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The Social Status of some Eighteenth Century Baptist Ministers

THIS theme suggested itself to me when I examined some documents which unexpectedly came to Bristol College a few months ago. They belong to a large collection of mainly parchment legal documents dealing on the whole with the conveyancing of land and property. The collection records such transactions made during the late seventeenth century, the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth century by members of the Evans family.

Hugh Evans was principal of Bristol College 1758-1779 and his son Caleb 1779-1791.¹ A direct descendant, Miss Mary Evans, has presented these interesting and valuable documents to the College. At present they are in the Bristol City archives department where they are being expertly examined and catalogued.

Among these documents are a few associated with the Stennett family which was so eminent among eighteenth century Baptists. Their inclusion may well be due to the close association with both Joseph and Samuel Stennett enjoyed by Caleb Evans. As a young man living in London Evans was a member of Joseph Stennett's church in Little Wild Street. He was apparently baptised by Joseph's son Samuel, who assisted his father for a few years. Samuel preached a sermon at Evans' ordination in Broadmead, Bristol, and in 1791 he again gave a sermon but this time at Evans' funeral. This friendship with the Stennett family no doubt accounts for the presence of some Stennett portraits in Bristol College as well as for the few Stennett papers among the documents.

It is these Stennett papers which have raised in my mind the question about the social status of some Baptist ministers, and it is my purpose now to offer a brief exploration of those questions.

"One of society's most marked characteristics was the great cleavage between the well-to-do persons of fashion and fortune and the poor or lower order of the people."² This is the judgment of the Oxford History of England upon English society during the mid-eighteenth century. The general statement is applied to the established church in the following words: "Perhaps the worst aspect of the ecclesiasticism of this period was the great gulf fixed between episcopal princes of the church, with all their state and comparative luxury, and the humble country parsons under their jurisdiction." "These humble and ill-paid pastors and their wealthy fathers-in-God rarely saw one another, and even when they did, the social distance between them was so great that little human intercourse was possible."³

I would not suggest that we can make this judgment about Dissenters in just these terms but we do well to remember that Dissenters shared in a society marked by such strong social distinctions and it may well be that the relationships among Dissenters were not com-

pletely and utterly different from those described in the foregoing quotations. Certainly it is worth asking questions such as these: were there some ministers, chiefly in London, who though widely honoured and esteemed yet were separated socially and educationally from the majority of Baptists? Was this separation wider during that period than during any other period of Baptist history? To what extent did they succeed or fail in influencing the future life and thought of Baptists?

All I can do in this article is to select Dr. Joseph Stennett, 1692-1758 as an illustration of my theme though I think it likely that a study of the social position of the Stennett family through successive generations might offer some interesting results.

The family comes into Baptist history with Edward Stennett who "was a faithful and laborious minister of the Baptist denomination at Wallingford in Berkshire; and suffered much for nonconformity in persecuting times".⁴ He also practised medicine in order to maintain and educate his family. His son Joseph Stennett, "having finished his grammar learning at the public school in Wallingford, soon mastered the French and Italian languages, became a critic in Hebrew and other oriental tongues; successfully studied the liberal sciences and made a considerable proficiency in philosophy".⁵ He spent much of his life as minister of the Devonshire Square Church in London. He represented Dissenters on several occasions in addresses to the sovereign and was clearly a man with considerable public influence.

He continued the family tradition of a sound education for his son, also named Joseph. According to Gill, the younger Joseph "received instruction in grammar and classical learning from two of the ablest grammarians this age has produced: Mr. Ainsworth, author of the Latin Dictionary and Dr. Ward, Professor of Rhetoric in Gresham College".⁶ He then ministered in Abergavenny 1714-1719, in Exeter 1719-1736 and at Little Wild Street, London 1736-1758.

Joseph Stennett shared with his father more than an outstandingly good education; he possessed his father's ability to influence public affairs and to become well known in circles far wider than those of Baptist life or even of Dissenters generally. Ivimey gives us two facts about his Exeter ministry which illustrates this point. He "exerted himself with uncommon zeal" in the discussions about the doctrine of the Trinity which was then disturbing many churches and in these discussions he "made a noble stand for the proper divinity of the Lord Jesus".⁷ His name was also attached to some Association letters. A different aspect of his life comes to light in two documents among the collection given to the College, for these two documents relate to a mining venture in Exeter for which official permission was granted. Among the group of gentlemen prepared to finance the venture was Joseph Stennett who obviously was in a position to advance some capital. There is no record of the success or failure of the venture.

His London pastorate provides much more evidence of his prominent position among Dissenters and of his association on equal terms

with some leaders in the national life. Like the majority of Dissenters he was an ardent supporter of the Hanoverian sovereigns appreciating the large measure of freedom which had been granted to Dissenters. In his funeral sermon Gill said that Stennett was "a warm assenter and defender of the liberties of mankind, most zealously attached to the interest of His Majesty King George and his royal house". Cathcart says that he was a friend of George II. He counted among his friends Arthur Onslow, an eminent Speaker of the House of Commons, and the Bishop of London. Gill tells us that "his talents for public service in civil affairs were discerned by some persons of the first rank and eminency who were pleased to honour him with their friendship and acquaintance".

Some of his sermons illustrate this ability to speak influentially about public affairs. On 17th July, 1743, he preached a sermon about the victory at Dettingen praising the courage of the king and stating that in London a large assembly of protestant dissenters "with the assistance of several of their ministers were warmly wrestling with heaven for the salvation which now we celebrate at the very hour when the battle began".

In 1745 Stennett preached a powerful sermon with the purpose, according to Ivimey, of checking "the unmanly and pusillanimous panic which had struck the nation on the partial successes which had been obtained by the Pretender"⁸. Earlier in the year he had presented an address to the king on behalf of the Protestant Dissenting Ministers giving an assurance that "nothing within the power of the protestant dissenters will be wanting to defend and secure your Majesty's just and undoubted right to the imperial crown of these realms"⁹. On 9th October, 1746, he preached a sermon to share in the national thanksgiving to Almighty God "for the suppression of the late unnatural rebellion" and in this sermon he portrayed vividly the dreadful consequences which in his judgment would follow if "our enemies had succeeded".

A man in favour with the royal house and with the supporters of that royal house, both political and ecclesiastical, a man of considerable learning and yet a man of public affairs, he clearly possessed considerable financial means and held a good social position. Yet amid all this he continued as a diligent and faithful pastor of the church meeting in Little Wild Street. Like other eminent Dissenters of similar position his portrait was painted by a reputable artist; this portrait, painted by Soldi in 1744, now hangs in Bristol College.

To add to this brief account of Stennett's social position mention must be made of a document in the collection given to the College. It is a quite unexpected document for it is the account for Stennett's funeral and his burial in Bunhill Fields on 24th February, 1758. The account is a document of four foolscap sheets with another sheet added for the receipt. It is headed: "For the funeral of the Rev. Dr. Joseph Stennett from Charter House Square to the vault in Bunhill Burial Ground per Thos. Roome in Fleet street." Was this account pre-

served because it represented an unusually elaborate funeral? And did the funeral denote the social position of the family?

The total of the account is £114. 0. 0. We can appreciate what this sum meant when we remember that at that time a craftsman in London might earn about £45 in a year and a labourer about £30. In the provinces the wages were less. The Stennett family spent on a funeral as much as a craftsman might earn in nearly three years or a labourer in nearly four years. Furthermore the receipt for the payment of the account is dated 3rd May, 1758, so that within a short time of receiving the account Samuel Stennett had this considerable amount of money available.

The funeral account sets out the varying items in detail so that it is easy to imagine all the proceedings. The house in Charter House Square was draped in deep mourning and the body lay in the study under a velvet pall; in the room were placed eight large silver candlesticks. Six horses drew the hearse to Bunhill Fields, all covered with black velvet and wearing plumes of black feathers. Eight mourning coaches followed and some thirty bearers and "pages" walked beside the coaches. There were "fine mourning cloaks" for the relations, ministers and deacons; there were crepe hatbands, gloves and silk scarves of best quality for the ministers and of poorer quality for "servants and pew keepers". The pulpit and its sounding board, the "clerk's desk", the galleries and two pews were all hung in black for a month. On the Sunday following the funeral four mourning coaches and four men in mourning attended to convey the family to the meeting. Quantities of hatbands and of "untopt lamb gloves" were needed for the "coachmen, postillions, porters, coach pages, feathermen and leaders". A vault was built in Bunhill Fields and for this purpose nine bodies had to be removed. And 7/6 was paid "for all the men's beer at the funeral". It all suggests an elaborate and costly occasion.

I have given this brief account of Joseph Stennett partly to put on record these interesting documents which now belong to Bristol College and partly to illustrate some wider issues.

First, it does appear likely that the social distinctions of eighteenth century society appeared among Baptists. There were a number of ministers and laymen, largely though not exclusively in London, whose education, personal relations and social position distinguished them from the majority of Baptists. They exercised genuine leadership and were accepted by their fellow Baptists but they must not be regarded as characteristic of Baptists. The way of life shared by most Baptists, their mental attitudes, their concerns, their place in society were all rather different.

This raises a second issue. These ministers mixed freely in the educated society of their day associating with all kinds of people. They made judgments about outstanding political issues and did not hesitate to make known those judgments in sermons. At times they initiated schemes of educational or social value. All this was combined

with a deep personal piety of an evangelical pattern. They represent a type of evangelical Christianity which has remained within Protestantism. It was fairly strongly represented among Baptists during the nineteenth century but it has grown weaker in the twentieth century to our considerable loss. We have forms of personal evangelical piety which have lost the emphasis on sound education and on social concern so becoming narrow, dogmatic, unpleasantly sectarian. We have, too, an emphasis on social concern which has lost its root in personal faith so declining into ineffective and ill-directed humanitarian activities. How can we in a setting so different from that of the eighteenth century with our changed and changing categories of thought and patterns of living maintain and express this fruitful marriage of personal evangelical faith with a wide educational and social concern?

One further issue may be suggested. These eighteenth century men held the Baptist doctrine of the church as the gathered community of believing people, though I think that the doctrine of the church was not at all prominent in their thought or preaching. But the holding of this doctrine did not prevent them from mixing freely with secular society and sharing positively in its life and concerns. Their doctrine of the gathered church did not mean isolation from society. They strove to awaken in their congregations a sense of personal responsibility for making sound political judgments and for meeting social ills though they accepted the structure of the society in which they lived. I do not think that they made any attempt to work out consciously a doctrine of the church which would justify their attitude. The noticeable fact is that they were able to hold together their understanding of the nature of the church as the community of believers gathered out of the world and their sense of responsibility for Christian thought and activity in regard to important issues arising in the world. They were able to do this because they saw no conflict whatsoever between a personal Christ-centred faith and an acceptance of culture, of a wide education and of social position. Perhaps in this, their Christ-centred faith was sounder than the institution-centred faith which is prevalent today.

NOTES

¹ "Caleb Evans, Founder of the Bristol Education Society". N. S. Moon. *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XXIV, No. 4, Oct. 1971.

² *The Whig Supremacy 1714-60*. Oxford History of England. B. Williams. Revised C. Stuart, p. 128.

³ *idem*, p. 81.

⁴ Sermon on the death of Joseph Stennett. Gill.

⁵ Preface to the *Works of Joseph Stennett*. Vol. I, p. 8. The author is probably Dr. John Ward.

⁶ Sermon. Gill. Dr. Ward, of course, is the man who established the Dr. J. Ward Trust. Andrew Gifford was also a student of Ward's at Gresham College a short time after Joseph Stennett. He would illustrate my theme as clearly as Joseph Stennett.

⁷ *History of the Baptists*. Ivimey, vol. III, p. 580.

⁸ *History of the Baptists*. Ivimey, vol. III, p. 242.

⁹ *History of the Baptists*. Ivimey, vol. III, p. 242.