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Southend Baptists

A Study of Origins 1875-1885

SOUTHEND in the 1870s was vibrant with new life and enthusiasm for new causes. Initially it had enjoyed some success as a resort for the upper classes but was unable to compete with the lavish brilliance of Brighton or Margate so that still by 1866 it was described as a "quiet, unknown region"¹. However the coming of the railway brought with it many new residents and provided access to the town for the East Londoner. Thus began the modern resort—the Playground of the South. Administrative independence and municipal institutions soon followed. Several new housing areas were begun in this period. Daniel Scratton's estate became Cliff Town, a collection of elegant, expensive houses overlooking the estuary. Park Estate was built north of the railway line for the commercial classes. These two areas provided the majority of the Baptist congregation.

Every community must have its religious expression. The Anglicans had St. John's and a mission Church in Hamlet Road. The Wesleyans had a magnificent chapel in the Park Estate only rivalled by the gothic-styled Congregational building in Cliff Town. However the Baptist Union Handbook for 1875 lists Southend among large towns without a Baptist Church.²

The Strict Baptists had been established in neighbouring Prittlewell since 1823 but have always been separate from the General Baptist Cause.

One or two people who were concerned about the lack of Baptist work in Southend met in Mr. John Edwards' house, 2, Avenue Road. Having no documentary information of this meeting we must rely on nonegenarian Mr. John Rutter's memory,³ whose parents attended. The date of the meeting and all who attended are unknown, though it was probably late in 1874 or early in 1875. However, besides John Edwards, who probably retired to Southend from Camden Town, also present were Henry Edward Lester, a retired shipwright who had seen considerable service in other Baptist Churches and George Rutter who came from Sheerness, having helped to found their Baptist work. It therefore seems likely that the founders of Southend's Baptist work were men who, having been Baptists elsewhere, were moved to join together and form a local work.

Following this meeting, Prayer Meetings were held in the front room of a house in Cambridge Road. I was able to discover this house. Mr. Rutter said it was immediately facing the railway bridge. Burrows⁴ says that at a later date, meetings were held in 8, Belmont Villas. The 1873-4 Prittlewell Rate Book⁵ lists the owner of this house as "Henry Leicester" (*sic*). Belmont Villas are now incorpor-

ated numerically into Cambridge Road. No. 66, Cambridge Road still bears a plaque reading "Belmont Villas". Counting this as No. 1, Belmont Villas, the eighth house along, 80, Cambridge Road, is immediately opposite the railway bridge. Thus it seems that the Prayer Meetings were held in H. E. Lester's house, 8, Belmont Villas. Mr. Rutter said that about twenty people met each week throughout the winter months of 1874-5.

Our first written record of Southend Baptists is their advertisement for the first public meeting, held in the Public Hall. Presumably 8, Belmont Villas became too small and John Edwards and Henry Lester financed the hiring of the Hall and the advertisement in the *Southend Standard*⁶ which appeared on June 4th 1875. "NOTICE With the view to the formation of a Baptist Church in this town. A few friends have arranged to hold Sunday services in the Town Hall commencing (D.V.) on Sunday June 6th and to be continued until further notice . . . All persons are affectionately invited". The visit of the advertised speaker, Rev. Dr. Angus, Principal of Regent's Park College, was probably postponed for a few weeks.

Lester's diary⁷ about the meeting reads: "I cannot describe the feeling I had, when for the first time I entered the Public Hall, Alexandra Street.⁸ The date was Sunday June 6th 1875, and I had engaged to take upon myself the responsibility of entertaining the ministers and all who would come to our help and attend and direct all its proceedings. I said to myself "Who is sufficient for all these things?" But I had committed it all to the Lord so I took courage. Our first preacher was Mr. Harry Wright from Regent's Park College. Morning sermon "It is expedient that I should go". Evening sermon "Christ's sympathy at the grave of Lazarus". Both services were good and delivered with great energy. Attendance in the morning was fifty, evening eighty".

The diary continues telling how, for the service, they used the stage, standing in the scenery used for the current production. Lester's daughter led the singing and played the piano. The day's entry concludes: "This day I received a donation of sixpence and sold one of our hymn books for fourpence. This finished our first Sunday with many thanks to God".

Of the following Sunday we have our only extract from the first minute book.⁹ I found this quotation written in almost illegible script in a later record book. "The second Sunday, (June 13th 1875) Mr. Edwards our esteemed friend and founder, supplied and always stood as "The man in the gap" to fill up vacancies as they occurred (which was never a matter of regret)".

Lester devoted a considerable amount of his retirement to building up the infant Church. Services on the 20th were conducted by Dr. Angus, attendances being over one hundred, fifty and two hundred. Fifty remained to an after-church meeting and £7 14 0 was collected in an appeal. "This was a grand day and I was led to cry, 'What has God wrought'" wrote Lester.

Initially Lester met some opposition from other churches in his venture. One gentleman visited him and after lecturing him on the responsibility of starting a new church, left him a pamphlet. On his second visit Lester told him that "Nothing would stop us unless the Lord entirely blocked up the way". The gentleman came no more. Often Lester was stopped in the street and reprimanded, one gentleman even accusing him of starving the Congregational minister by opening another Chapel! Sunday services continued to draw many people and collections averaged £2 10 0. Each week in its "Place of Worship in Southend" the *Southend Standard* stated "The Baptists meet in the Public Hall, 11 a.m. and 6.30 p.m."

Lester's diary is full of interesting entries about the early days of the Church. "July 11th was a great trial for me, I shall never forget it. No minister came, they always come on Saturday Afternoon to my house remaining until Monday and sometimes until Tuesday. It was a happy home for them they used to say, but today no-one put in an appearance. No minister could be got, so I commenced. I read, prayed, sung, prayed again, sung again. I looked eagerly about in the congregation to see if I could see anybody who looked like a minister. "Oh what shall I do" I cried to myself. Had I known it I could have prepared something. My hymn was nearly sung out, I trembled, I really don't know what I would have spoken, I was in such a tremor, when suddenly there appeared at the door Mr. Harry Vincent, the great orator, I knew him, my last verse had come, I nearly ran off the stage down to the good man, telling him all my troubles. He was ill and had come down for his health's sake. I almost pulled him along, saying I would pray for him, do anything for him if he would only preach. I fairly dragged him on to the stage. He gave a grand sermon on the words, "I have been a long time with you, Phillip".

Special services, led by Rev. J. Bigwood, Secretary of the Baptist British and Irish Mission Society, were held on November 21st.

Following the successes of the Public Hall services, the participants decided to constitute a Church. On 4th June 1876, Rev. J. T. Wigner, a leading figure of the London Baptist Association, led the service and thirteen joined hands in fellowship. These were Mr. and Mrs. Lester and two daughters¹⁰, Mr. and Mrs. Edwards, Mr. and Mrs. Bilborough, Mr. and Mrs. Rutter, Mrs. Dixon and Misses Hall and Pearl. A few weeks later the first church meeting was held at 8, Belmont Villas.

Lester was now becoming anxious about finding a building for the Church and throughout August 1876 he made enquiries. "The time had come to make a grand move and my prayers to be realised" he wrote. There was an iron mission Chapel in Hamlet Road which belonged to the vicar. Dating from 1871, it seated about 500 and was known as St. Albans. On hearing the building was for sale, Lester wrote "My whole soul stirred within me. What should I do? Go and ask the Master! I went immediately upstairs and laid the

whole case before the master, prayed and wrestled. The answer was "GO". I had prayed that I might find favour in the sight of the man, but I was a dissenter and a Baptist. It all seemed against me and to go to his house and to ask if he would sell the Church to me while it was in work made me tremble, but I did and as I knocked at the door I wondered what would be my reception going alone to buy his Church without a penny in my pocket. I was ordered into the drawing room. The Vicar came. "Your business, Sir?" I was a little perplexed. At last I summoned up, "Sir I understand the iron Church is likely to be sold?" He replied, "It is Sir, will you buy it?" I took courage at once and spoke up quite boldly, "I will, Sir". I thought that I had better tell him I was a Baptist; and I thought it would be an insurmountable difficulty. He seemed pleased and at once asked, "Are you connected with Mr. Spurgeon?" I said, "Yes Sir, we are". Then he said, "You can't be wrong". He wanted seven hundred pounds for the Church. I refused at once but after some talk in a most kindly spirit, he asked me if I was the Mr. Lester who gave the addresses in the Public Hall. I replied "Yes" referring to the afternoons. Finally I agreed to give him seven hundred pounds for the Church, with a certain amount of land around it, with all its fittings as it stood. He seriously objected at first to sell the freehold. At last he agreed but I was to keep everything quiet until all the arrangements were made. I met a friend and he agreed to help me purchase it, but this arrangement fell through, but my dear old friend Mr. J. Edwards and my son came to the rescue".

These loans were soon repaid and three hundred pounds were borrowed from the Baptist Society, to be repaid in quarterly instalments. Hence Southend took part in what Doris Witard has called "The Iron Age".¹¹ The building, standing in a garden, had to be enclosed. Lester did this, making rails, buying and planting trees. Then he ordered a large board twenty by two feet, and had "SOUTH-END BAPTIST TABERNACLE" written on it in large letters. "This I thought a good stroke of business".

It seems that at this time the *Southend Standard* had an editor unsympathetic to the Dissenters and we have no report of either the formation of the Church nor the opening of the building. However *The Baptist* for September 22nd 1876¹² carried a brief report of the opening stating that Lester's son Harry¹⁰ chaired the meeting and that various local ministers spoke. The day's collections were £3 18 0.

The opening of the Chapel marks the beginnings of real growth in the Church's life. The Baptist Union Handbook for 1877 notes that there were twenty members, and in March 1877 six people were baptised. Within six years there were over a hundred members. 1880 was a particularly good year, over thirty people joining the Church.¹³

For some time the Church continued to have different Sunday speakers. In its "Places of Worship" the *Southend Standard* listed the Tabernacle as supplied by students from Spurgeon's College

after January 1877. In April, however, we read that Mr. John Bradford would preach "as usual" and it is evident that he soon became student pastor. We cannot tell precisely when he came but it was presumably between January and April 1877.

This arrangement continued until June 28th 1878 when Rev. John Gane Wilson accepted a unanimous invitation to be the first full time minister. Wilson, coming straight from Pastors' (now Spurgeon's) College, had his Recognition Services on July 3rd when two tutors, Rogers and Gracey spoke. A tea meeting was held in the Royal Stores for which tickets cost one shilling. Wilson lived at Bridge House, an upstairs flat over a grocer's shop next to the Tabernacle.³ The church now had the spiritual leadership it needed.

We do not know Wilson's salary but he probably had some private means. However the Church's ability to pay him anything shows its rising prosperity. Such financial statements as we have support this belief. At the Second Anniversary Lester announced a yearly turnover of over £200. Two years later it was over £400. A major financial priority was repaying the chapel debt. After great effort,⁶ a triumphant meeting was held on May 17th 1881 at which the Chapel was declared free of debt. The *Standard* reported: "The building having been freed from debt, mainly through the untiring efforts of Mr. H. E. Lester, the deacons invited the members, subscribers and friends to meet them at tea, and a considerable number availed themselves of the invitation". Lester's diary records: "All went on swimmingly. Our congregations increased and the Lord was with us. We had a standing in the township and it was commonly said that we had 'the grip'".

Appalled at the lack of local education Lester started a school in the Chapel, with his grand-daughter in charge. He went round and begged the fittings and achieved his aim at negligible cost. However the local authority took over the school and closed it within a year.

From the first the Church seems to have attracted people of "upper society". Though it has proved impossible to compile a list of all Church members with addresses, those we do know came from the Park Estate and Cliff Town areas. Remembering the Church's situation this is to be expected.

We know the addresses of only seventeen members, six of whom lived in Cliff Town, the better area, and the others in Park Estate. Of these eleven, seven lived in Park Street. In Cliff Town lived Lester, Miss Pearl, a founder member, Maria Threadgold, in 4 Tiptree Villas, who after her husband's death took in private music pupils at ten and sixpence a quarter⁶ and on several occasions with her daughters produced concerts for the Church. Also in Cliff Town lived, William Griffin, a grocer, Alfred Harrion, a draper, and John Voisy, a cabinet maker who had their premises in Nelson Road, the most fashionable shopping centre in the town and adjacent to Cliff Town Congregational Church. Those who lived in Park Street would mostly be traders but we know only of R. Cole who worked

in Shoe Lane, Fleet Street.

The later Nineteenth Century is sometimes termed "The Non-Conformist Ascendancy" and the great influence of Dissenters is very evident from the *Southend Standard*. Tabernacle meetings were typical of Dissenting communities everywhere. Mr. Rutter⁸ described their earliest activities as Sunday Services; Tuesday Prayer Meeting; Thursday Mid-Week Service; Saturday Prayer Meeting for the coming Sunday. Soon after, however, there was a Women's meeting and a Sunday School which, by 1882, had ninety scholars under ten teachers.

The mid-week lecture was another feature of Victorian Nonconformity. Wilson gave several lectures⁶ on great reformers: Huss, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Knox. Later he lectured on a range of subjects which included "Queer Parsons", "Mohammed", "William the Silent" and "Poetical Recollections". Sometimes a visitor came to give a lecture and on one occasion Lester gave a most amusing talk on his married life. The continuation of these lectures until Wilson's illness of 1881 gives an idea of their success. As the *Southend Standard* commented, they "have added considerably to the knowledge of those who prefer this kind of entertainment to any other".

The verbose pomposities of Victorian Nonconformity are well illustrated by a series of midweek services given on Elijah⁶ by Wilson. Titles included "Royalty and the Ravens", "Death, Dearth and Deliverance" and "Godly fear and goodly faith".

Both the *Southend Standard* and membership statistics suggest the Church was very alive. This was the overall impression left with the *Standard* representatives when they visited the church for their series on local Churches. They concluded "energy seems to be the distinguishing feature of this infant congregation". The Service was a Baptism: "With regard to the immersion itself, it was managed conveniently and decorously and with as great an amount of solemnity as was possible, with the major part of the congregation cramming forward to get as good a view as they could". The article ends: "It is evident that the spirit which pervades this infant Church, though it's not in mortals to command success, they do more deserve it by earnest advocacy to what they think the truth".

Thus within six years of its formation, the Church at the Tabernacle had grown into a thriving active community. Its buildings were cleared from debt and its membership continued to grow. Under the leadership of Rev. J. G. Wilson the Church was indeed well established.

In 1875 a controversy had raged in the *Southend Standard* over the rights and wrongs of the Dissenters' case. One writer felt that he indicated a fundamental weakness in the system when he wrote: "Although some of their congregations are but a handful yet they often manage to split up into two or three parties or cliques, and then over the most wretched trifle they will fall out, and strive for

the mastery. Those who are beaten will set up a new Bethel of their own and regard their former friends as enemies". Christ put it more succinctly when he said: "If a house is divided against itself that house cannot stand" (Mark 3 v. 24.).

By 1882 the Southend Baptist cause was well established. Under the leadership of Rev. J. G. Wilson the Church had grown in membership, activities and influence. Tragically the prosperity of the Church did not last because in March 1882 the congregation split. The effects of this division are still with us today.

The major difficulty in investigating the division is the lack of sources. The relevant Minute Book has not been seen this century⁹ and the brief Church histories that we do have are incomplete and misleading.¹⁴ The breakaway Church started minutes in 1883 but its account of preceding events is brief and, understandably, biased. However a careful scrutiny of such records as do exist, put alongside the invaluable *Southend Standard*, enables us to form a picture of events and causes which is probably accurate, if we are prepared to face the subject with intellectual honesty.

Rev. J. T. Wigner may have known that beneath the Church's surface there were tensions in 1880, when he exhorted the Church "to be very united and very prayerful".⁶ According to Mr. Rutter the root of the trouble lay in a financial dispute. Some members wanted the budget voted *en bloc* whereas others wanted each item considered independently. This caused severe disagreement and as members rose to speak others pulled them down. As we have no other record of finance being a cause of the split, it might be reasonable to conclude that this storm was weathered prior to March 1882 but left the Church divided into two opposed groups.

The events of the division are simple. After a particularly difficult Church meeting Wilson consulted some of the Deacons at Paxon's, the treasurer's house. As a result a letter was sent to Lester calling on him to resign or else face carrying on the work without a minister.⁹ No reply being received, Wilson called a special Church Meeting on Sunday March 19th for the following evening. At this meeting Lester stated that "it was not his intention while he lived to sever his connection with the Church". Wilson therefore read a letter resigning from the Church and 26 other members followed him. These came from the following families: Wilson, Paxon, C. Edwards, Morphy, Cane, Harrison, Pearl, Southgate, Flegg, Gentry, Cheeseman, Caister, Downes and Ranson. These people who started services of their own formed the basis of what is now Clarence Road Baptist Church.

In trying to try to find the causes of the division, one is faced by a much more difficult problem. Obviously, the people of Southend wanted to know what was happening and on 31st March the following editorial was published in the *Southend Standard*. "The separation of the Rev. J. G. Wilson from the Baptist Tabernacle has been the subject of much comment among the large dissenting community in

this town. At his first evening service in the Public Hall last Sunday Mr. Wilson gave an explanation of the circumstances which had necessitated this step. His fundamental reason being that a difference of opinion had arisen between himself and the Chief Deacon (Mr. Lester) as to the administration of the sacrament. Mr. Wilson would administer it to all who believe in Christ, whereas Mr. Lester would confine it to the Baptised members of the Church. It is said that the dissension arose out of a division of the Congregationalists two or three years ago when some dozen of that denomination went over to the Baptists, on the understanding that they, without being Baptised into the Church should be allowed to partake of the sacrament. It would appear that these seceders have become a thorn in the side of a few of 'The stricter' Baptists but they have all along received the support of the 'broader minded' Mr. Wilson who seems to have had the bulk of the congregation on his side."

The same edition of the paper reports Wilson's first meeting at the Public Hall when he stated: "Please let me say that the question of communion which has been a source of our differences, perhaps the root of all, will be settled by a hearty cordial invitation henceforth to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ irrespective of any other consideration whatsoever."

While the editorial quoted above does not in fact state that the division was over Open and Closed Communion, Wilson's statement and the closing sentences of the editorial leave the respective parties' views in doubt. The following week the *Standard* printed two letters.

"Sir, as a Church and people worshipping at the Tabernacle, we feel that it is our duty to give an unqualified contradiction to the statement made in your leader last week.

From the commencement of this Church, a free invitation has always been given to members of other Churches to sit down at the Lord's Table, regardless of denominational differences.

Besides this the trust deeds of the Church are such that it must observe three conditions: 1. Open Communion. 2. A Baptist Church. 3. A Baptist Minister. These are conditions belonging to most Baptist Churches including the Metropolitan Tabernacle.

We regret that Mr. Wilson did not sufficiently consider the principles of the Church before accepting the Pastorate, in which case all this difficulty and unpleasantness could have been avoided.

Mr. Lester has always cordially subscribed to these and has done so we understand for the last fifty years of active service with various Churches.

You will see from this statement—proof of which we are prepared to submit to you—how unintentionally incorrect your statement and conclusions are. We say 'unintentionally' because you must have depended on others for your information, possibly Mr. Wilson himself has already put you right on this point.

It is quite true that Mr. Wilson called on the senior deacon to resign, but as the Church were fully convinced of his high Christian

character and the immense services that he has rendered to the Church, they desired him to continue in his position, and at our last Church meeting a unanimous vote of confidence and sympathy was accorded him.

There are many reports which are equally incorrect but our respect for the Church of Christ will not allow us to force its internal arrangement on public attention.

We have the sympathy of the neighbouring Churches and a full assurance that 'truth must prevail'.

In the future the pulpit will be supplied by students from Regents Park College, and other ministers until a Pastor is obtained to take oversight of the Church."

The second letter read:-

"Sir, I am very reluctant to take any part in the controversy about the separation of Mr. Wilson from the Tabernacle, but I feel that there is a solemn necessity resting upon me to deny emphatically the charge of being a strict Baptist.

For the last 54 years I have actively engaged in Christian work and through the whole of that time, have sustained and advocated *Open Communion* and have been what is known as a 'general Baptist' in contra-distinction to a close or strict Baptist.

During this long period I have been in connection with only four Churches, and it is rather painful therefore that one who was not born when I commenced services for Christ should now advertise me in quite new and false character.

I would receive at the Lord's Table any member of any other Christian Church, including of course the Church of England.

Having resided in Southend for nine years and having taken active interest in other Churches as well as the Tabernacle I am quite content to leave my name and reputation not only in the keeping of my fellow Christians but in that of my fellow-townsmen generally. H. E. Lester."

The paper also changed its editorial: "THE BAPTIST DIVISION: We understand that the point of difference between the late Pastor of the Tabernacle and its senior deacon in respect of the administration of the Communion was not as we stated last week, the wish of the latter to confine it to Baptised members of the Church, but to Church members in general, whilst the former wishes that no other condition, but that of professed love to the Lord Jesus Christ, should be imposed upon the communicants."

Where mention has been made of the split at all in the past, writers have said it was over Open or Closed Communion.¹⁵ These letters make it certain the issue was not so straightforward. There certainly was a difference between the two men and their supporters over this issue, but it was not between Open and Closed Communion but over the precise meaning of Open Communion. Lester held that anyone could receive Communion provided he was a member of some type of Church while Wilson held membership was unnecessary and any-

one could receive Communion who professed love in Christ. The true nature of the difference should have been apparent from the Clarence Road minutes which read: "The wish of the deacons to restrict the Communion to members of Churches, and the wish of the pastor to throw it open to all who love the Lord Jesus."

However, remembering that the controversy over Open and Closed Communion was a very live issue at this time and that the first attempt for an Essex Union had foundered on this point,¹¹ it is not difficult to see how the Southend issue became distorted in the eyes of a later generation.

While then it is certain there was this difference over the Communion, it could not have been the root of the trouble. It must have been a very secondary cause when one remembers that in neither Wilson's letter asking for Lester's resignation nor in his resignation letter to the Church is the Communion even mentioned. One would surely expect him to proclaim his own principles and appeal for others to join him. These two letters must be quoted fully as they give, I believe, the true and basic reasons for the split.

Letter from J. G. Wilson to H. E. Lester.

Dear Sir,

It must be patent to you as it is to many others that a crisis in our Church history has been reached.

I have for some time felt that you have been using your influence as an officer of the Church to prejudice the Pastor and consequently to the prejudice of the Church's interests, an opinion endorsed by a considerable section of the Church, and a still larger portion of the congregation.

I have come to the conclusion that this can no longer be allowed to proceed, and having this view of the case endorsed by no other person than the Rev. James Spurgeon, Vice-President of our College, beg to acquaint you therewith.

You have repeatedly used language which has been as discourteous to me, as it has been unbecoming to one who occupies so prominent a position as yourself, and further you have so endeavoured both privately and more publicly to depreciate my work and lessen my influence that we can no longer worship together in any relationship. I therefore have to ask you on the advisability of tendering your resignation of membership. I shall wait till next Saturday for your decision, which as the matter will have most momentous issues I have to ask may be in writing.

Thinking to receive such resignation or failing to receive any answer at all I shall convene a special Church meeting for next Monday at seven o'clock. At that Church meeting a copy of this letter will be read and if you decline to fall in with my suggestion my own immediate resignation will be laid on the table. Accompanying my own there will be also that of some of the members of the Church, who in connection with myself, and a large and decidedly influential

section of the congregation will then seek a spiritual home and a sphere of usefulness elsewhere in the town.

In the face of this determination it is for you to consider whether you think yourself able to carry on the work at the Tabernacle, and if so, whether the Church and congregation will endorse your decision.

Whatever such decision may be, I wish you to understand that I and those with whom I am acting are animated by no angry sentiments towards you but are simply unable to work with you in any Church affairs.

Wilson's resignation letter read to the Church.

Dear Friends, Nearly four years ago I received a unanimous invitation to the pastorate of the Church at which you are today members. That office I herewith surrender into your hands regretting that the conduct of the senior deacon renders it imperative for me to take such a step.

My own happiness as an individual, my self respect as a man, and any usefulness as a Christian minister, combined by the spiritual interests of a large portion of my hearers, renders it impossible for me longer to preserve a union which involves Church connection with this gentleman.

Firmly impressed with this view I deemed it my duty to give him the opportunity of retiring so as to avoid this separation.

That opportunity having been declined, notwithstanding the consequences were clearly pointed out, I have no alternative but to tender my resignation, with the intimation that at the request of many, and in accordance with what I feel the dictates of duty, I shall endeavour to establish another Church in the town.

In thus parting let me say that pained as I am in having to sunder ties which have bound us together I nevertheless wish to effect that separation in a spirit which will harmonise with the sacred name we bear.

When I remember that to nearly 80 of your number I have given the right hand of fellowship, and that some sixty of you I have baptised, that with many of you I have knelt in prayer, and striven privately to point to Christ whilst some few at least I have been privileged to lead to the Saviour, I cannot entertain the idea of entertaining unkind, much less hostile feelings toward you.

During these four years I have endeavoured to minister unto you the gospel of Christ. Of the shortcomings of that ministry, probably none are more fully aware than myself, but if in any time of trouble words from my lips have comforted you, or if in any other way my ministry had helped you, perhaps you will be able to forget the remainder.

As we are to live and work for the future of our town, though no longer under one roof, I trust that for the credit of our common Christianity, we may not present to the world the spectacle of Christians at variance with one another.

If we cannot, and under the circumstances already alluded to we cannot, any longer remain pastor and people, let us at any rate remember that we are still "One in Christ Jesus".

Finally friends farewell. If any have wronged me either from want of thought, or want of heart, I freely forgive them, and all whom I have wronged from either cause, will I hope freely forgive me.

If that which divides us now should for the rest of our earthly course keep us asunder, which I for one trust will not be the case, yet it is cheering for me in bidding you farewell to remember that in the Father's house differences will no longer exist among the Father's children.

J. G. Wilson.

Quite clearly these letters show the real roots of the division were personal and not doctrinal. The Communion is not mentioned. Evidently neither side regarded itself as championing some great doctrine. It is not difficult to see how a personal clash arose between these two men when one briefly considers their personalities and backgrounds.

Henry Edward Lester was a great man in many ways. His granddaughter Muriel¹⁰, who gave me much helpful material, told me he spent his working life building up a London Shipwright's firm and retired to Southend comfortably off, though not rich. He was converted when twenty and was early used to facing opposition from everyone. His father returned from the Napoleonic Wars very much a man of the world and hearing of his son's conversion would not let him practise his beliefs indoors. So the young Lester said his prayers in an outside lavatory! His service with other Baptist Churches had been long and distinguished and as we have seen he was largely responsible for the Southend work. Evidently he was well respected by the members. At the first anniversary they presented him with a clock inscribed with his name; the following year his grand-daughter received a gold watch and on the fifth anniversary he received a green morocco leather album containing members' photographs.

Diary extracts⁷ show us much about him and evidently he was not above thinking highly of himself. "I now hold the following important positions, Bill Sticker, Afternoon Lecturer, Bible Class Teacher, Superintendent, Deacon, Labourer, Town Missionary, Collector General for London, Scotland, Ireland, France etc." Above all, like Cromwell and Gladstone, he was carried along by a basic conviction that all he did was the will of God; and perhaps confused that will with his own.

Although we cannot find out as much about Wilson, as shortly after this he left England,⁹ what we do know shows that he was a very different person. Mr. Rutter⁸ described him as "a young fella with no beard". Coming straight from college he was inexperienced in leading a Church or in managing people.

Thus the root of the trouble lay in a clash between a younger and an older man. Wilson probably felt that the Church was his responsibility and that he was unable to introduce his ideas because of Lester's undue influence. Lester probably thought that he, the founder of the Church, and an older man, should be consulted for initiative. It is unnecessary and impossible to decide whose fault this affair was. No doubt both had faults though from our vantage position several decades later it seems a pity Lester could not have tried to understand youth more and that Wilson could not have given a little more credit to experience. In fact the whole affair was conducted with a marked lack of Christian love and consideration which could only lead to disaster.

As stated the split has always been accredited to disagreement over Open or Closed Communion. Personal factors have been almost ignored and the Communion difference exaggerated. This is understandable if not very laudible.

The affects of the division were to divide one healthy growing community into two weak sections. The process by which both grew into prosperous Churches was slow and painful.

The first the public knew of the division was a notice which appeared in the *Standard*: "The Rev. J. G. Wilson, having resigned the Pastorate of the Church at the Baptist Tabernacle will D.V. conduct services in the Public Hall, on and after Sunday Next."

At the first meeting there were about two hundred and eighty present in the morning and about four hundred in the evening. Having read again his resignation letter Wilson outlined his plans. The Communion table was to be completely open; membership was defined as "observance of the Lord's supper"; Baptism was no longer to be an essential but just a personal testimony to conversion. The Pastor was to nominate deacons and conduct all business. These rules are somewhat revolutionary, though they clearly reflect the recent trouble. We do not know how long the Church was organised in this way, but we can trace certain changes that took place and it seems before very long more normal procedure prevailed.

Initially this group was known as the Congregational Baptists and they continued to meet at the Public Hall which they hired from the Choral Society for a pound a week. Charles Edwards, ex-Tabernacle Superintendent, started a Sunday School and the British School Room was rented at 2/6 each Tuesday for mid-week Services.

During the first few weeks a number of donations were received and very soon the Church was able to purchase a Communion Set, a portable reading desk, a stage carpet and an American organ. The *Standard* reported that within eleven weeks over a hundred pounds had been collected.

On May 7th the Church was officially formed by Wilson "not as the Pastor but as a simple minister of the Gospel". A list of Church rules was read and the Church formed by all rising, joining hands and invoking the blessing. Paxton then proposed Wilson be appointed

Minister. This was carried and Wilson agreed to accept as stipend the balance of the collections when the Hall rent had been paid. Messrs. Paxon, Edwards, Morphy and Cane became deacons.

A first priority for the new Church was to find itself a building. In September a deposit of £32 0s. 0d. was put on a site in Central Southend. The *Standard* wrote: "We have great pleasure in announcing that the trustees of the above Church have secured a very commendable site for the erection of a place of worship for the large congregation working with Rev. J. G. Wilson in the Public Hall. The site is in the new road leading from Alexandra Road, by Mr. Hudson's to Cliff Town Road, being the third plot from the latter end. It has a good frontage of fifty feet. We congratulate the Reverend gentleman, Mr. Paxon, and the members of the new Church upon the success which has thus far attended their efforts."

Writing to Rev. C. H. Spurgeon⁹ they were disappointed to find that as he felt that there was not room for two Baptist Churches in the town he would give them no support. However, undaunted, the Church started to have money-raising efforts for a building fund.

An initial plan for a building seating 500 but costing £1,100 was abandoned and a more practical, but less popular plan to erect an Iron Chapel was carried out. An unidentified Mr. Scott lent £400 towards a total of £500, and the building was opened on April 3rd, 1883 by the Rev. Archibald Brown of the East London Tabernacle. The *Southend Standard* described the building. "It is in the new road leading from Alexandra Street, called Clarence Road, is constructed with wood framing and covered externally with corrugated iron, measuring eighty feet by thirty-four feet including lavatories etc. The walls internally are covered with yellow match boarding and painted as far as wall plates and both gables."

All had gone well so far, but now the Church had run dry; the enthusiasm of many abated, and the Church's instability resulted in troubles nearly causing closure. Very soon after his election as deacon, Morphy stopped coming to the Church. At length Wilson wrote him a charitable letter pointing out the responsibilities of his position. As a result Mr. and Mrs. Morphy withdrew from the fellowship. The weather kept people away from the Church during winter months. Apathy set in and at Church meetings members spoke of closing the work. Paxon, always Wilson's firm friend, became very ill and probably died. Wilson himself must have been very disappointed that Spurgeon, his college president, would give them no support.

On top of the cumulative affect of these troubles for Wilson came the final blow of the death of his wife in November 1883. Both the *Southend Standard* and the Clarence Road Minutes contain long accounts of the funeral and of how the hearse was led through the streets of Southend, while windows were covered with black blinds. Wilson went to Paris for a fortnight's holiday and on his return announced that the Church must expect his departure. Accordingly in March 1884, he resigned and moved to New Zealand. "To a new

life in a new land hoping to find there . . . a peace of mind which recent troubles have taken from me.”

Wilson left Southend a tired frustrated man. Though he was inexperienced to deal with such a complex situation he had the makings of a great man. He had the courage to start a new cause with no money and little personnel. Only the cumulative effect of many troubles caused his departure. I have not discovered what happened to him, other than that he is referred to ten years later as still in New Zealand but “no longer in the ministry”. Wilson’s departure took what little stability there was from the Church. Two ministers, F. R. Bateman and A. H. Smith, failed to unite the members within a four year period.

However the coming of the Rev. F. G. Hogbin in 1887 first as student pastor and later as resident minister brought stability and prosperity to the Church. Membership soon reached a hundred and the Church became financially self-sufficient. The present building was erected in 1898. By the time of Hogbin’s departure in 1902 the Church was firmly established in a growingly important section of the town.

We know little about the Tabernacle between 1882 and 1889 but the sources we do have reflect a steady growth and eventual re-establishment of former strength.

During the interregnum the Pulpit was occupied by Regent’s Park College Students and the Rev. W. Carpenter acted as moderator. At the Church anniversary there were seventy-five present and it was announced that Rev. H. W. Childs would become minister the second Sunday in October.⁶ On the sixth of October J. Edwards, Lester and Campbell put a letter in the *Standard* in which they commended the new minister to the people of Southend and invited all to the Tabernacle—a peculiar procedure by present day standards. In November Child’s recognition services were held.

Under new leadership the work gradually progressed. Within a year plans were made to erect a brick building to replace the old tin Chapel and, one suspects, to score a point over the Congregational Baptists! The Tabernacle had served both Anglicans and Baptists but a story Mr. Rutter told me shows it was due for replacement. One night, during a heavy storm, the belfry was blown off, rolled down the corrugated iron roof and fell through the boiler house roof.

While new premises were being erected the Church moved temporarily to the Public Hall and in August 1885 the foundation stone was laid. Spurgeon wrote a letter of encouragement to Rev. Childs which was included in an issue of the *Southend Standard*. Remembering his policy to the other community this action seems strange, unless all the time for some reason his sympathies lay with the original Church. However the answer may lie in a phrase of the letter “Southend is growing and must grow rapidly”. Previously he had written to Wilson that he did not think there was room for more than one Church. Maybe his discovery of the almost phenomenal

growth of Southend may account for the change in attitude. Whatever his reason he came down personally to open the new building in December 1885, staying at the Rutter's house for tea. In his address he encouraged the congregation to further work. The building had been put up at a cost of £950 and the following year the schoolroom and Caretaker's house were built.

Rev. A. H. Childs was followed in 1889 by Rev. E. Dyer who, at the end of a very successful consolidating ministry, was followed by Rev. J. McCleery in 1896. By 1901 the Church needed to move again and a new building and several halls were erected on a new site in Avenue Road. These splendid premises serve today.

Southend in the last two decades of the nineteenth century grew at a phenomenal rate. From a population of 8,000 in 1881 it grew to 12,000 in 1891 and was nearly 29,000 by 1901. Whereas before most houses had been along the cliffs and around the railway, large development plans were carried out which resulted in the growth of new areas. Similarly administration developed and in 1914 the town became a County Borough.¹⁶

Anyone with foresight could see the Baptists were destined to be increasingly important in the life of the town. Clarence Road was perfectly situated to attract the holidaymaker and was only a few doors from the new municipal buildings. Avenue was able to serve the new growing residential area which became Westcliff.

Though the recovery after the split was slow, by the end of the century both Churches had grown into thriving communities, each with their own constructive part to play in the town's life. Contemporary Southend Guide Books list both Churches and give an illustration of the brick Tabernacle. Almost the first sight which greeted the visitor on leaving the station was the lettering on Clarence Road's roof.

Baptist Churches were soon founded all over the Borough, some by ambassadors of Avenue and Clarence Road and others independently but no doubt drawing inspiration from their successful efforts.

Thus although I feel that we must view the split with some regrets, certainly, could Lester look back he would declare all this work "a good stroke of business" and be led to cry "What has God wrought?"

NOTES

¹ Noble T. C., *A Visit to Southend*, 1866. Now in Southend Ref. Library.

² All Baptist Union Handbooks in Baptist Church House. Issues for 1875 and 1876 list—"With no Baptist Church—Southend 3,000."

³ Before his death in 1967 I spent two evenings with Mr. John Rutter, who remembered the early meetings. Though he was only a baby at the time, he had been steeped in stories of the early days and where his memory could be checked he was always correct. References to this number in the text indicate information from Mr. Rutter.

⁴ J. W. Burrows, *Southend on Sea and district historical notes*, 1905, pp. 209-212.

⁵ E.R.O. D/P 183/11/17.

⁶ This essay could not have been written without information drawn from issues of the *Southend Standard* preserved on Micro-film in "Standard House", Southend. I wish to record my thanks for permission to print excerpts. References to this note in the text indicate where my information comes from the *Standard*.

⁷ Lester's diary is no longer extant. His grand-daughter had never seen it though her father must have had it as he copied parts out for the Jubilee Booklet (1926) prepared by J. N. Britten. The excerpts we have are transcribed in E.R.O. under the reference of my essay.

⁸ The Public Hall, Alexandra Street, was erected in 1872. It was used for many civic and public functions and could be hired for religious services. The Baptists used it (a) For their initial meetings (1875), (b) The break-away group used it before Clarence Road was built (1882), (c) The original group used it while waiting for their new brick Tabernacle to be built (1885). Later the Hall became The Empire Theatre which burnt down in a big blaze in 1895. On the site was built the Rivoli Cinema, recently replaced by an A.B.C. Cinema.

⁹ As far as I was able to discover the first Minute Book has not been seen this century, containing the beginnings of the work, Bradford, Wilson, the Split, Childs and the brick Tabernacle. The first extant Tabernacle Minute Book starts at 1889. A case can be made out for the deliberate destruction of the first book. The breakaway church started minutes in 1883, summarising previous events. A full transcript accompanies my essay in E.R.O. References to this note in the text indicate my source as a Minute Book.

¹⁰ Lester had thirteen children. ("Little strangers") Two of his daughters were founder members with him and one of his grand-daughters ran his school. His eldest son, Harry, lived to an old age and often visited the church. His grand-daughter Muriel was still active in social work until her death in 1968. She helped found the F.R., became its secretary, entertained Ghandhi and founded the Kingsley Hall settlements. I spent a most enjoyable afternoon with her and she gave me much helpful information on her grandfather.

¹¹ D. Witard, *Bibles in Barrels*, Essex Baptist Association, 1962, p. 110.

¹² *The Baptist* is stored in volumes in Baptist Church House.

¹³ Could one reason for this be the "Congregational Split?" See *Standard* editorial quoted later.

¹⁴ e.g. *History Handbook 1876, 1926, 1956*, which reads, "A cordial invitation was accepted by Rev. J. G. Wilson to become Pastor June 25 1878. He was followed by Rev. H. W. Childs in October 1882." The split is not even mentioned!

¹⁵ e.g., Burrows *op. cit.*, p. 210.

¹⁶ W. Pollit, *The Rise of Southend*, 1957.

This article is an abbreviated version of an essay awarded "Proxime Accessit" in the Emmison Prize competition sponsored by the Essex Record Office. The original is in the Office, Cat. No. T/Z/13/97, together with full transcripts of all source materials etc.

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