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## BAPTISTS AND THE CAMPAIGN TO ABOLISH THE SLAVE TRADE

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After setting the campaign in its historical context, this paper engages with three areas of analysis: Baptist collaboration with Thomas Clarkson and the Society for Effecting the Abolition of Slavery, the witness of the Word – that is the evidence of a series of sermons devoted to the cause, and finally an analysis of resulting actions - Sierra Leone and Jamaica, Prayer, the Use of the Press, Pamphlets and Publications, the Sugar Boycott and Petitioning.

### SCOPE AND CHRONOLOGY

There seems to be a considerable confusion in the media and in the churches about what it is that is being celebrated in this year of 2007. It is the abolition of the Slave Trade in the British Empire, not the emancipation of slaves even within the Empire, which must await at least another quarter of a century, and in reality rather longer. Of course [261] the two were connected, for the argument went that if you could control the source of supplies by abolishing the trade then that would in time necessarily corrode the stability of the institution of slavery itself. But not all who opposed the trade necessarily wanted the immediate abolition of the institution. A few days before the Abolition Bill became law, Earl Percy proposed the emancipation of children of enslaved negroes. No less a person than Wilberforce opposed it, saying he did not favour immediate emancipation.<sup>1</sup>

There is both a general, and a specifically Baptist, chronology to this story. The abolition campaign was launched between the American and French Revolutions; but the French Revolution, and the conservative forces it unleashed in Britain, meant another eighteen years had to elapse before a majority in both houses was secured for full and immediate abolition. The campaign is not only about basic civilized values and human rights, it has also to do with an emerging theology of what might befit a righteous empire, an empire now attenuated of its American colonies, some argued because of the imposition of unjust governance, or indeed, such corrupt practices as the Slave Trade. That is why so much of the argument turned on the history of past empires, God's judgmental intervention in their histories, and the moral obligations that fell to the imperial nation with the control of territories overseas. American Independence helped the British abolitionists by narrowing the focus from global to Caribbean slavery. Thus Seymour Drescher argues that, 'The West Indies emerged from the American War of Independence as the most important constituent of Britain's settler Empire', and adds that territories gained there during the Napoleonic Wars actually increased the number of slaves within the British Empire.<sup>2</sup>

From a Baptist perspective, the campaign takes place between John Sutcliffe's issuing of the Prayer Call of 1784, and the founding and establishing of the Baptist Missionary Society, noting that John Rowe, the first missionary to the West Indies, arrived in Jamaica in 1814,

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seven years after the trade had been abolished. The initial interest predates the founding of the BMS and therefore you will find slavery and the slave trade spoken of only as *potential* obstacles to missions yet to be launched. The contrast can thus be drawn between the campaign against [262] the trade which was prosecuted in the year immediately prior to the beginnings of the modern missionary movement, and the campaign to secure the abolition of slavery at a time when the West Indian mission was well-established and the missionaries on the field, to the consternation of the London secretariat, were becoming increasingly politically involved as advocates of change.

#### BAPTIST COLLABORATION WITH THOMAS CLARKSON AND THE SOCIETY FOR EFFECTING THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

The first part of the Christian Church to take up the cause of the slaves was the Society of Friends, who in 1783 established a Committee on the Slave Trade as part of the London Meeting for Sufferings. In the same year they petitioned parliament for the abolition of the trade, but, realizing the need for more broadly-based support, formed the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, the same year in which Sierra Leone, on the west coast of Africa, was founded as a colony for freed slaves. The Abolition Society, or more precisely its London Committee, became the organisational paradigm for all subsequent extra-parliamentary pressure groups, their methods copied by many another reform movement in the years following.

Although abolition was not immediately secured, the Society did achieve an act for the regulation of conditions on slave ships. After much petitioning, in 1792 the society secured a 230 to 85 vote in favour of gradual abolition, but the next year saw parliament unwilling to revive the issue because of events in France; the campaign had to begin anew.

Ivimey perhaps overestimates Baptist influence when he writes, 'It is pleasing to find that the Baptists were found, if not in the foremost rank of this noble army, (this was occupied by the friends or quakers,) yet in the immediate rear, upon this truly patriotic occasion, nor were their exertions, wishes, and prayers in vain'.<sup>3</sup> Supporting evidence comes from the records of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery [instituted in 1775 and incorporated 1789] which was the major anti-slavery society in the USA. Its membership lists make interesting reading. Robert Robinson is listed as a founding member, [263] then up to 1793 the great leaders of the movement were elected: Sharp, Clarkson, Wilberforce, etc., including C.J. Fox and Pitt, but from 1794-5 *all* eleven British elected into membership seem to have been Baptists.<sup>4</sup> Was Ivimey right and Baptists were playing a more important role than has generally been recognized, or was their North American network better than others, and their work better known there?

Support for the cause was most immediately seen in association meetings. For example, Ivimey records that the Western Association sent three five-guinea subscriptions to the Society between 1787 and 1790; these were duly acknowledged by Granville Sharp, who was pleased to indicate that 'their approbation of the endeavours of this committee and their hearty concurrence with us in the purpose of the institution, affords very great satisfaction to the committee.'<sup>5</sup> It seems that it was easier for the Bristol Baptists to work through the Association rather than through their leading churches for, as Roger Hayden has shown, the diaconate at Broadmead included those who had a vital interest in the trade: John Harris, a wealthy merchant and head deacon in the church, served as sheriff in 1776 and 1788, before becoming mayor of Bristol in 1790; John Page, another deacon, served as sheriff in 1793.<sup>6</sup>

Bristol Baptists were clearly split on the issue of opposition to the slave trade. Clarkson pays tribute to the support he secured from Joseph Hughes and Caleb Evans.<sup>7</sup> In February 1788

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Robert Hall wrote to his father, 'We have a great deal of talk here about the slave trade as I understand from your letter you have had too. A petition has been sent from hence to Parliament for the abolishing it; and a committee is formed to correspond with that in London, in any measure that may be taken to promote their purposes.' Clearly agitation swiftly secured nation-wide support, with petitions being sent up to parliament. The first, Ivimey suggests, was that from Cambridge, drafted by Robert Robinson<sup>8</sup>.

The Midland Association meeting at Oakham in June 1791 sent a similar subscription, 'that we might shew our hearty abhorrence of that wicked and detestable merchandize', duly acknowledged by Sharp.<sup>9</sup> At Nottingham in May 1792 they voted a further five guineas to the chairman of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade.<sup>10</sup> Clarkson [264] indicates that, when the revised committee sent out an appeal for support, the General Baptists were second to reply after the Quakers, 'on the twenty-second of June Stephen Lowdell and Dan Taylor attended as a deputation from the annual meeting of that religious body, to inform the committee, that those that they represented, approved their proceedings, and that they would countenance the object of their institution.'<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the congregation most zealous in the abolition cause was Maze Pond, Southwark. Clarkson in his History pays tribute to their energies. The Abolition Society Committee, 'voted their thanks to ... the pastor and congregation of the Baptist Church at Maze Pond, Southwark, for their liberal subscription; and to John Barton, one of their members, for the services he had rendered them. The latter, having left his residence in town for one in the country, solicited permission to resign, and hence this mark of approbation was given to him. He was continued as an honorary and corresponding member'.<sup>12</sup> On 17 November 1788, the church meeting passed a resolution requiring its pastor to preach on The African Slave Trade on the 30th of that month, with a collection to be taken for the benefit of the Abolition Society. Deacon Henry Keene was later asked to wait upon Granville Sharp with the outcome of that collection, 'as an evidence of our most hearty concurrence with them in this truly laudable undertaking'. On 15 December Keene reported that £22 8s 1½d was presented to Sharp who expressed his thanks to the pastor and congregation and that this should be recorded in their records. An extract was incorporated in the Maze Pond minutes:

Old Jewry, Dec 9<sup>th</sup> 1788

RESOLVED

That the Thanks of this Committee be given to the PASTOR and CONGREGATION of the BAPTIST CHURCH at MAZE POND, SO UTHW ARK; for their liberal collection towards the support of the Views of this Society, and that the same be communicated to them by the Chairman.

John Frederick Garling,  
Secretary<sup>13</sup>

In his Yorkshire and Lancashire Association Letter for 1790 on [265] 'Christian Benevolence', the Revd Thomas Langdon of Leeds refers to those who can so far forget their religious duty 'as to stand forth [as] the defenders and patrons of the most horrid and diabolical practice that ever disgraced the conduct of mankind ... The SLAVE TRADE'. 'Is it possible in this enlightened age,' he asks, 'to find a large majority in a British House of Commons, who can disgrace themselves and their country by voting against the abolition of this inhuman traffic, and pleading for its continuance?' Nevertheless he hoped that the time was not far distant when the Slave Trade would 'no longer dishonour the British name.' He thanked God for those inside and outside Parliament who had pledged themselves to the cause of abolition.<sup>14</sup>

#### SERMONS PREACHED AGAINST THE SLAVE TRADE

In April 1789, Pastor John Lloyd, of Tenterden Particular Baptist Church, was requested to

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'preach a Discourse relative to the African Slave Trade in Order to Discountenance the Same'.<sup>15</sup> The cause was taken up right across the theological spectrum, from the New Connexion to William Button, minister of Dean Street, Southwark, a congregation of those who had seceded from John Gill's congregation on John Rippon's appointment. Button, one of the first secretaries of the Baptist Union, picked up the issue. A strict-communionist and high-Calvinist opponent of Fuller, he preached a fast-day sermon against the trade early in 1795, in part provoked by the pillaging assault on Freetown, Sierra Leone, by a French squadron in league with two American traders 'in the accursed traffic in human flesh', Messrs Newell and Mariner. In a letter to William Rogers, pastor of first Baptist Church, Philadelphia, prohibitionist and friend of George Washington, he asks, 'Can those, who across the Atlantic boast a superlative freedom, countenance such barbarous proceedings, especially against those "whose noble design is to sap the foundation of the horrid African slave-trade".' He confesses that 'one of our national crimes was that of countenancing the slave-trade *at a distance*.' This he contrasted with American countenancing of *domestic* slavery to the tune of some 700,000 slaves; he makes this an argument in favour of the British constitution of crown in parliament, [266] which actually delivers greater freedom than the American republic: 'Let not Americans exclaim, "Where monarchies exist, there can be no freedom for the people" or "That a republican soil is that alone which is favourable to liberty".'<sup>16</sup>

The four sermons I want to analyse were delivered in 1788-9 and 1792; the preachers were James Dore of Maze Pond, Southwark, John Beatson of Hull, Wilberforce's home town, Abraham Booth of Prescot Street in London and John Liddon, sent into the ministry by Maze Pond, with a life-long ministry at Hemel Hempstead.

Dore's chosen text was Ezekiel 27:13, where the men of Tyre are condemned for trading 'the persons of men'; whilst Beatson spoke from the lawyer's question in Luke 10:29, 'Who is my neighbour?' Booth virtually had two texts: on the title page of his published sermon are the words of Ecclesiastes 4:1, 'Behold, the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no-one to support them; ... on the side of their oppressors was power; but their victims had no comforter', but the sermon text was Exodus 21:16, 'He that steals a man and sells him, or if he be found in his possession, he shall surely be put to death'. Liddon preached from Psalm 72:14, 'He shall redeem their soul from deceit [oppression] and violence: and precious shall their blood be in his sight.' Inspiration is drawn from the prophets, the wisdom literature, the law, the Jewish hymn book and one of Jesus' parables.

#### THE MORAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF EMPIRE

A number of common themes running through the sermons. The first is the need for a moral dimension to the development of Empire. Dore addressed the issue from Ezekiel's lamentation over Tyre, whose trade and command of the oceans brought great prosperity, but with this came pride, a taste for luxury and cruelty. From the city's subsequent history, it was not difficult to deduce that 'national crimes are productive of national judgments', a truth attested both by historians and scripture. The preacher pointed out that a city that once traded in slaves, after military defeat, experienced its own people taken into slavery, thereby fulfilling Joel's prophecy.<sup>17</sup> History, affirmed Dore, was full of examples [267] of great cities 'whose glory is no more', and, similarly, of the pattern of the rise and fall of empires. The moral was clear, that whilst late eighteenth-century Britain enjoyed a measure of prosperity, this was dependent on the nation behaving righteously, for there was a moral principle in history that corruption and cruelty will bring about downfall, sooner or later. The several reversals of Tyre's fortunes were all foretold by the prophets - Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel and Amos. Indeed, such fulfilment of prophecy was 'a striking evidence of the divinity of scripture'. The history of Tyre showed the hand of God intervening against a nation displaying 'cruelty in trading "the persons of men".'

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Would to God the trading of 'the persons of men' had been confined to Tyre! Would to God we had not to reproach ourselves with a traffic, so unjust in its nature, so sinful in its cause, so dreadful in its effects! But, alas! The page of British history has been long sullied with this disgraceful commerce; a commerce which shocks the feelings of humanity; a commerce inconsistent with the genius of our excellent civil constitution; a commerce inimical to the spirit of the gospel. – The very idea of trading the persons of men should kindle detestation in the breasts of MEN, especially of BRITONS – and above all of CHRISTIANS.<sup>18</sup>

Beatson made the same point, arguing that the history of the British Empire very closely paralleled that of Babylon in its oppression of its captive peoples and its neglect of petitions on their behalf. Only one conclusion could be drawn: 'that, as surely as [God] punished those nations for their crimes, so surely he will punish us, if we persist in a similar procedure'. The timing of such judgment might be open to speculation but the fact of judgment was quite certain:

... as certainly as there is a just and compassionate Ruler of men, so certainly will justice be done to the guilty, and compassion shewn to the oppressed; and so certainly will our crime of enslaving the unhappy Africans (were there no other) if persisted in, be punished in proportion to its magnitude and demerit.<sup>19</sup>

Nor did Booth ignore the point, rather he particularized the argument by comparing late eighteenth-century Bristol and Liverpool with biblical [268] Tyre and Sidon. Citing the judgment of God as described in Joel 3:6ff, he affirmed, 'Such was the Jehovah's determination against Tyre and Zidon, the Liverpool and Bristol of ancient times!'<sup>20</sup>

#### THE WHIG INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

The positive corollary to the argument about God's judgment on immoral empires, was to construe the energies of those who, inside and outside parliament, campaigned for the abolition of the trade as part of the great Whig theory of the growth in liberty. When Dore appealed to his congregation as 'BRITONS', he enquired of them: 'Shall slavery be countenanced by a people, who are animated with that heroic passion, the love of liberty, beyond all nations ancient and modern?' The appeal then was to what historians call the Whig Interpretation of History, a selective, approximate, optimistic reading of history, which saw the narrative in terms of the nation's constitutional strength and the gradual establishment of freedom for all. The word 'Whig' here does not signify a political party so much as a reformist mentality. Thus Dore appealed to this reformist sentiment when he refers to what he 'takes to be the markers of the securing of liberty for all in British history: Magna Charta, the Petition of Rights, the Bill of Rights, and the Coronation Oath are bulwarks of English liberty.'<sup>21</sup> The nation, the preacher noted, had only recently celebrated the anniversary of the Glorious Revolution, in which the Whigs took particular pride, 'when the royal diadem was taken from the head of an arbitrary Prince, and the Patrons of liberty elevated to the throne: and shall we be tenacious of liberty at home, and rule with the iron rod of slavery abroad?'<sup>22</sup> Such a discrepancy in behaviour was both inconsistent and preposterous. At home, many compassionate agencies had been developed to deal with human need. Given that, 'shall the most generous people upon earth countenance the sufferings of the Africans? Shall they sully the lustre of their virtues at home by their vices abroad?'<sup>23</sup> The wretchedness of the African slave was not less real because not immediately within the vision of the average Briton. African slaves groaned under tremendous burdens to keep the British in luxury. Dore then offered the emphatic exclamation [269] in determinedly eighteenth-century language, 'O thou adorable Being! It is to thy goodness we owe our liberty! And shall we never pity those who are doomed to slavery? Forbid it, O thou common Parent of mankind!'<sup>24</sup> Dore's Whiggism was reinforced as he confidently anticipated the future with hope of better things – 'The spirit of the nation is roused; and Parliamentary wisdom will be soon employed in devising means

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to redress the miserable; this I trust, through the blessing of God, will prove a lengthening to our national tranquillity.’<sup>25</sup> This belief in reform by parliamentary action put African slaves and English dissenters in the same camp. Indeed, it is worth reflecting that the abolition of the slave trade was secured twenty-one years ahead of the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts.

Beatson, who like Dore shared a Whig outlook, confidently confessed: ‘[I] deem myself under peculiar obligations to express my gratitude to Him who has fixed "the bounds of our habitation", that I was born in the eighteenth century, under the present mild and equitable government.- I rejoice in its prosperity; its improving agriculture, its growing commerce, and its increasing wealth. I admire the talents and eloquence of our senators...’ Such sermonic rhetoric leads on to a whole paragraph of celebration of the achievements of eighteenth-century Englishmen.<sup>26</sup> Later he acknowledged, ‘The national blessings we enjoy are many and great; they have long been continued to us; and though we had a succession of Princes before the memorable period of the Revolution, who were eagerly grasping at arbitrary power, and aiming to deprive us of our dearest rights, yet, by that important event, our liberty and privileges were fixed on a firmer basis than ever they had stood on before that era.’<sup>27</sup>

#### SCRIPTURE AND REASON

The language of the preachers and their thought forms reflect the intellectual heritage of the age. So it is not surprising to hear the preachers indicate that, whilst the teaching they were commending to their churches derived from revelation as recorded in scripture, it was also congruent with basic rationality, appealing to a wider than church [270] constituency. Abraham Booth thus argued that the law against ‘man-stealing’, though received by revelation, was based on general moral principle, what he later calls ‘the broad basis of common rectitude, of justice and of humanity’. ‘Manstealing ... must be considered a moral evil – universally evil, in every age and every nation.’<sup>28</sup>

Booth had some difficulty here because his Calvinist doctrine of original sin would not allow him to grant a state of simple innocence to Africans prior to their enslavement, so he deduced a state of *civic innocence*, for those who had committed no offence against the marauding western powers, as over against *theological innocence*, the common plight of all of fallen mankind. But whilst he might be careful to distinguish the civil from the moral innocence of the victims, he was in no doubt as to the moral and theological guilt of the slave traders.<sup>29</sup> In like manner he had to explain the existence of the slave trade in the light of his understanding of the sovereignty of God. ‘Be it observed, then’, he asserts, ‘that God being the creator of all things, is the universal Proprietor. No one has either liberty, or life, except by a grant from God ... Mankind having revolted from God, and rebelled against him, they have universally forfeited their all to Eternal Justice.’ Thus of the slave trader and his business, in agreeing that God’s judgment against those who enslave their fellows was wholly just, he writes:

This outrage on the sacred rights of liberty, of justice, and of humanity, is greatly enhanced, if that worst of thieves intend, either to treat them himself as the most abject of slaves, like those in the British West Indies; or to sell them for that most infamous and cruel purpose. In either of these cases, and much more when they are both united, reason and conscience, the common sentiments and feeling of mankind, will all unite if not debauched by avarice or blunted by habit ...<sup>30</sup>

#### CREATION HUMANISM

Arguing in like intellectual mode, Dore argues, ‘You are MEN: respect humanity’. Such respect involved feelings and reason, both of which ‘pleaded the cause of the oppressed Africans’. The equality of men, as all made by God, was fundamental Christian doctrine. ‘Did

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we not all [271] spring from one common stock? ... we are all brothers and sisters, members of one great family'. Different racial groups might be at different stages of development but all had the same origin. The preachers then articulated what one might call a doctrine of Creation Humanism. Liberty was the gift of God to every man: 'And can we trample on the sacred rights of the human kind without invading the prerogative of Heaven?' Freedom was a matter of natural right, 'belonging to men, *as men*'. Natural rights he particularized as 'their right to their lives, their limbs, their liberty, the fruit of their labour, and to the use, in common with others, of air, light, and water', for which declaration he referred his readers to Blackstone and Paley. As rights, these should be inalienable, and certainly not to be removed by a superior possession of power. Indeed, it was essential to civilization to protect 'the evident distinction between power and right'.<sup>31</sup>

Beatson argued in like fashion that 'mankind in general, deriving their origin from the same source, and partaking of the same common nature are under peculiar obligations to the exercise of mutual regard, independent of complexion, language, country, religion, or any other tie to the offices of kindness.' This was the importance of the creation story which clearly established that all men from their divine creation shared a common nature. If cruelty to brute animals was contrary to the will of God, the more so must be cruelty to fellow members of the human species. The notion that men were created different was contrary to scripture which consistently spoke of a common humanity with one God and Father of all. Different texts were cited but most particularly Acts 17:26. The actual observable differences between races – complexion, language, country of residence, religion etc. – were attributable to accidental factors, not the essence of a divine creation.<sup>32</sup>

Liddon made the same general appeal. One of the causes that commanded Christian commitment in the 1790s was 'the abolition of a trade which is founded in the violation of all the rules of justice, and which does violence to all the feelings of humanity. It is a trade which brings certain misery on the victims of it; and involves all who are concerned in carrying it on, in a great degree of guilt.'<sup>33</sup> [272]

#### DEBATES ON CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Discussion of the evils of the Slave Trade were almost inevitably set within the context of contemporary views of crime and punishment, that situation in which fairly minor property misdemeanours were categorized as capital offences or at least punishable by transportation. So for Booth enslaving a man was an evil

of the first magnitude against our neighbour. If he who pilfers any one's property, steals a sheep, robs on the highroad, or commits a burglary, be considered and treated as a thief, a robber, a pest of society; of what enormous villainy must he be guilty, who kidnaps my honest neighbour, my faithful servant, my dutiful child, or my affectionate wife, to transport the one or the other to a country unknown, and never thence to return!<sup>34</sup> How insulting to moral justice, and how affronting to common sense, that those very persons who, in England, would be flogged at the cart's tail, or perhaps transported to Botany Bay, for secretly purchasing five shillings-worth of property knowing it to have been stolen; should have it in their power publicly to buy and sell whole families of stolen, innocent Africans, with complete impunity, and without violating any prohibitory law of the land! As if rectitude and robbery were local things.<sup>35</sup>

Stealing a man's life was a much more serious offence than merely purloining his property, but for some aspects even of property theft the death sentence was applied. By contrast the Slave Trade was trivialized into a system for 'bartering "brandy and baubles" for human flesh and blood'. In this the purchaser was as guilty as the trader, for it was the demand for slaves that created the trade. It was ironic that those who, under domestic law, might receive

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punishment for receiving the equivalent of stolen goods, were those who were the engines of the trade, with the power to buy and sell whole families of innocent Africans. It was the *system* of the trade which made it so objectionable 'as if it were equally consistent with private justice and national honour, annually to fit out a number of ships, furnished with manacles, chains and fetters for cargoes of harmless men and women'.<sup>36</sup> [273] Liddon referred to the same comparison:

... what is the crime of a highwayman, who openly takes the property I have about me, compared with his who steals my person, separates me from all my dearest connections, sells me like a beast, and puts me, a wretched slave, under the power of a taskmaster who insults my miseries to the end of my life? Is not highway robbery innocence itself compared with this?<sup>37</sup>

#### THE APPLICATION OF NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING

Talk of 'highway robbery' suggests to Liddon the relevance of the parable of the Good Samaritan which was one of the major New Testament prompts in the sermons here studied – with its highly relevant message that neighbourliness cannot be confined by ethnic barriers. Along with what is called either the Golden Rule or the Royal Law (to do unto others as we would have them do unto us), Jesus' sermon in Nazareth, his teaching on how enemies should be treated, and the story of the Great Assize, this story was a major stimulant to action, lest these eighteenth-century Baptists come under the condemnation of the other-sided carelessness of priest and Levite.

Liddon posed the question, 'But what was the case of the man robbed and wounded compared with the miseries of thousands and millions of stolen, enslaved, insulted and wretched Africans?'<sup>38</sup> The parable underlined that there should be no bounds to Christian compassion, it was 'not to be limited to any sect of party. It is to have no bounds but human nature.' There were also, the preacher warned, too many Priests and Levites, who witnessed human distress but did nothing about it, in the late eighteenth-century church. By contrast, in the image of the Samaritan there was a depiction of Christ-like compassion, ministering to the wounded on the basis of need not credal conformity: 'How absurd and cruel would it appear, if, when a fellow-creature in distress were to apply for relief, instead of affording it, we were to require of him an account of his faith; and, if that did not correspond with ours, to refuse him our assistance.' Indeed, it was a Christian's duty to treat alike Mohammedans, Jews or idolaters as his brethren: far from discounting [274] his own religious principles this was a very good way of 'manifesting their superior excellence'. In this respect Christian doctrine was best expounded by exemplary behaviour.<sup>39</sup> In Liddon's exposition there was a quiet radicalism, thus the affirmation, 'If true compassion enters the breast of the master, the captive must be set free.'<sup>40</sup>

All the preachers alluded to the Golden Rule or the Royal Law, 'a rule so clear that none can misunderstand its meaning, so comprehensive that it includes every individual of mankind, and so equitable that every man's own conscience, at once, pronounces it to be right.'<sup>41</sup> By contrast, the slave trade was 'so flagrant a violation of the law of love to our neighbour, and such an outrage on the very spirit and genius of the gospel, can never be supported by any reasoning, but what is degrading to the person who uses it.'<sup>42</sup>

In Jesus' Nazareth sermon the liberty he announced, according to Beatson, though having a spiritual goal, was also 'a part of his plan to relieve the wretchedness of men as it relates to this present world.' He further argued that 'Even the single idea of considering all men as our neighbours and brethren, which [Jesus] has taught us to adopt, has done more towards the establishment of human happiness than all the laboured systems with which the world has ever been acquainted.'<sup>43</sup>

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Abraham Booth focused on the simple injunction from the Sermon on the Mount, 'Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you.' (Matt 5:44).

If our sovereign Lord require genuine benevolence and love to our *enemies*; he certainly cannot be satisfied with a less degree of social regard and virtuous affection, towards those who are *not* our enemies -those who never did us any evil; who never had it in their power to injure us... To treat *such* persons as if they had notoriously injured us in our dearest interests, and as if they were our most implacable enemies; must be absolutely contrary to the divine requisition in these precepts, and to every dictate of moral duty.<sup>44</sup>

One device commonly employed was to imagine the existence of a slave trade operating in a reverse direction, a trade in which African slave traders journeyed to British shores to enslave English men and [275] women. This idea was published by the Afro-British Christian opponent of the slave trade and slavery, Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, in *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (London, 1787), and was rehearsed again by Robert Hall in his letter to the *Bristol Gazette* in February 1788, where he asks how his readers would respond if a 'distant country were to send a fleet to our coasts ... and to carry off every year 30,000 of our countrymen'?<sup>45</sup> Booth, like others who preached against the trade, used his imagination as to how the British public would respond to a slave trade based on a very different disposition of power with African slavers plundering the ports of London, Bristol and Liverpool to seize and take cargoes of Britons – men, women and children, some 40,000 every year - in appalling conditions to sell them as chattels in 'the best market for the human species'. Horrific as such a prospect elaborately set out by the preacher might appear to eighteenth-century Englishmen, this was no more than a picture of 'their own behaviour towards the Africans'.<sup>46</sup> Such a reversal of fortunes he returned to at the end of the sermon: 'I have imagined myself, my family and all my dearest social connections, with many thousands of my countryman, to have been kidnapped, bought and sold into a state of cruel slavery.' He continued his speculation with news of his plight made known to his Christian friends in the UK but few of them bothering to pray for them or take any action on their behalf, and the indignation this would provoke in him as he saw such inactivity as the clear expression of national guilt.<sup>47</sup> The device of imagining role reversal, which was so much a part of the stock in trade of the abolitionist sermon, was also effectively deployed by Liddon with considerable emotional effect. The particularity of his use of this device was that he extended it to consider slave revolts in the West Indies: 'Were we to hear that our children and countrymen had burnt the plantations, and destroyed the persons of their oppressors, should we think that they had rebelled against lawful authority? ... What did our fathers at the Revolution? Do we not call that Revolution glorious?' And so the argument that 'reason and justice and the rights of mankind [are] the same everywhere'. It was not for the Christian to exercise partiality of judgment in favour of the European, and against the African.<sup>48</sup> [276]

#### ANTICIPATION OF MISSIONARY ACTIVITY

Finally, in this analysis of sermon content, something needs to be said about the anticipation of mission. Amidst this ferment of thinking and activity, Beatson argued abolition was necessary for the missionary purposes of the church.

Can the gospel be recommended to the attention of men, while you are thus buying and selling them as tho' they were brutes? To be depriving a people of their natural liberty, and at the same time preaching to them spiritual liberty would appear such gross hypocrisy, such an insult on the understandings of men, that it would be held in the highest detestation.

The trade made missionary enterprise in West Africa impossible. When the African

saw the deeds of violence,- when his ear was pierced with appeals from the oppressed and

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miserable captives to the God of truth and justice, for vengeance to be executed on the Europeans in general, and on the English in particular, his tongue would falter, his book would fall from his hand, and he would be ready to sigh that he stood connected with a country so justly degraded, and which took a leading part in the infliction [of] so much misery.

The conclusion was simple: 'If ever then you mean to spread the gospel of peace, wipe off this stain of infamy from the Christian name.'<sup>49</sup> The sermon was of course preached before the founding of the Missionary Society but it began to question both the Slave Trade and the institution of slavery as impediments to mission.

In the gospel, Booth affirmed, 'the Lord Redeemer addresses Jews and Gentiles, Europeans and Africans, without any difference'. The invitation is 'Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth'. But, argued Booth, 'nothing can be more inimical to that devout and kind affection, than the buying, the selling, and the enslaving of our innocent fellow creatures.' Explicitly he specified 'that the Slave Trade is, at present, an effectual bar to the propagation of Christianity among [277] [Africans]...'.<sup>50</sup> By contrast the abolition of the trade, 'and a total, but gradual abolition of slavery in our sugar islands', would lead to immense gratitude towards those who had achieved such important ends and prayers of thankfulness to 'the Father of mercies' of whom they had previously been ignorant. Such missionary concern was also directed to his immediate hearers who, whilst zealous for the freedom of the West Indian slave, could themselves be in rebellion against God 'and a subject of Satan's dominion'. It would be better 'to be slaves in the West Indies; than to enjoy all the liberties of British subjects, and to continue under the dominion of our own depravity'; for to live in spiritual bondage had an eternal consequence that was infinitely more serious than the consequences of secular bondage.<sup>51</sup>

Liddon also delivered his sermon when Baptists were thinking more deliberately about overseas missions. Carey had put forward his proposal for the founding of a missionary society at Easter-time in 1791. He had already drafted his text for the *Enquiry* and consulted John Potts about financing the project, whilst Fuller was persuaded that there was an inherent danger in delay.<sup>52</sup> In this context, Liddon presents the trade as preventing the introduction of Christianity into Africa. The existence of the trade compelled Christians to make that 'strange distinction' between 'the principles of Christianity, and the conduct of those who call themselves Christians', which was an argumentative gift alike to atheists and deists. In language which would be given greater publicity in Wilberforce's *Practical View of the Prevailing Religious system of Professed Christians ...contrasted with Real Christianity* [1797], Liddon argued, 'It becomes real Christians to remove this prejudice; and convince the oppressed Africans that Christianity is not their enemy but their best friend'.<sup>53</sup>

#### PRACTICAL ACTIONS

As part of his attempts to promote an international Baptist network and to publish information about Baptists in other countries, both before and after the founding of the BMS, John Rippon was independently in touch with and supporting the work of black Baptists in both Jamaica and [278 ]Sierra Leone; this inevitably brought him into contact both with slaves and the slave trade. Rippon organized both financial support and gifts of books for the Jamaican congregations,<sup>54</sup> and promoted the work of David George who led a group of freed slaves from Nova Scotia, who, on the foundation of the Sierra Leone colony, decided to relocate there. Rippon offered to fund the building of a chapel and the training of suitable African candidates for the ministry in England, and in 1794 one, John Cuthbert, came to London. Wisely fearing for its safety, Cuthbert declined to carry back to Sierra Leone the funds for the new chapel -wisely because Cuthbert was robbed of all his possessions as his return to Freetown coincided with the bombardment of the colony by a French squadron in league with

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American slave traders, in which fracas he was robbed of all he possessed. Some £50,000 of damage was done.<sup>55</sup> Rippon records that John Kizell, a black Baptist, gave all the profits of his trading to help the devastated families of Freetown. London Baptist churches – Carter Lane, Little Prescott Street and Little Wild Street -provided more than five chests of clothes for the victims, whilst Rippon also secured a gift of £20 from Samuel Whitbread, the brewer, to aid with the reparations. Promoting the welfare of the freed slaves of Sierra Leone was seen as one sure means of securing the abolition of the SlaveTrade.<sup>56</sup>

In turning to the activity of would-be abolitionists, the appeal to prayer, uttered in so many sermons, argued for earnest intercession that the nation should soon rid itself of a practice which so tarnished its imperial image. That was a first priority, but Baptist leaders moved with ease from prayer to petitioning in that quite remarkable marshalling of public opinion to right a moral abuse.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the argument is that in this and other respects the Abolitionists became the model for the development of all other extra-parliamentary pressure groups. One tactic in this campaign was the production of what became the logo of the Abolition Society – the figure of a kneeling slave appearing under the rhetorical question, ‘Am I not also a man and a brother?’ Copies of this were reproduced free of charge by Wedgwood and sold both to raise funds and promote the cause. Interestingly, this image is reproduced on [279] the front page of Dore’s sermon, almost giving it the status of an official society document.

Then there was the exploitation of the press so effectively undertaken by Robert Hall, already noted,<sup>58</sup> and more generally the writing and publishing of pamphlets. Here the activities of Martha Gurney of Maze Pond, William Fox, her publishing associate, the high Calvinist, William Button, and the high Arian, John Marsom, General Baptist bookseller and preacher of High Holborn,<sup>59</sup> achieved particular distinction. Also of importance is a rare anonymous pamphlet printed in Hull, and which Whitley correctly attributes to William Ward, providing another link between the campaign to abolish the trade and early missionary activity. The name of William Fox moves the analysis on to the issue of the boycotting of Caribbean sugar, about which he so influentially pamphleteered. Fox’s *On the Propriety of abstaining from West Indian Sugar and Rum* campaigned for ‘abstinence from these articles as a moral duty ... and a peaceable and constitutional measure’, for it was ‘a truth which was sufficiently obvious, that if each would abstain, the people would have a complete remedy for this enormous evil in their own power’. Clarkson, in his history pays tribute to the success of this strategy: ‘Rich and poor, churchmen and dissenters had adopted the measure. Even grocers had left off trading in the article, in some places’.<sup>60</sup> Fox’s *Address* went through twenty-six editions in less than a year, selling more than 50,000 copies in its first four months before eventually reaching a total circulation of some 200,000 copies. The pamphlet spawned more than twenty responses, both in support and opposition, from Dissenters and Anglicans, male and female, between the summer of 1791 and the spring of 1792. One such related publication was by Richard Hillier, who transferred from Cannon Street, Birmingham, to Maze Pond in 1791, shortly thereafter publishing *A Vindication of the Address to the People of Great-Britain, on the use of West India Produce* [1792], in response to a female writer who had written a pamphlet opposing Fox’s *Address*.

Pulpit, piety, petitioning, pamphlets and exploitation of the press all combined in a process which saw dissenters, now growing in numbers, wealth and influence, adopting an increasingly radical critique of the [280] *status quo*. In the campaign to secure the abolition of the Slave Trade they first learnt to unite with Evangelical Churchmen to secure change. Such an alliance would also be used to promote mission, to disseminate the scriptures, and to establish Sunday Schools. All was part of that activism, which in his ‘Evangelical Quadrilateral’ David Bebbington identifies as a vital aspect of Evangelicalism.

I finish with a footnote. When the Abolition Bill came before Parliament in 1807, no steps

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were proposed by the Dissenting Deputies to support it, but their minutes do record: 'Resolved that in the event of the passing of the above Bill it will be desirable that the Protestant Dissenters should publicly express their Gratitude to Almighty God for the deliverance of our Country from this National Sin.' In fact they did nothing.<sup>61</sup> By contrast, John Rippon held a special service of thanksgiving at Carter Lane on 27 March to give people of colour an opportunity to spend 'a day of prayer and public thanksgiving to God, in prospect of the grant of this astonishing salvation.' The assembled congregation included some 4-500 Africans: 'such a body of Africans', Rippon recorded, 'never before assembled for religious worship in any part of Great Britain.'<sup>62</sup>

Seven years later there was a tendency to rewrite history. Hoping that the Treaty of Paris at the end of the Napoleonic Wars would have included a clause extending abolition to all European countries, the Deputies resolved to send a petition to parliament embracing these sentiments,

From the commencement of the Discussions on the Slave Trade Your Petitioners have ever held that inhuman Traffic in the utmost abhorrence and have exerted their best endeavours to procure its abolition – That in consequence they exulted with the most heartfelt satisfaction in the sentence pronounced upon it by the legislature of Great Britain ... And therefore could not but feel extreme regret at that article of the late Treaty with France in which Great Britain is made consenting to the renewal of that murderous and desolating practice to an indefinite extent.'<sup>63</sup>

[281] Even godly men can exercise a failure of memory when it suits them, for surely here is an example of a kind of retrospective claiming to be on the right side, when at the time their support was less than enthusiastic.

1 *Hansard*, 1807, ix, 142.

2 Seymour Drescher, *From Slavery to Freedom: Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery*, 1999, p.10.

3 J. Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, Vol IV, 1830, says the trade was abolished during 'the short period over which the Right Honourable Charles James Fox presided'. The 'Ministry of all the Talents' was formed in February 1806 but Lord Grenville was the Prime Minister, Fox was Foreign Secretary. Fox died in September 1806 but the Bill abolishing the Slave Trade in the British Empire only finally passed the House of Lords in January 1807, though it had passed the Commons in the previous June.

4 Act of incorporation and constitution of the Pennsylvania Society, for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery: and for the relief of free Negroes unlawfully held in bondage, and for improving the condition of the African race : also, a list of those who have been elected members of the Society, 1860. There are two Welshman I cannot identify in 1796/7 [Thomas Lloyd and Benjamin Evans], with no more British names thereafter. The British members listed are: 1794: William Richards (Lynn), John Beatson (Hull), William Fox, Abraham Booth, James Dore, John Rippon, Elhanan Winchester, William Button; 1795: Morgan Rhys, Joseph Gurney, John Gurney. The only name I could not identify was J.L. Hammond. John Rippon even, on occasion, put the initials FAAS [Fellow of the American Abolition Society] after his name, which Ken Manley was unable to identify when he published his study of Rippon. K.R. Manley, *Redeeming Love Proclaim: John Rippon and the Baptists*, 2004, p.244.

5 The Western Association voted a fourth subscription of five guineas later that year. See J. Rippon, *Baptist Annual Register*, 1790, p.286.

6 See R.Hayden, 'Caleb Evans and the Anti-Slavery Question', *BQ* 39, 1, pp.4-14.

7 J.Clarkson, *The History of the rise, progress and accomplishment of the abolition of the African*

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*slave-trade by the British Parliament, 2 vols 1808, vol I pp.366-7, 568.*

8 ed. Olinthus Gregory, *The Works of Robert Hall*, Vol I, 1858 edn, p.28. It is in this letter that Hall identifies himself as the *Britannicus* of the letters to *The Bristol Gazette* [see note 45]. Hall returned to a condemnation of the Slave Trade in his fast-day sermon, 'Sentiments proper to the Present Crisis', 19 October 1802. Works vol II, 1866 edn, pp.132-3. Ivimey, pp.49-50.

9 J. Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, IV, 1830, p.63. Rippon in *Baptist Annual Register*, 1790, p.200 refers to it as the Northampton Association.

10 Rippon *Baptist Annual Register*, 1792 p.418.

11 J. Clarkson *History*, 1808, vol I, p.442; see also British Library Add MS 21,254, Anti-Slavery Committee (which began on 22 May 1787). 12 June 1787 Daniel Taylor attended the Committee and informed them that he had a message from the General Assembly of Baptists, which would be communicated at another opportunity. 22 June 1787 Stephen Lowdell and Daniel Taylor attended the Committee as a deputation from the 'annual meeting of the General Baptists' indicating their support of the Committee and its work. The long-lived Lowdell (1718-1810), a Southwark surgeon, was a member of the Worship Street [282] congregation under John Evans [not Park Church, Southwark, *pace* W.T. Whitley, 'Notable Baptists' *TBHS*, VII, 1921, p.216]. He was the treasurer of a number of General Baptist Funds and very active in the campaign to secure the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. In the Society's List of Donations the following appear: Society of General Baptists from Barton and Higglescoate, Leics; Castle Donnington, Leics; Leah and Wymeswold, Leics; Leicester; Hinckley, Leics; Loughborough and Quorndon, Leics; Langford [Longford], Warks; Melbourn, Derbys; Nottingham; and the Western Baptist Association. Individual donations are listed which total £29 7s 4<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>d References provided by Professor David Killingray.

12 J. Clarkson, *History*, 1808, Vol II, pp.27-8; I have searched the Maze Pond Church Books for John Barton without success, so it may be that Clarkson is being very precise when he says he was 'a member of the congregation' there, a hearer rather than a member. A 1788 List of Subscribers to the Abolition Society records a John Barton with an address in Hertford which could be the country residence he retired to. In the *Universal British Directory* for 1791, Volume 1, Section 2 p.65 he appears as John Barton, Textile Factor, Size Maker, 61, High Street, Borough.

13 Maze Pond Church Books, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

14 Cited by Rippon in *Baptist Annual Register*, 1790, pp.270ff with the precise citation on p.273.

15 Minutes, Tenderden Particular Baptist Church, 5 April 1789. I am grateful to Professor David Killingray and Mr Stephen Pickles for this reference.

16 Letter: William Button to the Revd Dr Rogers of Philadelphia, 6 March 1795, printed in *The Baptist Magazine*, November 1839, pp.525-7.

17 James Dore, *A Sermon on the African Slave Trade, preached at Maze Pond*

*Southwark, Nov 30, 1788, 1788*, cited the following scriptures relating to the history of Tyre: Isaiah 23:3-13 and Ezekiel 26:2-11, 14, 21; 27:3; 28:2, 29:18-19; Joel 3:5-9; Amos 1:9-10; 4-14.

18 Dore, pp.14-19.

19 John Beatson, *Compassion the duty and dignity of man; and cruelty the disgrace of his nature: A Sermon occasioned by that branch of British Commerce which extends to the Human Species preached to a congregation of Protestant Dissenters in Hull, January 21<sup>st</sup> 1789*, pp.37-41.

20 Abraham Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species, and the enslaving of Innocent Persons, inimical to the Laws of Moses and the Gospel of Christ, A sermon preached in Little Prsecot Street, Goodman's Fields, January 29, 1792, 1782*, pp.25-26.

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21 Dore, p.27.

22 Dore, pp.29-30.

23 Dore, p.30.

24 Dore, pp.28-9.

25 Dore, p.32.

26 Beatson, pp.29-30.

27 Beatson, pp.54-55.

28 Booth, p.6.

29 Booth, p.4.

30 Booth, p.6.

31 Dore pp.19-21.

32 Beatson, pp.10-12.

33 John Liddon, *Cruelty the Natural and Inseparable Consequence of Slavery, and both diametrically opposite to the Doctrine and Spirit of the Christian Religion, [Slavery inconsistent with true Christianity] represented in a Sermon preached on Sunday, March 11th, 1792, at Hemel Hempstead, Herts, 1792, pp.3-4.*

34 Booth, p.6.

35 Booth, p.7.

36 Booth, pp.6-7.

37 Liddon, p.22.

38 Liddon, p.21.

39 Liddon, pp.11-13. Liddon again refers to the Good Samaritan as providing guidance for Christian behaviour with regard to the

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Slave Trade, pp.20-21, 30, concluding, 'Copy the example of the good Samaritan. Exert all your talents, and all your influence to dry up the tears of the Africans, to meliorate the condition of those already enslaved, and to prevent the continuance of the abominable traffic.'

40 Liddon, p.13.

41 Beatson, p.20; Dore, p.33; Booth, pp.21-2; Liddon, p.10.

42 Beatson, p.23.

43 Beatson, p.52; cf Liddon p.19.

44 Booth, p.21.

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45 Robert Hall [Britannicus] Letter to *The Bristol Gazette*, 7 February 1787, reproduced in T. Whelan, 'Robert Hall and the Bristol Slave Trade', *BQ* 38, 5, January 2000, p.219. cf footnote 7 above.

46 Booth, pp.18-19.

47 Booth, p.28.

48 Liddon, pp.22-23.

49 Beatson, pp.49-51.

50 Booth, pp.23, 27.

51 Booth, pp.29-30.

52 Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society, 1792-1992*, 1992, pp.8-15.

53 Liddon, pp.4-5.

54 J. Rippon, *Baptist Annual Register*, I, 1790-3, pp.332-7, 541-3; E.A.Payne, 'Baptist work in Jamaica before the arrival of the Missionaries', *BQ.*, Vol 7, 1, 1934, pp.20-26.

55 cf footnote 16 above.

56 J. Rippon, *Baptist Annual Register*, II, 1794-7, pp.94, 215-8, 255-6, 409.

57 cf footnote 8 above.

58 cf footnote 45 above.

59 Professor T. Whelan provides the following information on Button's publishing enterprises: his name as seller on the Dore sermon of 1788; a 1793 work titled *Thoughts on Modern Politics*, attributed to Neil Douglas, which includes anti-slavery poems by Marjoribanks and

Cowper and other abolitionist pieces; a 1791 publication by T. Clout of Sevenoaks titled *A Short Account of the African Slave Trade*, coupled with William Fox's *Address to the People of Great Britain*. Button sold this in London in conjunction with John Marsom of High Holborn, the General Baptist bookseller and preacher of diametrically opposite theological outlook. He also printed, along with L. Wayland and T. Parsons an anti-slavery work titled *No Rum--No Sugar, or, The Voice of blood ...* (1792) (obviously a take-off on Fox's pamphlet).

60 Clarkson, *History*, 1808, Vol II, pp.348-9.

61 B.L. Manning, *The Protestant Dissenting Deputies*, 1952, p.471 citing minutes of 14 March, 1807/28 April 1807.

62 K.R. Manley, *Rippon*, 2004, p.244.

63 Ibid. pp.471-2, citing a Minute of 14 July 1814; the Deputies were rather more active in the later campaign to abolish slavery itself (pp.472-3). See also pp.425-30 for other occasions when the Deputies intervened to prevent the Jamaican legislature passing and implementing laws which were hostile to both the Dissenting interest and that of the slaves, in part because of the implications that any *de facto* amendment of the Toleration Act by actions in Jamaica might imply for the situation in the United Kingdom itself. The Chairman of the Deputies at this time was William Smith, the Unitarian MP for Norwich and the Deputy Chairman (1805-16) was John, later Sir John, Gurney (1768-1845). Although initially active at Maze Pond he later worshipped with the Anglicans, the change taking place perhaps in the early 1820s when his sons matriculated at Trinity, Cambridge. The Treasurer (1805-16)

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was Prescott Street deacon, Joseph Gutteridge, who succeeded Gurney as Deputy Chairman (1816-25).