

THE CHESHAM AND BERKHAMSTED CHURCH BOOK

During the winter of 1982/3 I transcribed this book, finding its contents informative for the Baptist historian and interesting for the general reader.

1. The Church Book The book consists of 264 well preserved pages. Its first sentence reads: 'Church book of disciplining commenced January 1st 1712 and in which year Chesham Meeting house was built'. Then come the names of the minister, John Cook, of six Elders and seven Deacons.

The book records the minutes of the regular monthly church meetings which usually alternated between Chesham and Berkhamsted. These are full minutes until 1745 so that we are given a detailed record of the life of an 18th century Baptist Church during 33 years. Then for a few years the accounts are brief, followed by the sad comment: 'Church book laid by. No memoranda made since 1754'. However, the record begins again in 1775, continuing in a somewhat scrappy manner until the last entry in June 1781.

The church was a General Baptist church formed in the 17th century, so representing the pattern of church life characteristic of Old Dissent before the influence of the evangelical revival under Wesley and the rise of the New Connexion. The church consisted of several congregations of which Chesham and Berkhamsted were the strongest; there were meetings also at Tring, Bedmond, Whelpley Hill, New Mill and other places. All these congregations formed one church.

At the beginning of the 18th century the church was clearly flourishing. Taylor¹ says that in 1700 there were more than 250 members and in less than six years this increased to 400 'dwelling in more than thirty towns, villages and distinct neighbourhoods'. His account in vol.ii pages 440-446 is obviously based on the book I have transcribed. The church continued to grow for in 1734 the minutes record the need for a better baptistery, in 1735 the enlargement of the Chesham meeting house, and in 1752 the installation of a new baptistery.

From the middle of the century the church began to decline, as Taylor² comments 'in zeal, in discipline, in numbers and in conversation becoming the gospel'. By 1780 there were only 112 members; but the church revived and continued its life.

Ministerial oversight was exercised by the Elders and the first business at each monthly meeting was the appointment by the meeting for the preaching of the Word of God in the several congregations. The electing of Elders and Deacons was a solemn and at times prolonged procedure; a vivid illustration is given later in this article. Elders and Deacons were ordained, usually by a visiting Messenger.

Once a year members from the several congregations came together for a General Meeting. Each year, too, delegates were appointed to attend the Association held in Aylesbury, and usually representatives went to the General Assembly. So the book conveys an impression of a well ordered church life.

But perhaps the chief interest of the book lies elsewhere. It mentions many people by name; I counted about 180. It shows the human and social situations in which they were placed. It records, often in considerable detail, their doings - or misdoings. In fact the record is so specific and lively that one develops a sense of entering into the fellowship and life of this 18th century Baptist church.

Most of the people are mentioned because the church decided that their behaviour called for the exercise of discipline. Taylor³ says that 'a constant inspection was exercised over the attendance of members: persons were appointed to take down the names of absentees and report them to the Elders, and nothing but reasons of obvious importance were admitted as sufficient apology for their non-attendance'. He then goes on to describe the nature of the discipline. 'Their discipline may be considered as either preventive or corrective. The one designed by a vigilant oversight to preserve the members from acting inconsistently with their high vocation and the other to reclaim such as had been led astray or to clear the church from any participation in the guilt or disgrace of their wanderings'.⁴ The book illustrates these sentences as the following examples will show.

2. Church Discipline

(i) Neglect of worship. The obligation to occupy one's place in the fellowship on the Lord's Day was taken very seriously. In 1718 the church made this decision about a member. 'Forasmuch as Sister Elizabeth Sage (as it appears to us) to profane the Lord's Day and sin in the neglect of Christian duty when she had opportunity to have been in her place in the house of God. And been guilty of inventing and speaking things which are false and venting her passions in evil words, she is by us in the name of the Lord withdrawn from until she shall reform and give testimony thereof by a good and Christian conversation'.

In 1728 the church received a report 'that Sister Fouks had neglected her place in the church into which she had been baptised and had allowed herself to go to the worship of the Church of England on Lord's Day'. Two Elders had paid a friendly visit 'to instruct her better and to show her the evil of looking back, but all in vain'. So the church appointed others to persuade her, but she did not respond, so was withdrawn from.

A different situation is revealed when the church realised that a widow, Sister Foster, had 'a long time neglected her place in the church and was suspected to be guilty of drinking to excess'. But she explained her absence by saying 'that she oftentimes going a nursing did prevent her from God's worship on Lord's Days'.

(ii) Sex. The book records several cases of sexual misbehaviour by members of the church. One case is recorded in such detail it covers six pages and on the basis of all that evidence the church decided that 'Robert Pierce is guilty of the sin of uncleanness in his heart, though not of the act of adultery'. Then comes the sentence in formal

language : 'We do therefore solemnly and in the name of the Lord withdraw from him as a person guilty of the sin of uncleanness according to Ephesians the 5th chapter, 3rd and 5th verses and Colossians the 3rd and 5th verses until he shall make satisfaction to the church by true repentance'.

(iii) Debts. Falling into debt with an inability or an unwillingness to meet the debt was regarded as a matter for church discipline. In 1732 complaint was made to the church about a widow, Sarah Seer, who had borrowed money for her husband although former debts were still unpaid. The church decided that she was not acting honestly and 'suspended her communion until she confess her sin'.

(iv) Lying, cheating, fighting. In reading the church book one is soon aware of the life of small communities in which people's affairs were well known, malicious tongues could cause gossip and quarrels could break out leading at times to blows. A vivid picture is drawn of Sister Butler who accused her brother of being 'a lying, false, insinuating fellow' who had interfered in her family life. When the church investigated the matter she 'did rave and behave herself like one in bedlam more than a sober Christian'. Then 'the church laboured to set them at peace by showing there were faults on both sides'. The brother acknowledged this but the church could find in his sister 'nothing but heat, malice and envy against her brother', so she was withdrawn from 'until God shall give her grace to repent'.

On another occasion it was reported to the church that Sister Mary Hill 'hath acted very unchristianlike in several respects and particularly in bewraying the naughtiness of her heart by the evil use of her tongue both towards her husband and some of the ministers of the congregation'. Apparently her husband was 'guilty of drinking to excess'. They were both summoned before the church but the record gives no account of their appearance.

(v) Drunkness. There are frequent reports of members drinking too much which led to behaviour which the church judged to be unfitting for a Christian. George Durant was 'charged with the sin of drinking and keeping loose company'. He acknowledged 'that he had joined with another man by going halves for a ram to be played for at bowls', but denied that he had been drunk. The church was not satisfied and 'laboured with him to make him sensible of the vanity and so the sinfulness of such things but feared it was in vain'.

When Richard Turner was brought before the church 'we found there had been too much truth in the report respecting the evil of drinking and of wasting precious time in ill company'. Turner declared his hearty sorrow for his conduct and 'was seriously admonished to a watchful life for the future'.

(vi) Marriage out of the fellowship. The most frequent cases for discipline concerned members who married outside the fellowship of the church. In 1704 the General Assembly had declared marriage with an unbeliever, i.e. one who was not a member of a Baptist fellowship, to be a sin.⁵ The church at Chesham and Berkhamsted adhered strictly to that ruling, but with increasing difficulty.

In 1733 Eli Redrupp was examined by the church 'why he took the liberty of marrying with an unbaptised person'. He said that he saw no evil in doing so, but he was 'reminded of his covenant and promise to the contrary when the church received him into her communion and fellowship at first'.

In 1737 Rebecca Hill 'married with an unbaptised person, tho' said to be a sober man and a constant hearer among us'. She was called before the church but was then admitted to communion.

In the same year William Adams was brought before the church for marrying an unbaptised person. He felt that he was blameless because 'she was a very sober, pious person convinced of the truth and purposed to put on Christ in baptism' and he knew that before he persuaded her to become his wife. But he was reprov'd 'somewhat sharply'.

But dissatisfaction grew in the church. In 1733 'some brethren expressing their dislike of the strictness of the church's discipline in the case of marriage desire an abatement thereof'; so the matter was discussed but no change was made. Later that year Benjamin Ware said to the church that he could see no evil in his marriage 'seeing he had a good wife and a good woman though not of our denomination' and he added 'that were it to do again, he should do it without scruple of conscience because he believes it is no sin against God'. At the bottom of the page the scribe added his comment. 'It was high time to put an end to that severe discipline concerning mixed marriages'. However, the practice was maintained until at least 1751; after that year the minutes do not record any further cases or any decision to alter the practice.

In dealing with all these problems the church used regular methods of discipline. For differences between members the rules set out in Matthew 18.15, 16 were followed; members were usually advised to accept this procedure before the matter was brought to the church for a judgment.

In other situations a member was summoned to the church meeting and the summons was usually delivered by two elders. If the member failed to appear a second summons was given and sometimes a third. Any accusation of misbehaviour had to be substantiated by proper evidence and members at fault were allowed to explain their conduct. If the charge was proved the church expected repentance and promise of better conduct to the satisfaction of the church. Then the church would 'renew her love' to the erring member admitting him or her again to communion. If satisfaction was not made the member would be suspended from communion; if the misbehaviour was persisted in the church proceeded to withdraw from the member 'solemnly and in the name of the Lord'.

3. The experience of J. WIDMER. A vivid illustration of relationships and methods in the church is provided by the account of the election of Jonathan Widmer to the office of elder. In 1712 the church agreed 'that Bro. Widmer and Bro. Foster be nominated to serve this church in the capacity of elders and do desire them to attempt of it and give them liberty until the next church meeting to show their reasons why they are not willing'. In January 1713 this decision was renewed and notice was to be given so that 'persons may bring their reasons if they do not consent to it'. At a meeting in March, twenty persons opposed the nomination of Widmer 'by reason that the Scripture lets us know that an elder ought to have a good report within and without as saith 1 Tim.3:7 which according to our apprehension we cannot see that he is so qualified'.

On April 16, 1714 the twenty persons attended a church meeting. It was found that twelve of them 'had nothing of their own knowledge they could prove against him'. Another member said that Widmer and some others had been asked to deliver some mince pies and other 'knacks', but had eaten them on the way. This had happened three or four years previously and Widmer said that he was sorry that he had joined 'with those wild persons in such a foolish action'. The church judged that the incident should not have been mentioned since the member who made the complaint had regularly shared communion with Widmer.

Bro. Adams reported another incident during harvest when Widmer went to help a neighbour rake the corn. A shower of rain 'forced them to go on the other side of the hedge and the maids which were with them complained of the cold'. Widmer said that if they went on the other side of the hedge he would quickly warm them, meaning that they would be warm when they went to work. Then Widmer acknowledged 'that he did in the middle of the field set down his rake and did upon some daring words which was spoken kiss one or both of them maids, which were at work with him'. The church judged that no evil was intended by Widmer, it had happened a considerable time ago and Adams was rebuked for bringing the charge.

Sister Hobbs accused Widmer of saying things not true but could not produce evidence; she had offered to put it to lot but Widmer refused 'because he thought that a lot was too sacred a thing to be used at the pleasure of men'. The church did not judge between the two members; they felt that they 'must leave this matter to God and their own conscience'.

Having examined all the complaints the church decided that there was no reason preventing them from proceeding to 'choose and ordain Widmer to the office of an elder in the church'.

No objections were made to the nomination of Foster, but he suggested that all these old matters should be entirely laid aside and that Widmer might be elected in a year's time; meanwhile he would be willing to serve alone during that year.

In 1716 Sister Hobbs caused further trouble and Widmer was advised to act according to Matthew 18, which he did without meeting any response from Sister Hobbs who was then suspended from communion.

In April 1717 the church received a long letter from Widmer asking that he might not 'for the future be appointed in so great a work as preaching the Word of God'. He had met with many things which 'discouraged, discomposed and encumbered' his mind so that he could not prepare suitably for preaching. He was unhappy about the manner in which the church had dealt with objections to his nomination. And he felt that he could not maintain his business and support his family 'in an honest Christian and decent manner' and spend the time necessary to 'prepare matter fit to be delivered in the pulpit'.

The church sent a careful written reply asking Widmer to be present at the next church meeting. This occurred on June 14, 1717 when the church emphasized their sincerity in wanting to nominate him, but Widmer asked for the matter to be deferred a little longer.

Then in June 1718 the church received another letter from Widmer beginning with the words 'loving friends' and containing the request 'for peace sake and my own comfort' that his communion might be transferred to the church at Aylesbury. The letter disturbed the church who did not want 'to part with a member we love and respect so well', so they asked him to attend the next church meeting when they would 'hear what you have to say and do by you as becomes a church of Jesus Christ'. All the elders signed the letter as 'your affectionate brethren and cordial friends'.

The meeting took place in July and as a result Widmer 'desired a little time and hoped to make himself easy'. Apparently the situation cleared so that in October 1718 it was agreed that Widmer should be elected an elder and in December four brethren were appointed to 'acquaint Bro. Widmer that this church for the good opinion they have received of him have chosen him to the office of elder'.

In February 1719 Widmer agreed to the appointment on certain conditions which included a request that the church would trade with him so that he could maintain his family. The church replied that they were 'willing to trade with him such of us as live convenient to do so in case his goods were as good and as cheap as another man's'.

The ordination was to take place the following Easter week and it was agreed that letters should be sent to the two Messengers, Hook and Hunt, 'to request them to do that work for us'. We must assume that the ordination took place because it is clear that Widmer served the church as an elder during succeeding years and in 1720 and again in 1722 he was appointed to preach the sermon on Christmas Day.

Then at a church meeting held 28 July 1728 a letter from the General Assembly was read requesting the church's consent to the ordination of 'our beloved Brother Jonathan Widmer' to the office of Messenger. Consent was given and Widmer agreed to be ordained, so the meeting on September 13 decided that the ordination would take place on Thursday October 3 to begin at nine in the morning.

There is no further reference to Widmer so we must assume that he died within a year or two of his appointment as Messenger. But in

1733 a minute mentions Sister Widmer, perhaps Jonathan's widow. She possessed a farm which she let to tenants, so she was a person of some means.

4. Church Life and Fellowship. It would be wrong to give the impression that the church was concerned mainly with cases of discipline. The deeper concern was for the maintenance of what was regarded as true church life. Mention has already been made of the care with which arrangements were made each month for the ministry of preaching and the observance of the Lord's supper, and although baptismal services are rarely mentioned there are frequent references to the covenant accepted at baptism, especially in regard to marriage.

(i) Transfers. This concern for true church life is manifest also in other ways. Transfers of membership were serious matters requiring careful investigation. In 1712 three men applied to the church at Chesham because they were denied communion at their church on account of some doctrinal differences. So three elders were appointed to visit their church and bring back a full report; this did not produce any evidence so three other elders were appointed to make a further visit; their full report at Chesham led the church to accept two of the men and to record dissatisfaction with the third.

In 1714 Thomas Ely asked for communion but it was reported that the church in Virginia St. London where he was a member had withdrawn from him; so two elders were sent to that church so that 'we may judge of this case for ourselves'. But the church in Virginia St. wrote a letter to enquire whether the brethren were authorised by their church and only with this assurance were they allowed to know about the situation of Thomas Ely. Report was made to the Chesham church and Ely was accepted.

In 1718 Sister Cook desired 'to come under hands and sit down with us', because her pastor had died and the fellowship to which she belonged was divided. She was accepted 'without obliging her to bring a letter from that people'.

But in 1727 the daughter of John Britain, a Messenger, came to Chesham with a letter of recommendation from the church at Stoney Stratford; however the church 'durst not receive her because her conversation had not been suitable since she lived in Chesham', so the minister John Cook had the difficult task of writing to John Britain about the decision.

In 1745 Sister Dogett asked for a transfer to the church at Hempstead and two members from that church visited Berkhamsted with the request. But the church was not satisfied with her reason, so the visitors were asked to come again in two months. This they did when 'we told them that we were willing to dismiss, but could not recommend her to them'. So she was dismissed 'with a friendly and Christian exhortation'.

(ii) Days of thanksgiving. Special days of thanksgiving were held from time to time. In 1712 a day was arranged 'to praise the Lord for his goodness to us in bestowing spiritual gifts upon us'. In 1730 part of a day was devoted to 'thanksgiving to almighty God for his mercy shown to our Sister Miller in bringing her out of the dark state of spirit and giving her comfort in her soul again'. And in 1739 a day of prayer was appointed 'at the request of Elizabeth Rowse who is greatly distressed in mind by reason of an affliction in her throat'.

(iii) Fasting. Days of fasting were held more frequently. At times these were held at the suggestion either of the General Assembly or of the Association. In 1730 it was decided to hold a 'fast meeting' in response to the request of the Assembly 'to beg of the Lord to bless the churches with wisdom to know how to act in these dark times and that the Lord would raise up and thrust forth more labourers in his vineyard'. In 1739 the Association called for a day of fasting 'to humble our souls before the Lord on account of the sins and impending dangers of the nation'. The following year it was agreed 'to keep the general fast as by the government appointed'. Sometimes the church arranged such a day apart from any outside decision. In 1739 a fast was held 'on account of the sickness of the inhabitants of the nation and the scarceness of provisions so that many are in want of bread, to implore the God of mercy that he will please to avert these judgments'. And in 1732 it was agreed that 'a day of humiliation by fasting and prayer be kept on consideration of the too great ignorance and decay of godliness that appears so generally amongst us'.

(iv) Care of the needy. Another prominent feature of church life is seen in the care shown towards members who were in need, usually widows. In 1714 it was reported by the Aylesbury church that the widow and children of Brother Anderson were in need and might have to depend on parish relief. So the churches combined to help and Chesham decided to raise £5 each year for the support of the widow. In 1716 the help was continued, but in the form of goods 'so many as shall come to two shillings and sixpence a week'. Still in 1718 help was being given; it is now '18 pence per week in bread upon the church's charge'.

In 1728 Sister Greenleaf, 'an ancient widow', was no longer able to work for her living by reason of age and the parish would not help her unless she went to the workhouse. But that was at a great distance from the meeting house so that she would 'be deprived from the worship of God to her great grief'. Therefore 'the church for the comfort of the said ancient widow have agreed to send her six shillings a month'.

Sometimes the need was less as with widow Hunt to whom the church sent one guinea 'as a token of their love'. So the church showed discernment in its help as in the case of Sister Carter whose first husband had been a minister and their son, now an adult, wanted to set up as a farmer. So she asked the church to assist him, but the church replied 'that if she herself do or shall stand in need of necessaries they hope that friends will help and assist her, but do not see that the church is obliged to assist her son'.

(v) Finance. Money for these charitable purposes as well as for the general maintenance of the church was collected by the deacons.

Members were expected to offer subscriptions and it was the deacons' responsibility to ensure that they were regularly paid; if a member defaulted enquiries were made as to the reason for non-payment.

Sometimes money was collected to aid other churches. In 1733 the sum of £3.1.1 was sent to the church in Great Yarmouth which had appealed for help in building a meeting house. In 1750 'Brother Young and Brother Cook went out to collect money to build Tring meeting house'; they visited 'all the baptised churches in Herts. county'. In 1738 a letter was received from London inviting the church and 'likewise any wealthy person' to help in 'increasing the fund for the support and encouragement of poor ministering brethren'. The matter was referred to the Association which approved of the scheme, so six deacons were appointed to organise the collecting of money in all parts of the church.

5. Conclusion. The illustrations of church life and discipline given in this article constitute but a small number from the many accounts contained in the book. It is outstanding for the detailed nature of its record and for the lively manner in which so many incidents are described. We see a carefully organised and vigorously led church in the days of its strength; we can discern too some causes for its decline. Its rule about marriage must have led to the loss both of actual and of potential members. Its constant scrutiny of the behaviour of members with its legalistic methods of dealing with offenders must have seemed forbidding to many. An increasing rigidity of practice and doctrine is evident. There was a lack of response to the new religious experiences and emphases exemplified in the evangelical revival and within some Baptist circles seen in the growth of the New Connexion and later in the influence of the Northants circle of Fuller, Ryland and Carey.

NOTES

- 1 A. Taylor, *A History of the English General Baptists*, 1818, vol.I, p.328.
- 2 Taylor, vol.II, p.443.
- 3 Taylor, vol.I, p.423.
- 4 Taylor, vol.I, p.434.
- 5 W. T. Whitley, *Minutes of the General Assembly of General Baptists*, vol.I, p.93.

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