

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

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

Thomas Dawson of Liverpool

NO standard Baptist history makes mention of the Reverend Thomas Dawson of Liverpool, and even W. T. Whitley's regional survey *Baptists of North West England* accords him only an occasional reference. Yet the career of this remarkable man is illuminating in many ways. It marks an important phase in that reassertion of strict Communion principles which culminated in the formation of the North Western Association (1860-76). It throws considerable light on to the struggles of those depressed down-town chapels of Liverpool, whose history is obscured by the more spectacular progress of the great city churches—Pembroke, Myrtle Street, Richmond and the like. It helps to elucidate the curious and unusual process which led to the eventual founding of Manchester Baptist College in 1872; it was the decisive factor in the setting up of the Liverpool Baptist Union. Finally, we learn with surprise, it was a seminal influence on the career of one of that circle of literary men, commonly, though perhaps misleadingly, known as the Decadents.

Thomas Dawson was born at Longwood, Yorkshire, on the 8th July, 1805. Of his youth little is known. He was baptized at the age of sixteen by Robert Hyde, pastor of the Salendine Nook Church, determined to enter the ministry and studied at Horton College from 1832 to 1834. His first pastorate was at Irwell Terrace Church, Bacup, and here he exercised a distinguished and successful ministry for fifteen years. In the summer of 1851 he accepted a call to Byrom Street Chapel, Liverpool.

Dawson had already established a considerable reputation as a vigorous and forthright evangelist, with a zeal for surmounting apparently insurmountable obstacles yet even he must have hesitated long before deciding to embark on such a hazardous undertaking as this. A brief backward glance at the recent history of the church explains his quandary.

Byrom Street was of course the historic Liverpool church which, though founded originally in Low Hill, Everton, had occupied that particular site since 1710. However, having suffered a number of disastrous schisms, it had during the 1830s and early '40s become almost entirely hyper-Calvinist and was on the verge of extinction when in 1846 the L.N.W. Railway Company, anxious to construct a tunnel from Lime Street to Waterloo Road, offered to purchase the chapel below which the tunnel had perforce to run. The sum offered—£4,250—appeared to the congregation extremely

generous, and they accepted it without further ado, using the money to erect a new Strict and Particular chapel in Shaw Street, where worship, despite extensive damage in World War Two, is still maintained.

On completion of the tunnel, it was discovered that the foundations of Byrom Street were undamaged, and demolition was unnecessary. In consequence the Company offered the building for sale to a group of persons anxious to convert it into a low Music Hall. Fortunately, there was at this time living in Liverpool a certain John Johnson, a very wealthy lime merchant and a grandson of the remarkable minister of the same name who had occupied the Byrom Street pulpit from 1740 to 1748. Mr. Johnson was a deacon of Myrtle Street Chapel; he had as a youth sat at the feet of the greatest minister of Byrom Street, Samuel Medley, and he was most unwilling to see the building pass into the hands of a theatrical company. He therefore purchased it himself for £3,000 and opened it for worship as a Mission Hall on the 23rd of June, 1850. The first missionary (not pastor, for a church had not yet been formed) was the Reverend James Smith who remained for only twelve months (June, 1850-June, 1851) and then removed to Shrewsbury, unconvinced that a church situated in such an impoverished and increasingly Catholic area could have a future of any kind.

Thomas Dawson, as we have seen, succeeded in 1851. He must fully have understood that his position was a most unenviable one. The church building was not vested in trustees, being the private property of an individual to whom all collections were remitted and who paid all expenses, including the missionary's salary. His congregation, consisting of about thirty souls, had not yet moreover covenanted together to form a church.

This latter difficulty was soon remedied and on the 8th December, 1851, Dawson had the satisfaction of seeing a church regularly constituted and himself chosen as minister. By the end of 1852 congregations had doubled, partly through evangelistic work, partly through the adhesion of ex-members of Providence chapel which had just closed. Four years of successful work followed. The church was somewhat handicapped by lack of Sunday School accommodation, for their original schools had been allowed to pass into alien hands. Johnson, however, handsomely made good the deficiency and new buildings were erected in Circus Street, entirely at his own expense, early in 1856.

But on the 2nd December of that year this liberal benefactor died, a bachelor and intestate, leaving approximately £500,000. It was to his sister, the widow of the late Richard Haughton, that the bulk of this fortune was assigned, and she, after forgiving various mortgages on Baptist chapels (including one for £1,000 on

Myrtle Street) divided the bequest between her two sons, retaining only a small portion of the original sum for herself. The Byrom Street property she transferred to her son James, an Anglican, who hastily effected an exchange with his brother John, a Baptist, and a member of the Byrom Street congregation.

We can well appreciate the uneasy feelings of the Reverend Thomas Dawson whilst all these complicated transactions were taking place, feelings which must have been aggravated by the repeated non-payment of salary. Anxiously the minister sought another source of income and usefulness; the post of chaplain and registrar of the Necropolis, the great Liverpool Nonconformist burial ground, was vacant, and early in 1857 Dawson received the appointment which he continued to hold till the cemetery was closed by the Corporation in 1889.

It soon became clear that the new owner of Byrom Street was not content to play the same passive role in the life of the chapel as had satisfied his uncle.

Liverpool Baptists were later on to owe an immense debt to John Haughton, but the latter had his own opinions on the future of the Byrom Street building which he envisaged as an evangelistic mission rather than a church, a view contrary to that of Dawson. Accordingly in January, 1861, the minister accepted a call to the tiny chapel in Soho Street, taking most of the members with him.

All the time he had been at Byrom Street, Dawson had not merely been content to fulfil his ministerial duties—indeed he seems to have been the kind of man who is compelled by some inner dynamic to occupy several different positions at once. Ever since the formation of the Strict Baptist Society in 1845 he had associated himself with that body and throughout its subsequent history and frequent changes of name, had remained one of its most loyal supporters. The principal object of this organization was, of course, to train men on strict communion principle as ministers and missionaries, and in 1852 Dawson had found himself appointed northern tutor of the society. Between that date and 1860 half a dozen or so young men lived in the Dawson household for one or two years, receiving pastoral and academic training of a most exacting nature. Though our list may possibly be incomplete, the names of these students appear to have been: J. Argyle, A. Spencer, A. J. Ashworth, E. Parker (later Principal of Manchester College), L. Nuttal, D. Taylor and J. Davies. Even after his removal to Soho Street and later, Dawson continued to take students. R. H. Brotherton, B. Anderton, T. Durant and F. E. Cossey serving under him during this period. The last named however was in Liverpool for only a few months and became the first student of the new Baptist Theological Institution at Bury (1866) which in turn grew into Man-

chester College (1874). The indebtedness of local churches to these students was considerable. Baptist advance in Birkenhead, Egremont, Old Swan, Clubmoor and in more distant places—particularly the Rossendale Valley—was pioneered and sustained by them. Trained in a hard school they were later to render yeoman service to the churches both at home and overseas.

But to return to Dawson at Soho Street. His pastorate here (1861-63) was short-lived and unhappy. The church was in a very sorry condition, and not even the eager supporters from Byrom Street seemed able to revive it. Dawson naturally took it out of the Lancashire and Cheshire into the North Western Association but that was about the only noteworthy feature of his ministry there. Many members drifted back to Byrom Street which Haughton had now re-opened and finally in the autumn of 1862 Dawson with fifty supporters withdrew to Youd's Assembly Rooms in Brunswick Road, and here a new church was formed early in 1863, and received into the North Western Association a year later.

A period of great spiritual advance at once set in. The fifty members had grown to seventy in 1863 and ninety-five two years later. Branch Sunday Schools were founded in various parts of the Everton district and in September, 1863, Mr. Thomas Durant, one of Dawson's pupils, was engaged as co-pastor of the church. The congregation (entirely working-class in composition) now began to look round for a suitable site on which to erect a new chapel.

Not far from Brunswick Road lay an old and abandoned graveyard of great historic importance to Liverpool Baptists, for hard by had stood their first chapel on Merseyside built by Dr. Daniel Fabius in 1705, the graveyard had been added two years later. The chapel had long since disappeared and no interments had taken place here since 1854. It was this somewhat unlikely site which was chosen for the erection of a new church, to be known as "Fabius," a church which would constitute the first Baptist witness in this part of Everton since the Fabius family had removed thence to Liverpool in 1710.

First of all the surviving trustees of the graveyard, both members of Pembroke chapel, were approached, fell in with the scheme, and wrote to the Secretary of State outlining the whole plan. Permission was soon granted to dig up the gravestones, relay them flat, and build the chapel over the burial ground, without the need for many re-interments. Such an arrangement would certainly not be allowed today, and even in 1863 must have seemed somewhat unusual.

All that remained was to secure the necessary financial help. Pembroke and Myrtle Street were both approached and at a joint meeting with representatives of Brunswick Road Church held early

in 1866 in Pembroke chapel, it was decided not only to launch a fund for the Everton project, but to reconstitute this ad hoc committee as the Liverpool Baptist Union. It is a matter of regret that a few months later the newly formed Union had reluctantly to inform Dawson that they were unable to give financial assistance to the proposed new church.

But this was only the start of a long period of troubles for the struggling Brunswick Road congregation. Late in 1866 they received notice to quit their Assembly Rooms, and moved into a hall in Brunel Street, recently vacated by another Baptist congregation which had just built for themselves the present Richmond church. In Brunel Street Dawson struggled on for four years; the money for the Fabius Building Fund came in slowly and mainly out of the pocket of Mr. John Haughton, though in 1870 a loan was obtained from the Baptist Building Fund. But on March 16th, 1870, at a stormy meeting at Brunel Street called to discuss the perilous financial situation, Dawson and his co-pastor, Durant, quarrelled and the former walked out, never to return. When Fabius church was opened in August, 1871, the aged minister was not present and Thomas Durant was elected sole pastor. Three-quarters of the total cost of £2,200 had been provided by Mr. Haughton and it was probably this factor more than any other which had precipitated Dawson's withdrawal.

From this point onwards a heightened degree of discomfort and tragedy creeps into Dawson's life. With a tiny congregation he secured a fresh lease of the Islington Assembly Rooms (1870-73) and another, for a two-year period (1873-74) of a dingy room in Roscommon Street. But church life was impossible in such conditions. Early in 1875 the congregation dispersed, the majority including Dawson rejoining, at a public "reunion" ceremony, the Fabius church from which Durant had recently resigned and where the Reverend W. E. Lynn was now exercising a highly successful ministry.

Despite his advanced age, however, Dawson could not rest content sitting in a congregation; the impulsion to be active in the Lord's work was too strong for him. Accordingly in June, 1875, he and his followers withdrew from Fabius and together with a handful of others from Mount Vernon Welsh church took a room over a stable in Farnworth Street, an area completely bereft of Evangelical witness. Here a church of thirteen members was formed, with Dawson, now a very old man, as honorary pastor. A year later they had increased to thirty and were worshipping in the Drill Hall, Coleridge Street. Now, with a zeal surprising in one so old, Dawson began to raise money for yet another new church. A strange architectural plan was drawn up whereby the new building could be converted into four dwelling houses in case the cause

failed. A site was acquired in Cottenham Street and the church building was opened in October, 1878. The cost had amounted to £1,150, but once again half the money, to Dawson's regret, had been provided by the ubiquitous benefactor, Mr. John Haughton. Though pressed to take the pastorate, Dawson refused for he was now busy preaching regularly at other churches in the city suburbs and even farther afield.

It would have been pleasant to record that the last years of Thomas Dawson were spent in quiet service to the growing Cottenham Street cause which he had done so much to promote, but such was not to be. With the young David Witton Jenkins, the first minister at Cottenham Street, he had co-operated wholeheartedly but Jenkins' successor, the Reverend Thomas Griffiths, proved the type of man with whom he could neither work nor agree. In 1885 twenty members of Cottenham Street including Dawson, were dismissed to form a separate church. "Dismissed" is perhaps a misleading term for the twenty had no desire to leave—indeed they appealed to the Liverpool Baptist Union for redress. It is difficult to apportion blame for this unfortunate incident, but in Dawson's defence it must be stated that Griffiths' ministry was a singularly unsuccessful one; in fact, by the time of his removal in 1887 the Cottenham Street cause had nearly expired.

Thus once again Dawson found himself pastor of a congregation. The twenty stalwarts took a room in Baker Street for four years (1885-90) and then purchased the old United Methodist Free Church in Empire Street for £600. But under their eighty-five year old minister expansion was unlikely. When Dawson died on the 24th October, 1891, the chief stumbling block to reunion with Cottenham Street was removed and the two churches became one again early in 1892, though, we note, the Empire Street building was retained for evangelistic and other purposes till as late as 1910 when it became "Disciple."

Dawson's death marked the end of an era in the history of Liverpool Baptists and at this point we might well conclude our account of his career were it not for the fact that in a definitive literary biography published recently (R. Whittington-Egan and G. Smerdon *The Quest of the Golden Boy* [1960]) he is mentioned frequently and with obvious affection and respect. While the present writer was searching in the Liverpool Record Office for facts relative to Dawson, he observed that one of the pastor's staunchest followers and one-time treasurer of the Fabius building fund was a certain John Gallienne. But not till the publication of the above-mentioned work did it become clear that this gentleman was in fact the father of the celebrated poet and writer, Richard Le Gallienne, for whose academic upbringing and spiritual training Thomas Dawson was primarily responsible. This perhaps accounts for several unusual

features in Le Gallienne's life. How for example could a member of the Oscar Wilde circle possibly pose as a defender of Christianity against atheistic criticism as Le Gallienne did in the early 1890s? His plea for "Essential Christianity" was perhaps impossible, unacceptable to most orthodox Christians (only the radical intellectuals of Pembroke chapel invited him to lecture to them on the strength of it) and is characteristic of much of the confused Utopian speculation of the period. Yet that it should have come from such a quarter at all is surely surprising and explicable only as a flowering of deep respect for things spiritual implanted in the author as a child by his old tutor and friend Thomas Dawson of Liverpool.

Finally, what of Dawson's work remains today? Of the churches which he and his students helped to found, some continue to bear vital witness down to the present, though the two on which most labour was expended, Tuebrook and Old Swan, have long since ceased to be. As regards the two churches for whose foundation Dawson was directly responsible, Fabius and Cottenham Street, only the latter still survives, carrying on valuable work in difficult circumstances such as demand the highest qualities of firmness and zeal from the small congregation which assembles there. Fabius church is now empty and derelict, having been closed recently under a compulsory planning order. Presumably the children who are always breaking in and running about the deserted building do not know of the graveyard which lies beneath their feet. Certainly few people in Liverpool will ever have heard of Daniel Fabius who lies buried there and fewer still of Thomas Dawson to whose labours the church owed its origin a hundred years ago.

IAN SELLERS