

British Baptists and Slavery

Peter J. Morden (Spurgeon's College, London, England)

Introduction

This is a revised version of a short paper read at the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) Heritage Commission which met in Accra, Ghana, in the summer of 2007. It leans heavily on two earlier papers given by British Baptist Historians Professor John H.Y. Briggs and Dr Brian Stanley at meetings at the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) Assembly, which was held in May that year. These have subsequently appeared, in amended form, in the *Baptist Quarterly* for October 2007.^[1] Professor Briggs, the editor of the *Quarterly*, kindly allowed me to see these articles in advance of publication and also sent me a longer 'research document' he had written. I am most grateful. An expanded version of Professor Briggs' paper, together with Dr Stanley's and others previously published in the *Quarterly* relevant to the slavery question are available to download and read on the Baptist Historical Society website, www.baptisthistory.org.uk.^[2]

My own paper seeks to sample some of the work done by British Baptists who supported the various anti-slavery campaigns of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The efforts of British Baptists in this regard have often been downplayed, with the focus almost exclusively on the (admittedly vital) contribution of Quakers and Evangelical Anglicans. Part of my aim, then, is to redress a certain imbalance in the historiography. But the question of balance is one that also needs to be addressed in another direction. As Brian Stanley observes, it would be too easy to speak of British Baptists and slavery as if everyone 'took the side of the angels'.^[3] But this would also distort the historical record. Accordingly the second half of this paper deals with attitudes and actions which those of us who identify as British Baptists would wish had not been present, before moving to a conclusion.

British Baptist Attacks on the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans and on the Institution of 'Slavery' Itself

First of all, the positives. On 10 February 1788, Robert Robinson, the radical dissenting minister of Stoneyard Baptist Church^[4] in Cambridge preached a sermon that dealt at length with the issue of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. Robinson's text was Luke 4.18 and included words from Isaiah 61.1, 'The Lord hath sent me...to proclaim liberty to the captives', which Jesus dramatically proceeded to apply to himself. The preacher invited his congregation to cast themselves back to the first century, and picture themselves as present among some early Christians gathered for worship around the Lord's table:

Let us imagine a primitive assembly of Christian slaveholders and slaves, not now, in this instance, as slaves, but above slaves, brethren beloved in the Lord, all sitting at the same table, eating the same bread, drinking the same cup, in remembrance of their

common benefactor, who had said, the Lord sent me to preach deliverance to captives. Let us hear Paul commending charity, or universal benevolence. ...How must a slaveholder feel, when in the assembly a charitable deacon proclaimed: Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them? The doctrines and the ceremonies of Christianity attack injustice and cruelty in their strong holds, depraved passions, and consequently if a slave trade be the effect of such passions our religion goes to subvert the whole system of slavery. Feel its influence, and the work is done.^[5]

Robinson's overarching point was simple, but profound. Key principles inherent in the gospel thoroughly and fatally undermined the institution of slavery. These principles included the dignity of humanity, God's love for all people, and the challenge for Christians to be themselves conformed to God's standards of holiness and justice.^[6] Also, the experience of sharing, as members of the same family, the same bread and cup around the table of their common Lord was incompatible with the continued enslavement of fellow brothers and sisters. The idea was simply preposterous. The fact that Paul did not explicitly condemn slavery was completely irrelevant. Once the 'spirit of Christianity' was truly understood and 'felt', the institution of slavery would wither on the vine. Robinson's sermon would be published later that year with the title *Slavery inconsistent with the Spirit of Christianity*. The title was clearly appropriate. The 'spirit of Christianity' was subversive of all forms of slavery.

Robinson was one of many British Baptists who preached and wrote against the trade in enslaved Africans in the period leading up to 1807, the year when the trade was abolished in what was then the British Empire. In his message Robinson also advocated emancipation although this would not come until much later. In respect of the British Colonies, the Act of Emancipation was passed on 28 August 1833 and became law on 1 August 1834. Apprenticeship, effectively enslavement by another name, came to an end on 1 August 1838.^[7] Of course, globally enslavement would continue to be an issue long after this latter date had passed.

Other attacks on the transatlantic trade and on the enslavement itself came from right across the theological spectrum of eighteenth- and nineteenth- century British Baptist life. So, for example, on the Arminian side, the General Baptist Assembly declared in 1787 that the trade was 'inconsistent with every rational and humane principle'.^[8] On the opposite wing of Baptist life, the London High Calvinist William Button preached against the slave trade early in 1795 and also wrote privately of what he called the 'horrid-African trade' which was 'one of our national crimes'.^[9] Occupying the theological middle ground (in this rather simplistic analysis!) were the Evangelical Calvinistic Baptists, a distinguished representative of whom would be Abraham Booth, another London Minister. In respect of the slave trade, he regarded such 'commerce' as 'infamous'; regarding the institution of slavery itself, his prayer was that it might 'cease to exist'.^[10] Like Robinson then, Booth opposed both the slave trade and slavery itself, although, he spoke of 'gradual emancipation' (as, in fact, did Robinson). Many such sermons were preached during the period under consideration, often at the 'request' of congregations. One congregation that was particularly active, in a number of different ways, in opposing slavery was Maze Pond, a Calvinistic Baptist congregation in London which had links with Booth's own church which met at Prescott Street.

One of the ways churches as a whole were involved in anti-slavery campaigning was through boycotting sugar shipped to Britain from the West Indies. Booth indicated his support for those who believed that any goods produced through slavery were tainted with the blood of enslaved men and women.^[11] Avoiding such products, he stated, was nothing less than a Christian duty.^[12] William Carey, in his famous *Enquiry*, also commended those 'many persons' who had refused to buy West Indian sugar because of the 'iniquitous' way it had been produced. The trade, he said, was 'inhuman'.^[13] More generally, Carey's sister, Mary, claimed never to have heard her brother pray either in public or in family prayers without interceding for slaves.^[14] Carey's missionary colleague and fellow member of the so-called 'Serampore trio', William Ward, was also resolutely anti-slavery. Before leaving for India Ward had been involved in radical journalism, and had used his editorship of the *Hull Advertiser* to give significant and sustained publicity to the cause of abolition.^[15] Many more examples of Baptist involvement could have been cited. Any history of anti-slavery activity in Britain between the years 1780-1838 which purports to be comprehensive but which fails to take Baptists into account is in need of revision.

British Baptists Failure to Support the Anti-Slavery Cause

But what of the 'negative' side?^[16] A number of prominent eighteenth-century evangelicals 'owned slaves', luminaries such as George Whitefield and Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, among them. Did Baptists also do this? It is difficult to find examples but, almost certainly this was, as Stanley states, for 'sociological' rather than 'theological' reasons.^[17] Put bluntly, most Baptists were too poor; they were not part of the 'slave-owning' classes. It will already have been noted that both Robinson and Booth failed to call for immediate emancipation as a moral and biblical imperative. Gradual emancipation was all they were willing to endorse. And there were Baptists who were entirely silent on the issue of slavery. The slave trade in England was especially associated with the ports of Bristol, London and Liverpool. Samuel Medley, the hymn writer, was pastor of an important Baptist chapel in Liverpool from 1772-1799. But he gave no anti-slavery lead from the pulpit, as he had adopted a strictly 'no politics' rule with regards his preaching. In a verse which could well have been written against the background of the slavery question, Medley stated:

And if on this subject I wrote my whole mind,
It is much but you'd think me severe or unkind.
On the whole, it is therefore, perhaps for the best
To say little or nothing, and so let it rest.^[18]

James Bradley speaks of 'the lack of progressive leadership' from the dissenting pulpit in Liverpool suggests that Liverpool dissent's deep involvement in the slave trade 'may well have dampened interest in radical causes'.^[19] Preaching, either positive or negative, cannot be dismissed, as John Briggs notes, as a mere 'pietistic pastime'.^[20] It could and did make a real difference, for good or, in this case, ill.

As noted, Bristol was one of three ports most associated with the slave trade in eighteenth-century Britain.^[21] It was also an important Baptist centre, home of both the historic Broadmead Baptist Church and of the strategically important Bristol Academy. Some Bristol Baptists were vocal in their opposition to slavery. These included Robert Hall Jr., who became assistant pastor at Broadmead in 1785, combining this with tutoring classics at the Academy. But, as Roger Hayden has shown, members of the diaconate at Broadmead had a strong interest in the slave trade, particularly with the shipping, sugar and general trade which was associated with this. These included John Harris, a wealthy merchant and head deacon in the church. Harris served as sheriff in 1776 and 1788 before becoming mayor of the city in 1790. Another Deacon, John Page, also served as sheriff, this time in 1793. Also significant was Andrew Pope, not a member at Broadmead but, according to Hayden, a 'significant benefactor'. Pope's grandfather had built a Sugar House at Lewin's Mead in the city which remained in the family until 1808, until they moved into banking. All these men benefited economically, indirectly and directly, from the slave trade.

What about Caleb Evans, the celebrated Evangelical Calvinist who was both tutor at the Academy and pastor of Broadmead?^[22] His legacy with regards slavery is difficult to pin down with any precision. He was a member of the Bristol Auxiliary of Granville Sharp's 'Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave-Trade', but no explicit condemnation of slavery, either written or in his preaching, has ever been traced. Evans had consistently supported the local MP, Henry Cruger, voting for him on three successive occasions, in 1774, 1781 and 1784. When, in 1789 Wilberforce campaigned for abolition, Cruger played a prominent part in resisting the cause, both voting and speaking against the bill. The relationship between Evans and Hall broke down in the late 1780s, so that Hall left Broadmead to replace Robinson as pastor in Cambridge in 1790. Traditionally this 'falling out' has been attributed to differences in doctrine and what has been regarded as Hall's rather eccentric bachelor lifestyle. But Hayden suggests that a divergence of some kind over the slavery question may also have been a root cause. Evans was a close friend of Harris and others who had profited from slavery. Ultimately, the evidence remains elusive. But it does appear that, on the issue of the slave trade and enslavement more generally, Evans leaves what at best is an ambiguous legacy.

It is worthwhile asking why Baptists were either ambivalent about slavery or, indeed, in some cases supportive of it. Of the many answers two will already be clear. Firstly, the desire to keep 'distasteful' political questions out of the pulpit was a factor. But secondly, and most importantly, there was the issue of economic self-interest. The economy of a city like Bristol with its shipping, sugar and other trade was, it appeared to many, inextricably bound up with that of the slave trade. Because of this some Baptists were deaf to the sorts of arguments put forward by Hall, Booth and Robinson. Certainly it is worth reflecting that we all come to Scripture with our particular biases and preconceptions, cultural and otherwise. In what areas are we blind to plain Scriptural principles because of prejudice or self-interest?

Conclusion

What is the appropriate way to conclude this brief survey? A reflection on the work of British Baptist missionaries in Jamaica may point the way.^[23] Initially, the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) home committee told those leaving for Jamaica to give politics a wide berth and to 'endeavour by a respectful demeanor to recommend yourself and the gospel to the white inhabitants of the Island.' Any missionary who refused to tow the official line and spoke out on the issue of slavery was liable, like Lee Compere in 1817, to be dismissed from the Society's service.^[24] John Howard Hinton, in his nineteenth-century biography of William Knibb, admits that his subject, who for long had held slavery to be an abomination, 'dutifully obeyed the instructions of the BMS Committee to say nothing in public against the plantation system.' This was until the brutal repression of the 1831-32 slave rebellion made such 'neutrality' impossible.^[25] Even at this stage, when Knibb and his missionary colleague James Phillippo returned to England they found John Dyer and the BMS Committee still sitting on the fence, urging 'prudence and a temperate policy.'^[26] To their eternal credit, this was advice that Knibb and Phillippo chose to ignore. Stanley concludes: 'Without their courageous determination to make the issue of colonial slavery determinative in the 1832 general election, it is likely that slavery in the British empire would not have been abolished when it was.'^[27] The story nicely captures the legacy of British Baptists regarding slavery, a legacy which is contradictory and ambivalent; one which contains considerable positive aspects, but also some significant negative ones.

British Baptist Apology

Since this paper was given in Accra, the BUGB Council have issued an apology with respect of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans which reads as follows:

As a Council we have listened to one another, we have heard the pain of hurting sisters and brothers, and we have heard God speaking to us.

In a spirit of weakness, humility and vulnerability, we acknowledge that we are only at the start of a journey, but we are agreed that this must not prevent us speaking and acting at a kairos moment.

Therefore, we acknowledge our share in and benefit from our nation's participation in the transatlantic slave trade.

We acknowledge that we speak as those who have shared in and suffered from the legacy of slavery, and its appalling consequences for God's world.

We offer our apology to God and to our brothers and sisters for all that has created and still perpetuates the hurt which originated from the horror of slavery

We repent of the hurt we have caused the divisions we have created, our reluctance to face up to the sin of the past, our unwillingness to listen to the pain of our black sisters and brothers, and our silence in the face of racism and injustice today.

We commit ourselves, in a true spirit of repentance, to take what we have learned from God in the Council and to share it widely in our Baptist community and beyond, looking for gospel ways by which we can turn the words and feelings we have expressed today into concrete actions and contribute to the prophetic work of God's coming Kingdom.'^[28]

From the perspective of someone present at the BWA Council meetings at Ghana, the issuing of this apology is to be warmly welcomed. The challenge is to live in the light of this repentance. For white British Baptists this will involve, amongst other things, a careful listening to the voices of black sisters and brothers.

^[1] J.H.Y Briggs, 'Baptists and the Campaign to Abolish the Slave Trade', *Baptist Quarterly* (*BQ*), 42.4, (October 2007), pp. 260-83; B. Stanley, 'Baptists, Anti-Slavery and the Legacy of Imperialism', *BQ*, 42.4, (October 2007), pp. 284-95.

^[2] Accessed 19 December 2007.

^[3] Stanley, 'Baptists, Antislavery and the Legacy of Imperialism', p. 287.

^[4] Now St. Andrews Baptist Church.

^[5] Robert Robinson, *Slavery Inconsistent with the Spirit of Christianity: a sermon preached at Cambridge, on Sunday, Feb. 10, 1788* (Cambridge: J. Archdeacon, 1788), pp. 12-13, as cited by Stanley, 'Baptists, Antislavery and the Legacy of Imperialism', p. 285.

^[6] So Stanley, 'Baptists, Antislavery and the Legacy of Imperialism', p. 285.

^[7] See Stanley, 'Baptists, Antislavery and the Legacy of Imperialism', p. 287.

^[8] R. Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1986), p. 102.

^[9] Letter William Button to the Rev'd. Dr Rogers of Philadelphia, March 6, 1795, printed in *The Baptist Magazine*, November 1839, pp. 525-27, as cited by Briggs, 'Baptists and the Campaign to Abolish the Slave Trade', p. 265.

^[10] A. Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species and the Enslaving of Innocent Persons Inimical to the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Christ: a sermon preached in Little Prescott Street, Goodman's Fields, January 29, 1792* 3rd edition, (London: L. Wayland, 1792), p. 22, as cited by Stanley, 'Baptists, Antislavery and the Legacy of Imperialism', pp. 286-87.

^[11] For information and example in this paragraph see Stanley, 'Baptists, Antislavery and the Legacy of Imperialism', pp. 287-88.

^[12] Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species*, pp. 24, 25.

^[13] William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (Leicester: 1792), pp. 79, 84.

^[14] E. Carey, *Memoir of William Carey, D.D.* (London: Jackson & Walford, 1836), p. 38.

^[15] J.C. Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward*, 2 vols., (London: Longman, 1859), 1, pp. 93-6.

^[16] See B. Stanley, 'Baptists, Antislavery and the Legacy of Imperialism'. I am drawing from material in Dr Stanley's unpublished paper. Cf. Stanley 'Baptists, Antislavery and the Legacy of Imperialism', pp. 288-89.

^[17] Stanley 'Baptists, Antislavery and the Legacy of Imperialism', p. 288.

^[18] As cited by J.H.Y. Briggs, 'Baptists and the Campaign to Abolish the Slave Trade'. I am now drawing from the unpublished paper.

^[19] J.E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 392, 411.

^[20] Briggs, 'Baptists and the Campaign to Abolish the Slave Trade'. Unpublished paper.

^[21] For information in this paragraph see R. Hayden, 'Caleb Evans and the Anti-Slavery Question', *BQ*, 39.1 (January 2001), pp. 7-8.

^[22] For information in this paragraph see Hayden, 'Caleb Evans and the Anti-Slavery Question', pp. 11-13.

^[23] See Stanley, 'Baptists, Antislavery and the Legacy of Imperialism', pp. 288-89.

^[24] B. Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society: 1792-1992* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), p. 71.

^[25] J. H. Hinton, *Memoir of William Knibb* (London: 1847), pp. 136-7; see Stanley, *History of the BMS*, pp. 76-7.

^[26] Stanley, *History of the BMS*, p. 77.

^[27] Stanley, 'Baptists, Antislavery and the Legacy of Imperialism', p. 289.

^[28] See www.baptist.org.uk/news_media/latest_news/slave-trade.html. Accessed 19 December 2007.