

The "Johnsonian Baptists."

The Life of Samuel Fisher, of Norwich and Wisbech, has just been published by Mr. Edward Deacon, of Connecticut; and a monograph on the religious body to which he belonged is being prepared by Mr. Robert Dawbarn, of Wisbech, who supplies most of the information following.

AT Lostock in Lancashire, two or three miles west of Bolton, there was a small General Baptist Church, where, in March, 1721, John Johnson was baptized, and afterwards had hands laid on him by two ministers, in accordance with the custom of that body. The only other General Baptist pastor in the neighbourhood was Samuel Acton of Nantwich, who was probably the second man involved; but it is not recorded who was the pastor at Lostock itself. Five years later Johnson was called to the ministry—not the pastorate, but to be an accredited local preacher, as we should say. About 1728 the pastor died, and some questions of ownership resulted in the congregation retiring from the building rather than go to law, and in the apparent collapse of the cause.

The other Baptist churches in the neighbourhood were at Manchester, Warrington, and Liverpool, and in the Rossendale valley, all being Calvinist. It would seem that Johnson did some casual preaching, and found it necessary to study the points in dispute, with the result that he presently joined the church at Warrington, then under the pastorate of John Hayes. On the death of John Turner, pastor at Liverpool, that little cause looked to its mother church at Warrington, and on 26 April, 1741, Johnson was dismissed to the seaport. On 28 June the church was re-organised, with him as pastor, and twenty-two other members. The little church was very feeble, with only one member of any financial ability, one Roger Fisher, a ship-builder. It had already

parted with one pastor, John Sedgfield, who had been solemnly advised that there was better means of livelihood for him on a farm at Tottlebank than at Liverpool; the same difficulty recurred, and as Johnson had three children by 1744, he engaged in business to support the family.

Three years later still the remarkable opinions that Johnson had formed, which he had indeed communicated formally before the call, proved such a cause of strife that he withdrew with his supporters, while a long minute was made in the church-book to detail the doctrines he was teaching; it is, of course, better to learn them from his own writings rather than from his opponents. Johnson's friends built a second meeting-house in Stanley Street, where he ministered for the rest of his long life. His financial position was, of course, worse than before, and it is not clear how he earned his living; but the rapid expansion of Liverpool evidently afforded opportunities of this, for his letters show no sign of financial strain. He was, however, indefatigable in evangelising; occasional visits were made to Garstang, Blackburn, Halifax, Bolton, and Bury; more frequently he took a week's tour to preach at High Legh and Toft near Knutsford, at Hill Cliff and Warrington, at Bollington, Congleton, and Millington. Warford in particular profited by his help, and was leavened with his teaching. About 1754 he crossed to Dublin, where there was a General Baptist church, lately under Oswald Edwards, now under Samuel Edwards. From this he drew off a second church, which was, for a time, energetic enough to publish some of his writings; but a quarter of a century later he acknowledged it had flickered out. These were the heroic days when Wesley also was riding throughout both islands.

In 1757 there was a general reorganisation of the northern Baptist churches, and doctrinal differences drew them into two rival camps. Warford and Warrington, after hesitating, joined a small group containing even Nantwich, the erstwhile General Baptist church, which group, therefore, excited much suspicion. Johnson's church leagued with a group of supralapsarian Calvinists, including the old church at Bacup (not that under Piccop), Wainsgate, Haworth, Bradford, Sunderland, Juniper-dye-house, and Whitehaven. Instances of his widening influence may be seen in that a church arose at Millington under Tomason, succeeded by Isaac Cheetham; that the church at Tottlebank, where some Liverpool people had gone to better themselves, sought his advice as to a new pastor; that when the ancient church at Manchester was rent in twain on the death of Winterbottom, he persuaded one party to retire from the premises, avoiding a

quarrel, and promoted a peaceful settlement under Edmund Clegg in new premises at Coldhouse; that Huddleston of Whitehaven corresponded with him on doctrinal questions; that Fernie of Juniper-dye-house and his convert Rutherford of Dublin were in touch; and that at Warrington he was in constant demand. When Wainwright, the pastor of that place, died in 1772, Johnson conducted the funeral services, three other ministers being present.

By this time, however, he had distinctly disavowed many of the Calvinistic principles he had imbibed there, and frequent doctrinal discussions arose. In a short time another part of the country was stirred by them, and a second leader emerged.

One of the great Fisher clan had been transferred from Nottingham in 1762 to the historic church of St. Mary's, Norwich, being then just of age. He corresponded freely with Johnson, and within four years his sermons showed distinct traces of Johnson's teaching. These led presently to anonymous attacks in print, then to his expulsion from the church in 1774. He gathered seven sympathisers to worship in his own home, and, encouraged by a visit from Johnson, organised a new church, which presently bought a meeting-house in Pottergate Street. Fisher decided to publish ten sermons by Johnson, who prepared them for the press in 1775, though there was no hope that the book would pay expenses, and funds were not forthcoming at once.

The Fishers sprang from the Midlands, near Mansfield; and this may account for the fact that churches holding the same doctrines presently arose at Chesterfield and North Muskham near Newark, at which latter place John Reynoldson became the mainstay. Fisher evidently became the apostle of the movement now. In 1781 he was called to minister to an old Particular Baptist church at Wisbech, and two years later to help a nascent cause at East Dereham, where, however, the Norwich St. Mary's people scotched his work. He found a helper in Richard Wright, who had been connected with an anomalous General Baptist church in Norwich, in touch with the old Assembly. Wright fell under the spell of Johnson's doctrine, and quitted the General Baptist church to help Fisher take charge of Pottergate and Wisbech, each taking six months at each place, and Fisher shifting his residence to Wisbech in 1788. Both men travelled to propagate their views, and often preached at Liverpool.

The peculiar arrangement lasted till Johnson's death in 1791, when he was eighty-five years old. Fisher now proposed that Wright should settle down in Wisbech and take charge of that congregation, while he himself should retire from the pastorate

of any special church, to devote himself to more itineration. But while these negotiations were pending, Wright published a pamphlet giving "A Scriptural representation of the Son of God," which looked decidedly like Unitarian doctrine. An anonymous review was attributed to Fisher by Wright, who opened a campaign in the press against Fisher in Wisbech. The upshot was that the old church at this town called Wright, and went off on a novel doctrinal development, leading it into the fellowship of Unitarians and Universalists; and finally out of all Baptist connections. The controversy reveals a church near Halifax which sympathised with Johnson and Fisher, evidently due to the Aked family; this is now known as Butts Green.

Fisher declined to assert what he considered his rights, but retired from the old church, with his friends, who formed a new church, and presently built in Ship Lane, where he was ordained early in 1794. Within a few weeks, a sermon preached on Fast Day brought him into general notice, and he received special thanks from the Prime Minister, William Pitt. His reputation greatly increased, and the little connection somewhat profited. He was soon able to fulfil earlier hopes, and to publish 157 of Johnson's letters, with notes on sermons.

The church at Liverpool had been left in straits by the death of its founder; and about the close of the century found it necessary to remove to Comus Street, which remained its home until the cause came to an end after another half century.

Fisher's course was run by 1803, when he passed away at Newark. In that same year the church at Nottingham, whence he had come, lost its pastor, Richard Hopper, and though the immediate cause was again somewhat personal, there is reason to think that Fisher's views were to some extent involved. A little society was soon formed of seceders from the old cause.

The mantle of Fisher, however, fell on John Reynoldson, of Newark, who moved to Norwich, and thence looked after the various churches. In Cheshire, near Warford, he gathered a handful of weavers, and another meeting-house was erected at Bramhall. Reynoldson also founded a church at Bromley, which afterwards met in London, where it enjoyed the ministrations of Thomas Curtis, a very cultured man, then of Knight, who was presently working at Towcester. Mr. Pickle was another preacher here, and Samuel Shepherd at Duncote, close by.

In the original district, Isaac Ridgway sustained work at Lymm; and the church at Liverpool produced one man of some power, Seacombe Ellison, skipper of a merchantman, whose lively adventures in, and escaping from, Verdun he told with spirit in

"Prison Scenes." He aided his fellow believers by editing a hymn-book, and his gifts of narration were turned to account in sketching a trial between infant affusion and believers' baptism, from which may be taken a compact statement of the "Johnsonian" views. It will be seen that, while his successive association with Arminians and with Calvinists had left strata clearly traceable, and while a kinship with Sabellius is not to be mistaken, he had also laid down a doctrine re-discovered later on by Edward White.

"They conceive of unity of judgment in the truth of the gospel as most important to the building up of the Christian Church; and that no modification of the ordinances of the gospel can be permitted; for which reason they do not hold fellowship with any other denomination of Baptists.

"They believe that immersion in water is the only ordinance taught in the Scripture, by which a believer can make his first profession of faith in Christ; consequently they do not recognise any unbaptised person as a member of Christ's body. They receive individuals, after baptism, as members, into the church by the ordinance of laying on of hands, with prayer, in faith of the gift of the promised spirit. By the latter ordinance, also, ministers and officers of the church are inducted into office.

"Their view of the doctrine concerning the one true and living God, is not in agreement with the Trinitarian scheme, as generally held. They are of opinion that the characters by which God has revealed himself are, as in revelation to us: that the Father is God, the invisible and incomprehensible Jehovah; that the Son is this glorious Being in manifestation in our nature, as 'the Word made flesh'; that the Holy Spirit is the same God in His spiritual operations, 'the Lord is that Spirit'; and that the character of Christ Jesus as the Son of God, is not a character independent of the human nature in which he was 'God manifest in the flesh.'

"They reject the doctrine of original sin as commonly understood, while they admit that children are born into the world destitute of the original perfection of human nature. But they deny that the sin of Adam brings guilt upon the conscience, or infuses a moral pravity, which necessarily leads them to acts of personal transgression, believing that the final condemnation of the wicked will be the effect of their own personal sin, altogether independently of the sin of Adam.

"They believe in the eternal happiness of all children who die before they are capable of understanding the evil of sin, and of all adults who have passed their whole lives in such a state of

mental imbecility as to have been incapable of discriminating between good and evil.

"They believe that the threatening of death to Adam, in the event of his violation of the divine command, had respect to his whole person; that the whole human race would have remained under the power of death, had not God interposed by His promise of the Seed of the woman to bruise the serpent's head; that by Christ, the second Adam, the free gift might come 'upon all men unto justification of life'; that the everlasting existence of the human race is through the resurrection of Christ, and consequently that the soul of man is not naturally immortal.

"They believe in particular, unconditional election; that God chose His people in Christ before the foundation of the world, irrespective of sin or other contingency, and that God would have manifested himself in the human nature had sin never had a being; but in consequence of the introduction of sin, Christ appeared in a suffering state, and gave Himself for the redemption of the Church, and also 'a ransom for all.' Therefore salvation is proclaimed to the whole human race, in the most comprehensive acceptation of these words. To the same extent, they believe that God wills the salvation of all men, and that the gospel is to be 'preached to every creature which is under heaven'; by which preaching all men are called to repent and believe the gospel.

"They believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith, but that the grace of God in the soul is inseparable from holiness of life and conversation; that the gospel gives unto them which receive it in truth, the full assurance of hope in eternal salvation; that every believer knows he is a child of God, and that therefore doubt is inconsistent with such assurance.

"They believe that Christ shall reign by the power of His gospel during the last thousand years of the earth's existence in its present state; and that afterwards, the heavens and the earth which now are, will be destroyed by fire, and then made anew, when all the saints, in a state of resurrection from the dead, will reign with Christ upon the new earth a thousand years, and that after the thousand years are expired, the resurrection of the wicked and the final judgment of the world will take place.

"They believe that it is the bounden duty of all the followers of Christ to be subject to the reigning powers, without regard to any particular line of politics; and to refrain from joining with any to overturn existing establishments."

The churches which held views akin to Johnson's, and their ministers, are as follows:—

- Liverpool (Stanley Street): John Johnson: (move to Comus Street), Fisher, Guyton.
 Norwich (Pottergate): Samuel Fisher, Barber, Sly, Gray.
 Wisbech (Ship Lane): Samuel Fisher, R. B. Dawbarn, Robert Reynoldson.
 Halifax (Butts Green).
 Todmorden: King.
 Newark: Fisher, John Reynoldson, J. Stephenson, Mackenzie.
 Chesterfield: Smith.
 [Great Warford: John Taylor, Joshua Wood, Thomas Holt, Thomas Holt junior, Joseph Barber, James Davenport.]
 Bramhall [Enoch Shard, James Davenport]: Barber.
 Lymm: Isaac Ridgway.
 London: John Reynoldson, Isaac Curtis, Knight.
 Towcester: Knight, Pickle.
 Duncott: Samuel Shepherd.

The following list of works will give the chief publications, with brief titles.

- JOHN JOHNSON, mostly published at Liverpool:—
1754. The Faith of God's Elect, pp. 268: criticised by John Brine of Cripplegate.
 1755. A Mathematical Question, pp. 106; often reprinted.
 1756. The River of God, pp. 32, Dublin, second edition.
 1758. Evangelical Truths Vindicated, pp. 89.
 1758. The Love of God, pp. 67.
 1759. The Election of God undisguised.
 1760. The Advantages and Disadvantages of the Marriage-state, pp. 46, fifth edition, many more, and translated into Welsh 1773.
 1761. The Eternity of God, second edition.
 1762. Jesus the King of kings.
 1762. Address to the Quakers, pp. 74.
 1763. Divine Prescience: Dublin.
 1763. The Triune God: Dublin.
 1764. The Two Opinions Tried: criticised by James Hartley of Haworth.
 1769. Divine Truth, pp. 228.
 1773. A Serious Address to Samuel Fisher, pp. 56.
 1776. The Riches of Gospel Grace opened; two vols., Warrington.
 1779. The Book of the Revelation, pp. 514. Warrington.
 1781. The Evangelical Believer's Confession, pp. 114.
 no date. Nature and Constitution of a Church, pp. 16.
 no date. The Divine Authority of the Holy Scriptures, pp. 93: Newark.

1796. Original Letters, and Memoir, pp. 825; Norwich.
 SAMUEL FISHER, mostly published at Norwich:
1766. The Spirit's Indwelling, pp. 35.
 1767. The True State of the British Nation, pp. 30.
 1771. [The Virgin's Song of Salvation by Christ, pp. 32.
 1773. An Appeal to the Public, pp. 24.
 1781. Scripture evidence in favour of a separate state, pp. 40.
 1791. The Christian Warfare [in memory of] John Johnson,
 pp. 40.
 1791. [? Review of Richard Wright's Scriptural Representation
 of the Son of God.]
1794. The duty of subjects to the civil magistrate, pp. 24.
 1796. The good shepherd, pp. 72.
 1798. The Christian Monitor.
 1789. Unity and Equality in the Kingdom of God, pp. 40.
 1800. The Perfection of Scripture [against Vidler].
 1802. Conjugal and Parental Duties, pp. 52.
 SEACOME ELLISON, of Liverpool:
1833. A Letter to J. J. Gurney [on] Baptism, pp. 111.
 1835. Rhantism versus Baptism, pp. 620; both were reprinted.