

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

what were to become the different areas of a large city, was the result of a vigorous and sustained policy of outreach in which the laity played a very active part and in which opportunities were not only taken as they presented themselves but were actively created. A preliminary examination of the situation in Derby gives the impression that what happened there was very similar.

### NOTES

References to individual churches are from the minute books of those churches, either in the possession of the church concerned or with the Nottingham County Archivist. Reference has also been made to the author's Nottingham University M.Phil. thesis, 1972, *The Nottinghamshire Baptists*.

- 1 *Baptist Repository*, 1804, p.50.
- 2 Stoney Street Register and Mansfield Road Church Records, in Nottingham University Archives; *Baptist Repository*, 1844, p.93.
- 3 Adam Taylor, *History of the General Baptists*, 1818, Vol.2, p.249, and *Baptist Repository*, 1823, p.382.
- 4 Examples of entries in the *Case and Minute Book*, 1850, of the Benevolent Society of Mansfield Road General Baptist Church:  
 'Mr Birch, Bear Court, Mansfield Road, was given 2/- a week. He was extremely deaf and it was doubtful if he heard an entire sentence of the conversation: ignorant, unable to read: nothing satisfactory to report'.  
 'Mr Warsop, Nelson Street, given 2/- a week. Very grateful, not likely to live long: since dead.'  
 'William Sparks, 45 Millstone Lane: first found in a wretched state of mind: died in possession of peace with God'.  
 'William Boulding, 7 Water Lane: dead: very ignorant: wife neglected him: traced: taken to house of relative who gave up her own bed to him and soothed his dying pillow'.  
 Both men and women took part in visiting, going in pairs to those of their own sex.
- 5 Reports: *Employment of Children in Factories*, 1833, and *Children's Employment Commission*, 1844; in both Felkin was an important witness. See also author's thesis, *The Nottinghamshire Baptists*.

F. M. W. HARRISON, *formerly Lay Pastor, Newthorpe Baptist Church*

---

## ALL CHANGE

### An East End of London Baptist Church in the Nineteenth Century

The East End of London can be defined as an area bounded by the City in the west, the River Lea in the east, the River Thames in the south, and Hackney in the north. In the mid-eighteenth century, when Abraham Booth became pastor of the Particular Baptist church founded in 1633 and now meeting in Little Prescott Street, most of this area was still covered with green fields.(1) Although the Prescott Street Meeting House was only a few hundred yards from the Tower, it was also less than half a mile from open fields. Stepney, Bethnal Green and Hackney were still villages; continuous building along the north bank of the

Thames did not prevent Wapping, Shadwell and Limehouse being known as hamlets. Most of the people who worked in the City lived in the City, above or behind their shops or dreary counting houses. Some of the better-off lived in desirable residences around Goodman's Fields, or in Prescott Street, Alie Street and Lemon Street.

London's trade as a seaport increased fourfold during the eighteenth century, but the method of discharging cargoes left everything to be desired. Trading vessels moored midstream, with smaller boats carrying the merchandise to the few authorised quays. Pilfering was widespread and workers saw the filling of big pockets in baggy trousers as just part of the job. All this changed during the first thirty years of the nineteenth century with the building of the London docks, with high walls, purpose-built warehouses and guarded entrances. As trade increased, factories were built, producing everything to meet the needs of a busy seaport. The old Ratcliff Highway became totally inadequate for the increased volume of horse-drawn traffic and was replaced by Commercial Road, driven at one point right across a Limehouse graveyard,

With this industrial transformation came the workers and with them the need for housing. Slowly, irresistibly, like an incoming tide, the fields were covered with narrow streets and rows of houses. Jerry builders and speculators, out for a quick penny, built street after street of four and six roomed terraced houses. As the population escalated, so did the rents. Houses designed for one family were soon home for two, three or even four families. Walter Besant tells of a family of seven forced to live in a room ten feet square; eventually something better was found, but too late, three of the five children were dead, poisoned by pollution seeping through from a rubbish dump on which the houses were built.(2) The erection of flats seemed to offer a solution, but these brought little relief for the residents and insufficient gain for the business men. A compromise was devised, flats built partly as a business venture and partly philanthropic. The first came through the Peabody Trust in Commercial Street in the 1860s. Millicent Rose makes a pertinent comment: 'A speculative builder has, in some measure, to put up the houses people want; the philanthropist builds what he thinks people ought to have'.(3)

Whether in flats or terraced houses, East Enders were denied light and space, fresh air and recreation. The women fought an unequal battle with too many children, too little money and often with drunken husbands, whose only refuge was the public house. Philanthropists may have exaggerated in claiming that here were children who had never seen a tree or a blade of grass, but for children who knew only the street as a playground, for whom petty crime, gang warfare and the penny theatre were the only excitements, the claim was substantially true.

Imagination has sometimes pictured the East End as one enormous slum, but this is incorrect. Most East Enders sought to live respectably, even if items of furniture must sometimes go to the pawn shop at the street corner, and clothes come secondhand from Petticoat Lane. The entire area was like a grossly overcrowded beehive where men and women worked in the factory and the shop, in the home and the warehouse, all day long and all year round. Men and women of all ages made things, sewed things, carried things, sold things and had things stolen. It was a sea of sweated labour, a slavery from which there was no escape, enlivened only by Bank Holidays at Hampstead Heath, or by bawdy cockney humour.

London's East End has also been the welcome refuge of countless immigrants. After 1685 many French Huguenots arrived, but in the nineteenth century Jews formed the largest immigrant group. At first they settled in the City, but gradually moved to better housing east of Aldgate, around Little Prescot Street. As the housing sprawl advanced, the more affluent moved further east or north, their places being taken by poorer Jews fleeing from the ghettos of Eastern Europe. By 1880 there were an estimated 30,000 Jews in the East End, some streets being entirely Jewish, but even then the percentage of Jews was not high in relation to the total East End population.

The merciless wheels of industrial revolution had forever transformed those few square miles east of Aldgate. And during that period of merciless change the Baptist Church in Little Prescot Street was called both to make its testimony and even to survive.

### A NEW PASTOR

When the congregation dispersed following the afternoon service early in October 1831, there was general agreement: it had been a good day. Charles Stovel, a 32 year old bachelor from Derbyshire, had made a good impression and was to do so again the next Sunday. At a Church Meeting on 14th December a resolution inviting Stovel to become their pastor was passed without a dissentient voice. Stovel's reply was all that could have been desired. 'I have been led to submit to your wishes in becoming the Pastor of the church in Prescot Street'.(4) He commenced his labours on 1st April 1832. The courtship had been short and sweet; the marriage would last many long years and survive extraordinary trials.

Charles Stovel was himself a Londoner, born just across the river in Southwark on 29th May 1799. Privations stemming from the Napoleonic Wars had reduced a poor family to even greater poverty and they removed to Kingston in Surrey for a new start. Stovel always remembered his first job, when as a 12 year old he had walked with his father from Kingston to Spitalfields to meet his employer.

Rather vaguely, William Willis says Stovel was converted at a 'very early age',(5) and the place of his baptism is given as Staines. Before reaching the age of twenty he had commenced preaching. His manner was uncouth, but his fame so spread that Dr James Hoby and the Revd Joseph Ivimey came to search him out. They found him in an attic, surrounded by his total assets: a few books, a preaching suit and half-a-crown. Outwardly he had nothing to show, but spiritually they had discovered a man of great worth and they at once commended him for a place in the Stepney Baptist College.

To Stovel's surprise he was accepted and the young man, who had been dismissed from his job as a baker's assistant because he was discovered reading and praying on a Sunday when his employer said he ought to have been working, suddenly found himself learning Greek and Latin, or writing out great chunks of Richard Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*. In 1826 he removed to Derbyshire to become pastor of the churches at Swanwick and Riddings. As he was not 'called upon to preach to the villagers what are called finished discourses',(6) he was able to continue his studies, making translations of the Greek philosophers, including Aristotle and Plato. Such luxuries came to an end with his removal to Prescot Street, where the prestigious congregation certainly expected 'finished discourses'.

Within a few months of his arrival in London there was a request for a service on Sunday evenings, in addition to the normal morning and afternoon meetings. No immediate decision was taken, but at a subsequent meeting Stovel arrived with a lengthy report. It gave him pleasure to know he presided over a church which desired the extension of the Redeemer's Kingdom, but questions needed to be answered. Would an additional service diminish attendance at other services? Was it their desire to bring in the poor and destitute to the evening service and would the more experienced members do their utmost to bring this about? There were also practical problems: lighting, expense, and members living at a distance. Stovel's report was duly considered by a specially convened committee and it was agreed to introduce the additional service at the beginning of March 1833. Whether or not the poor and needy came in is not told, but the practice of having three services continued for almost ten years. In 1842 the afternoon service was discontinued, except on first Sundays when it was followed by communion, but the time was not to be wasted. Sunday afternoons were now to be used for prayer meetings, district visiting and instructing the young.

Stovel's early years brought some encouragement. In his first full year there were twelve baptisms, in the following year nine, and in 1835 there were twenty-one. The monthly church meeting in November 1835 resolved 'that since it has pleased God to visit in mercy several families of the Brethren and turn the hearts of their children to himself, the prayer meeting on Friday Evening 27th Inst., be rendered special, to return thanks for the mercy thus given, and to implore an additional bestowment of grace on the young in the congregation who still remain undecided'.(7)

By 1845 the total membership stood at 242, with ladies outnumbering men by almost two to one - the pastor was still unmarried and would remain so. Most of the members lived within a mile of the Meeting House, although some travelled in from Oxford Street and from Camberwell and Walworth. To facilitate visiting, the members were divided into geographical areas, or districts. Each district had its own messenger or elder whose duty it was, or should have been, to give regular reports at church meetings. Duty was not always matched by performance, as the church records show, particularly in later years.

Little Prescot Street also sought to fulfil its evangelistic and social responsibilities. There was a Sunday School with an average attendance of 140, which met in Chamber Street, and a smaller school in Goodman's Yard. Stovel conducted a Bible class, which in 1840 had an attendance just short of 100. A Tract Visitation Society sought to bring the Gospel to the houses in the vicinity of the church. Nor were social needs neglected. A Prayer and Alms Society gave financial assistance to over 250 families each year, and a group of ladies came to the aid of many very poor women at the time of their confinements. From each of these agencies some began to attend the services and a few were converted. The church also gave generous support to the Baptist Fund, the Baptist Mission, and took up an occasional offering for the Aged Pilgrims' Friend Society. In its willingness to give financial help, the Prescot Street church stood in the forefront of the London churches. Then came the blow which was destined to change all that; a blow which neither Stovel nor anyone else could have foreseen.

## A NEW KIND OF TRIAL

At a church meeting held in August 1840, it was: 'Resolved that the Pastor and Deacons be requested to prepare a Memorial to the Directors of the Blackwall Railroad on the great and Serious Annoyance from the noise of their works in the time of Divine Worship'. At the same meeting a second resolution requested the sending of a further Memorial to the Blackwall Railway Company, 'on their awful profanation of the Lord's Day in the working of their trains'.(8)

A Parliamentary Bill authorising construction of the three and a half mile long London and Blackwall Railway was passed in 1836, and most of the work was completed four years later. Much of the line, the first to be driven into the heart of London, was built on brick arches and, to avoid fire danger to nearby housing from steam engines, cable traction was chosen. Sunday trains were not allowed on the short section running into Fenchurch Street, not at least until annoyance to people living nearby had been removed by its being completely covered in. Little Prescott Street was not in that short section and the Meeting House was right next to the line. Apart from a brief period on Sunday mornings, there were trains every fifteen minutes in both directions. The Memorials sent to the Railway Company bore little fruit and the church had no case in law for compensation. In the summer of 1841 a statement was sent to all members and friends stressing the gravity of the situation: the vibrations and noise from the railway have, 'in great measure destroyed the chapel's fitness for the solemnities of Public Worship'.(9) In July resolutions were passed by church and congregation authorising the setting up of a committee to raise funds for the erection of a new chapel on a convenient site. Three and a half years later only £1400 had been given or promised.

Then in 1846 came a further stunning blow, when the church learned that, 'the London and Blackwall Railway were about to move a Bill in Parliament to widen the present line, so bringing it on the site of the meeting house'.(10) The church took all measures to oppose this Bill, but in the event it worked for their good. After protracted negotiations the Railway Company agreed to take into consideration all circumstances relating to the use of the Chapel in their purchase price, and eventually an arbiter awarded the church £6560.

Efforts to find a suitable site were speeded up. The first proposed was in Colchester Street, near Commercial Road. Negotiations fell through and an alternative was found in Commercial Street. Alfred Bowser, city business man and deacon, proposed another alternative, in an area between Commercial Road and Mile End Road, where new houses were being built but there was no existing place of worship. The pastor considered this but did not agree. At a subsequent church meeting Bowser's proposal was defeated by 39 votes to 5, and the site in Commercial Street was approved by 33 votes with none against. Although the ladies did not vote, the voting figures are low for such an important decision, but it stood and plans for the new chapel were prepared.

It was now that Stovel made a terrible mistake. In March 1854 he made a long statement at a church meeting, claiming a share in the Railway Company's award. There had always been two claims for pecuniary loss, he argued, one from the church and another from himself, and it would therefore be fraudulent for the church to accept the whole amount. After securing the church's approval to this claim, Stovel made a further statement implying that he would have resigned

had the decision been otherwise. He then promised to give the entire sum (later agreed at £1000) to the building fund. Alfred Bowser was unmoved. He believed Stovel had a right to remuneration, but not out of the award to the church. As so often, Stovel had his way and Bowser resigned from the diaconate. Other resignations followed. When asked to join a committee managing the building finances, Bowser declined. In this crisis, the church resolved, that the Pastor, with the remaining Elders and Deacon be requested to meet and consider and to advise what measures may, in their view, be adopted for the preservation of the church'.(11)

For Bowser and Stovel it was the beginning of a sorry tale. There were hard words and twelve months later Bowser was excommunicated for violating all order. In November 1855 Stovel wrote to Bowser suggesting a meeting for reconciliation. After a flurry of letters, Bowser agreed to a meeting but only in the presence of a third party, a proposition which the pastor refused to accept. The excommunication stood. Eventually Bowser and his wife joined the church at Hackney, only to find that in consequence the church he had served so well resolved that Hackney could no longer be accepted as 'a sister church of Christ'.(12)

Meanwhile the trains rumbled by, disturbing the worshippers and undermining the building. In January 1854 part of the ceiling collapsed and for over a year services were held in the large vestry. By March 1855 it was at last possible to remove from Little Prescott Street to the schoolroom of the new chapel, which was itself completed three months later.

For fifteen years the burden of disturbance, negotiation and plans for removal had rested on the shoulders of Charles Stovel. To quote Ernest Kevan, 'The amount of labour, thought and writing put into this work by Mr Stovel is truly astonishing... In all the work of collaboration with the Parliamentary Committee... in interviewing Counsel, surveyors, solicitors... the energy of this indefatigable man was ceaseless'.(13)

During this lengthy trial the spiritual life of the church was not overlooked. Almost always spiritual matters were dealt with first in the church meetings: the reception of members, the applications for baptism and the appointment of visitors. When the Baptist Union proposed that some part of Sunday, 11th June 1848 be set apart to consider the state of the churches with greater zeal for improvement of personal religion, the Prescott Street church responded with prayer meetings at 7.00 and 9.30 in the morning, and at 8.00 in the evening, all well attended. In the following year meetings for prayer and humiliation were called when cholera raged, and a day was set apart for thanksgiving when it abated.

But inevitably, hard as the pastor and those around him worked, the church suffered, numerically, financially and mentally. Some members, finding the pressure was too much for them, moved away. After the trial was over the pastor looked back and saw in it all a proof of God's faithfulness, that he is 'able and willing to do all that he has promised and all that the triumph of His Kingdom requires'.(14)

#### A NEW HOME

The new chapel was opened on Wednesday, 11th July 1855. It was an imposing building, built in the style of a Roman Temple with

Corinthian columns, standing on the west side of Commercial Street, about 100 yards from Whitechapel High Street. No records survive of the numbers attending the opening meetings, nor the normal services. Presumably every one of the 800 seats would have been occupied when Charles Haddon Spurgeon preached the Anniversary sermons in each of the four years 1859-1862. In 1862 the debt on the building, which had cost £10,000, was at last cleared - an event bringing considerable rejoicing.

There were other encouragements, with sixty additions to the membership in the first two full years of occupation, but there were also problems. Some windows were broken by vandals, and the pulpit was found to be badly positioned. By the early 1860s the problems were more serious. In 1863 Stovel was calling for greater exertions in the church's activities. A year later the ladies, who brought help to poor women having babies, were experiencing difficulty now that most of the wealthier ladies in the church had died. There were deficiencies of over £100 in the church's incidental account, and a decline in numbers attending prayer meetings. Succeeding years saw little improvement. By 1873 the pastor was earnestly pleading with all involved in the Sunday School to think of measures which might be adopted for its preservation. Three years later a deacon resigned because of 'elements now existing in the church'.(15)

At a church meeting in 1875 Stovel spoke of the afflictions many were enduring and of numerical decline in the church and congregation. At the same time he was refreshed to see the enfeebled flock clinging to their hope in so much adversity. That year Stovel was present at a ministers' meeting addressed by D. L. Moody. Perhaps he thought the Moody and Sankey campaign would enliven evangelistic enthusiasm, but of this there is little evidence. A resolution was passed by the church in 1878 to use Bank Holidays, 'for advancing the Edification of the Church and the giving effect to its testimony in turning unbelievers to the Lord'.(16) When Stovel found that the church had taken no action for the August holiday, he arranged a meeting at his home, with a prayer meeting in the schoolroom from 6.00 until 9.00 in the evening, these 'were cheered with hope of blessing'.(17)

In the following year it was 'Resolved that the Officers of the Church, Deacons and Elders be requested to consider and report whether any, and if any, what measures can be adopted to further the Evangelizing of Sinners who are perishing in such numbers at our own doors'.(18) As a result it was proposed to revive and extend the tract visitation, but it was Stovel and not the church who bought 32,000 tracts and arranged for their distribution. This lack of resolve characterises most of what was taking place. When canvassers were sought for the Sunday School, none was forthcoming.

Then in 1881 came a request from the Little Alie Street church, with whom there had always been co-operation, that the two churches should be united. All proceeded well until Commercial Street stipulated that Charles Masterman, the Little Alie Street pastor, should be ordained as joint pastor with Stovel. Little Alie Street pointed out that re-ordination was unnecessary, and that Stovel could only make himself heard with difficulty, which would drive people away, especially young people. So, that was the end of that! Another proposal came from Zoar, Great Alie Street, for the use of the Commercial Street schoolroom for a Sunday School. There was a conference, after which the request was withdrawn.

Between these abortive attempts for some union between Particular Baptist churches situated within half a mile of each other, came Stovel's Jubilee, when the preacher was Dr John Kennedy from Stepney Meeting (Congregational). All present joined in congratulation to Stovel, and acknowledged the providence of God which had been his care and support. They sympathised with him in the affliction which had so long embarrassed him, commending him, 'to the care and keeping of the Heavenly Father, praying that divine peace may rest upon his spirit, divine strength be the support of his remaining days, and divine blessings fill his experience in time and eternity'. (19)

On the last day of 1882 the 83-year-old Stovel collapsed on his way home from the morning service. He sufficiently recovered to take most services until mid-February, when he suffered a further breakdown. Even then this iron-spirited man continued to take some meetings and occasionally officiated at the Lord's Supper. He died on 22nd October 1883.

### THE BRINK OF DISASTER

For over fifty years Stovel controlled the church with an iron hand. Through three large minute books, containing over 7500 minutes written in his almost indecipherable hand, his control is transparently evident. Now that control had gone, the marriage had ended. Three weeks after his death the deacons said, 'The bodily weakness of our aged Pastor during the last four years has been painfully evident to us all, and we do not know which has been the more remarkable, the strong will that enabled him, notwithstanding his infirmities, to continue his labours so long, or his reluctance to be relieved of even a part of his duties'. (20)

During the first twenty-three years of this long pastorate there had been 230 baptisms. In the first ten years at Commercial Street there were 138, but in the last eighteen years only 49. Taking into account transfers, deaths or exclusions, almost every year down to 1865 had seen an increase in membership. After that it was almost always a decrease. At Stovel's death there were upwards of 250 names on the church roll, but this takes no account of those who had been 'lost'. The actual membership was no more than eighty, and the number attending almost certainly even less. In his reluctance to hand over, the pastor had stayed at his post too long, bringing the church to what some believed was the danger of extinction.

In spite of this Charles Stovel was still deeply respected. When he died the church lost a faithful pastor, the denomination lost a stalwart and London's East End lost a man who cared. Although he served on many committees within the Baptist communion, and was twice President of the Baptist Union, he firmly believed his place was in the East End, living in a terraced house just off Whitechapel High Street among the 500,000 who lived within two miles of Commercial Street Chapel. At the stone-laying ceremony in 1854, in a voice choked with emotion, he had said: 'My place is among the poor, and at the sick bed; my living is plain, my health depends on it; and it is the object of my existence to snatch victims from the flames'. (21) Nor were these empty words. Being called early one morning to the bedside of a dying woman who had previously ignored his warnings, he took his time in dressing, causing a delay of fifteen minutes. The woman died as he arrived at the house. 'As I fixed my eyes on the corpse', he

wrote, 'this passage came upon my mind, "The door was shut". At that moment I would have given all the world contained if I could have recalled those fifteen minutes, which might have been spent in prayer at her side. Oh, sirs, I desire never to feel that emotion again'. (22)

Stovel's concern for those among whom he lived was eloquently expressed in the funeral sermon preached by Thomas Tymms, pastor of Downs Chapel, Clapton. 'The suffering poor in this crowded end of London have had in him a benefactor who prayed and thought and wrought for them to no small effect. The cry of misery which is just now making itself heard so loudly was always in his ears. He would never go and live among green fields while humanity wailed and moaned in multitudinous throngs down here where his duty had been cast. His preaching was as Greek or Latin to the surrounding population, but though they did not understand him he understood their wrongs, their sorrows, and their sins, and he saw and groaned over many mistaken remedies which made the evil worse'. (23)

Here was a man who loved the poor, who had been among them himself, but paradoxically his preaching was of no more use to them than a Latin homily. Training had given him polish, it had equipped him to write with distinction on complex theological subjects, and to exercise a very acceptable ministry for the city business men in the Little Prescott Street congregation. But translating Greek poets had done little to prepare him to preach the Gospel in an area where there was no local newspaper and not a single bookshop. Stovel, like others, was a victim of a system more concerned to produce men of letters, than to equip a man of God to so preach that the 'common people' would hear him gladly.

It is difficult to reconcile Stovel's concern for the poor with his insistence to build on Commercial Street. At the Stone Laying he acknowledged that the church was no longer affluent, for 'our great men are gone from us', (24) but that was the site he chose, on the edge of the city, where the business houses and warehouses were going up. He had rejected Alfred Bowser's idea, to build where houses were being erected, and where afterwards the East London Tabernacle was built. At the East London Tabernacle, Archibald Brown exercised his remarkable ministry, where 'he built up a church', (25) which by the time of Stovel's death had over 2000 members.

But blame for the decline at Commercial Street must not be laid entirely at the feet of Stovel. The attitude of the church must also be taken into account. In another statement to the church the deacons said, 'We have given our attention to the condition of the church with a view to measures which should be adopted in the present emergency... it is now twenty-eight years since the foundation stone of our chapel was laid and during that time many changes have taken place in the vicinity to our disadvantage. The most serious of these have been the tendency of the Church and chapel-going population to leave the neighbourhood; a corresponding influx of foreigners and an increase of those classes which can only be reached by special missionary agencies'. (26)

A year later William Adey of Scarborough became pastor. He worked hard, some evangelistic meetings were held, but by 1886 pastor and deacons, together with the London Baptist Association, concluded that only removal to another site gave any reasonable hope of survival. Discussion had centred only on the church functioning as a church; no thought had been given to what a Mission Hall might be

able to do. Although the London Baptist Association sent its 'big guns' to pressurise the church, the proposal to move was turned down by a small majority. The LBA withdrew its support, pastor and deacons resigned, and twenty difficult years would elapse before the decision was made to remove to Walthamstow.

London's oldest Particular Baptist church never came to grips with London's new East End. In Little Prescott Street, among people where at least some would have attended a place of worship, it had enjoyed prosperity, but when these people died or moved away, and their homes were taken over by those for whom staying away from church was the done thing, it was left high and dry. It had no answer to mass overcrowding, to poverty, or to a total apathy to the claims of the Gospel. The Commerical Street chapel was opened in great hopes, but to the men and women of the East End it was so incongruous. It looked like a relic from a previous age, it was so different from their crowded terraces, and there it stood among the warehouses and business premises of the very people who, in their eyes, were the cause of so much of their pain and heartache.

A hundred years have now passed. Affluence has largely taken over from poverty, but the barriers remain. In a smart area of London's commuter belt, an unmarried mother has joined the congregation of an Independent church for Sunday morning worship. She looks at the very respectable families sitting in the gallery opposite and says to herself, 'I wish I could find a church where there were other people like me'.

#### NOTES

- 1 For the origins of this church see W. T. Whitley, *The Baptists of London*, 1928; E. F. Kevan, *London's Oldest Baptist Church*, 1933; or A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, 1947. The church, variously described as in Wapping, Goodman's Fields, or Prescott Street, removed to Walthamstow in 1914, where it is now known as Church Hill Baptist Church.
- 2 Walter Besant, *East London*, 1902, pp.218-20.
- 3 Millicent Rose, *The East End of London*, 1951, p.267.
- 4 Church Book No.4, Meeting held 18th January 1832.
- 5 William Willis, *Preparations for Pulpit Exercises in Little Prescott Street Meeting House*, 1888, p.xv.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.xxi.
- 7 Church Book, No.5, Minute 449. These books are at the church.
- 8 *Ibid.*, Minutes 1135 and 1136.
- 9 *An Address to the Members of the Church and Congregation... and to other Christian Friends*, 10th June 1841.
- 10 Church Book No.6, Meeting 16th January 1846, Minute 156.
- 11 *Ibid.*, Meeting 19th May 1854, Minute 1580.
- 12 *Ibid.*, Meeting 17th July 1857, Minute 2266.
- 13 Kevan, *op.cit.*, p.167.
- 14 Church Book No.6, Meeting 4th January 1864, Minute 3430.
- 15 Church Book No.7, Meeting 11th October 1876, Minute 1701.
- 16 *Ibid.*, Minutes 1857 and 1863.
- 17 *Ibid.*, Minute 1868.
- 18 *Ibid.*, Minute 1832. (The Minute numbering is in error; nos.1821-1920 are repeated).
- 19 *Ibid.*, Meeting 12 April 1882, Minute 2057.
- 20 *Ibid.*, Meeting 7th November, 1883, Minute 2104.
- 21 Cited from a printed report of the Stone Laying Ceremony, inserted in Church Book No.6.

- 22 C. Stovel, *The Dreadful Requisition, or a Treatise on the Righteousness of God in Punishing the Neglect of Souls*, 1837, p.39.
- 23 Cited from a printed report of the funeral service, inserted in Church Book No.7.
- 24 Cited from report of Stone Laying Ceremony.
- 25 George E. Page, A.G.B., *The Story of the Life and Work of Archibald Geikie Brown*, 1944, p.27.
- 26 Church Book No.7, Meeting 12th December 1883, Minute 2120.

KENNETH DIX *Minister of Dunstable Baptist Church and Honorary Secretary of the Strict Baptist Historical Society*

---

## RELIGION AMONGST THE PROPRIETIES OF LIFE

### George M'Cree and the Bloomsbury Domestic Mission

Reporting on the religious section of the 1851 Census(1), Horace Mann expressed concern at 'the destitute condition of our great town population'. The urban labouring classes, 'vast, intelligent and growingly important', were estranged from the churches and did not recognise religion as amongst 'the proprieties of life'. New and energetic missionary enterprises were needed to mitigate spiritual destitution. Mann noted with approval that some dissenters, attaching 'no peculiar sanctity to buildings', were holding services in secular halls, bringing the Gospel to the people's 'own haunts'. Among such dissenters were the Baptists of Bloomsbury Chapel, with their Domestic Mission.

Gathered churches, Mann noted, dependent on members' giving, were already following those members out to the suburbs, deserting the poor of the deteriorating inner cities. By contrast, Bloomsbury Chapel was planted strategically in 1848, intended by Morton Peto to serve the well-to-do trades folk of Bloomsbury to the north and tap their resources for ministry in the wretched slums to the south. Some of the notorious St Giles' 'rookeries' had been eliminated by new roads, but displaced residents stayed in the area, packed ever more densely into decaying tenements. Whole families lived in each room, without furniture or sanitation. Disease was rife, crime rampant. Interconnections between tenements and yards made pursuit of criminals almost impossible. Money, whether acquired by theft or street trading, mostly went on drink. It was a grim, sordid, violent district, avoided by respectable people. The parish churches did their best: the St Giles' District Visiting Association provided a savings fund, lending library and lying-in assistance. St Giles' and St George's jointly ran the Bloomsbury Dispensary for the sick poor. Already the urgency of inner city mission proved a 'motivating ecumenical feature'(2) and the Baptists were welcome as extra labourers in the field. They gladly supported the Dispensary and the local Ragged Schools.