 1804.
²⁵ J. Jarman, *The Duties and Office of Deacons Explained and Enforced*, Nottingham 1828.
²⁶ *General Baptist Magazine* 1810, p. 388.
²⁷ Sutton-on-Trent minute book, May 29 1823.
²⁸ Collingham minute book, Nov. 4 1836.
²⁹ *Baptist Repository* 1838, p. 461.
³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1836, p. 224.
³¹ *Ibid.*, 1827, p. 41.
³² *Ibid.*, 1842, p. 86.
³³ *Nottingham Review*, Feb. 8 1852.
³⁴ Sutton-in-Ashfield Zion minute book, Aug. 12 1770.
³⁵ J. B. Goodman, Ed. *Memoirs of a Victorian Cabinet Maker* (J. Hopkinson), London 1968, p. 70.
³⁶ East Midland Baptist Magazine, Feb. 1896, p. xii.
³⁷ Friar Lane minute book, Sept. 30 1811.
³⁸ *Ibid.*, Nov. 27 1815.
³⁹ Broad Street minute book, April 1 1865.
⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Dec. 28 1853.
⁴¹ *General Baptist Magazine* 1883, p. 241.

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