

THE BEACON SEPARATION

In the year 1818 an experiment in the formal teaching and expounding of the Scriptures was in progress at the Friends' school at Ackworth. It was designed to provide the basis for a new system of religious instruction, incorporating the use of a catechism on knowledge gained by reading and study and contained the implication that faith could be acquired by the exercise of the powers of reason. It met with much criticism from conservatively minded Friends and John Barclay* wrote several letters to the school committee, saying that they were 'as it were putting the Cart before the Horse, teaching Children to *profess a set of doctrinal truths* before their *minds* are altogether ready and ripe to profess such belief'; Barclay also considered that 'we are in danger of having a set of young formalists rise about us, whose heads are more likely to be filled with notions than with that nothingness of self which is as truly the introduction to all right knowledge on these subjects as the other is a snare and a stumbling block in the way of it.' The experiment, revolutionary in itself and clearly showing the influence of evangelicalism, was a straw in the wind, indicating how a breach in the unity of the Society might be expected to develop.

Thirteen years before the Ackworth experiment the gentle and sincere Henry Tuke of York had published a short book entitled *Tuke's Principles of Religion*, which proved very popular and ran into ten editions by 1828. In his introduction to his book Henry Tuke directed his readers to Barclay's *Apology*, but he departs from Barclay in two important particulars. On pages 16 to 17 he sets out a view of the last judgement and eternal damnation for sinners which is not contained in the *Apology* and which has a particularly evangelical emphasis, while on page 20 he emphasises the divine and pre-eminent authority of the Scriptures as given by God as against Barclay's view in Proposition III of the *Apology* that they are only a declaration of the fountain itself and therefore a secondary rule, subordinate to the Spirit. Henry Tuke qualifies his view of the Scriptures in the following passage from pages 42 and 43 of his book:-

Highly however as these writings are to be valued, and highly indeed do we esteem them! there is not only a possibility but a danger, of placing too much dependence upon them, by preferring them to that Divine Spirit from which they proceed, to which they direct our attention, and by which only they can be opened to our understanding.

Rufus Jones considered that although Henry Tuke wrote his book in a time of controversy to defend what he saw as the orthodox position, he raised 'evangelical doctrine into unprecedented prominence'¹. But he departed from Barclay's *Apology* only on the two points indicated and on the rite of baptism and the sacrament of the Last Supper he was firmly in line with early Friends. There is in his book the germ of evangelical thinking and that this was in line with tendencies developing in the Society is supported by the abrupt change to evangelical language in the wording of the Epistles from London Yearly Meeting from the year 1800 onwards.

It would be a mistake to assume that evangelicalism swept into the Society in the years from 1800 onwards and revitalised it; on the contrary, it is difficult to chart a clear course through the confusion of the first 35 years and the climate of opinion swings like a pendulum backwards and forwards between the Quietism of the latter half of the eighteenth century and the new movement towards evangelicalism. Thomas Shillitoe, for example, was at first strongly influenced by evangelicalism, but is said to have renounced it on his death bed, in a solemn testimony². Quietist ministers like Sarah Lynes Grubb (1772–1842) were still very active throughout this period and the evangelical Joseph John Gurney could write to Jonathan Hutchinson in October 1821 as follows:–

When we look at the scattered and desolate state of our little Society as it respects outward and inward particulars, I believe both thou & I are liable to discouragement in the prospect of its possible perhaps probable dissolution³.

and to the same in 1834:–

In many parts of the Kingdom, our Society seems rapidly losing its numbers & strength – & yet from time to time, there is that to be felt & enjoyed amongst us, which throws a hopeful gleam over the prospect⁴.

Joseph John Gurney was the most notable exponent of the evangelical point of view, who, coming from a background of wealthy, unconventional Norwich Quakers, had in 1811 taken the decisive step of declaring himself a 'plain Friend', a position only reached after a long personal struggle. He was a rationalist, but whereas in eighteenth-century Ireland rational criticism of the Scriptures had led many Friends to a complete rejection of biblical authority, for Gurney and his friends the reverse was true. The Canaanite wars, which had so troubled Abraham Shackleton⁵, were seen by English Quaker Evangelicalism as a just punishment

for transgression. In this acceptance of the righteousness of public calamity as the justice of God there is an echo of the reaction to the Lisbon earthquake of 1750 and the curious incidence of evangelical language in the Epistles from London Yearly Meeting between the years 1754 and 1760, which did not recur until just before 1800⁶.

Joseph John Gurney believed that the cultivation of the power of reason is man's responsibility and that the rational faculty should be used both in preparation for the acceptance of the word of God and in the subsequent sharing of faith and experience. Such a view was so diametrically opposed to the Quietist view that in the struggle which developed within the Society, Gurney finally became to the Quietist group the arch-antagonist. A steady stream of books and pamphlets flowed from him during the years 1820 to 1826, many of them distributed free among Friends; they advised, explained, and exhorted Friends to 'the necessity of studying religion by the powers of the human mind'⁷.

At a public meeting for the youth of the Society on 6 June 1831 the Quietist minister John Grubb, writing to his brother Joseph in Ireland, described Joseph John Gurney as speaking:—

a very long time – some thought it in degree like a *lecture*, more than Gospel ministry, but we should be cautious of judging⁸.

and again to his brother Joseph:—

I believe Sally & I think very much as thou dost respecting J.J.G.'s services as a Minister in our Society and some endeavours have been made to stir up Friends to take care lest the beautiful simplicity of Gospel Ministry as practised by our religious Society from the beginning & practised by its approved Ministers all along, should degenerate into a kind of learned theological lecture⁹.

It would be an over-simplification of the situation within the Society to regard it as sharply divided between Quietism on the one hand and Evangelicalism on the other. Sarah Lynes Grubb, corresponding with a friend on 20 March 1837, writes as follows:—

As regards the sad schism within *our* borders, I trust that which openly and vauntingly declared itself against the principles of Friends, has already begun to wax feeble; but what is to be done with that spirit that is still temporising, and standing between the decision of truth, and that which seems to expect to be made perfect in the *letter*, after having known what it was to begin the great work of salvation in the spirit? I cannot think that this middle rank will be able to escape the scrutinizing power of that living *word*¹⁰.

and again on 8 February 1838:—

We have a third class in our Society, who appear to me to stand at present in the way of our arising in ancient simplicity and brightness, more than those who have separated themselves, and even opposed the old school with much violence; and that is the class who would compromise, and if possible, mix up light with darkness, that there may be no breach of what they miscall charity, love and unity¹¹.

It is suggested from the foregoing that in the period leading up to the publication of *A Beacon to the Society of Friends* by Isaac Crewdson in 1835 there were three distinct strands of thought within the Society. The tensions can be clearly seen. At one extreme the remnant of eighteenth-century Quietist thought, on the other the evangelical Friends led by Joseph John Gurney and in the middle a body of Friends who were not committed either way and it is probably due to the existence of the solid, middle of the road group that the Beacon Separation when it came did less harm than it might have done to the Society.

Isaac Crewdson published his pamphlet *A Beacon to the Society of Friends* in the early months of 1835. He was an acknowledged minister and a member of Hardshaw East Monthly Meeting and gave as the reason for the publication of the pamphlet his intention to refute what he considered to be the errors of the American Quaker Elias Hicks, and throughout the subsequent controversy Hicks' doctrine played an important part. Elias Hicks was an extreme Quietist and carried his concept of the Inward Light to a point which appeared to reject all training of the mind not strictly required to meet the day-to-day needs of a farming community. Such training he considered as not only unnecessary, since God himself would supply more learning than could ever be gained from books, but as an impediment to that perfect communion between man and his Maker which was the cornerstone of his faith. Isaac Crewdson's method of refuting this doctrine was to take extracts from Elias Hicks' writings and set them side by side with passages from the Bible.

It is worth noting at this point that there had been considerable lack of unity in the area of Lancashire Quarterly Meeting even before the *Beacon* appeared. The first open expression of differences occurred as the result of the formation in Manchester in 1831 of an association for the purpose of lending Tracts to working class men and women who were not members of the Society. All went well until some Tracts were objected to by a number of Friends on the ground that the phrase 'the word of God' was applied to the Scriptures; the difference of opinion could not be resolved and the Association ceased its work. In 1833 William Boulton, a brother-in-law of Isaac Crewdson, started a series of

meetings for the social study of the Scriptures; the first meeting consisted of 12 young men and this was later increased to 25, including some Friends. No objection was made to these meetings until the spring of 1834. A proposal that the assistance of Lancashire Quarterly Meeting of ministers and elders should be sought was not accepted¹². The situation deteriorated so badly that Lancashire Quarterly Meeting appointed a committee of 21 Friends to assist Hardshaw East Monthly Meeting, but the approach of the 1835 London Yearly Meeting prevented this committee from starting its work.

The publication of the *Beacon* was received with alarm and disquiet by all shades of opinion within the Society, except among extreme evangelical Friends. Early in 1835 Joseph Gurney wrote to Isaac Crewdson, setting out what he felt to be the Quaker position on the doctrine of the Inward Light, to which he considered Isaac Crewdson had given insufficient weight. Gurney tried to show how the Holy Spirit operated in applying biblical principles to the conduct of daily life, reminding Crewdson that the traditional Quaker expressions of 'centring down', 'dwelling deep' and 'turning inward' described a personal approach to the universal availability of the Holy Spirit¹³. In February the *Beacon* was condemned by many members of the Morning Meeting¹⁴, Peter Bedford refused to send John Grubb a copy on the ground that he would not encourage its sale by the purchase of a single copy¹⁵ and a Quaker bookseller to whom it was sent declined to accept it for distribution¹⁶. The appearance of the *Beacon* produced a flood of pamphlets and letters, charges and counter-charges, among them a publication by Joseph John Gurney, showing how close he was in fact to the position taken up by Isaac Crewdson (*Strictures on Truth Vindicated*, published in London in 1836 in answer to *Truth Vindicated*, published in 1835 by Henry Martin of Manchester).

By May 1835 differences within the Society had become public knowledge and the proceedings of London Yearly Meeting were fully reported in the *Christian Advocate*, the weekly paper of evangelical dissent. Representatives from Lancashire Quarterly Meeting had reported that publication of the *Beacon* had produced a breach of love and unity amongst them. Discussion of this report from Lancashire extended through several sittings, in a manner totally foreign to the normal conduct of Yearly Meeting business, until after a stormy debate, fully reported in the *Christian Advocate*, a committee of 13 of the most important and weighty Friends was appointed to assist Lancashire Quarterly Meeting.

No account of this painful debate appears in the minutes of London Yearly Meeting, but the distress caused to Friends is reflected in the wording of the minute appointing the committee:—

In consequence of the painful defection in regard to unity set forth in the summary from the Yearly Meeting of Ministers and Elders, and which on enquiry is found to relate principally to the Quarterly Meeting of Lancashire. This meeting has been introduced into a deep feeling of sympathy with the said Meeting and concludes to appoint a Committee for the purpose of rendering such assistance to the said Quarterly Meeting as they may be enabled to give. The following Friends were appointed a Committee for the service, viz:—

Barnard Dickinson, Edward Pease, Joseph Marriage, Peter Bedford, William Allen, Edward Ash, Josiah Forster, William Forster, George Stacey, Joseph Tatham, Samuel Tuke, George Richardson and Joseph John Gurney.

The composition of this committee is interesting. George Stacey was Isaac Crewdson's cousin; it contains on the one hand the evangelical Friends Edward Ash, Joseph Forster and Joseph John Gurney, on the other hand the conservative Quietists Edward Pease, Peter Bedford and William Allen. But the majority of its members were middle of the road, uncommitted Friends and although all its members had more or less expressed their disapproval of the *Beacon*¹⁸, it was probably as well based in fairness to Isaac Crewdson as the Yearly Meeting could achieve.

The Yearly Meeting committee met with Isaac Crewdson on a number of occasions, but their discussions with him failed to make any impression. He had accepted quite literally the biblical injunction:—“Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 28, 19), as requiring baptism by water, refusing to accept Barclay's argument in Proposition XII of the *Apology* that baptism by Christ is by The Holy Spirit and by fire, or the similar position held by Joseph John Gurney, and also Gurney's advice that the inner meaning of the Scriptures can be revealed by the operation of the Inward Light.

In April 1837 it was rumoured that Isaac Crewdson had not only been baptized himself, but had baptized others; the rumour was correct and in June 1837 a number of well known Friends were baptized by Crewdson while he was in London. Among them was Maria Hack, who, in order to counteract what appears to have been a bowdlerized and possibly scurrilous account and to vindicate the character of Isaac Crewdson, described the ceremony in detail in a letter to her son, from which the following extract is taken:—

I had a private interview with I.C. at Clapton that very evening, and I can hardly tell you how much comforted I was to find him a very superior kind of man to the idea I had conceived of him – I expected meekness, humility & sympathy – I also expected from his benevolence that I should meet with kindness and Christian sympathy, but I was not prepared for so much dignity, nor for the *cautious* inquiry into the progress of conviction as to this ordinance... As we were going downstairs he stopped and turning round said to me that tho' no doubt remained in his *own mind*, yet as most unjust reports of the proceedings of himself and his friends had been circulating, he hoped I would not think he asked *too much* if he requested that before the ceremony I would explicitly state my belief in the Divine nature and the Offices of the Saviour, lest it should be said he had baptized a *Unitarian*...¹⁹.

Crewdson emerges as a sincere, gentle and unsophisticated man, of limited intellectual ability, who believed that in writing the *Beacon* he was meeting a genuine need and that its publication would be welcomed by his evangelical friends. He failed to realise that Gurney himself was steering a difficult course in making evangelicalism acceptable to the delicate susceptibilities of Friends and that the publication of the *Beacon* and Crewdson's subsequent behaviour marked an extreme point to which Gurney did not wish to go. The separation when it came was small. About 300 Friends from different parts of the country left the Society and styled themselves Evangelical Friends²⁰. The headquarters of this group was in Manchester, where they built a chapel to seat 600, but the schism failed to establish itself and after Isaac Crewdson's death in 1844 the chapel was sold to the Baptists, most of the group being absorbed into the Church of England or the Plymouth Brethren²¹.

Beaconism, as it came to be called, caused much distress in the Society. Families and friends were divided in their allegiance, the publicity given to the Society's proceedings was painful and echoes of the differences aroused reverberated through the Society for many years, but it was in effect no more than the extreme high water mark of the evangelical movement which assumed for a time an importance out of all relation to its true significance. The current of thought of the first 35 years of the nineteenth century led up to it, it surfaced and peeled away, but because there were those solid, middle of the road Friends whose existence Sarah Lynes Grubb so much deplored, the present writer believes that although damage was indubitably done it was not so serious as has been thought and that the verdict of history on the Beacon separation will be that in the final event it did not matter. London Yearly Meeting weathered the storm and moderate evangelicalism became the practice of the great majority of Friends almost until the end of the nineteenth century.

In conclusion, although it is no part of this paper to trace the subsequent history of evangelicalism within the Society, a brief note on what has been described as 'moderate evangelicalism' will help to clarify the Quaker position. This moderate evangelicalism, led at first by Joseph John Gurney and later by J. Bevan Braithwaite, differed in important respects from the evangelical movement which swept through the mainstream churches. Friends stood firmly apart from the rite of baptism and the sacrament of the Last Supper and although the Scriptures assumed an importance which had not been attached to them during the Quietist period, they were still to be interpreted by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Joseph John Gurney is quite clear that *outward knowledge* of the Scriptures is not indispensable to salvation; all men have received a measure of the divine influence. The Son, or Word of God, is "the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John i.9)²².

and again:—

the Holy Scriptures [and the Spirit] will ever be found in accordance with each other. The law written in the book, and the law written in the heart, have proceeded from the same Author; the only standard of both of them is the will of God; and therefore they can never fail to correspond. Scripture is a divinely authorised *test*, by which we must try not only all our sentiments on matters of doctrine, but all our notions and opinions respecting right and wrong... It ought, however to be remarked, that the written law, for the most part, consists in *general directions*. Now, the inward manifestation of the Holy Spirit... will instruct us how to apply them in our daily walk, and under all the various circumstances and exigencies of life²³.

Both Quietists and Evangelicals made use of the analogy of the seed, or the spirit of Christ in the heart, but while to the Quietists the seed could only be strengthened and illuminated by the Inward Light, the Evangelicals turned more positively than the Quietists had done to the biblical concept of the seed of Abraham in the children of Israel, with whom they continued, as early Friends had done, to identify themselves. The outward trappings of evangelicalism, such as hymn singing and bible reading, were later to appear in Quaker meetings for worship, but Friends continued to adhere faithfully to the direct experience of the divine, without any intermediary, on which their faith was founded. In essentials, with the two exceptions from Barclay's *Apology* noted above, they remained faithful to their early traditions and their position remained substantially unchanged from that adopted by Henry Tuke.

The careful course which Joseph John Gurney steered led the Society away from the low ebb reached by eighteenth-century Quietism, past the pitfalls of Beaconism, into a period of emergence from within the hedge which had enclosed it into a fuller participation in the affairs of the world, as, for example, the field of foreign missions. There was a greater willingness to take part in the 'creaturely activity' condemned by the Quietists and the idea of good works became a part of Quaker thinking to an extent not previously realised, but which was in full accord with the quickening spirit of the age, as it moved into Victorian England.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

*John Barclay was a cousin of Joseph John Gurney, who was responsible for the Ackworth experiment. Barclay was a traditionalist, opposed to the evangelical group. The experiment was confirmed at the school's General meeting in 1819.

- ¹ Jones, Rufus, *The Later Periods of Quakerism*, 286.
- ² *JFHS* vol. XLIII, 10.
- ³ Friends House Library MSS 3/357.
- ⁴ Friends House Library MSS 3/385.
- ⁵ Carlow MM minutes 2 Aug. 1799: Dublin Hist. Library MSS C312.
- ⁶ Epistle From London Yearly Meeting, 1750.
- ⁷ Hodgson, William: *The Society of Friends in the 19th Century*.
- ⁸ Dublin Hist. Library MSS SGD b/46.
- ⁹ Dublin Hist. Library MSS SGD b/47.
- ¹⁰ *Letters of Sarah Lynes Grubb*, 351.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 365.
- ¹² Friends House Tracts 33, 7-12.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 124-15.
- ¹⁴ Dublin Hist. Library MSS SGD b/154.
- ¹⁵ Dublin Hist. Library MSS SGD b/153.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Yearly Meeting minutes Vol. 24, 515-516.
- ¹⁸ Friends House Tracts 33, 16.
- ¹⁹ *JFHS*, Vol. 17 (1920) 82-87.
- ²⁰ Russell, Elbert: *The History of Quakerism*, 346.
- ²¹ Memoir prefixed to Glad tracts, 13: cf Richard Cockin to Mary Fox, 10 April 1842; printed in *JFHS* (1930) 31 and quoted in Isichei, Elizabeth, *Victorian Quakers*, 51.
- ²² Gurney, Joseph John: *A Peculiar People*, 35.
- ²³ Gurney, Joseph John; *loc. cit.*, 93.