

# The Evangelist System: Charles Roe, Thomas Pulford and the Baptist Home Missionary Society

**H**ISTORIANS of English religious revivalism in the nineteenth century have understandably taken the Methodists as their starting point.<sup>1</sup> In the first half of the century itinerant preachers and stationed ministers, armed with a theology that emphasised man's moral ability, human instrumentality and immediacy in conversion, gave Arminian Methodism—particularly the Primitive branch—a deserved reputation for revivals and “enthusiasm”. But the Methodists were not alone in their participation in what contemporaries referred to as “aggressive evangelism”. Particular Baptists may have had their doubts about excessive emotionalism, incautious dependence on human engineering and the unrestricted appeal of Arminianism, but a vigorous and influential body within the denomination was firmly committed to the pursuit of revival. These activists found various outlets for their energies, but during the second quarter of the century the main channel was the Baptist Home Missionary Society (BHMS), founded in 1797 as “The Baptist Society in London for the Encouragement and Support of Itinerant and Village Preaching”, and given its shorter name in 1822.<sup>2</sup> Struggling financially during most of this period of its existence, it presents rather an unlikely candidate for investigation but its fascinating shift in direction and ebullient pursuit of revival in the 1830s and 1840s warrant detailed attention.

In its early years the Society directed most of its limited funds to helping settled ministers, mainly in southern and rural England, to take the Gospel to “dark villages” around their chapels; the first efforts were often outdoor, but eventually these gave way to preaching in houses or barns, and in due course a meeting-house might be built.<sup>3</sup> During the 1820s, particularly under the secretaryship of John Edwards, the Society tried with some success to supplement these village preachers with full-time missionaries who were to work locally to break new ground and nurse infant causes. Typical was the missionary to East Kent, who each week travelled seventy or eighty miles, preached in five villages, ran a Sunday School of fifty children and conducted two prayer-meetings; every fortnight he exchanged loan tracts, and sold copies of the Bible; in addition he preached frequently in the open-air at the “dark village” of Newchurch.<sup>4</sup> By 1826 the BHMS supported twenty-five such missionaries, by 1835 a hundred.<sup>5</sup>

This pattern changed in two major ways in the years after 1835. First, the Society started to take seriously the demands of northern England and of urban areas. While, as John Howard Hinton complained, in its earlier years it had “studiously turned away its eye . . .

from towns, however destitute", during the late 1830s and the 1840s it made more concerted urban efforts.<sup>6</sup> By 1850 one-third of its three hundred stations were in towns, thanks in part to the bringing of the well-managed Lancashire and Cheshire auxiliary under its wing; the energetic Joseph Harbottle and John Aldis had encouraged this county home mission to face up to urban problems some years earlier than the London-based BHMS.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, the Society began to engage full-time evangelists, men who had given up their pastorates to visit feeble churches and "to kindle a new spirit"; they were to work alongside the existing agents. The work of the latter was essentially local and designed to promote church extension; in contrast the itinerating evangelists worked a broader compass and sought as much to revive established churches through special "protracted meetings" as to set up new ones.

This shift in policy can in large part be explained as a reaction to the perceived double threat of "Infidelity" and "Popery". Traditionally evangelicals had considered the major obstacle to evangelical advance to be as much ignorance as ideological rejection of the Gospel message. Village preachers had commonly described rural inhabitants as "ignorant" or "superstitious", and examples of their "barbarity" continued to be noted in the 1830s and 1840s: Joseph Burton was appalled to find a heathen female who "when asked whether she knew anything about the Lord Jesus, replied that she had heard that there was a gentleman of that name residing in the neighbourhood, but she knew nothing about him".<sup>8</sup> But outright rejection of evangelical Christianity and the aggressive "diffusion of error" were far more worrying than mere ignorance. Much of the rapidly growing population of the northern manufacturing districts was in abject poverty during the depressed years from 1837 to 1842; Baptists watched in alarm the spread of "socialist", "atheist", "infidel" and Chartist literature. They undoubtedly exaggerated the "secret atheism" of the working class, but the alienation of the population from the churches, if not from a species of Christian belief, was real enough.<sup>9</sup> As for the Roman Catholic challenge, this was not to reach its climax until the Irish influx after the potato famine, but the spread of "Protestant Popery contained in the Oxford Tracts" was more directly threatening.<sup>10</sup> Baptists agreed with Francis Cox that something had to be done to promote a "Christian Patriotism", the spiritual welfare of the country's citizens.<sup>11</sup> One lobby within the BHMS saw an answer in mobilising the churches' lay membership and enthusiastically recommended and circulated the influential Congregational tracts on lay agency, *Jethro* and *Our Country*;<sup>12</sup> others advocated a revival of open-air preaching.<sup>13</sup> But the loudest voices called for itinerant evangelists and protracted meetings, which would provide an antidote to the supposedly deadening routine and inflexibility of the pastoral system. As the visiting American Archibald Maclay told the Annual Meeting of the Society in 1840, by using them, "Christians . . . would have no reason to fear Socialism, or any other ism."<sup>14</sup>

To validate their call for evangelists, energetic Baptists adduced Scriptural precept and recent experience. David Douglas, minister at Hamsterley, Durham, drew applause from a number of his colleagues for his *Essay on the Nature and Perpetuity of the Primitive Evangelist*. Evangelists, he argued, had held a distinct office in the church in apostolic times, had been regarded then as a permanent specialist ministry, but had in practice been "either subverted or absorbed" by the pastoral office. They should now be restored to their former independence. William Steadman's itinerancies in Cornwall for the Baptist Missionary Society in 1796 and 1797 offered one instance from the fairly recent past of how this might be done.<sup>15</sup> In Wales Baptist ministers regularly went on preaching tours to rouse churches and conduct revivals; Christmas Evans was the best known but by no means the only representative of this approach. Even more of a stimulus was Methodist example. Whatever Baptists might think of her church government, they could not but be impressed by Methodism's travelling preachers. Douglas was full of admiration: they presented "the nearest approximation to the primitive evangelists, of any party of Christians we know."<sup>16</sup> The most potent and influential examples of "the Evangelist system", however, were American in origin.

One of the distinctive features of the Baptist literature of the 1830s is the intensity of its interest in American religion. Descriptions of the prosperity of American churches during the climactic decade of the Second Great Awakening dotted the Baptist periodicals, especially the *Revivalist*. Joseph Belcher, Baptist minister at Chelsea and later Greenwich, and a guiding light of the BHMS before his emigration to North America in 1844, began publishing this monthly interdenominational magazine in 1832 as a means of stirring sluggish Calvinist churches along the lines of the "new measure" American revivals.<sup>17</sup> Through its pages, for example, he promoted Calvin Colton's influential *History and Character of American Revivals*, the even more widely read *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* by the master revivalist Charles Grandison Finney, and Francis Cox's *Suggestions designed to promote the Revival and Extension of Religion*.<sup>18</sup> The latter was a short tract which the author prepared late in 1835, shortly after his return from an official visit to the Baptist churches of the United States. The speed of its appearance indicated how excited Cox was by the subject; its rapid sale suggested an audience equally enthusiastic. Amongst other things he called—as befitted a stalwart member of the BHMS—for protracted meetings and "journeys undertaken for the express and sole purpose of promoting religion."<sup>19</sup> Both wishes were gratified. Protracted meetings, already in evidence in Lincolnshire in 1834 ("being the first of the kind ever held in this Country") increased in incidence in the next three or four years, many of them under the auspices of the BHMS.<sup>20</sup> The American stimulus to these revival meetings was quite explicit: a visiting American minister helped in the Bradford meetings of 1835; John Spasshat conducted his Redruth revival of 1836 in the light of Cox's account of

the American churches; Samuel Green sought "Times of Refreshing" at Walworth armed with Finney's *Lectures*.<sup>21</sup> As for the "itineracies" that Cox demanded, these were provided by the prodigious efforts of Charles Hill Roe, the commanding secretary of the BHMS and the personification of the revivalist wing of the Baptist denomination.

Roe was thoroughly well qualified for the job he took up at the invitation of the BHMS Committee in March 1835. Son of an Irish clergyman, he had been converted as a boy of fifteen by a Baptist home missionary, had determined on a life as a Baptist minister, and seven years later, in 1822, had entered William Steadman's Baptist college in Bradford. Here he imbibed much of the admiration for Methodist zeal and the activist evangelical philosophy that marked the whole generation of Steadman's ubiquitous Horton students, and he took with him to his first pastorate in Middleton-in-Teesdale not only Steadman's daughter as his wife, but a strong commitment to village preaching and home missionary work. He possessed formidable physical and mental gifts. Tall, athletic and strong (he was a good wrestler and could leap with ease over a five-bar gate), he had all the strength necessary for the arduous work of tramping the fells to preach in the cottages fifteen miles or more from Middleton. "His voice was rich and full", recalled one of his daughters, "and could without the least straining fill the largest hall or be heard by multitudes in the open air." There was a persuasive intensity to his eloquence which is no doubt what Steadman himself had in mind when he handed over his daughter to "this wild Irishman". But his mind and judgment were good: John Howard Hinton's verdict was that he combined "all the glowing ardour of the Irish heart" with "more than all the judgment, tact, and sagacity usually associated with the Irish head." All this, and his generally cheerful disposition, gave him a natural authority that was essential to the success of his new work in 1835.<sup>22</sup>

As secretary, Roe set himself two major tasks. First he sought to put the Society on a sounder financial footing. For years the Committee had had to turn down, for lack of funds, offers of help from prospective agents. Now Roe set out on frequent tours of the stations and auxiliary societies for four to six weeks at a time to ask for money. He was markedly successful: "he had only to show himself on a platform and the money came jumping out of people's pockets." The Society saw its annual income rise from under £2,000 in 1835 to over £5,000 in 1841. This was still not enough to give the BHMS real financial confidence, but it did allow for some expansion of the Society's activities—Roe's second assignment—during a period of severe economic recession.<sup>23</sup>

Roe combined his work as a collector with that of an evangelist. His aim in part was to extend the restricted operations of the Society, to take the Gospel into areas largely destitute of evangelical preaching. This was the thinking behind the formation of new auxiliaries, as in Worcestershire in 1836 and Lancashire in 1841, and the attempts to penetrate the four northernmost counties of England where the

BHMS was at its weakest. More significant, however, were his efforts to revive existing but "feeble" churches; of the fifty meetings that he held during the first four weeks of one of his early tours—in the west country in 1836—six were to collect funds, forty-four to promote a religious revival in the churches. The revival services he encouraged were based very much on the American model that he had first encountered in Bradford in 1835 in Benjamin Godwin's church.<sup>24</sup> In particular he was involved in the influential London protracted services at Shakespeare's Walk, Shadwell, in 1836, at the paedobaptist Surrey Chapel (under James Sherman and the visiting American revivalist Edward Norris Kirk) and at Walworth in 1838, and in the highly successful meetings for revival that united Portmahon and Townhead Street chapels in Sheffield, in 1839.<sup>25</sup>

Even Roe's powerful constitution could not stand the strain of his non-stop regimen, and in the summer of 1840 his health began to fail. His visit to Salendine Nook in June 1841 did not help his recovery. Suffering from "inflammation of the lungs" he took to his bed, but hundreds, he recalled, hearing of his successful revival in Shipleigh, "came and took me out of bed, dressed me up, carried me out through the crowds in the chapel yard into the pulpit, and there I preached . . . as a dying man, for I thought sure it would finish me." Seriously ill, and aware of the burden that his absences imposed on his wife and his large and increasing family, he handed in his resignation. The Committee's esteem for the man to whose advice it had deferred for so long was transparently clear in its offer to increase his salary of two hundred pounds a year by another hundred if only he would stay. Roe stood firm, and in September 1841, he resigned to take up the pastorate of Heneage Street Baptist Church, a mission chapel on the outskirts of Birmingham. Here for the next ten years, before his emigration to America, he combined the work of pastor and revivalist, sustaining several series of protracted meetings and successfully securing the services in 1849 of one of his great heroes, the pre-eminent American revivalist, Charles Finney.<sup>26</sup>

Roe's own work as an evangelist was but part of the "Revival System" that he hoped to introduce under the Society's auspices. Particularly after his tour of Wales in 1837 he became much more conscious of the benefits that would derive from appointing two or more evangelists ("an order of ministers in our religious polity too much overlooked") to visit BHMS stations and neighbouring churches to hold public revival meetings.<sup>27</sup> This was the inspiration for the appointment of Thomas Pulsford of Torrington, Devon, as "the first evangelist to the north of England" in April 1839. Later in the year the Committee tried to make further appointments, but failed to persuade John Craps of Lincoln and John Spasshat of Redruth, both known to be active in promoting revivals, to give up their pastorates.<sup>28</sup> Early in 1841 two further appointments were made, R. G. Jameson of London and William Barnes of Thrapstone. Both young men rapidly burnt themselves out. The Committee replaced Barnes with

Joseph Burton of Amersham, formerly a Baptist missionary in Jamaica and a man well qualified to take over many of the responsibilities of collecting and evangelising that Roe had previously shouldered.<sup>29</sup> This group—energetic and dedicated as it was—never really totalled more than the sum of its individual parts: the “evangelist system”, because of a lack of funds and a consequent shortage of manpower, was not in practice particularly systematic. It drew its strength not from the power of its organisation, but principally from the personal contributions of its first, best known, and most successful representative, Thomas Pulsford.

Pulsford’s name is now forgotten, but “the flame of Pentecostal fire” that he carried through Baptist churches in the late 1830s and early and mid 1840s gave him a contemporary reputation in his denomination that matched that among the Wesleyan Methodists of the visiting American, James Caughey. In absolute terms Pulsford never approached Caughey’s successes, but in a denomination unused to itinerant preaching and protracted revival services “the Baptist Evangelist”, as he was known, offered something novel and deeply impressive. His earlier career offers only hints of his later fame. Devonshire born and bred, he was baptised and joined the church at Tiverton in 1812, not long before his nineteenth birthday. In the summer of 1819 he settled at Torrington as pastor. Over the next twenty years he earned a local reputation for extraordinary energy as he built up the church and worked vigorously under the BHMS umbrella to spread the Gospel in the villages of north Devon. “I will not rock the cradle for the devil” was his motto as he drove himself and his laymen to supply the various outstations. His attitude and successes won the good opinions of the Society, and it was no doubt Roe’s visit to a “flourishing” north Devon in 1836 and Pulsford’s constructive relationship with the Committee that secured his invitation to become the Evangelising Agent of the BHMS in the North of England.<sup>30</sup> He was to fill the post for eight years.<sup>31</sup>

During that period he became a celebrity. The novelty of his approach and his effectiveness as a soul saver drew in the curious by the hundred. At Newark in 1841 according to the pastor, “the vestries, aisles and pulpit stairs were literally crammed, so that it was often with difficulty that we got from the vestry to the pulpit”. At Bromsgrove (where a wide-eyed participant reported that there was “never . . . such a sensation produced in the town before”), over seven hundred crowded into the small chapel, leaving over a hundred unable to get in—an experience repeated frequently elsewhere.<sup>32</sup> That Pulsford’s was not a superficial, fair-weather appeal is clear from the regularity with which churchgoers attended his early morning services. Two to three hundred were present daily at 5.00 a.m. in Haddenham, Cambridgeshire, in 1846, and at Kilham, Yorkshire, a few years earlier during the severe winter Pulsford reported that “the people had to come to the [early morning] meetings . . . up to their knees in snow. Still they did come, although it was sneeringly said that they would

not unless I paid them for it.”<sup>33</sup>

The revivalist won a loyalty and respect from the churches he visited that sometimes bordered on adulation, but there is no evidence to suggest that Pulsford was carried away by his own importance. Certainly he allowed his movements to be directed by the BHMS Committee and followed the itinerary they laid down, which meant that he spent much of his time on the fringes of the denomination, not at its more flourishing centre. Often responding to the urgent requests of pastors and church members impressed by his reputation, the Committee sent the evangelist to churches variously described as “low”, “desolate”, “depressed” and “struggling”; only one or two places, like Shrewsbury, where revivals had taken place in the two summers preceding his visit, stood significantly outside this pattern.<sup>34</sup> Otherwise there was no obvious uniformity to the places he visited. In the main he itinerated around northern and midland churches, though occasionally he worked farther south, in Herefordshire, Sussex, Essex and Cambridgeshire.<sup>35</sup> Some were of quite long standing, as at Kilham; others were recently established causes, as at Stockport and Roe’s Heneage Street Chapel. (The nearest that Pulsford came to the work of missionary “extension”, as opposed to church revival, was at Carlisle, where in the summer of 1839 he helped in the formation of the town’s first Baptist church.)<sup>36</sup> Some of his work was done in villages and market towns—in north Yorkshire and East Anglia, for instance; at other times he worked in Manchester, Sheffield and other major urban and manufacturing areas serving a large hinterland.

Pulsford entered every church he visited with a single-minded determination to promote revival through the use of well-thought-out “means”. As he was the first to admit, he was not an original or novel thinker, but he had saturated himself in the “instrumentalist” literature of revivalism, particularly Finney’s *Lectures* and Thomas Jenkyn’s *The Union of the Holy Spirit and the Church*, and saw it as his job to apply its lessons.<sup>37</sup> Ministers and church members should not wait passively for revival to come: “Antinomian indolence”, he maintained (repeating Rowland Hill), “will make more havoc in a Church, than six great hogs in a gentleman’s garden.” Conversion should not be looked on “as miraculous, or a physical change by some sovereign application of power”; rather it was “a spiritual operation by divine truth, in the use of wisely adapted means appointed for that end by the great Head of the church”. Attempting to protect himself from the charge of undervaluing or even eliminating the role of God in conversion, Pulsford followed the conventional instrumentalist argument and divided means into two kinds: “such as belong entirely to God, and such as are connected with human instrumentality. With the *first* kind are the mediation of Christ, the agency of the Holy Spirit, and the energy of divine providence. In the *second* are the revelation of the divine will, the preaching of the gospel and the constitution of the Christian church”. By such reasoning were his special protracted services defended.<sup>38</sup>

Pulsford consequently insisted on careful preparation before launching his campaigns. Prayers for "the divine blessing . . . to rest upon 'the man of God' ", as at Farsley, near Leeds, were designed to put the church membership in the right frame of mind. Often handbills and placards acquainted the irregular church-goers of his impending arrival, unless the pastor (like Baker of Stockport) found such advertising offensively ostentatious. All this tended to raise the community to the right pitch of expectancy. On his arrival—if his energetic lay supporters had not done so beforehand—he distributed hundreds of copies of a four-page tract urging the unconverted to stop procrastinating and to attend his "special services designed to promote a revival of vital godliness"; for their part, church members were told to read Finney's *Lectures* or, if their tastes were "too delicate and refined to approach" the American, to look at Jenkyn, to prepare themselves for "energetic, untiring exertion".<sup>39</sup>

The protracted meetings themselves, usually conducted twice daily and three times on Sunday, were designed to bring "religion . . . so prominently before the mind that the world is excluded, rather like bringing a number of Sabbaths into immediate succession".<sup>40</sup> Pulsford followed the practice of his English and American contemporaries in modifying the original American model of "four-days meetings" in two ways. First, he insisted that the pastor or the visiting revivalist should take total control of the services; he was unhappy about dividing responsibility amongst several participating ministers. Secondly, whole days were not given up to revival meetings (in contrast to the practice of American camp meetings, on which the later "four days meetings" were based); rather, special services were placed at the beginning and end of the working day and repeated over a period of several weeks, perhaps as many as six. This regimen was compatible with the working day, if not with the long-term health of the revivalist and his hearers. Pulsford himself seems to have followed Wesley's injunction to rise at four and he rarely relaxed his insistence on holding early morning meetings for prayer and addresses: only in Stockport, where factory workers went to work at five, did he admit that he could not press his four o'clock meetings "on people who work such an unreasonable number of hours daily".<sup>41</sup>

It was, however, the evening service, dominated by Pulsford's sermon, which formed the climax of the day's work. We have few firsthand accounts of his pulpit performance, though it is clear that he was a dominating, authoritative figure. A fellow evangelist, Charles Kirtland, described him in the Newark revival of 1841 as "kind" and "gentle" in deportment, and "sincere, affectionate, and earnest" in pulpit style; according to Roe and others his preaching was "plain" and "powerful". He seems to have had the necessary severity to drive home the terrors of hell; he was quite ready to use Jonathan Edwards' celebrated sermon, "Sinners in the hands of an angry God" to show that unconverted, sinful men deserve God's wrath and the everlasting fiery pit of hell. Yet he had also the essential warmth and gentleness



to make the effective switch, so common amongst revival preachers of his day, to the theme of God's love and the redeeming blood of Christ.<sup>42</sup> His theology was a popular form of the modern Calvinism then gaining ground in Baptist and Congregational churches on both sides of the Atlantic. Like Finney and Hinton, he emphasised the general nature of the atonement and man's ability—if not inclination—to repent. He had no time for the strict Calvinist protest: "I have often been told, I have no power to do anything good. . . . If I am one of the elect, God will bring me [to salvation]; and if I am not, it will be of no use for me to come." It would have been neither "just nor reasonable" for God to have required of men what they were not able to do, countered Pulsford. Moreover, that ability could be exercised immediately. As a good revivalist he insisted that sinners should "turn to God *this day*."<sup>43</sup>

"There was nothing particularly exciting in his manner of preaching", reported the pastor of the Baptist church in Shrewsbury, "but yet the people were excited under it." Physical and emotional temperatures could rise feverishly in small, overcrowded chapels, under the impact of a searching sermon or a dramatic baptism. Pulsford's defenders were anxious to make it clear that he was free from the worst excesses often associated with revivalism, that "there was nothing extravagant, nothing vociferous or enthusiastic" in his work. Yet he could certainly arouse and play upon deep emotions. Fisher of Broomley explained that "deep-toned feeling was evinced by the many tears that rolled down the cheeks of the aged and the young"; at Bromsgrove "poor hardened men and women [were] almost broken hearted—crying for mercy, confessing their sins"; one young man at Malton was "nearly bereft of his reason for some time."<sup>44</sup>

It was often in this sort of highly charged atmosphere that Pulsford dismissed the congregation and asked for the "anxious" and "seriously impressed" to remain behind for the "inquiry meeting". Methodist revivalists quite commonly called those "under concern" forward to the communion rail or "penitent bench" for consultation in the full view of the rest of the congregation. Most Calvinist evangelicals found this offensive and dangerous: it could push persons into the church who had not properly repented; it could hold back the more sensitive. Pulsford avoided this public call forward. The more discreet inquiry meeting gave him just as good an opportunity to talk to the penitent who were close to conversion. From the second or third week of his services he held them nightly, at times dealing with between one and two hundred inquirers. If a considerable emphasis of his sermons had been on "the awful gulf of hell", his approach in these meetings was gentler, more comforting. A church member present at Pulsford's inquirers' meetings at Farsley "was struck with the tenderness, kindness and love" of the evangelist. He stressed the "glad tidings". "Your question is, What must I do to be saved? . . . *Believe . . . 'that [Christ] died for our sins'*. Believe this simple, glorious truth . . . and your sins are forgiven, your soul is saved. Oh, glorious news."<sup>45</sup>

The stir caused by Pulsford's methods was soon reflected in church statistics. Wherever he went he produced marked rises in membership. The church in Kilham, which had added a meagre twenty-nine over twenty years, now grew from nineteen to seventy in just a few months. His urban success was even more marked. John Davis baptised over one hundred and thirty in nine months thanks to Pulsford's special services in Sheffield in 1842; in Stockport during a four-month period in the following year sixty-two were baptised. One of his best-remembered revivals, held over six weeks in Newark in 1841, produced over two hundred inquirers and, within a month of his departure, an increase in membership of ninety-eight: a virtual doubling of church strength. According to Joseph Burton, during what was probably Pulsford's most successful year, 1842-43, he helped convert "as many as five hundred persons."<sup>46</sup> These figures compared unfavourably with those of Caughey, the most influential revivalist of the 1840s, who averaged over three thousand converts a year for about six years; but whereas the American was operating in the major cities at the centre of the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion, Pulsford was at work on the periphery of his denomination.

More significant than the numbers of converts was their character. At their most effective, revivals made enough of an impact on the community at large to suck in non-churchgoers. Charles Kirtland reported from Newark that "many came to hear us who had never been in the chapel before"; at least two of them came intending "to make a row". These outsiders—variously described as "persons notorious for wickedness", "glaring transgressors", "bold blasphemers"—included a number of drunkards; signing of the pledge was an integral part of Pulsford's revivals, as of Roe's and other Baptist evangelists'.<sup>47</sup> Easily the largest number of converts, however, was drawn from the respectable ranks of regular and irregular churchgoers—a finding which supports Alan Gilbert's conclusion that churches in this period were turning more and more to their "pool" of unconverted adherents to achieve growth.<sup>48</sup> At Collingham most of those affected "had long been accustomed to hear the gospel"; a quarter of the converts in Newark had belonged to the pastor's inquirers' class well before the revival began; a fair proportion in Sheffield were "believers of many years standing". By far the largest proportion were young people, sometimes Sunday School children or their teachers, and usually members of families with strong evangelical credentials. In the Newark revival, sixty per cent of the church members added were under twenty-five.<sup>49</sup> The older group of converts, too, were usually well acquainted with evangelical religion. Some were backsliders or excluded church members whose feelings of guilt and remorse were exploited by the revivalist. Others were evangelicals from outside Baptist ranks: seventeen of the fifty baptised at Broomley in 1840 were Methodists persuaded of the validity of adult baptism; one of Pulsford's successes in Bromsgrove was to baptise a travelling Primitive Methodist preacher; neither were Anglicans nor

Congregationalists immune, and many were converted who chose to stay within their parent denomination. Converts from "popery" were much rarer and much more loudly celebrated.<sup>50</sup>

From impressionistic evidence it appears that, whether from inside or outside the churches, Pulsford's converts were generally working-class men and women,<sup>51</sup> agricultural labourers and factory operatives, drawn more from the artisan group than from the socially outcast. Pulsford's handbills may have announced "no collection", indicating the relative poverty of the people he expected to attract;<sup>52</sup> but most of those who turned up were in some form of work during a period when the ravages of unemployment were on the increase. They felt at home in Pulsford's services, for the revivalist was fully in sympathy with "the poor oppressed slaves in our manufacturing districts [who] toil . . . for a *poor scanty living*".<sup>53</sup> But there seems to have been nothing overtly political in Pulsford's preaching, no attempts to exploit social discontent; if anything his avoidance of such issues nurtured a social and political quietism. The duty of the revivalist was to avoid "meddling with politics", for "political excitement" was considered injurious to revivals. As Joseph Belcher put it: "We are no advocates for the renunciation of the rights of citizenship because we are Christians, but we do fear that the religion of the Christian is sometimes lost in the struggles and anxieties of the citizen."<sup>54</sup>

The response of Pulsford and his generation of Baptist revivalists to those engaged in social engineering was millennialist: "the grand instrumentality by which every glorious transformation of society is to be effected" was "the preaching of the whole gospel". Through revivals and assiduous evangelical activity, Pulsford claimed, the number of real Christians could be doubled annually, "till the whole world shall be full of the glory of God". Pulsford and Burton, in particular, were at their most active during the years of the Millerite agitation, but they had no time for the millennialist prophecies of William Miller; his calculations were wrong and his understanding of the events prophesied in the book of Daniel was seriously faulty. Burton's millennialism was less speculative, more pragmatic than Miller's: "the great demand of the day is for *active, useful Christianity*: that . . . the church [employ] a combination of power for subduing through God's blessing, the whole world unto Christ."<sup>55</sup>

For a time, as conversions, baptisms and temperance pledges multiplied under Pulsford's aegis, it really did seem as though the millennium was at hand. Church finances improved as attendances increased, and on occasions, as at Malton and Bromsgrove, galleries had to be added to cope with the extra numbers.<sup>56</sup> "Frozen" church members re-acquired their zest for active work. "Revival unions", established in a number of churches during the 1830s as a means of organising the church membership to pray for and cultivate the conversion of their communities, were themselves revived.<sup>57</sup> Many Baptist churches adopted, at Pulsford's, Burton's and Roe's urging, the Methodist class-system, "for mutual instruction and spiritual improve-

ment"—an excellent example of the way that the more revival-minded in the denomination drew inspiration from the warm evangelicalism of Methodism.<sup>58</sup> "We had rather turn 'Ranters' at once, than become frigid, ice-bound baptists!" was the determined cry of those who believed that God's kingdom was but a step away.<sup>59</sup>

There was good statistical justification for this mood of optimism. From an average annual net increase of about four members per church in the mid 1830s, Baptists saw the graph rise dramatically to about nine members per church in 1840, thirteen in 1841 and ten in 1842.<sup>60</sup> And the evangelist system was given much of the credit for this heady growth. The loudest chorus within the BHMS and the denomination as a whole was for an expansion of the system, that Baptists might be "blessed with hundreds of such men" as Pulsford.<sup>61</sup> Those with doubts about itinerant revivalists kept them largely to themselves. What opposition there was came from outside the denomination, as in Bromsgrove in 1843, when the "trustees of our local charities [threatened] their poor expectants; tyrannical priests and their despicable minions frowned and growled like over-charged thunder clouds" in an effort to thwart Pulsford's progress.<sup>62</sup> Only as the rate of Baptist church growth began obviously to slow down in the mid and late 1840s (in 1845 the net annual increase was lower than it had been for a decade) did the doubting seriously begin within the denomination.

Criticism focussed on four charges. First, and perhaps most serious, was the claim that itinerant revivalists were so determined to get results that they pressurised the unqualified and unprepared into baptism and church membership. In due course, after the revivalist had left, those who had "made a profession without a renewed heart" either withdrew from the church or had to be excluded. Pulsford was frequently defended against charges of pushing inquirers too hard, but as time passed it became clear that by no means all his converts stood; in Newark, for instance, the setting for one of his most successful revivals, the post-revival "reaction" was "rapid and long".<sup>63</sup> Secondly, a number of critics argued that itinerant evangelism brought disorder to the churches—"excitement", "enthusiasm" and a "reign of terror"—particularly by its disruption of the relationship between pastor and people. Here the experience of American churches did not help the revivalist's image. The editor of the *Baptist Record* was just one who pointed to the "reckless agitators" across the Atlantic (he would have had the showman-cum-revivalist Jacob Knapp in mind) who, lacking the ability to become successful pastors, preyed on vulnerable churches for personal gain and destroyed their internal discipline. These critics were quick to point out that the motives and experience of English evangelists were very different (the BHMS had been careful to appoint only experienced pastors, not callow young ministers, to the office). But the practical outcome of English revivals was often similar: new converts, inflated with a sense of their own importance had lost confidence in their pastor, whom they compared

unfavourably with the dynamic evangelist; the latter himself was generally happy to dominate the pulpit, pushing the pastor into a seat in the table-pew, and to take the lead in recommending persons for church fellowship. The third charge was that churches would come to think of using an itinerating revivalist as the only way of escaping from a condition of religious relapse, would thereby undervalue the ordinary means of promoting conversions, and—a fine non sequitur—come to regard periods of religious decline as inevitable. Finally, it was alleged that the emphasis on revivals did damage to missionary work, the work of “extension” for which the BHMS had been originally established: evangelists should principally cultivate new areas, not revive old ones.<sup>64</sup>

This growing tide of criticism, the deterioration in BHMS finances in the later 1840s, and the departure from the Committee of the two most vigorous revivalists (Roe in 1841 and Belcher in 1844) was too much for the evangelist system. There had been hints as early as 1843 that the Committee was not entirely convinced of the system’s soundness.<sup>65</sup> By 1846 there was enough opposition for the Society to stand pledged to its constituent bodies “that Mr. Pulsford should not visit any churches without the cordial concurrence, and indeed earnest request, of both pastor and people; and that the expenses incurred by his movements, when assisting churches not otherwise aided by it, should not fall on the society.” In the following twelve months Pulsford was mainly occupied in revisiting the places where his earlier successes made him welcome; few other churches applied to the Committee for his services; some treated him with “derision”; the additions to BHMS churches came “not as the result of special movements, but as the fruit of the ordinary, unpretending . . . efforts of the agents”. The Society’s annual meeting in April 1847 saw only one course open to it: to tell Pulsford “that the system with which his name was identified, had been brought, by providential circumstances, to a close”.<sup>66</sup>

Pulsford’s consequent return to his native southwest and to a settled ministry symbolised the closing of a significant chapter in Baptist history. Many English Calvinist evangelicals during the second quarter of the century believed that American and Methodist forms of revival provided a solution to their problems and an agency for the introduction of the millennium. But as the full implications of protracted meetings and itinerant evangelism began to unfold, the more traditionalist elements in Baptist and Congregational churches reasserted themselves. Baptists continued to participate in revivals, of course, and they benefited from the revival wave of the late 1850s, but their commitment was cautious and often uncertain. Even various of the branches of Methodism, including the Primitives, began to express doubts about itinerant revivalists in the 1850s and early 1860s. It was left to a later generation to respond positively to the campaigns of Moody and Sankey, and to discover once again the attractions of itinerant American revivalism.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This is not the place for an historiographical essay, but the emphasis on Methodism is well illustrated in W. R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England 1790-1850* (London, 1972) and, most recently, in John Kent, *Holding the Fort: Studies in Victorian Revivalism* (London, 1978). Kent's sparkling essays to my mind underestimate the thrust towards revivalism within evangelical Calvinist churches in the mid-nineteenth century. I have tried to paint the broader context into which Baptists can be fitted in *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (London, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Brown, *The Story of Baptist Home Missions* (n.p., 1897), pp. 14, 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> *Baptist Annual Register*, 2 (1794-97), 456-70; 3 (1798-1801), 1-40.

<sup>4</sup> *The Annual Report of the Baptist Home Missionary Society . . . For the Year ending June 1828* (London, 1827), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, *Baptist Home Missions*, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Baptist Magazine*, 33 (1841), 322-23.

<sup>7</sup> Garth Arthur Weston, 'The Baptists of North-West England' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Sheffield, 1969) pp. 90, 154-56, 168.

<sup>8</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 324.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 (1836), 413; 33 (1841), 538; 35 (1843), 239-40; *The Annual Report of the Committee of the Baptist Home Missionary Society . . . For the Year ending April, 1842* (London, 1842).

<sup>10</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 324.

<sup>11</sup> *Baptist Reporter*, n.s. 3 (1846), 239-40.

<sup>12</sup> John Campbell, *Yethro: a System of Lay Agency, in connexion with the Congregational Churches, for the Diffusion of the Gospel among our own Population* (n.p., 1839); James Matheson, *Our Country: or, the Spiritual Destitution of England considered; and how it can be supplied through Lay Agency* (London, 1839).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, *Bapt. Mag.*, 28 (1836), 414; *Revivalist*, 1841, pp. 99-101.

<sup>14</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 32, (1840), 345-47; 33 (1841), 324.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas, *op. cit.*, p. 152; *Bapt. Mag.*, 30 (1838), 383-86, 554-56; 31 (1839), 220-23.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas, *Primitive Evangelist*, p. 178.

<sup>17</sup> *The Freeman*, 3 Aug. 1859; *Revivalist*, 1832, pp. 1-3.

<sup>18</sup> *Revivalist*, 1832, pp. 12-14, 28-31, 141, 151-52; 1837, p. 35; 1838, pp. 142-43; 1839, pp. 214-15, 324. John Mockett Cramp's tract, *An Address to British Christians on the Importance and Necessity of a Revival of Religion . . .* (London, 1832), was inspired by Colton's work; the Committee of the BHMS agreed to buy 500 copies 'for circulation among our village congregations'. Minutes of the Proceedings of the Baptist Home Missionary Society Instituted in London in 1797, 17 July 1832, Baptist Union Library, hereafter cited as 'Minutes'.

<sup>19</sup> Cox, *Suggestions*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>20</sup> A. Perrey, *Narrative of the Services Connected with One Week's Revival Meetings in Boston, April 21st to April 27th, 1834* noted in *Bapt. Mag.* 26 (1834), 341; *Revivalist*, 1834, pp. 314-16.

<sup>21</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 28 (1836), 6, 160-61; Samuel Green, *Times of Refreshing from the Presence of the Lord . . .* (London, n.d.), pp. 18-19; *Revivalist*, 1839, pp. 62-64.

<sup>22</sup> *The Baptist Hand-Book for 1873* (London, 1873), pp. 273-75; *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 322; 65 (1873), 25-26; Eliza Roe Shannon, *A Minister's Life: Memoirs of Charles Hill Roe* (Chicago, 1900), pp. 21-23, 52-57 and passim; *The Freeman*, 19 July, 1872.

<sup>23</sup> Brown, *Baptist Home Missions*, p. 32; Shannon, *Roe*, pp. 26, 40-41; *The Primitive Communionist*, 1 (1839), 143; *Annual Report of . . . the BHMS* (1842), p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 28 (1836), 5-9, 414-16, 550; 29 (1839), 133-35; 33 (1841), 537; Shannon, *Roe*, 39-40.

<sup>25</sup> *Revivalist*, 1837, p. 392; 1839, pp. 62-64; *The Patriot*, 12 Nov. 1838, 27 Jan. 1840; Charles Larom, *The Awakening: A Memorial of a year of revived religion, in the First Baptist Church, Sheffield* (Sheffield, 1840); Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism*, p. 76.

<sup>26</sup> Minutes, 21 July, 1840; 18 May, 7 June, 20 July 1841; *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 537-39; Shannon, *Roe*, pp. 26, 43-44, 58-97.

<sup>27</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 29 (1837), 365-66; 30 (1838), 93.

<sup>28</sup> Minutes, 23 April, 17 Sept., 8 Oct. 1839. Craps was one of the first Baptists to promote protracted meetings and conducted them not just in Lincoln, but in other parts of the country, including London, Sheffield and Shrewsbury.

<sup>29</sup> Minutes, 15 Dec. 1840; 19 Jan., 16 Feb., 18 May, 22 June, 24 Aug., 1 Sept. 1841; 15 Nov. 1842; *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 21-25, 542; 34 (1842), 514; *Annual Report of . . . the BHMS* (1842), pp. 12, 15-16; *Baptist Hand-Book for 1887*, pp. 113-14.

<sup>30</sup> *Baptist Hand-Book for 1873*, pp. 269-70; David Thompson, *A Book of Remembrance; or A Short History of the Baptist Churches in North Devon* (London, 1885), pp. 32-36; *Bapt. Mag.*, 27 (1835), 28; 28 (1836), 549; Minutes, 19 Jan., 25 Mar. 1836; 8 Aug. 1838.

<sup>31</sup> Minutes, 8 Oct., 5 Dec. 1839. The appointment was for six months in the first instance, then made semi-permanent. Pulsford's starting salary (later increased) was £100 a year, supplemented by travelling expenses, by special grants for publishing his tracts, and by gifts from grateful churches.

<sup>32</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 158, 681; *Bapt. Rep.*, 6th ser. 3 (1844), 21.

<sup>33</sup> *Baptist Record and Biblical Repository*, 3 (1846), 286; *Annual Report of . . . the BHMS* (1842), p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Minutes, 20 Dec. 1842, 17 Jan. 1843; *Bapt. Rec.*, 2 (1845), 287, 643; *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 540, 681; 35 (1843), 506.

<sup>35</sup> From the pages of the Baptist periodicals and the BHMS Minutes it is possible to piece together the major stages of Pulsford's itinerancy:

1839 Carlisle, Bedale, Stockton-on-Tees, Hamsterley, Middleton-in-Teesdale, Wolsingham, North Shields, Newcastle-on-Tyne.

1840 Carlisle, Broomley, Bridlington, Stockton-on-Tees, Newcastle-on-Tyne.

1841 Boroughbridge, Malton, Shrewsbury, Bedale, Newark, Birmingham, Driffeld.

1842 Kilham, Lynn Regis, Sheffield, Stratford-on-Avon.

1843 Lewes, Farsley (nr. Leeds), Sheffield, Rotherham, Wakefield, Shipley, Bramley, Rawdon, Stockport, Chowbent, Birmingham.

1844 Bromsgrove, Manchester, Sutton-on-Trent, Collingham, Cradley (Worcs.), Houghton (Hunts.), Halstead.

1845 Haddenham, Bluntisham, Hereford, Ledbury, Birmingham.

1846 Haddenham, Halstead, Rotherham.

1847 Hull.

<sup>36</sup> *Annual Report of . . . the BHMS* (1839), pp. 9-10.

<sup>37</sup> The influence of John Howard Hinton's *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Conversion . . .* (London, 1830), Cox's *Suggestions*, and various American authors, including Colton, E. N. Kirk, S. H. Cox and W. B. Sprague, is also apparent in Pulsford's writings and approach to revival. Pulsford, 'An Affectionate Appeal to the Churches of Christ', in T. Pulsford, *Helps for Revival Churches* (London, 1846).

<sup>38</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 158; *Bapt. Rep.*, 6th ser. 1 (1842), 17-18, 60; Pulsford, 'Affectionate Appeal', pp. 4-5 and 'Means of promoting Revival', pp. 1-20 in *Helps for Revival Churches*.

<sup>39</sup> *Bapt. Rep.*, 6th ser. 1 (1842), 18; 6th ser. 2 (1843), 203; n.s. 1 (1844),

96; *Bapt. Mag.*, 32 (1840), 697-98; 36 (1844), 59; Pulsford, 'To the Inhabitants of this town and its vicinity' and 'Affectionate Appeal' in *Helps for Revival Churches*.

<sup>40</sup> Pulsford, 'Means of Promoting Revival', p. 17, in *Helps for Revival Churches*.

<sup>41</sup> Pulsford, 'The Importance of Revival Principles and Operations', p. 14, and 'The Duty and Advantages of Early Rising', p. 2, in *ibid.*; Shannon, *Roe*, pp. 39-40; *Bapt. Mag.*, 35 (1843), 506.

<sup>42</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 540, 682-83; *Annual Report of . . . the BHMS* (1842), p. 26.

<sup>43</sup> Pulsford, 'Can I Repent?—and—May I Hope?', pp. 2, 21 and *passim*, in *Helps for Revival Churches*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 32 (1840), 157-58, 697-98; 33 (1841) 540; 35 (1843), 75; *Bapt. Rep.*, n.s. 1 (1844), 21; *Bapt. Rec.*, 2 (1845), 72.

<sup>45</sup> *Bapt. Rep.*, 6th ser. 2 (1843), 203; Pulsford, 'How Can I Be Saved?' in *Helps for Revival Churches*.

<sup>46</sup> *Annual Report of . . . the BHMS* (1842), p. 28; *The Working Church, Involving the Question of Lay Agency. The Circular Letter of the West-Riding of Yorkshire Association of Baptist Churches . . . 1843* (Bradford, 1843), p. 19; *Bapt. Rep.*, 6th ser. 2 (1843), 345; *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 681; 35 (1843), 238; 36 (1844), 59.

<sup>47</sup> *Bapt. Rep.*, 6th ser. 2 (1843), 345; n.s. 1 (1844), 21, 95; *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 158-59, 681-82. One of Pulsford's lectures was 'On the Connexion between Total Abstinence and Revivals'. *Bapt. Mag.*, 36 (1844), 226.

<sup>48</sup> A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740-1914* (London, 1976).

<sup>49</sup> *Bapt. Rec.*, 2 (1845), 72, 643; *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 682; 35 (1843), 76.

<sup>50</sup> *Bapt. Rep.*, n.s. 1 (1844), 95; n.s. 2 (1845), 36; *Bapt. Mag.*, 32 (1840), 506; 36 (1844), 59-60, 226.

<sup>51</sup> It was generally agreed that more women were involved in revival meetings than men. In the only revival of Pulsford's for which I have found precise figures (Newark, 1841-42) three were converted for every one man. *Bapt. Rep.*, 6th ser. 1 (1842), 134-35.

<sup>52</sup> *Bapt. Rep.*, n.s. 1 (1844), 96.

<sup>53</sup> Pulsford, 'The Duty and Advantages of Early Rising', p. 1, in *Helps for Revival Churches*.

<sup>54</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 29 (1837), 568-75; *Revivalist*, 1837, pp. v-vi.

<sup>55</sup> *Revivalist*, 1838, p. 256; *Bapt. Mag.*, 27 (1835), 28; 36 (1844), 95-96.

<sup>56</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 36 (1844), 225; *The Baptists of Yorkshire* (London, 1912), p. 208.

<sup>57</sup> One of the earliest 'revival unions' was formed by Joseph Ivimey in London's Eagle Street Baptist Church in 1833; J. M. Cramp and Joseph Belcher were early advocates of their value. Eagle Street Chapel Church Book 1822-1846, Church meeting 4 Apr. 1833, in Baptist Union Library; *Revivalist*, 1832, pp. 154-57; 1833, p. 188; Cramp, *Address*, pp. 22-24; *Bapt. Mag.*, 36 (1844), 60; *Bapt. Rec.*, 2 (1845), 643.

<sup>58</sup> *Bapt. Rep.*, 6th ser. 1 (1842), 18; 6th ser. 3 (1843), 203, n.s. 1 (1844), 95; *Bapt. Rec.*, 2 (1845), 287; *Bapt. Mag.*, 35 (1843), 75, 77; 36 (1844), 59. Many Baptists of the hyper-evangelical variety had a strong sympathy for Methodism. John Spasshat, for example, was a Wesleyan local preacher until he was baptised in 1822; William Corken was another ex-Wesleyan. William Steadman, of course, had been deeply appreciative of Methodist vigour.

<sup>59</sup> *Bapt. Rep.*, n.s. 1 (1844), 96.

<sup>60</sup> The precise figures are as follows: 1840—8.8; 1841—13.1; 1842—9.8; 1843—7.1; 1844—6.3; 1845—3.7; 1846—2.9; 1847—1.7; 1848—3.1; 1849—2.9. A. D. Gilbert, 'The Growth and Decline of Nonconformity in England and Wales . . . before 1850 . . .' (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1973), p. 106.

<sup>61</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 540.



<sup>62</sup> *Bapt. Rep.*, n.s. 1 (1844), 95.

<sup>63</sup> *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 682; 35 (1843), 76; *Baptist Hand-Book for 1887*, p. 114; *Bapt. Rep.*, 6th ser. 2 (1843), 345; n.s. 2 (1845), 72; *Bapt. Rec.*, 3 (1846), 287.

<sup>64</sup> *Bapt. Rec.*, 2 (1845), 77-78, 184-86, 332-33; 3 (1846), 73; *Bapt. Mag.*, 32 (1840), 697.

<sup>65</sup> *Minutes*, 21 Feb. 1843.

<sup>66</sup> *Bapt. Rep.*, n.s. 4 (1847), 210; *Bapt. Mag.*, 39 (1847), 406.

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## Towards a Consensus on Baptism? Louisville 1979\*

### Introduction

The study of baptism has long ecumenical history. At the Faith and Order Conference at Lausanne in 1927, baptism, together with many other subjects, was tabled as that which both united and divided. In Edinburgh in 1937, the report contained a statement about the meaning of baptism which was agreed, and which in a footnote was accepted also by the Baptist delegates as an agreed meaning provided it was applied to the baptism of believers. At the Faith and Order Conference in Lund in 1952, there was inaugurated a study of baptism which sought to relate it very closely to the understanding of the Church and the eventual outcome was a report entitled 'One Lord, One Baptism', which was commended by the Montreal Conference on Faith and Order in 1963, as an illustration of "how wide is the agreement among the Churches with regard to baptism". These efforts, however, had aimed mainly at seeking to reach a common understanding of the meaning of baptism and had not seriously been applied to the question of the possibility of mutual recognition of each other's baptism on the basis of such agreement. It meant, therefore, that the time was ripe in the late 1960s for a new discussion on baptism and indeed on eucharist. A further reason for new initiatives

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