

The Significance of 1679

ON 3rd June 1679, Edward Terrill—part-time schoolmaster, financial dealer and sugar trader, and an elder of Broadmead Chapel in Bristol—made out a deed of gift in favour of his church. After his death, its benefits were to include the support of a minister at Broadmead, “well-skilled in the tongues” of Hebrew and Greek, who would have the task of preparing young men for ministry among Baptist churches. In this bequest, Bristol Baptist College traces its origins, and so this year celebrates its tercentenary as the oldest surviving Free Church theological college in this country. The celebration can justly claim to concern not simply this one institution, but the development of the whole modern concept of theological education for ministry.

Had Terrill made out his deed of gift a year earlier, of course, the Bristol College would have been able to conjoin the celebration of its tercentenary with that of the publication of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. This, however, might have provided too great a temptation for the writing of the College’s history.¹ Bypass Meadow, the Slough of Despond, the Delectable Mountains and so forth might make excellent chapter headings, but who would dare try to cast the various figures in the College’s history in the roles of Bunyan’s saints and villains? Such a task could not be done before we have reached the Celestial City, in which, since there is no temple, there is presumably no theological college either. But the near coincidence in time between the two events cannot be ignored. For in their very different ways, both Bunyan’s pen and Terrill’s practical wisdom were witnesses to the courage and creativity of nonconformity during one of the most arduous phases of its life in this country. It is on this plane that the significance of 1679 must first be measured.

The situation of dissenters during the period 1660-88 has been summarised by saying that “it was virtually impossible to imprison a nonconformist illegally!”² Charles II’s Declaration of Breda in 1660 had raised hopes of religious compromise and toleration, to which the Clarendon Code of the Restoration dealt the death-blow. The Corporation Act of 1661 debarred from civil office all who refused to take the Lord’s Supper according to the rites of the Church of England. The 1662 Act of Uniformity led to the ejection from their livings of all clergy who refused to subscribe to the Book of Common Prayer. The Conventicle Act of 1664 made it illegal for more than five adults to assemble for worship other than according to the practice of the Church of England. Magistrates were empowered to enter private houses to detect such meetings, and to fine or imprison participants, especially those responsible for preaching and teaching. Repeated

offences were punishable by deportation. The Five Mile Act of 1665 forbade those clergy who had been ejected from their livings to return within five miles of the town where they had ministered.

As frequently happens, the impact of such legislation varied greatly and was particularly dependent on the attitude of local authorities. Terrill himself records that in Bristol the first really severe persecutions began in 1670, when Sir Robert Yeamans was mayor of the city. Constables ejected worshippers from their meetings and for several months the Broadmead congregation held clandestine meetings in quiet country lanes. During 1671-2, under the mayoralty of John Knight, there was some respite, and when Charles II issued his Declaration of Indulgence in 1672 peace seemed more established. Then in 1673 came the Test Act, ostensibly aimed at excluding Roman Catholics from public office, but at least equally effective in discriminating against dissenters. In Bristol, Bishop Carleton, aided by the mayor Ralph Ollive and John Hellier, an attorney and warden of St. James' parish, implemented the law with the utmost rigour. Hellier, particularly, seemed to take a perverse delight in continual harassment of the congregations, exhausting the patience even of aldermen, magistrates and parish constables who must at times have considered that their energies could have been more usefully employed elsewhere. As far as Broadmead was concerned, it was Thomas Hardcastle, minister since 1671, who personally bore the brunt of the persecution. Already no stranger to the inside of a prison, during this new outbreak of repression he was put into Newgate, from where he wrote a remarkable series of letters to the Broadmead congregation during 1675-76, testifying to the way in which even persecution can be a means of grace. It is hard not to believe that the rigours of Newgate hastened Hardcastle's untimely death, at the age of 42, in 1678.

Now one can talk too glibly of triumph in adversity, of sparks of genius being struck by the hammer of persecution or (slightly misquoting Tertullian) of the blood of the martyrs being the seed of the Church. There is detectible in some contemporary Christian talk a perverted wish for a persecuted church, together with a romanticising of the situation of Christians under illiberal regimes in the world today. Perhaps this attitude springs from a frustrated attention-seeking wish, which finds that in secular, pluralist modern Britain the only judgment falling upon the household of God lies in its being ignored. The fact is that there was little romantic about being a Baptist in Bristol in 1679. Judging by the Broadmead Records, the experience of persecution was one of nagging anxieties caused by the fickleness of the harassing authorities: tedium and frustration rather than high drama. Rather than a matter of confessing the faith before rulers, it was a matter of legal haggles over the technical validity of magistrates' warrants—a war of continual skirmishes rather than decisive set-pieces. Coming after five years of such wearisome struggle, Hardcastle's death must have seemed a bitter blow.

It must have been a particularly heavy blow to Terrill, who had

strenuously laboured to persuade Hardcastle to come to Bristol in the first place, in the face of vehement opposition to Broadmead's claims upon him, by the Swan Alley church in London. It is not hard to guess what was in his mind, when, next year, Terrill included in his deed of gift the support of a learned minister at Broadmead to educate future pastors. For Hardcastle was a graduate of St. John's College, Cambridge, being but one of that generation of Puritans who under the Commonwealth had been able to benefit as much as anyone else from education at the universities. From 1662, dissenters could no longer study at Oxford or Cambridge, or teach there. Within the foreseeable future, therefore, there might no longer be a supply of dissenting ministers educated at such a high level. The situation was already being foreseen for the general education of the sons of dissenters, as can be seen from the emergence of the dissenting academies in the late seventeenth century. Moreover, in 1675 a group of London Baptist ministers invited their colleagues in the provinces to a meeting to discuss the question of education for future ministers. Terrill was thus not unique in his concern. But his bequest—even though its effective use did not begin till well into the next century—marks the first concrete step towards the provision of specifically theological education for ministerial students, and it was an essential factor in the growth of Bristol Baptist College.

1679 is therefore a significant date in the coming of age of non-conformity. It showed that some Baptists, at least, though they were suffering severe social disabilities, were not simply prepared to lament the loss of their privileges. The state might deny them full educational advantages, but they were determined to prove that in fact they had their own resources to meet their need. They were not only *claiming* freedom, but *acting* in freedom, refusing to accept the identity which repression by the establishment was attempting to stamp upon them. Were Baptists more aware of this phase of their history, they might be more sensitive to the aspirations of religious and ethnic minorities in this country today.

Furthermore, in taking responsibility for themselves, Baptists such as Terrill were also—more than they realised—encouraging the recognition of theology as a worthy and necessary discipline in the service of the Church. We have already noted how Terrill's initiative was almost unique in its specifically theological proposals, as distinct from the broader concerns of the dissenting academies (which he doubtless had in his mind as models). It would have been perilously easy, in time of persecution which so often induces a siege-mentality, for Baptists to have dismissed intellectual concerns as irrelevant to the immediate needs of survival. Indeed, there were those strongly opposed to the idea of *learning* as in any way conducive to Christian ministry; and, in Bristol, the Quaker emphasis on the "inner light" on occasion led to controversy at Broadmead as to whether even the Bible itself was not a hindrance to the knowledge of revelation. But Terrill's initiative (a lay initiative, be it noted again) set the course

for what subsequently proved so decisive: interpretative study of the Scriptures. Terrill's specification of a minister "well skilled in the tongues" implies a desire for something other than a superficial Biblicism or a petrified Calvinism. It indicates a sure grasp of where evangelical scholars must go for the truth: the Bible. But equally it recognises that the journey is a search, an exploration, not a simple shopping expedition. There is surely continuity between Terrill's purpose and the intellectual vigour of the dynamic Calvinism found at Bristol in the later eighteenth century. There is continuity, too, with the whole modern scene of the development of theology, which in Britain has been decisively shaped by theological colleges as well as university departments of theology, and by the frequent close relationship between them. Indeed, in Bristol itself, it was out of the Congregational, Methodist and Baptist Colleges that the University Department of Theology eventually grew.

One could of course say that the significance of 1679 lies simply in the emergence of Bristol Baptist College and all that this has meant, denominationally and ecumenically, among the churches and in the world, here and overseas. But does the significance of a past event lie only in the later developments to which it gave rise? Or can the event itself speak to us more directly with its own challenge to our present concerns? It is right and proper that the Bristol College, and its sister colleges, should this year look back to Terrill as in a real sense the founding father of theological education for ministry. But note the phrase we use: theological education for ministry.

To be brief, we should remember that Terrill did *not* have in mind a "theological college" as we now envisage such an institution. What he envisaged—and in the circumstances he could not hope for more—was for a suitably qualified minister, himself fully engaged in the pastorate, to see to the ministerial preparation of a number of young men *in the context of his pastoral ministry*. The students were to be participants in the life of the congregation, preparing for ministry where it was being practised and not in an institution isolated from that practice. This, indeed, was how Terrill's wish began to be fulfilled at Broadmead in the eighteenth century under Bernard Foskett, Hugh Evans and Caleb Evans. It was under the pressure of numbers and the necessities of domestic economy that eventually the conception of the College as an entity distinct from the manse and the church grew. Even so, it was not until well into the nineteenth century that the effective link with Broadmead Chapel ended, and the role of the minister of Broadmead as College Principal was discontinued.

Today, the question of the relationship of ministerial training to the life of the churches and the realities of secular life is coming more and more to the fore in colleges of all denominations. Theological education cannot take place in academic isolation from the experience of local churches. We learn best by doing, and by reflecting on our doing. All this is well and truly said. But it is proving more difficult to move beyond words into experiment with new patterns of ministerial train-

ing which relate college more closely to practical situations, or even locate a good deal of the training in the practical situation itself. It is partly, no doubt, because the colleges have now for long been institutions with an assumed existence of their own. It is also partly because the churches themselves do not naturally see ministerial training as part of their responsibility (beyond whatever financial support they afford the colleges to do "their" work). How many congregations regularly ask themselves, for example, whether the work they are doing would provide a suitable context to enlarge the experience of a student during his college course? This much at least, then, can be said for Edward Terrill and 1679: that if both colleges and congregations take seriously his modest but effective vision, they will see that ministerial preparation is a responsibility shared by both college community and local churches. If this partnership is really believed in, then the possibilities for the future will be no less rich than those of the past.

NOTES

¹ A history of the College, at the time of writing, is being prepared by N. S. Moon.

² *The Records of a Church of Christ in Bristol, 1640-1687*, ed. R. Hayden (Bristol Record Society, 1974), p. 57.

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BRISTOL BAPTIST COLLEGE STUDENTS

The Rev. C. Sidney Hall reports that, in preparation for the forthcoming book on the history of Bristol Baptist College, he has made a card index of all the past students who can be identified. There are no college documents earlier than 1770, when the Bristol Education Society minutes begin, but information back to 1720 has been gleaned from a variety of sources. The cards give: (i) the name of the student; (ii) date of entering college; (iii) the church from which he came; (iv) pastorates or other appointments; (v) date of death; (vi) references. Printed sources have included the B.H.S. *Transactions*, the *Baptist Quarterly*, Ivimey's *History*, Rippon's *Baptist Annual Register*, the *Baptist Magazine*, *Baptist Union Handbook*, D.N.B., *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, and histories of churches, associations and missions, while Baptist manuscripts in Bristol have also been scrutinised. The resulting hoard of data gives a longer and more reliable list of students than any hitherto compiled, and the college is willing to share this information with anyone engaged on historical research.