

Conditional Immortality and New Zealand Baptist Churches 1880-1892: The Bradford Challenge to New Zealand Baptist Orthodoxy.

ABSTRACT

In the 1880s the Rev George Brown from Bradford, England, challenged Auckland Baptists with his preaching on Conditional Immortality. George Aldridge, also from Bradford, followed Brown and large crowds heard his teachings. In 1889 the Rev. C.C. Brown of Timaru was expelled from the Baptist Union, in part for associating with Aldridge and his congregations. Thomas Spurgeon and a number of others had threatened to resign from the Union unless this action was taken. In 1892, after Spurgeon had left the Auckland Tabernacle, Brown was reinstated with support from the Canterbury Auxiliary. One of the influential laymen demanding toleration and an advocate of Conditional Immortality was Herbert Olney of the Oxford Terrace Church. Changing attitudes since have made separation on account of the doctrine of Conditional Immortality unnecessary.

In his article 'Downgrade Down Under'¹ Dr Martin Sutherland traces the conflict between the Rev Charles Crisp Brown and the Baptist Union of New Zealand as the first major test of the ability of the fledgling Union to cope with conflict. This controversy was wider in its implications than the

1 Martin Sutherland, 'Downgrade Down Under', *The Baptist Quarterly*, Vol 37, No 7, July 1998, 351-363.

challenge of a number of strong leaders by a strong personality with a personally held divergent theological stance.

The roots of this incident go back to the arrival of the Rev. George Brown, a successful young pastor, originally from Bradford, who like the Rev. Thomas Spurgeon for health reasons came out to New Zealand. He had been a very effective minister of the Mint Lane Baptist Church, Lincoln. During his three years of ministry there, two hundred and twenty new members were added to the church roll. However, on his arrival in Auckland in 1880, he was not accepted by the Wellesley Street Chapel.² For a time George Brown took up farming in Mangere and associated with a small independent fellowship of baptised believers, who were sympathetic to his views on conditional immortality. Kindred spirits helped him form a church under his pastoral leadership on October 24 1880. A week later there were baptisms. By the end of January 1881, three months later, there were 100 members on the roll. The Choral Hall in Symonds Street was engaged for services. By June 24th 1882 the church moved on Sunday nights to the new Opera House which held 1,300 people and was comfortably filled most nights. During 1883 ninety-six members were added to the church. Further, a Church was built at Port Albert on land given by S.B.Lush, who had been under the ministry in the U.K. of the prominent Conditionalist Dr. Leask³ At the same time Thomas Spurgeon had begun preaching in the Wellesley St Chapel and in the Choral Hall. There seemed to be room in Auckland for both these orators but George Brown, in the Opera House, had the larger auditorium.

In addition to his preaching George Brown founded and edited *The Bible Standard*, similar to the English *Bible Standard* and Dr. Leask's magazine *The Rainbow*. In the first issue of this magazine Brown set out his purpose.

2 J.Ayson Clifford, *A Handful of Grain Vol. 2* (New Zealand Baptist Historical Society, 1982) 100

3 *Jubilee Souvenir History of the West St. Church of Christ*. 1930.

Our purpose is to present a living Christ to a dying world and call men's attention to the fact that their thirst for a future life, for immortality can only be satisfied in Christ

Which is better? Error with ease or truth at all hazard, or at any cost? Peace in the Church with two or three rotten planks in our ship of doctrine or agitation enough to hunt out and haul out the dead timber and put in the solid oak where the dire effect is seen? Is not God's honour something and is it not at stake?

Here are two grand pillars of revelation: God only has immortality: the soul that sinneth it shall die.'

In the same issue was a headline 'Baptists Read This'

The following is from The Baptist Banner published in the United States of America. We commend it to the consideration of New Zealand Baptists.

'On the occasions of preaching funeral sermons it is announced from the pulpit ten times perhaps, that death takes good men to heaven where it was once was said that the resurrection will bring them up from their graves. Thus we rob Christ of the glory due to Him as the only source of a future life.'

On Eternal Torment.

The doctrine of eternal torment is found neither in the Apostles nor the Nicene Creeds nor in the principle confessions of faith in the sixteenth century. We believe that even if this dogma has been handed down throughout the protestant churches it is simply an inheritance from the errors of the Middle Ages and from the speculative theories of Platonism. If we examine the writings of the earlier fathers.... We find them all faithful to the apostolic doctrines of the final destruction of the wicked.

The doctrine of everlasting torment did not creep into the church until she yielded to the influence of Platonic philosophy. Plato had said 'the soul is immortal, indissoluble' and his assertion outweighed the denial of the apostles and the prophets.

These writings, although popular with many lay folk, were not acceptable to the pastors who had had been trained at the Pastor's College under C.H.Spurgeon, and certainly not to his

son Thomas. The extent of George Brown's popularity can be seen in the crowds that attended his farewell service in July 1884.⁵ Some two thousand crowded into the Opera House (five hundred extra seats were on the stage). It is reported that twenty-five persons responded for baptism at the end of the service.

The same issue of *The Bible Standard* reported that George Brown had come to Auckland as a total stranger – no Baptist pulpit was open to him but he determined by God's help not to leave or be discouraged till he had made known to the people of this beautiful city the 'unsearchable riches of Christ'. 'He had been glad in Auckland to have opposed the mouths of some hot brained, cold-hearted preachers of hell torments. The people of Auckland now knew better and simply would not have it. But while condemning the horrible dogma of eternal torment he warned his hearers of the righteous judgement of God.'

As George Brown's church grew in Auckland and outlying areas it was decided to obtain help from Britain so that a team ministry could be established. To this end notices were published in the English *Bible Standard* for November and December 1881. As a result of this advertisement E.H. Taylor arrived in April 1882 and was sent to the Thames. George Aldridge arrived in June of the same year and went to Hamilton.⁶

George Aldridge had been active in the leadership of the Sion Baptist Chapel, Bradford. The fervour of his youthful preaching had attracted the notice of C.H. Spurgeon who invited him to consider the Baptist ministry. However, Aldridge had become an earnest advocate of Conditional Immortality. He had read the writings of Edward White⁷, Dr Leask (editor of *The*

5 *Bible Standard* July 1884.

6 *If by reason of strength* History of the Churches of Christ (Life and Advent Association) special issue of *The Bible Standard* June 1964.

7 The Rev Edward White was elected Chairman of the English Congregational Union in 1886.

Rainbow) and Dr. R.W. Dale⁸ all of whom advocated conditional immortality. In 1878 on account of these views he, together with George Mackay, another capable leader, was asked to withdraw from leadership at Sion Chapel. George Mackay found a more accepting Baptist church and entered the English Baptist ministry.⁹ In 1895, although an ardent Conditionalist, while minister of the Devonshire Square Baptist Chapel Mackay was elected President of the London Baptist Association. George Aldridge took a different route. At the age of twenty-eight, together with his wife and family, he decided to leave Bradford to come and assist the Rev George Brown who he knew personally.

It is interesting to observe that in the years to come Sion Chapel was to relax its attitudes so that when George Aldridge was on a visit to the United Kingdom in 1903 he was listened to with enthusiasm in the Chapel. They were proud to call him a son of the Chapel – he who had been formerly a scholar, member, teacher, and evangelist at Sion Chapel.¹⁰

In 1883 George Aldridge gave a lecture in the Public Hall, Hamilton on ‘Man’s Nature is he Mortal or Immortal.’ The *Waikato Times* gave a report of the meeting¹¹ commenting that strong arguments in support of conditional immortality were given. ‘The Bible’ he insisted ‘nowhere gives warrant for the belief in man’s immortality except through Jesus Christ.’ The newspaper commented further ‘Mr Aldridge’s manner is exceptionally good; his diction is choice and appropriate and he modulates his voice with skill and judgement. The lecture was one of the best delivered we have heard in the Waikato.’

8 Congregational minister and theologian.

9 At this time Hugh Stowell Brown, Minister of Myrtle St. Baptist Chapel, Liverpool had considerable influence among Baptist churches in regard to conditional Immortality. He was minister in Liverpool for thirty-nine years. Five thousand attended his funeral. *NZ Baptist* quotes his writing and death February 1889.

10 *Bible Standard* October 1903.

11 *Bible Standard* July 1883.

His lectures were fruitful for on Christmas Day 1883 at 3 o'clock in the afternoon eleven converts were baptised in the Waikato River. This was believed to be the first believer's baptismal service by immersion in Hamilton.¹²

So effective was George Aldridge, in Hamilton, that when George Brown moved to America George Aldridge was appointed senior pastor in Auckland. He was to be pastor of this congregation for forty-two years. A large chapel was built in West Street, Newton,¹³ although the Opera House was still sometimes used and later the Auckland Town Hall. As well as leading the congregation he became the editor of *The Bible Standard*.

As editor of *The Bible Standard* George Aldridge exposed what he considered to be shallow thinking and non-Biblical Christianity. For instance, after hearing that Pastor Thomas Spurgeon, in a special Memorial Service, had declared that C.H.Spurgeon's death (his father) was a birthday into a better life and that during the service a letter from C.H.Spurgeon's wife was read. 'My husband is still welcoming into the land of rest his own converts.' Aldridge commented 'this is a fine little romance built on nothing. C.H. Spurgeon sleeps in Jesus waiting His Master's call to life.'¹⁴ But in the same issue May 1894 he paid a tribute to Archdeacon Maunsell of Auckland. 'He held the doctrine of conditional immortality avowing it in the pulpit and by the pen. On more than one occasion he has given words of commendation to *The Bible Standard*.'

When challenged as to his quoting other Christian leaders he was able to provide documentation in the pages of *The Bible Standard*. A letter dated May 28 1891 from R.W. Dale, a well-known English Congregationalist, is printed in full.¹⁵ That

12 *Bible Standard* February 1884.

13 This chapel was demolished to make room for the Auckland motorway 1964.

14 *Bible Standard*, May 1894.

15 *Bible Standard* September 1891.

letter includes the statement that 'I have held and preached for many years the substance though not all the details of the doctrine maintained by Mr. Edward White in his *Life in Christ*. I have never experienced regret that I taught the doctrine, I teach it still.'

In 1902 George Aldridge, in *The Bible Standard*, made comment on the Revd A.H. Collins of Ponsonby Baptist that 'the dismal dogma of an everlasting hell where countless myriad were said to suffer had no place in his creed.' Neither had Sion Chapel, Bradford, such a creed. So George Aldridge discovered on his second return visit to Bradford where his ministry was not only invited but also expected.

As the world changed and churches changed so George Aldridge adapted in his ministry. He was among the first to begin broadcasting evening services through 1YB. Others considered this somewhat worldly.

The extent of his influence can be seen in the messages sent to his funeral service in 1926. There were many from Church leaders of all denominations, especially the Anglican. One significant Baptist tribute was from Stephen Page, Secretary of the Auckland Baptist Tabernacle who wrote 'George Aldridge's name will ever rank high amongst those who helped to make this city and its spiritual force what it is today.'¹⁶

This tribute is in marked contrast to what was being said about George Aldridge by the Tabernacle and other Baptist church leaders in the 1880's.

The attitudes of many New Zealand Baptist leaders in the 1880's towards the Baptist Pastors George Brown and George Aldridge came to a climax when the Revd Charles Crisp Brown not only taught conditional immortality in the Timaru Baptist Church but chose to speak at these churches which were now called the Churches of Christ.

The Revd Charles Crisp Brown came to Dunedin after service with the Baptist Missionary Society and the Lal Bazaar

16 *The Bible Standard* November 1926.

Church in Calcutta. His wife had worked in the Zenanas. Having been trained in Spurgeon's College he arrived with a letter of introduction from C.H. Spurgeon. At first he assisted in Hanover St., and then moved to Lincoln and then in 1885 took up the pastorate in the Timaru Baptist Church. At first Brown was considered to be part of the establishment with his Spurgeonic credential and his missionary experience which he used to help the initial candidates prepare for the fledgling work in India.

However, his views often collided with the articles of some Baptist pastors who wrote for the *N.Z. Baptist*. He was frustrated in not being allowed by the editor, Shackelford, to have an alternative response published. The *N.Z. Baptist* of September 1884 had declared 'Death to God's people is but a ferryboat. Every day and every hour the boat pushes off with some of the saints and return for more.' To the Conditionalist such poetic language was remarkable for its lack of Biblical content. Back in 1882 Thomas Spurgeon had written in the *N.Z. Baptist* 'Who but the blind can fail to see unquenchable fire even in Christ's teaching? Should you wish to change your views you can be obliged with a glance through peepholes labelled Conditional Immortality, Cleansing Fires or Annihilation.'

By December 1887 the tone of the *N.Z. Baptist* had become even more aggressive, as it recorded the Baptist Conference resolution of 1887. - 'A resolution moved by the Honourable T. Dick and seconded by the Rev. W. R. Woolley of the Thames: - This Baptist Union regrets to know that the Rev Brown holds and gives prominence to the distinctive views of the body represented by Mr Aldridge and considers it right to declare that such views are not in accordance with the views of the Union.' Prior to this there had been considerable discussion in the pages of the *Baptist* concerning Conditional Immortality. *The Bible Standard* commented on the stance taken by Baptist Union leaders. It could be said the Baptist leaders were anxious about preserving the unity of the Union, which had only come into being in 1882. They would be mindful of the fact that the Rev C.H. Spurgeon had withdrawn the Metropolitan Tabernacle,

London, from the English Baptist Union. So when a request came from the Auckland Tabernacle, itself under some tension from the rival baptistic group of Pastor Aldridge, they took note.

Dr Martin Sutherland has dealt in full in his article *Downgrade Down Under*¹⁷ with the influence of the Auckland Tabernacle. They wished that the Rev C.C. Brown withdraw from the Union and had a meeting in Auckland together with the Mt. Eden Church officers to discuss a motion.

The seventh annual Conference of the Baptist Union was held in Christchurch in November 1888 with Thomas Spurgeon in the chair. The Rev. Mr North moved 'That in the judgement of this assembly the Rev C.C. Brown has so identified himself with another denomination that he ought no longer to continue a member of the Union, and that therefore he be, and is hereby requested to withdraw.' The motion was carried by a total of thirty-one votes to five. Mr Brown withdrew.

After the expulsion of its minister, the Timaru Baptist Church flourished even more. The local paper recorded the events of the Conference under the Banner 'Welcome home to Timaru'¹⁸

The Timaru Church deprived of Baptist Union participation threw its weight into the re-formation of the Canterbury Baptist Association. In fact the first meetings were held at the Timaru Baptist Church. Here was an anomaly – the Rev C. Brown was a recognised member of the Canterbury community of Baptists but not of the Baptist Union. Furthermore the Timaru Church was both evangelistic and growing and the second largest church in the Canterbury province.

By 1892 Baptist politics of nervousness played a part in the Conference resolution carried by twenty-six votes to nineteen that the Rev C.C. Brown be readmitted to the Baptist Union. There had been considerable opposition from the provinces that the Union was a clique of urban Baptists who were not

17 Sutherland, 'Downgrade'.

18 *Timaru Herald*, Timaru, November 1 1888.

interested in provincial areas. A letter from S.R.Ingold shows the pressure on the Union to re-admit Mr Brown. 'We have not noticed the Union making any effort to enlist the co-operation of the Timaru Baptist Church and her pastor. There is a growing, working church of over one hundred members, situated in the second town of the province asked to withdraw from the Union when speaking on another platform. Sending a man to Coventry for four years is sufficient punishment for an error of judgement. Now is the time to exercise the Christian grace of forgiveness.'¹⁹ This letter which appeared in the *N.Z. Baptist* was typical of the thinking of many lay people.

An example of the lay support for and interest in Conditional Immortality was Herbert Olney of the Oxford Terrace Baptist Church. Before coming to New Zealand he had been a member of C.H. Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle where his father William had been a deacon. Herbert was educated under Dr. Petavel, at Neufchatel College, French Switzerland. From Dr Petavel he learned Conditional Immortality. At Oxford Terrace Herbert was active as a deacon and Sunday School superintendent, he was also Treasurer of the Canterbury Baptist Auxiliary. *The Bible Standard* described him as 'no secret disciple of Conditional Immortality'²⁰

An example of Herbert Olney's convictions is seen in a letter he wrote to the *N.Z. Baptist* in June in defence of the Rev C.C. Brown.

When Mr Brown's doctrines are attacked he is well able by scripture to defend himself, but when his personal character is attacked, as it is being done in your columns, you will kindly permit a few lines in his defence.

Mr Spurgeon's statement that Mr Brown can preach with much acceptance is now endorsed by hundreds who have heard him in the colony. So long as Mr Brown can gather around him in Timaru, amongst other Christian agencies a week evening Bible Class with

19 *N.Z. Baptist*, October 1892, 158-9

20 *Bible Standard*, January 1896.

an average of forty to fifty adults he need not despair even if he does not enjoy the confidence of his brother ministers. May he speedily regain it.²¹

It is significant that Herbert Olney's funeral (he died early at the age of thirty-nine years) on Wednesday December 4, 1895 featured an address not only by the Rev J.J. Doke but also the Rev C.C. Brown.

By 1892 the Rev. Thomas Spurgeon had left the Tabernacle and that Church was preoccupied with its own internal disquiet with its new minister. It was a sign of Christian grace and the new political climate that it was the Rev W. Woolley of the Thames who proposed the re-instatement of the Rev C.C. Brown. *The Bible Standard*, which had a large circulation among the denominations including Baptists, congratulated the Baptist Union in its emphatic though tardy reversal of an unwise decision.²²

The Baptist Conference resolution of 1892 meant that as New Zealand Baptists were about to enter the twentieth century the Baptist Union was open to any pastor holding Conditional Immortality and able to uphold the Union Constitution.

It should be said that the Timaru Baptist Church suffered mixed fortunes in the next decade as the Church trying to recover from the loss of its building through a fire and an unfortunate purchase of the Congregational Union building which had to be returned. It then suffered a split. The division was on whether to co-operate with George Aldridge's new style Churches of Christ or remain a Baptist Church. Brown opposed the division but could not stop a substantial number of members leaving and holding their own meetings. This, together with

21 *Bible Standard*. January 1896.

22 *Bible Standard* December 1892.

depressed circumstances in South Canterbury meant that the Church could not afford a minister or church building. The Rev C.C. Brown then moved to Rotorua and for eighteen years served as a teacher in Maori schools. He also wrote for *The Bible Standard* and was much in demand for preaching in the Churches of Christ.

The question needs to be asked why did so much Conditionalist talent fail to be harnessed by New Zealand Baptists of which the four men described are only a sample. The answer lies in part in the fact that the New Zealand family of Baptist churches were few in number and dominated by the Spurgeon factor. The 1880s also were a time of economic depression in New Zealand and many families were leaving for Australia which created a crisis in the stability of many congregations. To cope with doctrinal differences was too hard a task for the Baptist Union leadership of the first decade. It was unfortunate that the Auckland Baptist community spurned the talents and abilities of the Rev George Brown. George Brown died in harness as a pastor of Monk's road Baptist church, Lincoln, U.K. in 1907 aged 59 years. This church was a member of the English Baptist Union. This Bradford man brought out the gifted George Aldridge and other Baptist leaders in what became the Churches of Christ (Life and Advent).

The first decades of the Wellesley St, Baptist Chapel were noted for their hell-fire preaching. Some Baptist families withdrew from Wellesley St because of the heavy emphasis in this regard. George Brown and George Aldridge, evangelical gospel preachers though they were, could not identify with the brimstone theology. It is interesting to observe that Ponsonby under A.H. Collins had a different attitude and this Church did not join with Mt. Eden and the Tabernacle to press for the expulsion of C.C. Brown.

The twentieth century is another story. Hell-fire preaching was of a different kind, and a variety of understandings of resurrection and the Second Coming of Christ have been tolerated. By the twenty-first century in many Baptist congregations spiritual experience standards are regarded as

more important than doctrinal standards. It surely should not be either/or but both. When George Brown began his magazine *The Bible Standard* it was an indication that to him what the Bible says should be the standard of the Church. One organization surviving from the work of Brown and Aldridge is the conditional Immortality Association (formerly the New Zealand Evangelistic and Publication Association). This association is responsible for Carey park (originally a Baptist enterprise) a theological magazine and Advent Christian missions in partnership with an American Conditionalist Church. Currently three Auckland Baptist pastors are members of the Board who are responsible for the association's activities. As well, a number of Churches of Christ (Life and Advent) have joined the New Zealand Baptist Union. This in itself is an indication of changing times.

Don Dickson