

‘The Low Condition of the Churches’: Difficulties Faced by General Baptists in England – the 1680s to the 1760s

ABSTRACT

The English General Baptists of the mid seventeenth century had a number of things in their favour. They had some gifted leaders and they developed the role of Messenger as an evangelistic office. Orthodox beliefs were espoused. Oversight in the churches helped to ensure commitment. Spirituality appeared, in churches of which there are records remaining, to be quite vibrant. Yet one hundred years later there had been considerable decline. It is often thought that this decline was due primarily to theological weakness, to isolation and to the weariness that General Baptists felt after years of persecution. These were certainly factors, but they were not the only ones, and even these issues were complex. Other crucial reasons for decline are analysed in this article. In the critical area of leadership, few, if any plans were put in place to find new, younger leadership. Gifted leaders were lost. At local level and also nationally, spiritual oversight was exercised in a way that was too often rigid and oppressive. Spirituality became to a large extent inward-directed. In the mid eighteenth century a number of General Baptist pastors and churches were expressing deep dissatisfaction and began to take an interest in the new spirit coming from the Evangelical Revival. Among many of the original General Baptist causes, however, despite their earlier history as a very creative Baptist movement, the ‘low condition’ which had come to characterise them was not remedied. But General Baptist life did emerge in new forms.

The antecedents and the beginnings of Baptist life owe a great deal to the creativity of John Smyth (c1570-1612), who after having been a Puritan preacher established a Separatist congregation in Lincolnshire in 1606-7. The members of this group described themselves as ‘the Lord’s free people’ and they ‘joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a Church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all his ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it would cost them, the Lord assisting them’.¹

¹ W. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, notes and introduction by S.E. Morison (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1959), cited by J.R. Coggins, *John Smyth’s Congregation* (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press 1991), 33.

After fleeing to Holland in 1608 to escape persecution, Smyth formed and led the first congregation from which Baptists trace their roots. Believer's baptism marked the move from separatist to Baptist life. As another Separatist, John Robinson, reported, Smyth 'baptised first himself, then others, 'out of a bason'.² Smyth had a varied career as a Church of England clergyman, a Puritan lecturer, a Separatist pastor, a Baptist congregational leader and finally a Mennonite fellow-traveller. A.C. Underwood, in his book *A History of the English Baptists*, generously describes Smyth as having 'a singularly open mind'.³ Smyth's theological contribution was significant, and his legacy of independent thought was carried on by Thomas Helwys, who returned to England to establish the first Baptist church on English soil and who also wrote an enormously significant treatise on religious freedom.⁴

After Helwys' death in Newgate prison, what became the 'General Baptist' or Arminian expression of Baptist life in England, committed to the belief in 'general' (universal) rather than 'particular' redemption, was led by John Murton. The General Baptists probably numbered not much more than one hundred and thirty people in six congregations in the 1620s, but they emerged from obscurity in the 1640s, taking advantage of the era of freedom ushered in by the English Civil War. They had lively churches such as the Bell Alley church in Coleman Street, London, led by Thomas Lambe, who was joined by Henry Denne, a dynamic preacher who had previously been an Anglican clergyman. Denne seems to have started a church in Fenstanton in East Anglia, and detailed records of this church exist. It is clear that under Denne's ministry there was a strong evangelistic emphasis at Fenstanton, with the 'Great Commission' of Matthew 28:19 being used by Denne to encourage evangelism.⁵ The evangelistic concerns of the General Baptists were reflected in the way they introduced and utilised the office of Messenger. Edward Barber, who probably worked with Denne, argued that the office of apostle (or Messenger), had not ceased. A Messenger must be appointed by a church and must gather disciples.⁶ In line with this,

² John Robinson, *Of Religious Communion* (Leydon, 1614), 48, cited by B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 19.

³ A.C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1947), 37.

⁴ T. Helwys, *The Mystery of Iniquity* (1612) (London: Carey Press, 1935).

⁵ *Records of the Churches of Christ, Gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys and Hexham, 1644-1720*, ed., E.B. Underhill (London: Hanserd Knollys Society, 1854), 71-2.

⁶ White, *Seventeenth Century*, 28-32; 34-6; J.F.V. Nicholson, 'The office of 'Messenger' amongst British Baptists in the 17th and 18th centuries', *The Baptist Quarterly* [hereafter *BQ*] Vol. 17 (1957-8): 206-25.

significant church planting took place among English General Baptists in the 1640s and 1650s.⁷

However, in a circular letter in 1711 from the ‘Messengers, Elders and Brethren’ representing ‘several congregations of the baptized believers who own the doctrine of universal redemption’ the churches belonging to the General Baptists’ General Assembly – the body which had oversight of the congregations – were told about the ‘low condition’ of the churches and the ‘careless walking and deadness of spirit’ which apparently characterised the congregations. There was a call for a day of fasting and prayer.⁸ Why were the General Baptist churches in England in such a poor spiritual condition? From 1660 to 1688 they had, on the whole, stood firm under the severe restrictions and persecutions meted out to Dissenters and they welcomed the move to toleration in 1689 after William and Mary came to the English throne. Local General Baptist churches monitored these political developments closely.⁹ When freedom came, Thomas Grantham, a Messenger and the most gifted General Baptist leader of the time, wrote that ‘the most glorious and worthy work to be done by God’s people, is to advance his truth, and to seek the salvation of the world, by all possible means’. But the plea for advance seems, for the most part, not to have resulted in growth.¹⁰ The causes of weakness and decline from the 1680s onwards merit consideration.

Leadership issues

One important factor inhibiting the advance of General Baptists was a lack of visionary leadership. It is true that they took seriously the office of Messenger, recognising that some ministers should be engaged in church planting and supervision of the churches. In the later seventeenth century there was a system of visitation of the churches by Messengers. But by the mid seventeenth century churches were less willing to release and support their ministers or elders to fulfil the role of Messengers and the Messengers were less evangelistic than they had been before. By the

⁷ See Ruth Butterfield, ‘The Royal Commission of King Jesus: General Baptist Expansion and Growth, 1640-1660’, *BQ* Vol. 35, No. 2 (1993): 56-80.

⁸ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptist Churches in England, Vol 1, 1654-1728*, ed., W.T. Whitley (London: Kingsgate Press, 1909), 118.

⁹ See minutes of the Ford General Baptist Congregation, in *The Church Books of Ford or Cuddington and Amersham in the County of Bucks*, edited by W.T. Whitley (London: Kingsgate Press, 1912), 4, 7.

¹⁰ R. Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1986), 14.

end of the century General Baptists had lost leaders of the calibre of Thomas Monck, who led the churches of Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire in the south of England, and Thomas Grantham, both of whom died in the 1690s.¹¹ General Baptists did not, unlike the large group of Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists, usually attract into their leadership those who had wider theological knowledge. The exception to the general picture of weakening leadership was Matthew Caffyn, minister of the Baptist congregation in Horsham (this became the Free Christian Church, Horsham), in the county of Sussex.¹² Caffyn, a prosperous farmer, had embraced Baptist views while a student in Oxford. He was minister in Horsham from 1648 to 1714 and had enormous influence in the counties of Sussex and Kent. His theology, however, and in particular his unorthodox view of Christology (see below), caused huge tensions within General Baptist life. Thomas Monck led those who opposed Caffyn in this area.¹³ Weakness and division in their wider leadership undermined General Baptist life.

The drawing together of translocal and local leaders in the regular General Assembly meetings of the General Baptists was intended to be something that contributed to unity among the churches. On many occasions, in fact, the reverse was the case. Assemblies had to listen to extended reports of trivial local disputes. Often personality issues were involved. In 1704 a question was put to the Assembly about whether churches that previously did not have elders and who then called an elder were at that point able to dispense with the pastoral service of a Messenger. Clearly the answer was 'no'. The real reason for the question was then revealed. One Messenger, Thomas Dean, 'thought himself not to be treated as he ought to have been' by two of the London churches. The Assembly listened to the evidence from both sides and ruled that Dean had not been mistreated. The verdict given was that Dean had listened to the views of a few people and the failure was on his side since he should have been 'exerting his office' – as it was described – by actively caring for the churches.¹⁴ Difficulties continued. Dissatisfaction with the Assembly's processes and decisions meant that in 1711 the Assembly, meeting at the Dunning's Alley church in London, agreed that as a body Assembly members had 'no authority over any particular

¹¹ *English Baptist Records, Vol 1: The General Baptist Church of Berkhamsted, Chesham and Tring, 1712-1781*, transcribed by L.G. Champion (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1985), viii.

¹² See Emily Kensett, *History of the Free Christian Church, Horsham* (Horsham: Free Christian Church, 1921).

¹³ M.R. Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 298-301.

¹⁴ *Minutes of the General Assembly, Vol 1*, 112-13.

churches only to give their counsel and advice'.¹⁵ Nor did the Assembly manage to establish the General Baptists as a denomination with which the wider Dissenting community in England could do business. This was highlighted a few years later when, in spite of the efforts of one leading London Particular Baptist minister, Benjamin Stinton, the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists failed to achieve a working relationship over the administration of the Particular Baptist Trust Fund. Hopes for a monthly meeting which would cultivate better understanding between General Baptists and Particular Baptists failed. This united effort was, said Joseph Ivimey, 'of short continuance'.¹⁶ It seemed that the General Baptists lacked leaders who had the calibre to engage with wider ecclesiastical life.

Isolation of this kind from other Christians contributed to the loss of some General Baptist leaders to the Particular Baptists. The best known instance was Benjamin Keach, who became a Particular Baptist in the 1670s, when he was in his early thirties. By his prolific hymn writing Keach contributed significantly to the development of worship among Baptists.¹⁷ Over the next thirty years a number of other ministers left the General Baptists, some perhaps with Keach's encouragement, and a few became influential in Particular Baptist churches. For example, Mark Key, after leaving the General Baptists in 1702, ministered in the town of Reading, Berkshire, and then became senior pastor of the strategic Devonshire Square church in London from where he attempted to spread Calvinistic teaching to the General Baptists.¹⁸ Whereas experienced Calvinistic ministers often encouraged younger leaders, there was relatively little of this going on among the General Baptists. In 1702 it was proposed at the General Assembly that a theological academy – a 'school of universal learning' designed to 'bring up persons...to the work of the ministry' – should be established, similar to the Particular Baptists' Bristol College. Perhaps because of internal dissension, nothing was done.¹⁹ Often General Baptist ministers were engaged in farming or some other trade to support their families:

¹⁵ *Minutes of the General Assembly, Vol 1*, 104.

¹⁶ Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, Vol. III (London: B.J. Holdsworth, 1823), 111-13.

¹⁷ For early Baptist hymnody see H. Martin, 'The Baptist Contribution to Early Baptist Hymnody', *BQ* Vol. 19 (1961): 195-208; cf. C.J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM, 2004).

¹⁸ B.R. White, 'The Baptists of Reading, 1652-1715', *BQ* Vol. 22 (1968): 154-68, 219-34.

¹⁹ *Minutes of the General Assembly, Vol 1*, p. 75; cf. H. Foreman, 'Baptist Provision for Ministerial Education in the 18th Century', *BQ* Vol. 27, No. 8 (1978): 358-69.

typically the churches did not have the money to pay them, and this caused frustration. In 1729 a Lincolnshire General Baptist pastor, John Hursthouse, who had been repeatedly chosen to be a Messenger but whose church would not release him, expressed his despair over the loss of 'so many of our best and ablest ministers' and the fact that there were 'so few to supply their places'.²⁰

The problem of wastage of leadership from General Baptist churches at local level is illustrated well by General Baptist church at Ford, near Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, an area of considerable Baptist strength. One of the leaders of the Ford congregation was Edward Hoare, from nearby Prince's Risborough. Meetings of the Ford congregation took place in homes in towns and villages in the area. In 1699 the church minutes noted that Hoare was one of those supervising church members and was involved in the administration of discipline.²¹ Later that year tensions boiled up within the church over some members, including Hoare, who held that 'Christ did not die equally for all mankind' (that is, who held Calvinistic beliefs). It was agreed that they should be 'borne with' but should not propagate their opinions.²² At a church meeting on 12 June 1700, however, Hoare was charged with 'denying that the Lord Jesus Christ died as a redeemer for all mankind'. He was also accused of withdrawing from a day of fasting and prayer because a prayer by Clement Hunt, the local Messenger, implied - as Hoare saw it - that the day would be devoted to prayer that God would remove 'the cloudiness of the minds of all Christians and enlighten them in the faith of universal redemption'.²³ A month later, at a meeting in Prince's Risborough, the question was put whether Ford members could 'sit under the ministry or break bread' with a schismatic group being led by Hoare, Thomas Norris and John Coker. It was made clear that it was unacceptable for any member to support 'disorderly separation'.²⁴ This stance was affirmed by the General Assembly in 1702.²⁵ The Ford church did not formally end communion with Hoare, however, until 1706, and sought to draw back members such as John Norris, Mary

²⁰ John Hursthouse, quoted in Adam Taylor, *History of the English General Baptists*, Vol 2 (London: T. Bore, 1818), 106-7.

²¹ *Church Books of Ford...and Amersham*, 30-1. Whitley's index suggests that he sees Brother Hore and Edward Hoare as different people, whereas my reading of the minutes leads me to believe they are the same person.

²² *Church Books of Ford...and Amersham*, 33-4. This minute was signed by seven of the congregation's leaders. I have modernised the spellings.

²³ *Church Books of Ford...and Amersham*, 35.

²⁴ *Church Books of Ford...and Amersham*, 36-7. See Assembly Mins, Vol 1, 65.

²⁵ *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol 1, 74.

Dagnall and Hannah Spreadborough who had joined Hoare's 'erroneous company'.²⁶

There were other kinds of local leadership problems. An example is the case of Jonathan Widmer who, in 1712, was nominated as an elder to serve the church at Chesham and Berkhamsted, about twenty-five miles outside London. At the time the church, which was formed in or soon after 1640, had a remarkably large membership of over four hundred, with three main congregations – Chesham, Berkhamsted and also Tring – and about eighteen preaching stations. The Minute Book exists, covering 1712 to 1781. The church had been well served by a team of elders – Thomas Monck had been one – but in 1712 only one of the elders remained. Despite the urgent need for new leadership, it took an astonishing seven years to complete the process of Widmer's appointment as various objections to him were raised. One story recorded in the minutes was that Widmer had been entrusted with some mince pies to pass to a well-known local person but that instead of delivering them Widmer and others ate them. In fact Widmer owned up to this misdemeanour, and because it had happened three or four years before and there was no other similar case the charge was dismissed.²⁷ More seriously, one member alleged that during the harvesting period Widmer had 'told some maids that if they would go on the other side of the hedge he would quickly warm them'. Widmer's defence was that he actually meant that the girls would be warmed up by their work although he admitted that he did kiss one or two of them. His defence was accepted. Widmer was finally judged to be acceptable as an elder.²⁸

The extraordinarily lengthy process through which the Chesham/Berkhamsted church went shows that the appointment of local leadership was subject to careful screening. However, it also indicates that a few people could act as a bar to new leadership emerging. It is clear that there were factional elements in the church which restricted Widmer's ministry. He himself believed that Mary Hobbs, an articulate church member, was one of the people fomenting public opposition to him. The church insisted that Widmer and Hobbs should meet and – according to the biblical pattern – sort out the differences that existed between them. At the same time the church agreed that Mary Hobbs 'sit down with her husband as a member in the Wycombe church'. It seemed that her husband was at another congregation, in

²⁶ *Church Books of Ford...and Amersham*, 54, 57, 61.

²⁷ *Berkhamsted, Chesham and Tring*, 7-8, 10-12; cf. G.R. Doster, 'Discipline and Ordination at Berkhamsted General Baptist Church, 1712-1718', *BQ* Vol. 27, No 3 (1977): 128-38.

²⁸ *Berkhamsted, Chesham and Tring*, pp. 12-13, 46.

nearby Wycombe, and so she was being advised to join him. This outspoken lady disappeared from the scene in 1716. The Berkhamsted church meeting minutes recorded that she was ‘delivered to her husband for the future’, and someone added the telling note – ‘better than to Satan’.²⁹ It took a further two years (and a despairing offer by Widmer to resign from church membership) until Widmer became an elder, an office which he undertook with such effectiveness that in 1728 he was appointed by the General Assembly as a Messenger.³⁰ If he was in any way typical, the route to General Baptist leadership was a tortuous one and this did not encourage the recognition of gifts.

Doctrinal disputes

Theological issues constituted another problematic area. The most significant dispute which divided General Baptists in the period from the 1670s to the 1730s was over the nature of the person of Christ. There were Presbyterians and Anglicans who were questioning traditional Christological doctrine, and Kent and Sussex General Baptist churches were influenced by the Christology of Melchior Hoffman, an Anabaptist leader in Holland in the sixteenth century.³¹ At the General Assembly in 1693 various doctrinal questions were raised. Was Christ a created being? Did he take his flesh from Mary? Hoffman’s theory that Christ’s flesh was not taken from Mary was explicitly rejected. Orthodox belief about Christ’s full deity and true humanity, such as had been embodied in the important General Baptist *Orthodox Creed* of 1679, was affirmed. But at the same time Caffyn was acquitted of holding unorthodox views.³² It was an uneasy compromise. In an attempt to contain the controversy, the General Assembly did not meet for the following three years, but when it did convene again agreement was impossible. A rival Assembly, the General Association, met. There was a subsequent reconciliation in 1704, on the basis of a series of statements, including that Christ was ‘the second person of the Trinity and the only begotten Son of God and that he did in fulness of time take to himself of our nature in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary’.³³ But this was followed by further tensions in

²⁹ *Berkhamsted, Chesham and Tring*, 21.

³⁰ *Berkhamsted, Chesham and Tring*, 32-3, 68-9.

³¹ Watts, *The Dissenters*, 298-9. For Hoffman see K. Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman: Social unrest and apocalyptic visions in the age of Reformation*, transl. by M. Wren, ed. B. Drewery (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987).

³² *Minutes of the General Assembly, Vol 1*, 39-40. For the *Orthodox Creed* see W.L. Lumpkin, ed., *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1969).

³³ *Minutes of the General Assembly, Vol 1*, 87-91.

the next few years. It was clear by 1719, when out of a representative group of General Baptists only two were prepared to subscribe to a Trinitarian affirmation of faith (this became known as the Salters' Hall controversy), that General Baptist orthodoxy, particularly in the area of Christology, was extremely precarious.³⁴

It is not that General Baptists were embracing an explicit Unitarian position in this period, although later a number did. Rather, what was said increasingly by many General Baptist pastors was that the Christian faith should be expressed only in the words of scripture, not in the words of a creed, even a Baptist creed. This might have meant more room for doctrinal unity but in the event it spelled further rupture. In 1731 there was a division, much like the one in 1696 which had been healed temporarily in 1704. There were in fact virtually two General Baptist denominations over the course of at least three decades, the more orthodox churches being found mainly in Buckinghamshire and the Midlands, with the followers of Caffyn concentrated in Kent and Sussex.³⁵ The reason for the further dispute in 1731 was that at the Assembly it was resolved that 'no preacher or member of the churches, now belonging to this Assembly...shall preach, write or urge, in discourse, such controversy about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which shall be unto the disturbance of the churches' peace...'.³⁶ Further discussions took place, with the Assembly members stating in 1733 that scripture, not a creed, was 'the only rule of faith and practice'.³⁷ This did not impress the churches that demanded an orthodox statement of faith and so the Assembly of 1735 declared unequivocally that 'we firmly believe in the Doctrine of the Trinity'. This was designed to bring the estranged churches – the Buckinghamshire churches were mentioned explicitly – back into Assembly life.³⁸ But the theological tensions were considerable and unity was fragile. Such unity as there was in the 1730s was not to last.

Despite the disputes about Trinitarian formulation, General Baptists all insisted that they were being true to their doctrinal heritage in respect of general or universal rather than particular redemption. The title they used to describe themselves continued to be 'Baptized churches who own the doctrine of universal redemption'. However, the stress on

³⁴ Brown, *English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, 21-3. For further background see Underwood, *History of the English Baptists*, chapter 6.

³⁵ Watts, *The Dissenters*, 300. Watts and Brown disagree about the position of the churches in Essex.

³⁶ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptist Churches*, Vol 2, 2.

³⁷ *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol 2, 16-17.

³⁸ *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol 2, 32-3, 37.

study of the Bible alone could yield unwanted results when it came to Arminian-Calvinist debates. One Berkhamsted church member, Sister Butler, testified in 1718 that she had ‘turned over her Bible and found God had a chosen people in the world’. The doctrine of election was associated with Calvinism, and she therefore asked to leave and join a Particular Baptist church. The Berkhamsted leadership questioned this move, arguing that ‘we as much as they [the Particular Baptists] did own that God hath a chosen people in the world’. Not surprisingly, when asked to explain the different views of election that were being advocated Sister Butler was unable to do so. In a fascinating episode, three ‘Particular Brethren belonging to Dunstable Meeting’, a minister, elder and a member, attended a meeting with the Berkhamsted church leadership to discuss certain charges that had been made against Butler.³⁹ Calvinistic Baptists, although theologically troublesome, were seen during this episode as ‘brethren’ who shared a common belief in a disciplined church. But anti-Calvinism was still a strongly-held General Baptist distinctive.

Both Particular and General Baptists were to feel the effects, and especially the challenge to their traditions, of the Evangelical Revival. This created new vitality within Particular Baptist circles, which had been hindered by a high, non-evangelistic Calvinism. The new vitality was expressed most famously among Particular Baptists through the Northamptonshire Association. Andrew Fuller, as part of that Association, became the leading theologian among Particular Baptists.⁴⁰ Among General Baptists it was Dan Taylor, born in 1738 and converted at the age of fifteen in a Methodist class meeting, who injected new energy into General Baptist life. After his baptism in 1763 he was ordained as a General Baptist pastor by Gilbert Boice, the Lincolnshire Messenger, and two years later Taylor attended his first General Assembly. He soon became upset by the doctrinal deficiencies of the General Baptists, writing in his diary on 27 August 1765: ‘I am now returned from Gamston [from a General Baptist meeting] where I have had much disputing for what I call the truth...I see how easy it is to perplex when we cannot refute the plain truth of the gospel. Lord help me to hold fast by thy word.’⁴¹ Dan Taylor attended General Baptist

³⁹ *Berkhamsted, Chesham and Tring*, 48-9.

⁴⁰ For Andrew Fuller see P. Morden, *Offering Christ to the World: Andrew Fuller and the Revival of English Particular Baptist Life* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003).

⁴¹ Adam Taylor, *Memoirs of the Rev. Dan Taylor Late Pastor of the General Baptist Church Whitechapel, London* (London, 1820), 21-2. For Dan Taylor and the New Connexion see F. Rinaldi, *The Tribe of Dan: A Study of the New Connexion of General Baptists, 1770-1891* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, forthcoming).

Assemblies as well as local Association meetings in the later 1760s, and found, as Adam Taylor recorded in his history of the General Baptists, that there were debates about doctrines such as the atonement and regeneration, doctrines which he regarded as ‘absolutely essential to Christianity’. In 1769, Adam Taylor wrote, ‘disputes ran so high, both at the Lincolnshire association and the general assembly...that many of the friends of the great truths already mentioned were led to conclude that a separation was necessary’.⁴² Gilbert Boice tried hard to prevent the separation, but at a meeting in Lincoln it was resolved that a ‘New Connection’ of General Baptists be formed. This Connection was formed a year later, ‘with a design to revive Experimental Religion or Primitive Christianity in Faith and Practice’.⁴³

The practice of church oversight

Church oversight and discipline was often carried out in a way that weakened the General Baptist churches. At the 1668 General Assembly it was pronounced that ‘for a believer to marry an unbeliever is a sin against the law of God’. The unbeliever was defined as someone who was ‘not a member of the visible Church of Christ’, but in fact the Church was restricted to the General Baptist denomination.⁴⁴ The policy of ‘endogamy’, as it is termed, was to remain unchanged over many decades, although it was gradually softened to allow marriage to members of churches other than General Baptist causes. It was mirrored in other Dissenting denominations such as the Quakers.⁴⁵ In 1704 it was agreed at the General Assembly that marrying ‘out of the Lord or out of the Church’ was a cause for discipline, it would not be called ‘fornication’, as had previously been common.⁴⁶ It seems according to the Chesham/Berkhamsted church meeting minutes that at their baptism members who were unmarried made a vow not to marry outside the church. In 1714, however, both Sister Cattlin and Elizabeth Rudrupp ‘married contrary to the law of God’ and contrary to their ‘covenant in baptism’.⁴⁷ The policy created great tensions. No other issue crops up so often in the discipline of these congregations. Men as well as women married ‘outside’. Even one of the church’s elders, Brother Foster,

⁴² Taylor, *History of the English General Baptists*, Vol 2, 133-5.

⁴³ Taylor, *History of the English General Baptists*, Vol 2, 136-9.

⁴⁴ *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol 1, 23.

⁴⁵ Watts, *The Dissenters*, 329-31. For more on marriage debates see J. Caffyn, *Sussex Believers: Baptist marriage in the 17th and 18th centuries* (Worthing: Churchman Publishing, 1988).

⁴⁶ *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol 1, 93.

⁴⁷ *Berkhamsted, Chesham and Tring*, 17.

married 'out of the way of the Lord', and at a church meeting in Chesham in 1719 he was 'withdrawn from in the name of the Lord until he shall be enabled by the grace of God to make satisfaction to the church'.⁴⁸ In many cases, as with Foster, the way was open for member to repent of the sin after their marriage. In Fenstanton, for example, Rebekah Andrews, from St Ives, acknowledged her 'evil' in 'marrying outside the church' and was received back.⁴⁹ One can only imagine what effect this kind of process had on the marriage.

One brave church, in the village of Bessels Green, near Sevenoaks, in Kent, queried the strict endogamy ruling in 1744. The very restrictive policy had meant a continual loss of members. Given the generally small congregations within the General Baptist denomination it was likely that marriages outside the denomination were going to take place frequently, and they did. A detailed and impressive reply was given to the Bessels Green church by Matthew Randall, who was a leading General Baptist Messenger. Randall emphasised the problems with 'mixed marriages' but he then went on to suggest a more open policy than was currently the case. He believed that there was nothing in scripture to stop two Christians marrying each other even if they were from different denominations. Indeed the idea of a denomination, he argued, was not known in Scripture. Excommunication for 'marrying out' was, he acknowledged, draining away church members and also discouraging others from becoming members of General Baptist churches. If a Christian woman could not marry within the church, asked Randall, was there not another option? He asked: 'Must they, on pain of excommunication, refuse every sober, virtuous Christian-like person merely because he has not happened to be baptized by immersion or profession of faith? Is this consistent with Christian charity and forbearance?'⁵⁰ It was sound and sensitive pastoral wisdom, but a long history of unsympathetic approaches to oversight and discipline within General Baptist congregations had already taken its toll.

General Baptist church discipline, as indicated by an analysis of the Chesham/Berkhamsted church records, covered at least six main areas. A careful check was made by the elders of attendance at worship by the members. There might be valid excuses, such as that offered by Sister Foster who could explain her absence by saying that 'nursing did prevent her from God's worship on Lord's Days'. But frequent non-attendance generally resulted in being put out of membership. Sexual

⁴⁸ *Berkhamsted, Chesham and Tring*, 51.

⁴⁹ *Records of the Churches...at Fenstanton, Warboys and Hexham*, 263-4. This was in 1677.

⁵⁰ *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol. 2, 72-5.

misconduct also incurred discipline. Cases of debt were regularly dealt with, although one member, Sarah Seer, was handled more leniently because she was borrowing from her husband. Other areas of misbehaviour that appear in the minutes are lying and cheating, fighting and drunkenness. The proof that a charge was justified did not mean automatic excommunication. Whether or not there was evidence of repentance was a crucial issue.⁵¹ On occasions, as can be seen from all General Baptist congregational records, there was disagreement about discipline. In the mid-1650s Robert Haines joined the General Baptist meeting in Horsham, Sussex. He was a wealthy and inventive farmer and after discovering a way to improve hop clover seed he applied for an official patent. Matthew Caffyn, the Messenger, who may have been jealous of this discovery by Haines, insisted in 1672 that Haines should be excommunicated for greed. A decade of wrangling followed, including hearings at the General Assembly and threats of legal action. Eventually Haines was vindicated.⁵² Enormous energy had been expended on a mistaken application of discipline. The strength of discipline when properly applied could become a dramatic weakness when it was misused.

Questions of spirituality

The final area where General Baptist weaknesses became apparent over time was that of spiritual experience. It might be expected that there would be an emphasis in the church records on the experience of baptism and its relationship to conversion, but in the Chesham/Berkhamsted records, for example, surprisingly little mention is made of baptism. An example of a baptism in the records of the General Baptist Church in Fenstanton, however, is illuminating. The entry notes that John Copper was baptised at Spalding, by Luke Copeland, a deacon of the Fenstanton church, in the winter of 1694, at the age of twenty-two. Despite the hard frost and deep snow Copper was, the record comments, protected from any harm to his health. This was presumably an outdoor baptism. 'Let none be afraid to venture into the water when the season is cold', said the senior elder of the church, 'lest they be laid in their graves before the weather be warm'.⁵³ Here a high view was clearly being taken of baptism. There was controversy, however, over the General Baptist practice of laying on of hands, at

⁵¹ L.G. Champion, 'The Chesham and Berkhamsted church book', *BQ* Vol. 31, No. 2 (1985): 74-82.

⁵² *Minutes of the General Assembly, Vol 2*, xii-xv.

⁵³ *Records of the Churches...at Fenstanton, Warboys and Hexham*, 264.

baptism, for the gift of the Holy Spirit. In 1704 there was discussion at the General Assembly as to whether there should be 'two lawful administrators' to lay hands on the baptismal candidate.⁵⁴ At the Amersham church the practice that developed was to have a Messenger lay hands on those baptised. Thus in 1724 when Henry Saxton was baptised by Jonathan Widmore he then 'came under hands in order to communion', the laying on of hands being conducted by John Britain of Stony Stratford, a Messenger. A decade later Joseph Hobbs, a Messenger from Wycombe, laid hands on a couple in Amersham ten days after they had been baptised by one of the Amersham elders.⁵⁵ Baptism and the laying on of hands should have been a practice that emphasised spiritual experience but the focus seems to have been increasingly on external ritual.

Spiritual life in congregations was nourished by the Bible and by celebrating the Lord's Supper. One important way by which the Bible was mediated was through preaching. Sermons were generally long. When John Stanger, who in 1766 became the minister at the Bessels Green General Baptist Church, Kent, preached his 'trial sermon' (to test his ability as a preacher), it was no less than two hours in length. Even then he did not get through all his material.⁵⁶ There is no evidence as to whether all the members of the congregation kept up their concentration. However, it does seem that members at times lacked enthusiasm for preaching. In 1755 Thomas Brittain, an experienced minister from Leighton Buzzard who served as scribe of the General Assembly, recorded that on one occasion when he came to his church to preach 'there was nobody to hear me'. He went home 'sorely disappointed'.⁵⁷ Instruction in biblical knowledge also took place – in theory at least – in the home. Catechisms were produced, but by 1715 congregations were being told that there was 'great neglect' in the catechising of children and that many young people were abandoning their faith. Ministers were urged to preach on family worship.⁵⁸ Early General Baptist preaching was probably spontaneous, with no notes being used, but prepared sermons became more prevalent. Linked with the ministry of the Word was the observance of the Lord's Supper. The Chesham/Berkhamsted church gave priority to arrangements for

⁵⁴ *Minutes of the General Assembly, Vol 1*, 85.

⁵⁵ *Church Books of Ford...and Amersham*, 245, 247.

⁵⁶ E.A. Payne, 'The Venerable John Stanger of Bessels Green', *BQ* Vol. 28, No. 7 (1978): 306.

⁵⁷ T. Brittain, *The Theological Remembrancer* (1900), cited by Brown, *English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, 66.

⁵⁸ *Minutes of the General Assembly, Vol 1*, 129-30.

preaching, but also brought together from time to time 'all the members from all parts' (from the different congregations and preaching stations) so that they could 'break bread as one Church'. This was a complex arrangement, and reflected the need for an elder to preside.⁵⁹ Where there was a shortage of elders, as was often the case, Messengers attempted to fill the gap.⁶⁰ Sustaining the inner life of the churches was difficult.

There was concern about how worship should or could be expressed when unbelievers were present in the Baptist meetings. Since many meetings were held in private houses, the presence of unbelievers may have been less frequent than if the churches had met in public buildings. These debates reflected the way in which the early evangelistic spirituality of the General Baptists had become to a large extent inward-looking. How could a 'mixed congregation', it was asked, with believers and unbelievers both present, offer up worship that was truly spiritual? One solution was to have only solo singing. It was agreed in 1689 at the General Assembly that just as prayer offered by one person in the church was the prayer of the whole, so the singing of one person was the singing of the whole.⁶¹ Like the Quakers, the General Baptists in this period did not place strong emphasis on the use of song in worship. Perhaps meeting in homes did not encourage the use of congregational songs. James Rolph, a member at Berkhamsted, obviously rather frustrated by his experience of Baptist worship, decided to try out worship in a church of a different denomination - probably the Church of England - which used an organ and liturgy. He was censured by his own church, and having refused to come and explain himself to the members (and also having married 'out of the communion of the Church' - perhaps a related issue if he had married someone from the Church of England) he was expelled from membership.⁶² Possibly following the example of the Particular Baptists, some General Baptist churches did introduce congregational hymn singing in the early eighteenth century, much to the disgust of the Northamptonshire churches, which in 1733 dismissed hymns as 'other men's composures', and condemned such 'innovations which do easily find a way in to the Churches of Christ'.⁶³ The contempt that was shown for hymns raises fascinating questions about what style of singing was adopted by soloists.

⁵⁹ *Berkhamsted, Chesam and Tring*, 74.

⁶⁰ Nicholson, 'The office of 'Messenger' amongst British Baptists in the 17th and 18th centuries', 218.

⁶¹ *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol 1, 27.

⁶² *Berkhamsted, Chesam and Tring*, 32.

⁶³ *Minutes of the General Assembly*, Vol 2, 15-16.

By the 1730s some General Baptist churches were being given more freedom to innovate in their worship and to enrich their spirituality, but it was a freedom which came too late for others.

For almost all General Baptists, true spirituality meant living a life which was seen as separate from the world and in which the believers devoted herself or himself to Christ. What about Christians who indulged in 'worldly' practices? The General Assembly was asked to rule in 1711, in answer to questions from churches in Lincolnshire, about the acceptability or otherwise of playing cards, or even condoning card-playing. It seems that ministers were not guiltless in this particular area and that it was even known for ministers to approve of cockfighting. The question was asked whether such 'vices', even though 'moderately used', were a sufficient cause for a church to deprive someone of communion. The answer was in the affirmative. Ministers who countenanced such vices, said the Assembly, rendered themselves unfit for ministerial office. The letter from the Assembly that year reflected the serious discussions that had taken place and drew attention to the 'deadness of spirit in the churches'.⁶⁴ There is little evidence of improvement over the succeeding years. The Assembly of 1732 mentioned, with evident anxiety, the 'very great decay of holiness and piety in many of the members of the baptized churches and rising generation'.⁶⁵ Twenty years later concerns about the level of spirituality were still being voiced. The 1755 Assembly asked that one of the Messengers present, Matthew Randall, should revise a book by Francis Stanley, *Gospel Honour and the Church's Ornament*, so that it could be republished. Stanley, a Messenger of a previous generation, taught in this book the importance of being a 'well disciplined Christian'.⁶⁶ A General Baptist church was still seen an alternative community, spiritually set apart from the world, but this standard was hard to maintain.

Conclusion

The English General Baptists of the mid seventeenth century had a number of things in their favour. They had some gifted leaders and they developed the role of Messenger as an evangelistic office. Orthodox beliefs were espoused. Oversight in the churches helped to ensure commitment. Spirituality appeared, in churches of which there are records remaining, to be quite vibrant. Yet one hundred years later there

⁶⁴ *Minutes of the General Assembly, Vol 1*, 115, 118.

⁶⁵ *Minutes of the General Assembly, Vol 2*, 7.

⁶⁶ Brown, *English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, 65.

had been considerable decline. It is often thought that this decline was due primarily to theological weakness, to isolation and to the weariness that General Baptists, together with other Dissenters, felt after years of persecution. These were certainly factors, but they were not the only ones, and even these issues were complex. Other crucial reasons for decline have been analysed here. In the critical area of leadership, few, if any plans were put in place to find new, younger General Baptist leadership. The financial support of elders and Messengers was an ongoing problem. Gifted leaders were being lost to the Particular Baptists. The lack of engagement by General Baptists with the wider Christian community and their many internal squabbles hindered the development of the denomination from the 1680s onwards. At local level and also at the General Assembly, spiritual oversight was exercised in a way that was too often rigid and oppressive, especially over the matter of those who married outside the General Baptist fold. Spirituality became to a large extent inward-directed. In the mid eighteenth century a number of General Baptist pastors and churches were expressing deep dissatisfaction and began to take an interest in the new spirit coming from the Evangelical Revival. The leader of what became a fresh movement of General Baptists, Dan Taylor, modelled himself on John Wesley. In 1770 nineteen General Baptists, led by Taylor, signed a statement which affirmed orthodox Christian teaching, together with traditional General Baptist distinctives. The six articles of this statement dealt with the fall of humanity, the moral law, the person and work of Jesus Christ, salvation by faith, regeneration by the Holy Spirit and believer's baptism. These signatories were the 'fathers' of the New Connexion of General Baptists.⁶⁷ Among many of the original General Baptist causes, despite their earlier history as a very creative Baptist movement, the 'low condition' which had come to characterise them was not remedied, but General Baptist life did emerge in new forms.

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⁶⁷ Taylor, *History of the English General Baptists*, Vol 2, 139-43.