

The Independent Primitive Methodists

The Primitive Methodists, from their beginning, had much in common with the Independent Methodists in terms of revivalist spirituality and the role of lay people. They also tended to cater for a similar section of the population, notably its poorer element, who found personal significance in a movement that was often led locally by people who were as poor and uneducated as themselves, to the extent that some of the early local preachers were actually illiterate. Circuit meetings were made up largely of lay people and they had considerable local autonomy. The pecuniary demands placed on members initially were not great; in 1820 they were asked to pay a penny a week 'if they can afford it, and more if they choose', together with whatever they could afford at the quarterly ticket renewal.¹ There was a genuine concern not to over-burden the poor in the difficult post-Waterloo years when Wesleyan Methodism was losing members because of the pressures its ministers placed on them for payment of dues. The reluctance to set higher financial targets partly stemmed from some of the free gospel thinking² which pervaded Primitive Methodism in its earliest days, which persisted into the 1820s, not least through two of its most successful ambassadors, John Benton and John Wedgwood.³

However, as time passed, inadequate funding and repeated financial embarrassments made it necessary to tighten financial regulations and the conference of 1826 ruled that each circuit thereafter must pay its own itinerant and that no circuit could accumulate a debt. This was clearly a prudent and practical move, but it inevitably reflected growing centralised direction, the need for which was not always understood or appreciated by lay people who were only conscious of loss of local control and the obligation to fund a paid itinerant, albeit on a pittance of a wage that would only be accepted by the most dedicated people.

In the second quarter of the century, a series of secessions from Primitive Methodism arose, usually through conflict with the Conference-appointed itinerant, sometimes over matters of discipline and sometimes over refusal to meet increased financial demands. In almost every case, the secessionists formed themselves into churches which operated on an autonomous, free gospel basis. Some joined the Independent Methodists, who, in the early 1850s, made it their business to capitalise on what they saw as the beginning of a collapse in the 'hired system.'

Undoubtedly, there were social factors at work in this process of unrest. For most of the people concerned, to have a voluntary association for which they were responsible and in which they had a stake was a totally new experience. Religious motivation was high and they were passionate about their faith, but they were also materially poor, so demands upon their limited financial resources carried undertones of oppression. This was an era in which parish tithes and church rates were still mandatory, stretching the pockets of the handloom weavers, framework knitters and agricultural labourers who formed the bulk of the Primitive Methodist membership in many places.

Primitive Methodism had made an impressive start in the Trent Valley area of Nottinghamshire when John Benton missioned it during the winter and spring of 1817,⁴ so much so that by the following June revival broke out in the area, with the result that Benton needed the help of others to cope with the work. A year later, the first Primitive Methodist Chapel in Nottinghamshire was opened in the village of Bingham, the service being conducted by Lorenzo Dow who was on his last visit to England.⁵ Primitive Methodism

¹ *Primitive Methodist Magazine* 1 (1820), 208-13, 215.

² A 'free gospel' – the belief that ministry and preaching should be unpaid.

³ J. S. Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion, Its Background and Early History*, (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, Ltd., 1984) 138. Both men had an independent streak which was accommodated with some degree of compromise on the part of the Primitive Methodist hierarchy.

⁴ Werner, 89f., H. B. Kendall, *The History of the Primitive Methodist Church* (London: Edwin Dalton, und.) i, 233ff.

⁵ Kendall, i, 266.

became very strong in the area as new societies sprang up in many of the villages surrounding Bingham and were duly added to the Nottingham Circuit.

The seeds of free gospelism were already in the minds of some of the people who may have been influenced by Benton and also by John Wedgwood who worked extensively in the area.⁶ When William Clowes visited Radcliffe-on-Trent, he had a lengthy, but unacrimonious discussion on the subject with some members who advocated an unpaid ministry. At Bingham he encountered a class leader with free gospel views, to whose influence he attributed an eventual disruption.⁷

By the late 1820s, there were rumblings of discontent among some of the societies, including the one at Bingham, and, significantly, among a number of local preachers who chafed at the connexional system and its disciplines. One of these, John Parrot Sen. of East Bridgford, who had organised a great Camp Meeting in June 1817 at Radcliffe-on-Trent, evidently became disaffected in later years and finally resigned his position in 1829, saying that he could not conscientiously continue his work in the circuit.⁸

Parrott and others made an assertion of independence by holding services of their own outside of Primitive Methodist jurisdiction, sometimes in the same buildings where the Primitive Methodist societies met. Inevitably, this resulted in further conflict. In June 1832, the Nottingham Primitive Methodist Circuit took the bull by the horns and expelled five local preachers - Henry Castledine, George Baxter and Samuel Shepperson (all of Bingham), George Mabbot of Redmile and John Mabbot of Radcliffe - for 'base immorality and attempting to make a division and bad conduct to Mr. Whitby' (Mr. Whitby was a Nottingham based Circuit Steward and local preacher).

The term 'base immorality' is likely to refer what the authorities perceived as unethical behaviour in flouting discipline and organising meetings without the sanction of their leaders in the Circuit. Much of this no doubt stemmed from an objection to the payment of the travelling preachers. At its earliest stages, Primitive Methodism in Nottinghamshire would have appeared to differ very little from free gospelism, as there was no pressure on members in the newly constituted societies to finance the work, nor was the ministry in the area based on the clear disciplines which applied by 1830. Therefore, when tighter financial regulations were introduced, and members were expected to make regular contributions, as the Wesleyans did, this led the 'rebels' to view the payment of the travelling preachers as tantamount to the introduction of a priestly class for which there was no scriptural justification. However, it is likely that resentment towards the payment of itinerants stemmed as much from poverty as from issues of principle. Most of the members of the village societies around Bingham were agricultural labourers earning very low incomes and finding the support of an itinerant a heavy burden on their already limited means. Henry Castledine's sons, William and Edward, who went on to become long-serving leaders among the rebel group, never earned more than twelve shillings a week in the whole of their working lives.⁹

The expulsion of the five preachers was followed by a process which saw several societies withdraw from the Nottingham Circuit; this was not difficult in most cases, as the societies met either in rented accommodation or private houses, so there were no issues of property ownership to resolve. The dissident societies adopted the name 'Independent Primitive Methodist', denoting their adhesion to the beliefs and spirituality of Primitive Methodism, but their rejection of its developing polity. The functions of paid ministers (including pastoral work) were taken over entirely by local preachers. Using language similar to that adopted by the Lancashire Independent Methodists, one of their leaders described them in the 1851 Ecclesiastical Census:

⁶ Werner, 87.

⁷ Kendall, i, 265.

⁸ Kendall, i, 253.

⁹ James Vickers, *History of Independent Methodism* (Wigan, 1920), 205.

The meaning of Independent is this. They are a separate Denomination from the Primitive Methodists. Independent of any paid ministers. Those officiating in this place are men who like St. Paul can say 'these hands administer to my own necessities (*sic*),' working with their own hands six days and reason with the people and exhort the Sabbath.¹⁰

The determination to change allegiance spread to several other villages between Nottingham and Newark; by 1840, the only PMs left were those at Shelford and East Bridgford, whereas the IPMs now had about eleven societies in the same area.¹¹ They maintained many of the customs and practices of Primitive Methodism, including Camp Meetings. To the uninitiated, the change would hardly have been noticed.

The new churches formed themselves into a circuit which published a preachers' plan and held quarterly meetings, though these would not have dealt with the same financial issues as a Primitive Methodist Circuit. In 1851, the Ecclesiastical Census shows ten churches, with evening congregations totalling 865 adults and three Sunday Schools totalling 137 children.¹² By the first quarter of 1854, a further three places had been opened. The Circuit had 25 preachers, 6 exhorters and 6 assistant preachers.¹³ In due course, chapels were built and a sense that the movement could be permanent was reflected in the etching into their stonework of the title 'Independent Primitive Methodist'. Most of the churches were in small villages or hamlets; Bingham itself, with a population of about 2000 was the largest place by far. It is not surprising, therefore, that the church in Bingham was the strongest of the group, recording an attendance of 180 in 1851.

The small village of Caythorpe provides a typical example of one of the smaller churches started by the IPMs, who had begun Sunday School work there by 1833. Three years later, they purchased for ten shillings a piece of land on which to build a chapel from local landowner Robert Faulks, who stipulated that if it ceased to be used for a chapel it would revert to his ownership. Twelve trustees were appointed, of whom four were framework knitters, one a 'gentleman' and most of the others self-employed in various independent trades. They made up exactly the kind of autonomous-minded community in which free gospelism took root. The chapel had only 23 seats, of which nine were rented and the others were free.¹⁴ Thus, on a very small scale, many of the facets of a larger chapel were to be found. This was a village without an Anglican Church, so the IPMs effectively were free to become the spiritual and social hub of this tiny, close-knit community, where they continued until 1949.

The IPMs were geographically separated from the IMs and may have been unaware of their existence at first. However, contact was eventually made and William Sanderson visited them, but they were unwilling to commit themselves to any form of union, fearing that this would cost them their liberty. Occasional visits were made by some of the Lancashire preachers in the latter part of the century and in 1890 Matthew Kennedy of Wigan made a general tour of them.¹⁵

By this time, only eight churches with ten preachers remained. Seven of those listed in 1854 had closed, with just two new ones added, at Kneeton and Sutton. At Radcliffe-on-Trent, a chapel had been built in 1843, but closed about 1862. The building was subsequently taken over by the Primitive Methodists in 1864 and a permanent society was established which continues today in a newer building as Radcliffe Methodist Church.¹⁶ Free gospelism was evidently no longer an issue to the congregation, which must surely have

¹⁰ Religious Census 1851: return from Radcliffe-on-Trent by Thomas Smith, steward and leader.

¹¹ The exact number cannot be verified; it is based on a description of a circuit plan of 1839 which is no longer extant. (Vickers, 203)

¹² See Appendix 1.

¹³ Ian Matthews, 'Plans of Unusual Interest', *Cirplan Magazine*, (Lent 1996), 36ff.

¹⁴ Ann Sharp and Julie O'Neill, *Not Forgetting Caythorpe*, (Trent Valley Local History Group, 1992)

¹⁵ Vickers, 202.

¹⁶ *The Methodist Church, Shelford Road, Radcliffe-on-Trent 1893-1993*, 7.

included some of the previous IPM members. The battle over unpaid ministry began to look increasingly irrelevant with the passing of the years. Furthermore, the people would have found out by now that preachers who worked for long hours in the fields for six days a week could not, even collectively, provide the kind of pastoral cover that their paid counterparts could give.

In 1892, this group of churches finally applied to join the IM Connexion, but it was obvious that their high peak of strength was past. They now became the Bingham Circuit of Independent Methodist Churches, the 'Primitive' part of the title being dropped. In the same year, a church with separate origins was opened in Nottingham and added to the circuit, followed by a vigorous mission church at Bulwell in 1907. These two churches provided a lifeline to the others for a time until their own decline set in, but the circuit was losing its cohesion by the middle of the twentieth century and the links between the churches were weakening. By 1950 only Bingham, Sutton and Lowdham of the former IPM churches remained, together with Nottingham and Bulwell. Half a century later, Lowdham Church alone survives, though no longer in membership with the IM Connexion.