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Benjamin Evans, DD and The Radical Press, 1826—1871

WHEN, as a young minister, Benjamin Evans (1803-1871) arrived in Scarborough in 1826 "the nation was rising from the oppression under which it had groaned for a long season . . . The spirit of constitutional liberty was rising in her might and girding herself for a long and severe conflict. The Test and Corporation Acts were in full force. Municipal and Parliamentary reform was unknown; and church rates, the right to marry by Dissenters, and the Acts for registration of births and deaths had to be wrung from a dominant faction in the nation."[1] Evans, writing this in 1871 in *A Brief History of the First Baptist Church of Scarborough* (in 1826 it was known as Ebenezer Chapel) passes very quickly over his rôle as one of those leaders of Protestant nonconformity who "wrung" the concessions of religious freedom from the established order. He continues: "Time would fail to glance at the hostility we had to encounter on the slavery question, the Parliamentary and Municipal reform agitation, the Anti-Corn Law League, and other great measures in which (he) was forced to engage."[2]

With the possible exception of Dr. Thomas Price (editor of the *Eclectic Review* 1837-1850) Benjamin Evans was the most popular Baptist journalist of the mid-nineteenth century. He concentrated only a small portion of his boundless energy on the publishing of tracts and it would seem that the majority of those were merely reprints of speeches and sermons. His first venture into the editing and publishing end of journalism was with a monthly magazine for Sunday Schools and a young people's magazine *The Northern Baptist*.[3]

The Northern Baptist was begun in 1838 and continued until January, 1846, when it was merged with *The Church*. With a total of sixteen pages, *The Northern Baptist* contained news and articles designed to educate as well as amuse the young adult. Contributors to this small journal included William Brock, J. A. Cox, J. E. Giles, and John Henry Hinton. It is interesting to note that although Evans was passionately involved in the breaking up of disabilities imposed on nonconformity he did not use this young people's magazine as a sounding board for his political views. While maintaining the religious thrust of *The Northern Baptist* he advised strong support of Thomas Price and his *Eclectic Review*

because the *Review* was " . . . committed to the great principles of liberty and human rights and it must advance. Do our readers see it? Most of them should. It is worthy of their support, and it will benefit them always to peruse it. Half a dozen should unite and take it."[4]

Faced with the failure to meet publication expenses consistently, Evans merged his journal with *The Church* (founded in 1844 by Giles, Clouse, Dowson and Pottinger). Regarding this merger, Evans announced through the pages of *The Northern Baptist:* " It is intended that *The Church* shall be the cheapest issue . . . Cordially and earnestly does the editor invite his readers to transfer their support to the united periodical."[5] It was not with an idea to retirement that Evans decided to merge with the younger *Church;* one condition of the merger was his replacement of Giles as the chief editor.

The one penny eight-page *Church* was published by John Heaton of Leeds and Simpkin Marshall of London. The editorial policy of *The Church* closely paralleled that of the *Northern Baptist;* i.e., *The Church* actively invited the patronage of the *Eclectic Review* until 1850 when, upon the retirement of Dr. Price, it withdrew its support. At no time did it consider itself at cross purposes with the sixpenny *Baptist Magazine.* Attempting to reach its readers on the one penny level, *The Church* was sporadically entitled *The Baptist Penny Magazine.* The West Riding of the Yorkshire Baptist Association by a unanimous vote in June of 1845 gave *The Church* " . . . their cordial recommendation, so that, . . . it may be virtually regarded, as the organ of that powerful association."[6]

This provincially supported journal was never provincial in its handling of the news and was in fact as cosmopolitan in its interests as one of the London journals like Price's *Eclectic.* Advertizing itself as the cheapest religious journal in the British Empire, *The Church* carried much solid material besides the usual records and comments on current affairs; e.g., travel, biography, history, book reviews, poetry, and a series of articles covering the gamut from famous Popes to famous Baptists, living and dead. The *Eclectic Review* and the *Baptist Magazine,* although filled with much excellent material, had limited circulations due to the fairly high subscription rates. The major difference between the above journals and *The Church* was that of cost. All three journals catered for men of education and intelligence, i.e., men who clearly had to be interested in serious matters and capable of pursuing argumentative articles. Chiefly, therefore, due to cost and content *The Church* definitely filled a marked gap in the literature of the denomination.

The Church frequently launched bitter attacks on the State Church; however Evans never allowed this objective to be an over-

riding consideration. *The Church* was not attempting to do the job of Edward Miall's *The Nonconformist* though it did give this contemporary publication unqualified support. The purposes of *The Church* was to speak out in eight areas of Christian concern. The objectives were: to exhibit the nature of that church which constitutes the kingdom of the Son of God; to strike a blow at all religious monopoly and especially at State Establishments of religion as anti-Christian and unjust; to diffuse those blessed truths which pertain to life and godliness, and to oppose the progress of error whether in the principles or practice of religion; to direct attention to public duties and events; to maintain Scriptural views of the ordinances of the Gospel; to furnish biographical notices of eminent Christians; to supply early intelligence with regard to home and foreign missionary proceedings; and to collect information relating to public religious services, Sunday Schools. deaths, etc. among church members.

There was, however, during 1844 and 1845 a journal published by J. Burton, Haymarket, Leicester, which gives the impression that its main reason for life was to fight the religious disabilities of nonconformity and the State establishment of religion. *The Baptist Examiner,* a monthly journal of religious literature, statistics and general information, was edited in almost complete anonymity during its short life. The only breach in this editorial veil occurred in March, 1845, when the editor added the initials B.E. to an editorial note.[7] Upon a close reading of the *Examiner* and subsequent comparison with the work of Evans I would like to suggest that this radical journal was the child of Evans although he himself never admitted any connection with it.

The general attitudes of the *Examiner* in its short two years of life are easily isolated: (1) the immediate end to all disabilities imposed on nonconformists, including church rates; (2) disestablishment of the State Church and complete support of the Anti-State-Church Association; (3) the support of Free Trade and the abolition of the Corn Laws; (4) the ending of the *regium donum;* (5) support of the *Eclectic Review;* (6) the retention of education in the hands of nonconformists and the rejection of schemes of public education favouring the establishment; (7) the ending of the establishment in Ireland and the consequent "freeing" of the Irish people; (8) vehement opposition to the Maynooth education grant for the education of Irish Roman Catholic priests; (9) and finally the continual urging of its readers to vote for liberal and radical Parliamentary candidates pledged to the above and the voluntary principle which was the political and religious catchword of militant nonconformity.

A summary of the *Examiner's* purpose was outlined in its prospectus of 1844, in which the editor declared that " . . . the religious literature of our day appeared . . . too *exclusively religious.* The spirit it breathed was that of religion in solitude . . . The aim of the *Examiner* has been to present its readers with the religion of life, of reality and of society; to show it, as it mixes itself with the hourly experience of our hearts and the daily toil of our hands; to deduce its results in the next world from its bearings in this; to lower the importance of profession and formality; to raise the standard of truth and principle; to oppose the reign of ignorance and superstition, and to advance the progress of knowledge and goodness."[8]

The historian with justification questions the actual numbers of people that such a journal as *The Church* represents. I would suggest that this can be sampled on the basis of its circulation, contributors, and finally the attitudes of the denomination as a whole. The circulation of *The Church* rose from several hundred copies to four thousand per month immediately after the merger with the *Northern Baptist* early in 1846; by 1849 the editors were claiming some 17,000 copies with something under a million readers.[9] The identification of contributors is made difficult by the literary practice of this period which favoured the use of initials and cryptic pen names instead of the author's name. Nevertheless we are able to find signed articles by Benjamin Evans, Baptist W. Noel (then an Evangelical), J. E. Giles, J. H. Hinton, John Birt, C. M. Birrell, John Jenkinson of Kettering, Jabez Burns, Cornelius Elven, J. J. Brown, Edward Steane, J. P. Chown, Francis Clowes, J. P. Mursell, Alexander MacLaren, Charles Spurgeon, J. Landels, and Arthur Mursell. This list of distinguished denominational leaders coupled with a respectable circulation indicates the important rôle the *Baptist Penny Magazine* (*The Church*) played within the political interests of the denomination.

The editorial position taken by *The Church* from 1846 on was so similar to that of the then defunct *Examiner* that one can conjecture that the readers of the *Examiner* rather easily and naturally transferred their allegiance from Leicester to Leeds. Although the *Examiner* was without question more radical than *The Church,* it was *The Church* that was looked upon with favour by the Chartists. *The Church* also contributed substantially to the reputation that Leeds enjoyed during the 1840's as a centre of the anti-Corn Law agitation. Evans, an avowed supporter of the Anti-Corn Law League saw that *The Church* also echoed these sentiments from its home in Leeds. He firmly believed there was a moral issue at stake; he saw the League's enemies as enemies of the voluntary principle.

This attitude was never any more clearly revealed than in the

election of 1841. Significantly the great post-election event was a conference of ministers summoned by Cobden at Manchester to discuss the subject of the Corn Laws. Cobden, drawing himself to his full oratorical height, called upon those present to declare that the Corn Law was "opposed to the law of God, was anti-Scriptural, and anti-Christian." Mr. G. Kitson Clark claims that it was "the only conference for which the thrifty Leeds Baptists are known to have paid the travelling expenses of their delegates."[10] The Leeds Baptists at least four years before the publication of *The Church* were convinced that the Corn Laws were a social evil and contrary to the word of God. This conviction turned many Baptist ministers like Thomas Price, Benjamin Evans, John Eustace Giles, Ebenezer Elliott[11] and F. A. Cox into virtual agents of the League in their areas. The Manchester meeting of the Anti-Corn Law (Free Trade) supporters drew 645 ministers of various denominations; of these the Independents led with 276 ministers and the Baptists had 182 representatives. Charging that the vested interest of the State Church was a factor in the existence of the Corn Laws, these dissenters were also able to train their spiritual artillery against the establishment through the Free Trade issue.[12]

Applying the voluntary principle with its usual vigour, *The Church*, speaking on the proposed Maynooth Grant in May of 1845 struck out in favour of ending State interference on both the level of religion and commerce. It said: "State patronage ruins commerce; they have not eyes to see that it is the death blow to religion."[13] *The Church* was never content with merely setting out the evils of those who impiously trod upon voluntaryism; with every election it repeatedly called upon dissenters to vote for those who would protect the principles of nonconformity. A highly characteristic plea from April of 1847 reads:

> ELECTORS! be prepared! Vote for no one who will not *pledge* himself against Government grants for Education and Religion . . . DISSENTERS! Come out for your principles! Aim your strokes at the root of the tree. A State-Church will wear you out in breaking off its ever growing shoots of mischief. Follow the League. Proclaim the truth *you* understand. Fill the ranks and the coffers of the Anti-State-Church Association. Invite its lecturers to your towns. If our governors *will* force on us National Education, let them lose in compensation—suffrage monopoly, church monopoly and hereditary legislation, and then the *worst* dangers, though not all, of Government education will be repelled.

In 1848 *The Church* received a notice from the Chartist journal *The Republican*. "With the religious contents of this periodical

. . . we have nothing whatever to do; but we are glad to say that its political tendency is towards Demoncracy. It is conducted in a most candid spirit and occasionally gives some good blows at that monstrous absurdity, a STATE CHURCH."[14] What was the relationship between the programme advocated by the Chartist movement and that of Evans and *The Church?* A programme of political and social reform was featured by *The Church* in the issues of April, May June and July of 1852. This eight-point programme was similar in several respects to the famous Six Points of the Charter. The Chartists demanded universal manhood suffrage, voting by ballot, equalization of constituencies, annual Parliaments, no qualifications for election to Parliament beyond the approval of the electors (i.e. no property qualifications) and finally payment for members of Parliament. *The Church,* on the other hand, advocated: universal suffrage; voting by ballot; the ending of all property qualifications for electors and candidates; the ending of the laws of primogeniture and entail; modification of the laws of partnership; repeal of the tax on knowledge (i.e. the newspaper tax and paper duty); removal of labour taxes in favour of property taxes; and lower taxation, thus ending the favoured position of "idle aristocracy and their offspring."[15]

Prof. H. U. Faulkner pointed out that of "all the nonconformist denominations, with the possible exception of the Unitarians, the Baptists probably showed the most sympathy toward the democratic schemes of the Chartists. This was partially due to the fact that the whole tone of the [denomination] was more radical than that, for instance, of the Congregational." He goes further to show that an ". . . overwhelming majority of the Baptists" were committed to the separation of church and state while among the Congregationalists only a small advanced party led by Edward Miall were in favour of an active political campaign." This radical nature of the Baptists is indicated in the London Conference of 1844 which gave birth to the Anti-State-Church Association. The Baptist Union was the only representative body to send delegates to the conference. This can be attributed primarily to the leadership of the Union co-secretary, John Henry Hinton.[16]

The London Conference was not Hinton's maiden voyage into politics. As a young minister he had taken an active part in the anti-slavery struggle; he was present in 1834 at Nottingham at the first general conference which called for the disestablishment of the Church of England. In 1836 he was a founder of the Church Rates Abolition Society and in 1839 of the Religious Freedom Society. Then just prior to the creation of the Anti-State-Church movement in 1842 he served Joseph Sturge's National Complete Suffrage Union as a lecturer.

Reviewing the political attitude of the denomination, a brief

glance at the *Eclectic Review* from 1837 to 1850 is revealing. During that period the *Review* was under the editorship of Dr. Thomas Price, former pastor of the Baptist chapel at Devonshire Square, Bishopsgate (1827-1837). The general policy of the monthly was highly favourable to the extension of suffrage as well as most political and religious reforms. The *Review* is seen usually as the literary representative of the Independent's radical wing and yet it had a Baptist editor-owner, and may be more accurately regarded during the 1840's as a Baptist organ.

The generally more conservative *Baptist Magazine,* while perhaps the preferred magazine for those who could afford the sixpenny price, continued to advocate policies similar to those articulated by the *Review* and *The Church.* The clearest difference between the old sixpenny journal and that which Evans edited at Leeds was the rather more moderate tones that prevailed in the editorials and general articles. The *Baptist Record,* a monthly begun in 1844, was not only similar to the *Eclectic Review* in style and content but in political attitudes as well.

The Church's pages were never overburdened in such a way as to make it essentially a political magazine. It always approached politics—whether in terms of political or religious reform—from the framework of Christian ethics as the editor understood them. The character thus never ceased to be religious from beginning to end. Despite *The Church's* low price its evangelism was not reaching many people. Therefore *The Appeal* was begun in 1848. This little halfpenny magazine published by Evans was designed to reach the unconverted "thousands" of England. *The Appeal* reached a circulation level of 34,000 per month in the first eight years of its life.

The Church cast its shadow on every major social, political and economic event from 1846 to 1855. The sarcastic pens of Evans and his writers probed the several ministries that had served the Crown during those nine years. It chided those magazines and newspapers that avoided the radical line. It attacked both Whig and Tory until in 1852 Evans threw his support to the People's Party which stood (unsuccessfully) for religion free from government and aristocratic domination. The editorials advocated popular education, shorter time in factories and in agriculture, further limiting of child labour, a form of profit sharing, an end to secret diplomacy, a law to legalize partnership with limited responsibilty, national admission to national universities, a new reform bill and finally what was labelled the "taxes on knowledge." These taxes took the form of a newspaper stamp and a duty on paper which severely curtailed the number of papers published.

Sharp biting comments characterize the pages of *The Church* during the early years of the 1850's. The editor compared the

Methodist Conference under Jabez Bunting with the Council of Trent; and described nunneries as "a kind of religious Lunatic Asylums"[17] and the House of Bishops (Lords) as "the Golgotha of liberal measures."[18] It stated that "the sole stay of the Church of England [was] *one hundred and twenty thousand bayonets*"[19] and (in 1857 when the Queen's infant daughter was christened) "It is satisfactory to know that the little princess has been *well* baptized, for 'the ceremony was performed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, assisted by the Bishops of London and Chester, the Honourable and Reverend Gerald Wellesley, and the Honourable and Very Reverend the Dean of Windsor'."[20]

Evan's attention to the "tax on knowledge" was motivated by very practical considerations; by 1853 he had begun to take another step to advance the influence of *The Church's* radical position. Evans had prior to 1855 given complete support to Edward Miall and the *Nonconformist*. However a parting of the ways stimulated a move to found a liberal-radical-Baptist newspaper that would advocate the editorial policy of *The Church*.

This new Baptist newspaper, *The Freeman,* came to life with the repeal of the Stamp Tax on newspapers and the support of such denominational leaders as Chown and Acworth of Bradford, Burchell of Rochdale, Landels of Birmingham, Mursell of Leicester and, of course, Evans. The first issue of *The Freeman* under the editorship of Evans was published at Leicester and London on January 24th, 1855. It is quite evident that *The Freeman* was intended to devote itself to the gripping political issues of the day; with the appearance of this younger brother *The Church,* ceasing to be an active political agitator, turned to the spreading and deepening of the gospel.

The Church, in December of 1854, announced in a full-page advertisement that "IN POLITICS, *The Freeman* will be, what it could not but be, liberal and outspoken. It will hold fast to democratic principles, at the same time carefully eschewing the rudeness, empiricism, and vulgarity, with which those principles have been sometimes associated. ON SOCIAL TOPICS, *The Freeman* will be the strenuous advocate of progressional measures, though it will look for social remedies, not so much to any external interference, as to the gradual development of the intellectual, the moral, and the industrial capabilities of the people."[21] *The Freeman* sold for 4½d. a week and carried the banner "The LIBERTY wherewith Christ hath made us free."

The Freeman's popularity grew rapidly and at the end of the third year it boasted of a circulation of 30,000 subscribers who were then paying 4d. (5d. stamped). Evans was quick to realize the value of illustrations in his struggle to increase circulation and in 1858 featured steel engravings of Rippon, R. Hall, J. Foster, J.

Ryland, Kinghorn, Knibb and Burchell, Carey, Marshman and Ward. (These portraits, reduced in size, were later used by *The Church.*) In 1860 *The Freeman* offered portraits of twenty living Baptist ministers to new subscribers.

Arising in an era of liberalism *The Freeman* carried the same banner of radical politics that had been raised by its editor in 1846. The last bit of political news had disappeared from the parent *Church* in 1859. Within three years of its inception *The Freeman* with the recommendation of twenty-five Particular Baptist Associations, the General Baptist Association and the Baptist Union had become the newspaper of British Baptist opinion. Following the tradition of the *Church, The Freeman* merged in 1899 with the *Baptist Times* and continues as the *Baptist Times and Freeman.*

This has been essentially the story of Benjamin Evans, D.D., seen through the historical mirror of his sometimes vitriolic but at all times talented pen. It is indeed difficult to realize that from the time of his call to the pulpit at Scarborough until his retirement in 1864 he was an active pastor as well as a political reformer and editor. He was instrumental in the founding of the North and East Riding Association, the Scarborough Museum, and the Mechanics Institute. Although he resigned the editorship of *The Freeman* in its early years he continued as its writer of ecclesiastical articles and as a contributor on American affairs. He was also the English correspondent for an unnamed American periodical. Evans was especially proud of his work for the Baptist Missionary Society and claimed that he journeyed to London four and five times a year and had the distinction of having never missed a quarterly meeting of that society. Under the auspices of the missionary society at various times he visited Scotland, Ireland and Wales, claiming that he travelled two or three thousand miles every year on missionary work. He was elected to the chair of the Baptist Union in 1858.

One extremely important literary contribution made by Evans was his two-volume contribution to the Bunyan Library's *Early English Baptists* (1862-64). These volumes grew out of a series of *Freeman* articles entitled "Glimpses of the Past." Champlin Burrage in *Early English Dissenters* (1912) commended Evans as "much the ablest of the early English Baptist historical writers" with " . . . the mind of a true historian." Evans merited this praise as a result of his competent use of the early Mennonite archives at Amsterdam upon which he founded his articles.

During his thirty-eight years in the chapel at Scarborough, Evans "retired" four times due to ill-health; however, only the fourth resignation was accepted (1864). He refused to accept inactivity as the price of retirement yet found that others far younger

than he had moved to the fore in the proclamation of those principles for which he had fought since 1826. In a typical gesture he began his final journal, the quarterly *Baptist Record,* in the year of his death, 1871. Much of the life of this Baptist pastor-reformer is shrouded in obscurity and uncertainty. However, enough is visible of the man to mark him as an outstanding leader of militant nonconformity in the mid-nineteenth century.

NOTES

[1] B. Evans, D.D., *A Brief History of the First Baptist Church,* Scarborough, London, 1871, p. 14.

[2] *Ibid.,* p. 15.

[3] *Ibid.,* p. 16. Although Evans never mentions it there is good reason to believe that he also had a hand in the publishing of *The Burgess* at Scarborough in 1836. This paper was published monthly from March, 1835 to February, 1836. Its backing was that of radical nonconformity with the express purpose of promoting the reforms proposed by the Scarborough Association for the Protection and Extension of Civil and Religious Liberty.

[4] *The Northern Baptist,* B. Evans, Scarborough, 1844, Vol. II, p. 181. The aim of Price was "... to win the mass of people by advocating their cause in relation to political rights" (John Waddington, *Congregational History, Continuation to 1850,* London, 1878, p. 578).

[5] *Ibid.,* Vol. III, ii, 1845.

[6] *The Church,* John Heaton, Leeds, Vol. I, p. 81. The publisher Heaton was a well known Leeds Baptist.

[7] *The Baptist Examiner,* J. Burton, Leicester, March, 1845, notes on p. 100.

[8] *Ibid.,* Vol. I, iii.

[9] *The Church,* Vol. II, p. 334.

[10] G. Kitson Clarke, "The Electorate and the Repeal of the Corn Laws." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* 1951.

[11] Carlile, *The Story of the English Baptists,* London, 1905, p. 231.

[12] R. G. Cowherd, *The Politics of Dissent,* London, Epworth, 1959, p. 135; cf. also N. McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League, 1838-1846,* London, Allen & Unwin, 1958, p. 177.

[13] *The Church,* Vol. I, p. 77.

[14] *The Republican,* C. G. Harding, London, Watson, 1848, p. 140.

[15] *The Church,* Vol. VI, p. 177.

[16] E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union,* Carey Kingsgate, London, 1958, p. 84. Payne also makes the point that the 182 Baptist ministers who met at Cobden's Manchester meeting were a far larger number than had so far attended a meeting of the Baptist Union (p. 70). The name of the Anti-State-Church Association was changed in 1854 to the less provocative Society for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control.

[17] *The Church* (1853), Vol. VII, p. 194.

[18] *Op. cit.,* Vol. IX, p. 167 (1854).

[19] *Op. cit.* (1848), Vol. II, p. 148.

[20] *Op. cit.* (1857), Vol. XI, p. 104.

[21] *Op. cit.* (1854), Vol. VIII, p. 308.

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