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John Gill in London, 1719-1729
A Biographical Fragment

JOHN GILL (1697-1771) still awaits an adequate biography[1] although he was probably the most influential Particular Baptist minister of his generation. His single pastorate, which stretched through half a century, provided him with a London pulpit from which to oppose his own exalted version of Calvinism to what he considered the doctrinal heterodoxy of his day, whether Arian or Wesleyan. Nevertheless the elderly oracle who struts the pages of John Rippon's *Memoir* seems rather less than human partly, no doubt, because of the lack of detailed source material, partly because of Rippon's inadequacies as a biographer. Perhaps Gill hardly justified a Boswell, certainly he had not the fortune to discover one.

It happens, however, that there is material for a plausible reconstruction of his first ten years as a London minister which had not been used until some of it was touched upon in the course of a recent study of Thomas Crosby.[2] After that study had been completed a query remained as to why, at a crucial point in their relationship,[3] Gill, who owed a considerable debt of gratitude to Crosby, almost without warning, turned from him and joined in the moves which led to his excommunication. Crosby was himself surprised and hurt by this treatment and wrote "What should induce this man to act as he has done, is what fills me with wonder. In all our conversation, never nothing else but sincere friendship appeared on both sides; I always sought his interest and advantage, and was always generous and free, both towards him and all that belonged to him."[4] It is the intention of this article to attempt to explain the question which so puzzled Thomas Crosby. To do this it will be necessary briefly to describe the relationships between the congregations forming the London Baptist community, the events surrounding John Gill's early months in London, and something of his own activities in the years which followed.

In 1719 there were probably[5] eight General Baptist congregations in London, fifteen Particular Baptists, two Seventh Day Baptist, and at least one other which was not, at the time, firmly aligned with any group. Whilst the London Baptists had, as a group, joined for some years past with the Presbyterians and Independents, as occasion required, in the presentation of addresses to the throne there was, as yet, no other formal machinery in being for co-operation between the Three Denominations. Within the London Baptist community itself, however, there were two[6] monthly meetings of ministers, one of which at the Hanover Coffee House, included both Generals and Particulars, and the other, at Blackwell's Coffee House, included Particular Baptist

ministers only. In addition there were at least two other schemes binding some of these congregations more closely together : first, the joint management of the Baptistery on Horslydown, Southwark and, secondly, the administration of the Particular Baptist Fund. The foundation of the latter in 1717, to benefit Calvinists only, had led to monthly meetings to which those churches sharing in its management sent their minister and one other delegate for every £50 of capital subscribed.

John Gill had been born at Kettering 23rd November, 1697, so, when he came to London in the early summer of 1719, he was not yet 22 years of age. Of his parents, Edward and Elizabeth Gill, John Rippon was later to write in a characteristic turn of phrase,[7] " By the indulgent Providence of God, they were equally delivered from the snares of poverty and affluence ". Their son early won a reputation for being a voracious reader but, after his withdrawal from the local grammar school because the master insisted that all his charges should attend daily prayer at the parish church, he was largely self-taught. He was baptised 1st November, 1716, and was received into communion with the Baptist Church in Kettering by the pastor, Thomas Wallis, the following Sunday. His fellow churchmembers were soon greatly impressed with his gifts as an expositor and the church forthwith[8] " called him to exercise his ministerial gift in public, and sent him forth as a minister of the word ". Shortly afterwards he went to live with the pastor of the church at Higham Ferrers,[9] one John Davis, both to study with him and to assist him in his pastoral work. Whilst there he met, and in 1718 he married, Elizabeth Negus, who was in membership with Davis's congregation. It was during this period that he was brought to the notice of one of the managers of the Particular Baptist Fund, a London minister, John Noble, who nominated him for a grant.[10] The following year, in October, 1719, it was agreed to make him a further grant of £5[11] " in Consideracon of his Last Years service in ye Church at Kettering" whither he had returned to act as assistant to the minister for a while. It is worth noting that, by the time this decision was taken, his name was well known to the managers of the Fund not only as a promising youngster in the provinces but as the minister-elect of one faction in an important London congregation.

It was, then, this young man from the Midlands, 21 years old, recently married, and with some talent for preaching who, in May or June, 1719, first came to preach as a possible candidate for the pastorate of the congregation meeting at Goat Yard, Horslydown, Southwark. The church had been founded by Benjamin Keach who had died only 15 years before and who had been succeeded by his son-in-law, Benjamin Stinton.

It was Stinton's unexpected death in February that had caused the vacancy which Gill hoped to fill. In membership when he arrived were the widows of both Keach and Stinton with other

members of both families and, particularly, Thomas Crosby, another son-in-law to Keach and a great admirer of Stinton. Not only had Keach been one of the outstanding Baptist leaders of the latter part of the 17th century but his congregation had grown strong during his ministry and its very doctrine and constitution had been shaped and moulded by his mind.[12]

Some of the story of Gill's first years in London has already been told elsewhere,[13] insofar as it formed part of the biography of Thomas Crosby, for Crosby was, from the first, Gill's most emphatic supporter and was, more than any other single person, responsible for the events which followed. On 13th September, 1719, by a majority vote in churchmeeting it was decided to invite John Gill to become pastor. This majority, however, was obtained by counting the votes of the women members and it was argued, by those who opposed Gill's appointment, that a majority of the men were against the decision. They then asserted, probably justly, that it had not been customary for the church to count the votes of the sisters in a matter of so much importance. Nevertheless Gill accepted the invitation and, after service on Sunday, 27th September, it was decided by his adherents to lay their version of the case before the two boards of ministers.[14] The letter in which this was done was interesting[15] not only because it implied that the ministers were at that time the accepted court of appeal for a church in difficulties but also for the somewhat fulsome terms in which its introduction was couched : " Next unto God himself, we look upon it to be our Duty to make our appeal unto you, who are his chosen ambassadours, and qualifyed by him for the Good of his people and therefore as we hope your prayers have not been, nor will be wanting for us, so we likewise trust you will give us all the Christian direction you are capable of, and Judge impartially with respect to the Difference betwixt us and our Brethn."

In a letter dated 8th October at the Hanover Coffee House[16] the ministers gave their advice after a meeting which has unfortunately left no trace in the Hanover Coffee House records. They upheld Gill's opponents' view that the matter should have been decided by a majority of the brethren and recommended that he should continue to preach once a Sunday on probation and that those who opposed him should provide the preacher of their choice for the other part of the day until an agreed solution could be arrived at. Gill's supporters utterly rejected this advice of the men whom they had earlier termed God's " chosen ambassadours " and took measures to constitute themselves a separate congregation.

Furthermore they underlined their conviction that they were in the right by recording in their new Churchbook that, as the more numerous section of the congregation Benjamin Stinton had pastored, they, and not those who disagreed with them, were " The Church at Horslydown lately under the Pastoral Care of the

Reverend Mr. Benja. Stinton". They also recorded their subscription to the covenant of Benjamin Keach as published in 1697 when they gathered together on 11th October, 1719 in a disused meetinghouse which they had contrived to rent.[17]

From the point of view of the remainder of Stinton's congregation and of the London Baptist community at large, as represented by the Boards of ministers, Gill's group was not an orderly congregation but a stubborn and disorderly faction in schism from a congregation. The other section had the recognition of the London ministers, it included all the deacons,[18] and probably the greater part of the wealthier, more influential, churchmembers.[19] The future outlook, therefore, was somewhat bleak for John Gill and it is quite clear, from the available evidence, that he was thrown, whether he wished it or not, into the arms of the Keach-Stinton family group of which Thomas Crosby was the most outstanding personality. Ahead lay several months of struggle even for limited recognition and it was, in fact, some years before the wounds now opened could be considered largely healed.

It is notable that the young man around whom these storm clouds gathered was to play little active or public part in the events of the next few months : he signed none of the letters which fluttered to and fro between the various parties to the dispute. In the forefront of the battle were others, notably, of course, Thomas Crosby. Nevertheless it would be difficult to over-estimate the importance of John Gill's unwavering conviction that it had been right to accept the invitation which had been extended to him in such unfortunate circumstances. For Gill's own stand was the key to the situation : if he remained firm long enough he could hope to live down the initial opposition ; if he faltered, his own future as a minister in London was in grave doubt. Whilst there can be no doubt that his firmness stemmed from his own certainty that this was God's will for him the prospect was one before which most men of his age would have quailed. That he was not at this time deficient in self-confidence was hinted by Robert Morgan, one of his opponents, when he confessed on one occasion during the previous summer his reluctant belief that[20] "Mr. Gill might become a usefull man, if it should please God to keep him humble".

Meanwhile Gill's adherents sent to Kettering to request his transfer in order that he should become their pastor and, on 20th October, rejected an approach from the other side suggesting a solution on the lines suggested by the ministers earlier. As Crosby himself pointed out,[21] such an agreement would only prolong the uncertainty about the pastorate indefinitely without any guarantee of unanimity at the end of it all. The reaction of the other side to this reply was, he said, to begin a war of nerves by a whispering campaign directed to reminding Gill's supporters that all the London ministers were opposed to them as "Schismaticks, Fools,

Beggars and the like", and to hinting darkly at the dreadful consequences which would befall those so evidently isolated in wrongdoing.

Meanwhile there was at least one exception to the alleged common front against Gill's congregation in London for, on 25th October, the venerable Mark Key, minister at Devonshire Square, visited them to administer the Lord's Supper. The next significant event was the reading of a letter, at churchmeeting on 11th November, from Kettering releasing Gill from membership and commending him to the congregation on Horslydown. This letter is quoted in full both as illustrating the churchmanship of the Particular Baptists of the period and also for its intrinsic interest for the story of John Gill himself.[22]

"Dearly beloved in the Lord we received your Letter sent to us dated ye 15th of October, 1719, Wherein you desire and request of us to give up our Dear Brother in Christ Mr. Jno. Gill to you. We having also his desire to be dismist to you made known to us. This may certify you that we having taken the Matter into Consideration do think it our Duty to grant his and your request as judging that a Church ought not to be made a prison to any of its members so as to detain them against their wills though we are deeply sensible of the great Loss we sustain thereby, and cannot but acknowledge the Frowns of Divine Providence upon us in this regard. But seeing it must be so in order to your and his contentment and spiritual advantage we do dismiss him unto you discharging him from his near relation and obligation unto us and commit him to your particular Watch and Care as a person whom we doubt not partakes of the Grace of God in Christ and hath walked in all good Conscience and Holy Conversation amongst us Desiring you to receive him in the Lord and that you will be every way helpfull to him to the promoting to his Edification and Comfort and that he in the hand of Christ may be a blessing to you for which spiritual ends we commend you and him with you to the Lord and the Word of his Grace who is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all them that are sanctified Declaring withal that upon his actual joyning with you we shall look upon his particular relation as actual member with us to cease. We salute you in the Lord and rest your Loving Brethren in Gospell Bonds."

On 15th November the Churchbook recorded that he was "received a Member in full Communion with the Church". On the following Tuesday it was decided that John Gill's ordination should be held on 28th December and that Crosby's key position in the life of the congregation should be recognised in his appointment as treasurer and as the one who should "register the Acts of the Church from time to time". On the following Sunday another minister, John Curtis, from Wapping, came to administer the Lord's Supper. According to Crosby one consequence of this was an

anonymous letter of rebuke from Gill's opponents to Curtis[23] and, in fact, some months later the opposing churchmeeting sent a formal letter to Curtis.[24] This made it abundantly clear that they regarded Gill's members as disorderly members of theirs and that anyone who administered aid and comfort to them must be regarded as interfering in the internal affairs of another congregation. Should he continue to do so they threatened to refer the matter to his, Curtis's, own congregation "or others", presumably the Baptist ministers of London, for discipline.

On Thursday, 26th November, the deacons' election led to the appointment of Thomas Stone, John Jones, John Smith and Thomas Crosby. It was also agreed that three ministers, Mark Key, David Rees and John Curtis, should be invited to ordain John Gill and his deacons and that invitations be given generally to both Boards of ministers to invite them to the ordination. That these invitations all met with refusals is quite evident from what followed as, early in January, Thomas Crosby wrote a lengthy letter to the ministers at the Hanover Coffee House[25] in an attempt to win their sympathy. To this the ministers made no reply.

Meanwhile, since the lease of the Goat Yard meetinghouse had run out in mid-summer, 1719, Gill's opponents were themselves under notice to move. A letter to Joseph Burroughes,[26] minister at Paul's Alley, Barbican, described the circumstances in which Gill's congregation negotiated successfully with the owner for a renewal of the lease and its transfer to them : the others were to move out by midsummer, 1720. Crosby was appointed one of the six trustees at a churchmeeting held 12th January, 1720[27] when it was agreed "to take a Lease of the Meetinghouse for the Term of 40¾ years and to repair the same with all needfull and necessary reparations and likewise to Insure £300 thereupon from Damages that may be sustained by Fire". Step by step, though still unrecognised by the wider London Baptist community, John Gill and his congregation were establishing themselves.

During this period in early January, 1720, some of the London ministers had been privately urging that some sort of reconciliation ought to be patched up between Gill's supporters and his opponents.[28] Consequently another decision was taken at churchmeeting on 12th January, which was not, oddly enough, recorded in the Churchbook, to send a deputation from Gill's congregation to enquire whether the others would be prepared to re-open the matter of the voting the previous September or, alternatively, whether[29] "they were willing to concurr in an amicable parting by consent". The reply, dated 24th January, 1720,[30] showed no disposition on the part of Gill's opponents to advance on their earlier position.

At the churchmeeting held by Gill's congregation on 9th February, it was agreed to attempt one final appeal to Goat Yard. This

concluded[31] "We desire peace and have endeavoured after those things which make for it and do once more for the sake of peace and that the Interest of Christ and honr of the Gospel may not be reproached renew our Enquiry Whether you are amicably and friendly and Christianlike to agree to a parting by Joint consent That so we may become two Churches of the same Faith and Order in perfect Love and harmony forgiving and forgetting all offences of what Nature or Kind soever. But if you are not willing thus Christianlike to Comply then we do acquaint you That we are a Church of Christ being set down in Covenant with God and one another and as such purpose in the Strength of Christ to abide being able to make it appear That our Separation and Settlement is more reasonable and Justifiable than several other Churches now in Honour and Reputation and will leave the Issues thereof to Divine providence Wishing you Grace Mercy and peace a Quiet settlement and a Pastor to go in and out before you to train you up for the Kingdom of Glory Signed by us . . . " Before this meeting closed a delegation was also appointed to approach the ministers meeting at Blackwell's Coffee House[32] " to Desire their Concurrence and Assistance at the Ordination of our Pastor and Deacons and to do and order all other affairs necessary and relating thereunto ". Since Gill's supporters were unlikely to make such an approach to invite another snub from the ministers it seems probable, and the tone of the letter just quoted supports this view, that they had been informally told that if they made one last effort towards a reconciliation the ministers would then be prepared to help.

On the other hand a letter from the other congregation dated 27th February[33] made it quite clear that they were not at present prepared to accept an amicable parting. The ordination was arranged for 22nd March, 1720, and since Gill's opponents would not sanction the use of the Goat Yard meetinghouse for the occasion, the service took place in the smaller meetinghouse which his adherents had been renting since the previous autumn.

On 20th March[34] the Church formally and unanimously renewed their invitation to John Gill to accept the pastorate and he then formally renewed his acceptance.

On the following Tuesday the meetinghouse was packed so full that the ministers who were to share in the service were hardly able to struggle through to their places at the Communion table. After a prayer had been offered and a psalm sung, John Skepp of Cripplegate, the presiding minister, asked the formal preliminary questions proper to the occasion which were answered by Crosby on behalf of the church. The first question asked why the ministers had been summoned. Crosby replied that the church " having called Mr. Jno. Gill to the pastoral office and He having freely accepted the same are met together this day solemnly to sett him apart and fix him and have called in you for advice and assistance

for the more orderly performance of the same". Next he was asked for some account of the circumstances in which the invitation had been given. After he had responded with a brief narrative of the course of events he was asked first, whether Gill had been received into membership in an orderly manner and, secondly, whether he had been given and had accepted "an orderly Call to the Work of a Pastor". After affirmative answers had been given in both cases two ministers were called on to offer prayer.

At this point John Noble who, it will be remembered, had been the first to introduce Gill's name to the managers of the Particular Baptist Fund nearly two years before, took over the conduct of the service. He summoned the churchmembers to gather round the Communion table but the crush was so great that he had to ask them to remain where they were but to rise in their places whilst the rest of the assembly remained seated. Then he told the churchmembers, "Brethren, we desire you now to Confirm your unanimous Choice of Mr. Gill for your pastor by a solemn lifting up of your hands". After their hands had been raised he turned to John Gill and said, "If you as in the presence of God do heartily accept of this solemn Call of this Church to the pastoral office, signify the same to this Church now by a free and solemn declaration". Crosby noted[35] "The which he did and spake briefly to ye 4 following things viz : That he took the Word of God for his Rule, the spirit of God for his guide, The promises of God for his support and Christs fullness for the supply of all his wants".

After Gill's declaration two other ministers, significantly enough John Curtis and Mark Key, ordained him to his pastoral office "by laying on of hands". Next Noble called upon the church to confirm the appointment of their deacons "which being done they were likewise ordained and sett apart for that office Bro. Gill joyning with the other Elders therein". Mr. Noble then addressed the pastor and deacons upon their responsibilities from Acts 20.28 and Mr. Skepp the church on theirs from Hebrews 13.17. The account in the Churchbook concluded, with every evidence of satisfaction, "The Discourses we had from these Texts (which were very excellent and suitable to the work of the day) being ended Brother Gill went up and prayed Then the 133d Psalm was sung from Mr. Patrick's Version and afterwards Brother Gill dismissed the assembly with one of the Apostolical benedictions. There were present at this Solemn Assembly Ten Ministers of the Gospell".

The first great hurdle towards full recognition of Gill and his congregation within the London Baptist community was now surmounted but a note in the Churchbook of his opponents underlined their view that these proceedings had been quite irregular :[36] "The People adhering to Mr. Gill were this day set down in a church

State—And Mr. Gill ordained their Pastor. N.B. They where never dismissed from us." Some small evidence of the lasting bitterness which had been engendered was the unlovely wrangle between the two congregations over the ownership of the pews of the Goat Yard meetinghouse. These were eventually sold upon their departure to Unicorn Yard in midsummer, 1720, by Gill's opponents to their erstwhile brethren for the sum of £10.

There were, however, further hints of continuing tensions within the wider Baptist community in London suggesting hostility towards Gill and his congregation even after the ordination. According to the records of the Hanover Coffee House meetings it was at the monthly gathering in May, 1720, that the proposal was made[37] "yt Mr. Gill be Invited to become a Member of this society". Membership, according to their constitution, was open to all those who were, or had been, pastors of London churches and who lived near the capital. It was not recorded who proposed Gill for membership but it was probably one of those present who had taken a leading part in his ordination some six weeks earlier : either Mark Key or John Skepp. However, there were at least two ministers present who had strongly opposed Gill during the previous winter, Richard Parks[38] and David Rees. The full minute read "A Motion being made yt Mr. Gill be Invited to become a Member of this Society & the Rule for Inviteing persons in such Cases not being produc'd att this Time ; Agreed yt ye Consideration of ye sd Motion be referd to our next Monthly Meeting & yt ye Secretary take Care to produce ye sd Rule att ye Time". Such a minute, although undoubtedly most discreet, makes it difficult to reconstruct the situation with complete certainty.

However, it seems probable that "such Cases" were those in which members differed among themselves since, when the matter was taken up again that autumn[39] the rule discussed, apparently in connection with John Gill, was[40] that "no Question nor any Debate upon a Question shall be admitted relateing to any Opinions in Doctrine or Discipline wherein ye Members of this Society are known to differ among themselves". Undoubtedly it had originally been drafted to prohibit endless doctrinal debate within a group including both Calvinists and Arminians but the word "Discipline" could reasonably be held to apply to such a matter as the different reactions among the London ministers to the flat rejection of their advice the previous year by Gill and his adherents. At all events the dust appears to have settled by the October meeting when it was decided that[41] "Mr. Skepp and Mr. Noble do Invite the sd Mr. Gill to become a Member of this Society". His name thereafter appeared with fair regularity as among those present at the meetings for the next two years or so. Unfortunately no records remain from this period of the meetings at Blackwell's Coffee House of the London Baptist Calvinistic

ministers : it seems reasonable to deduce that, since the whole affair was primarily a matter for the Calvinists, the decision taken at the Hanover Coffee House meeting would be followed at Blackwell's. After 1724 the extant records shew that he was certainly a regular and active member of this group.[42]

Meanwhile one important matter still remained in dispute between Gill's congregation now in possession of the newly repaired and redecorated[43] meetinghouse, which had been the scene of the ministries of both Benjamin Keach and his son-in-law, and the other section of Stinton's congregation housed in the new meetinghouse in Unicorn Yard. Towards the close of Stinton's ministry, when the first investments were made in the Particular Baptist Fund in 1717, his congregation had contributed £150 and so obtained the right to send their minister and three other delegates to the monthly meetings for the management of the fund. Now that the congregation was divided virtually into two halves Gill's people laid claim to half of what had been Stinton's church's share. By the close of 1720 William Arnold had become the new minister at Unicorn Yard and it is clear from the records of the Fund that the congregation there was still considered to hold the whole stock and therefore to be entitled to send their pastor and three others to the management meetings.[44] One of these, Abraham Atkins, had been prominent in the affairs of the Fund since its commencement, and it seems possible that he, who had been one of Gill's firmest opponents, may have been responsible for the delay in settling Gill's claim. At all events Gill did not attend his first meeting as a manager of the Fund until[45] 3rd March, 1724.

This lapse of time is a further indication of the way in which the tensions between the two congregations even after Gill's ordination were reflected in the London Baptist community outside them. The first approach, suggesting that Gill's congregation might like to share in the management of the Fund, was not even decided upon by the managers' meeting until 5th June, 1722.[46] At church-meeting in August[47] Gill's congregation informed representatives of the managers that they had a right to half the sum originally contributed by Stinton's church " and that if the other part of the Church would raise among them £25 we would do the Like That so our first Stock of 150£ might become 200£ and Each Church entituled to 100£s thereof ". Representatives of the managers then met Arnold's congregation and, at the managers' September meeting, it was decided that a compromise proposal should be adopted[48] " that if the Church under the care of Mr. Arnold will Remitt one of their Messeng. in favo. of the Church under Mr. Gill and Mr. Gills Church will rays £50 to bring into this ffund they shall be kindly Reced and have Right to send 2 Messengers ". This modified financial arrangement, together with the promise of a " kindly " reception (what sort of reception had been in prospect

earlier ?), was suggested to Gill's October churchmeeting but an answer was then postponed until the matter could be laid[49] " before the whole Church ". In March, 1723, representatives of the management of the Fund were again in touch with Gill and had to report that the matter was still not settled. This was, no doubt, partly due to a new cause of tension between the two congregations : Thomas Crosby was in process of leaving Gill's fellowship for Arnold's. At all events the records for the Particular Baptist Fund in 1723 had no reference to John Gill after the March meeting until it was reported in December that he and his church had agreed to the conditions suggested to them in October, 1722.

In three vital matters John Gill had now established both his own position and that of his congregation among the others composing the London Baptist community of his day : he had received the support of the ministers at his ordination, he had been welcomed into the Coffee House fellowships of the London ministers, and he and his church had a share in the administration of the Particular Baptist Fund—the most important co-operative undertaking among the Calvinistic Baptists of the time. It is now necessary, however, to turn to an examination of his relationship with Thomas Crosby, who had so far played a leading part in Gill's introduction to London and in his struggle, and that of his congregation, for recognition.

There were two strands in the story as Crosby told it and, unfortunately, for much of the story he remains the only witness. Nevertheless, in his earlier accounts, where it has been possible to check his facts, he has been found to be generally reliable and so it seems reasonable here that he should be treated as both honest and accurate in his narrative of the facts as he saw them.[50] The two strands were Mrs. Gill's illness and its consequences on the one hand and the jealousy felt by some other churchmembers for Crosby's friendship with Gill on the other.

It was apparently in August, 1720, that Elizabeth Gill had a miscarriage. As a result she considered herself, and was treated by her husband, as an invalid for the seven or eight months which followed. During this period her husband's injudicious expenditure upon delicacies for her and her habit of brushing aside the injunctions to pull herself together given by some women members, including Susannah Keach, Benjamin's widow and Thomas Crosby's resident mother-in-law, aroused considerable criticism in the church. At last, in March, 1721, Crosby decided to invite Gill out to the Ram's Head tavern to warn him what was being said and to suggest that his wife was malingering. This rather blunt suggestion was, Crosby thought at the time, taken quite well by the minister and it did no apparent outward harm to their relationship. Indeed, when Mrs. Gill went home to Northamptonshire to con-

valesce, her husband went to stay with the Crosbys as their guest for two or three months.

Meanwhile some other churchmembers were becoming jealous of the Crosby-Gill alliance and suggested that Crosby had bought Gill's friendship by two gifts of £20 from money entrusted to him as Treasurer to be used at his discretion for "the minister and poor of the Church". These, and perhaps other, criticisms so irked Crosby that on 17th July, 1722, he informed the church that he had decided[51] "to resign the said trust reposed in him and Delivered into the hands of Bro. Jones . . . the Ballance of his Accompts due to the Church as appears by their publick Accompt Book which he at the same time likewise delivered unto them". Some seven months later he was accused of defrauding the church and, soon after he had triumphantly been cleared, he received a visit from Gill. On this visit, Crosby recorded,[52] "He desired me not to leave the church on this occasion, tells me, he had rather twenty of them should leave it, than me, and that if I had not justice done me, he would preach no more to them ; and pressed earnestly to know, whether I would stay, if I had justice done me. My affection for Mr. Gill, with his earnest intreaties, made me promise to him that I would, and then he took his leave of me with very great satisfaction". Consequently Crosby, who went to the next churchmeeting expecting his minister's support when he asked for a vote of confidence, was amazed and upset to find that Gill took the lead in refusing any such resolution. This action certainly requires some explanation since, unless Crosby had totally misunderstood him, Gill broke a clear promise to support him. However, the explanation of this is probably not far to seek. It was clear from Crosby's own narrative that, although his honour had been vindicated in the matter of the church accounts, the feelings against him which had originally provoked the incident were still very much alive. This was underlined by Gill's own report to Crosby that the people concerned had told their pastor that "if he would be on their side all would be well". In such a situation it is quite likely that Gill had second thoughts about the wisdom of insisting upon a vote of confidence in Crosby which might still further divide the church and reawaken a conflict which might otherwise now die down. Certainly what Crosby reported Gill as saying to him in the course of the churchmeeting supports this interpretation and suggests a minister trying to avoid a difficult, and perhaps explosive, situation[53] : "to my great surprize, Mr. Gill was the first, that opposed my request, and urged . . . that no body had any thing to charge against me, and that it would be an impeachment of the church to grant my request, and further told me it was sufficient they had done it, at the Audit of the accounts". If this reconstruction is correct Gill's chief mistake was one of tactics : he should have explained his intentions to Crosby beforehand and have urged

him also to let sleeping dogs lie. Such a mistake may have been the result of inexperience, equally, in view of what followed it may have been the result of a growing lack of patience with Crosby.

At all events the immediate consequence was that Crosby left the meeting angrily intending, as he told them, to transfer his membership to another congregation. However, when he had cooled down, he wrote to Gill a few days later saying that he had decided not to seek a transfer since he had discovered that his removal might precipitate the withdrawal of others. Gill's reply was unexpectedly severe. In a letter dated 11th March, 1723, he expressed his surprise that Crosby had changed his mind and complained bitterly of the Ram's Head tavern conversation two years previously. Now Crosby had resigned Gill seemed determined to keep him out and, at the next churchmeeting on 26th March, 1723, he added his own complaints about Crosby's earlier criticisms of his wife to the more formal ones made by the church.

It is difficult to assess the major motives in this attack launched by John Gill upon a man to whom he owed, at the very least, a considerable debt of gratitude, in the absence of Gill's own version of these events. There is the evidence that, from his first coming to London, Gill himself did not lack self-confidence and that only a man with a firm will would have survived the circumstances of his arrival there. On the other hand, there is also abundant evidence that Crosby was generous but not good at handling personal relationships[54] and was fiery in temper and probably lacking in much talent for self-criticism. In addition, Gill's position was fairly secure now and he had not the same need for the belligerent partisan of earlier days. It is also clear, from the fact that he dragged the old business of the criticisms of his wife out into the open after two years, that in fact Crosby's comments then had not been accepted, forgiven and forgotten as readily as the latter had, perhaps, thought. Besides this Gill's judgment may have been in part one of political policy—that it was more important to keep Crosby's opponents loyal than it was to keep the Keach-Stinton family group. Whilst all these factors were probably at work I believe it possible that another was more powerful than any of them although to some degree related to several of them. Gill's ministry had so far been carried on in the shadow of the Keach-Stinton tradition : the very meetinghouse had been built and then enlarged for the congregations drawn by Keach's sermons ; Keach's widow had led the criticisms of his wife ; Keach's son-in-law had played a notable part in founding the joint ministers' meeting Gill had needed to join to gain recognition ; Gill's own presence in Southwark was largely the result of the untiring efforts of Keach's other son-in-law ; and, above all, the very covenant, constitution and confession of faith of the church, even down to the practice, rare among Particular Baptists, of laying hands on candidates for

membership, all bore the mark and impress of Keach's personality.

It was this last factor, I believe, that may finally have decided Gill to be finished with Crosby once and for all. And if this suggestion is correct the irony of Crosby's letter attempting to retract his decision to leave the church on the grounds that if he did he would take others with him is the more devastating. For it was largely a family group who eventually left Goat Yard with Thomas Crosby—as Gill must have known it would be.[55] So it may have been precisely the reason that Crosby felt should make him withdraw his resignation that was one which encouraged Gill to let him go—to get rid of the foremost living exponents of the Keach-Stinton tradition in the life of his church.

A further irony in the situation was the fact that the dissident group all eventually joined Arnold's congregation at Unicorn Yard. Naturally this did not help to ease relations between the two churches. When, in June, 1723, two representatives from Unicorn Yard visited Gill's congregation to ask for the transfer of Crosby's nephew, Samuel Stinton, their request was refused. The grounds for this refusal were, first, that Stinton was himself in dispute with the Goat Yard church and therefore could not be commended as in good standing and, secondly, that[56] " the two different Congregations had not as yet owned each other as Sister Churches & 'till that was done we could not see how we could regularly give or take dismissions ". In fact the formal recognition of each other as sister churches was not arranged until 1727 when Arnold's congregation took the initiative.[57] Obviously, in 1723, these tensions were in part the cause of the lull in the negotiations about Gill's representatives in the management of the Particular Baptist Fund. Gill's first attendance as a manager in March, 1724, came just a few weeks after his last attendance at the joint ministers' gathering at the Hanover Coffee House. From now on his lot was cast with the Particular Baptists and with them alone.

At this point it is proper to turn to a review of the less dramatic internal affairs of Gill's congregation from the initial renewal of the Keach covenant on 11th October, 1719, to the acceptance by the church of Gill's own covenant 25th March, 1729. Gill's first biographer[58] stated that from the commencement of his ministry " large additions were made to the church, year after year, for a considerable time ". In point of fact this is not an accurate description of the figures for the years 1719-1729.[59] After the reception of 42 members in the period ending 31st December, 1720, and a further 24 during the following year the numbers of new members ceased to be particularly large. Furthermore since, in the course of the ten years under review, there were at least 20 deaths and more than 20 people appear to have been excommunicated, it is unlikely that the membership, which at the beginning was about 90 strong, would have more than doubled by 1729.

Various arrangements made for the internal life of the congregation during this period were noted in the Churchbook. In November, 1721, not only were four brethren appointed to visit those who had been slow to help discharge the costs incurred in repairing the meetinghouse the year before but a regular scheme for the visitation of the membership was also launched. The Churchbook recorded the decision :[60] "That a List of all the members be drawn out with their place of Abode in 4 Divisions and that Two of the Brethren be appointed for each Division Once in Every year to visit every member in their said Division." At the same churchmeeting it was agreed to contribute thirty shillings toward the repair of the jointly administered Horslydown baptistery and that John Gill should be the Goat Yard congregation's trustee. This was one small further step in consolidating his own and his congregation's position among the Southwark Baptists.

In May, 1722, it was noted that the church had agreed to spend the time at churchmeetings waiting for a quorum of brethren to arrive[61] in prayer. This suggestion may be safely traced to Gill himself who had persuaded the church the year before to hold a quarterly "Day of Humiliation and prayer". Meanwhile, the departure of Thomas Crosby in 1723, and the death of John Smith[62] in April, 1724, left two vacancies in the diaconate. After an election on 28th April two men were invited to join the diaconate and by the August meeting they had both agreed to do so. It was on this occasion that it was decided they should "officiate as Deacons next Lords day in attendance at ye Lords table". Oddly enough it was not finally decided to hold[63] "a day of prayer for ye ordination and setting apart Bro. Deale & Bro. Turner to ye office of Deacons in this Church" until May, 1727 ! On this occasion there was no suggestion that ministers from outside should join in their ordination and, in fact, the date decided upon for the event, 30th May, 1727, passed without remark in the Churchbook.

The funeral sermon for John Smith published in 1724[64] was apparently Gill's first venture into print. Apparently, the welcome this received emboldened him to publish a second piece of exposition that same year which was reprinted[65] in 1725. This, on the theme of Urim and Thummim as prophetic of Christ was of no special theological importance but was effectively worked out within the expository conventions of the time. It was late on in 1724[66] that he began his exposition, in 122 weekly instalments, of the Song of Songs. The writer of the 1773 *Memoir* claimed that it was the publication of this work in 1728 which[67] "served very much to make Mr. Gill known . . . and, perhaps, no work he ever published has been more useful to private Christians and families, than this has been". Such a judgment of a contemporary upon the popularity of the book has some importance but it is probable that Gill became more widely known among Baptists for the two

books he wrote defending believer's baptism by immersion[68] in an arid debate in 1726-27 with Matthias Maurice[69] of Rothwell, in Northamptonshire. It is doubtful whether his last book from this period, *The Prophecies of the Old Testament, respecting the Messiah consider'd,* intended as a contribution to the debate between the orthodox and the deists, was of any great value.

Nevertheless these early writings won him a circle of admirers drawn not only from his own denomination and in 1729 some of them invited him to undertake a weekly lecture in Great Eastcheap. He maintained this lecture for twenty-seven years[70] thereafter and it provided both the first occasion for, and the first hearing of, a number of his later full-length theological works.

Churchmeeting in January, 1729[71] brought a suggestion from the church at Cripplegate[72] for a merger of the two congregations. Indeed the Cripplegate church had already made the concrete proposal that "Bro. Gill might preach to 'em one part of ye day for some time, untill a union be come at". After some debate the Goat Yard congregation decided first, that the union should be sought provided it could be arranged on proper terms and a new meetingplace could be decided upon which would suit both congregations. Secondly, that Gill was left free to decide whether he should preach at Cripplegate once a Sunday for a month only. Thirdly, that the deacons and four other brethren were to discuss the matter further with the church at Cripplegate.

At the next churchmeeting it was noted that[73] the delegates reported that a number of difficulties had arisen and it was agreed to shelve plans for a merger at least for a time. But this gathering was significant for another reason : it was there that the first steps were taken to remove the shadow of Benjamin Keach from the ministry of John Gill once and for all. First, the church listened to Gill's objections to the practice, inherited[74] from Keach, of laying hands upon all those admitted into membership, and agreed "yt he be left at his liberty in yt point for ye future". The other decision was even more far-reaching : "It was also agreed yt a declaration of ye faith and practise of the church be drawn up by Bro. Gill to be read and assented to by members at their admission instead of yt which was formerly called ye church covenant". A month later, at the March churchmeeting, Gill's draft was agreed and the church[75] ordered that it "be transcribed into ye church-book, to be read & assented to at ye admission of members, it was likewise agreed yt it should be printed".

Whereas the actual Keach covenant only involved the solemn acceptance of the duties of Christian discipleship and churchmembership, the emphasis in the new statement lay upon doctrinal matters. John Gill's statement of 1729, with its twelve succinct, tautly phrased, articles, and with its closing statement of the

obligations of churchmembership was very evidently intended to replace not only the actual Keach covenant but also the two statements he had published about the faith and practice of his church in 1697. In fact, in the key article concerned with the doctrine of election, there appeared to be no discernible difference between the two preachers.[76] The difference, at this time, was not doctrinal, the difference was that John Gill had now exorcised the ghost of Benjamin Keach from his ministry. It was, no doubt, more important to John Gill than to his congregation that, like its predecessor, it should be printed, and so publish his liberation to a wider circle.

John Gill had now arrived : he had won his way to acceptance by the London Baptist community, he was beginning to be respected in rather wider dissenting circles in the metropolis and he was now master, for good or ill, in his own congregation.

NOTES

[1] Three studies are extant : i, John Gill, *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 2 vols., 1773, contained an anonymous introductory memoir with an eulogy of Gill by Toplady to conclude it ; ii, J. Rippon, *A Brief Memoir . . . of the late Rev. John Gill*, 1807 ; iii, R. E. Seymour's unpublished Edinburgh Ph.D. thesis (1954), entitled "John Gill—Theologian". Dr. Seymour was not, apparently, aware of the more significant sources here cited.

[2] B. R. White, "Thomas Crosby, Baptist Historian", Part I in *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XXI, 4, October, 1965.

[3] *ibid.*, pp. 164-6.

[4] B. Stinton's manuscript, "A Journal of the Affairs of ye Antipaedobaptists" (in the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford), was continued by Thomas Crosby and will be cited as Crosby, "Journal". This reference will be found on p. 190.

[5] *Cf.* W. T. Whitley, *The Baptists of London*, London, 1928., *passim.*

[6] Whitley was unaware that there was a Calvinistic Board of ministers also at this time but see my "Thomas Crosby, Baptist Historian", *op. cit.*, p. 163.

[7] John Rippon, *A Brief Memoir . . . of the late Rev. John Gill* (1838 Edition), p. 2.

[8] John Gill, *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts, op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. xiii.

[9] The John Evans List of "Dissenting Congregations and Ministers", in Dr. Williams's Library noted (p. 86) that Higham Ferrers was a new meeting dating only from 1714 and that Davis was an Independent. This, however, seems most unlikely for the Carter Lane MS Churchbook recorded 5th June, 1720, a letter of transfer for Gill's wife Elizabeth from that congregation signed by John Davis. Such a transfer to a "closed-membership" church such as Gill's was would hardly have been possible had Davis been a Congregationalist.

[10] Vol. I of the MS Records of the Particular Baptist Fund : entries dated 1st April, 1718, 13th May, 1718.

[11] *ibid.*, 6th October, 1719.

[12] See Benjamin Keach, *The Articles of Faith of the . . . Congregation . . . at Horslydown* and *The glory of a true church and of its discipline display'd.* London, 1697.

[13] *Cf.*, "Thomas Crosby, Baptist Historian", *op. cit.*, for some account of both Benjamin Stinton's ministry and events up to 13th September, 1719, after his death.

[14] Crosby, "Journal", p. 149.

[15] *ibid.*, pp. 149-53.

[16] *ibid.*, p. 157f. The MS of the Hanover Coffee House meetings is deposited at the Baptist Church House. It should be noted that W. T. Whitley was probably misleading in terming these meetings of a "Fraternal": both these meetings and those of the Particular "Baptist Board" (whose MS records from 1723 are also extant) often assumed, as this narrative itself illustrates, a *quasi* judicial function and supplied the place of association meetings. It was, of course, about this that Thomas Crosby complained in his *History of the English Baptists.*

[17] Crosby, "Journal", p. 159.

[18] Crosby was *not* a deacon in Stinton's congregation although it has often been assumed that he was.

[19] The Unicorn Yard Churchbook MS (belonging to Gill's opponents) at Baptist Church House, London, f.9v., shows that Gill's adherents had subscribed £17 12s. towards Stinton's support out of a total of £52 9s. After their secession a new subscription list opened to support the newly appointed minister, Mr. Arnold, amounted to £84 7s. Crosby, "Journal", p. 165, quoted David Rees (presumably on the occasion he refused to share in Gill's ordination) as saying that Gill's opponents in the congregation were superior to his adherents in "Wisdom, Riches and Number". Unfortunately no record of a subscription list opened for Gill's support at this period has survived.

[20] Crosby, "Journal", p. 143.

[21] *ibid.*, p. 160f.

[22] Carter Lane Churchbook MS entry dated 11th November, 1719. This MS is kept at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London. "Carter Lane" was the address of the congregation's next meetinghouse.

[23] Crosby, "Journal", p. 162.

[24] Unicorn Yard Churchbook MS f.8a, 8b, dated 2nd February, 1720.

[25] Crosby, "Journal", pp. 162-169.

[26] *ibid.*, p. 169f.

[27] Carter Lane Churchbook MS, *loc. cit.*

[28] Crosby, "Journal", p. 172.

[29] *ibid.*

[30] *ibid.*, p. 172f., also transcribed into the Unicorn Yard Churchbook.

[31] *ibid.*, p. 174-6, also transcribed into the Carter Lane Churchbook.

[32] Carter Lane Churchbook, MS, 9th February, 1720.

[33] Crosby, "Journal", p. 177.

[34] The account of the ordination which follows is largely taken from the Carter Lane Churchbook MS which has rather more detail than the "Journal".

[35] Crosby, "Journal", p. 182.

[36] Unicorn Yard Churchbook MS, f.8b.

[37] MS "An Account of the Proceedings of the Society of Baptist Ministers in London, 1714-1736". Deposited at the Baptist Church House, London. Entry for 2nd May, 1720.

[38] Before Christmas, 1719, Parks had refused to transfer two of his members to Gill's congregation since he would not recognise them as orderly constituted. *Cf.* "Thomas Crosby, Baptist Historian", *op. cit.*, p. 163.

[39] "An Account of the proceedings. . . " *op. cit.* entries for September and October, 1720.

[40] *ibid.*, p. 2f. "Settled Rules of the Society."

[41] *ibid.*, entry of 3rd October, 1720.

[42] "The Baptist Board Minutes, 1724-1750," in *Trans. B.H.S.*, V., 1916-17.

[43] A transcript of the cost of this work from the Carter Lane Churchbook appeared as "Repairing a Meeting-house in 1720", *Baptist Quarterly*, V., 1930-1931, p. 28.

[44] MS Records of the Particular Baptist Fund, Vol. I (unpaged, citations by date).

[45] *ibid., loc. cit.*

[46] *ibid., loc. cit.*

[47] Carter Lane Churchbook MS, 14th August, 1722.

[48] Particular Baptist Fund MS Records *op. cit.*, 4th September, 1722.

[49] Carter Lane Churchbook MS, 9th October, 1722.

[50] Crosby, in the "Journal", gave three versions of this affair : i, pp. 185-190, continued the story of Gill's congregation ; ii, pp. 190-195, A Letter to the London ministers and an account of the sequence of events ; iii, pp. 195-200, A transcript of a letter of protest sent to Gill's church-meeting plus a list of Gill's complaints against Crosby with his answers. The accounts are not contradictory but each has contributed details to the narrative I have reconstructed.

[51] Carter Lane Churchbook MS, 17th July, 1722.

[52] Crosby, "Journal", p. 188.

[53] *ibid.*, p. 188f.

[54] *Cf.*, "Thomas Crosby, Baptist Historian II", in *Baptist Quarterly*, XXI[5], January, 1966, especially, pp. 222-4.

[55] Of the eleven persons finally excommunicated over this affair eight can be shown to have been members of the Keach-Stinton family from the MS "A Perfect and Compleat Regester . . . on Horsly-downe" (lodged at the Public Record Office) and other sources.

[56] Carter Lane Churchbook, 18th June, 1723.

[57] *ibid.*, 21st February, 1727. Oddly, this whole agreement, apparently initiated from Unicorn Yard, was ignored in that Churchbook.

[58] John Gill, *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts, op. cit.*, I, p. xiv.

[59] These figures are drawn from the Carter Lane Churchbook but are only approximately accurate since the Churchbook is itself inconsistent at some points. Also (i) some figures on the edges of pages are illegible (ii) some 29 deaths which could have fallen in this period were not dated. Figures for reception into membership year by year are : 1719, 4 ; 1720, 38 ; 1721, 24 ; 1722, 14 ; 1723, 9 ; 1724, 9 ; 1725, 7 ; 1726, 13 ; 1727, 2 ; 1728, 8 ; 1729, 4. It is not at present known how these figures compare with other London Baptist congregations of the period.

[60] Carter Lane Churchbook, 14th November, 1721.

[61] *ibid.*, 15th December, 1719, decided a quorum should consist of eight brethren and the pastor.

[62] Opponent of Thomas Crosby, *cf.*, "Journal", pp. 188, 192.

[63] Carter Lane Churchbook, *loc. cit.*

[64] John Gill, *The glory of God's grace display'd* . . . London, 1724.

[65] John Gill, *A Discourse on Deut. XXXIII.* 8 . . . London, 1724. The book noted in Whitley's *Baptist Bibliography* (6-725) is a reprint.

[66] John Gill, *An Exposition of the Book of Solomon's Song*, Preface.

[67] John Gill, *A Collection* . . . *op. cit.*, p. xvii.

[68] John Gill, *The Ancient Mode of baptising by Immersion* . . . London, 1726. *A Defence of the Ancient Mode* . . . London, 1727.

[69] Matthias Maurice, *The manner of baptising with water*, London, 1726. Matthias Maurice, *Plunging into water no scriptural mode*, London, 1727.

[70] John Gill, *A Collection* . . . *op. cit.*, p. xviii.

[71] Carter Lane Churchbook, *loc. cit.*

[72] The minister at Cripplegate until his death in 1721 had been Gill's friend, John Skepp. He was followed by Humphrey Barrow who died in 1727. There was apparently no pastor until the settlement, in 1730, of John Brine, an admirer of Gill and from the same home church at Kettering.

[73] Carter Lane Churchbook, 3rd February, 1729. NB. A full account of a union which did take place can be seen in the Devonshire Square records. Churchbooks belonging to both congregations are now preserved at the Devonshire Square Baptist Church, London. The union was consummated 4th June, 1727, so was probably in the minds of those conducting these negotiations. A brief, and somewhat unsympathetic account of the Devonshire Square union is to be found in Ivimey, *op. cit.*, III, pp. 326-30, 353-5.

[74] Benjamin Keach, *The Articles of Faith* . . . *op. cit.*, p. 23. "We believe that *laying on of hands* (with Prayer) *upon baptised Believers*, is an Ordinance of Christ, and ought to be submitted unto by all such Persons that are admitted to partake of the Lord's Supper." This view was comparatively rare among Particular Baptists hence the Carter Lane Churchbook, 12th March, 1721, reported that two members transferred from two other London congregations "having not at their first Entrance to the Christian Church Come under the Ordinance of the Laying on of Hands it being not the practice of those Churches to which they gave up themselves Did now submit thereunto and had Hands laid on them according to the practice and example of the Holy Apostles". Of course, the recorder at this time was Thomas Crosby, who would support the Keach tradition with some enthusiasm as the extract suggests.

[75] Carter Lane Churchbook, *loc. cit.* Gill's Confession of 1729 was printed with comments by Seymour J. Price, *Baptist Quarterly*, IV (1928-9), pp. 366-71.

[76] Some items from Keach's *Articles* of 1697, which bore the marks of disputes in which he had himself shared Gill completely omitted. Gill's first three articles dealt with Scripture, the Trinity and Election, in that order. Keach dealt with the Trinity in articles 1 and 2, the Bible in 6, and Election in 33. Keach on Election reads as follows: "We do believe that God from all Eternity . . . freely and unchangeably decreed and ordained, for the manifestation of his own Glory, some Angels, and some of the lost Sons and Daughters of Adam, unto Eternal Life . . . and that others are left or passed by under a Decree of Preterition." Gill on Election was more brief but to the same effect: "We believe, that before the world began, God did elect a certain number of men unto everlasting Salvation whom he did predestinate to the adoption of children by Jesus Christ . . ."

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The attention of those interested in Baptist history is drawn to a short article entitled "The Registration of Meeting Houses", published by Mr. Edwin Welch, of Southampton, in the *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, Vol. III, Number 3 (April, 1966). This is a useful statement of the arrangements which have been made for meeting houses' registration 1672-1953.