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VARIETIES OF HIGH-CALVINISM AMONG NINETEENTH-CENTURY PARTICULAR BAPTISTS

There is a lovely statement on the nature of gospel preaching in the 1644 Baptist Confession of Faith:

The tenders of the Gospel to the conversion of sinners is absolutely free, no way requiring, as absolutely necessary, any qualifications, preparations, terrors of the Law, or preceding Ministry of the Law, but onely and alone the naked soule, as a sinner and ungodly to receive Christ, as crucified, dead, and buried, and risen againe.¹

The Particular Baptists we are now considering would not have described those sentiments as lovely. Nor would they have been any happier with the wording of the 1677 Confession, that in the Covenant of Grace, God 'freely offereth unto Sinners, Life and Salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them. Faith in him, that they may be saved'.²

Some of the nineteenth-century Particular Baptists for whom these seventeenth-century statements would have been both unlovely and unacceptable, are well known. William Gadsby of Manchester, John Kershaw of Rochdale, John Warburton of Trowbridge in Wiltshire, together with J.C. Philpot, MA, of Stamford, who for thirty years faithfully edited *The Gospel Standard*, which William Gadsby and his son John had commenced in 1835. And then, Charles Waters Banks, editor from 1845 of *The Earthen Vessel*, and James Wells, who ministered to a congregation of near two thousand at the Surrey Tabernacle, almost within earshot of Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle.

Among those who are perhaps rather less well known, John Stevens, who ministered to a large congregation in London's West End, and John Foreman, with an equally large church in Dorset Square, near Baker Street, and who in magazine articles often signed himself 'John of Marylebone'. Later on in the century, also in London, John Hazelton of Clerkenwell, and W.J. Styles, who wrote what is the nearest approach to a manual on theology by any nineteenth-century Strict Baptist. In Suffolk, there was the influential trio of George Wright of Beccles, John Cooper of Wattisham, and Samuel Collins of Grundisburgh. It was the last named, who in 1832, 'devised the plan of a cheap monthly serial of Christian truth',³ to be known as *The Gospel Herald*, and for those of us interested in these matters, an invaluable source of contemporaneous information.

These men, and many others whose names are now largely forgotten, were committed to the baptism of believers by immersion, believing that any other form of baptism is invalid and void. They held firmly to the doctrine known as primitive communion, that in the New Testament all believers were baptized, and not a single example exists of an unbaptized individual receiving the Lord's Supper. They were

also strongly independent, at times almost isolationist, which goes far to explaining the antipathy of some to Associations.

These men and the churches they served, loved their Calvinism, they were totally committed to the doctrine of particular redemption; that 'Jesus Christ by his death did bring forth salvation and reconciliation onely for the elect, which were those which God the Father gave him'.⁴ They loved the doctrines of distinguishing grace, but in a comment made to describe some of their eighteenth-century predecessors, they tended to carry 'their notions very high'.⁵ These Strict Baptists, which is how I shall refer to them from now on, hated the free offer teaching, as found in the writings of John Bunyan, who was a man they loved: they detested the duty faith teaching of Fuller, whose very name was an anathema to them. They stood apart from the mainstream Particular Baptists, and from the Baptist Union. And rather sadly, they often distanced themselves from each other, for they were far from being a unified group. Among these men and their churches there were differing emphases and distinctives: there were doctrinal differences, and often a degree of suspicion which tended to keep them apart. Some of these differences will now be examined.

1 THE PLACE OF THE MORAL LAW

The 1677 confession affirmed that, 'Although true believers be not under the law as a covenant of works ... yet it is of great use to them ... in that as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly'.⁶

This position was consistently maintained by the Particular Baptists throughout the eighteenth century - the moral law as expressed in the decalogue is the believer's rule of life. William Huntington disagreed. He taught that believers, are 'delivered from the yoke and bondage of Moses's law in every sense of the words',⁷ and he repeatedly denounced Caleb Evans of Bristol, the Rylands, Andrew Fuller and others, who taught otherwise.

Huntington was not of course a Baptist, but he exercised a widespread influence, and the Particular Baptists sensed danger, fearing the dread spectre of outright antinomianism. In 1791 Abraham Booth's church in Wapping, dealt with a Mr Molloy, who denied 'the moral law to be a law of moral conduct', and who could not be received into membership, 'were he ever so desirous of it, while he maintains a sentiment so erroneous and dangerous'.⁸ In his *History of the English Baptists*, Joseph Ivimey cites an occasion in 1798 when the managers of the Particular Baptist Fund withheld making a grant until they had the applicant's assurance that he had not denied the moral law to be the believer's rule of moral conduct.⁹

In the often acrimonious debate on this issue William Gadsby sided with Huntington, leading to the charge of his being an outright antinomian. The charge was false, for 'No minister in Manchester', wrote Robert Halley, 'lived a more moral life or presented to his hearers a more beautiful example of Christian discipline and self-control'.¹⁰ Several of Gadsby's writings were devoted to the

moral law issue, and in contrast to mainstream Particular Baptist Churches, Gadsbyite churches often incorporated a denial of the law as a rule of life in their articles of faith.

But other Strict Baptists were firmly opposed to Huntington and Gadsby on this issue. During an evangelistic preaching tour in Lincolnshire, John Stevens discovered that 'the tenets of Mr Huntington' regarding the place of the law 'were making considerable advance in some of the churches'.¹¹ He responded with *Doctrinal Antinomianism Refuted*, written in 1811. Although Stevens had not intended it, this publication resulted in a pamphlet war with Gadsby, who believed the book had been launched at himself. In a second edition, Stevens pointed out that his 'eye was fixed on the head officer, and my attention to Mr G. was only a secondary consideration'.¹² From these differences, two strands of Strict Baptist thought emerged. Stemming from Gadsby, whose views were not as extreme as those of Huntington, came the assertion in *The Gospel Standard* that 'the Gospel ... is the only rule of the believer's life and conduct'.¹³ Most other Strict Baptists followed Stevens in accepting that the rule of life is the whole preceptive word of God in the hands of Christ.

This issue was not without its sad consequences, bringing division and strife within some of the churches. In Suffolk there was some uneasiness about the views of George Wright, it having been reported 'in very strong terms', that he 'holds sentiments repugnant to practical godliness ... that believers have nothing to do with the law in any sense whatsoever', Wright was able to give assurances that he earnestly insisted on 'the obligation of believers to obey the preceptive will of the Redeemer ... in spirit, word, and actions'.¹⁴

2 ATTITUDES TOWARDS ASSOCIATIONS

Following the example of Baptists in other parts of the country, the Particular Baptists in Suffolk and Norfolk formed an Association in 1769. There were five churches in membership, three from Norfolk and two from Suffolk. By 1823 the number had risen to twenty-four, but by then the dark clouds of division were beginning to gather, chiefly in 'disputes and clashing about the doctrine called Fullerism ... which some of the churches had begun to embrace', to quote Daniel Wilson, pastor of the Tunstall church.¹⁵

At the Annual Meetings in the summer of 1829, George Wright gave offence by affirming that salvation is 'not proposed to us for our choice - it is not a benefit offered to us',¹⁶ but is divinely given. Attitudes sharpened, and in the following September a meeting was held at Grundisburgh to form a new Association. Representatives of six churches attended, and a letter was sent to all the Suffolk churches, giving reasons for what was held to be a necessary separation. In this graciously worded letter, none of the associated churches were accused of any departure from the Articles of the Association. The point made was that some of the churches had departed from what was inherent in those Articles, that the doctrines

always maintained by the Association are 'wholly incompatible with the doctrine which asserts that *saving faith is the duty of all men*'.¹⁷ In other words, calls to repentance and faith are incompatible with a belief in particular redemption. As a defection from this 'original principle' had 'taken place in several Churches', a separation was now necessary, as a means of 'securing our own comfort, and uniting our efforts, to advance the true glory of our Lord's kingdom'.¹⁸ In this stand for high-Calvinism, therefore, those who separated believed they were doing nothing more than upholding the historic position of the Association.

The division of 1829 was serious, but it did not result in any bitterness between the opposing groups, and the two Associations continued side by side for a number of years. The old Association gradually declined and was dissolved in 1849, with some of the churches joining the newly formed Suffolk Union. Meanwhile the new Association prospered, under the energetic leadership of Wright, Cooper and Collins, from an initial membership of seven churches, to over thirty in the 1860s, with about a hundred village preaching stations. The activities of the Association forged a unifying link between the churches, and the annual tent meetings were clearly a highlight in the year for thousands of people.

Moving from rural Suffolk, a rapidly growing London had by mid-century 120 Baptist churches, about half of which can be identified as Strict Baptist. 'The London Association of Strict Baptist Ministers and Churches', was formed in 1846, composed of four churches and eleven ministers, just a tiny fraction of the number which might have joined. Little progress was made, and there were always tensions, chiefly over terms of communion: one of the ministers, for instance, was severely reprimanded for administering communion in an open-communion church.

A second London Strict Baptist Association was formed early in 1849, and resulted from a suspicion that some of the ministers in the existing Association held 'the sentiment commonly known as *duty faith*'.¹⁹ The new Association began with seven churches, had but one addition, and then declined. Not unexpectedly, conflict soon developed between the two Associations, so in order to head-off further strife, a joint meeting was held, when an amicable decision was made to unite the two Associations. But in the words of Seymour Price, 'The marriage was not a success; the parties were in death-throes almost before the close of the honeymoon ... and within a year or two the Association passed peacefully away'.²⁰

The early demise of the London Strict Associations highlights some of the differences existing among the strict communionists. Some were prepared to join in association with those of a duty-faith persuasion, others were not. The largest congregations of Strict Baptists, at the Surrey Tabernacle and at Dorset Square, stood aloof, John Foreman of the latter having declared that he could not unite with an Association which 'has in it those who hold *duty faith*'.²¹ The precise terms of strict communion brought further tensions, and inevitable collapse in 1853. Two years later, an earlier London Baptist Association, formed in 1835, also collapsed, not through doctrinal diversity, but through lack of interest, leaving the capital

without a Particular Baptist Association.

There was a new beginning in November 1865, when, enthused by Spurgeon, a meeting took place at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, and the new London Baptist Association was formed. It was to be a union of 'Evangelical Baptist Churches', embracing Calvinists and non-Calvinists, without respect to terms of communion. By 1866 fifty-nine churches had joined the new Association, with a total membership of over 19,000. This emphatic success may well have been the inspiration leading to the formation of the Metropolitan Association of Strict Baptist Churches in 1871. The doctrinal basis stressed restricted communion, and a clause was written into the articles of belief affirming that 'saving faith is not a legal duty but the sovereign and precious gift of God'.²² The objects of the Association were to promote the unity, edification, and prosperity of the churches, as well as to devise and employ means for extending the cause of God in London and its suburbs.

When this Association was formed there were twenty-three churches in membership. By 1900 the number had risen to sixty-six, with an aggregate membership of 4,031. There were 7,157 children in the Sunday Schools, who were 'happily benefiting by the devoted efforts of 642 teachers'.²³

William Gadsby, to whom I now return, always stood aloof from all associations, believing they exercised an improper power or authority over individual churches. Mr Philpot took an even stronger line. In 1840 a number of ministers met at Chatteris in Cambridgeshire, and issued a tract on the subject of *Foreign Missions*. Philpot subjected this to a blistering attack, ruthlessly attacking all associations, as 'having no precept nor precedent for their formation in the word of God'. Although 'union is strength', he maintained that this is only 'carnal strength', for 'all strength gained by union is a departure from that weakness in which alone divine strength is made perfect ... and, as such, involves a departure from Gospel principles'. He went on to compare associations with joint-stock companies, where,

The power thus gained by the ministers is employed and worked against the people, and chiefly against God's people ... A creed is drawn up, or tacitly assented to by all the ministers of the association; they, naturally, preach for one another; and their pulpits are only open to the associated ministers, or to those who come with their countenance, or with their shibboleth ... The living family form a small, despised, browbeaten minority. The leading members of the churches work with the ministers, and all opposition is silenced and put down ... The living family are starved, honest men gagged, the faithful witnesses for truth excluded, and a dense crop of weeds grows up under the protecting shadow of the association ... We would say, then, to all the people of God, who have ears to hear, resist where you can, and where you cannot, flee out of Associations'.²⁴

Behind Philpot's typically exaggerated expression lies a fear which was certainly not limited to high-Calvinists, that Associations unduly interfere with the autonomy of individual churches. When 'The Northern Counties Union of Strict Baptists' was

formed in 1895, its founders were unfairly charged with 'seeking to interfere with the management of the churches'.²⁵ Paradoxically, developments in the churches subscribing to *The Gospel Standard*, following the formation in the 1870s of the two Aid Societies from which financial help could only be given to members of churches which had adopted the 'Gospel Standard Articles', has led to a degree of control over the churches which was unknown in the nineteenth-century Associations.

3 MINISTERIAL TRAINING

The Strict Baptist track record on ministerial training is, at best, rather less than satisfactory. In the present century, the 'Strict Baptist Bible Institute' was founded in 1923, but by the time of its demise in 1962 had trained only forty-two full-time students. The nineteenth-century record is even worse.

The Metropolitan Association of Strict Baptist Churches commenced a ministerial training class in 1872. Classes were held on Friday evenings, with most of the tuition given by W.J. Styles, who seems to have been the only Strict Baptist minister of the nineteenth century to have been trained at Spurgeon's College. These classes continued for about three and a half years, but were then terminated through lack of support and disagreements between Styles and the management committee.

Charles Waters Banks was a great encourager of young preachers, and it was his ambition to commence a training college. The desire was present, but the will, or time and money to perform, were not. Whether or not other London Strict Baptist ministers would have supported Banks in such a project can only be a matter of conjecture - my own view is that the leading London ministers, John Stevens, John Foreman and James Wells, were too individualistic for anything of a corporate nature to have met with success. In Suffolk a fund to provide books for ministers was commenced, but it does not appear that any attempt was made to cater for any formal training.

That leaves us with Gadsby and Philpot. Gadsby not only stood aloof from Associations, but also from ministerial colleges, affirming that 'all the literature and learning that was ever taught at the college or academy never did nor ever will make a man spiritual'.²⁶ Philpot was equally anti-college, believing that the pre-eminent qualifications for the ministry were 'a deep acquaintance with trial and temptation', and 'knowing something experimentally of the beauty and blessedness of Jesus Christ'.²⁷

The lack of formal training does not mean that Strict Baptist ministers did not give themselves to study and improvement. Many of them studied hard, both before and after receiving a call to the ministry. John Cooper of Wattisham once wrote in his diary, 'Spent the morning at the Hebrew. The more I study it the more I delight in it; but without a teacher the difficulties will take me a long time to surmount'.²⁸

This antipathy towards colleges stemmed only in part from a belief that they do not make a man spiritual. There was also an ingrained notion that colleges were the seed-beds of two of their greatest hates, Fullerism and open-communionism. While

these objections remained, it was unlikely that any attempt to commence a college would have met with success.

4 SUNDAY SCHOOLS AND DAY SCHOOLS

Unlike some high-Calvinists, William Gadsby was an enthusiastic supporter of Sunday Schools, and endeared himself to the 300 children in the school in his Manchester church. 'Allow me to observe', he wrote a few months before his death in 1844,

that I really do consider that, next to the preaching of the glorious gospel of the blessed God, and a special attendance to the order and ordinance's of God's house, Sunday schools are one of the best institutions in the kingdom; and I am sorry to see such a want of zeal for the promotion of them among some who profess to maintain the discriminating truths of God's grace ... For my part, I feel persuaded ... that those persons who engage themselves to teach in Sunday schools ... should be much esteemed as far as they fill that office well; for they are the means of raising the rising generation of poor children from that degradation into which they must otherwise have sunk.²⁹

The children, Gadsby declared, should be taught their duty to their parents, and 'to their superiors in every station of life'. They should have clearly laid before them, 'the awful nature and consequence of sin, in all its bearing; and all proper means should be used to induce them to shun vice and immorality, and to regularly attend a place where God is worshipped, and his truth faithfully preached'.³⁰

In direct contrast to Gadsby's Manchester church, there was only a small Sunday School at Philpot's church in Stamford. For many years he was opposed to Sunday Schools, until,

he had to give way before the general consensus of his followers. But he did not cease to insist that children should never be taught or allowed to use the language of appropriation, to sing, for instance, 'Rock of ages, cleft for *me*'; or, '*My* Jesus hath done all things well'.³¹

It was the abuse of Sunday Schools which Philpot was chiefly opposed to. 'It is a great evil', he wrote, 'to consider the Sunday School the nursery of the church', where the older children, using his analogy, will 'expect to leave the nursery for the dining-room'. The only text-book to be used in Sunday School should be the Bible, with the children being clearly taught 'that it is the inspired word of the living God - the word by which they will be judged at the great day'. The Bible should also be,

the sole foundation and source of the Sunday School hymn book. Mere dead, dry, moral lessons about cleanliness and good temper in jingling rhymes, like some of the infant school sing-songs, should be discarded as worse than useless ... the hymns should not be childish nonsense about clean face and hands ... but the solemn truths of the gospel ... for sound hymns learned at the Sunday School might be made the greatest blessing, and lead them to

Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.³²

Philpot's interest appears to have been lukewarm at best, which in fairness has not characterized his spiritual descendants in most *Gospel Standard* churches. Nor was there anything lukewarm about the concern in Suffolk for children's work. By the time of the 1829 separation most churches had a Sunday School, and the numbers attending were regularly given in the Association's Annual Circular Letters. From the reports of the churches read at the Association meetings, it is apparent there was a very genuine interest.

Wetherden reported that 'an attempt to establish a Sunday school has been crowned with unexpected success':³³ Wattisham reported, 'Our Sabbath schools are much more prosperous than for years past, and our young friends are taking a lively and laudable interest in promoting their efficiency and usefulness'.³⁴ Beccles mentioned 'two youths, teachers in our Sabbath School', who were giving evidence of being 'called by grace'.³⁵ In both of these churches, the teachers were themselves young people, and were not necessarily church members.

The dedication of the teachers, and the enthusiasm of the children, shines out from the accounts of Sunday School anniversaries appearing in *The Gospel Herald*. At Waldringfield, for instance, in 1855, the meetings began at two o'clock, some of the children recited and sang, and some received prizes for the best written letters on 'The Utility of Sunday Schools'. About 120 children enjoyed a bountiful repast of cake and tea in the chapel yard; after this 150 friends sat down to a comfortable tea in the chapel. The evening meeting, with further recitations etc., broke up at about nine o'clock, when 'both children and friends expressed themselves as having spent a very happy day'.³⁶ The Wattisham joint Church and Sabbath School anniversary services in 1857, included Lord's Day sermons on 'The Grounds of Sabbath School Teaching', 'The Certain Extension of the Redeemer's Kingdom', together with three addresses on the following Wednesday on the nature, importance, and results of Sabbath school instruction.³⁷ Addresses on these and similar subjects were given in other churches, but sadly do not appear to have found their way into print.

In addition to Sunday Schools, a number of churches, including Chelmondiston, Sutton and Wattisham, established day schools. Of the Wattisham day school in 1849, it was reported that, 'upwards of 50 children are deriving its valuable advantages under the superintendence of an effective governess'.³⁸ And at Grundisburgh, 'The friends of education here have succeeded in establishing a day school, and much to their credit without sacrificing their independence to money considerations by becoming dependants on the Council of Education'.³⁹

In many an English town or village the Strict Baptist Sunday School, with its annual treat, its singing, its subscription funds, and its library of books, all neatly covered in the regulation black cloth, would have differed little from any other Baptist Chapel Sunday School.

5 MISSION

In the review of the tract on Missions to which reference has already been made, Philpot said that he was not opposed to preaching the gospel among the heathen, his objections rested on those who send, and on those who are sent, on whether or not they possess the power of vital godliness. 'Is their ministry acceptable to the living family of God?', he asked. The answer was furnished by their 'generally understood determination to keep out of their pulpits such men as Gadsby or Warburton'.⁴⁰

A very different attitude prevailed in Suffolk and London, and in many other Strict Baptist churches throughout the country, although it was to be a long time before anything practical was attempted.

Many Strict Baptist churches supported the Baptist Missionary Society, but by mid-century this support began to fall away, not from loss of interest in missionary activity, but when it was realized, 'that the leaders of the Baptist Foreign Missionary Society ... are upon many important points of sentiment opposed to ourselves'.⁴¹ Attempts were made to form an alternative society, largely through the pleas of Henry Dowland in Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania), but nothing materialized, probably because there was no-one to promote it, in the way Andrew Fuller had toiled for the BMS. Eventually, at a meeting in London in 1861, the Strict Baptist Mission was founded, with the object of providing support for agents who were already working in India. The work, which included support for native Indians, continued in this way for over thirty years, until two full-time missionaries sailed for India in 1895. To offset a widespread criticism that missionary societies were spending too much on secretaries and office accommodation, the SBM employed no paid staff, and worked on the principle that overheads be kept to an absolute minimum.

Meanwhile the Suffolk and Norfolk Association had been encouraging its members to support the work of Johann Oncken in Germany, and he came over to speak at the Association's Annual meetings and in a number of the Suffolk churches. There was also support for a society formed at Ipswich in 1831, with the object of the further extension of the Redeemer's kingdom, by preaching the gospel in the villages of Suffolk and Norfolk. This society was well organized, and for many years was linked with a similar society in the counties of Cambridge and Huntingdon. Within the constraints of a limited budget, good was done; churches which otherwise would have closed were kept open, and financial assistance was given to a number of ministers.

6 THE CONVERSION EXPERIENCE

Baptists of every persuasion expected their candidates for membership to give evidence of a true conversion, of a genuine call by grace, to use the term many Strict Baptists preferred. In the thinking of Gadsby, the conversion experience took a standard form. 'Every quickened soul', he said, 'must be brought to feel that he is lost, helpless, and ruined, and desperately ruined too'.⁴² Gadsby's own experience

of feeling himself a guilty condemned criminal was made the pattern for all. This feeling of terror under the law had then to be followed by a powerful inward application of the promise of God. John Kershaw, who was later one of Gadsby's closest associates, described his call by grace in *Memorials of the Mercies of a Covenant God*, published shortly after his death in 1870. As a young man he came under an acute and terrible conviction of sin. Then through the preaching of John Hirst of Bacup, Jesus Christ became precious to him; he now knew that Christ was able to save him, but questioned whether he was willing to. After a struggle he was persuaded of the doctrine of election, but could find no internal evidence that he was one of God's chosen people. He regularly attended Sunday worship, and walked miles to be at prayer meetings, but due to darkness of mind and sinful temptations he still doubted whether he was a child of God. And then as he walked home after having attended three services which only made him feel more wretched still, words from Romans chapter seven came with power into his mind. He hurried home to read these words in his Bible, then read on into the next chapter, 'There is therefore now no condemnation', the burden of sin was lifted, he felt the sealing testimony of the Spirit of God, he knew his election of God. He was so ravished with the beauty and glory of Christ that sleep was impossible, and he lived in the 'sweet enjoyment of this liberty of the gospel for many months'.⁴³

A personal rehearsal of this kind became the anticipated norm for those seeking membership in the *Gospel Standard* churches, often with distressing consequences. Prior to her death in 1913, Ada Kemp of Luton had often spoken of her call by grace, her love for the house of God and the means of grace, and of her love for the scriptures and for the Lord's people. At the time of her death it was said that the Lord had been 'pleased to take her home to Himself'. But she was not a church member, as she was not able to 'look back to any special time or place', in other words to a climactic experience. This godly woman longed for membership, but feared she would 'have nothing to say to the deacons or to the church': she was ready and prepared to meet God, but not to meet the deacons!⁴⁴

Other Strict Baptists took a more balanced and a more Biblical view. Philip Dickerson, a Suffolk man who pastored the Little Alie Street Church, in London's East End, wrote:

All the chosen and redeemed of the Lord are born again of the Holy Ghost ... all are brought to repentance and godly sorrow for sin, and to look to Christ alone for salvation: yet with respect to the degree of distress felt, or the period of its continuance before pardon is bestowed, perhaps it would be difficult to find two cases in perfect agreement ... Some are long held under the terrors of the law ... On the other hand, there are many of the same chosen family ... who are more tenderly dealt with, and more gently drawn to the Saviour's cross.⁴⁵

This diversity was unacceptable to the experimentalists who tended to distance themselves from those who knew little or nothing of this deep experience. In a

sermon preached in 1845, Philpot declared that one of the ways to do the will of God is to flee from 'the ministry of letter preachers, heady, notional Calvinists, with the doctrines in the head, and enmity against the power of vital godliness and the living experience of God's children in the heart'. 'Turn your back', he said, 'on the false apostles, and cast your lot among His poor, despised and persecuted family.'⁴⁶ To what extent these exhortations were heeded cannot be known, but distrust, suspicion and divisions were generated, not over questions of fundamental doctrine, or on the issues of high or orthodox Calvinism, but on an insistence that the only evidence of the existence of true religion is a particular type of mystical experience.

7 PREACHING

Along with most non-conformists, Strict Baptists certainly believed in the centrality of preaching. They also suffered from one of its ill-effects - the practice of running around after favourite preachers. In South London, C.W. Banks was grieved to see empty pews, knowing their normal occupants had gone to hear the most popular preacher of the day. At Meard's Court, in London's West End, the congregation more than doubled when a certain J. Tearl was the visiting preacher.

There was less of this in country districts, although at Stamford the congregation fell by about a third when Philpot was preaching elsewhere.⁴⁷ But what was the preaching of the leading experimentalist like? 'In declaring the symptoms of soul disease', Spurgeon wrote, 'he was at home, and no man was his superior. Of bondage, despondency, conflict, backsliding, he could speak marvellously'. At the same time, Spurgeon deeply regretted that 'he did not enter more fully into the liberty of the saints, and dilate more at large upon the high privilege of the believer'.⁴⁸ There can be no good reason for questioning Spurgeon's assessment. The 'O wretched man that I am' aspect is not balanced with the thrill of being a new man in Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit within in exposing sin, is not balanced by his work to glorify Christ. The Biblical emphasis on faith is almost absent, its place taken by seeking to discover internal evidences of election. Joy in the Lord is virtually absent. The sinner is not addressed. Nor, as in so much nineteenth-century preaching, is there any variety; it is all sin and salvation, with little or no attempt made to deal with the practical aspects of Christianity, with the necessity of living a sanctified life.

Gadsby's sermons have the same basic content, but they are warm, rather than clinical, homely rather than studied, and above all else, they are Christ exalting, as he earnestly pleads with 'sensible sinners' to come to Christ, who is a mighty Saviour. Nor is he afraid to cry out to the presumptuous sinner, 'Where are you? Where are you? May God the Spirit pursue you'.⁴⁹ The working classes in Manchester heard him gladly. His journeys, together with those of John Kershaw, across lonely moors and in all weathers, to preach to groups of folk throughout Lancashire and Yorkshire, are almost legendary. He spoke in a plain way, with a fair measure of native wit; he spoke with unction, authority and power. When a

large and noisy crowd once gathered to witness a baptism, he stood like an Old Testament prophet and commanded silence 'in the name of the Lord God of Israel'.⁵⁰ He was well loved at Gower Street and Great Alie Street, the two London citadels of Baptist high-Calvinistic experimentalism, but his preaching was not limited to 'the tried people of God', as with Philpot, or later on with J.K. Popham of Brighton. And it must be remembered, that in addition to preaching, Gadsby was involved in political activities, his chapel having recently been described as a meeting place for those 'involved in the nether world of radical politics'.⁵¹

Gadsby's wide itinerating was matched by the Suffolk men, albeit within a smaller geographical compass. Many were unwearying in taking the gospel to preaching stations in their own neighbourhood, believing it to be the duty of ministers to preach 'the gospel to those who will not come to a stated ministry', George Wright 'commenced a regular course of Cottage preaching', in at least ten different localities in and around Beccles.⁵² His high-Calvinism did not prevent him from freely presenting the gospel, or of warning the unbeliever of the fruit of his unbelief. Although, 'Faith is the gift of God' and the unbeliever 'cannot believe till it be given [him] to believe', this does not lessen the sin of unbelief'. Those guilty of this sin, 'and who are under the doom of the unbeliever' are those,

who do not so credit the truth of the gospel as a revelation of God's free grace and love in the gift of his Son for the salvation of lost sinners as to receive Christ, and place their heart on him also, with the persuasion that they shall be saved through him.⁵³

George Wright was certainly a high-Calvinist, but this in no way hindered him from, 'Making known to sinners round, What a dear saviour I have found'. And he expected others to follow his example. One of his sermons for the Association Meetings has the intriguing title, 'The successful instrumentality in promoting the Conversion of souls, as exemplified in the instance of the Woman of Samaria'.⁵⁴

CONCLUSIONS

The nineteenth-century Strict Baptists believed the distinctive doctrines they held so firmly were rooted in scripture. They were also fully persuaded that in the stand they were making *for* restricted communion, and *against* free offer/duty faith teaching, they were doing the will of God. They were convinced that high-Calvinism was Biblical truth.

The assumption is commonly made that high-Calvinism destroys or stifles all efforts to promote missionary or evangelistic endeavour. In the case of the Strict Baptists in Suffolk, in London, in many other parts of the country, and in a good measure in the life and witness of Gadsby, this was not true. These men certainly refused to offer the gospel, but they still proclaimed it: they studiously avoided calling on men to believe, but they clearly taught the necessity of faith. They may not have said 'whosoever will', but one of their favourite hymns was 'Come ye sinners, poor and wretched'. And interestingly, J.C. Philpot, who was arguably the

highest Calvinist of them all, did not use high-Calvinistic arguments in his opposition to associations or missions. His opposition centred on the leaders in these movements, on those sending and sent, on whether or not they belonged to the living family of God, on whether or not they were the true recipients of the grace of God. The ground of his opposition was experience, not Calvinistic doctrine.

It is accepted, of course, that the attitude of some Strict Baptists to mission has been almost entirely negative, and some of us *have* heard it said, 'If Mr X is to be called by grace, then he'll come in through the chapel door'. I suggest this is not the fruit of high-Calvinism alone, but of an extremist form of high-Calvinism coupled with extreme experimentalism. Where these extremes meet, then the sinner is seen as completely helpless: he cannot be exhorted as this would imply creature power. So far as salvation is concerned, he can only be told to sit and wait, rather as the man at the Pool of Bethesda sat and waited,⁵⁵ for the Spirit of God to convict of sin, and then give some token in his experience that he is indeed an elect soul. It is certainly true that children, and those who are older, are encouraged to attend the means of grace, in the hope that one day the Lord will speak to them. Any form of mission or evangelistic activity against this backdrop is therefore almost an irrelevance. You do not accept an invitation to someone's house for a meal in the hope that one day you might just possibly get something to eat!

In this paper I have been seeking to show that there were two main groups of Strict Baptists in the nineteenth century, the evangelical and the experimental. The former were represented by the churches in Suffolk and London, and in many other parts of the country. The latter, the experimental - and it would be wrong to think of a clear-cut division, were represented by Philpot and the *Gospel Standard*. And then of course, there was William Gadsby, hovering over both groups! Strongly experimental, founder of *The Gospel Standard*, he yet had an ability to go out and preach to the working classes which few others have possessed.

High-Calvinism, therefore, does not necessarily sound the death knell to mission and all evangelistic activity. It may not have been the only reason why it was necessary for John Sutcliff and Andrew Fuller to stir the Particular Baptist churches out of their lethargy. After all, William Gadsby was a fervent anti-Fullerite - he was also a fervent supporter of Sunday Schools!

NOTES

This paper was presented to the Summer School of the Baptist Historical Society, Cambridge, 1998.

1 London Confession, 1644, Article 25.

2 1677 Confession, Chapter 7, section 2.

3 *The Gospel Herald*, Vol.40, 1881, p.354.

4 London Confession, 1644, Article 21.

5 Thomas Harmer MSS in Dr Williams's Library, London.

6 1677 Confession, Chapter 19, section 6.

7 William Huntington, *Works*, Vol.8, *The Coalheaver's Confession*, p.265.

8 Particular Baptist Church, Little Prescott Street, Wapping. Minutes of church meetings 24.8.1791 and 21.9.1791.

9 Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, Vol.4, 1823, pp.76-77.

10 Robert Halley, *Lancashire, Its Puritanism and Nonconformity*, 1859, p.486.

- 11 Anon, *Memoirs of Mr John Stevens*, 1848, p.22. This Memoir was 'compiled at the request and under the direction of the bereaved Church' (Meard's Court, Soho).
- 12 *ibid.* p.25.
- 13 *The Gospel Standard*, Vol.1, 1835, p.3.
- 14 *Suffolk and Norfolk Association Circular Letter*, 1830, p.24.
- 15 Daniel Wilson, *The Life of Daniel Wilson*, 1847-48, p.96.
- 16 *Suffolk and Norfolk Circular Letter*, 1829, p.7.
- 17 Letter *To the Ministers, Deacons, and Members, of the Baptist Church, at ... from meeting held at Grandisburgh, 22nd September, 1829*, p.[2].
- 18 *ibid.* p.[1].
- 19 J. Seymour Price, 'The London Strict Baptist Association, 1846-1853', *The Baptist Quarterly*, Vol.9, 1938, p.115.
- 20 *ibid.*, p.117.
- 21 John Foreman, *Remarks on Duty Faith*, 1860, p.1.
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- 23 MASBC *Annual Report*, 1900, p.24.
- 24 *The Gospel Standard*, Vol.7, 1841, p.298.
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- 30 *ibid.*, p.135.
- 31 J.H. Philpot, (Ed), *The Seceders*, Vol.1, 1930, p.120.
- 32 *The Gospel Standard*, Vol.18, 1852, p.239.40.
- 33 *Suffolk and Norfolk Circular Letter*, 1855, p.24.
- 34 *ibid.*, 1849, p.22.
- 35 *ibid.*, 1838, p.27.
- 36 *The Gospel Herald*, Vol.23, 1855, p.150.
- 37 *ibid.*, Vol.25, p.150.
- 38 *Suffolk and Norfolk Circular Letter*, 1849, p.22.
- 39 *ibid.*, 1847, p.23.
- 40 *The Gospel Standard*, Vol.7, 1841, p.298.
- 41 *The Gospel Herald*, Vol.21, 1853, p.148.
- 42 *Sermons of William Gadsby, op.cit.*, p.161.
- 43 *Memorials of the Mercies of a Covenant God ... being the Autobiography of John Kershaw*, 1930, p.61.
- 44 For Ada Kemp's obituary see *The Christian's Pathway*, Vol.18, 1913, pp.302-306, 336-338. Mrs Kemp was the author's grandmother.
- 45 *The Gospel Herald*, Vol.28, 1860, pp.65-66.
- 46 J.C. Philpot, *Selected Sermons*, Vol.1, 1935, p.58.
- 47 cf. *The Seceders, op.cit.*, Vol.2, p.78.
- 48 *The Sword and the Trowel*, Vol.11, 1875, p.425.
- 49 *Sermons of William Gadsby, op.cit.*, p.14.
- 50 Paul Ramsbottom, 'A Chiasm of Despair', *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol.37, No.5, January 1998, p.232.
- 51 *ibid.*, p.235.
- 52 *Suffolk and Norfolk Circular Letter*, 1836, p.22.
- 53 S.K. Bland (ed.), *Memorials of George Wright*, 1875, p.285.
- 54 *The Gospel Herald*, Vol.2, 1834, p.144.
- 55 John's Gospel, chapter five.

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