

REVIEWS

R. R. Darsley, *A Short History of Baptists in York, 1646-1987*, 1987, 48 pp, £1.95, from The Barbican Bookshop, Walmgate, York.

Roger Darsley is to be congratulated on a contextual, honest and extremely readable history of Baptists in York over the past three and a half centuries. Priory Street Church, his main concern, was founded in 1862, as part of the work of the Baptist Home Mission Society, which was concerned to open Baptist churches in growing areas of the industrial north. However, he does not forget the Baptists in the Cromwellian Army, the evangelists like William Mitchell of Rossendale, and those who registered their homes for Baptist worship during the Restoration and into the eighteenth century.

Priory Street was started as a result of a letter from Richard Whitwell to *The Freeman* in 1856. The chapel - 'an edifice of pretty design - quite ecclesiastical in character' - was opened in 1867, facing the Wesleyan Chapel. The work was first advanced by the distinctive ministry of F. B. Meyer, appointed in 1872. The growth must be attributed in some measure to his working with D. L. Moody on that man's first English Mission, held in York that year. An event commemorated in a small brass tablet inlaid in the vestry table in 1954!

The story that emerges is one of elation mixed with despair, a veritable see-saw of growth and decline. One who shared in retrenchment and renewal in the 1930s was W. Murray Raw, his first pastorate after training at Bristol, the church having been vacant for seven years. The buildings were transformed, the finances strengthened, and the membership greatly increased in five years. In more recent years Dr D. J. Davies, over a fourteen years ministry, established the church in the city and within its evangelical community, and started the work at nearby Acomb with members as well as money in 1960.

The danger of taking a story to the present time, for the historian, is too close an alignment with the community. Of this Mr Darsley is well aware, but he has provided in the closing pages of this plain tale, lovingly told, an analysis of the most recent despair and decline which is instructive for all concerned with Baptist identity.

Under Neill Robb's ministry the church moved towards a more Reformed Baptist position, at a time when York was feeling the full effect of David Watson's charismatically renewed ministry. It was obviously a period when evangelical foundations were advocated in Priory Street, in the face of a growingly emotional Christianity. When Mr Robb left for Scotland, the church diaconate brought a resolution that Priory Street resign from the Baptist Union: a motion 'defeated by 32 votes to 20 although the membership was nominally 110'. (p.36) A result which led to all the deacons but one seceding to form York Evangelical Church, and reducing Priory Street to 45 members.

Baptist churches in the 80s must be ever aware of the importance of congregational church government, which demands responsible participation in worship, witness and church meeting. In York, it was

the action of the Superintendent, Tasker Lewis, which enabled the church to recover through the active help of retired minister, Edgar Wright, for 2½ years.

The present minister, Iain Collins, appointed in 1984, concludes this story with a personal vision of Priory Street's future and a brief summary of what Baptists believe. History can be dull - but this story illuminates, instructs, and challenges the reader about the future by insights from the past and the present.

ROGER HAYDEN

W. P. Clark, *Eythorne: Our Baptist Heritage*, 92pp
 D. Leeming, *Brierfield Baptist Church: 1886-1986*, 1986, 32pp.
 L. Walmsley, *Hatch End Free Church: 1936-1986*, published by the church, 1986, 50pp.
 Basil Amey, *Harrow Baptist Church: 1906-1984*, published by the church, 1984, 67pp.

Why do Baptist church histories sometimes thrill and at other times disappoint? Without much doubt much of the disappointment arises from a failure to discern source material, which results in extravagant claims being made. Sometimes it is because a plain story has been told even more plainly, when there were aspects of the story that deserved noting. The thrill comes when a well-researched piece of work is then given a telling style, which presents the subtleties of the atmosphere which the congregation has, within a total local context.

The first two histories reviewed here are disappointments. Mr Clark's version of the Eythorne, Kent, history is marked by all too many inconsistencies - even the references are not completed! The book abounds in secondary sources being quoted as fact. If he had consulted the two articles in the *Transactions* Vol.3, pp.41-50, and Vol.6, pp.37-49, he would have known better than to have suggested that Joan Boucher had anything to do with Eythorne on the one hand, or that John Giles conjectures about the church in 1624 were reliable on the other. The church's existence prior to 1700 is very doubtful.

Donald Leeming's account of Brierfield, Lancashire, is totally reliable, but it does not follow through some of the facts sufficiently. Was Brierfield unusual in having a chapel built by a mill-owning friend of Spurgeon, before ever a congregation had been gathered? Why did a Scotch Baptist Church decide in 1905 that it would open the Lord's table to all other local Baptists? Two tantalising references not followed through.

Lesley Walmsley has faced the difficulty of being too close to the story at Hatch End, Middlesex, and has chosen to get the 'feel' of the church at its fiftieth anniversary by blending personal reminiscence with a careful chronological account of the past. When a later historian comes to tell the story he will be grateful for such a careful presentation of the 'mood' of the church - and the present generation will be glad to have a shape given to their emerging work.

Basil Amey's account of Harrow Baptists has provided members

with a thoroughly researched account of their roots and heritage at a significant moment in the church's life. The story has been written as the church moves into a completely new suite of buildings. It is set within the wider denominational context, and provides another necessary account of Baptists in the Greater London area. There is a weaving together of all the available material in a skilful, professional style, which makes an intricate story a delight to read. It is the story of a lively, questioning, caring community of Baptists who have learned to turn disappointments into opportunities.

ROGER HAYDEN

ed. C. S. Rodd, *Foundation Documents of the Faith*, T. & T. Clark, 1987, 152pp. £6.95.

These essays, which survey the historic creeds of the church, the confessions of faith of most of the world confessional families, and the nature and place in church life of contemporary credal affirmations, are mostly reprinted from the *Expository Times*. Morris West starts his discussion of Baptist statements not with the personal affirmations of Smyth and Helwys in the context of the exiled English separatists in Holland but with the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644 and the General Baptist Confession of 1651, drawing particular attention to the Orthodox Confession of 1678's affirmation of the historic creeds of the church as reflecting the theology of the scriptures. In the eighteenth century, however, Baptists, notwithstanding their doctrinal difficulties, became less enamoured of confessions: 'If a confession contained more than the New Testament it would contain too much. If it contained less, it would be too little'. Such non-credalism was very slow to die, but in the light of the Downgrade Controversy, the Baptist Union first passed a declaratory statement in 1887 and in 1904 adopted a rather fuller declaration of faith within its constitution. Dr West, here, points out the significance of the changes of 1906 and 1938, which both emphasised its christological orthodoxy and the authority of the Holy Spirit. The volume concludes with a survey of modern credal affirmations and a defensive essay on 'the place of creeds in Christianity today' by Wolfhart Pannenberg. Baptist unease with creeds, however, remains. Potentially they may, as in the past, be used as a test to exclude from the church. Baptist authority by contrast is found in the whole of the scriptures and more particularly the Christ of the scriptures, rather than credal statements about him, for all creeds in their statements speak within a given historical cultural context which all too speedily becomes dated and secondhand. Finally a commitment to the story of God's mercy as revealed in the scriptures commits us to the dynamic revelation of God acting in grace in human history to redeem sinful man. His truth is revealed in the story of his love, not in a series of abstract propositions which in the historic creeds relate to the Greek context of the post-apostolic age. But Dr West rightly reminds us that, suspicious of creeds, Baptist fellowship has been nurtured by a common confession of faith. May be the distinction between creed and confession needs further thought among us: the editor is willing to publish.

J. H. Y. BRIGGS