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The Education of Baptist Ministers, 1870-1900

PERHAPS one of the greatest changes in Victorian nonconformity lay in the changes within its ministry between 1870 and the end of the century. Hostile critics could still charge that the nonconformist minister was "destined from the earliest period of his studies to be a great man in a little world".¹ Other observers noted, however, that many nonconformist ministers were men of "great ability" who "speak as a rule with dignity, and with eloquence, with a remarkable grasp of fact". "Their enthusiasm", the same observer noted, "is still that of a child who asks all kinds of fascinating questions about the new world in which he finds himself."² Likewise, interested government departments, such as the Board of Education, commented that ministers were "no longer content to be preachers and pastors for their own congregations" only, but were "in closer contact with social problems" and had a "greater hold on political questions" than in the past.³ "Mark Rutherford" noted the change in the transformation of "Tanner's Lane Chapel" into "Latimer Chapel", with its organ, choir and week-day lectures given by the new minister, a "student fresh from college, who had taken an M.A. degree at the University of London".⁴

Indeed, the education of the nonconformist ministry may be said to have lain at the bottom of many changes which occurred within Victorian nonconformity. As nonconformity increasingly became an urban, and more specifically a suburban, religion in the nineteenth century, as well as a religion confined more and more to the prospering lower middle classes, congregations began to expect more of their ministers than the pronouncement of the simple "Gospel story" however reassuring. The need was, inevitably, for a message more in keeping with the realities of urban life and this meant a necessary change in the ministry. Baptists, like other nonconformists, were becoming more sensitive to criticism like that levied by the Bishop of Ripon concerning Spurgeon and the "Puritan" intellect: "He was as one who sits in an observatory to view the heavens, but has his telescope so adjusted that he can only follow the course of a star through one portion of the sky".⁵

This change is best seen, perhaps, among English Baptists. By the beginning of the twentieth century they formed the most urban of the major nonconformist bodies and were also, in many fields, the fastest growing and most optimistic denomination. The extent to which this fundamental change is reflected in the education of Baptist ministers as well as the extent to which it was caused by it is the basis for the following discussion.

If one compares the actual number of Baptist ministers in charge of churches in England in 1901, with those in 1870, one sees that there were 218 fewer ministers. In 1870, there had been some 1,577 (or one for every 1,021 English Baptists); in 1901, they had dropped to

1,359 (or one for every 1,792 members). This was a decrease of some 14 per cent. The denomination was growing, however, at a healthy rate, and the difference was made up by the sizeable increase in lay preachers. Unfortunately there are no available statistics for 1870, but by 1901 these men numbered 4,578 or one for every 532 Baptists in England. (This was an increase of 35 per cent over the 1891 total.)⁶

Baptist leaders, as well as those of other denominations, saw 1870 as a turning point in their history. Between 1870 and 1871, Oxford and Cambridge were opened fully to nonconformists; likewise in 1870 the Board School system was initiated and the state finally undertook to provide a system of elementary education. Further, the increase of free public and circulating libraries, as well as the rising demand for public secondary and technical education meant that Baptists needed "more emphatically than ever before an educated ministry".⁷ Indeed, between 1870 and 1901 the denomination made sizeable advances in raising the standard of education amongst its ministers in England. Whereas in 1870 half of the active ministry in England were without any formal education, by 1901 the number had dropped to 18 per cent, which was lower than the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists' figure and only 1 per cent above the Congregationalists'. In 1870, only 49 per cent of all Baptist ministers in charge of English churches had been to one of the denomination's six English, three Welsh and one Scottish colleges; by 1901, however, the proportion had risen 15 per cent to a total of 64 per cent. Finally, whereas in 1870 only 1 per cent of the English ministry had received any university training, by 1901 the number had risen to 8 per cent, due mainly to the growth of regional University Colleges and to the affiliation of Regent's Park College with the University of London. Although there were 8 per cent more Congregationalist ministers who had gone to university (mainly through the same agencies as well as the creation of Mansfield College in Oxford), Baptists here outnumbered Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists.

The traditional source for most university degrees for nonconformists had been London and the Scottish universities. Of the twenty-five Baptist ministers in 1870, who had university degrees, only three had been to the ancient English universities: one to Oxford and two to Cambridge. By 1901, however, the percentage of Baptist ministers who had received university training and had been to "Oxbridge" had risen to 7.8 per cent although two-thirds had been to Oxford: a reversal of the 1870 figure. The majority by the end of the century, however, still took their degrees from London and the Scottish universities, although the number of Scottish graduates had dropped by 19 per cent whilst the number of London graduates had risen by 23 per cent. It must be remembered, however, that the vast majority of the London graduates held external degrees; few had been in residence.

Thus, between 1870 and the end of the century, Baptists had made great efforts to improve the educational qualification of their ministers. Baptists supported the Senatus Academicus, formed in 1879, to grant Associateships and Fellowships in the "Theological Senate" and to

provide one standard examination for all co-operating colleges. In the Senate's history, some 500 diplomas were granted and by 1902, five Baptist colleges were co-operating. With the reorganisation of the University of London in 1898 as a teaching university able to award the B.D. and D.D. degrees, the need for the Senate had passed. Throughout its history, however, "its examination was recognised . . . as a second best"⁸ and in 1902, only 7 per cent of all Congregationalist and 5 per cent of all Baptist ministers held either the "A.T.S." or "F.T.S.". Finally, there was the Baptist Union Examination. This was designed for those ministers without any recognised qualification (e.g. theological college, London external degree, A.T.S.) who wished to secure one. The examination had had little effect by the end of the century.

The bulk of Baptist ministers, indeed just over six out of every ten in England, was trained at one of the denomination's colleges. The English colleges were: Bristol, Nottingham, Regent's Park, Spurgeon's, Manchester and Rawdon; the Welsh colleges were Bangor and Cardiff. Although it is only a rough guide, it is interesting to note the expenditure on ministerial education and the variation amongst colleges. In 1870, the English and Welsh colleges (to the above must be added Haverfordwest in Wales and Chilwell and Chamber Hall, near Bury, in England) spent a total of approximately £15,000 on educating 337 students, if laymen at Regent's Park and evening students at Spurgeon's are included, or 219 if the 17 laymen at Regent's and the 118 evening students at Spurgeon's are excluded. (In the same year the denomination spent just over £50,000 for foreign missions.) In 1901, the six colleges for which information, albeit approximate, is available (Bristol, Nottingham, Regent's Park, Spurgeon's, Cardiff and Bangor), were spending some £15,850 whereas in 1870, the same six had spent £11,458. This was a real increase of £2,674 given the decrease of 3s. 1d. in the purchasing power of the pound between 1872 and 1900. (In the same year, 1901, the denomination spent over £120,000 on foreign missions and English Baptists devoted over £96,000 in improving their buildings and paying off building debts.)

The chief note about the denominational colleges was their variety. This is seen, first, in the expenditure per student by the end of the century. In 1901, Bristol had 23 students and spent £85 on each; Nottingham however had but 14 students and spent £78 on each. Cardiff had 23 and spent £59 on each whilst Bangor had 21 and spent £65. In London, the two colleges, Spurgeon's and Regent's Park had, respectively, 60 and 29 full students and spent £64 and £140 respectively on each student. Thus Regent's Park was spending almost twice as much on each student as all other colleges and although one must bear in mind the increased cost of living in London, Regent's Park still spent over twice the Spurgeon's budget. Any generalisation which might cover all the colleges is, thus, difficult.

The difference between the two London colleges marks a second distinction amongst Baptist colleges: the difference of approach.

Regent's Park College, founded at Stepney in 1810, was the most prestigious and academically respected. In 1841, it had affiliated with the University of London and in 1900, it was made one of the constituent colleges in the reconstituted University of London. By 1907, "almost all candidates were required to matriculate before admission".⁹ At the other extreme was Spurgeon's College, founded in 1856. Spurgeon was quite clear in his reason for founding the institution: it was to train and equip "a class of ministers who will not aim at lofty scholarship, but at the winning of souls—men of the people" who might otherwise receive no training.¹⁰ As there was no entrance examination (Regent's Park established one in 1839), it was admitted that there was a "lowering of the average of scholarship".¹¹ But, so long as men had "genuine talent" Spurgeon did not "greatly concern himself in regard to . . . educational shortcomings".¹²

The differences between the two colleges illustrate the absence of any denominational standard for the education of Baptist ministers. The situation had long been recognised. In 1846-7 and in 1865, the Union had discussed the problem and in 1871, Dr. Green, of Rawdon College, read a paper on "The Education of the Ministry". His plan was for a co-ordinated system including all colleges. This system would consist of three types of colleges. The first would provide, if necessary, a preparatory training lasting one, two or three years. The second college would provide a higher training in conjunction with a University College which would last three years. The third would provide a seminary training lasting at least two and, if possible, three years.

The paper was printed and circulated to the colleges whose opinions were requested; a committee was appointed to report to the spring assembly in 1872. The report was not given until the autumn assembly in 1872, when Dr. Green reported that the colleges "do not consider that the time has come for the introduction of any scheme of united action". He did note that Rawdon, Regent's Park and Bristol supported the idea and suggested a scheme whereby Rawdon would take on preparatory work, Regent's Park university work, and Bristol theological work. The assembly agreed to urge the three colleges to do this but nothing came of the idea.¹³

The 1890s saw a second effort to attack the problem. In 1891, the Principal of Bristol College read a paper on "Our Colleges" before the autumn assembly after the President, Colonel J. T. Griffin, had proposed, in his Presidential Address given before the spring assembly, that Baptists establish their own university with an endowment of £250,000, to train young nonconformists. Griffin held that: "In the coming conflict between the Free Church principles and those of churches State-controlled, the young warriors reared under the shadows of a 'Trinity' or a 'Balliol', amid the luxuries of a political establishment, will be emasculated ere they fight."¹⁴ However seriously the proposals were meant, Robertson Nicoll noted on Griffin's death in 1902, that "some of the ministers smiled" at the idea.¹⁵

The Union, in the spring assembly of 1892, discussed the problem at

a special meeting and appointed a committee to report in the autumn. They were to investigate three major proposals: (a) That colleges drop all preparatory and "classical" work and concentrate solely on being seminaries and that the new (and higher) standards thereby exacted be used by all colleges, and all candidates be examined to ensure that they meet the new levels; (b) That the curriculum at all colleges should be widened to include, "as far as possible", Hebrew and Biblical Aramaic, New Testament Greek and Syriac, textual criticism, exegesis, systematic theology, apologetics, Christian history and literature, social economics, pastoral theology and homiletics; (c) That there be an enquiry into possible federation of the various colleges, if not a union of two or more with each college specialising in one field.¹⁶

The radical proposals met considerable opposition. Dr. Angus opposed the exclusion of "preparatory" work. He pointed out that of forty recent applications to Regent's Park, twenty had to be rejected "for want of elementary education" which his college did not provide. A state system of secondary education did not exist and would not begin until 1903. "Secondary" schooling was limited to those who could afford to pay for it and, more importantly, those who could afford to do without the wages which would otherwise have been coming into the home. Also, rural residents suffered because so many schools were in the towns. Nonconformists especially suffered, as most private secondary or endowed secondary schools were Anglican.

In the event the Union postponed the discussion until the spring session of 1893, but the *Year Book* records no mention of the problem. The matter was left until the new century when serious efforts at amalgamation and re-organisation were begun.

The problems besetting the reformers were numerous. Each individual college was a local institution and was often possessed of a rich history: Bristol had been founded in 1770 and Nottingham had begun in 1797. Each was jealous of its independence and wary of Union control. If reformers thought they could transfer funds of former colleges in order to make up for the steadily declining income, they were mistaken. The number of Welsh colleges had been reduced from three to two with the closing of Haverfordwest in 1898, yet the income of the remaining colleges continued to decrease. It was not enough to denounce the situation as "a disgrace to our denomination" because to tackle the autonomy of the colleges was to attack the underlying basis of independency.¹⁸

Indeed, this last decade of the nineteenth century was a disturbing one for those who sought reform. After 1890, income for all Baptist colleges for which evidence is available never reached the 1890 level save in 1892, and expenditure, which reached a high mark of £21,570 in 1893, declined steadily thereafter. Yet, the number of students stayed at the 1890 level until 1899 when it began to decline. Whilst the number of students remained more or less steady, annual figures for men "settled" in their pastorates showed that whereas in 1890 only 20 per cent had been without any formal education (it had been 22 per

cent in 1870), the number had risen alarmingly to 47 per cent in 1901. It would seem that the 1890s were reversing the trend begun in 1870. This was due partly to the demand for ministers between 1890 and 1901. In these twelve years 1,165 men either resigned the pastorate (1,045), left the denomination (24) or emigrated (96). In the same period the denominational colleges were only able to produce 605 men. Lay preachers, men without any theological college or university training and student pastors filled the gap.

In 1895, the Union agreed to act, not in regard to the colleges, but in reference to the problem caused by the lack of denominational standards for the selection of ministers by local churches. The committee appointed reported in 1896, and said that whilst they did not want to "discourage any man who has received from the Lord the gifts and call which qualify for the work of a pastor and teacher" it did want to prevent "unworthy men" from entering the ministry. A standing sub-committee was appointed to co-operate with local churches and associations to apply a new code of minimum standards by which non-graduates were to be examined. Likewise, non-graduates were to be encouraged to go to college and the committee was empowered to give financial help if necessary.¹⁹ The new century would see a much greater degree of Union control.

One final word must be said about another facet of the problem: the D.D. degree. Before London was granted the power to confer theological degrees in 1898, no English university could grant divinity degrees to those not in Holy Orders, or, as one critic put it, to the "uncircumcised and the Philistine". Nevertheless, "new ambitions have arisen in Nonconformity" and "there is not a little aspiration after gowns and hoods".²⁰ Although there had been no D.D.s listed in the 1871 *Year Book*, by 1901 there were fifteen, and whilst Spurgeon refused an offered American D.D. saying that he "wouldn't give . . . tuppence for a bushel of 'em",²¹ others actively sought the honour. This led, in some cases, to bogus degrees being purchased and in 1903, there was a famous lawsuit concerning *The Christian World* which had exposed the purchase of a D.D. by a Congregational minister from a Tennessee university for £17.²² The conservative *Pall Mall Gazette* bemoaned that nonconformists "whose ancestors were, perhaps, somewhat narrowly independent and contemptuous of worldly learning, run after recognition by some glorified kindergarten in the United States". Nevertheless the paper agreed that "all honour . . . is due to the Congregational and Baptist Unions" for their determined stand.²³

The Baptist Union had, after a "rather stormy quarter of an hour" and a discussion which "grew rather heated", agreed to appoint a committee to investigate the problem.²⁴ The obvious solution was to follow the practice of the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists and of Crockford's *Clerical Directory* and to cause the origin of any honorary degree to be listed. The Secretary of the Congregational Union had announced that his Union recognised American degrees only from Yale, Harvard and Chicago.²⁵ It was, of course, not just a noncon-

formist problem, for "the clergy of the Church of England have not been altogether guiltless in the . . . foolish yearning for unearned University distinctions."²⁶ Again, men who ought to have been honoured in their own country were surely not to be debarred from taking legitimate honours in Scotland or America simply because of the actions of a minority. The inability to earn D.D. degrees seemed not only a professional slight but a social snub as well, which in many cases it was.

The problems over the D.D. degree point to the importance of education for the nonconformist ministry by the end of Victoria's reign. Baptists, like other nonconformists, suffered from a lack of control over denominational colleges. It was not enough to increase the percentage of men who had a college training: the debates in the 1890s showed this. What needed to be done was to attempt to raise the varying standards of education given. Yet this went against the grain of traditional thought and was felt to be an attack on those institutions, like Spurgeon's, which met a definite need within the denomination. Yet it was not enough to raise the standard of education given, nor to enforce entrance examinations, nor to convert "academies" into "seminaries" if one could not pass the fruits of improvement on to the individual churches. But this was beyond the power of the Union and there were doubts as to whether it was advisable. To what extent could Baptists preserve a healthy variety and still enforce a modicum of training felt essential by the denomination's leaders?

At the root of the problem lay a central dilemma for English nonconformists. When Colonel Griffin proposed a "Baptist University" ministers smiled; they did so not because of financial difficulties but because of social and emotional objections. To build and attend a Baptist university meant rejecting the right to attend Oxford and Cambridge. It implied a belief in separation which exposed Baptist ministers to continued intellectual isolation and social discrimination, real or imagined, in their most formative years. The "spirit of the age" in which Baptists shared fully, was against segregation and in favour of social and national unity. This is most clearly seen in the denomination's whole-hearted support for the School Board system.

Lastly, behind this lay the basic yearning which ran through Baptist life as well as through other nonconformist denominations by the end of the nineteenth century. This was a desire for ecclesiastical recognition as a true Church in exactly the same sense as the Church of England. No longer were nonconformist ministers content to see themselves, as one Anglican priest put it, as "separated children" of the Mother Church.²⁷ Nonconformists demanded that Churchmen be "simply just"²⁸ in recognising the truth of their calling and many felt that this calling would be enhanced by raising the quality of the education given to Baptist as well as to other nonconformist ministers. A better educated ministry, if nothing else, would be less open to sneers by opponents who would be forced to take nonconformity seriously.

Baptists had made tremendous gains between 1870 and 1901 but much was left to be done. Baptists, like their fellow Englishmen, were coming to see that university training in addition to seminary training was essential. The move of Regent's Park College to Oxford in the twentieth century was a symbolic gesture by English Baptists who claimed what was theirs by right. Yet it was a gesture made within, not against, the English system of values. Baptist ministers were Baptist by faith but Englishmen by conviction.

NOTES

¹ Anon., *The Nonconformist Conscience Considered as a Social Evil and a Mischief-Monger by One Who Has Had It* (London, 1903), pp.24-5.

² Anon., "Some Tendencies of Modern Nonconformity" in *Church Quarterly Review*, liv (1902), p.112.

³ Board of Education, "Notes on the Action and Pronouncements by Nonconformists with Reference to Public Elementary Education", Bd. of Educ. Files, Public Record Office, ED 24/13A/8.

⁴ Mark Rutherford, *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane* (London, 9th ed., 1909), pp.386-7.

⁵ Bishop of Ripon, "Mr. Spurgeon" in *Contemporary Review*, lxi (1892), p.312.

⁶ These and all other statistics are taken from the relevant *Baptist Union Year Book*.

⁷ Rev. E. G. Gange, President of the Baptist Union (1897-8), Presidential Address, Autumn Assembly, 1897. (*Baptist Union Year Book for 1898*, p.100).

⁸ E. A. Payne, "The Development of Nonconformist Theological Education in the Nineteenth Century with Special Reference to Regent's Park College" in Payne (ed.) *Studies in History and Religion* (London, 1942), p.245.

⁹ R. E. Cooper, *From Stepney to St. Giles: The Story of Regent's Park College* (London, 1960), p.78.

¹⁰ Anon., *Charles Haddon Spurgeon: A Biographical Sketch* (London, 1903), p.139.

¹¹ W. Y. Fullerton, *C. H. Spurgeon: A Biography* (London, 1920), p.232.

¹² G. Holden Pike, *The Life . . . of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (London, 1893-4), I, 233.

¹³ *The Freeman*, 6th October, 1871, 18th October, 1872.

¹⁴ *Baptist Union Year Book for 1892*, pp.40-41.

¹⁵ *British Weekly*, 30th January, 1902.

¹⁶ *Baptist Union Year Book for 1893*, p.56.

¹⁷ *The Freeman*, 6th May, 1892.

¹⁸ E. K. Jones, *The Baptists of Wales and Ministerial Education* (Wrexham, 1902), p.39.

¹⁹ *Baptist Union Year Book for 1897*, pp.81-2.

²⁰ H. W. Horwill, "Degrees for Nonconformists" in *Contemporary Review*, lx (1891), pp.559-560.

²¹ H. Williams, *Personal Reminiscences of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (London, 1895), p.158.

²² See *The Christian World*, 22nd May, 29th May, 12th June, 19th June, and 26th June, 1902.

²³ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 17th June, 1903.

²⁴ *British Weekly*, 30th April, 1903.

²⁵ *Westminster Gazette*, 16th June, 1903.

²⁶ *The Guardian*, 17th June, 1903.

²⁷ A. Saunders Dyer, *Sketches of English Nonconformity* (London, 2nd ed., 1893), p.43.

²⁸ A. M. Fairbairn, "The Genesis of the Puritan Ideal" in *Contemporary Review*, liv (1888), p.723.