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BICENTENARY OF A BAPTIST CHURCH

The celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Sion Baptist Church, Clough Fold, was commenced there on Thursday by a series of services and public meetings. On Thursday afternoon a service was held in the church, conducted by the Rev Dr Green, of Rawdon College, who also preached the sermon. Taking for his text Isaiah, ch vi, v 13, "As a tall tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them when they cast their leaves: so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof". Dr. Green drew a picture of the state of society at the time when, according to tradition, the church was founded, remarking that it was at the peril of their liberties and possessions, if not of their lives, that the founders of that church first gathered their little meetings and declared throughout the Rossendale forest the beloved name of Jesus. In them, he said, and such as them was the holy seed of which the text made mention. The secret of England's future was not in the keeping of a profligate court or a service Parliament, but in the many among whom godliness had become a jest, but in a few - in men who believed and prayed, who sometimes were not sure but that the ark of God was sinking beneath their feet, but who would, nevertheless, trust themselves to it. At the time the church was formed Milton had just passed away, John Owen was near the end of his career, John Howe was in his prime, Richard Baxter was issuing treatise after treatise on practical and controversial theology. William Penn had just written his "No Cross, No Crown", Barclay was busy with his "Apology" whilst John Bunyan was meditating upon the publication of "Pilgrim's Progress". These were the holy seed from which a New England - nay, a new world - was to spring up, and with them might be associated the less renowned spiritual ancestors of that church. The services that week were an acknowledgement of the great truth that the kingdom of heaven springs most mightily from truth implanted in humble hearts; that it was like unto a mustard seed, What should be their lesson from all this? Above all - and here he would be content almost to stop, for was it not enough to say that we had the same life, not it might be expressed in the same form, not sustained and regulated according to the same method, but in its principle identically the same, the life of faith. These men of the past had but a scanty library and perhaps this fact drove them more and more to the foundation of truth. They were men of one book; they were mighty in the Scriptures. Far be it from him to say a word against the most extended studies, but he asked them to bear with him when he said that in the churches one of the main dangers of the present time seemed to him to that Christian people would make too little of their Bible, would understand it too superficially, would be content with too vague and uncertain a view of the matchless and

wondrous contents of the Book of God. We spoke in these times of a revival of religion, but there was a danger in every popular movement that it would become merely superficial. Religion did not consist in excited feelings, happy moods, and sweet songs about the beautiful land on high. This was but a part, and a very small part, of what true religion meant; and there was a danger that the Bible should be comparatively laid aside for mere sentimentality; at any rate that the heights and depths and lengths and breadth of the wonderful truth of God should be untraversed by multitudes who would yet love Christ and keep His commandments. The lesson of the past to them was to be Bible Christians. They had ill learned the lesson if they were content to take their theology from the reservoirs, and not from the living fountain. The men of the past had constructed their systems and creeds only to show them what they themselves could do; their forefathers constructed their theology from the Scriptures, and they might construct their theology from the Scriptures also.

In the evening a public meeting was held in the church, under the presidency of Mr A Crowther, of Huddersfield. The pastor of the church (the Rev A J Parry) read a paper on "The History of the Church at Clough Fold". He said the human history of the district of Rossendale dated from 1511. Previous to that time it was a dense forest, but in that year Henry VIII directed its disforestation, and thenceforward began its onward progress. So rapid was the change that in 40 years its population of 80 persons had increased to 1,000, and from that time until the present its progress in this respect had been steady and unbroken. During the period since its disforestation the locality had had its religious history, and not the least significant fact in connection with this phase of its history was the one witnessed to by the services of the day, viz., the existence in its midst for 200 years of a Nonconformist community. It testified to the fact that the people of the district, even so far back, were accustomed to carry their shrewd, sturdy independence, so proverbial of them in other respects, into the domain of religious thought. It was, he thought, no small honour to Rossendale that it could claim to have had, at a time of shameful national declension, its band of God-fearing, truth-loving, priest-hating Nonconformist patriots. The community now known as the Clough fold Baptist Church claimed the honour through God's grace of being the direct lineal representative of one section of this noble band, the other section being represented by the Crawshawbooth Society of Friends. The church at Clough Fold was organised in the year 1675. The date of its formation rested upon tradition, there being no known records of the fact nor of the particulars of the transaction. There was, however, nothing more certain in the minds of the Clough Fold people than the date of 1675 as the time when the church was organised. For thirty years after its formation the church must have met in private houses, the abodes of its members, removing from one to another

as the exigencies of the times required, and to ensure secrecy and security from the prosecutions to which the people so meeting were liable. The first direct intimation of preaching in connection with that section of Nonconformists represented by the Clough Fold Baptist Church was contained in an appendix to the life of John Hirst, written by the Rev Jas Hargreaves, where reference was made of the imprisonment of William Mitchel under the Conventicle Act, and this brought down the history of the Church to within ten years of the date assigned for its formation by tradition. The Rev James Hargreaves attributed the formation of the Church in Rossendale to the itinerant labours of William Mitchel and his cousin, David Crossley; but this he (Mr. Parry) thought was untenable. Whether it was formed by Mr Kippax, an incumbent of Newchurch who went out under the Uniformity Act of 1662, or by some one else out of materials gathered by his ministry, there was no means of ascertaining, but it did not, however, appear unlikely that Mr. Kippax himself had a hand in the important work. Mr Parry then proceeded to show the connection of Crossley and Mitchel with the church, and remarked that there was strong evidence to prove that up to 1692 it was exclusively a paedo-baptist community, but in a document by which a piece of land was conveyed to the church at Clough fold as a chapel site, and drawn up in 1705, the church was designated "Protestant Dissenters called Anabaptists or Independents." By this time the church had adopted Baptist views and Mr Parry briefly dwelt upon his subsequent history.

Addresses were delivered by the Rev Dr Green, the Rev C Williams, Dr Stock and other gentlemen. The celebration of the bicentenary was continued yesterday.