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Tony Walsh

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Gospel
Standard
Baptist Chapel

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Rehoboth Gospel Standard Baptist Chapel

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Surrounded by its neat burial ground Rehoboth Baptist Chapel stands trim and secure behind its white picket fence. Several gravestones, some of the more aged ones leaning at drunken angles punctuate the immaculately tended grass. Like most of the older structures in the area the little building is constructed of mellow Cotswold stone and roofed with similar lichened slates; they give off a golden glow in the sunlight of the chilly autumn afternoon. A stone bearing the date 1799 and the word 'Rehoboth' is set above the narrow doorway. In front of the chapel the narrow country laneway briefly pauses in its meandering way and then plunges down the steep hillside to the hamlet in the wooded valley beneath. On the other side of the valley the solid square tower of the ancient Parish Church stands out amongst its group of trees. There is an air of timeless tranquility about the whole scene.

The Baptists of course owe their formative influences to that third and most sweeping sector of the European Reform movement, the Radical Reformation. Concerned that Luther, Calvin and Zwingli had not gone nearly far enough, many independently emerging groups were committed to the restoration of a New Testament church order. They were convinced that baptism of professing adult believers was the only Scripturally sanctioned mode, that church and state should be rigorously separated and that believers should display a life style and assumptive world that was consciously different to the norms of wider society. The first Baptist congregation was formed in London in the early 1600's; like other non-conformists they suffered extreme persecution from state and established church particularly in Ireland, England and

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on the Continent but ultimately spread throughout the world to become the largest of the Protestant church movements. Internally they evidence a wide variety of both theological emphases and styles of worship. This article deals with a small and particularly conservative group found mainly in rural England, who trace their origins back to the early English Baptists and to the 1644 London Baptist Confession (of faith).

CHURCH SERVICES

A small black painted notice-board, neatly lettered in gold, is secured to the wall beside the door; it proclaims that this is Rehoboth Strict and Particular Baptist Chapel, with the parenthesis ‘Gospel Standard’, beneath. There is a list of ‘Lord’s Day’ and ‘Week-evening’ Preaching Services, prayer meetings and a fortnightly ‘Sabbath school’. For such a small, out of the way chapel the catalogue seems quite formidable. It would appear that the observant Strict Baptists of the area have little time for other activities. The notice-board doesn’t really seem to be directed at the uninitiated passer-by and anyway its lettering is barely visible from the gate. Instead the board appears to represent a statement of identity; there are no contact details and no suggestion of a welcome to visitors. As strong Calvinists, these Strict Baptists tend towards the view that if God has His chosen people in the area He will bring them in *without* human agency. It is not therefore the function of chapel noticeboards – or indeed services – to consciously attract. It is God’s prerogative, and His alone to deal with people.

Later that evening I return for the ‘Week-evening Preaching Service’. As I walk up the narrow pathway the sun is setting in a glory of red and gold, reflecting the autumnal colours of the surrounding countryside. The front door is ajar and gives onto a miniscule dark brown wooden lobby. The interior of the small chapel is a study in browns and creams; timber paneling, well polished seats and cream distempered walls set a tone of *stark simplicity*. There is a dull red carpet on the floor of the diminutive central aisle and a scattering of similarly coloured cushions on the seats. The carpet terminates at a small hexagonal wooden pulpit complete with sounding board, positioned in the middle of the back wall of the chapel. There are no memorials, no coloured glass, no ecclesiastical accouterments to distract the eye. The building is warm, pervaded by a faint smell of damp, polish and a hint of wood smoke; packed to capacity it would seat no more than fifty people (with perhaps a dozen more in the miniature gallery at the back). Underneath and set directly in front of the pulpit is

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a table topped with a wooden reading desk. An old fashioned cast iron stove stands in the middle of the aisle (hence presumably the warmth and the smell of wood smoke). A scattering of twenty or so people are seated in solemn stillness-all within the radius of the stove's warmth. Some are reading black bound Bibles or hymn books; others just sit. There is neither conversation nor eye contact. The men wear dark suits, and the women too are dressed in sombre blacks or navy blues. All the latter wear berets or hats. A few young children, miniature replicas of their parents and grandparents are scattered around the small building, boys' hair slicked firmly into place, girls long tresses modestly covered. One small girl stands out, wearing a startling pink confection; she moves her head often perhaps conscious of the exotic impact of her hat. A mother sits between her children, arms around them both, snuggled together in a tight threesome. Among the older women grey hair is caught up in traditional buns or rolls. As I take my place amid the somber, silent group I feel conspicuous in a sports jacket and open-necked shirt. What seemed quite respectable clothing outside, now – like the pink hat - feels vaguely exotic and out of place. No-one looks at me or exchanges a greeting; but from a variety of side-long glances I sense my entrance has been noted.

Periodically a rattle of the door handle and the squeak of hinges announces new arrivals. There are no greetings or acknowledgements, no smiles of welcome there either; the newcomers swiftly and quietly seat themselves; eyes close for a few moments of prayer and then join their companions in the communal sense of quiet expectation. The measured ticking of the Victorian wall clock and the occasional soft clunk as fuel settles in the stove intensifies the stillness. The sense of quiet containment is almost uncanny.

A pale faced younger man sits behind the table beneath the pulpit; he directs an occasional warning glance at two small boys sitting alone in the front seat. He is the deacon and, I deduce, probably their father; mother perhaps at home this weeknight evening, minding younger children. His duty is to assist the preacher by choosing the hymns, as he feels the *Spirit's* leading. Nothing is prepared or pre-agreed with the preacher. Few Gospel Standard chapels have a 'stated pastor' most rely instead on an historic pattern; men formally recognized as preachers by other chapels are sent out as 'ministers' to preach. The deacon's other unpaid duties probably include booking ministers to preach, cutting the grass and generally overseeing the welfare of the building - and of its congregation.

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MUSIC

A cottage organ stands against the wall at right angles to the pulpit; typically Victorian and complete with brass candle holders and rich carving, it is by far the most elaborate piece of furniture in the chapel. I hear later that all the other furniture and fittings were constructed by, or at the direction of the village carpenter when the building was erected over two hundred years ago. A small brass plaque records the ‘sanctified labours’ of a farmer’s wife through whose energy and motivation the chapel was built. Apparently the task of marching a husband and eleven children five miles to the nearest town to chapel every Sunday became too much and she marshalled a landowner to donate the land, and villagers to assist her husband in building Rehoboth. A young woman sits near the organ, hymn book in her lap. *Music* before, or indeed after the service, common in many churches would be frowned upon here, considered a distraction, or worse as smacking of entertainment. Such worldliness should have no part in the solemn business of worship. As I look the deacon places a number in a little rack on his table, deliberately facing it towards the organist. He has felt led to a particular hymn with which to commence the service. Catching his movement she looks up the hymn and then begins to search through her music book for an appropriate tune. Quietly too the congregation turn up the hymn in their own books. Gadsby’s selection of hymns, published in 1840 is still the standard fare favoured by the Gospel Standard Baptists; its use is one of a number of measures of conformity to the “Gospel Standard Association” to who’s rules and standards they must subscribe. There is no edition of ‘Gadsby’ with music included; instead a separate volume, the Companion Tune Book, contains a selection of tunes arranged by metre; it is the organist’s duty to find a tune for the chosen hymn. In some more traditional chapels there is still no musical accompaniment; instead a member of the congregation, usually a woman with a strong voice and a good ear, Companion Tune Book in hand, gives the start note with a pitch whistle and leads off at a slow deliberate pace. Most chapels continue to use this practice at communion services, the solemn monthly ritual, held universally following the evening service on the first Sunday of the month. Here any distraction, or hint of worldliness or modernity is particularly to be avoided.

COMMUNION

Their attitude to *communion* is one factor which distinguishes these Strict and Particular Baptists from others. The descriptor ‘*Strict*’ is

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a corruption of the term 'Restricted', and applies to admittance to the communion table, generally termed 'the ordinance'. Only local members or visiting members in good standing of churches of similar faith and order are deemed eligible to 'sit down'. '*Particular*' in their title, of course refers to the group's understanding that Christ died, not for the world, but only for a particular chosen group, an Elect people. They subscribe to High Calvinism and believe strongly in the doctrine of Particular Redemption. Only those who, after much heart-searching and sometimes years of introspection, feeling that they have 'a little hope' would ever dream of putting themselves through the searching application process for Church membership. Such a view tends to breed self doubt and lack of confidence. Only those who apply and who exhibit unmistakable evidence of a 'work of grace' in their lives are accepted as eligible for admission to local Church membership through believer's baptism. Only these are allowed to 'sit down' at the Lord's Table; and on such occasions those who move forward to sit together at that Table generally constitute a small, sometimes tiny percentage of attenders. Most of those who do attend will never feel sufficient certainty of their status as members of God's Elect, to presume to apply for membership, or to have the confidence to see themselves as 'born-again' Christians. And so, on Communion Sundays they will attend but sit as spectators.

SERMON

Pre-occupied with my search for the hymn, my eye is suddenly caught by a movement. Obscured in shadow, I had not previously noticed the man sitting perched in the pulpit; somehow it seems too small for his large frame. His head previously bowed in prayer he looks up, peering over the heavy pulpit Bible resting on its fat, fringed cushion. Dressed in a dark suit, dark tie and immaculately starched white shirt, his eyes rove over the congregation, stopping briefly on me, speculatively. Then a swift glance at the clock and he bows his head again in prayer. Perhaps he has not yet been given a 'word' for this evening's service. Gospel Standard preachers traditionally do little specific preparation for particular occasions, relying on *God* to direct them to a chapter, verse or phrase on which to speak. Sometimes this is only 'given' as they mount the pulpit steps or even in the moments just before the sermon is to be delivered. There is a conviction that a topic, phrase or even a particular word may well be given for an individual in a congregation, to meet their precise need for guidance, reassurance or direction. Too much preparation is frowned upon implying a reliance on self (or worse-on other writers or commentators). And

while one can say that sermons are unprepared in a traditional sense, the preachers are not; many ministers spend much of their time meditating on the Bible, or in spiritual introspection.

There is a sudden movement; the deacon edges to his feet, hymnbook open in one hand; without looking up he speaks softly, hesitantly as if overcome by the enormity of the task he is engaged upon.

“May we be helped to commence the solemn worship of Almighty God, as we sing hymn number one. Number One. To the tune number ----.” His broad West Country accent gives texture to his words. Slowly the organist plays the first two lines of a well-known tune. It is almost unrecognizable because of the pace. Then she stops and in the pause the deacon reads the first two verses. His voice trembles with feeling.

‘Great God, how infinite art Thou,
 What worthless worms are we.
 Let the whole race of creatures bow
 And pay their praise to Thee ...’

A slow chord from the organ and a strong woman’s voices takes up the tune. Gradually she is joined by another, then a tenor and a bass. By the middle of the verse about half the congregation are singing, loudly, in slow, slow four-part harmony. A couple of wonderful rich contralto voices furnish depth and volume. The pace is incredibly slow, with long thoughtful pauses between every verse, each singer pausing to savour the meaning of words and phrases. An elderly woman in front of me is not singing; but her lips move with the words; her eyes far away, caught up perhaps in an inner vision. The hymn eventually finished, the congregation sit to hear a long chapter read from the book of Genesis. The preacher is not from these parts; his accent marks him out as from a Midlands metropolis. Then the Bible is closed and the preacher leaning his weight on it, his hand covering his eyes, speaks again. ‘And now Lord ... most holy Lord, wilt Thou help us to pray Remind us what a privilege ... what a privilege ... what an unspeakable thing it is to come into the Divine Presence ... unto the Living God ... the Eternal One ...’ As he proceeds his voice breaks with emotion, almost undone by the solemnity of his task. There are many references to Biblical personalities and events: ‘May we be given a fresh vision like unto dear Ezekiel of old ... Oh for a praying faith like dear Jacob who wrestled ‘till break of day.’ Its burden is the sinfulness of humankind, their utter unworthiness, the need for a touch from God. He pleads on behalf of a sinful nation, a dissolute Royal Family, a godless Government, for the

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aged, the ill, the infirm; for the little ones 'in our midst' or at home, for those 'who stand upon the walls of Zion'. And so on. For at least twenty-five minutes. I am reminded of a Strict Baptist pastor who was introduced to the new vicar of the village to which the latter had recently moved. 'This man can pray longer than you can preach,' the village worthy announced, as he introduced the pastor to the surprised vicar. Hmm.

Eventually, the minister subsides onto the seat in the pulpit and with a visible effort the congregation pull themselves upright from the various crouching positions they have assumed during the prayer. A teenage boy replaces the cushion he has borrowed on which to prop his head and elbows on the back of the seat in front; far from being asleep he seems to have been totally lost in the prayer. Magically, during the petitions, another number has appeared on the deacon's table. Unhurriedly the organist straightens her beret and moves to the organ; and after a perceptible pause the deacon rises and announces another hymn.

If the prayer was long, the sermon which follows is even longer. We venture into a veritable ocean of largely uncharted waters of the Old Testament. The preacher's burden is the necessity of feeling a 'touch from the Lord' that might be construed as a 'Gracious indication of Divine favour ... of election ... of promise.' Many Biblical examples are called forth. Members are encouraged to seek after such a token; then all may yet be well. The minister's solemn tones and the repetition of Scriptural names or references seem to have induced a deeply thoughtful, almost meditative atmosphere in which the congregation have retreated into their own internal spiritual exercises. After just under an *hour* of unstructured reflections, the minister suddenly concludes. Without haste the congregation shifts on the hard seats and reaches for their hymn-books. The deacon announces and lines a hymn and we rise to join in the singing. A closing prayer and we are done.

After the service the congregation drifts promptly towards the door; there is little talk inside. Instead they greet each other (and me) warmly, but economically, outside. "Aw' right then, m'dear?" Conversation is sparse and the group moves swiftly towards their cars. As I drive away the lights of the little chapel still shine across the open hillside.