

A Seventeenth Century Baptist Church: Bromsgrove.

FEW Baptist Churches, dating from the latter half of the seventeenth century, have so complete a record of their early days as that of Bromsgrove. From this record a fairly accurate sketch may be made of what a Baptist Church was in the troublous years of the Restoration period. Its first book dates from 1670, but the resignation of its first pastor in 1696, which refers to his thirty years labour "in planting and building up ye Church," fixes the date of the Church's foundation as the year 1666. The name of this first pastor was John Eckels, who as a youth came from Bewdley, ten miles distant, to Bromsgrove to learn his trade as a "clothier," the town being then famed for its production of cloth and linen. This youth, according to Crosby, had been baptised at Bewdley by John Tombes, B.D., the "Anabaptist lecturer" of the Parish Church there, who formed the Baptist Church in that town whilst ministering at the Parish Church. Eckels was known as "the boy preacher," and probably divided his earlier efforts at preaching between the two towns, Tombes having left the former to become one of the "Tryers" in London under Cromwell's ordinance for the approbation of public preachers.

Puritanism had left its mark in the town of Bromsgrove after a local reign of thirty years, but the rise of Nonconformity and the formation of the Baptist Church in particular, is in no way attributable to it. Here, as elsewhere, the Separatists stood aside from the Puritans, who were jealous of their separation. The Puritan vicar of the town in the year 1643 had been denounced by Charles I., from his headquarters at Oxford, as a "rebel," the king demanding his expulsion. But owing to the uncertainty of the king's position in his struggle with the parliament, and the changes already introduced into the Established Church, the good man was left undisturbed by the Dean and Chapter of Wor-

cester, who were the patrons of the living. On his death, his son-in-law, John Spilsbury, M.A., another Puritan, received the appointment of public preacher. But at the Restoration, being dissatisfied with conformity, he resigned the living and afterwards formed an Independent Church in the town.

Whilst Spilsbury was exercising his ministry at the Parish Church, Eckels was preaching in the open-air, or in such houses as were available, and thus introducing Nonconformity in the form of Separatism, and the opinions of the Baptists in particular. Undaunted by the Conventicle Act of 1664, which was designed to silence the ejected clergy of 1662, Eckels prosecuted his work. That Act, however, expired in 1667, when the ejected clergy and the Separatists again boldly opened their conventicles. Archbishop Sheldon, therefore, poured out letters from Lambeth urging the bishops of his province to enforce at least the canons in the ecclesiastical courts. Sir Matthew Hale, on the other hand, drafted a bill for the comprehension of the Nonconformists and indulgence to others, but the Commons would not listen to it, and parliament was adjourned. Sheldon continuing his agitation ordered the Dean of the province of Canterbury to ascertain what conventicles were actually meeting. The results of his enquiry were digested in 1669, and a copy of the result is at Lambeth in the Tenison MS., 639. The Bishop of Worcester reported that at Bromsgrove and Kings Norton (a chapelry of Bromsgrove) there were several conventicles, but very few considerable persons attended; the teachers were sometimes Nonconforming clergy, in their absence other laymen. With a mass of facts showing conventicles rife, parliament in May, 1670, passed another Conventicle Act to be permanent.

Between the purchase of the Church book in 1670 at a cost of two shillings, which is duly recorded on its first page, and the year 1672 only one entry appears, viz., the admission of a member. The reason for this was doubtless the desire to avoid the danger which written records might occasion in the persecution of Nonconformists which was rife under the new Conventicle Act. The ecclesiastical authorities were busy in the diocese of Worcester, under pressure from Lambeth, in seeking to exterminate Nonconformity; the little Church in Bromsgrove experiencing its full share of suffering, as a reference to "sore and great temptation" doubtless indicates. According to Crosby, the pastor, John Eckels, was arrested whilst preaching, greatly abused, and flung into a dungeon of Worcester goal. There is, however, no reference to this in the Church Book, or in the letter of resignation which Eckels tendered in 1696. Other particulars given

by Crosby of his liberation are incorrect, and as the records of the gaol have perished, no corroboration is possible. But it is very likely that his imprisonment was a fact, for the Independent pastor in the town so suffered. In 1672, however, the Church waxed bolder and inscribed in its book a "Covenant." This was the year of Charles II.'s "Indulgence" to Nonconformists on condition that their preachers and places of meeting became licensed. The Baptists of Bromsgrove, whilst availing themselves of the liberty of worship granted, did not apply for a license, and to the honour of all the Baptist Churches of Worcestershire, be it recorded, not one of them applied. The reason for this is doubtless to be found in the principle to which they adhered, viz., that the "civil magistrate" had no authority over the conscience in matters of religion. Charles II. had no moral right to persecute, therefore they recognised no obligation to apply for a license to worship God according to their own consciences.

The Covenant, which is a lengthy document, is not a doctrinal Confession of Faith. Strictly speaking, the Church has never had a doctrinal Confession of Faith. It, however, sufficiently indicates that its signatories held the doctrines which we broadly denominate Evangelical. Of their own unworthiness this little knot of believers were conscious by describing themselves as "a company of poor despised worms, partakers of the heavenly calling," who through grace had been "brought into the fellowship of the glorious gospel of the Son of God to partake of the holy things of His house, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth." "The Dayspring from on high" had visited them through the tender mercies of God, and had given them light when they sat in darkness and the shadow of death. They declare themselves "subject to Christ our only Lord and Saviour by His holy word and Spirit; whereby we through mercy have put on Christ by baptism, according to the Apostolical doctrine which is after Christ." With evident reference to Rome, they declare, we "have separated ourselves from Anti-Christ and the accursed thing, according to the commandment of the everlasting God." "Therefore lying under divine obligation to love fear and serve the God of heaven and earth" they proceed to ask "what remains but that we should be followers of Him as dear children, and to carry it towards the children of the most high God as becometh Saints, in all love, humbleness of mind, to comfort the feeble-minded, to support the weak, and to bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ." They therefore covenant "to sanctify God in our hearts and to make Him our fear and dread in our lives, to do what we can for

the Gospel's sake, even for the honour of the truth as it is contained in the Scriptures of truth; to avoid causing the enemies of the truth to blaspheme the worthy Name; to take all opportunities to wait upon God in the place appointed by the Church; to eschew the sin of speaking evil of one another; to tell no person of the weakness of our brethren or sisters until we have performed our duty to the offending, according to the mind of Christ in Matt. xviii: 15, 16, 17; to keep in the way of separation from all doctrines of men, and to hear the Church we are now members of in reproof, correction, and counsel, believing her to be built upon the foundation of the Apostles, prophets, and Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone." Finally, "never to leave the communion of the Church we have given ourselves up to, to embrace any other doctrine that tends to schism and division of the Church until we have appealed to the Church for satisfaction." It will be seen that the severer doctrines of Calvinism find no place in the minds of these people, whilst the evangelistic note, not always clear in those days, is strongly sounded. Thirteen members, including the pastor, attached their signatures to this covenant.

These thirteen members doubtless represent the full numerical strength of the Church in the year 1672. That they were not more in number is doubtless accounted for by the fact that the previous six years had covered a period of painful persecution, when public work was more or less proscribed. Indeed fines were imposed upon those who did not attend the Parish Church, the proceeds being applied to apprenticing local "parish lads." But during the eleven years following great progress was made, so that by the year 1683 the Church numbered about 87 members. Members of well known local families were drawn into it and men of substance joined its ranks. And so when another episcopal enquiry was set on foot in 1676, the results of which for the province of Canterbury are enshrined in a handsome volume at the Salt Library, Stafford, Bromsgrove stands out not only as the largest town in the diocese of Worcester, but as the very capital of dissent. Three hundred people over the age of sixteen were recorded as frequenting conventicles, no other parish in the diocese furnishing a hundred.

The pastor, like most of his order, received no remuneration for his services, but laboured in commercial pursuits as a clothier, which in those days meant a cloth-worker or merchant. The officers of the Church, in addition to the pastor, comprised deacons and elders. Its business was evidently conducted in an orderly

manner, the burden of which were cases of discipline, which was rigidly enforced. The appointments to office were made by solemn prayer and fasting. Careful observation was taken of the attendance of members at the monthly observance of the Lord's Supper, visitors being appointed to interview absentees. Discipline was exercised for "disorderly walking" and "sin against the Lord," the most common lapse being that of drunkenness. The offending members were warned and pleaded with, and if amendment did not ensue they were "cast out of the Church." In cases where repentance issued, restoration took place, and letters from penitents were copied into the Church Book. Towards the end of the century, marriages of members began to be solemnised, evidently without being conducted at the Parish Church. These are headed "the sivill (civil) contractt of marridg was between——and——solemnized and performed before ye Lord God, Angells and us who were witnesses at ye same time." Sometimes these services took place at a Church Meeting. The witnesses whose names are appended, in one case, number as many as twenty-three, testifying perhaps to the popularity of the parties.

Nor was the interest of the Church confined to its own immediate affairs. It seems to have considered the needs and difficulties of other Churches, witness the entry of 1690—"that there be a letter sent to Hooknorton for to stir them up to theyr duty concerning theyr pastor." The idea of a Sunday School did not suggest itself to the Church until 1798, but a list of children's births was commenced in 1674 and continued for many years, probably with a view to keep in touch with them as they grew up. A list of baptisms, headed "B. B." (believers' baptisms?) begins with the year 1688, although there were many before that date, in addition to the ordinary Church Roll, which does not indicate how the members joined. A list of deaths, commencing in the year 1684 was also kept, the interments being made in the parish churchyard.

The expenses of the Church were small, inasmuch as no meeting-house of its own existed, and no salary was raised for the pastor. The first money account appears in 1694, when it was agreed that "the generall sums of money bee payd into the hands of the deakons for the yous of the poore of this congregation and other necessary charges by us who have voluntarily hereunto subscribed for the year following,"—an admirable method indeed of providing beforehand for the year's expenditure. The amount subscribed was £7, and the expenditure embraced such items as "2 garments to baptize in 8/7," "Bro. Eckels' charges

for going to London to ye meeting of ye Elders there 1 to 0," his charges for travelling to the Association meetings at Hooknorton 5/6, together with the charges of other delegates, "paid for 2 post letters come from Bro. Belcher 7d.; items paid to the poor varying from 5/- to 1/-. A balance of 8/3½ however remained, which was given to the poor. The reference to the Association points to the Midland (now the West Midland) which the Bromsgrove Church with eight other Churches joined to revive in the year 1690. That Association was formed in 1655, but since 1658 had suspended its operations owing to the death of Oliver Cromwell and the persecution which followed the restoration of the Stuart kings.

With such a record of activity and progress, it is not a little startling to find that no meeting-house existed through all these years. The people met in "ye place appoynted by ye Church," which most likely meant the houses of its members. It was not the house, but the reality and power of Christian fellowship which most concerned them. Where they baptised is not known, but the town brook ran near the back of one of the houses in which they met, and was probably used for the purpose. At the same time a Church with upwards of 80 members having no settled place of meeting is somewhat unique. It was not until the year 1700 that the house of Humphrey Potter, a worthy and generous deacon, was registered according to the requirement of the Toleration Act, as the Baptist meeting-house. Behind this house he had already erected, or was about to erect, the meeting-house which he afterwards bequeathed to the Church. This worthy man was a mercer, who also held the public office of Overseer of the poor, was a friend of Thomas Newcomen, Baptist pastor at Dartmouth for twenty years and the almost forgotten inventor or adapter of the steam engine. Indeed a part of the good deacon's wealth was derived from shares in the practical work of erecting Newcomen's engines at the coal pits of Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Northumberland, and the copper mines of Cornwall.

Before the close of the seventeenth century the Church had become associated with more than one prominent name in Baptist history. The following entry appears in the book—"Richard Claridge, A.M., late Rector of Peopleton, was baptised October 21: 1691." Claridge was presented to the Rectory of Peopleton, in the County of Worcester, in 1673, but for several years after entertained doubts as to the doctrine and ceremony of the Established Church. He sought refuge first amongst the Baptists, but in 1697 joined the Quakers and removed to London. He was

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an energetic preacher and in private life a man of estimable character. His published works have been repeatedly quoted by Quakers in vindication of their Society from charges of Socinianism.

But a still more notable name also appears,—“ David Crosley of Barnoldswick-in-Craven, in the county of York, was baptized the 10th day of the 6th month, 1692.” Crosley, however, did not long remain in the town, for on “ the 26th of the 7th month ” of the same year, a letter was given him, sending him forth to the ministry. What brought him to Bromsgrove is not known. He was born at Heptonstall Slack, Yorkshire, in the year 1669, but appears to have lived at Barnoldswick before coming to the Midlands. His name, however, appears on the roll made as late as the 10th day of the 4th month, 1698, and in the money account of 1694 there are two sums of £1 2 0 and £1, “ given to Bro. Crosley.” He became the originator of about twenty Baptist Churches in Yorkshire and Lancashire, which in turn have given rise to nearly sixty more, to say nothing of men whom he influenced to devote themselves to the ministry. A late note in the Church Book states that he died September, 1744, at the age of 75 years, and was buried at Goodshaw, Lancashire.

Thus ends the story of a Worcestershire Baptist Church of the seventeenth century, situated on the high road from the North through Birmingham to Bristol in the West. The town of Bromsgrove to which it belonged, with its 2,000 inhabitants at the time, was not an unimportant one when we bear in mind that the population of England was only five-and-a-half millions.

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