

## **EDGBASTON REFORMED CHURCH, BIRMINGHAM**

**Hugh L Williams**

Once a premier centre of the world's Industrial Revolution, Birmingham today still stands as a hub of the nations's manufacturing enterprise, though perhaps its former glory has somewhat diminished. A million souls live within its precincts and, like all our cities, it has its quota of unemployment, crime and social disruption. It is in one of the more salubrious areas of the city that Edgbaston Reformed Church is to be found where, for the last eleven years, a small group of the Lord's people have endeavoured to shine forth the light of God's Truth into all the spiritual darkness of their environs.

Time was when in Birmingham the voice of no less a preacher than Dr James Packer could be heard regularly at one of the city's parish churches. Worship was according to the old Prayer Book, with reverence of language and deportment, gravity of approach in the preaching and serious Christian discipleship. Times have changed, however, and changes have taken place in many Anglican churches. In some quarters charismatics have come flooding in like a tide, whereas in other places modernism and general spiritual lassitude have seemed to be a hallmark of the day. Many believers could find good fellowship amongst the Strict Baptist churches of the city, but to those who held convictions about infant baptism and about the teaching of the Westminster Standards, there seemed a need to inaugurate a new congregation that would, in its worship and ultimately in its church order, be conformed to the old standards of the Puritans.

Accordingly, after much consideration a small group of just three families founded Edgbaston Reformed church in the October of 1982. The venue was, and still is, the premises of the Quaker Meeting House in George Road, Edgbaston., whose co-operation in the use of their premises should be acknowledged. Only one service per sabbath, at 6.30 pm, was held initially and a prayer meeting on Wednesday evenings. The little group soon found that some students from the University (of Birmingham) attached

themselves to the meeting and this, together with another family joining, meant that numbers rose to the point where, after about a year, a morning service was added on Sabbath days. The congregation met in the premises of West House School in nearby St James Road, as the Quaker Meeting House was occupied at the time. At this stage the attendance rose to the point at which it seemed that the congregation would outgrow the library room which it rented at the School.

In the ensuing years under the leadership of the Rev John Brentnall door-to-door evangelism was carried out in the surrounding district, even in the face of hostility from some quarters, and although this did not yield any spectacular results, the congregation experienced spiritual strengthening. Over these years a number of Korean students, including one whole family, became attached to the fellowship and remained attendant on the Word and sacrament for a considerable period until, their research work completed, they returned home to their far-distant land. Their Christian manner and friendship was a marked feature of the Edgbaston fellowship and it was with deep sorrow that farewells were said. Important was their testimony that they had grown in the knowledge and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ whilst in our midst, learning much about the distinctive doctrines of the Reformed Faith.

The Rev John Brentnall's ministry was, and continues to be, a great blessing at Edgbaston. However, his call to serve full time, first at Castlefields and currently at Derwent in Derby, means that we inevitably see less of him than we could wish. Edgbaston has, nevertheless, gained enormously from his work. Another matter of encouragement was that a young couple, who had joined the fellowship, had so grown in stature that the congregation recognised the young man's call to the ministry. This he duly took up, first training for one year at the Free Church College in Edinburgh and then completing his training with the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. He now ministers in that denomination, his preaching being eminently of a high quality. Thus Edgbaston has reason to see that in God's providence it has, by His grace, served a distinct purpose.

But all these gains in other fields have meant losses for the congregation. With the retirement and move back to his home town of one of the founding elders, the loss of another faithful brother by death, the removal of some young families from the district and, more recently, the impending return of a former Free

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Particular Atonement, so she has held to Particular Grace." Christ's death is not for everyone; so neither is His grace for everyone.

The Scripture never uses the word *grace* to apply to all without distinction. Grace is therefore not *common* but *particular* (Jeremiah 31:2; Acts 15:11, Romans 11:5-6). God's bounty, goodness and mercy are indeed over all His works and all men have a taste of them, but these are never designed for their salvation but for their destruction. Psalm 73 was expounded in this connection, especially verse 18, "Thou didst set them in slippery places..." Many homely anecdotes were used to show how men use God's bounty as an excuse not to believe in Him, thinking His goodness will somehow never be withdrawn.

I found the evening meeting much more stimulating and challenging and would recommend the cassette to shake some long established views.

*[Cassettes of the conference are available, price £4.00, from Alan Ticehurst, c/o 6 Orchard Road, Lewes, E Sussex BN7 2HB. Tel: 0273-472279]*

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Church of Scotland stalwart back to his native land, the congregation is at the present time somewhat depleted and, for the moment, only one service is being held, in the afternoons at 3 o'clock.

Consideration has been given to closure of the work but the arrival 'out of the blue' of a new, deeply committed, family, has provided fresh impetus. At present the congregation consists of three families, two widows and some adherents. One person attends occasionally travelling in some distance to worship and, although he cannot attend regularly, testifies to the fellowship and spiritual uplift he receives when present. During recent months a Dutch student from the 'Liberated' Reformed Churches of Holland has worshipped with us although, sadly, she will be returning home shortly.

Our future is in God's hands. How much longer we can remain as Birmingham's only salient congregation holding to the Reformed doctrinal standards of Westminster depends on Him alone. His will be done is our prayer and, meanwhile, we maintain our witness and seek that His blessing might continue upon us.