

ELD LANE, COLCHESTER AND THE SPURGEON FAMILY

C.H. Spurgeon gave so much to the religious life of Britain and the world in general that the particular banner under which he served is of less than crucial importance. Yet it is among Baptists that his influence was, and is, most strongly felt. So it is pertinent to ask why he was a Baptist. His parents and grandparents were important formative influences on him and were all Congregationalists. He was converted in a Primitive Methodist chapel. Yet he was baptized as a believer four months after his conversion and within eight months he became a member of St. Andrew's Street Baptist Church, Cambridge. A year later he was, aged seventeen, the pastor of Waterbeach Baptist Church. So, why? The conversation he had with the Church of England clergyman at Maidstone in 1848/9 (before his conversion)¹ is well documented and certainly had an effect. But even a remarkable teenager like Charles Spurgeon needs a mentor to whom he can relate at the critical times in his life. The intention of this article is to point to that forgotten person, drawing on the papers of his 'home' church, Eld Lane Baptist Church, Colchester,² and on his 'Autobiography'.³

The story starts on 19 October 1842. That was the date of the service of recognition for a new minister at Eld Lane, Robert Langford. Langford was born at Spitalfields, London, in 1798 and baptized at the church in Great Alie Street in 1820. In 1822 he was called as the minister to the Baptist Church at Sible Hedingham, Essex. Sible Hedingham is on the Colchester-Cambridge road, now de-trunked but on most maps shown as the A604. It is about twenty-five miles from Colchester. The church was formed in 1801 and it grew under Langford's ministry from a membership of 110 in 1822 to a peak of 198 in 1836.⁴ In addition, a church was founded at nearby Sudbury in 1834.

The service of recognition took place in the afternoon. Five ministers are recorded as taking part, plus a deacon of the church who described the circumstances of the call, and Langford himself. Upwards of eighty dined at the Angel Inn, while the poor of the church were given a 'good dinner' in the schoolroom. In the evening there was a further service which ended with a closing prayer from the Revd James Spurgeon of Stambourne, about five miles from Sible Hedingham on the further side from Colchester. Spurgeon's grandfather journeyed that far to take a very minor part in the proceedings of the day. The mutual regard between two neighbouring ministers, Congregational and Baptist, is plain. Whether the eight-year-old Charles was present it is impossible to know, but, with his great regard for his grandfather and the unlooked-for treat the occasion gave of a visit from him, it seems at least likely.

The next link is the day of C.H. Spurgeon's conversion. According to Spurgeon's *Autobiography*,⁵ 'The day was January 6, 1850. Prevented by the weather from accompanying his father on the nine mile journey to Tollesbury [where his father was the minister] and from walking into the town, Spurgeon was led to the place of

his conversion, a Primitive Methodist Chapel in Artillery Street close to their home on Hythe Hill.' The historic date has been queried by the Revd J.J. Brown, Secretary and archivist of Spurgeon's College, on the basis of studies of the local press which show the weather at the time. I agree with him that 13 January is more likely and that Spurgeon, so clear as to the circumstances, mistook the date in his calculations. The Revd Mike Nicholls,⁶ aware of our researches, is wiser to say 'One Sunday in January, 1850'. Where Spurgeon intended to go that morning he does not say, beyond that 'while I was going to a certain place of worship'. Geography shows that it could have been almost any dissenting chapel in the town. He was in the phase of doing the rounds of all the chapels in the town in his search for salvation.⁷

Quite clear, however, is what the newly converted Charles Spurgeon did that evening. In the words of his father,⁸ "In the text, *Look, look, look,*" Charles said to me, holding up his hands, "I found salvation that morning. In the text, *Accepted in the Beloved*, preached at the Baptist Church in the evening, I found peace and pardon." Out of searching mode and needing feeding, it was to Eld Lane and Langford that Spurgeon turned that evening. The latter text is from Ephesians 1 v.6; it is interesting to note that on 27 June 1847 James Hunt, giving his testimony to the Church at Eld Lane in applying for baptism and church membership, said that he realized the privilege of 'acceptance in the beloved'.

The young convert was not slow to commend Eld Lane to his family. On 20 April 1850, writing to his mother in Colchester from Newmarket about his impending baptism, he says 'But, my dear Mother, why do you not go and hear my friend, Mr. Langford? He is an open-communion Baptist, and I have no doubt will receive you without baptism. Perhaps his preaching may be blest to Archer, Eliza, and my sisters, as well as to myself; would it not be worth giving up a little difference of persuasion for?'⁹ As Eld Lane was at this time a closed communion church, this was a bold statement. At this time a number of ministers and churches were moving away from closed practice.

However, the term 'friend' for Langford was not just a word. When he came to Eld Lane, Langford 'gave it to be understood that he would not himself seek to introduce any change in the practice of the church, and to this understanding he honourably adhered.'¹⁰ C.H. Spurgeon had obviously got behind the official position of the church to the private convictions of the man and was using his information correctly to persuade his mother to the course of action he desired.

The young proto-evangelist was successful in his persuasions. In an undated letter to his mother in 1852 he wrote¹¹ 'How are all my Christian friends? Love to Mr Langford, and my best respects; tell him I desire a special interest in his prayers.' On 31 March 1853 James Archer Spurgeon made his profession of faith and was accepted into membership at Eld Lane. He was baptized on 24 April and given the right hand of fellowship on 1 May.

Then on 4 January 1855, in the words of the minutes of Eld Lane,¹² 'Brother J. A. Spurgeon requested to exercise his gifts in preaching before the church three times with a view to our sanctioning his going into the ministry.' On 1 February¹³ 'Our brother J. A. Spurgeon having preached before the church three times in the course of the last month, the following resolution was adopted - Resolved - That our brother, James Archer Spurgeon, having preached to us three times and having learnt that he has preached to several congregations in our neighbourhood with general acceptance, we think it right formerly [sic] to express our belief that the Divine Spirit has been pleased to endow him with gifts for the service of his church, and that to give to our brother our support and sanction in this character - Praying that he who hath "received gifts for men" may enrich him in all utterance, and in all knowledge and spiritual grace, directing his footsteps in providence, and prospering his way even to his heavenly kingdom'. James was to go to Stepney College, London. He remained in membership at Eld Lane until dismissed to his first pastorate on 2 June 1859. This was at Portland Street, Southampton, where he followed Alexander MacLaren.

In the meantime Spurgeon was moving from Waterbeach to New Park Street. He first preached at New Park Street in December 1853 and was asked back for Sundays, 1st, 15th and 29th January, 1854. Before the last date arrived the church had taken steps to secure his services permanently. In the midst of these momentous changes he did not forget his family or the church at Eld Lane. Writing to his father in December, 1853,¹⁴ 'I have no objection to preach for Mr. Langford on Wednesday, January 4th, if he wishes it.'

Charles and James had both love and esteem for Langford. Both were to repay the debt. It was to James the opportunity fell first. In 1855 the church at Eld Lane was in a period of crisis. In March it was 'agreed to hold special prayer meetings with reference to the low state of religion among us'. At the second of these James is recorded as praying. 'On the pastor's suggestion it was agreed that the male members should meet to confer on the low state of religion among us, and to consider whether a change in the pastorate would be desirable'. That meeting reported back on 3 May.¹⁵ After James Spurgeon opened the meeting in prayer 'Brother Hunt stated that according to a resolution passed at our last church meeting a conference of the male members had been held on the evening of the 12th ultimo at which he presided. That a motion was made by Brother Spurgeon, seconded by Brother Benjamin Orrin, as follows - That this meeting deeply sympathises with our pastor in his present painful situation and also deeply laments the present depressed state of the church, but are of the opinion that the fault does not rest with him, and are unable to state where it lies, but are of the opinion it is with ourselves.' An amendment was made, lamenting the low state of the church and sympathising with the pastor in his feelings on the subject. Eight voted for the amendment and 16 for the motion. When it was pointed out that the amendment was an attack on the pastor opposition largely disappeared. James was then just short of his eighteenth birthday.

James figured frequently in minutes about that time. With other brethren he visited a candidate for membership and a member who had resigned, but was persuaded to withdraw the resignation. On five occasions in 1855/56 he is recorded as opening or concluding meetings with prayer.

Langford's problems continued. Despite poor health he was expected to lead three services every Sunday. In 1856 a co-pastor, William Jackson, was appointed. With two ministers to support the church asked C.H. Spurgeon to preach, which he did at an unknown date in the autumn of 1857.¹⁶ This raised the enormous sum of £26. Of that £6 went on incidentals such as the printing of bills and the services of a policeman and £10 went to Spurgeon, leaving £10 for Mr. Jackson. In 1859 Jackson decided he was still some years from becoming sole pastor and so resigned. There is nothing in church records to record his marrying, but at some stage he married Eliza Spurgeon, the sister who came in age between Charles and James. She was never a member of the church, so one presumes they can only have met through James.

The strain of leading three services told on Langford. This was eased a little in 1863 when the Sunday evening service was turned into a prayer meeting. This was only a palliative. However, another avenue was opening up. On 24 April 1866¹⁷ Langford reported to the church 'that he had, following a decision of the deacons, corresponded with the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon with a view to obtaining an assistant from his college should the church determine on such a measure. ...he with the deacons had been favoured with an interview with him when he was in Colchester on the 17th inst. That he was disposed to send us a preacher on trial for a month.' Following correspondence with Charles Blackshaw at the Tabernacle, it was agreed that the preacher be supplied free provided the church board him and pay his travelling expenses.

Thus, on 3 June 1866, arrived Edward Spurrier, at twenty-nine only three years younger than his Principal. Initially Spurrier's title was Assistant Pastor, but he took charge from the first. At the first church meeting after his appointment, on 1 November, a letter from C.H. Spurgeon was read:¹⁸ 'Mr. Spurgeon offers to assist us in our pecuniary means for supporting the assistant minister by preaching collection sermons for us and, in connection with Mr. Fredk. Warmington, to guarantee the sum of fifty pounds in the course of the year, contingent on ourselves doing our utmost. A vote of thanks was passed to Mr. Spurgeon unanimously, expressing also our hope that we should not be obliged so heavily to tax his generous sympathy.' Given the demands on Spurgeon's time no more generous offer can be conceived. A cheque would have been easier, but then the next development would not have occurred.

The accounts for 30 July 1867 record that C.H. Spurgeon preached twice that day, realising £33 of which printing and the attendance of two policemen absorbed £2.8s.0d. During his visit he saw that the Sunday School was thriving but that accommodation was inadequate. The church meeting of 1 August had another letter

from Spurgeon. Mr. Spurgeon offers to the friends at Eld Lane £50 towards the cost of a new schoolroom provided they will raise £100 among themselves. He will also, if desired, lay the first stone. The only condition is that Mr. Spurgeon's architect be employed and the plans be approved of by Mr. Spurgeon. Mr. Spurgeon will lend the remainder of the money, if it does not exceed £150, for five years without interest, if four friends guarantee the remainder of the sum in half yearly instalments.' The church accepted the offer unanimously and set about raising the £100 immediately. The hall actually cost £403. Although now obscured by an extension in front it is still there and in daily use. The stone, which was actually laid by James, has disappeared, presumably as a result of that further extension.

Robert Langford completed fifty years in the ministry. He died on 17 September, 1872. Among those taking part in the service at his graveside in the cemetery were the Revd John and the Revd James Spurgeon. James had the last word. He spoke²⁰ 'of the good which he and other members of his family had derived from the ministry of Mr Langford, who had pointed them to Christ when burdened with a sense of sin, and had given them wise counsels in the earliest days of their life'. He concluded by 'urging those who had heard the gospel from their late pastor's lips to immediate decision for Christ'.

Eld Lane sanctuary has only three memorials, of which just one is to a minister. That commemorates Robert Langford. Edward Spurrier retired as minister of the church at the end of 1908. He continued to live in the town and died in 1918. When the history of the church was written for its 300th anniversary in 1989 there were several still living who could remember him.

NOTES

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| 1 C.H. Spurgeon, <i>Autobiography: 1 - The Early Years</i> , Banner of Truth 1962 edition, p.38. | 9 <i>ibid.</i> , p.117. |
| 2 H. Spyvee, <i>Colchester Baptist Church - The First 300 Years, 1689 - 1989</i> , Colchester 1989, available from the author at 16 Wakefield Close, Colchester CO1 2SD Price £3.00 + 65p postage. | 10 E. Spurrier, <i>Memorials of the Baptist Church worshipping at Eld Lane, Colchester 1889</i> p.55. |
| 3 <i>Autobiography</i> , see note 1. | 11 C.H. Spurgeon, <i>Autobiography</i> , p.214. |
| 4 Revd P.N. Bushill, <i>250 years, the story of North Street [now Hedingham Road] Baptist Church, Halstead, 1678 - 1928</i> , pp.21-25. | 12 Spyvee, <i>op.cit.</i> , p.61. |
| 5 C.H. Spurgeon, <i>Autobiography</i> , pp.78, 87. | 13 <i>ibid.</i> , p.62. |
| 6 M.K. Nicholls, <i>C.H. Spurgeon: The Pastor Evangelist</i> , Baptist Historical Society 1992, p.3. | 14 C.H. Spurgeon, <i>Autobiography</i> , p.251. |
| 7 C.H. Spurgeon, <i>Autobiography</i> , p.86. | 15 Spyvee, <i>op.cit.</i> , p.62. |
| 8 Quoted, <i>ibid.</i> , p.110. | 16 <i>ibid.</i> , p.65. |
| | 17 <i>ibid.</i> , p.68. |
| | 18 <i>ibid.</i> , p.71. |
| | 19 <i>ibid.</i> , p.75. |
| | 20 <i>ibid.</i> , p.79. |

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