
A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

An Old Scotch Baptist Church

SOME time ago, a manuscript fell into the hands of the writer's father, then treasurer of Bristo Baptist Church, Queensferry Road, Edinburgh. Written in a fine hand, it is entitled, "Some Reminiscences of the Old Baptist Church, Pleasance," by James Williamson, and was found in the houses which he gives as his address about 1830. As his dates are about 1818—the 1890s, this find may be reckoned as providential.

Like many such works, this one is badly dated and, apart from one or two outstanding occasions, describes personal memories rather than the factual material of historians. When, however, in an appreciation of his spiritual elders, the author declares his certainty of their apostolic calling as being as unquestionable as his knowledge that "Queen Victoria succeeded William IV," we are taken into a strangely remote past.

As there is no new light thrown upon matters of fact in this booklet, we can turn to the standard histories of the Scotch Baptist church. There was a certain amount of Baptist influence in Scotland during the occupation by Cromwell. Essentially, however, it was an English influence, and therefore unpopular. It did not survive the withdrawal of the Protectorate troops in 1660. Yet all was not lost, for in the years of trouble that came with the Restoration, not only did Presbyterianism have to search its soul anew; there was at least one professor of Baptist principles in Lady Craigie Wallace, and some of the State records show concern not only with the Covenanting unrest, but also with the "sneaking sect of the Anabaptists."

By the time of James Williamson, "Scotch" Baptist churches were in existence. Note the description "Scotch"; the movement now felt itself to be native. The first church is always reckoned as that of Keiss, in Caithness, founded by the laird, Sir William Sinclair of Dunbeath, but that church did not have the influence that one might have expected. The real beginning of the Scotch Baptist church came from the famous question asked of Archibald M'Lean, the Glasgow printer, by Robert Carmichael, the ex-minister of an Anti-burgher section of the Secession church who became a "Glasite." Thus far had the heart-searchings of the church in Scotland gone. As has often been said, the church in Scotland, for all its many disruptions, has strangely remained Presbyterian. But it had gone a long way towards the conclusion that it must be free of state control, self-determining, and indeed, a body of believers. As in modern times, this question became associated with the question of Baptism. Carmichael asked M'Lean what he thought of Baptism, with the result that in 1765 they formed a church, meeting,

oddly enough, in the (still extant) Hammermen's Hall, Edinburgh, where John Craig and Knox had laboured for the cause of reform.

Archibald M'Lean was dead not so long before the young James Williamson began to be "walked" from Leith up the "Duke's Walk" to the church in the Pleasance which the Baptist community in Edinburgh had built in 1811, after finding other accommodation too small for their growing influence and numbers. M'Lean's name is not actually mentioned in the Reminiscences, but Mr. Braidwood, one of his colleagues, is remembered as "an old man with a brown wig . . . ascending the pulpit stair with a spenser above his coat," perhaps on the last occasion when he preached. Henry David Inglis, advocate, and grandson of Colonel Gardiner who fell at the Battle of Prestonpans, is also recalled, and he may be cited as representing the distinguished men who came into the Baptist church in the 1770s. There were many prosperous businessmen in membership, of whom James remarks that while they delighted in hymns that referred to this life as a barren and howling wilderness, they sometimes made pretty little Edens of their homes, what with their nice gardens and all. There were also some distinguished artists to come forth from this fellowship, like David Scott, John and Gourlay Steel, Robert Scott Lauder and James Eckford Lauder, but the roll of members suggests that there were also many of the artisan class in the fellowship. To this class James Williamson's parents probably belonged.

When it is remembered that the period which we have been describing was the heyday of Sir Walter Scott (who, incidentally, had no use for Dissent) it will be seen that James Williamson looks back to an early childhood coloured by national greatness to which the place of his Sunday pilgrimages had contributed not a little. It is therefore interesting to observe how this genius expressed itself, and the construction of the Pleasance church, which is reproduced in plan in the Reminiscences, is a striking illustration. This church was built to the Baptist idea of what a church should be, as indeed, its two successors, in Bristo Place and in Queensferry Road, have also been built. The first believers had been baptized in the Water of Leith, and the church contained not only an open baptistry—which the present church also boasts—but an open baptistry in an open-air court lying between the church and the "love feast" room. The love-feast room remained a tradition also in the subsequent buildings. Its origin lay in its necessity as a meeting place where families from far away could eat their mid-day meal between the forenoon and afternoon sessions. The present writer remembers stories of similar meals in the Bristo buildings, where the love feast consisted of good Scotch broth. Today, with the progress of transport and the changed tradition of "morning and evening" rather than "morning and afternoon" services, the love-feast lives on in

the familiar and pleasant habits of Bristonians to linger after service-time. In the new buildings, a special "Crush-hall" was provided for the purpose.

The actual layout of the church also expressed the Baptist idea of worship. It consisted of two parts, separated by an aisle that ran crossways from one side of the room to the other. Forwards of this aisle was the sanctuary, to which partakers of the Lord's Supper moved at the time of the "Ordinance" (a word much favoured by Scotch Baptists.) Others who remained to look on—including James and his father, who were not then members and therefore not invited to what was a "closed" table—were nevertheless invited to remain and watch. Few did; which is a fact not perhaps astonishing when we recall that the morning service had lasted from 10 a.m. till nearly one o'clock and the afternoon service from 2 p.m. till after 3 p.m., the only break being the time of the love-feast, or, in James' case, an occasional walk down the "Duke's Walk" to buy baps and a drink of milk. Sunday trading and Sunday public-houses were then the order of the day, as Mr. Williamson remarks.

The pulpit consisted of two tiers. The pulpit proper was the sort of rostrum familiar enough still, reached by a little stairway. Here sat the elders or pastors who conducted the service. Below them sat the precentors, and on ground level facing the congregation, the deacons. It seems to have been customary for three of each office to be present; but that could not always have been so, as the church roll appended to the Reminiscences mentions only two elders, William Braidwood and William Peddie. There were, however, the proper number of seven deacons and three precentors. The office of elder and pastor appears to have been, in practice, interchangeable, whether the incumbent were actually trained for the ministry, like Mr. Peddie, or engaged in another profession, like Mr. Inglis and many others. This slightly blurred distinction between elder and pastor is characteristic of Scotch Baptist practice, and has tendencies that remain still. The situation arose from the paucity of trained ministers in many of the districts to which the cause spread, so that the best qualified of the fellowship became the natural leaders without, however, being financially able to give up lay professions. But if the eldership and pastorate were blurred, that joint office stood out above others. For example, only elders and deacons were addressed as Mr. So-and-So. All others, and especially the precentors, were addressed as plain John and William, although the ordinary members might be called Brother So-and-So. More important, however, was the relationship of the elder or pastor to the conduct of the Communion service. In 1810 and again in 1834, the Baptist witness struck a rock of controversy on the question whether the Ordinance could be proceeded with in the absence of pastor or elder.

Another characteristic of the old church was the emphasis and practice of emblematic reference. The elements of the ordinance were, of course, called "emblems"; but there were many others, some deliberate, as for example, candlesticks, others again incidental. Mr. Williamson refers to his childish thought that the window cords, with their red intertwining strands, symbolised divine protection. The writer recalls a sermon in the old Bristo—the new Bristo to Mr. Williamson—which dwelt upon the emblematic significance of the open cross-beams of that building. This interpretation of divine signs derived from the literal interpretation of the Bible which was current to Scotch Baptist theology, which, as Mr. Williamson shrewdly remarks, could lead to many problems of practice. One matter, however, was clearly accepted. The Scriptures were read as they came, including such passages as those referring to the origins of Moab and Ammon and the details of levitical purification. The women of the congregation were stout defenders of this strange custom, declaring that Moses himself read all the Law in the ears of the women and the little ones. (*Joshua* viii. 35.)

The lengthy services were due to the number of "exhortations" which were given from, as it were, "the floor" of the house. These were in addition to the formal sermon "by one of the pastors," and were apparently extempore utterances. This lay contribution has passed from Scottish Baptist practice, although the deacons usually offer the prayers of thanksgiving at the Communion service. Mr. Williamson records that very seldom was there a pause in the exhortations; perhaps, on the contrary, some over-readiness, for there was a ruling formulated by Mr. M'Lean himself, that in the event of more than one brother offering exhortation, the presiding pastor should say which should exhort. Apparently, therefore, one of the pastors held a sort of presidency in the services, probably conducting it and himself contributing a prayer and a prepared address.

The teaching was almost exclusively doctrinal; and the divinity of Christ was so emphasised that His humanity seemed almost a disguise. A favourite question to candidates for membership was on this theme, since Presbyterians were credited with the heterodox view of Christ as "the eternal Son of God," whereas Scotch Baptists held that He was the "Son of the eternal God." Mr. M'Lean had expressed himself forcefully on the subject, and his views were accepted as dogma. "Practical pursuits," says Mr. Williamson, "whether Missionary, Social, or Benevolent, were not much considered." Local affairs were not ignored, but were used, like the "emblems," to point to the divine Hand. The great fires which raged in Edinburgh in November, 1824, occasioned much homiletic head-shaking against the Edinburgh musical festival of that year, when Handel's *Messiah*, Haydn's *Creation* and other oratorios had

been sung. Mr. Williamson is slightly sceptical of this argument from cause to effect, but he was himself passionately fond of music, and might be prejudiced.

St. Paul, of course, played a large part in the thought of the Scotch Baptists, perhaps supplying the basis of their Christian conduct. There was a fruitful denunciation of dress extravagance, including an insistence upon dress according to social status. This was a common enough theme in Scotland since the Reformation. Baptists avoided public office. One of the precentors declined the post of music teacher in George Heriot's Hospital (i.e. school) when he knew that he would have to lead the praise in an Established church on Founder's day. A Mr. Philip, schoolmaster, gave up his private school to teach in the Edinburgh jail at a time when the first attempts were being made to re-educate juvenile criminals; but Mr. Philip was regarded as doing something shady. Marriage, of course, was strictly "in the Lord."

Mr. Williamson, writing his recollections of things past as he watched his generation depart one by one, had many anecdotes to add. There was "the daft laddie" whose mischievous cronies told him to "gang into the kirk and gie a great roar." But the outstanding memory was of the "Break-up" of November 30th, 1834. His mother was a devoted member of the church and went to the decisive meeting. It lasted on and on, and James went down several times to see what was happening. When she did come home, she was in tears, saying that the church was divided. It was indeed divided. Next Sunday James and his younger sister, partisans of the liberal view, returned to the Pleasance church. His mother and elder sister went with the true-blue stalwarts into the wilderness. This adherence to principle cannot pass unnoticed by us. It divided families without loosening their loyalty to the practice of worship. The minority formed a new church elsewhere in the city.

But the heart seemed to have been taken out of the Pleasance church. Within a few months they, too, vacated the building and worshipped in hired rooms until a new building was erected in Bristo Place. It was a wise action, for in the new premises much of the old hurt was healed and the church moved towards unprecedented influence, gathering at one time a membership of 600 and giving birth to many subsidiary causes both in Edinburgh and, especially, in the north-west Highlands. It is a curious fact that memories of the old Pleasance church did not seem to linger on as have the memories of the Bristo church. The name Bristo has been incorporated in the newer buildings, but the Pleasance church was allowed very largely to be forgotten. Perhaps the memory of the "break-up" was too poignant, and the church felt impelled to make a new start, forgetting the unhappy things that lay behind.

WILLIAM SPEIRS