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A Study in Dissension

WINTOUN STREET, LEEDS, 1870-1895

NINETEENTH-CENTURY dissension in Baptist churches has often been examined and evaluated in terms of discord over policy, polity and principles. Yet whilst controversy over such matters as "open" Communion, doctrine and church procedure were common in the nineteenth century, a recent study has demonstrated that often dissension was caused predominantly by clashes of personality and dissatisfaction with ministerial and diaconal supervision.¹

The origin of the General Baptist Church in Wintoun Street, Leeds, has been dealt with in an earlier article.² Briefly, the church was formed in 1850 at Call Lane Chapel and until 1865 was ministered to by Rev. Jabez Tunncliffe, the founder of the Band of Hope movement. Tunncliffe's successor was Rev. William Taylor who came from Stoke-on-Trent. It was during the latter's ministry, in 1870, that the old chapel was demolished for road-widening purposes and a temporary iron structure erected in Wintoun Street, to be replaced three years later by a more comfortable and commodious building.

The records of the last twenty-five years of the church's existence (which were discovered in 1969³) are fascinating, for they reveal much that is worst in Baptist history—the pettiness, jealousy and personal animosity amongst members, the arrogant and autocratic behaviour of those in responsible positions within the fellowship. Indeed, the church at Wintoun Street provides a classic example of a Baptist church extinguished by internal discord caused by personal animosities.

The first serious episode of dissension occurred during an officers' meeting⁴ on 14 July, 1870. In the course of a discussion on various subjects, "in consequence of some very excited remarks made by Mr. Todd, Mr. Thos. Shaw stated that he should withdraw from the Meeting & from the Cause too & have nothing to do with it anymore. Whereupon Mr. Dyall the Secretary (to whom most of Mr. Todd's remarks had been addressed) called upon the Rev^d W. Taylor to produce & read his (Mr. Dyall's) Resignation which he had placed in Mr. Taylor's hands previous to the commencement of the meeting & stated that he should abide by it." Whereupon George Dyall, like Thomas Shaw, left the meeting.

A special church meeting on 4 September appointed a committee, consisting of all the male members of the church, to co-operate with the church's officers in the management of church business. Ostensibly the committee of management was formed because the officers were "so numerically weak," but as three of the four deacons were still in

office and the fourth, Thomas Shaw, was soon persuaded to assume office again,⁵ the real reason was fear of continued discord amongst the deacons, depriving them of an ability to supervise efficiently the church's affairs.

After an election of deacons had taken place at the next annual church meeting, on 15 December, the pastor, William Taylor, after stating the duties of a deacon, took the unusual step of suggesting that the formal acceptance of office should be delayed for a week or so, after which the deacons should "state their views as to the office & their intentions as to the mode of conducting themselves." Unfortunately, whatever intentions were stated, antagonism between Samuel Todd and other deacons continued.

Eventually, at a special church meeting on 27 February, 1871, the pastor called upon Todd to retract the remarks he had made at an officers' meeting. The latter refused to do so, whereupon the following resolution was passed unanimously: "That Bro. Samuel Todd, having made use of language, highly disrespectful to the Officers of this Church, and manifesting a most unchristian spirit towards bro. G. Dyall; and having on being asked to withdraw the same, emphatically refused to do so—be and hereby is suspended—a. from exercising the office of deacon in this church—b. from attending church meetings and c. from partaking the Lord's Supper, until he shall have withdrawn the expressions complained of, and manifested contrition for the unchristian spirit he has shown." However, within ten weeks Todd was restored to all the privileges of membership and to the diaconate by a church resolution,⁶ implying that the required apology from him had been obtained.

In fact, dissension during the 'seventies was caused primarily by similar high-handed and inconsiderate actions and attitudes on the part of certain deacons. At the end of 1871, for example, some deacons had arranged a church meeting without notifying the minister. At that church meeting, the pastor stated that the meeting had been called in his absence, without his knowledge and in such a way as to cause great inconvenience for him to be present. That this was by design and not by accident, and that there were leaders of an anti-minister party amongst the diaconate is confirmed by the activities of the previous month. At a congregational meeting a resolution had been proposed that "the ministry of Mr. Taylor in this place has not been satisfactory" and that his resignation be accepted. An amendment expressing full confidence in the pastor was lost by 9 votes to 8, and the meeting adjourned. Ultimately, Taylor was requested to retain his office at a meeting "more numerous attended than any of the preceding ones."⁷

Sixteen months later, Samuel Todd was again a central figure in a disagreement within the church fellowship. This time it was over the appointment of a new minister. Taylor had resigned the pastorate and

left the ministry, possibly disheartened and disillusioned by recent events, to become a local shopkeeper. At a church meeting on 19 February, 1873, Todd opposed a resolution which proposed that a call to the pastorate should be given to Mr. Wood of Bradford. Nevertheless, the resolution was carried, whereupon Todd announced his resignation from the diaconate. However, at a meeting of the congregation, on 2 March, called to ratify or reject the proposed call, nobody even seconded the church's resolution! Todd then moved that Mr. Wood "is not suited to the requirements of this Congregation" and that instead Mr. Silby of Lineholme be invited to come and preach as early as is convenient. The meeting supported Todd, who then withdrew his resignation from the diaconate.

It was in 1877 that schism really rent the church asunder. In March, one of the deacons resigned. In April, the minister's resignation was notified to and accepted by the church. At the beginning of June another deacon, Thomas Chaplin, resigned, whereupon a resolution "that the Church having lost all Confidence in the Deacons do hereby respectfully request them to resign their office" was moved and seconded.⁸ At another church meeting, on 6 June, Chaplin gave an explanation of his conduct in order to defend himself against remarks made at the previous meeting by Todd and Charles Willans, both of whom were deacons and the latter church treasurer as well. The four deacons still in office stated their case, after which Silby replied before putting the resolution of no confidence in the diaconate to the meeting. The resolution was carried, twenty of the thirty-one members present voting for it and six of the remaining eleven being deacons or their wives.

The third church meeting within five days was held on 8 June, when the deacons presented a report to the church containing five salient points. First, it was claimed that as a matter of courtesy and church custom "they (the Deacons) should have had due notice of the charges (so called) which it was intended to make against them." Secondly, it was asserted that "such verbal objections as required explanation were dealt with by the Deacons then present." Thirdly, it was pointed out that "the mistaken leaders of the disaffected party for reasons best known to themselves, refused to state their objections in writing, and up to the present moment no such formal statement has been received by the persons whose official reputation it is sought in this irregular manner to injure or destroy." In the fourth place, the deacons stated that they were "conscious that from the period when Mr. Silby's resignation was handed to them, they have righteously & consistently preferred the welfare of the Wintoun Street General Baptist Church to any particular or personal interests and loyalty to the same principle of action compels them to decline acceding to the request" to resign. Finally, the deacons declared that until "due cause be shewn for such an extreme step" they felt that "they would not be justified in relinquishing the responsibilities of office & they therefore distinctly claim

the right of maintaining their position, and of faithfully endeavouring to discharge the duties devolving upon them." As a result of the statements made, the church resolved that the existing deacons were no longer to be regarded as in office.

At the next church meeting, on 2 July, although the resolution accepting Silby's resignation was rescinded and a committee of management elected, the resolution was passed, "That the Church whilst sincerely regretting that a Feud has arisen between them & the Officers of the Church yet would feel desirous to offer to them the right hand of Church Fellowship & reconciliation of the Deacons providing that they (Deacons) will admit that they erred in Judgement in the suppression of the Pastor's letter and that suppression led this Church to accept the resignation at the first meeting." Unfortunately, the feud continued. Even Silby's departure did not ease the friction.

Todd's refusal to hand over to a newly-elected church treasurer some church money, which had been invested in a local savings bank in his name, caused a church meeting on 3 September to notify him that "all necessary proceedings" would be taken to obtain the money although the church would "be extremely sorry to resort to any other than persuasive means." Todd's reply to the church secretary was characteristic of the man, dogmatic, unyielding and hard.

38 Park Lane, Leeds
Sept. 6th, 1877

Mr. J. Rookledge
Sir,

I duly received yours of this morning & am sorry to see such a bad & unchristian spirit, manifested by the committee, toward me. I have neither money or book belonging to the Church. You must therefore apply to the right persons. And as to your threat about removing my name from the Church Books: If I am rightly informed you have prevented a large number from attending the Chapel already, with your mischievous ways. I think you had better consider *well* before you take such a Step or it might reflect more to your *shame*. But remember, you must call a proper and legal church meeting which I *will* attend & vindicate my course of action—the one you refer to, being improper, & please oblige me with number & names of those present. I am truly sorry Mr. Silby, who I understand is about leaving Leeds, should so mislead you, the Committee; but if I have further Communications, or trouble, on this head the Deacons will go with me to Retford and lay before the Chapel and Association Committee his true character, with the whole Correspondence that we have (some of it very disgraceful) & so shew up the man.

Yours Indifferently,

S. TODD

P.S. What think you of my threat?

In a further attempt to recover the church money, the committee wrote to the former church secretary, George Rowand. In reply, Rowand described the letter he had received as having an "offensive and insulting character," although the full text of that letter is preserved in the church minute book and does not give the impression Rowand attributed to it. After denying having any church property in his possession, he added: "If at any time you have need to correspond with me kindly (nay for God's Sake) write becoming a Christian and a Gentleman."⁹

However, some progress was made at the next church meeting, on 22 October. Todd and Willans admitted that there was £30, plus interest, in the savings bank, but they refused to permit its withdrawal until an election of deacons took place. A resolution of censure was accordingly passed on the three deacons, Todd, Willans and Rowand, and their names erased from the membership roll.

When Todd still refused to hand over the money after a new diaconate had been elected, the church had no option but to put the matter into the hands of a solicitor. Members unanimously resolved, "That the officers are hereby instructed to consult a Solicitor & place the matter in his hands to apply for [the money], but no proceedings to be taken at law before bringing it under the consideration of the Church again."¹⁰ The threat of legal action brought the dispute to an end. Todd and Rowand visited the solicitor's office and promised that they would now do anything necessary to transfer the money, whilst Willans surrendered the deposit book.¹¹

For the next few years serious discord was avoided. The prominent personalities who had caused so much trouble had left the church. Again, though, it was a person who had occupied a responsible position in the fellowship who fomented the next period of unrest and ill-feeling. After resigning as church treasurer at the beginning of 1890, owing to his removal to another part of Leeds,¹² George Coleman still had church funds in his possession eight months later. A church meeting on 3 September decided to give him fourteen days' notice to surrender £10 which rightfully belonged to the church. He acceded to this request, but a meeting of the general purposes committee (which was managing the church's affairs in lieu of a diaconate), on 19 January, 1891, felt compelled to pass a resolution of censure on Coleman, calling upon him not to interfere with church management. At a committee meeting on 2 February this resolution was superseded by one which requested the church secretary to write to Coleman, inviting him to join in church work for the general prosperity of the cause. However, at a church meeting, fourteen days later, both resolutions concerning Coleman were read out (mainly at the latter's instigation) whereupon "strong words ensued & the meeting broke up by the pastor pronouncing the Benediction."

On 25 February a church committee meeting was held as a result of two of its members having received a letter from Coleman. In this

letter he had demanded an apology from the two for having moved and seconded a resolution in reference to him. He also threatened legal proceedings if no apology was forthcoming. On discovering that a fellow-member of the committee had revealed their names to Coleman, the two announced their resignations from the committee. "A long animated discussion followed, much personal feeling being manifested." Eventually, the two resignations were withdrawn on the understanding that all members of the committee would accept responsibility for the passing of the resolution in question. In the event no further action was taken by Coleman.

Later in the same year, both Coleman and John Briggs (the committee member who had made the revelation to Coleman) were again at the centre of controversy. At a committee meeting on 11 August "a very heated discussion" took place on the question of whether or not Briggs had influenced the church organist to discontinue his services. The meeting closed with Briggs being removed from the committee. Further action was taken at a church meeting on 22 December when, in consequence of the disparaging remarks made by Coleman and Briggs about the pastor (Richard Davies), both were suspended from church fellowship. Nevertheless, they were present at the next church meeting. Coleman moved an amendment objecting to the minutes of the two previous meetings and summoning the church to reconvene a week later. Briggs seconded the amendment, but by 15 votes to 2 the amendment was negatived and the minutes then confirmed. Coleman and Briggs were asked to leave the meeting but they declined to do so. Thereupon, the pastor pronounced the benediction and closed the meeting, requesting the accredited members to meet him again in fifteen minutes.¹³

At a meeting of the church and congregation on 19 June, 1892, Davies reported that Briggs had made a false statement which had no other motive than to damage his character. The unanimous decision of the meeting was that the pastor should take such steps as he or his solicitor might deem necessary. Later that month, owing to his prior conduct as well as to recent charges which "he has failed to substantiate," Briggs was expelled from membership.¹⁴

For two years some measure of harmony appears to have been present within the fellowship, but strife was renewed in 1894. The resolutions suspending Coleman and expelling Briggs were rescinded and Lindon Partridge, who had become co-pastor five months earlier following a successful mission he had conducted at the church, stated his intention never again to work with or have his name associated with Davies. It was decided to ask the latter to resign.¹⁵

The next four months witnessed most disgraceful and disturbing scenes. Davies refused to resign and appeared, together with his solicitor, at a church meeting on 25 July. He acted as chairman, announcing the opening hymn, but the members present took no notice

of him and the hymn was not sung. A resolution was passed which asked the solicitor to leave as the meeting had been convened only for church members and church business. However, Davies retorted that his solicitor would not leave as the latter was present at his request. A resolution was then carried, empowering the deacons to seek legal advice over Davies' conduct. As the members present refused to deal with any further business until after the solicitor had left, Davies "made an attempt to pronounce the benediction amongst great confusion also stating that he dismissed that meeting for a month."

At a church meeting on 22 August, after considering Davies' conduct in bringing his quarrel with Partridge into the Police Court and taking an oath that he was in fear of bodily harm from Partridge, in introducing his solicitor to a church meeting and insisting upon him remaining despite protests by the members, and in his general defiance of the wishes of the church meeting, Davies was dismissed from the pastorate of the church by 27 votes to 3. Another resolution requested the trustees to close the Chapel "in consequence of the unseemly and disgraceful conduct of the congregation" on the previous Sunday, when Davies had announced from the pulpit that he was being forced to resign.¹⁶ In fact the Chapel was not opened again until six months had elapsed.

Unfortunately, friction continued, as an account of the church meeting on 24 September reveals:—

The above was a very disorderly meeting. Mr. Davies sat in the Chair declaring himself the pastor of the Church. Said that it was his turn now and he should speak as long as he liked and in strong stentorious tones dared anyone to interrupt him. Mr. Partridge was eventually voted to the Chair—but remained in his seat on the form. Mr. Davies attacked 1st Mr. Bexon then Mr. Partridge, bringing charges against both which were emphatically denied by both. A great deal of confusion and babble was caused by one George Harrison who supported Mr. Davies. He bood and talked at a great rate first at one and then another without being in any way remonstrated with or restrained by the Rev. R. Davies. Mr. Davies called upon Mr. Guess to lead the meeting in prayer but the confusion and the unchrist-like manner in which the whole deportment of Mr. Davies and others was exhibited more than anything else convinced the Church of the necessity for the adoption of the most stringent resolution and it was Mr. Davies's total disregard for the honours and respect of the Church Meeting that more than once decided the Church Members to give their vote against Mr. Davies.

By 20 votes to 3 Davies was then excluded from church membership.

The church never recovered from this schism. The sad episode not only resulted in the dismissal of both Davies and Partridge (a step

made inevitable by the findings and recommendations of the Yorkshire Baptist Association's Committee of Investigation)¹⁷ and the temporary closure of the chapel, but also in the termination of the cause. The church's local image and reputation had been tarnished indelibly. Dissension, a diminishing membership and an increasing debt made extinction certain. At a church meeting on 23 June, 1895, it was resolved to invite the other Leeds General Baptist church, at North Street, to join with Wintoun Street, there being a debt of about £125 on the latter "which those who attend cannot possibly cope with." In a letter to their fellow-Baptists, the church agreed that such an amalgamation "virtually means for you to take over the full management and control of the place by your own Pastor & Deacons."¹⁸ On 5 January, 1896, the decision was taken to "disband & dissolve" the church immediately and the North Street Baptists were authorised to take over the premises.

At the end of 1850 the church was composed of 46 members. Thereafter, there was usually a small annual increase or decrease. In 1875 the membership of the church stood at a little under a hundred. By the middle of 1892 there were only 45 members, after 28 had been erased during the previous twelve months. In the middle of 1895, following a further 23 erasures within a year, the church consisted of only 30 people. The extant church account books¹⁹ reveal that the church had a constant struggle to meet the expenses of the cause. With the loss of members after each serious dispute, the burden on remaining members became heavier.

The church at Wintoun Street was never strong. It began in obscurity, but in hope and with a challenge. It ended in obscurity, but in dissension and with disillusionment. It constitutes a classic example of a church extinguished by disharmony and debt. Its struggle against debt was heroic. Its surrender to internal discord was deplorable. It demonstrates the hopelessness of a church whose membership is not large, whose expenditure exceeds its income even by a small amount and whose members are unable to maintain mutual respect and internal harmony for long. The history of Wintoun Street Baptist Church also shows the weakness of modern Baptist polity. A democracy, instead of a theocracy, enables those with strong personalities to disrupt, and at times determine, the will of the church meeting. It also exposes the myth that the decision of the church meeting is always the will of God.

NOTES

¹ "The Baptists in the Borough of Leeds during the Nineteenth Century: a Study of Local Church History," an unpublished thesis in the Library of the University of Leeds, by the present writer.

² "General Baptist Beginnings in Leeds 1840-50," *Baptist Quarterly*, vol. XXIII, 1970, pp. 301-310.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁴ The officers consisted of the minister, deacons and church secretary (who was not necessarily a deacon and was appointed by resolution, not by election).

⁵ Minutes of church committee meeting, 5 September, 1870.

⁶ Minutes of church meeting, 10 May, 1871.

⁷ *Ibid*, 18 October, 1871; minutes of congregational meetings, 13 and 20 September and 11 October, 1871.

⁸ *Ibid*, 19 March, 21 April and 4 June, 1877.

⁹ *Ibid*, 8 October, 1877.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 7 January, 1878.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 28 January and 28 February, 1878.

¹² Letter of A. Jones to Geo. Coleman, 23 January, 1890. A copy of it is appended to minutes of the church meeting on 20 January, 1890.

¹³ Minutes of church meeting, 11 January, 1892.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 30 June, 1892.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 11 July, 1894. On the secretary resigning his office after a resolution requesting Davies to resign had been passed, Coleman was appointed to the vacant office. A reversal of esteem indeed!

¹⁶ In a letter to Davies from the church secretary, dated 18 August, 1894—a copy of which is in the church minute book—it is stated: "You are therefore under the absolute necessity of filling the arrangement made through your Solicitor this morning to resign the Pastorate of the Church and announce the same in the manner therein set forth at each service tomorrow the 19th inst."

¹⁷ Minutes of church meeting, 7 November, 1894.

¹⁸ Letter of I. Bexon to the Pastor and Deacons of North St. Baptist Church, 27 June, 1895, a copy of which is in the church minute book.

¹⁹ See *Baptist Quarterly*, vol. XXIII, 1970, p. 308, note 1.

ROGER J. OWEN.