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A Note on the Sierra Leone Mission and Religious Freedom, 1796

ON 7th April 1795, members of the Baptist Missionary Society gathered at Arnsby heard a letter read from their India missionaries wishing "... that what had been applied to their support might now be employed for the support of some other Mission". Lack of money had prevented the society from expanding its work to other fields but small sums of money had been sent to the Presbyterian and Moravian societies as an expression of solidarity. Yet voices were heard at that meeting expressing the fear that the India missionaries, having become self-supporting through their involvement in "affairs of trade", might be "overcharged with the cares of this life and so rendered unfit for the work". There was little for the society to do, however, but accept the financial independence of the India missionaries led by Carey and Marshman and prayerfully search for God's will on the creation of a new mission field.¹

The answer was already at hand, for the Directors of the Sierra Leone Company, the successor to Granville Sharp's Province of Freedom and surrogate for the Crown in the west African colony, had recently appealed for schoolmasters and missionaries for its population of some eleven hundred black former slaves.² William Button (6th March 1795) referred to the colony in terms of "... its noble design, which was to promote civilisation, to propagate the Christian religion, and to encourage an honourable commerce in Africa, and so in the end to put a final stop to the abominable slave-trade".³ The Arnsby meeting appointed the twenty-six year old Jacob Grigg as a missionary to Sierra Leone and recommended him to the Sierra Leone Company. Henry Thornton, an intimate of William Wilberforce, as chairman of the company, accepted the Baptist Missionary Society's offer and on 11th June the society appointed James Rodway, another former student of Bristol Academy to accompany Grigg. The cost of transportation to Sierra Leone was provided by Mr. Ward of Derby, an ardent supporter of the society. The farewell service for the two young men was held on 16th September 1795 with John Ryland delivering the address. Grigg and Rodway arrived in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone on 1st December. The society's high hopes were to be

stillborn for within six months Rodway's health was broken by the tropical climate and Grigg had been ejected from the colony for "interference in colonial disputes"—political meddling.

The lack of information concerning the expulsion of Jacob Grigg has made it difficult to define precisely what the charges were against him. H. G. Hartzell, writing in 1943, claimed that what essentially alienated the company's governor and council was Grigg's unyielding stand against the slave trade and slavery, although there were some other irritants as well.⁴ More recently Clifford J. Parsons in his unpublished Whitley Lectures (1968, p.6) stated that "... the issue on which the mission was to founder was not humanitarian but ecclesiastical", citing changes in the new colonial regulations of 1796 dealing with marriages. More recently, Basil Amey's article on "Baptist Missionary Society Radicals" *Baptist Quarterly* (xxvi, No. 8, October 1976) took the position that the marriage issue was "... probably ... not the main cause of conflict". Amey (p. 368) cited a letter of Grigg published in the Baptist Missionary Society's *Periodical Accounts* (I, 253) which gave added weight to Hartzell's conviction that the central issue concerned slavery. There is no reason to dispute that Jacob Grigg, like most Particular Baptists, was a critic of both the slave trade and slavery, an attitude which doubtless hardened with his Sierra Leone experience with freed blacks and the trade which still existed along the coast. After emigrating to the United States he lived for a time in Kentucky where his outspoken criticism of slavery eventually was to force him to move to Lebanon, Ohio. What is disputable is that slavery was the central issue in his expulsion from Sierra Leone. In point of fact he was not the central figure in the dispute at all. The leading opponent of Governor Zachary Macaulay's colonial policies was a former company schoolmaster, (he resigned 2nd May 1796) John Garvin. Such evidence relating to the conflict which exists in the Colonial Office files at the Public Record Office does not mention slavery, although this official silence need not be construed to mean that it was not a factor in the overall problem. A closer look at the conflict clarifies the motives of Garvin and by extension, we might assume, Jacob Grigg. James Rodway appears to have kept out of the controversy possibly because he was already seriously ill by the end of June 1796.

On 8th July 1796, Governor Macaulay, the 28 year old son and grandson of ministers of the Church of Scotland, and his Council passed an ordinance requiring all marriages in the colony to be performed in the parish church, after the banns had been read there three times. The ceremony was to be performed by the company chaplain, the governor, or someone appointed by the governor to act in his stead. The ordinance also dealt with the care of illegitimate children, while confirming the validity of marriages performed previously by the various Negro preachers and if applicable, the Baptist missionaries. The reaction to the ordinance was immediate and angry with the strongest protests against this violation of customary practice coming

from John Garvin. Garvin, an Evangelical member of the Church of England turned Methodist, had been recommended to the Baptist Missionary Society committee by Jacob Grigg as a possible replacement for the ailing Rodway. Garvin strongly denied that he was, however, going to be rebaptised.⁵ Garvin's major complaint about affairs in the colony was clearly expressed in a letter (16th May 1796) to the Rev. Melville Horne of Olney, a previous chaplain in the colony. Macaulay was accused of "labouring hard to unite Church and State".⁶ This comment was expanded upon in a letter to the Council written by Garvin on behalf of the Independent Methodist Church of Freetown. The new marriage ordinance was seen as the first step in a series of changes that would have seriously limited the pattern of religious freedom which had thus far developed in Sierra Leone. "We are dissenters", the letter said, and "cannot persuade ourselves that politics and religion have any connection".⁷ Jacob Grigg also addressed a letter of protest to the governor. Macaulay, writing to John Rippon, said that the "language of the letter of the Methodists which I received is the language of rebellion, and Mr. Grigg cannot deny, nay he avows that the letter he drew up was much worse".⁸

The Nova Scotian Negroes who had been resettled in the colony in 1792 were generally organised around three dissenting congregations, Wesleyan, Huntingdonian and Baptist. Until the passage of this ordinance, there had been no interference with their religious practice from either the chaplain or the governor. That the colony's chaplain, John Clarke, was a Scottish Presbyterian made no difference to those dissenters who mistrusted any form of established church. It was believed that if the restrictions on marriage were logically extended then baptism and burial would be the next items for control on the council agenda and then, most likely, the licensing of the Negro preachers in the style of the English Toleration Act. In other words the seemingly harmless, if not positive, step of regularising marriage procedure, threatened the existing freedom of religion. Garvin and Grigg were not prepared to accept toleration in place of freedom without a struggle.⁹

In addition to the letter which Grigg addressed to Macaulay, he (according to Hartzell) had also alienated the young governor by protesting at the imposition of new taxes and land rents on the black settlers. Grigg was also reputed to have preached against Macaulay's fortification of the colony against an anticipated French attack and the forming of a black militia. There was also the matter of Grigg refusing the suggestion that he should work primarily at Port Logo. Grigg wrote to the B.M.S. committee explaining the crisis in Sierra Leone and his part in it, requesting their support. James Rodway returned to England in late September and the ship he travelled on carried a letter to John Ryland from Governor Macaulay. Ryland was told that Grigg "had of late conducted himself with great impropriety in the colony" by associating himself with "discontent among the settlers . . . along with Mr. Garvin". Ryland could see how the company was reacting

to Grigg's complicity for on 22nd September the directors had refused "for present" the society's offer to send a family to the colony. An emergency meeting of the executive was called for 6th October 1796. The members discussed in detail the letters from Macaulay and Grigg, in addition no doubt to personal reports from Rodway and further communication with the company. They decided to censure Grigg strongly for "interference in colonial disputes", without themselves deciding "anything respecting those disputes". They wrote to Grigg of their "disapprobation", telling him that if Macaulay requested him to quit the colony he should do so immediately. The committee promised him passage to either England or America. The final word was that he was unfit to remain in the service of the Baptist Missionary Society. A letter was sent by the society to Macaulay apologising for Grigg's interference and on 10th October Dr. John Ryland, President of Bristol Academy, went to London to see Henry Thornton to assure him personally that they had disciplined Grigg. Despite Ryland's intervention the Sierra Leone Company firmly closed the door on the replacement of Rodway, much less Grigg, and the mission came to an abrupt and painful end. Grigg answered the committee's criticisms by letter at length but in January 1797 they decided that his reply did not justify his conduct. Fearing that he could now do no good and much harm they asked him to return home as a friend and not go to America as he had intimated. The society was prepared to underwrite his passage in any case. He chose America and Macaulay advanced the twenty-two pounds four shillings and five pence, forwarding the account to Ryland for payment.¹⁰

Although the crisis, which lasted only a few months, had destroyed the Sierra Leone mission, the Baptist Missionary Society had been able to maintain their relationship with the Church of England Evangelicals of the so-called Clapham sect. These men had not only provided the opportunity in Sierra Leone but continued to offer the dissenting missionary society personal access to the normally "unreachable" levels of national government. Such access was crucial if the missionary work was to be expanded into the British controlled sectors of India and the West Indies. The obvious link between the society and the Evangelicals was its own treasurer, John Broadley Wilson. Although baptised by Isaiah Birt at Plymouth Dock, Wilson retained his membership in the established church while being closely identified with Particular Baptist work throughout his life.¹¹

The growth of the work in India and the development of a mission built upon the existing native black Baptist church in the Caribbean island of Jamaica eased the disappointment of the Sierra Leone failure. The lessons of Sierra Leone were not to be forgotten. It was not that the committee was unaware of the threat of political involvement, before 1799 as suggested by Basil Amey (p.365). In the committee's interview with John Fountain (another of Amey's "radicals") on 2nd February 1796—before the Sierra Leone crisis erupted—the following question (number three of a total of four) was put to the

aspiring young missionary.

"Whatever be your political principles as to the best form of civil government, do you not think it the duty of individuals, especially of a Christian missionary, to be obedient to any form of government where providence shall cast you?"¹²

Fountain apparently agreed with this "loaded" question and went out to India where he found that he could not be obedient to the East India Company causing great difficulty for the missionary society until his early death in August 1800. Andrew Fuller had threatened resignation if the committee did not deal immediately and effectively with Fountain. The following statement by Fuller makes his position on political involvement crystal clear.

"I have observed also that those ministers who have been the most violent partisans for democratic liberty, are commonly not only cold-hearted in religion, but the most imperious in their own churches. Now, whatever fault I may see in the government of my own country, I had rather live under such kind of liberty as I should have reason to expect from such characters."¹³

As late as 1824 the committee warned William Knibb that the situation which he was about to find himself would "be painful and trying to your feelings but you must bear in mind, that, as a resident in Jamaica, you have nothing whatever to do with its civil or political affairs; and with these you must never interfere". This was the official policy of the Baptist Missionary Society.¹⁴

This policy of political neutrality was carefully adhered to with only minor slips until the Jamaican slave revolt of Christmas 1831. Even then this policy was only rejected after the Baptist and Methodist missions had been put to the torch by irate planters seeking a scapegoat. The society's executive, even as it had in 1796, was prepared to believe that their missionaries were in the wrong. It was only after William Knibb and Thomas Burchell grasped the burning brand from the ruins of the mission and carried it as a sign of triumph from one end of Britain to the other that the society was forced to admit that the issue at stake was religious freedom and the continued evangelisation of the Negro slave. For over fifteen years the missionaries had carefully followed the committee's instructions designed to encourage the evangelism of the "poor enslaved heathen" and discourage any political activity which might justify the expulsion of the missionaries as had happened with Sierra Leone. The wisdom of this "blind eye" policy was to some extent vindicated by the development of twenty-four churches with 10,838 members plus 17,000 enquirers over whom the mission had a more limited influence. The slave rebellion brought to an end, almost thirty-five years after it emerged out of the experience of Sierra Leone, a policy that had its beginning and ending within the task of carrying the Gospel to the black African. Times had changed and the political quietism of Particular Baptists expressed by John Ryland with reference to domestic politics was almost a thing of the past, but even here the catalyst was religious

freedom and only then did the great surge of humanitarianism overwhelm slavery. Jacob Grigg and the abortive Sierra Leone mission were an important part of this developing realisation that a Christian could not be "obedient to [just] any form of government".¹⁵

NOTES

¹ *Periodical Accounts relative to the Baptist Missionary Society*, i, 39f, 45, 49.

² C. Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 13-37.

³ William Button's letter reprinted in *Baptist Magazine* (1839), p. 525.

⁴ H. G. Hartzell, "Jacob Grigg: Missionary", *The Chronicle* (now *Foundations*, July 1943), pp. 83-90; 130-143.

⁵ *Periodical Accounts* . . . , i, 69; Colonial Office 270/4, 147.

⁶ Colonial Office 270/4, 143-47.

⁷ Letter dated 11 July 1796: Colonial Office 270/4, 48-9.

⁸ Quoted in Amey, p. 368.

⁹ Fyfe (pp. 69-71) provides a detailed account of the affair based on Macaulay's notebook/journal and the Colonial Office records which lacks any recognition of the dissenters' fear of what a seemingly sensible law could produce in the eventual limitation of religious freedom.

¹⁰ *Periodical Accounts*, i, 53, 73-7, 83, 257f.

¹¹ For Wilson see John Birt's obituary of Isaiah Birt in *Baptist Magazine* (1838), pp. 199f.

¹² *Periodical Accounts*, i, 59. The interview was at Kettering.

¹³ J. C. Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward* (1859) i, 75f, 134. Such an attitude was not peculiar to the Particular Baptists as evidenced by the opinions of the Independent minister and historian David Bogue; see C. Terpstra, *D. Bogue, D.D., 1750-1825: Pioneer Missionary Educator* (Edinburgh, Ph.D., 1959) p. 340.

¹⁴ J. H. Hinton, *Memoir of William Knibb* (1847) pp. 149f. An excerpt from one such letter of instruction is reprinted in J. Ivimey, *The Utter Extinction of Slavery* (1832) pp. 70f and Basil Amey presents some other similar examples in his "Baptist Missionary Society Radicals". For a more detailed discussion of Particular Baptist political opinions see K. R. M. Short *A Study in Political Nonconformity: The Baptists with special reference to Slavery* (Oxford, D.Phil., 1972), esp. chp. 1.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of the Jamaican slave rebellion and the role of the Baptist missionaries in the abolition of slavery see K. R. M. Short, "Jamaican Christian Missions and the Great Slave Rebellion of 1831-32", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, (January 1976), p. 57ff.

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