

CHURCH DISCIPLINE IN THE LOUGHWOOD RECORDS

The Loughwood Baptist Church Books(1), starting at 1653, reveal the exercise of strict discipline, as also evolution in the methods and subjects of disciplinary action. The first pages of the book give lists of the first members of the church, the first list dividing up the membership between those living in and around Honiton, and those living in and around Loughwood itself. The second list, probably the earlier to have been compiled, gives one list for all members. This consists of 105 members in good standing, plus a further 38 'members sometime belonging to the church at Dallwood, since cast out and withdrawne from for sin and disorder'. (Dalwood - present spelling - is the parish in which Loughwood is situated).

The other list gives 46 members listed under Honiton, of whom no less than 14 were recorded as 'cast out'. The members listed under Loughwood number 87, of whom only 5 were cast out. A good proportion of those cast out were for reasons of non-attendance over long periods and 'forsaking the assembling of saints', Hebrews 10.25. The greater distances involved in travelling may well have led to some of these dismissals. However, when in 1658 Francis Perriam of Sidbury pleaded great distance from the church as an excuse for absence from Sunday worship, the church elicited from him the confession 'that he hath been severall tymes further uppon ordinary occasions'.

One of the first cases of discipline recorded sets a theme which is repeated many times in these early years. From the entry dated 25th. 2 mo. 1654 -

1. That Bro. Phillipp and Bro. Jno. Demmige havinge neglected to assemble with the church on the first day and at that tyme meett with those persons which hold the doctrines of freewill, fallinge from grace and generall redemption; and doe upon examination profess themselves to be of that judgement, and beinge warned to come to the church that soe their scruples touchinge these doctrines might be removed. But doe neglect the same and refuse to heare the church therein. It is ordered that Bro. Jno. Davy and Bro. James Hitt doe sometye this weeke warne them to doe their duty in cominge to the church the next first day in order to their satisfaction.

Accusations of doctrines of 'freewill, fallinge from grace, and general redemption' reveal that the persons concerned were moving towards the position held by General Baptists, some of whom had been at Tiverton as early as 1626.

The latter part of the Sunday meetings were spent in 'inquiringe after persons absent' and 'tryinge the things heard and dutys neglected'. Out of this came visits to erring members usually, but not always, by two elders. Just two representative entries illustrate this:

That the business of Bro. Parkman havinge been often under consideration, and he beinge not willinge to offer somethinge further in writinge to the churches satisfaction. It is ordered

that Bro. Owen and Bro. Tho. Payne doe call upon him for what he hath further to offer and bringe it in the next first day. (12 mo. 1653)

It is agreed that Bro. Owen and Bro. Tho. Payne doe take an account of sister Hitt of Ottery and if they find cause, to admonish her to her duty and to appeare before the church in some convenient tyme. (6 mo. 1658)

If this first visit did not bear fruit it was followed by a solemn warning to appear before the church, so in the case of Brother Parkman a meeting a couple of months later recorded:

The case of Bro. Parkman beinge againe considered and his repentance beinge not found to satisfaction; and still after admonition to duty in his family, he continually neglects it. It is ordered that Bro. Vickery and Bro. Jno. Payne doe warne him to the church the next first day.

There are relatively few records of cases where members defended themselves in front of the church. One such case, that of Sister Hossiter, is worth looking at for the light it shows on the way other 'suspect' religious groups (in this case Quakers) were regarded:

Bro. Gryland and Bro. Martin then informed the church of the disorderly walkinge of sister Hossiter of Honiton. Carelesse attendinge the meetings at that place; and her manifestinge an inclynation to the delusions of the Quakers. The said brethren informed the church also that she hath been dealt with severall tymes by particular members and joyntly by the whole people in that place on those things and as yett they see noe amendment in her.

Sister Hossiter for herself.

That she did question whether she did sitt under the ministry of the gosple at the meetinge of the members at Honiton. And havinge severall scriptures laid before her (as 2 Kings 7 the case of the lepers for one) she was then minded to goe to the Quakers meetinge and did accordingly goe to their meetinge and was taken sick at that tyme; and have since been convinced of their error and hath nott gone to those meetings any more. She seemeth also to be satisfied to sitt downe in her place in the church; yet seemeth of an unstable spiritt as to the ordinances of it. Some endeavours were then used to convince her of it. On the whole the church agreed to admonish her to more close walkinge for future which was done accordingly.

She appeared before the church on the 29th. 10 mo. 1658, when she was admonished. On the 16th. 12 mo. 1658, her repentance was to be further inquired into, Then, on the 2nd day of the next month, it was reported that she was still meeting with the Quakers. The decision then was that 'in regard of her persistinge in her unsoundnesse and disorder above mentioned she be withdrawne from which was accordingly done this day'.

The withdrawing from members could be reversed if repentance

were forthcoming. There are a couple of instances of this happening, as for example the following dated 14th. 12 mo. 1655:

Sister Sprague, having offered satisfaction by repentance before the church is received into full communion againe.

In one case which was undecided at the time, the member was asked to 'forbear from breaking bread' until the matter was settled.

The final sanction was full excommunication. An example of this is dated 13th. 11 mo. 1656:

The church this day proceeded to the excommunication of sister Elizabeth Burgis for divers evils which she stood guilty of and for which she brought forth noe satisfactory repentance after long waitinge. Her evils were: charging the church as a company of hippochritts; railing at a particular person; idlenesse and lyinge.

Sometimes, in the earlier records, the sentences were passed with a scriptural, but devastatingly final addition, as witnessed by this entry dated 24th. 8 mo. 1654. It concerns Richard Copp of Axminster, who was found guilty of holding the doctrines of freewill, falling from grace, and general redemption. After 'divers admonitions' and waiting for his repentance, the record continues:

... but he still stiffly persisting therein and indeavouring to cause divisions in the church and to draw away others after him, was by the church in the name of Christ - delivered up to Satan, and was judged fitt to be no further communicated with than a heathen or publican. And that upon these scriptures (viz) 1 Tim.6:3,5 verses, Romans 16:17, Titus 3:10. (2)

Whilst 'errors of judgement', that is doctrinal issues, account for many cases of discipline, and whilst other cases are simply recorded as 'disorderly walking', several cases of drunkenness are specifically recorded:

Bro. Gill from the Brethren at Honiton informed the church that Bro. Lamby was drunke in the open streete on Saturday last to the reproach of the gosple. The church appointed Bro. Gill Bro. Gryland or some other brethren at Honiton to give notice to Bro. Lamby to be here next first day in the morninge when the church intends to deale with him about his miscarriage. (16th. 1 mo. 1659)

On 10th. 2 mo. 1659 it is recorded:

Bro. Lamby being present with the church his sin of drunkenness being charged upon him and proved by 4 members that live in that place, saw him and spake with him. The said Bro. Lamby expressinge noe sense at all of this sin but of some passion towards that brother that spake to him. The church did unanimously agree forthwith to cast him out which was done this day.

Although strict, the application of discipline was not carried out before the person concerned had a chance both to defend himself and to show his repentance, as is again shown in a case of 1655:

Michael Gaulsworthy havinge been delt with in all our manner by particular members and by the church in generall: for these his evils vizt. His unseemly carriage at Culliton faire, his unchristianlike reply to Bro. Guppy when in tendernesse and faithfulness he inquired of him aboute it; his rejectinge the counsell of the church touchinge marriage; his travellinge on the first day neglecting the worshipp of God, and that on noe extraordinary occasion; and falsly accusinge the church; and bringinge forth noe repentance to any satisfaction of the church; declared and is hereby considered by the church an Excommunicate person; and noe further to be communicated with than a heathen. (10th. 6 mo. 1655)

Other instances of misconduct included sister Serridge, who was excommunicated for 'lyinge and even makinge a jest of it'; Bro. Dabin, admonished for 'offeringe to take a positive oath on a bare probability and charging Bro. Simes on the same and noe other ground vizt. probability'.

Perhaps the most spectacular case involved sister Grace Barnes and sister Elizabeth Burgis. On 28th. 10 mo. 1655, they came before the church 'to give an account of what happened between them to the dishonour of God and reproach of the gosple'. What happened was this:

Sister Barnes chargeth Sister Burgis with the callinge of her durty beast, dogged woman; threateninge to throw her cup to her head, and at least hinting to one of the world as if she had more than ordinary familiarity with another womans husband. Also it appeared before the church that sister Burgis harbored groundlesse jealousyes touchinge Bro. Hitt and Bro. Owen; as if they knew of some desyne that some persons had against her but would not disclose it'.

Sister Burgis made some lesser charges against sister Barnes, and at first the church could not decide who was in the right. Eventually, after much delving, the church pronounced that Sister Burgis was the guilty party and in 1656, after 'long waitinge' for repentance which was not forthcoming, she was excommunicated.

By the eighteenth century Loughwood was struggling to maintain its identity. Membership was low, few baptisms were recorded, and the main emphasis was on the maintenance of purity of doctrine. Cases of church discipline are of the more conspicuous variety. For example, Thomas Parsons was excommunicated in 1732 for

an abominable act of lasciviousness, lightness and wantonness, a break of the 7th. commandment, Romans 13th. and 13, 2 Peter 2nd. and 7, being taken in the very act.

Other members were withdrawn from or cast out for drunkenness,

whoredom, unbecoming conversation, contempt of church authority, frequenting ale houses on the Sabbath, an attempted abortion, and wilful lying. Betty and Sarah Rockett, mother and daughter, presented the little congregation with a case demanding action. Betty Rockett, the mother, had been a member for some time, and her daughter Sarah was baptised in 1757. In 1782 it is recorded:

Betty Rockett having refused to agree with the church in the choice of a deacon and when she could not obtain her end withdrew her comunion and left her place in the church and being kindly admonished to submit to the judgement of the church and to keep her place she refused and Sarah Rockett her daughter when she saw that her mother could not have the government of the church she said she could not in conscience joyn with the church and withdrew her communion and left her place and after a long time on October 13th. 1782 the church withdrew from them both and sent mesengers to let them know it which they disregarded and after waiting a whole year and more they thout them unruly members and so unworthy a name or place in the church and sent them a messenger to let them know it and on March 25th. 1784 being our church meeting our pastor in the name of the church pronounced the sentence of excommunication against them as standing in no relation to the church.

This throws a little light on the role of women in the church at that time, and shows that the disciplinary actions were not taken lightly, nor without some attempt to reason with the people involved, as is revealed by a case recorded in 1762:

Betty Carter withdrawn comunion from for being with child before marriage and after several admonitions to no purpose and for casting contempt upon the churches word was withdrawn from on September 21st. 1760 and cut off January 1st. 1762.

In the early years of the ministry of Richard Gill at Loughwood in the early nineteenth century, the church revived with many more baptisms taking place than previously. In May 1809 it is recorded that Betty Carter was restored to fellowship upon repentance, 'having been cast out many years before', a restoration after forty years. This was a period of growth: altogether the membership of the church rose from 24 in 1806 to 66 in 1814.

The influx of new members brought its own problems, though. Towards the end of this period of growth, there were many members with financial problems. A committee of seven men was set up to help members 'in their secular concerns ... encountering difficulty or embarrassment'.

This genuine attempt to express Christian brotherhood and love in a practical way was done, however, in a context of a fellowship that believed strongly in discipline. If any member neglected to seek advice, or failed to act upon the advice given, and fell into trouble 'likely to bring a disgrace or reproach upon religion', he was 'deserving of receiving censure'. However, if any member acted upon advice but still failed, he was to 'receive the sympathy of the church'.

In April 1834 a whole new set of church rules was agreed, which identified the officers of the church as the deacons and pastor, and provided for the conduct of church meetings and business. Women members of the church were expected to attend but were not allowed to speak at church meetings. The men were expected to speak 'only in an orderly and Christianlike manner... Members shall keep inviolate the secrets of the church'. The final article on order and discipline, betraying an uneasiness, almost as if they were expecting trouble, reads:

In the case of any disorder or confusion at any church meeting, the officers shall endeavour to restore order. Should this prove ineffectual the meeting shall forthwith be dissolved, and the originator or originators of the confusion be suspended as peace breakers unless they acknowledge their fault with humiliation.

This sounds very much as if the rule was put in to cover a specific situation which had arisen at that time -although no trace of any serious disorder exists in the church book itself.

The final, and longest, section is concerned with discipline. Offences were classified into public or private, with trivial or aggravated categories in each, and the final sanction of excommunication was recognised as something not to be undertaken lightly. All cases were to be handled with love, kindness and affection. The prospect of ultimate restoration of the offender was always to be held in view. The rules conclude with an apology for the need for rules:

Laws are absolutely necessary to the well being of earthly kingdoms... How much more necessary to the peace and prosperity of the Christian church is discipline.

The church book showed very few cases of discipline between 1832 when Richard Gill retired, and 1837, despite the church rules. However, upon the arrival of Job Stembridge, Gill's successor, the number of cases recorded increased, most being cases of non-attendance over a long period.

In 1842 we read that Stembridge had resigned the ministry with the intention of going to America. However, 'Divine Providence having prevented it, an invitation was given him to continue his ministrations amongst us'. Then in 1846 there is a sad, short entry: 'The Rev. Job Stembridge is excluded to become the pastor of this church'. It was signed by 12 members, and then by Job Stembridge himself, who also added in his own hand, 'This has nothing to do with money matters'.

However, the mystery is that Job Stembridge continued to be the pastor. There is no corrective entry in the book, nor any explanation of how he was reinstated, but he continued to be the pastor for a further ten years. He was succeeded by the Rev. George Medway, who was personally implicated in one disciplinary matter in 1865, when publicly accused by James French of having wrongly paid over some money to another person. Investigation, however, completely exonerated the pastor, whilst James French was excluded from

membership, but received back upon repentance the following year.

In the second half of the nineteenth century a sense of decorum leads to the church books containing only the most general description of disciplinary cases. For example, an entry dated 7th. February 1883 records that: 'Elizabeth Pavey's name was struck out and our prayer is that she may be led to repentance'.

The 1884 Annual Meeting, however, witnessed something of a disturbance. The record reads:

Whilst we were partaking of tea, Mrs. Robert French to the annoyance of all present, began to make a speech about a presentation to Mrs. Samuel French, but our pastor wisely prohibited her from doing so.

The following year, because of 'her unchristian conduct in every way trying to damage the pastor', she was not allowed to take any further part in church meetings, 'unless she confess her sorrow at what she has done and promise to amend'. But that kind of entry had by then become a rarity.

The minutes of the late nineteenth, and also of the twentieth century, show much less concern with disciplining the membership as these responsibilities increasingly fell to be discharged by deacons and minister rather than the membership at large, and without minutes documenting their actions.

NOTES

- 1 All quotations are from the Loughwood church books, 1653-1900, deposited at the Devon Record Office, Exeter.
- 2 Whilst the scriptures cited give examples of withdrawing from those who cause divisions and teach false doctrine, the authority for 'delivery to Satan' is not quoted but is probably from 1 Cor. 5.5 and 1 Tim. 1.20. Those verses, however, should be looked at carefully and in context: they refer to specific cases and not the sort of disciplinary action taken here.

J. B. WHITELEY, F.C.A.
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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of the Baptist Historical Society will take place on Monday, 28 April 1986 at 4.30 p.m. in the Lloyd Jones Hall at Westminster Chapel. The Henton Lecture will be given by the Rev. Dr G. Henton Davies, M.A., M.Litt., B.D. His subject will be 'Bound for (South) Wales'; the scope of the lecture will be to trace aspects of Baptist life in South Wales.