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Reviews

The Minutes of the First Independent Church (now Bunyan Meeting) at Bedford, 1656-1766. Edited by H. G. Tibbutt. Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, volume 55, 1976. 232 pp. £4.50.

This volume is pleasing in appearance, and similar to the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society's volume 51, *Some Early Nonconformist Church Books,* containing records from eight other churches in or near Bedfordshire (reviewed in *B.Q.* Jan. 1973, pp. 46f.). The editor of both is Mr. H. G. Tibbutt, whose introduction and notes to this volume are economical in words yet reliable in information.

The Bunyan Meeting was the first Nonconformist church in Bedford, and for years the only one, drawing its membership from a wide area. Furthermore, this is the church of which John Bunyan was member and pastor.

The minutes begin after John Gifford's death in 1655, prefaced by an account of how Bedford Puritans were gathered into a separated church in 1650. Though this volume stops at 1766, the original book continues to 1821.

Here are exceptionally full minutes, despite gaps in the 1660s and even bigger ones in the 1720s and 1730s. However, we would know little of Bunyan's life in gaol and nothing about him as writer if we relied on these minutes alone. They record nothing about the building of the meeting-house in 1707, though Mr. Tibbutt's confidence in the church's record-keeping abilities makes him postulate another book for that purpose.

There remains a valuable quarry of information that will be used in studying particular aspects of church life for this period. To help in this, the Subject Index should have been fuller, e.g. with entries "Baptists", "Presbyterians"; other entries are not complete, e.g. the 1701 minute allowing singing at every meeting is not listed under "singing".

Little insights into church practices are given—the times of winter services are 9 a.m. and 12 noon for the benefit of rural members; there is no hint that getting up on Sundays was a problem to members. A deacon can have a trial period to see how he gets on, his job being to help the needy; brother Nicholls is assured there will be a plentiful supply of money to carry out this work.

To some people old minute books are an especial source of humour (or horror) for their disciplinary entries. These minutes will help a deeper and more sympathetic study of church discipline, for they reveal a pastoral concern for wayward members, with repeated visits and patient waiting for reformation. A desire to do better in the future often resulted; one man with a recurring drink problem visited

his church visitors on his own initiative when temptation overtook him again. Once total abstinence is advised to a member. But this is not the abstinence era (nor were they usually successful in helping people out of addiction to alcohol). One member has an alehouse, and his only censure is for having too many visitors on a Sunday.

There is a whole range of matters for discipline (the index omits interesting items on pp. 75, 99). Any idea that churches continually declined in the early eighteenth century or that strict discipline put people off must be tempered by the regular trickle of additions here and by the twenty-seven members added in six months in 1720, only two of whom reappear for misbehaviour.

Interchurch relations are interesting. This church's principle was "faith in Christ and holiness of life, though there be different apprehensions in circumstantialls or externalls". They would not transfer members to Baptist churches that made believers' baptism a condition of communion. Samuel Sanderson, pastor until his death in 1766, advised the church about choosing a successor: "nor must you have a Baptist". But some of the groups associated with Bedford developed Baptist principles, e.g. Gamlingay, where they sought liberty to preach believers' baptism in 1691, nineteen years before becoming a separate church.

People admitted to membership had to be completely severed from Church of England practices and services. There was hesitancy over membership transfers with Presbyterians: surely not because the latter were too strict (p. 13) but because some Presbyterians were not strict enough in separation from the Church of England (p. 122)—some Presbyterians also attended parish churches.

The topics for special prayer are amply detailed, from the political upheavals of 1659 to the Rebellion of 1745. Wet and dry weather alike stimulate prayer, and of course they prayed "for the children of the members of the church that God would convert them by his grace" and that God would "bless the ministry of the Church to saints and sinners". The perennial evangelical lamenting about present-day decline, running throughout this volume, must not overshadow the bedrock of positive devotion, prayer, courage, and proclamation of this "Church of Christ at Bedford".

ALAN BETTERIDGE.

So Down to Prayers: Studies in English Nonconformity 1780-1920. Clyde Binfield. J. M. Dent & Sons. 296 pp. £8.50.

Changes in the emotional values attached to words or phrases are always interesting and often indicative of altered attitudes and judgments. Half a century ago the term 'Victorian' was one of disparagement or scorn; it was equated with outmoded ways and utter lack of taste. But now antique shops everywhere find buyers

willing to pay good prices for Victoriana while the cynical judgments of Lytton Strachey on eminent Victorians seem as remote from us as they were from the Victorians themselves. Out of our confused, restless and violent times has been born a new respect for the aspirations and achievements of nineteenth-century Britain with a willingness to examine them with positive appreciation. This new attitude shows itself in the realm of religious thought so that recent years have brought the publication of numerous studies to which this present book is a useful addition.

How do we enter into the life of a previous age with sensitive response and understanding? That is always the problem facing the historian. Clyde Binfield who is senior lecturer in the department of history of Sheffield University responds to the problem by offering a series of detailed and carefully documented studies to which he gives a strange main title and a somewhat misleading sub-title. The amount of material about Baptists and Methodists in these "studies in English Nonconformity" is extremely limited so that, to give two obvious examples, there are only slight references to the place of Methodists in the growth of the Trade Union movement or to Spurgeon among the Baptists. English Nonconformity must here be understood as urban Congregationalism with the attention largely given to vigorous churches, their ministers and their leading laymen in Lancashire and Yorkshire.

But the eleven studies are valuable both in themselves and as illustrations of wider themes which remain significant within all the Free Churches. They are ordered in such a way that they trace "the enlargement of horizons as Dissenters became Nonconformists and Nonconformists became Free Churchmen, and their numbers increased thirtyfold". That may suggest a more rigid and definite scheme than the author intended, but the detailed studies indicate the varied, often uncertain and hesitant manner in which the changes occurred.

Thus after an initial two chapters offering a good general survey of Methodists, Baptists and Congregationalists during the chosen period, the author suggests that his studies "describe some of the ways in which Nonconformity chiefly represented by Congregationalists tried to resolve the irresolvable". The chapters which follow reveal a chequered pattern of challenges and responses, of conflicts with victories and defeats, of ideals and aims with partial achievements, strong loyalties and some failures.

Not only do these studies illustrate a theme; they also "seek to evoke an atmosphere". The author understands this atmosphere for he is an elder of the United Reformed Church and a descendant of Congregationalists about whom he acknowledges "it still seems to me that what they stood for was right". He realises too that such people shared more than common convictions; they knew and shared a whole way of life of which he says "this was not just religious nor even the religious stretched into the political or the intellectual, for

it could be light and delightful like family life and the trust and laughter of friends". That is well said!

Much of the value of these studies derives from the careful use of local and denominational source material such as year books, minutes and letters; such sources provide much detailed and lively information. The focal point of interest is the local church and that is proper in a book about Nonconformity, yet the reader is consistently made aware of the larger interaction of social and industrial changes, political events and religious happenings.

But this is not an impersonal, sociological survey; we are told that the "studies are about men and women". So we read about the influence of powerful families like the Baines of Leeds who through several generations gave leadership to their church and city or the Armitages of Manchester who influenced suburban development as well as the arts. We read, too, about strong individuals like Edward Miall and Silvester Horne both ministers, writers and politicians, Chalmers and Tomkins missionaries clubbed to death in the South Sea Islands, Leyton Richards pacifist in time of war. Often families and individuals were linked by marriage, thus illustrating the interesting judgment that Congregationalism was "a denomination which depended for its cohesion on a mixture of personal beliefs and personal relationships".

The life of a denomination is also manifest in its buildings so that changing emphases in worship are expressed in different types of architecture. The description of three chapels in Huddersfield in a chapter headed "Dissenting Gothic" could be paralleled in the story of all the Free Churches during the nineteenth century, revealing much about developments in organisations, altered ways of worship and changing views about the functions and status of the minister. Changing attitudes also to learning and to culture are illustrated in the interesting accounts of the establishment of Mansfield College, Oxford, and the Rylands Library, Manchester.

Scattered throughout these studies are some provoking judgments; here are a few examples. "Nonconformity was bred on deprivation." Nonconformity "offered an alternative society" but this alternative society "could never achieve political shape. There was never any possibility of a Dissenting party." "The Nonconformists, like all ill-defined but self-conscious minorities, were strongest as an influence rather than as a power." To these judgments might be added two statements about Baptists. The first refers to the earlier part of the period: "The Methodists were the pacemakers of revival . . . the Baptists experienced the most spectacular transformation." The second concerns believers' baptism: "It was this which set Baptists apart from other Christians, building radicalism into them and then tempering it with an equally inbuilt conservatism."

Here then is a collection of useful studies portraying vividly the growth, vitality and power of nineteenth-century Nonconformity, yet mingling with these brilliant colours the darker hues which depict

the causes of Nonconformity's decline and confusion in the twentieth century. All who are concerned about the present state of the Free Churches in England and about their immediate future would benefit from looking carefully at this portrayal as much as historians of the nineteenth century.

L. G. CHAMPION.

The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation. Alvin J. Beachy. Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1977. xv, 240 pp. Fl.90.00.

The left wing of the Reformation is now sufficiently well documented for its historical development to be traced with greater accuracy and its theological emphasis to be examined and compared more fairly with the familiar ones of its opponents, whether Roman or Anglican.

Alvin Beachy, now teaching at Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, began the exploration of the Anabaptist concept of grace, while studying at Harvard under Professor George Hunston Williams some twenty years ago. His work now appears as Vol. XVII in the valuable series *Bibliotheca Humanistica and Reformatorica*, in which Irwin Horst's book on Anabaptism and the English Reformation to 1558 is also to be found. The original thesis has the advantage of a lengthy appendix based on the reflections of the author in the light of a number of the more recent publications in this field. He gives particular attention to the books of Steven E. Ozment on the mystics Tauler and Gerson and their influence on Anabaptists and to James M. Stayer's *Anabaptists and the Swords*, in which it is argued that their pacificism was no more than a strategy of survival.

Professor Beachy finds his main material in the writings of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marbeck, Hans Denck, Melchior Hoffmann, Dirk Phillips and Menno Simons. All of them, in his view, reject the attitude of the Magisterial Reformers (to use Hunston Williams's categories) that grace is a state of being declared righteous forensically by virtue of the work of Christ and one that involves predestination and the bondage of the will. On the contrary, grace for the Anabaptists means an ontological change based on the fact that human nature is not entirely vitiated by original sin. The links with medieval mysticism are clear and prepared the way for an attempt at personal and group sanctification and discipline, and for discipleship in which the life of Jesus Christ and His sufferings are the model. The Church is visible, not invisible, and suffering is one of its marks.

This is an important book, with its sources clearly indicated.

ERNEST A. PAYNE.