

“Brother Giles” becomes a Recognised Minister.

IN September 1779, John Giles, a youth of twenty-one, was transferred from Reading to the church now known as Spurgeon's Tabernacle. Here he “regularly and conscientiously attended, not only on Lord's-days, but also at the various social meetings for prayer and conversation on the Word of God. His conduct soon attracted the attention, and secured the affectionate regard, of his brethren. They observed with grateful pleasure his humility, his prudent deportment, his edifying conversation, his thirst for knowledge, and above all his habitual devotedness to God.” (*Brief Sketch of Life and Character of Rev. John Giles*). Within ten years, at the church meeting on the 5th January, 1789, his fellow members “unanimously resolved that he should be sent forth into the work of the ministry.” This interesting resolution prompts the enquiry: How did our fathers of one hundred and fifty years ago face the vexed and perplexing question of *ministerial orders*?

At intervals during upwards of twenty years, the church, which then worshipped in Carter Lane, Southwark, had been troubled by unauthorised members going about “publicly preaching contrary to all rule and order among the regular churches.” The church tenaciously held that no man could take the ministry to himself; and that for a man to preach before he had been called out and set apart by his own church was to commit a serious irregularity for which the church might discipline him. At the church meeting on the 21st July, 1788, such a case was reported and two deacons were appointed to enquire of the offending brother, one William Francis, “the truth thereof and to inform him if he continued in that irregular way the church would be oblig'd to proceed against him.” A month later, on the 18th August, 1788, the messengers reported they had “convers'd with him, he acknowledg'd he had preach'd in about twenty different places about London, that he had been encouraged by some persons haveing receiv'd benefit thereby, he therefore thought it his duty to continue it; that after some conversation with him about the irregularity of his conduct without the consent of the Church and informing him that our Pastor at our last Church Meeting intimated his intention of drawing up some Rule or Direction for a guide in that matter to lay before the Church for their determination, he consented

not to preach publicly for one month." This apparently satisfied the church for the time being, but as a measure of precaution the same messengers were continued for further admonishment. The minister, Dr. John Rippon, then informed the members that he had maturely weighed the matter in his own mind, and on his suggestion the following resolutions were adopted and recorded in the minute book :—

"As some of the Members of the Church have lately given us trouble by going about preaching without our leave first obtain'd, and have in justification of their disorderly proceedings said that this Church is inimical to a fair trial and encouragement of the Gifts of any of the Brethren.

Resolved—That the insinuations of such Members are as unjust and illfounded as their Conduct is disorderly and censurable.

Resolved—That as no man has a right to make himself a deacon or a pastor of a church, so no one has a right to put himself into the office of a publick teacher—an office which is communicated by the church and which 'no man can with propriety take to himself' or thrust himself into.

Resolved—That if any one thrusts himself into the work of the ministry, who is not put into it by that particular Church of Christ to which he belongs, he throws contempt on the whole Church; and if he perseveres publickly to preach after the first and second admonition to desist, he should be excluded.

Resolved—That it will give us great sorrow if in future we find any of our fellow members imagining they have gifts for the work of the ministry at a time when the church in general does not perceive any such talent.

"Nevertheless, if any member in full communion with the church imagines he has ministerial gifts and is desirous of giving his thoughts to his brethren on some part of the Word of God, he may himself mention his wish to our pastor or to either of the deacons, which done they shall appoint a private meeting in some convenient place to hear him, at which meeting he is at liberty to invite as many other men members of the Church as there shall be deacons to hear him. If any of the deacons should find it illconvenient to be present, he may nominate some other Brother in his room.

"The meeting shall be opened in prayer, after which the Pastor, or in his absence the Brother who presides shall put the following questions :—

"To the Brethren who are come to hear—
"Brethren! Is it your desire to hear our Brother at this time in the Fear of God, and will you give him the best advice in your power?"

“ To which they shall audibly answer—

“ To the Brother who is to speak—

“ Brother! Will you take the advice that the Brethren present, or the majority of them may give you, and abide by it in the Fear of the Lord?

“ He shall audibly answer ‘ Yes in the Fear of the Lord.’

“ *Resolved*—That no one shall be heard by the Brethren, who will not give an audible Reply in the Words aforesaid to the Questions which shall be put to him.

“ *Resolved*—Finally, that no member shall be heard in the manner aforesaid who shall after the date of this Church Meeting preach publickly.”

John Giles was the first to preach before the church after the passing of these regulations. At the church meeting on the 22nd September, 1788, Dr. Rippon “ reported that on information from various members of the church as well as his own opinion, he thought their brother John Giles had ministerial gifts, and wished the church to make trial thereof.” Accordingly a month later the young man gave his thoughts on the text, “ My Beloved is white and ruddy, he is the chiefest among ten thousand,” and the worthy deacon who recorded the minute added that the utterance was “ much to the satisfaction of the church, and in order that they might have a farther taste of his gifts, he was requested to speak to them again at the next church meeting.” From the *Brief Sketch*, we learn that of that occasion Giles said, “ With much concern of mind I left the church-meeting, and walked through the streets praying and weeping for nearly two hours.” A month later his sound doctrine on the text “ For whom he did foreknow he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brethren,” so pleased the members that they resolved to have a third hearing in December. By this time the would-be preacher had attained the preaching confidence which is not unknown even to-day among seekers after ministerial recognition, and the critical and sympathetic auditors to whom he ministered held no terrors for him. Preaching on “ Who being the brightness of his Glory, and the express Image of his Person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high,” he was so carried away by the wealth of his text that he found it needful to reserve the latter part of his sermon for another opportunity. The twenty-minute sermonette of to-day would hardly stand such a division! Most of the members were ready to approve their brother forthwith, but Rippon moved with caution and it was agreed to hear the second half of the sermon a fortnight later.

At this meeting, on the 29th December, 1788, "The Church in general were fully satisfied, but the Pastor wished to hear Bro. Giles on the Work and Influence of the Holy Spirit," for which purpose the members gathered specially on the following Monday, 5th January, 1789.

At the close of this, his fifth sermon, he withdrew and the members unanimously decided "that they thought the Lord had bestowed ministerial gifts, and being fully satisfied that the sooner he was called out to that work the better, it was agreed that the church be stopt next Lord's day afternoon solemnly to call him forth to that important work."

The gathering in the old Carter Lane meeting-house at the close of the afternoon preaching service on the following Sunday was evidently deeply impressive. Doubtless the ugly building was thronged, for this was the springtime of Rippon's ministry. The three grave and elderly deacons may have sat in front beneath the pulpit wearing the silk stockings, knee-breeches, and long-tailed coats dear to that generation. One would be waiting to mount the open desk to announce the opening hymn, and, near at hand, would be another brother ready to start a tuneful note. All were solemn, for that on which they were engaged was of eternal significance for their young brother. The recording deacon informs us that "Our pastor in a very affectionate manner called on our Bro. John Giles, and asked him if he was willing to take upon him the work of the ministry and consent to the voice of the church and cheerfully abide by their decision. On his consenting, the opinion of the church was taken which was unanimously in the affirmative. He was by our pastor in the name of the church solemnly set apart to the public work of the ministry by prayer and laying on of hands; after which a Certificate, drawn up by our Pastor, was read and approved of by the church, which, when wrote out fair and signed by the Pastor, deacons, and as many of the members as choose, shall be given to our Brother John Giles as a testimonial."

This certificate, which was signed by Dr. Rippon, by the three deacons, and by twenty-six men members, was in the following terms:

"The Church of Christ of the Particular Baptist Denomination meeting in Carter Lane, near London Bridge, Southwark, under the pastoral care of John Rippon to the Faithful and Called in Christ Jesus whom it may concern, Sendeth greeting.

"This is to certify that the bearer, our beloved brother, John Giles, has been a member in full Communion with us nine years; and that having frequently at our request given us his

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thoughts on different parts of the Word of God, on Monday, January 5th, 1789, we unanimously resolved that he should be sent forth into the work of the Ministry; and accordingly at a full and happy meeting of the Church, he was sent forth by our Pastor as our Representative, on Lords-day afternoon, January 11th, 1789. May Grace, Mercy and Peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ be with our dear brother and with the whole Israel of God.

“ Signed by us for Ourselves and on Behalf of all our Brethren and Sisters at our Church Meeting, Jany. 19, 1789.”

Thus did Brother Giles become a recognised minister, and, as for upwards of thirty years he maintained an honourable and widely respected ministry at the historic church at Eyethorn in Kent, his career justified the confidence reposed in him.

There is something impressive in the careful and solemn way in which our fathers considered men for the ministry. “ Has the Lord called this brother? ” was their first concern, as it is ours; and lest any would-be minister, sighing for a return of those days, should fulminate against the present rules for Ministerial Recognition which have been drawn up with a like carefulness and solemnity, it may be well to add that the records show that the members were quite capable of informing some that they stood alone in thinking they had ministerial gifts, and of advising others to get in touch with Dr. Ryland at Bristol, as they were in need of collegiate training.

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