

THE GOSPEL LIFEBOAT MISSION

Enmore Green, Dorset

The 1886 Primitive Methodist *Quarterly Review* has an article under the title *Primitive Methodism as it was, as it is, and as it should be* on pages 692-702, by John Stephenson, which shows that Liberal theology was already moving some Christians to leave the Connexion by the late nineteenth century:

But it is to our doctrinal teaching that the attention of the Connexion will have to be chiefly directed. There never was a time in the history of the Connexion when our danger was so great in this direction as at present. ... As we are one organic body, we cannot but see how important it is that ... the same doctrines should be held by all. If not, we are simply a rope of sand. ... For a man, in our opinion, can no more be an honest man who teaches doctrines contrary to the doctrines of the Connexion while in it, than a soldier or any other man, who takes an oath of allegiance to her Majesty, and forthwith devotes himself to the interests of her enemy. To plead 'sincerity', or 'liberty', and 'a man must preach what he believes,' is no justification of such conduct.

Now our doctrines are so clearly and definitely set forth in our standards ... and the statement of them is in language so clear, full, and guarded, that to change or modify the doctrine is to destroy it.

Stevenson goes on to draw his readers' attention to some of the mental and emotional distress that new "Liberal" theological teachings were already creating, and to the painful decision to which they were already driving some believers:

The sorrow often manifested by some of our most thoughtful members and officials on hearing certain doctrines taught from our pulpits is most distressing to witness. ... And yet to a man to whom truth is sacred, and who holds the doctrines of the Connexion as God's truth, there appears no other course open to him as a conscientious man than to leave us.

Distress at the spread of weakened teaching combined with a sense that moral standards were being allowed to slip, especially concerning the use of alcohol and tobacco. The story of the Gospel Lifeboat Mission, and the cause at Canada, Hampshire, with whom the Gospel Lifeboat Mission is still in fellowship, brings these two threads together.

An account was written in 1960 by Les Pennels entitled *Victory through the Blood of the Lamb: a short account of the history of the Gospel Lifeboat Mission founded at Enmore Green in 1889, and in particular as it relates to that part of the work established at Winterslow*. It was never printed, but rather has remained only as a bundle of loose manuscript pages: these pages were lent to me by the person in whose possession they currently remain.

The manuscript records that Benjamin Norton of Enmore Green and Albert Shears of Winterslow were grieved that some ministers were smoking and drinking alcohol. As we shall see, Norton was also provoked because a young preacher in his district had been adversely criticised for speaking in the open air of "The atoning blood of Christ". Norton considered such criticism a greater sin than the use of tobacco and alcohol, and the fact that the critic was one of the ministers probably made matters a good deal worse.

Another booklet entitled *A Hundred Years of Witness to the Faithfulness of God* records the history of the first century of Totton

Evangelical Free Church, which began in 1901 as one of the Gospel Lifeboat Mission churches. It was published by the church, and was written by Jim E. North (identified only as JEN in the booklet). This volume tells us that:

The Mission came about because of the concerns of the members of one family that theological liberalism was entering the Primitive Methodist Churches in the Shaftesbury area. Matters came to a head when a ministerial candidate had been criticised by a visiting Primitive Methodist minister for speaking of “The Atoning Blood” at an open air meeting. ... Evangelical preachers were reproached for preaching Evangelical doctrines, ...

George Fowler, the minister, deplored reference in the open air to Christ’s atoning blood and saw such teaching “the doctrine of the shambles”, or was happy to hear it described as such. (Shambles were butchers’ tables, or the slaughterhouse itself.) This was probably George Fowler (1831-1912), who was stationed in Hungerford, Micheldever, Faringdon and Motcombe Circuits in the 1880s.

North then supplies a quotation from Pennells:

For holding such pure and high Scriptural doctrines, Gospel Preachers were finding that their local chapel pulpits were being closed to them. Especially obnoxious to some of these ministers and the lighter part of the congregations, was the preaching of some of these men of ‘Holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord’ in the light of which, the bazaar, concerts, fêtes etc, which many of the people enjoyed, were of no value at all.

North then relates that:

The brothers Benjamin and Edmund Norton, after much prayer in their family, withdrew from Methodism and commenced meetings at Enmore Green, Shaftesbury, on Sunday, 24th March 1889. They went on to build a meeting hall which, although not in use as a place of worship, was not demolished until 1963.

Benjamin Norton was President of the Gospel Life Boat Mission in 1935. His 1939 *Jubilee Items* supplies further details of the Mission's birth. One night in 1889, six members of the Norton family, and a few like-minded friends, met for prayer in a home, to pray about how to respond to the situation in the Primitive Methodist society. At that time, Rev. George Fowler was stationed at Motcombe, about four miles away.

The prayer meeting was suggested by Edmund Thomas Norton, Benjamin's elder brother, who was seldom absent over the course of many years from the services at the hall and was regarded as a pillar in the wider Gospel Lifeboat Mission. Benjamin, being an accredited local preacher, led the meeting. The decision was taken to separate from the Primitives, and the following Sunday some forty persons gathered and heard an address on the words from the Book of Jude, "Earnestly content for the faith once delivered to the saints". Happily, no quarrel ensued, each party agreed to pray for the other, "many old friends rallied round," and in 1892, by which time he was stationed in Calne (Wiltshire) Circuit, George Fowler wrote a letter saying, "As far as I contributed to that matter, I deeply regret it. ... It shall be as though it had never taken place. ... May God's richest blessing be yours." Chapel pulpits, including ones not visited before, opened again to preachers from the Gospel Lifeboat.

As part of their secular work the Norton brothers used to attend the weekly cattle market in Salisbury, where they met Christians from

various Methodist chapels in the area. They discovered that people in a number of chapels shared their concerns.

B. H. Norton, who had been a journalist before taking up farming, became General Secretary of the Mission, and began to publish, in 1894, its magazine, *The Pilot*, offering doctrinal material, news, obituaries, letters, Bible quizzes for young people, and information about the Mission's ministry. The Mission also produced tracts.

The September 1894 issue, published at Enmore Green declares on its front cover the Mission's threefold object: declaration of uttermost salvation; conversion of sinners; advocacy of total abstinence. The leading article, entitled *Spiritual Adulteration*, is written in outspoken, fiery words, from which I extract the following:

And yet the churches today, even the Methodist, ... is living in open and unblushing adultery with the world. ... The church has torn from her walls the warning 'The place whereon thou standest is holy ground.' Through her doors, thrown open to the world, into the holy of holies from which the guardian angels have been driven or grieved away, some powerful, poisonous vipers have entered. They are destroying the vine which should have grown the grapes to supply food for the young converts. These vipers have been fondled in the bosom of the church because of the gold dust found in their trail, and which by a process of convenient alchemy is converted into that mysterious currency 'Answer to prayer money,' of which the 'circuit' (including the minister, under whose benign smile the process is conducted,) gets the benefit, the young converts the fun, and for which it is only fair the devil should have the thanks.

The church has become a community of 'Lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness.' What

mean the worldly concerts, entertainments, bazaars, amateur theatricals, tableaux vivants, mayoral and corporate vanities whose association with the church is atoned for because the monetary proceeds, we are piously told, are for carrying on the work of God? What mean the cricketing, footballing, foxhunting, circus-going, cigar-smoking, political-wrangling local preachers? Many of them mixing during the week with those who live as near hell as possible, and then parading in the sanctuary on Sunday as representatives of a holy God! One might get as much food from their ministrations as he would blood from a flint. ... Does not the pleasure spirit manifest itself in the desire for popular preachers? To be popular one must please human nature – keep a congregation in roars of laughter, provided they pay for it (to help on the work of God.) What a recommendation for a starry crown! ‘He kept congregations in roars of laughter.’ Had Peter exercised this gift instead of the tongue of fire what a collection he might have taken! But – (what follows is of minor importance to popularists) would he have rescued three thousand souls from the Destroyer? ...

Then what a seminary of pride has the College become. How many young men’s holy fervour has been refrigerated there! What transformations into priestly self-importance!...

How much doctrinal error there is in the church! How many question and oppose the doctrine of full salvation; veer to non-eternal punishment; question inherent depravity; sneer at the Atonement; and disown the personality of the Holy Ghost. ...

Strictly the church can only be within saving touch of the world when completely separated from it. What baker ever

swept his chimney into the flour-bin to make whiter bread?
Out with the soot!

“The tone of that extract is very like the content of the North American Holiness magazines of the same period,” comments David Bebbington (email, 9th April 2018). The words do seem unusually stark even in comparison with those of other seceders. One wonders why. It may be that Norton and the Gospel Lifeboaters who clustered around him were extreme in their views and saw the church and the world in unusually stark, black and white contrasts; or perhaps the Dorset and nearby Primitive Methodist societies were more compromised than those of some other regions. Certainly the continuing grassroots opposition to the widespread decay in belief that was documented and explored in *Change and Decay* would prompt belief in a substantial remnant of Primitives loyal to the early faith and ethos of their Connexion, but I have not made a comparative study of the degrees of theological drift in different areas of England. This, perhaps, is a subject for some other researcher.

The September 1896 issue of *The Pilot*, again published at Enmore Green, records the Mission’s annual holiness convention held on Whit Wednesday “with our warm-hearted Winterslow friends”: “A good number were present at 10.30 to hear a paper” about Christ’s Second Coming. There was an open-air meeting at 2 p.m.. After tea a meeting was conducted from the van (“the Car”) on the Green at Middleton. At the closing meeting, addresses were given by all the superintendents and three others. “The attendances were large, and all were thankful for the day of refreshing.”

In 1899 the May issue announced a “United Holiness Convention” to be held on Whit Monday in the mission hall at Enmore Green, consisting of services at 10.30, 2.30 and 7.00, with tea (for sixpence) at 5 p.m.. Services were to continue at 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. on the Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. “We need all pray that the result of the Convention services shall be a general awakening throughout

the Mission. Romanism, Ritualism, Sabbath Desecration and Drunkenness are rampant outside; and many who profess to be on 'higher lines' who once ran well are hindered and hinder. ... Let us all welcome the Holy Spirit this Pentecost as never before."

Pennells tells us that they drew not only on their own men for ministry. On such bank holidays, and at other times, they invited "many well known servants of God, men and women, to the Mission" including from the Pentecostal League of Prayer in London. The League was founded in 1891 by Richard Reader Harris (1847–1909) and his wife as "an interdenominational union of Christian people who, conscious of their own need, would join in prayer to fill believers with the Holy Spirit; revive Christian churches and spread scriptural holiness." The League's magazine was called *Tongues of Fire*.

Among the prominent workers of the Gospel Lifeboat Mission was Albert Shears from the Wesleyan society in Winterslow, "a rough village lad" who had been converted at the age of 18, and was appointed class leader, probably with special responsibility for young people. He was concerned about the use of tobacco and alcohol among Wesleyan ministers.



Gospel Lifeboat superintendents, 1901

The decision was taken at Winterslow and elsewhere to secede from the existing Methodist connexions in their various towns and villages and begin separate meetings under the leadership of Benjamin Norton of Enmore Green.

As we have seen, the new congregations took the name Gospel Lifeboat Mission, the name still in use for the resulting church at Winterslow.

Albert Shears was the leader of some twenty Wesleyans who seceded at Winterslow. A good number of people joined and many were converted and committed themselves, as understood in the ethos of the new Mission, to sanctified, holy living. The present building at Winterslow was opened in 1979.



Gospel Lifeboat Mission, Winterslow, 1972

Within five years from 1889 there were several meeting halls under the superintendency of Benjamin Norton. Here are their doctrines, as set out frequently in *The Pilot*:

- Present, free, and full salvation
- Scriptural holiness
- The filling of the Holy Spirit
- Total Abstinence from strong drink and tobacco
- The exposure of Popery and Ritualism
- The divine healing of the body
- The near return of the Lord Jesus

They may be described as basically Wesleyan, with the addition of the prohibition on alcohol and tobacco, the addition of divine healing, and a more specific eschatology. Norton (1939) explains:

Our attempt at doctrinal renovation has not departed from the original basis of Holy Scripture. True in a secondary sense it is renovated Arminian Methodism, and many are crying out today, lovingly and for Christ's sake, for a second leader such as the one called to special service from the Epworth Vicarage in our country's troublous times similar to the present.

Norton lays great emphasis on instantaneous entire sanctification. He also writes (*Jubilee Items*, page 14): "Many remarkable cases of conversion have taken place, many striking cases of divine healing of the body, many triumphant deaths, and tens of thousands of services held in hall, house, car, open air and sick chamber. ... There has always been means to carry on the work, the Mission is not a penny in debt, and never a bazaar, sale of work or effort of any kind beyond the free-will offerings of the people have been resorted to."

The above doctrines are expanded in the Rules which set out the beliefs that members of the Gospel Lifeboat Mission were required to hold. As so often with the Methodist understanding of sanctification, this aspect of their faith seems a little unclear:

Sanctification by the Holy Spirit, producing outward and inward holiness, instantaneously received by faith when the heart is freed from sin, (Rom. 6,22), as revealed by the Holy Spirit, and then continuously progressive through grace, unto “perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord.” (II Cor. 7,1)

Also made more explicit are two other tenets: “The possibility of falling from converting or sanctifying grace, and of again being restored to God’s favour upon repentance.” Again, this is unclear: does it mean a believer can lose his salvation, or only God’s favour? And “The resurrection of the wicked dead after the Millennium.” This shows that the Mission had adopted a premillennial eschatology.

Pennels wrote, “The work progressed steadily, with conversions, blessings of the Holy Spirit and healings.” During the summer Albert Shears conducted open air evangelism in villages within a 25-mile radius of Winterslow, where he served for many years as Superintendent of the Gospel Lifeboat Mission. When he preached from his “Gospel Car” in a field in Totton, some Primitive Methodists in particular welcomed his visit, for Primitive Methodists were turning to bazaars, sales of work and concerts to raise funds, which some found trying, and began to wonder whether there might be better ways of finding spiritual fellowship. We saw earlier that Totton Evangelical Free Church began as part of the Gospel Lifeboat Mission.

A van, similar to the one used by Albert Shears of Winterslow, operated from Enmore Green. In his later years Benjamin Norton employed a Mr Poolman as minister. Both Mr and Mrs Poolman could preach, and he was the only regularly paid minister the mission had.



Albert Shears on the Preaching Platform
of the Gospel Car

To gain a feel for the ethos of this secession, we have read a little more widely than only the Primitives of Enmore Green, into the story of the group of churches that acquired the name 'Gospel Lifeboat Mission'. Much of what follows is taken from some unsigned handwritten notes given to me by Penny Costello of Winterslow, who

received them from Ruth Cave, whose mother was “born into the Mission” in 1900.

Ruth Cave’s mother suffered from “accelerated colitis”, by which is probably meant ulcerated colitis. She suffered some twenty years of hospital visits, and was told she would not be able to bear children. Albert Shears and others prayed for her at her home, with the anointing of oil, and she gave birth to two daughters who lived to be 86. Ruth’s father, Frank Keel, was dying from food poisoning which had entered his blood stream, and the doctors were unable to offer medical help. However, “we all prayed”, and Frank heard an audible voice promising him healing. Following this, he was able to return to running his farm, which he continued till he reached his early 70s.

It was a lady in Croydon who had experienced healing in answer to prayer who bought the caravan in which Albert Shears went around the villages preaching salvation, holiness, and divine healing.

The photograph is entitled “Enmore Green Mission Hall today”, but sadly no date is given. I have been unable to discover the date to which the mission continued, but inasmuch as it appears on a Gospel Lifeboat Mission preaching plan for September 1933 (set out in the style of a Methodist circuit plan) currently in the possession of a gentleman in Christchurch, it certainly functioned into the period of this study and indeed until after Methodist reunion. Norton’s 1939 Jubilee record lists places that had ceased to function, and Enmore Green is not among them, showing that the mission there continued at least till 1939.

In 1959 Pennels went to Shaftesbury to see the two original mission halls, by which he must mean Sherborne Causeway and Enmore Green, about a mile and a quarter from each other, but discovered that both had closed down. The Enmore Green hall was being used as a store by one of the Norton family for his business.



Enmore Green Mission Hall today

As we saw in the first two books in this series, *The great River and Change and Decay*, Primitive Methodism so often contained a strain of legalism, that is, of requiring obedience to rules which go beyond Scripture. The adoption of strict rules to aid one's own resistance to temptation is one thing, imposing them upon others without biblical warrant is another, and is known as legalism. In the *Rules of The Gospel Lifeboat Mission (Founded at Enmore Green, March 19, 1889)* the following requirements for members are included:

- Regularly (when possible) attend the public services in the mission hall and in the open air
- Be an abstainer from all intoxicating liquors (as a beverage), tobacco and Snuff
- Strictly observe the sanctity of the sabbath by doing no avoidable labour thereon, and by abstaining from receiving

and writing letters, visiting (except in the Master's name), unnecessary cooking, riding, driving, and walking for business or pleasure.

- Wear no unnecessary jewellery, trimmings, etc: be clad in neat, plain, respectable attire.
- Be in subjection to the Managing Committee.

These regulations were adopted in 1892 “for the guidance and control of every member.” They were to be read out at the quarterly renewal of tickets.

The Gospel Lifeboat secessions from Methodism were not entirely a return to early Wessex Primitive Methodism, for, as we read in Tonks (1907:82-4), writing about the Brinkworth Circuit:

For long, beer had a place on the Quarterly Meeting dinner table, and not in small quantities; a barrel was consumed thereat as late as 1838. Publicans were found among the most influential officials, and the growth of the anti-intoxicant movement was very gradual at first.

Rather, these secessions arose more than half a century later, when the denomination was in the early stages of the decline in both ethos and numbers, and the strict rules and prohibitions represented no doubt, *inter alia*, an attempt to shore up the defences against further decay. As the denomination's leaders moved doctrinally in a more liberal direction, it appears that the Lifeboat reacted by moving in an opposite pathway towards greater detail and strictness.

Canada, West Wellow, Hampshire

Canada is a hamlet in the New Forest, by West Wellow. The *Primitive Methodist Magazine* carries a report from Edmund Hancock in March. The chapel now bears the name Canada Road Gospel Hall. Despite its name, it is not a Brethren assembly, and the people still remember its Methodist roots. In fact, the congregation is affiliated to the Elim Pentecostal denomination, although there is little if anything beyond a few notices inside the building to betray that link to a visitor.

1851 that, in the Whitchurch Branch of the Mitcheldever Circuit, the Lord had been pouring out his Spirit for several weeks past, to the conversion of “many vile sinners”. Extra services had been held. Local members and “our praying host” cooperated heartily in the work, “and the revival flame is still burning.” More than thirty people had professed faith at Canada, Barton Stacey, Hurstbourne Priors and Whitchurch.

In 1870 Canada appears on the Plan for the Basingstoke Circuit, as the Mitcheldever Circuit was renamed Basingstoke in 1853. The present chapel was built in 1908.

The original, wooden chapel, built on Dovey’s land, and was called the Gospel Methodist Temperance Hall. Their present brick chapel was built around it before the wooden one was taken down and removed. Thus, the congregation was never without a chapel to worship in.

However, a division occurred, and a new cause was established nearby in 1883, led by Charles Dovey, a market gardener born nearby at Nomansland. He disapproved of alcohol and smoking being allowed among the Primitive Methodists, and left the church for that reason. There was a large Primitive Methodist Sunday School and a

number of children left with him. He himself was the father of thirteen children, though three died young.



Charles and Ellen Dovey

The church maintains spiritual fellowship with other churches in Hampshire and Wiltshire, including Landford Wood Mission Hall

(which used to invite Primitive Methodist preachers), and The Gospel Lifeboat Mission at Winterslow



Canada Road Gospel Hall

.The Wesley Historical Society's *Proceedings* #33, page 7, state that Canada Road Gospel Hall was a secession from Wesleyans, but this is a mistake. I have preached there a good number of times, and have eaten or slept in the homes of various members of the fellowship. Neil Parsons, Charles Dovey's great-grandson and a pillar of the present congregation, is quite definite that the secession was from the Primitive Methodist chapel a short distance away in Canada.

David Young (extracted from *Primitive Methodism 1919 to 2019* (Young, D M (2019) Tentmaker Publications, Stoke-on-Trent)