

## **“Downgrade with a vengeance”:**

### **New Light on a Tabernacle Controversy**

In early November 1889 the leadership of the Auckland Baptist Tabernacle shared a mood of eager anticipation mixed with regret. There were certainly grounds for optimism. In the middle years of the decade the Church had experienced a period of unprecedented growth under the leadership of Thomas, the scion of the most famous living Baptist, Charles Haddon Spurgeon of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London. Thomas had resigned in June 1889 but had continued in the pastorate for five months. On Monday 4 November he was reluctantly farewelled.<sup>1</sup> However, the regret attending Spurgeon Jnr's departure was tempered by the expectation of the imminent arrival of his hand-picked successor. The Auckland Tabernacle leaders had requested Charles Spurgeon and Dr Alexander McLaren (another outstanding figure in English Baptist life) to select their next Pastor. This they had duly done. The Rev. William Birch was coming to Auckland from a strong pulpit ministry in Manchester in which he had regularly preached to 5000 and more. The prospects for continued prosperity seemed secure.

Yet William Birch's ministry at Auckland would be brief and disastrous. He would fall out with key leaders, divide the Church and bring it into public disrepute. A full eight months short of the expiry of his initial two-year term he would resign, eventually taking up the pastoral charge at Oxford Terrace Baptist Church in Christchurch, where a similar debacle would occur.

Although the Birch affair created considerable controversy, little more than the bare facts outlined above has been incorporated into the official histories of the Church and the denomination.<sup>2</sup> This polite reticence is understandable - few wish to magnify negative episodes. Moreover much of the detailed evidence available up till now has been found in newspaper accounts of sensational meetings. Such sources, often hostile, are rarely trusted wholeheartedly by Church historians. Now, however, new evidence has emerged which sheds light on the issues at stake between Birch and his officers. This consists of correspondence addressed to Charles Spurgeon and preserved by him in scrapbooks devoted to issues touching the career of his son Thomas.<sup>3</sup> Reproduced here are five letters from Auckland which cover the period of Birch's ministry and its immediate aftermath - one from Seering Matthews, two from Birch himself and two from "Bishop" R.B. Shalders.<sup>4</sup> The letters suggest that a combination of factors - theological, political and personal - contributed to Birch's downfall. They also provide significant insight into the evolving relationship between colonial Baptists and their principal "Home" patron.

The first letter celebrates Birch's arrival and displays the hopes and expectations of its author, Seering Mathews, then Secretary of the Tabernacle.<sup>5</sup>

*The Tabernacle*

*Auckland 11 Nov' 1889*

*Pastor C H Spurgeon*

*London*

*Dear Brother*

*On behalf of the Tabernacle Baptist Church I have to tender yourself and D<sup>r</sup> M<sup>c</sup>Laren its heartfelt, grateful, thanks for your interest in securing as our Pastor so worthy and estimable a man as M<sup>r</sup> W<sup>m</sup> Birch.*

*We felt that we were trespassing upon your time and burdening you with yet another care when we asked your help, but the urgency of our case &*

the loving interest you have always manifested in us during your Son's pastorate over us, was our excuse and plea.

Everything seems to have been providentially arranged & we can truly "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" & who has "caused all things to work together for our good."

M', M<sup>rs</sup> and Miss Birch arrived here on Friday the 8<sup>th</sup> November & on Sunday (yesterday) he preached to crowded congregations.

Today - being a Public Holiday - we held a Pic-nic to welcome him, about 800 attending. This was a grand opportunity to go about among the people & he heartily embraced it, his gracious affable manner winning the hearts of all.

His first Sunday's services was [sic] the occasion of a blessing to God's own people and the gathering in of not a few from the world. At the after meeting on Sunday evening several young people stood up as a testimony to having that night decided to accept Christ Jesus as their Saviour.

We are praying for a great ingathering to the faithful preaching of the Gospel by our late Pastor, who leaves here on Thursday this week.

No words can express our sorrow at his departure. So faithful a preacher, so loving a Pastor and friend as he has been, cannot go away without receiving warm and loving expressions of our esteem and affection. Our prayers go with him and our earnest desire is that he may be made a still more abundant blessing than even he has been in this city.

Accept the expression of our gratitude to you & prayer that our loving master may continue to make you a blessing to the world at large.

*I am yours, fraternally,*

*Seering H. Matthews*

*Secretary.*

Matthews' sunny optimism rapidly faded. Birch quickly lost his appeal. Style was an issue - his rambunctious preaching caused disquiet - but more important was his early sounding of a discordant theological note. By Easter 1890 Birch had sparked open controversy, the first of three flare-ups which would eventually cause his downfall.

Ironically the focus of the first contention was "Holiness". At stake was the degree to which a Christian might expect to attain to holiness in this life. For Birch, the righteous life was hugely important and he emphasised it time and again in his sermons. However, his detractors interpreted him to be preaching "perfectionism". A public disagreement with a popular visiting speaker, Edward Varley, culminated on 7 April 1890 in a dramatic meeting at which Birch's harsh polemic and provocative behaviour stunned many of his congregation.<sup>6</sup>

These events form the context of Birch's letter of 19 May to his "dear friend", Charles Spurgeon.<sup>7</sup> He was critical of the state of his new home town and frankly contemptuous of some of his Church officers. Birch denied any improper actions on his own part in the Varley affair. By this time, reports of his antics were reaching England and part of his intent in writing to Spurgeon was to secure a measure of "damage control".

*Kyber Pass. Auckland N.Z.*

*May 19 1890*

*My dear Friend,*

*My life is a busy one. Since my arrival, I have always preached three times every Sunday and generally every day in the week excepting Saturday. The Tabernacle congregation and collections keep up and good is being done - much good I believe.*

*As a rule, the Auckland City people are crude, low in moral tone, and infected with the spirit of gambling. In this small city I am told that there are about 600 prostitutes, and that most of the traders have failed in business - many two or three times. My teaching therefore that he is only a true Christian who is righteous in all his ways, has cut the Aucklanders "on the raw."*

*Then M' Varley came saying that "no Christian can live a day without committing sin"; and when I called a meeting to protest against the*

inference to be drawn from that idea, a great number of Plymouth Brethren, Conditional Immortality, Seventh Adventists &c. turned up to oppose. I showed M<sup>r</sup> Varley's teaching in practical life - "One cannot help a little sin, you know; so said the sugar, put that lard into the butter, water the milk &c., &c., and now come let us go to the Prayer meeting!" This flabbergasted the audience and many of them rose in agitation while four or five of the Tabernacle elders &c rose one after the other, one of them foaming at the mouth, another shaking his hymn book at me, a third running up on the platform. It was a great scene! They had the idea that I was speaking against M<sup>r</sup> Varley, but I did not say a word against him, only illustrated his teaching. When the opposition had finished howling at me, I quietly said, "Would any other brother like to say a word or two?" You can imagine the result.

Well, the city has been moved and M<sup>r</sup> Varley has been the hero, especially to the women. M<sup>r</sup> Varley's view allows "a little sin you know, especially the one I like - cannot help it, you know!" while my teaching that a man or woman who continues wilfully to do what he knows to be wrong, is a backslider, sticks in their throats.

Our Tabernacle Church and congregation have stood by me as a whole, and the four or five officials who lost their heads at the bear-garden meeting referred to seem sorry for the display they made.

<The people here as a rule are feeble in back-bone. (sentence struck out in the manuscript) > Yesterday at the Tabernacle, we had full congregations; and at the evening Lord's Supper, the attendance was larger and the spirit more genuinely loving than any since my arrival. We may not have quite so many women as in January, but we have many more men.

My list of sick cases is a long one, for people who do not attend the Tabernacle send for me, and in several God has made me his instrument in conversion - tears of joy from dying people just converted! This week four of my sick ones have died, only one belonging to the Tabernacle. This will reveal the feeling of the people outside the churches towards me and the great influence with which God has blessed me.

No doubt, distorted reports will reach England, as one of the Newspapers here has been unfriendly, and you have now the truth of which

*you can make use if needs be. Yesterday's Tabernacle services especially the Communion, show that the Varley row has welded us together as a church and congregation.*

*You may depend upon me in keeping to the truth.*

*I still have the idea that your son will return to the Tabernacle before my two years are run out.*

*May you continue to have much success in your own work and a renewal of strength of body! Faithfully yours,*

*In haste, William Birch.*

A little over a month later Birch wrote again.<sup>8</sup> By now he was overtly antagonistic towards a group of his officers. On the face of it, at this point in the dispute the issues at stake were still primarily theological, but Birch's descriptions reveal the "racy" language for which he was becoming notorious among the staid Baptists of Auckland. Once again there was an element of self-justification in this communication with Spurgeon. Birch, already contemplating a return to England, was anxious lest his reputation be besmirched and his prospects jeopardised.

*Kyber Pass Auckland N.Z.*

*June 23<sup>rd</sup> 1890.*

*Dear Friend,*

*I have been ill two Sundays from blood poisoning caught while visiting a woman on her death bed where the dreadful smell was enough to knock a cow down, but I am rapidly recovering and hope to be at work next Sunday. As I have preached seven or eight times each week since my arrival, the quiet and rest even tho' from fever is enjoyable.*

*The work at the Tabernacle goes on as well as can be expected. The last Sunday I was there, an ordinary service, every seat was occupied, and, a novel feature for Auckland, more men than women. The collection average is better than for several years past.*

*I do not wonder that your son resigned. One or two of the officers are cantankerous, as men are whose bowels move only once a week. One or two of them need scriptural education. At one meeting, an elder stood up to protest against my teaching that believers must be holy (through the Holy Spirit, of course, I teach). The elder in answer to my questions admitted that God commands us to be "holy in all manner of conversation" (1 Peter i,15) but insisted that God was not able and willing to work that holiness is us 1 Thess v, 24. I said in answer that until he so believed I could have no official dealings with him - would you not have said the same? In a day or two afterwards he had the manliness to resign his office. At the same meeting another elder struck the table in a rage and went out. A third elder also in a terrible way went out. Both have however returned, the fist-table man with an apology. The crucial point was this, not, Have we been holy in our past dealings with our fellow-men? but Are we willing to "be holy in all manner of living" now, and so far as possible make restitution? There could of course be only one result. The officers as a body admit that scripturally I am on an immovable rock. The great bulk of the Church and especially the young men are with me, while the congregations and good collections show that I am supported.*

*I have some enemies, who hate me as if I were a second "Old Nick" - they are Plymouth Brethren of the rank sect and various Antinomians in several Churches, several Tabernacleites, to whom Mr Varley was like a God-send. Their idea of religion is as Chalmers said, 'that selfishness which under the guise of sacredness sits down in placid contentment with the single privilege of justification.' They have a theological or imaginary faith, and with much apparent delight embrace the idea that "the sin we cannot help" (or as I say, the sin we like) is excusable - that the robe of righteousness blinds God to the wilful sin of the justified!! No wonder that Auckland is chiefly ruled by mammon, music, races and self-indulgence.*

*My impression is that some of the Antinomian Calvinists or Plymouth Brethren may send home garbled accounts to the Home religious press and you are at liberty to publish this letter in reply.*

*If the Holy Spirit bless us with a revival of vital religion, I hope your son will return to the Tabernacle, and I can go elsewhere as the Lord may*

appoint. The enclosed copy of Resolution shows that our officers are at one with me.\*

Faithfully Yours,

William Birch.

Included with the letter was the following:

\* Copy of resolution signed by all the Officers excepting one who is in Australia.

The Tabernacle,  
Auckland, N.Z.

*"That the Elders and Deacons of the Auckland Tabernacle deeply and lovingly sympathise with the Pastor (Rev. W<sup>m</sup> Birch) in his present illness; and we unite to pray the Great Head of the Church to speedily restore our Pastor to his wonted health and strength, that he may go in and out among us, and break to us the Bread of Life."*

June 16<sup>th</sup> 1890.

Despite the sympathy expressed regarding his health, Birch was becoming increasingly alienated from his officers. The relationship would never recover. Two further crises would follow the "Holiness" row. To concern over Birch's theology would be added anger at his politics and indignation at personal affronts. The colour of the reaction is eloquently represented in the two letters of R.B. Shalders which follow. It is useful at this point, however, to set out the chronology of the breakdown of Birch's Tabernacle ministry.

In August and September 1890 Birch, the Trades Hall preacher from Manchester, gave active support to striking miners. On Saturday the 6<sup>th</sup> of September he addressed a large gathering of unionists at a meeting held in the natural amphitheatre of Mt Eden's crater. The following morning he preached on "The Land Question" and in the evening sparked a walk-out of his congregation by inviting a miners' leader, John Abbot, to share the podium at the Tabernacle.<sup>9</sup>



The officers of the Tabernacle found all this intolerable. A flurry of activity quickly followed. At an emergency joint meeting of Elders and Deacons on Tuesday 9 September they concluded that Birch's part in the "strike question" deserved the "highest censure". In addition they listed the following grievances: the lack of "spiritual food" in his sermons, his disregard for the constitution and his unpleasant handling of the officers. They summoned Birch to a meeting with them on Thursday 11 September "re his relationship with the Church." It is unclear what understandings were reached at the Thursday meeting, or even if Birch appeared. What is known is that the officers drew up resolutions calling for his resignation, planned for pulpit supply and even drafted his resignation letter!<sup>10</sup>

Birch was not yet ready to go. At a special meeting of the Church on Monday 15 September he apologised for his actions over the strike. The resolution from the officers that he resign was defeated by 97 votes to 77. Two weeks later, at an ordinary members' meeting on 29 September, a similar resolution was moved but ruled out of order by Birch, who insisted on retaining the chair throughout.<sup>11</sup>

A stand-off had now been reached. No reconciliation would occur. The Church limped through the summer. The end came rapidly when, on 23 February, Birch was held to have personally insulted two to the leading women in the Church, Mrs Gaze and Mrs Batts, both wives of officers. To a members' meeting held that same evening Birch refused to apologise and by a letter dated 24 February 1891 he resigned on certain financial conditions.

R.B. "Bishop" Shalders recounts these events and the whole sorry affair in two letters to Charles Spurgeon.<sup>12</sup> These remarkable documents reveal much about the mind of a prominent Baptist in the New Zealand of the 1890s.

Auckland, April 14/91

199 Queen Street

My dear Mr. Spurgeon

*I have long had a conflict in my mind as to whether I should write to you re Mr Birch or not, but as you state you are in the dark respecting him I write to you (tho hesitatingly).*

*I would first say I have no hesitation in according my esteem of his personal qualifications as a kind hearted man. I spent on his arrival five days visiting with him in districts surrounding Auckland and five happier days I never spent. His prayers and kindness of heart bound me affectionately to him and I have not now or ever had one unkind feeling towards him.*

*I do not mean this introduction as the pugilists shake hands and then hit each other, for I had hoped that he would at least command our sympathies, if not our intelligent appreciation. For more barren sermons I have seldom heard. I have read 5 vols of his sermons and, beyond anecdotes, there is little in them save two themes (and glorious themes they are: salvation thro faith in the precious blood and a holy walk as an evidence of the faith). As a teacher he is inferior to a well taught Sabbath School teacher and had I not had your printed sermons, which I have reveled in for 15 or 20 years, and my own studies and reading for my local efforts, I should have been a starveling indeed. As to doctrines of Sovereign grace, he is totally ignorant of them and some of the doctrines he has are sadly astray. The following are extracts from 2 of his printed sermons.*

*"Conversion is not a miraculous interposition of God but an outcome of what man has already in his heart." I showed it to him and told him of the necessity of the new birth by the Holy Spirit and how such a doctrine struck at the root of man's natural depravity. He said "Oh no, it's all right" so I replied "'Tis no use discussing the matter further."*

*Sermon number 846 has this: "On the cross Jesus transferred to us his eternal life but when it (eternal life) was dead in the tomb God gave back to the body of Jesus the eternal life he had forfeited for our sakes". Did anybody ever read such rubbish? I showed it to four theologians and they thought with*

me that he (Mr B.) never read a theological book in his life or certainly not his Bible, for no such thought is there. For eternal life certainly ceases to be eternal if it can be given up.

In two other of his sermons, in one he says "Man has two natures" and, in another in the same volume, he says he has not. At any rate he has two, for he has a most ill governed temper. illustrations After he had been here about a month we heard he had baptized an infant, so at the next elders' meeting we very quietly asked him to account for the report. On which he jumps up, stamps his feet and bangs the table and furiously says "You are not my masters. I won't stand it. I am a man!" On another occasion, one of our elders read a bible extract on preaching Christ for the edification of us all. He again put on the same antics and said "Do you mean that for me Sir?" "No Mr. Birch, do sit down, it was for all of us." So we quieted him after a bit to sit down. On another occasion he shook his fist in my face and said, "you shall not go out preaching again!" I replied "I feel like the apostle Paul. 'Woe is me if I don't preach the gospel' and while people wish me to preach I shall go." He angrily said "No one that don't preach holiness as I preach it shall go!" I said "I always preach scripture holiness but not enter in the Holiness question to disputation."

After he had been with us six weeks and preached on one subject - Holiness, or rather sinless perfection - we asked him to vary his subject. He then in the Chapel bawled out "If anybody don't like my doctrines I will pack up my traps and give you back all the money I have received and go back to the 5000 people in Manchester who will be glad to secure me." (I wish he had!)

Again after three months we again made a similar request. He then in the Tabernacle loudly said "If you don't like my doctrines, I am prepared to receive the resignations of all the elders and deacons" (deacons 8, elders 5 = 13 officers). I told him we should not give him our resignations, we did not receive our office from him [and] that we had no intention of resigning the Tab. into his hands.

These are all only a sample of the indignities we have received from his hands. I should weary you and myself too did I tell you all his vagaries. I must however add one or two. At the time of the strike he went to the Unions

meetings of about 4000 people and made a most dynamite speech telling the people "capital had had its innings and now you have yours." Such a speech in England would have ended in a mob such as I have seen in London after less exciting speeches. Then, on Sunday, he preached on the land question and in the evening introduced a mining leader on to the platform to speak who was too well known for the congregation to listen to, so the people dispersed. This conduct he apologised to the church for and asked our forgiveness.

[The] last episode, which resulted in his resignation, was insulting two of our most respected and earnest workers in the Church: Mesdames Gaze and Batts. He had taken a prejudice against these ladies for months and tried to get them out of the office to which the church had appointed them (viz: to prepare the candidates) and on the occasion of Mr. Birch baptising four from other churches he evidently thought it would be a good opportunity to get rid of them. But they were early at their post and had prepared one candidate when Mr. Birch brought to the door (where the candidates were) a Mrs. Smith, his nominee, and said "Now, Mrs. Smith, your work is before you. Do your duty. And Mrs. Gaze and Mrs. Batts, you clear out." "No, Mr. Birch, we shall not clear out." Mr. Birch replied "If you don't, I'll fetch a policeman and turn you out!" Reply: "We are here by the authority of [the] church and shall not cease our work." Reply: "Yes & I'll put you out of the church tonight." And then he rushed off to the deacons' meeting then being held and said "I want you to help me to turn these women out or I'll send for a policeman" (these words are entered in the minute book of the deacons, I duly confirmed). The deacons sent the Secretary to make peace, which he did.

At the Church meeting following later in the same eve Mr. Birch was requested to apologise. This he refused, on which the Church - 2 or 300 present - passed a strong vote of censure on him and also notified he should retire in Novr next. So, in a few days, Mr. Birch sent in his resignation, stipulating we should take his lease of the house off his hands. So we paid the lessor 80 [pounds] and Mr. Birch's salary up to March 1/91 and he retired. Since then he has done his level best to draw away our members and tho. numbers have gone to hear him preach in the Choral Hall, I do not think 50 will leave the church and I think your son would get back 40 of them. All the

*intelligence and support of the church still adhere to it.*

*One More Vagary*

*He preached some months ago for the Weslyans and said "As for you Weslyans, you need not trouble yourselves about baptism. Dismiss it from your minds. Your sprinkling is as good as our immersion." And then he said "Some folks think holiness stinks but it is in the Bible" and came off the platform, with his Bible in his hand and rushed up and down the aisle and, pushing his Bible under people's noses (one lady friend of mine he quite hurt) and said "Does that stink? Does that stink?" He has tried to contradict the first of these but two well-known gentleman named Hill and Plummer are prepared to affirm it before any Justices of the Peace. Such mad freaks cannot be endured by any church. Dr. Thompson's description (enclosed)<sup>13</sup> is true to the letter. You surely cannot have seen it, or I am sure you would not have sent him.*

*The cause of true religion has been more ridiculed thro. Mr Birch's vagaries. He has done mischief to our church and congregation which I fear will take long to recover and when I think it has cost us 760 [pounds] I feel grieved at such division as he has caused. I am not ashamed he should know all I have written and I think Mr. Battley now in London will confirm all I have said. He leaves for Sydney on Tuesday next. Woolloomoolloo Church<sup>14</sup> has invited him for three months. I hope he won't come back here. He has endeavoured to form a "Free Church", whatever that may mean. These holiness people are a great hindrance to the spread of truth. I can assure you we have had the greatest forbearance with Mr. Birch and, could you know all, you would pity me. The papers have understated the particulars of his meetings and I enclose a lot for your perusal. I hope you will urge your son to return to us and get the people together again in peace. There was no real need for his leaving us.*

*Yours faithfully*

*R B Shalders*

*199 Queen St, Auckland*

Six weeks later Shalders updated Spurgeon on developments. His confidence that the Tabernacle congregation would not suffer unduly seems to have been misplaced. By now Shalders was openly questioning Birch's sanity. More significantly, a note of complaint entered as Shalders questioned how Spurgeon and McLaren came to endorse one so theologically unsound in the first place.

*Auckland May 22/91*

*My dear Mr. Spurgeon*

*I wrote to you last month enclosing [manuscript illegible] slips from the daily papers re Mr. Birch and, thinking you might like to know the present position of matters relating to our Tabernacle, I report Mr. Birch is gone to Sydney, he said for three months. I hope he will not return here to further damage the interests of true religion in our city. Only about sixty members have left the Tabernacle but the congregation is largely affected - only about half filled. Those who have left have opened the old Baptist Chapel five minutes walk from the Tabernacle and have styled themselves the Free Union Church or Union Free Church. Baptist principles seem to be a discount with them as it is a conglomeration of views held by various individuals, without any common bond of union. They seem rather to have gathered around the standard of a man (Mr. Birch) rather than on central truths. I scarcely think they will continue long, unless Mr. Birch returns, which I hope you will use your influence to prevent. So many elements can scarcely keep long united.<sup>15</sup>*

*As for Mr. Birch, I am puzzled to know what his principles are. I enclose some extracts from his sermons, which are so far from the teaching of the scriptures that I cannot account for your sending us such a man, except you were entirely ignorant of his views, which you should not have been, and the greater wonder is that Dr. McLaren, who lives in Manchester, should have allowed you to send him. There's not a minister in Auckland would let Mr. Birch into the pulpit. I believe two or three of the ablest think he has been a curse to Auckland. It would take too long to recite their expressions to you which they have made to me but the complete testimony of all is his*

[manuscript illegible] have swallowed up his intellect and principles. So we charitably conclude, as numbers say, he is off his head. For further defects in his theology read vol. 19 page 144 - in fact half this volume a Unitarian could preach. I have read six vols. of his sermons - some contain excellent gospel teaching but the atonement is often sadly left out.

I feel deep interest in the cause here. I am not a novice (66 years of age) I am one of the first of the members and aided[?] or rather compiled the constitution form so well it is my command. I am not circulating these extracts<sup>16</sup> (not wishing to be drawn into controversy), merely printing them to show the wanderers the truth and to prevent them asking Mr. Birch to return. He is certainly down-grade with a vengeance. I trust the Lord will give him his Spirit and lead him back to the truth of Christ and him crucified.

Mr. Birch is awfully sweet on you, he calls you his "dearest and most intimate friend." He says he has ate with you, slept with you, washed your feet and all and sundry things beside. I always take a discount off his statements. The secretary of our YMCA has just returned from Sydney and stayed in the same hotel and he informs me Mr. Birch told them he had 100 conversions in his meeting at our Choral Hall where he preached before leaving Auckland, and before he left he told us at a Ministers' meeting they were all in tears, when there was not one, nor have I heard of one conversion at the Choral Hall.

I am sure his head is gone wrong, but he is a man of great power, especially over the girls. At one meeting of girls he had, he flattered then by "How very fair and pretty you all look" and "How neatly you all are dressed and so beautiful" and "Would you not like to be a missionary wife?" So he bears captive the fair sex. Sometimes in his sermons the ladies have had to cover their faces and one left and could not come again and has not yet.

Illus.: when reading of [a] women with child - "the woman knew it must come!, it must come!, it must come!" So such fleshly allusions do not become the sanctuary.

I have now gladly done with Mr. Birch but I feel it my duty to let you know these things. I could give you items enough to weary you. I only want to serve the cause of truth, not to damage Mr. Birch. I cannot expect a

*reply, although a line or two would be prized. I am sure from the number of your engagements it must be trouble enough to read these notes. I continue to prize your sermons. I was specially charmed by one on "foundations". While reading on a Railway train, I passed the station in absorption and did not return to consciousness till I found I had to walk 4½ miles in penalty for my abstraction. May God bless you in your faithful maintenance of the old Gospel truths and give you many crowns of rejoicing to cast at the beloved Saviour's feet.*

*I remain*

*Yours faithfully*

*R B Shalders*

*199 Queen St, Auckland*

*P.S. We are looking prayerfully forward to your dear son's arrival amongst us.<sup>17</sup> Try and induce him to stop with us.*

*RBS*

A full analysis of William Birch's doomed sojourn among New Zealand Baptists will require detailed examination of minute books and newspaper accounts in both Auckland and Christchurch. The interest here has been primarily in the five letters themselves. They suggest much about Birch's style and the concerns of at least some of the Tabernacle officers. Perhaps most importantly they give us a glimpse of the willing dependence of the Auckland Church on the counsel and prestige of Charles Spurgeon. This respect had been bolstered by the high regard in which Thomas continued to be held at the Auckland Tabernacle, even after his departure. Nevertheless, as the tone of Shalders' second letter indicates, a realisation was growing that Spurgeon senior's advice was not infallible. On this issue a sixth letter gives an intriguing slant. Although not from Auckland it is preserved, like the letters already examined, in Spurgeon's scrapbook. It is addressed to A.G. Brown, one of Spurgeon's assistants, at the time when news of Birch's affairs was filtering through to England. The signature is unclear but, whoever penned it, its frank contents indicate that Birch's behaviour was no sudden aberration, and that Spurgeon had been warned.<sup>18</sup>



34 Devonshire Road

Liverpool

2 May 1890

Dear Mr Brown

You thought me wrong in my judgment about Spurgeon's sending Mr Birch - eh? Well what do you think now? Pity you hadn't taken my advice my Brother & got C.H.S. to telegraph & stop him.

Next time you are in Manchester walk into the Exchange & ask the first man you meet if he knows W. Birch Inr (who W.B. Snr is nobody knows) & why he left Manchester. The answer will be a revelation. I say no more. Except that I do heartily wish CHS could be brought to wash his hands of this business. Possibly his letters from Auckland may have let him see by this time that I was not to (sic) far wrong when I warned him through you of the worse than folly that be ... (illegible) perfectibility. Now don't my dear Brother let him get further into the net. He had better say "Peccaor" [I made a mistake] in the Sword and Trowel & have done with it before any more comes out.

believe me

always yours

(signature unclear)

William Birch had been assigned to the Auckland Tabernacle pulpit by agents, with little or no input from the Church itself. This was not an unusual procedure - in the 1880s New Zealand Baptists were largely reliant on England as a source for trained ministers. Nevertheless, as the decade closed a new trend was emerging as New Zealanders began sponsoring and preparing their own candidates for ministry. A series of unsatisfactory experiences, of which the disastrous Birch affair was only one, accelerated this shift. To this extent, though negatively, the Tabernacle controversy of 1890/91 contributed to the eventual emancipation of the New Zealand Churches from dependence on their English brothers and sisters.

Martin Sutherland

## NOTES:

1. See the account of Spurgeon's farewell in *The New Zealand Herald* Nov. 5 1889.
2. See for instance T.F. Hill "History of the Auckland Baptist Tabernacle" Chap. VII, *The Reaper*, Vol 1 No.10, December 1923, pp 264-5; A. Clifford, *A Handful of Grain: The Centenary History of the Baptist Union of New Zealand* Vol 2, Auckland, N.Z. Baptist Historical Society, 1982, pp 28-9.
3. These scrapbooks have only recently been discovered in the New Zealand Baptist Historical Archives Acc. No. 1180 (see the society's newsletter of June 1996.) Unfortunately the provenance of the Spurgeon scrapbooks is unclear. In these notes they will be referred to by the abbreviation "SS".
4. On Matthews see Clifford p 2. On Shalders see the references in P. Tonson *A Handful of Grain* Vol 1.
5. The letter is to be found between SS folios 74 & 5. In the case of the two letters from Shalders some editing has been necessary, largely in order to convey the sense though modern punctuation. With the exception of a few (noted) points at which the manuscripts are illegible, the full text is included. Original spellings and emphasis are retained.
6. See the newspaper reports SS ff 78-81.
7. Letter, W. Birch to C.H. Spurgeon, May 19 1890, SS ff 82-3.
8. Letter, W. Birch to C.H. Spurgeon, June 23 1890, SS ff 86-7.
9. See the reports in *The New Zealand Herald* Sept. 9 1890.
10. Loose-leaf notes and minutes taken at these meetings are to be found in Bapt. Historical Society Archives Acc. No A5/25.
11. See reports SS ff 94-8.
12. Letters, R.B. Shalders to C.H. Spurgeon, April 14 1891 and May 22 1891, SS ff 110-111 & 112-113.
13. Shalders included a clipping from an unknown paper citing a sermon by "Dr Thomson" in 1877 seriously questioning Birch's orthodoxy.
14. Woolloomooloo is an area of Sydney. Birch's visit was reportedly for the opening of a new Church. The Baptists there were rumoured to have approached Thomas Spurgeon to be their minister - see SS f 101.
15. The Union Free Church eventually became the Baptist City Mission and joined the N.Z. Baptist Union in 1898. Through this group was founded the work which grew into the Manurewa Children's Home. The Church disbanded in 1906. See Clifford p 62 and Hill pp 264-5.
16. Shalders had put together some "Extracts from Mr Birch's sermons [Printed not for public circulation]." A copy was enclosed with the letter of May 22.
17. Between his duties as Union Evangelist Thomas Spurgeon supplied the pulpit at the Tabernacle on a number of occasions in August & September 1891.
18. Letter, unknown correspondent to A.G. Brown, 2 May 1890, SS ff 78-9.