

# THE WONDERFUL WORKS OF GOD

IN CONNECTION WITH THE

*Rise and Progress of the Church of Christ meeting for divine worship*

AT

PROVIDENCE STRICT BAPTIST CHAPEL, WEST STREET, CROYDON.

IN THE COUNTY OF SURREY.

Written in commemoration of the Centenary of the opening of the Chapel, which took place on March 12th 1848

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## PREFACE

In the pages of this booklet there is a record of the faithfulness of a Covenant God toward His people in the sanctuary. Providence Chapel is well named, seeing that it is entirely by God's providence that the chapel has stood for a hundred years. Amid all the changes which have occurred in the world and in this land during that period, the cause of truth established through the instrumentality of Francis Covell has remained as a witness to the faithfulness of our God. The same truth of eternal election in Christ by the Father, the complete atonement made by the Son, and the effectual calling of the elect by the Holy Ghost are still believed and loved by many who meet together in the sanctuary at West Street.

How little could Francis Covell imagine when he first preached the gospel in his own home that the foundation was being laid of a cause which would be still continued after the end of a century! It is the hope of those who now attend the chapel that the Lord may still maintain it for many generations to come, and use it for the ingathering of His own people and the honour of His holy Name.

We desire to thank Mr. Paul, of Brighton, for kindly compiling the record, which we hope may be profitable to many.

*W. CROFT.*

## INTRODUCTION

On the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Ghost was poured out in so remarkable a manner on the Apostles that they, although for the most part unlearned, began to speak in the many different languages of those gathered at Jerusalem on that occasion, the beholders of this great miracle were all amazed and marvelled, saying: "We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God" (Acts 2.11). This was of course an outstanding event and unique in the history of the church of Christ, as being that initial manifestation and outpouring of the Holy Spirit which signalized the Saviour's ascension to the right hand of the Father and the commencement of the visible New Testament churches. Many and various have been the manifestations of the Spirit since those days in the rise and maintenance of true Gospel churches in different parts of the earth, and not the least in our own beloved land; and although these latter effusions may be hardly comparable with the great Pentecostal one, yet each has its own peculiar accompaniments of the works of God, both in providence and grace, which were indeed wonderful to those immediately concerned therein, and to all beholders who take pleasure in the same. This is particularly true of the church of Christ to which this little memoir relates.

To write an account of the church of God worshipping at Providence Chapel, West Street, Croydon, is to a large extent, at least in its earlier history, to write an account of that gracious man of God and good minister of Jesus Christ, Francis Covell, who was the instrument used in its commencement, and for thirty-one years was its faithful and beloved pastor. In this is to be seen and admired the wonderful work of God in calling one of the inhabitants of Croydon from his self-righteous ignorance and darkness to a living and gracious acquaintance with His dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and in constraining and enabling him, though before a man with a stammering and stuttering speech, to speak and to preach Christ to his own townsmen without the least impediment in his utterance; and this removal of his painful defect was done both suddenly and lastingly on his first standing up to speak in the name of the Lord. Little wonder that he was "the talk of the town, from the hotel down to the little pot-house" as he used to say. Here was Francis Covell, whom they knew as a fellow-tradesman having an impediment in his speech, with his tongue loosed and preaching the Gospel of the kingdom to the many who gathered to hear him.

This was the means used of the Lord to commence the Cause of truth at Providence Chapel, and the rise and progress of this Cause under the gracious ministry of their first pastor, as well as in subsequent times, is treated of in the following account. May it please the Lord to own and bless the remembrance of these works of His, to the good of His people and to His own praise and glory.

## CHAPTER 1

### MR. COVELL'S PASTORATE

During the eighteenth century there had taken place in England a considerable revival of true religion, through the blessing of the Lord attending the preaching of several eminent ministers, mostly in communion with the National Church, such as Whitefield, Berridge, Grimshaw, Newton, and others. Following these, in the succeeding century, there were a number of Particular Baptist ministers whose preaching was owned of the Lord and made powerful in the hearts of the hearers, to the conversion of many to the ways of the Lord, and the establishing of churches of this order and belief in different parts of the country. Gadsby, Warburton, and Kershaw are outstanding names among this latter line of ministers, and it is to the days in which they exercised their ministry and subsequent years that the present account relates.

Towards the end of the year 1808, Francis Covell was born in Croydon, in the County of Surrey, in a house in the High Street where his father carried on business as a tin man and brazier. For over two hundred years the Covells had lived in Croydon; and in Croydon Francis was born and lived and died, and exercised in the same town his gracious ministry for thirty-five years, being therein a notable exception to the rule stated by the Lord Jesus, with particular reference to Himself: "A prophet is not without honour save in his own country."

John Newton had died the previous year, and William Gadsby by had been preaching about ten years, when Francis was born into this world and grew up, the eldest surviving son of the family. In his boyish days he was mercifully kept from following the evil example of others in lying and swearing, and was often corrected and checked in his conscience by various sicknesses that overtook him in youth. Yet he was unmindful of the eye of the Lord which was upon him, and had no knowledge of those "thoughts of peace and not of evil" which were in the eternal Mind towards him. Little did he think, when in his kindly and sociable disposition he was engaged in play with his fellow-scholars, that he should one day be preaching in a chapel erected upon the very ground over which he ran. In these early days his conscience was not altogether lulled to sleep, but when it was disturbed, he had recourse to prayer, and to vows that he would not again do those things which had occasioned the disquiet. Brought up to attend the parish church, as did his parents and forefathers, he became very strict in his church-going and would often stand during the sermon that he might the better hear what the clergyman was saying. By these means he attained to great lengths in self-righteousness and, with Saul of Tarsus, counted himself blameless as touching the righteousness which is in the law. Doubtless he was pleasing to himself as well as to his parents who seemed to be in the same darkness and ignorance; and he thought himself so pleasing to God that if but two persons from Croydon went to heaven, he should surely be one of them.

But the time came when his eyes were to be opened. One Lord's day, his self-righteous esteem had risen to such a pitch that, as he walked up the church aisle, he thought that if the people knew how holy he was, they would think him a good young man indeed. After dinner, as 'was his custom, he went to his bedroom to say his set forms of prayer; but he had not continued long before the Lord opened his eyes to see the evils of his heart and nature, as one might open the leaves of a book to read its contents. That which makes manifest is light, and the light of truth now so shone into his heart, and the scales were so taken from his eyes, that he was filled with horror at the sight. "All my sins," he says, "my secret sins, lies, overreachings, and things long forgotten passed in review before me, and oh the depravity, evil, and corruption I saw heaving, moving, and working in my wicked heart. I cried, I groaned, I roared, I prayed for mercy. I needed no one to tell me I deserved hell; I felt it. I knew it would be just, and feared that God would send me there for what I saw and felt." (*Brief Account of the Lord's Dealings with Mr. F. Covell, by his Son, p.3.*)

Still he sought to do something to please God and to remove this sense of wrath and deserved judgment which he felt at the discovery of his heart evils; and the preaching at the parish church seemed to show no other way of salvation. The set prayers which he had read and said from a book now gave place to earnest heartfelt cries proceeding from divine life in his soul and frequently expressed in the language of the publican: "God be merciful to me, a sinner." In the fields and other places where he could be alone, his anxious spirit was constantly venting itself in cries and tears, seeking in all sincerity and simplicity to know how he could be saved.

Providence and grace are often seen to go hand-in-hand in bringing the objects of the Lord's favour and mercy to the saving knowledge of Himself, and it has frequently been that, when the Lord has begun to teach a poor sinner, certain providences have operated to isolate him from his former companions or from his own family, and seem to shut him up alone to the Lord. They wander in the wilderness in a solitary way, and so it was now with Francis Covell. His father, seeking only the advancement of the boy's knowledge in his business as tin man, sent him for this purpose to a large manufactory in Old Street, London; but the Lord's purposes of mercy were to be accomplished by this isolation, and it was there that the conviction of his ruined condition was deepened, until he was brought to feel utterly lost and undone. Then it pleased the Lord to reveal His dear Son in him, and to persuade him of his interest in the eternal love of the Father and the work of Christ his Saviour by the internal witness and sealing of the Holy Spirit of Promise. By this means he was, on that memorable night, completely instructed and experimentally established in the great doctrine of the Trinity.

But now came a further trial for the lad. He had always dwelt affectionately with his parents and family, and while he was away in London he used to come home at the weekends to be with them, and his father usually sent their pony cart to meet him at Kennington Common Gate to welcome him home. The one desire of his affectionate parent was to train up Francis to follow in his own steps, which included not only taking up the same business, but to attend regularly at the parish church, as his parents and most of the neighbours had always done. But the clear work and teaching of the Holy Spirit in the boy's heart had opened to him the hollowness and insufficiency of the teaching in the parish church, and he was compelled to go elsewhere to seek food and nourishment for his soul. This was more than his father could bear or allow, and Francis must either leave the home which he had so loved, or leave his new "Methodist" ideas. What a test and trial to come upon the work of grace so newly wrought in him! But the Lord did not leave him. He could not halt between two opinions, but by the teaching of the Spirit in his soul was brought to choose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to abide among those who were dead in a mere profession. It was then that the Lord sweetly comforted and encouraged him with the application of the promise: "When father and mother forsake thee, the Lord will take thee up." This decision meant much privation to the lad, and often he had nothing more than a few dried sprats and some bread for his dinner; yet he could walk about the City of London satisfied with the portion of the love of God which he enjoyed in his soul. The Lord in time also mercifully moderated the outward circumstances of this bitter trial. The father's health began to fail and, relenting of his treatment of the son, he called him back home, again receiving him with affection; and when later the father died, the house and business came into the hands of Francis, who marrying afterwards settled in his own home and carried on his father's business.

Leaving the National Church then, Francis sought elsewhere for that which would satisfy his soul, but seemed at first as unsuccessful amongst the nonconformists as in the church of his youth. One Sabbath morning he went to a 7 o'clock prayer meeting at the Congregational Chapel in George Street, Croydon. Having so recently received the forgiveness of sins and the sweet deliverance already referred to, he could not forbear telling the people about it, thinking they would understand and rejoice with him. In this he was sadly disappointed, and they told him that he had embraced Antinomianism. What they meant by this term he knew not, and he begged of the Lord that he might not be deceived. But the Lord shone into his heart with such love and peace that he said: "Whatever Antinomianism may be, I have got the pardon of my sins," and therein he rejoiced.

Some time later he was directed by a friend to the Strict Baptists meeting at Gower Street Chapel in London, where he heard William Gadsby preach from the words: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." As the minister described what sinners were called by God from, and what they were called to, Francis had great difficulty to refrain from saying aloud: "I am called, I am called." Here at length he found a ministry that traced out the path in which he had been led, and was brought in the providence of God amongst a people who knew the same things in their own souls; and with the Strict Baptists he continued to the end of his days, as esteeming their faith and order to accord with the Holy Scriptures.

We must now trace our story a step further towards the establishment of Providence Chapel, Croydon, and this will embrace Covell's call to the work of the ministry. Not only had he been taught his deep need of Christ and brought to a believing reception of Him as His Saviour and Redeemer, but he was also filled with a fervent desire to tell his fellow-sinners of this same Lord Jesus. Morning, noon, and night for seven or eight years he had this burning desire and continual exercise upon his spirit. But if nothing else, there was one great mountain which stood in the way - he stuttered and stammered, having a painful impediment in his speech. How could he, who was unable often to speak properly to his

customers in the shop, think of standing up before a concourse of people to tell the glad tidings of the Gospel? Yet this he ardently wished to do, not out of desire for vain glory, but from love to his fellow-men and a fervent wish that he might be the means of leading them to Christ. But this unconquerable impediment, how it seemed to make the fulfilment of his desire impossible! Oh if his tongue might be loosed and set free! So with cries, tears and entreaties he begged of the Lord to make manifest what His will was in the matter.

During this time John Kershaw, who had observed Covell and marked his conversation, and no doubt his prayers also, felt constrained to ask the latter whether he was not exercised about the ministry. Covell at first tried to put him off with an evasive answer, but at length had to acknowledge that it was so. Yet there was still that great mountain how should the stammerer be able to speak plainly?

This exercise, and the consequent fear of venturing, went on until July of 1844, when the Lord operated so powerfully on his heart, and so moved his spirit, that he felt he would be cut down as useless if he did not attempt to speak of the mercy, love, and goodness of the Lord, to the few friends who were accustomed to meet in his house for prayer. Still the fear of his impediment presented a difficulty, and as he once more reminded the Lord of it, these words echoed in his heart like a voice from heaven: "Who made man's mouth?" With them, there came a persuasion that the Lord would cure him, and as he began to speak to the friends, his tongue was immediately loosed, and he was enabled to speak for an hour from the words in Titus 3. 3-5: "For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish," etc. Referring to this remarkable fact later, he says: "Lo, the impediment was gone! And from that time to this I am not aware that I either faltered or failed in my speech, and most of you are witnesses of the fact." (*Memoir, p.12.*)

The next Lord's day he went to London to hear, leaving the people meeting in his house, but returning in the evening, when they all met as usual for reading and prayer, some of the friends reminded him that he had not finished his subject of the previous Sabbath. So by the Lord's help he went on speaking from the same words, and again on the following Sabbath. Thus was commenced Mr. Covell's useful course of ministry, extending over thirty-five years. It was soon noised abroad in the town, that the stammerer had begun to preach; and while those who feared the Lord gladly embraced an opportunity to hear him, there were not wanting those who mocked and ridiculed, and endeavoured to dissuade him from it. A lady at Beddington, and mother of the Rector there, taunted him with the fact that he had never been to college. This he acknowledged to be true, but added that he had diligently studied the Scriptures for eleven years previous to that time. By this means the Holy Spirit had enlightened his mind in the truth, and prepared him for the work of the ministry; and the gracious experience with which he had been favoured in his own soul enabled him to testify of things which he had tasted, handled, and felt of the Word of life. Customers at his shop would expostulate with him, as setting himself above those who had attended the parish church all their lives, and even threatened to withdraw their custom. But none of these things moved him from the work to which he had set his hand, although they were the cause of severe trial in his own soul.

At first the services were held in one of the rooms in the house, but soon it was necessary to use two rooms, and later on to place forms in the shop to accommodate the increasing number of hearers. For nearly two years he continued to preach in his own house, sometimes for as long as one and a half hours, until the number of hearers, at first about a dozen, increased so much that the house and shop were not large enough. They then met in a Chapel in the Old Town called "Ebenezer," Mr. Covell preaching his first sermon there on February 8th, 1846, from the words: "Then the Lord awaked as one out of sleep," etc. (Psalm. 78, 65-72.) Again the place was too strait for them, and their growing numbers demanded still more accommodation, which led to a further venture, in the purchase of a piece of land in West Street and the erection of Providence Chapel. They moved into this on March 12th, 1848, on which day Mr. Covell opened it, preaching from the text in Isaiah 66, 1, 2: "Thus saith the Lord, The heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool; where is the house that ye build unto Me? ...but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My word."

The handful of a dozen or so who first met in his house had now grown to about seventy, and this seems to have been the total of his congregation at the commencement of Providence Chapel. Preaching in 1875 he recalls this small beginning: "When I first came to this chapel, there were but few people in it, I expect not more than seventy at the most, and there was a heavy debt upon it, for I did not go to other churches for help; I believed I should live to see it all paid off, and the place filled. Many years passed by, but I have lived to see it filled, and more seats put in than there were at first and it is clear of all debt." This "heavy debt" was about £900, as the cost of the land and the building was £1,460, of which amount £560 was paid off, and the remainder borrowed and gradually repaid during the course of some

years. One stipulation made at the commencement of the undertaking was that there should be only one collection taken each year. Possibly those who enforced this restriction hoped that it would be impossible to maintain the Cause under these conditions, and the venture would come to nought. But if this was the case, they proved to be mistaken, and did not reckon with that gracious Lord who had sent His servant to preach and intended to prosper his labours in that place. At the outset, the amount of the annual collection taken in the first year was only £48, but before Mr. Covell's death collections of the order of £500 were taken annually.

It may be readily imagined however that, with these small initial annual collections of about £50 or so, the minister's salary would be very limited, as all expenses connected with the Cause had to be met out of the collections supplemented by the pew rents. It is not surprising therefore to hear of the early struggles in providence which were his lot. In the reminiscences which he made on his 70th birthday, he says: "I look back too very often, remembering that as regards my worldly prospects when I first began to speak in His name, how I had been nurtured in and by His good providence, surrounded with many blessings of this life, but in order to teach me to trust in Him ... and to bring me more and more closely to Himself, He was pleased to scatter all these earthly things, to blight my prospects, to throw down continually that which I was trying to build up, thus to bring me out of the business in which I was then engaged, that I might serve Him the more fully and devotedly, showing me that it is better to trust in Him, and while serving Him He would provide for me in all my temporal needs; but He suffered me to come into a very low place almost the lowest condition in respect of these things, and what for? Why to make me a pastor after His own heart, to enable me to speak to the profit and comfort of exercised businessmen and others in like circumstances, causing me to live upon His bounty and providence day by day. Ah, my friends, you little know how I have walked the fields, crying, Have pity upon me, O Lord! What will men say of Thy truth? How Thy name will be blasphemed! What will become of Thy faithfulness? Where will Thy power and love be seen? Good God, do help me! Pray save me from impending ruin which I see before me; have mercy upon me for Thy love and pity's sake.' But God knew better than I did. 'I lead,' saith He, 'the blind by away they know not, in paths that they have not known; I make darkness light, crooked things straight, and rough places plain' ... Having brought me to this place, I, have stood in this pulpit in times past, known only to my dear wife ... without a sovereign in my pocket with which I could say I was going through the next week."

Here he discloses some of the inward trials which were occasioned by the temporal straits into which he was brought in these early days, as well as the gracious teaching which he received under it, making him a wise steward capable of encouraging the tried men of business who doubtless formed a goodly part of his congregation. The proximity of Croydon to London makes it the home of many City businessmen, who after their daily travels and toils would often be refreshed by some encouraging word from the lips of their equally tried pastor, who had thus been prepared to sympathise with them and to be a teacher to them.

On the other hand some of these City men were doubtless prospered in temporal things and made supporters of the Cause in such matters, and so we find that his congregation gradually increased and his circumstances became easier. "Passing over many seasons of straits and trial," he says, "He began to enlarge my coast and scatter temporal blessings round about me and upon me, until by His good hand and power He has brought me to this day, blessing me with as loving, kind, praying, and affectionate a people as any mortal under the canopy of heaven can ever wish to be placed over."

It was not until July of 1850 that Mr. Covell was himself baptized at Eden Street Chapel in Hampstead Road, London. William Tiptaft, who had found it necessary to leave the Established Church nearly twenty years previously and had cast his lot among the Strict Baptists, performed the ceremony in the presence of a crowded congregation, and Covell spoke at the pool for a short time before going down into the water. The testimony of a good conscience which he felt on the following morning would be enough, he said, to make the weakest go through the ordinance. In the December following, a baptistry was built at Providence Chapel, being paid for by private subscription, together with a well and pump for supplying the pool. It was presumably about this time that a Strict Baptist church was formed, as the pastor had now openly declared his Baptist principles by passing through the ordinance, and provision was made for administering the same to others who should desire to walk therein, after making a confession of their faith before their brethren.

Mr. Covell's business difficulties have already been mentioned, and it seemed as though the Lord thwarted all his efforts to build it up and blighted his prospects in that direction, until he was brought to the decision to come out of business and give himself wholly to the work of the ministry, casting himself upon the providence of God for his maintenance and support. This he did in June of 1851 and

moved from the shop premises to Parsons Mead, Croydon. In addition to the providential straits which this step brought upon him, a time of bodily affliction was also appointed for him to pass through. Early in 1852 his general health failed, and a very bad gathering came up in his hand, causing several days and nights of great pain. Whilst earnestly begging of the Lord to be healed, he felt an inward persuasion that it would be so, and in less than a fortnight his hand was so improved that he was able to write a letter, which was much sooner than the doctor anticipated.

He was still often in providential difficulties, as he relates in one of his later sermons, referring to this period of his life: "Once when in great temporal difficulty, wanting some money, and yet could not tell how it could come, the Lord spoke these words with power to my heart: 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.' I came out of the secret place where I was, with my countenance no more sad; the burden was gone. The Lord persuaded me I should have what I wanted, and He did not deceive me, for I got it, blessed be His name."

In 1854 there came a short break in his ministerial course. His voice was not heard in Providence Chapel for some weeks. An attack of cholera brought him so low in body, that he referred to the sermon he had preached just before the illness as though it might have been the last his people would hear. He commended the text to them as being a suitable word, if it should prove to be the last. It was this: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." (Phil 4. 8.) However, through the Lord's mercy and goodness to them, it proved not to be his final message by a long way. He was greatly favoured in his soul, and restored in body, so as to be able to preach again in a few weeks.

The following year saw his removal from Parsons Mead to Chapel Street, Croydon, but this house proving too small for his increasing family, he was able to build a house according to his own wishes in Wandle Road, to which he removed in 1859. Like Isaac, he at length found that the Lord had made room for him and his household, a fact which he put on record by calling the new house Rehoboth Cottage (see Gen. 26. 22), and there he was able to abide until the end of his days.

We now come to the time when Mr. Covell's congregation received a notable addition by the removal to Croydon of Mr J. C. Philpot. About the time that Providence Chapel was being built, this dear servant of the Lord had suffered a serious breakdown in health, but after an illness of eight months he was mercifully restored, and was able to commence his labours in the ministry again in 1848 in Stamford and Oakham. At these and other places he continued to preach, except as prevented by recurring illnesses, until the year 1864, when another severe attack caused his physician, Dr Corfe, to advise him to give up the ministry and move away from the bleak neighbourhood of Stamford to a warmer and drier climate. At length it was decided that Croydon would be a suitable place for him especially as he would have the privilege, when able to get to the chapel, of hearing Mr. Covell, with whom he soon became so friendly as to refer to him as "Brother Frank." Croydon was then a rapidly growing town, being with the advent of the railway conveniently near to London, and the only accommodation that could be found at first was at Ivy Cottage, Broad Green, Thornton Heath. This "temporary refuge" however presumably gave place to more commodious quarters, but still in Thornton Heath (*The Seceders*. Vol. II, p.70). The change proved in a measure beneficial to his failing health, so that he was able to fulfil some preaching engagements in the summer months, and at times to supply the pulpit at Providence Chapel in their pastor's absence. "He found in Mr. Covell a warm and sincere friend, one with whom he could converse with pleasure and profit, and he regarded his frequent visits with great appreciation. In the Croydon hearers he found a friendly and earnest flock, who gave him a cordial welcome whenever he came amongst them. It was his delight, whenever his health permitted, to seat himself under Mr. Covell as a hearer, and sometimes he even found himself strong and well enough to take part in the service, an assistance which both the pastor and his people highly valued." (*Letters and Memoir of J. C. Philpot*, p.103)

Here and there in his letters written to friends while he resided at Croydon, Mr. Philpot drops a remark testifying to the value he placed upon both the ministry and the friendship of the pastor at West Street. Thus to Mrs Peake he says: "We much like Mr Covell. He generally comes to see me once a week, and sits some time. We agree very well on most points. I find his conversation spiritual and profitable, without any affectation and cant" (*Letters &c.*, p408). Again, to Mr J. Davis: "I hear Mr. Covell, the minister here, very comfortably. He is a good man, and a good preacher, contending for experimental saving realities" (pg 416). Also to his old friend Joseph Parry of Allington, he commends Mr Covell in similar terms: "He is a good man, and has a good experience, with a very fair gift, having a great

knowledge of Scripture, and much readiness in quoting it suitably and appositely. He is very friendly, and generally spends an hour with me once a week" (p.419). To another correspondent, Mr. Copcutt, who was residing in the United States, Mr. Philpot describes more fully his ministerial friend at Croydon and the services at Providence Chapel, at the same time drawing a contrast with the lack of sound preaching in America: "As the editor of *The Gospel Standard*, I get letters sometimes from various parts of the United States, and in almost all of them I find the same complaints of the want of a sound experimental Gospel ministry. Gracious persons also, who have emigrated, send back the same report; so that I am forced to come to a conclusion that the truth as it is in Jesus is but little held and little preached. I have the pleasure since I have lived here of sitting under a very sound, experimental, and much favoured servant of God, Mr. Francis Covell. During indeed the severe weather, I have been much confined to the house, but greatly prize his ministry, as his soul is much alive in the things of God. In prayer especially he is most warm and fervent, with great sincerity and simplicity of petition, much humble confession of sin, and great earnestness in wrestling for heavenly blessings. In his preaching also, though not what is called eloquent, yet his sermons are sound in doctrine, clear and savoury in experience, and strictly practical in all fruits of Christian obedience" (pp.457, 458).

In October of 1865, a sudden illness overtook Mr. Covell and caused much anxiety and alarm, both in the home and in the church. After breakfast on a Saturday morning, with the services of the following day no doubt on his mind, he suffered the rupture of a blood vessel and brought up a considerable amount of blood. During the whole sad event, however, he was kept in a very quiet frame of mind, and when he was able to proceed to his bedroom, he said on reaching the top of the stairs:-

"All things for our good are given;  
Comforts, crosses, staffs, or rods;  
All is ours in earth and heaven;  
We are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

Also as he lay upon his bed, the Lord shone upon his soul and granted him answers to his prayers, as he told those about him when allowed to speak a little. "For some time past," he said, "I have been putting up many cries to God, and He blessed me with many little tokens and manifestations of His favour; but since I have been on my bed, I have found they were only foretastes of what was to follow. I have indeed proved the truth of what the Psalmist says: 'He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him' (Ps. 126. 5)." (*Life of Francis Covell, by E. Wilmshurst, p.25.*)

Mr. Philpot, in a letter to Mrs Peake, tells how he was sitting quietly alone after dinner, when the pastor's brother, Mr. George Covell, called to tell him of this sad occurrence, which grieved him so much that he offered to take the morning service the following day, his own weakness not allowing him to do more than that. This very practical help was gladly accepted, and in the morning Mr. Philpot ventured out, "in the midst of a most driving rain which lasted all day," to occupy the pulpit in the morning: "The incessant rain much thinned the congregation; still we had a goodly number, and I was very glad to do what I could to alleviate the blow, both to himself and the congregation. I am glad to say he is going on well. It was only on Friday that he came to see me, and as the day was fine, wished to take me a drive into the country. He was very cheerful, and seemed to be in the best of health. When he has come to see me on a cold, wet, or snowy day, I have sometimes said to him: 'Happy man! not to know or care whether it is cold or hot, wet or fine'; and now see, he is lying on a bed of sickness bidden not to speak, and I the poor invalid standing up in his room. I have not felt anything for some time which has so truly grieved me; and I look forward with pain and fear to what may be the result. He is much loved by his church and congregation, and it will be to them a most severe blow. . . . . How often have I coveted his health and strength, and yet how all may be dashed in a moment!" (*Letters &c., pp.430, 431*).

Through the great goodness of God, both to His servant and those amongst whom he laboured, Mr. Covell was wonderfully restored and in a month or two able to preach again. We are indebted again to Mr. Philpot's correspondence for an account of his first appearance in the pulpit after this illness: "I wish you could have heard his opening address the first time he preached after his illness. He gave a testimony which might well make many of us blush or hang our heads down for shame. He said that for many months previously he had never once gone to bed dry-eyed; that is, as he explained it, without having shed tears during some part of the day, either of contrition or melted by mercy. He also said that, in reference to this, the words of Psalm 126.5 (quoted above) were much upon his mind, and that the interpretation which he gave them was the glimpses of joy which he felt on these occasions; but when he

was laid upon his bed, that then he saw that this reaping in joy had a much greater fulfilment, for that he swam as it were in a sea of love, enjoying so much of the presence and power of God. I cannot tell you half that he said, and much wish that it had been taken down. The chapel was very full, and it might be said the people rejoiced with trembling, fearing his exertions might bring on another attack. But he seemed not at all the worse for it next day, and has now resumed his usual labours. I am (D.V.) to speak again for him on the morning of January 7th, as it is ordinance day, and thus he has more than his usual labours. I feel quite willing and desirous to do what I can to help him, and as I have a cab to and fro, and the chapel is easy to speak in, I can do so without much risk" (*Letters &c.*, p.432).

Apparently Mr. Philpot assisted in the same way on the first Lord's Day in February, for writing again on January 29th, he says: "I was at chapel on Lord's day morning. Mr. Covell preached from 2 Chronicles. 33; 12, 13, but did not get much beyond, , The Lord is God.' He spoke very nicely upon affliction and its effects in Manasseh's case. I heard him very comfortably, and could follow him very nicely in the path he laid down. I am (D.V.) to speak for him next Lord's Day morning" (p.435).

But although the drier climate of Croydon was of great benefit to Mr. Philpot, his weakness of chest continued to trouble him, and in the autumn of 1869 his health completely broke down under an attack of bronchitis of more severity than usual, and on the 9th of December he passed gently away. Just before he departed, he was seen to look upwards earnestly and then closing his eyes, said: "Beautiful!" On being asked what was beautiful, he made no direct answer, but presently with a failing voice said: "Praise the Lord, O my soul!" and so breathed his last.

On his dying bed he had expressed his wish to be buried by Mr. Covell in the Croydon Cemetery, and so this sad duty now fell to the lot of his very close friend, the pastor of Providence Chapel. In the midst of a storm of wind and rain, his body was lowered into the grave amidst a gathering of friends from all parts of the country. "Know you not," said Mr. Covell, "that a great man and a prince is buried this day, proving that all flesh is grass, and the glory of man as the flower of grass. The gold of acquired literature that our dear departed friend possessed, and the silver of human eloquence to speak it forth, now lie silent in the dust; but John said he 'heard a voice! saying, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord. Yea, saith the Spirit, for they rest from their labours, and their works do follow them.' It is done; the conflict is over; the spirit has fled. Let Zion's children weeping kiss the rod, and gird on their robes of deepest sackcloth" (*Letters &c.*, p.105).

And doubtless there was a great mourning in Zion at the loss of one who had been made such a blessing to the churches. But with himself it was a blessed exchange, as Mr. Covell said in his address: "In the case of our dear friend, death put him near to Jesus Christ, the best position he ever had. How many sicknesses, how many recoveries and relapses he had are known to his friends, but death terminated the work in an instant; and from that there is no relapse. He can become sick no more; his racking cough has ceased to trouble him, his weakness has left him. Oh what a friend to him was death! On earth he had in his own soul the substance of future joys, and he realises now the truth of the Scripture and the declaration of God, that He will satisfy the desires of the righteous. He shall no more travail with pain, he shall suffer no more corruption; and thus, I repeat, death proved his best friend in carrying him into the arms of the Son of God" (p.106).

Concluding with a reference to his personal friendship with the departed he said: "It must ever be a source of satisfaction to me that he declared that he enjoyed my ministry. Again and again he expressed how thankful he was to God for bringing him to Croydon" (p.108).

In about six months after this loss, Mr. Covell suffered another bereavement, the closest that could come to him. Soon after his father's death, Francis had married his cousin, Elizabeth Turner, and now after nearly forty years, she was taken from his side in June of 1870. It is said that she never slept away from home for one night during all that time, so that he must have greatly missed her constant devotion now that death had removed her. But of her he could say: "I believe she is now in heaven." And doubtless his own feelings under the sad bereavement are reflected in a letter which he wrote later on to a friend who had just suffered the same loss: "I trust you may see and feel a Father's hand in it; and this will enable you to say, 'Not my will, but Thine, be done.' Oh what a mercy it is when our will is swallowed up in His! How true we find it, that every good gift is from above" (*Life*, p.26).

Mr. Covell had by this time become well known and esteemed amongst the circle of Strict Baptist ministers and churches which had rallied during the last ten years around *The Gospel Standard*, and the stand made therein for the truth of the eternal Sonship by its editor, Mr. Philpot. It is not surprising that

the grace and ministerial gifts of the Croydon pastor should have brought him amongst the foremost of these ministers, and in 1872 we find him discussing with Mr. Hatton, the pastor of the joint Causes at Smallfields and Shaw's Corner, Redhill, and other ministers, what practical means could be taken for the assistance of the Lord's aged poor. Their first concern was to form a fund for the relief of aged ministers or their widows, and their efforts in this direction resulted in the formation of the Gospel Standard Aid Society. A Committee was appointed to administer the fund, and both Mr. Covell and Mr. Hatton were made members of this Committee, as well as trustees for the fund. Five years later they were appointed to similar positions in connection with the Gospel Standard Poor Relief Society and its fund, which was then commenced for the donation of quarterly allowances to the aged poor of the Lord's people attending Strict Baptist places of worship in which the Gospel Standard Articles of faith "are faithfully preached and practised, in which the errors rejected in the said Articles are firmly opposed, and in which the *Gospel Standard* magazine is supported" (*See Rule 3 of the Poor Relief Society, and Memoirs of Joseph Hatton, p.33*).

In August of 1872, Mr. Covell was the subject of a further attack of haemorrhage, though not so severe as the previous one. However it necessitated a considerable period of rest, and he was not able to occupy the pulpit again at Providence Chapel until the Lord's Day, September 29th. Before commencing to read the 39th Psalm, he gave a little address to the people, out of a desire publicly to acknowledge the goodness and mercy of God. "I would be thankful unto Him and bless His name, for His pity, His kindness, His compassion and long-suffering towards one so unworthy and so unprofitable. I would desire in the next place to thank you, my friends, for all your prayers, kindnesses, sympathy, and liberality towards me. You now prove what a prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God He is, in my appearing before you once more; and while I thank you for all your sympathy, kindness, and prayers, I pray that you may find and feel, when you come where I have been, that it is not forgotten of God, but that you may prove what Paul desired for Onesiphorus, that as he 'was not ashamed of his chain,' but oft refreshed him, so he might 'find mercy of the Lord in that day' (2 Tim. 1. 16-18); so may you find mercy of the Lord when you come to need the sympathy, prayers, and kindness of those that love *you*, and may He thus hear and answer, and reward you."

"While I thus acknowledge publicly His loving-kindness and your kindness also, you may ask: 'What have you gained by this sickness? What profit has come by it? What have you gained by trading?' In reply I would say, seek the face of the Lord, seek His face evermore; make God *your* Friend while in health, and you will find Him to be a good God to you in sickness. The day before the affliction, so to speak, took place, I was walking along and seeking the face of the Almighty, and while doing so in my simplicity with earnest entreaties, I came to a field, and as I entered it, such a sense of His love and mercy flowed into my heart in a moment that it drew tears from my eyes, and I kept exclaiming: 'O Lord, I love Thee! Thou knowest that I do love Thee'; and, my friends, I felt a quietness in my heart, a peace in my soul, and a resignation to the Lord's mind and will, without knowing what was about to take place. Soon after this there were slight symptoms of a rupture of a vessel. The next day I came into the chapel, and after winding up the clock, I dropped upon my knees *just here* (pointing below the pulpit), entreating favour, supplicating mercy, and begging God in my simple way, that He might bless your souls, comfort your hearts, do you good, and teach, lead, and guide you in His way; also that He would help me with wisdom, strengthen the hands of a poor ignorant creature, and give me what I stood in need of for the work-when I felt blood coming. After a little while I tried to proceed, but could not; so I went home, sent the servant for the doctor, and told her to call in the High Street and let my sons know what had happened. Alone in the house, I went to my bedroom, dropped upon my knees, and in the simplicity of my heart prayed in broken cries and petitions, that He would give me confidence in His wisdom and in the pity and compassion he had, that whatever might be the result or issue, I might be satisfied and submissive and resigned to His mind and will; and I believe, although it was in my poor broken way, it entered into the ears of the God of heaven, for as I lay in my bed I felt *such* resignation to His will, such submission to His ways, that I was satisfied He did all for the best, and such a sweet feeling that His love, pity, and compassion flowed out toward me that I felt again and again I would not move a finger to alter one thing. His wisdom so sparkled in my eyes, His pity so shone in my heart, that I felt: 'It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth Him good.' While under these feelings, I looked at death and felt thus: 'Death, if thou comest any nearer or any closer, and wipest thy hand over my face, I have nothing to do but to die,' I never was more certain in my life that my religion was right. . . . . But say you, was there no other side? Yes, again and again carnal reason, flesh and blood made such work with their questioning, if's, but's, and may-be's, that I have lain in my bed and perspired, while faith has struggled to hold fast the things that God had just before made me believe in my heart . . . . . but grace reigned and brought me through and out, to fall at God's feet and say: 'Lord, do with me as seemeth Thee good "

..... I trust I have gained that which I shall never lose, and I can in truth say: 'It has been good for me that I have been afflicted'."

In the sermon which followed this address he said, speaking of prayer and what it can do: "Prayer built this chapel; prayer paid for it; prayer has brought it to what it is; prayer has kept me many years in this pulpit; and prayer brings me up again to stand before you now. What think you now of prayer? What, all this by prayer? Then there is nothing too hard or too great to ask God for, seeing that He has done all these, things" (*Providence Chapel Sermons*, No.8).

The annual collection was taken at the chapel on the anniversaries of the day on which it was opened, or the nearest Lord's Day, and often on these occasions the pastor would look back over the past and close the service with a short address, testifying of the Lord's goodness to the church and congregation. On the twenty-fifth anniversary, March 9th, 1873, he spoke as follows: "I would just say that twenty-five years ago today, the Lord first permitted me to enter this pulpit and open this chapel. Should I be spared, by the mercy of God, until the middle of July, it will be twenty-nine years since I first began to speak in His name; and as far as I know, I am almost the only one in our connexion that has gone in and out so long and so continually among the same people. There are, I believe, only two or three Strict Baptist ministers now living who have preached for so many years as I have done without being moved from one place to another during those years. I can but think of the hundreds of times during twenty-five years that I have entered this pulpit so fearful, timid, and depressed, with the feeling and cry in my heart: 'Bring me through this day, good God, and I will trust Thee evermore.' And how He has done it up to the present time, although on each occasion I have been in the same place a week or two afterwards, all to prove that my help cometh from the Lord, and not from man.

"There are but three or four persons now before me left of those who met with us when I first preached in my old house twenty-nine years ago-there were about ten or twelve in number-the rest are all gone, some of them I have no doubt to that place where they sing for ever of the grace that brought them there; and it must soon be the case with us that remain - my days with you must now be very few, seeing that I am in my 65th year. Many pains and infirmities tell me that time, which waits for no man, presses on; and that I must pre- pare my stuff for removing. There is one thing I must say has encouraged me in standing before you for so many years, that is, your compassion, forbearance, kindness, and goodness to- wards me, in putting up with my infirmities, bearing with my weaknesses, and having compassion upon my ignorance; for I have often thought, who but a people like you could put up with such a man as I am. Therefore I would desire to be deeply grateful and thankful for all the kind consideration you have manifested towards me; and I do trust that the same good feeling, oneness of heart, and love to each other may be continued until our days are no more.

"If I remember rightly, our first collection in this chapel twenty-five years ago was £48; our last year's amounted to £220 or £230. ...When I compare £48 with £230, I think, What hath God wrought! May the same good feeling that you have exercised towards me ever be felt in your hearts towards another who may occupy this pulpit; and when the place that now holds me shall see and hold me no more, may my successor find such favour as I have found, that he may be enabled to go in and out before you as long or longer than I, and be made a blessing to your souls, and salvation to many of God's elect.

"I would desire to bless God that during my ministry many indeed many that I have known have been brought by sovereign grace under concern respecting the salvation of their souls, who have been removed by death, and are now with God in heaven, singing His lofty praise. I believe there are some before God now in this chapel to whom He hath made His word 'quick and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword,' that have in secret cried: 'God, be merciful to me a sinner,' and who will be found there at last, 'seals to my ministry and souls for my hire,' to the joy and rejoicing of my heart. I believe God hath heard my many cries, bottled the thousands of tears that have fallen on my pillow, that He would comfort, replenish, strengthen, and help your souls, and still follow the preached word with His blessing during the few remaining days, months, or years that I may be with you; and that He may 'make this hill a blessing,' that showers of blessing may come down round about it, so that He may still get to Himself praise, and glory, and honour.

"I would once more thank you, my friends, for all the liberality, patience, and kindness you have shown me for so many years and as for the collection, it would not be right for me to allude to it any further, seeing that I am so much interested in it."

At the close of the evening service the same day, he said: "Now, my friends, I think I shall surprise you when I tell you of the exceeding open-heartedness and abundant liberality of the people this morning. Indeed it must exceed all your expectations and outdo all your best feelings, when I tell you that the sum collected this morning amounted to £237 14s. 1d" (*Providence Chapel Sermons, Nos. 15 & 16*). Of course there would be the evening collection to add to this.

Two years later he made the following reference to the annual collection after the morning service: "The Lord has spared us to meet in this house for seven-and-twenty years. We shall never see twenty-seven years again. Many of you, whose faces have long been familiar to me, whose souls' salvation I have so much desired, and whose temporal profit and good I have ever prayed for, will soon be separated from me. Since we first met together, many whose memory I cherish, and whose spirits I love, are now singing in that upper and better world. We that are left may be thankful that so many of us who met together at the opening of this place are still spared and blessed beyond many other churches, and that so few, considering our little number, have been taken away. ... I would desire to thank God that He has thus kept us together in the union and peace we enjoy; that he has always given you such kind, large, and liberal hearts. ... We have reason to be thankful that God has so enabled us to cleave together. If we look around at the various churches on every hand, what unpleasantness, disunion, and dissension do we see! How Satan has sown the seeds of discord among them! How few ministers that have from time to time occupied this pulpit are now remaining! And with one or two exceptions, I am the oldest minister in our connection that has stood before *one* people so long. There are ministers older than myself, but they have in the providence of God been moved from one place to another. ... May the Lord still keep us in union and peace, and when my head is laid in the dust, may you, my friends, be enabled still to meet together in peace and union. ...and may the same blessing, both spiritual and temporal, rest upon him that shall succeed me, so that you may still be agreed together in blessing God for this house, and prove that He has made 'this hill and round about it a blessing' indeed.

"I can but think of twenty years ago. How few there were, of us who first entered this house and met together here! We were just scattered here and there amongst the pews. ...May God still give you a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and feed you with that spiritual food that shall be convenient for you, which only can support you in life, and which will do you good when you come to die. Amen." After the evening service the same day, he closed as follows: "I have no doubt. ... the largeness of heart, and liberality, and bounty of the people again and again at these yearly collections does astonish you. Year after year, it has exceeded and outdone all we could think or expect; but *this time* it has exceeded what any of you, I believe, could have anticipated. I honestly confess, when I heard the amount, £343 18s. 3d., collected in the morning, I was quite overcome by the love, the kindness, and the largeness of your hearts; and I think you will be ready and willing to say with me: 'What hath God wrought among the people!' Therefore we can do no less than sing: - Praise God from whom all blessings flow,' &c." (*Providence Chapel Sermons, Nos. 39 & 40*). The total for the morning and evening on this occasion was £372 18s. 4d.

His remarks at the close of the services at the next annual occasion, March 12th. 1876, have also been recorded: "It is twenty-eight years since the chapel was opened. What has held us together? Prayer, I believe many of you have come up praying for God's blessing: 'Lord, bless him that we expect to hear.' So you have been delivered from all pick-thank feelings, finding fault with the weakness that has been displayed. As you have come up, so I believe I have come up: 'Lord, bless the people, smile upon them, do them good.' So this tie between us has been a better one than man could have invented. We have no handsome place to draw you to. You are not likely to increase your business by coming here. It has not been the excellent singing or the splendid tones of an instrument, that has attracted you; nor has it been the silver eloquence of the preacher. If anything has reached your hearts, it is because out of his weakness God has perfected strength."

"When I look round, what faces I miss that I was wont to see twenty-eight years ago! Where are those that used to meet in my own house, that wended their way to the little chapel in the old town, and who with heart and hand helped to build this place? I have no doubt that some are singing of the grace which saved sinners like them. What fears and shakings I have had, what puffings from the devil that I should not hold out and hold on, and that you would be tired of me! But notwithstanding my fears, God has multiplied us. We have had no Penny Readings to get you together, no concerts; we have nothing else to attract you, but the truth that you are sinners and must be saved by the grace of God.

"When we opened this chapel, I thought the £48 collected on the opening day was a wonderful sum; but He has since opened your hearts to such an extent that 'your praise is in all the churches.' If this year's

collection does not come up to what it did last year, I shall not think your affection towards me and the cause of God is in the least diminished, but that it is your circumstances have brought you to what you have done. Whatever you give, whether two mites or more, God enable you to feel: 'Lord, prosper Zion'."

The total sum collected on that day was £462 15s. 7d. (*Life &c.*, pp.32 & 33).

We come now to the time of Mr. Covell's arriving at the "threescore years and ten," and the advantage that the church and congregation worshipping at Providence Chapel took of this to manifest their love and esteem for one who had so long and fervently watched over their best interests, and sought to minister to them in spiritual things. A sum of £200 was collected amongst the friends, and the presentation made included a chiming clock, an oil painting of Mr. Covell, a purse containing one hundred and thirty-one new sovereigns, and an illuminated address on vellum, which was worded as follows: -

"To Francis Covell, Minister of Providence Chapel, West Street, Croydon.

"Dearly Beloved Pastor,-We, the church and congregation assembling under your pastoral care, desire to offer our affectionate congratulations, and to record our thankfulness to the Father of all mercies, that your valuable life has been spared to complete the days ordinarily allotted to man, and while we have no desire to offer flattering praise, we feel that no words or gifts can express the love of our hearts towards you, and it is in this spirit we feel peculiar pleasure in asking your acceptance of a purse of gold, together with portrait, timepiece, &c., as a token of our love and high esteem for you, both as a man, as well as a faithful servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, earnestly praying that you may yet be spared many years to proclaim the same glorious truths, to the comfort and ingathering of God's people; and when your days here on earth are completed, we feel fully persuaded your summons will be: 'Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord'."

As the birthday was on a Lord's Day, the presentation was made on the previous Friday evening. At the morning service on his birthday, Mr. Covell embodied his feelings of gratitude to God and to the people in a very appropriate and reminiscent address: "Love and gratitude," he said, "to the God of all mercies, and to you my friends for your kindness, affection, and liberality, constrain me to speak.

"First, I would acknowledge publicly and thankfully before God and before you all, His boundless mercy, forbearing love, and great goodness displayed towards me as regards both soul and body for these seventy years, which this day witnesses. When I consider His great goodness towards me in the helpless days of my infancy, in giving a kind and tender mother to nurse me during those days, to succour and take care of me, and a kind and good father to provide for and support me when unable to take care of myself ...; when I think of His good hand towards me during my boyish days, correcting me from many evils, checking me in my conscience, and thus keeping me from lying, swearing, and many other things that I might have done ...When I look back and see how He protected me through all the sicknesses liable to childhood and youth. ...how He carried me through, held me up, and brought me out of all those various sicknesses and diseases until I arrived at youth and manhood; even then, although I had my judgment informed that there was a God who rules over all things, I still had no knowledge so as to desire Him, or to fear or love Him. ...But the time of love to my soul came, and as I look back, I remember His smiting my conscience, His bringing me into the dust on account of my sin, His putting a cry into my heart after mercy, making me seek His face as the one thing needful, His bringing me to His feet day by day, often many times a day, and night by night; how I walked the fields too, that I might find that mercy my poor soul then stood in need of. ...Oh how good God was to me! How He 'remembered me in my low estate with his mercy which endureth for ever.' How He led me and kept me up and on by His mercies and kindness towards me, until He was pleased, in the riches of His grace, to reveal to me how He could be just and yet save a sinner like me, revealing to me His own dear Son in all his suitability, sufficiency, and sweetness, working faith in my heart to lay hold on Him, to embrace Him as mine, pardoning all my sins and giving me to feel that I was saved with an everlasting salvation."

"When I trace back and see how He began to work in my heart with such a desire to tell of that Jesus who had saved me - from the burning pit, how God saves poor sinners, manifesting that love which knows no bound; to tell them there was hope in God, none were too vile for Him to save, none too far off for His arm to reach; the heaven He had to take them to, and the hell from which to save - oh the

working of my mind, the heaving up of desire continually in my heart and soul. Not three hours together, my friends, morning, noon, or night for seven or eight years, except during the hours of sleep, but these things worked up and down in my poor anxious heart and mind, to tell of that Three-One God that saves sinners, takes them to His bosom, and makes them eternally happy. But - I stammered, I stuttered, having an impediment in my speech. Oh how often while walking the fields, or upon my knees in my room, have I cried: 'O Lord! that I *could* tell poor sinners' ...Oh how I longed to tell of these things; but as I said, my tongue was tied, there was that impediment in my speech! But when it pleased God, in July 1844, to operate powerfully upon my heart, so as to make me feel that unless I did say something of that mercy, love, and goodness I had found and experienced, He would cut me down, as useless; although at the same time I felt a fear and trembling lest I should be presuming and doing wrong, and had much questioning as to how the thing would turn out, yet I was so moved in my spirit as to make the attempt to speak in His name. ..and immediately my tongue was loosed Lo, the impediment was gone! And from that time to this, I am not aware that I ever faltered or failed in my speech, and most of you are witnesses of the fact.

"When I look back upon the hundreds - I may say thousands - of happy hours I have spent in God's service, encouraging sinners to trust in Him, to hope in Him, to look for Him, and wait for Him. ...When I look back, as I do again and again, and consider from what a small beginning our present church and congregation sprung, I would ever remember, and encourage you also, to look to God, depend upon Him, make Him your hope and confidence, let God be to you all and in all. ...Ah, I have found and proved that I serve a good and faithful Master, a loving and gracious God, who remembers me in all my weaknesses and failings, who pities me in all my shortcomings and infirmities, and pardons my thousands and thousands of sins.

"Having thus hastily, and but ten thousand times too little, spoken of His grace, love, and goodness towards me, I now come in love and gratitude to thank you. What a kind people you have been to me! For thirty-five years you have borne with me in all my want of ability, have borne with me in the smallness of my gifts and grace; all these years you have put up with my nothingness, insufficiency, helplessness, and the want of everything which only God and myself know how to deplore. Oh how I cry for more grace to serve Him better, and more power to speak for your soul's comfort and good! And yet, after all I feel and all I fail in, you have never failed or come short; there has been no lack of affection, goodwill, or kind feeling on your part. ...What kindnesses and blessings I have received at your hands for so many years, and how many private secret favours have you bestowed upon me, that no eye has seen nor any ear ever heard.

"Now as I look back upon all these things, both public and private, and your unbounded liberality and largeness of heart continued from year to year, I come to the present time, wherein I have received such a valuable and splendid testimonial at your hands. ...When I tell you that. ..not a breath did I hear, nor had the least idea that such a thing was afloat, you may imagine when the friends called upon me, and it was said I was wanted in the next room, how I was struck with astonishment. None can tell but those who have been placed in the same pleasing position, the feelings of that man whose friends shower down blessings upon him, while he feels so unworthy and undeserving of such favours. It will sink him into nothingness, into the very dust. I cannot describe how I felt as they read the address to me, and presented me with that splendid testimonial. ...I never sank so low in self-nothingness and self-abasement, and never have seen my undeservedness as I have done since last Friday night. ...Although I have prayed and prayed often, I have never put up so many prayers in the time as I have from that night until I entered the pulpit this morning - earnest unceasing prayers and tears, that God may make me a blessing to your souls, that He may make me more faithful and useful to you. Although the ministry costs me some tears from week to week, I believe I have shed more in secret before God the last three days, feeling what I am. Oh the burning desire that He would make me useful to you, and a blessing to you. It has cost me more tears and cries than for a month before, and it lays me under such an obligation to you ...and a sweet obligation it is too. ...May God so lay me upon your hearts that you may never bow the knee in prayer, but His poor servant, and 'your servant for Christ's sake,' may be remembered by, you. "

The following year, 1879, on March 9th, Mr. Covell gave his last address on this annual occasion. He commenced with a reference to the testimonial he had so recently received from the people. "I needed no memorial of your kindness, my friends," he said, "but I have one at home that, when we have all passed away and are smouldering in the dust, my children and my children's children will be able to look upon in proof of the union that existed between pastor and people at West Street Chapel. There is a union between us that no casual Supply can ever feel towards a people to whom he speaks only

occasionally. Supplies who visit a people once in two or three months, as the case may be, cannot feel towards them, nor they towards him, as a stated minister and people feel towards each other. The Supply does not yearn for them as the pastor does; he does not carry them on his heart as he moves from place to place all the year round; he cannot present them to God continually: 'Lord, bless the people.' It is not possible that the thing can exist in the heart of Supplies as it does with the pastor, who tries to feed them with knowledge and with understanding, to build them up in the truth, having them on his heart and affections. The Supply system is therefore a bad system at the very root. I know that in some places it cannot be avoided, but in many places I fear the real prosperity of Zion does not lie at the hearts of the people. And something else I am almost ashamed to say - the Supply system is thought by some a cheaper system. God Almighty route out such a sordid spirit. Is it likely, if cheapness be the order of the day that real soul prosperity can exist in such a place? But I have not to say this of you, my friends. When other ministers have spoken to me of our large collections, I say to them: 'I cast my eye over your congregation and that of others, and see as much money in those congregations as in mine.' It is not the amount of money, but being willing to part with what they *possess*. Where there is love in the heart, it needs no exhortation to give. It is not the amount of money given, but the heart that prompts it."

At the evening service on this annual day, he spoke as follows: "When I tell you the amount collected this morning was £464 14s. 11 ½ d, you must say love has grown stronger, and be ready to ask, 'Where can it come from?' Well, I would say, from loving hearts and hands. The same love that brought us together, and has kept us to this day, be with us to the end. The end must be close at hand. But there is one thing I feel gratified about whoever may follow me, however able he may be, although he may excel me so far as the sun excels the stars, I have had the cream of your affections; nor do I expect he will ever be able to live in your affections as I have done. If it be the Lord's will, may he gain your esteem, and may you grow up together in love, and may he find you as I have ever found you, abounding in liberality, kindness, and forbearance. But he must not expect to have your first love, as I have had the best; and no one who follows me can expect to have the first love at the end. However my earnest prayer is, that you may show to the world that there is such a thing as the spirit of Christ, the love of God, and the fruit of the Holy Ghost to be found in the church of the living God, and thus may you be enabled to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things'."

The total of the morning and evening collections on that day was £510 16s. ½d. (*Life, &c., pp. 46, 47*), and so the pastor saw the annual freewill offerings of the people increased more than tenfold since the opening of the chapel.

But the end was "close at hand," as he had said: and the address, although so full of love and esteem to the congregation, must have seemed to them to be mingled with sorrow as they thought of his references to his approaching end and to an anticipated successor. Before coming to the closing scenes however, it is interesting to record that Mr. Covell's longstanding wish that he might outlive his eldest son was wonderfully granted to him. About two months previous to his own end, he had the satisfaction to know that his afflicted son was taken out of all his sufferings. Preaching after the death, the father said in his sermon on September 21st, 1879: "No one knows the many petitions I have put up that God would spare me to see the dear boy's end, for I knew that nobody would care for him and bear with him as I did, neither could anyone be expected to; but I have often kicked against it till the last three months, when I have felt such submission to the Lord's will, and that if He did take me first, all would be well. And now His time was come to deliver him, and to answer my three petitions, which were that I should be with him at the last, that a medical attendant should also be present at his death, and that he should be spared much suffering" (*Life &c., p.58*).

Two months later, on Wednesday evening, November 19th, 1879, he preached his last sermon from the words: "Woe is me, that I sojourn in Mesech, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar!" (Ps. 120.5). As he said afterwards, he "felt as if he wanted to get through the tents, to *get through them, through them*, to get to Him." On the following Friday, it became necessary to perform an urgent operation; but this was not allowed to prolong his life many days, and he gradually sank until, on the following Wednesday, November 26th, he passed away in his seventy-first year.

He was greatly blessed upon his death-bed. "I would not exchange this dying bed with the Queen of England," he said. "Why, when she comes to the same place, she can have no more than I. The Queen upon the throne, the beggar in the poor-house, and Frank Covell, only want the same; that is, to have someone wet their lips with a feather, that's all." At another time he said: "Queen Bess said, 'The half of my kingdom for an inch of time'; but I say, 'Make haste, my Beloved, make haste.' What a difference! And she a queen too, while I'm only a poor sinner."

To his ministerial labours he referred thus: "What a burning desire I have had for the people's welfare; what a desire to speak well for God, to encourage His people, and how often have I had God's testimony in my heart. It was not said, 'Well done, good and successful servant,' but 'Well done, good and faithful servant'."

Again and again he would manifest the abundant consolation his soul was experiencing in these dying moments, by such expressions as these: "You can say you have seen a man on a dying pillow who has nothing to do but to die:

'All is settled,  
And my soul approves it well.'

I'm willing to wait; but do Thou what seemeth Thee good. If it is His will, I do not wish to struggle through another night; but He knows best. Goodbye all. Safe! safe! safe! saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! and now, all earthly objects, however fair, Farewell! "

Asking for some quiet, that he might get some sleep, he found this was not given, and said: "God so fills me with His glory and blessed presence that I cannot sleep." Being told by the doctor that the end was near, he replied: "Hallelujah! hallelujah! Grace, grace, honours to grace!" The last words that could be heard were: "I'm so happy, so happy. It's' all ordered well, ordered well."

And so on the 26th November, 1879, this honoured servant of the Lord was taken to His eternal rest, and the church and congregation at Providence Chapel left to mourn the great loss that had befallen them; indeed the whole church of Christ on earth was the poorer for the removal of so useful a ministry from their midst. To this fact Mr. Hazlerigg called attention when opening the funeral service which was held in the chapel: "We are come together on a very solemn occasion - to place in the ground the remains of one, of whom I may say that by his death the church of God has suffered a great loss. He was a man who had a closet religion, which is a secret between God and the soul; a man who was mighty with God in prayer. So that it is not only the dear people who meet here in this place of worship who have sustained a loss, not only the members of his family; but as I said before, we are here with one feeling in our hearts - that we all have suffered a loss. We desire today to pay every respect to his memory; but at the same time, our dear friend and brother in Christ would have wished us to look to God, who gave him all that grace, and made him a bright and shining light in his day and generation."

Mr. Hull then followed in prayer, after which Mr. Hatton addressed the congregation. In the course of his remarks he said: "Our friend was known to many of his townfolk here present, as well as to many friends far and near. What is the distinguishing feature then of his religion and ours? Why, the substance of this Book (holding up the Bible to view) written and implanted in his heart. Here is our faith; here is our rule; upon this we profess to ground our hope. This is the foundation of all our sentiments: Godliness in the heart, to be crowned in the end with, 'Grace, grace unto it.' You may ask me, 'Why are you so exclusive?' What we want is this - the Word of God written upon and in the new heart of the man or woman. Let us see its powerful effects in the life and conversation; then we can say, 'Here is my friend and my brother' ...So I bring before your notice our departed friend as an example. What says the Word of the Lord? 'Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.' And here we have before us a living example of its effects upon the heart and in the life. Speaking within limits, he gave away upon the average a pound a day, but whoever knew it? None but the poor who benefited, or as it may have oozed out through them. *He* never proclaimed it himself, and why? Because the work and Word of God were in his heart. Had you heard him express himself to be a sinner, a worthless worm, an unworthy sinner only deserving condemnation, you might have said, 'How was that, his actions belie his words.' Nay, but do you suppose he would lie in this matter? No, he was what he said he was ..... But how can you make the two agree? In this way. No one knows the pride that rose in his heart. When you have done any good to anyone, although very small, what lifting up there has been of pride in your heart. Could you keep it back? No. Then it is God that has given you grace to be liberal, grace to live to His honour and glory, grace to be honest and upright, grace to maintain His truth, to hold on in His ways. ..there Was grace to abhor the very thought that would claim any of His Lord's honour and praise for any good he might have done, but he would 'Crown Him Lord of all' ...

"Now God's people are not those base vile sinners before their fellow-men. No, they do not mean *that* when they express themselves as such. ...It would not be true if others said the same things of friend Covell as he said of himself in the presence of God. Hear the prayers of our dear departed brother in

secret before God. I have heard him loathing and abhorring himself, but could *you* attribute anything of this to him? No, no. He must do it himself; it would not be true if you were to say it of him as a man amongst his fellow-men; but he himself must confess himself so in the presence of God, measuring himself by this Word (holding up the Bible), measuring himself by the precepts of the Gospel. ..

"Then as regards speaking in praise of our dear departed friend, we say: 'Let his works follow him;' they speak more eloquently than I can speak. Then you might say: 'What makes the people so attached to him? It is strange infatuation surely' ... This is the reason why they cleave so to the minister - it is the Word that has bound them together through the constraining power of the Holy Ghost. It is this great power of godliness then, that makes the difference between us and others. There are, I know, persons who say: 'Covell had such particular and peculiar views; he did not associate with others as some do. But I can tell you he associated with those people he believed to be the people of God, and they associated with him.

"But I must confine myself to the religion that made the man what he was. ... I must tell you then, that as a Christian man, like many that are here, he has bowed his knees in secret prayer for his Sovereign, for his country, for its rulers, and for his fellow-men, with tears running down his cheeks. But they knew nothing of it; God knew it. ... We may not mix with those about us; but we pray in secret, appealing to God on behalf of our country, for its welfare, and for all that are in authority. We bear our Sovereign and our country on our hearts in secret, we plead before God for our country's welfare; and yet we labour under many charges that we take no interest in it. But we do so before God, and here our dear friend was a lively example of the same. ... I knew our departed friend's secret moments. I have talked with him, and wept with him ! many times when talking of the things of the Lord. So I know that he was a very great deal in his secret moments with God. He often used to cry: 'Oh to be right, and to have a religion to die with!' ... But sometimes as we have talked together he has said: 'Oh my heart has been in heaven! How good God is to me! I do love Him, and I love His truth.'

"Now r must draw to a close, very reluctantly because of the time. You perceive I have not lifted up our dear friend as an example simply as *a man*, but as a *Christian man* I do, and as an example of God's grace. I do not say, oh look at our friend Covell; look at him. No; I say, look at the grace of God in him.  
...

"As regards this church and congregation, they *know* that they have suffered a great loss, that they shall hear his voice no more, that voice which came from a warm living heart; and they know that they shall have his prayers no more. But they have got his God, and that God who warmed his heart and moved his tongue can also hear their prayers; and the same heart and the same hand that upheld him while he lived is toward them now he is no more. May the Lord grant you a blessing in your sorrows, my dear friends. May the Lord help you in your prayers. May the Lord give you grace and patience, and everything that is requisite in your present existing circumstances, and sanctify them to us all. May the Lord come upon us with a spirit of prayer; give us more zeal in prayer, more love, more fervency for His truth and Gospel's sake. And now we follow the remains of our dear departed friend - his works will speak for him in this town amongst professors who would probably despise his religion. Let me tell you who despise his religion, it is to despise the cause in which he died, and by which he shined when alive, in the presence of his God and in the presence of his people."

The interment took place in the family vault in the graveyard of Addington Church, near Croydon, where the body was committed to the tomb by a clergyman friend of Mr. Covell's, the Rev. W. L. Rolleston, Vicar of Scraptoft in Leicestershire, assisted by the Vicar of Addington. All along the High Street and South End of Croydon, the shops were partially or wholly closed, and everywhere there were visible signs of the esteem in which he was held. The service in the chapel was attended by a large concourse of people, including several Strict Baptist ministers as well as three other Baptist ministers of the town, and the seating accommodation was insufficient so that a number had to stand in the aisles. It is estimated that there were about a thousand people inside and outside the chapel. The mourning coaches were followed by some sixty other vehicles to the graveyard at Addington, while several hundred persons walked the entire distance, although the weather was wintry and the ground covered with snow. Another townsman who attended the service, Mr. John Drage, who was headmaster of the Boys' British School in Tamworth Road, remarked that he had never seen so many people before at a funeral service.

On the following Wednesday evening, Mr. Hazlerigg preached in Providence Chapel from Luke 2.29,30, and towards the end of his sermon he made the following references to the late pastor: "What a

great deal of private religion the good man had; how much of soul communion with God! And what a man he was in prayer! It is no irreverence to say of him, that it seemed as if he would pull down a blessing from God upon His people. He was truly a mighty man in prayer. Secret communion and private prayer were the secrets of his ministerial power. Then again, what a mighty man he was in the Scriptures! Then what a blessed experience! What an experience of the plague of the heart! I have heard him speak many things about the discoveries of his heart. Then what a heaven of pardoning mercy, righteousness, and the love of God shed abroad in his heart, he at times enjoyed!

"But not only was he a man of much secret soul communion with God, a man of prayer, mighty in the Scriptures, and possessed of a deep and varied experience, both of the plague of the heart and God's sweet remedy; but as the fruit of these things, his life and conversation manifested three sweet Gospel characteristics - humility, love, and peaceableness. He did not set much by himself or vaunt himself. ...He loved the brethren; he used hospitality towards them without grudging. And he dearly loved peace. Here then we have a religion before and with God, manifesting itself, as it will surely do, in a blessedly Gospel walk before men.

"Now why do I say these things? That I may, if God So pleases, stir you up to desire and pray for grace to be followers of your late dear pastor. How well it will be for you all if you too are enabled to cultivate, as he did, a secret religion, a religion in private with God. How it will be for the good of the Cause if you are all enabled to walk in the steps of his humility, love, and peaceableness. I would even enforce these things by appealing to the love and respect felt by you towards your late pastor. Though nothing can really undo the work the Lord did by him, in a certain sense his reputation as a minister is in your hands. It will be sad if, through the self - seeking and fleshly forwardness of any, or through the entrance of a spirit of party, or through other sources of division, you should be rent asunder as a people, and thus occasion be afforded for some to say: 'Oh you see Mr. Covell gathered a people to himself, and not to the Lord!' Behold him then! Mark that you may imitate him. May the Lord grant you much to pray for this, and may you still prosper and flourish as a church and people of God. Amen" (*Memoir &c.*, pp.70, &c.).

Mr .Covell had said that, if any minister wished to say anything to the people respecting him after his death, it could be done from the words in Heb. 13.7,8, : "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God; whose faith follow ," &c. This now fell to the lot of his ministerial friend, Mr. Ashdown, who preached on the following Lord's day. In the course of his sermons that day he said : "I trust our dear friend and brother Covell, by God's matchless grace, made such a divine impression by his words and conversation, as well as his conduct as a godly man in your midst, that the impression will never be eradicated as long as your time lasts. ...Now your head is gone, you need to labour hard at the throne of grace individually and collectively. God help you. This has been a great loss to Zion at large. Your dear pastor was not only beloved by you, but almost in every church in our connection - east, west, north, and south. Why? Because he was prevalent with God in prayer. And if I may judge in this respect, this was the masterpiece of his religion - prevailing with God in prayer; and what made him so was, that he would not give up asking until he had what he wanted. ... I felt this morning a desire that God would stir up *such importunity* in your hearts, that you might give Him no rest until He should set another pastor over you. He can raise up one from amongst His servants, and it would be a mercy if God should lay this on your hearts as a people; for if you obtain one by *prayer* I am sure God will bless his ministry to your souls" (*Memoir &c.*, pp.85, &c.).

One of the present deacons at Providence Chapel, Mr. F. C. Woodhams, who was named after Francis Covell, has given some boyhood remembrances of the congregation and their pastor, and these go to show the sobriety, reverence, and earnestness which characterized the public worship in those days. On his way to a service, Mr. Covell would not usually stop to speak to anyone personally, but with a smile and wave of the hand would exchange the usual greetings and pass quickly to his vestry. His mind was doubtless intently exercised about the service, and he wished in this way to avoid distractions. It was not from lack of love to his people, nor of interest in their welfare, as these were abundantly manifest on other and more fitting occasions. The presence and blessing of God in the service were what he was after, and he sought to avoid anything that might detract from this. In a similar way, he liked to see the people, when the service was over, manifesting an anxiety to retain and meditate upon what they had heard, and a carefulness that it should not be lost in unnecessary conversation about other things. If he saw little groups talking together outside the chapel after a service, he would often say: "Ah, the best hearers are all gone home."

His sermons were usually long, often extending fifteen or twenty minutes beyond the stated time, although this occasioned a difficulty for those in domestic service, as it made them late in returning to their duties. It also prevented some of them from attending the prayer meeting, when this was commenced in the afternoon of the Lord's Day. The starting of this afternoon meeting arose from the fact that several people from outlying districts brought their meals with them, so that they could stay in the vestry and be present for the evening service. In the afternoon some wished to read good books, which were provided for their use, but were hindered in this by others who wished to spend the time in conversation. Eventually, to overcome these difficulties and to use the time profitably, it was decided to start an afternoon prayer meeting.

There are several notable marriages recorded in the church book as having taken place in Providence Chapel, among which are the following: "Mr. Grey Hazlerigg of Leicester and Sarah Ann Clarke of Loughborough; John Gadsby of London and Emily Johnson of Tenterden; Robert Parminter Knill, Baptist Minister of Croydon (where he resided at that time) and Margaret Davey of Lewes."

## CHAPTER 2

### A PASTORLESS PERIOD

Thus we have traced out a little of the wonderful works of God in raising up and establishing the Cause of truth at providence Chapel, Croydon, and have come to the termination of the first phase of its existence under the gracious and useful pastorate of Francis Covell. And it must be said that this first phase was the most prosperous in a spiritual sense. How often it is so with the visible churches of Christ, and how the sovereignty of the great Head of the church is manifest therein! Where and as He will, He raises up and equips a godly servant of His to be the means of planting and watering a visible church, while He Himself gives the increase during the years His servant is spared to labour therein. But in the divine purposes there is a time set when these labours are to end, and His servant be taken home to glory, and often it transpires that the measure of increase and prosperity begins to wane. Then often it may be asked as was done with the Jewish church: "Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? Is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?" But even so, those who follow after are not to be discouraged, not to despise a "day of small things," as the prophet there exhorts: "Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel! saith the Lord; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest! and be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work; for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts" (Haggai 2 : 3,4.).

If the Lord is pleased to raise up and appoint a godly successor to the instrumental founder of the Cause, it is a great favour; but how often it is otherwise. Yet the Lord may maintain a measure of prosperity under the elders who outlive their pastor. This difficult period of *interregnum*, as Mr. Philpot somewhere calls it - that is, the period between the rule of two successive pastors, falls upon the surviving deacons, under our independent system of church government; and often indeed it is a time of difficulty as they endeavour to manage the affairs of the Cause in the absence of pastoral care. Such a time now fell to the lot of the deacons at Providence Chapel and their anxiety to have the vacant pastorate filled is seen in the various steps that were taken to this end, in dependence upon the Lord's blessing. A brief account of this period may, if the Lord should so use it, be instructive to other churches and deacons who find themselves in the same position.

The attention of the church seemed first directed to Mr. Eli Ashdown, who was at that time pastor of the church at Burgess Hill. He was asked to occupy the pulpit at West Street on the first Lord's Day after Mr. Covell's funeral, and "felt helped in the Lord's service through the day." Again in the following February, he says: "I found a very warm feeling among the friends towards me, and hope I felt a spirit of sympathy and love towards them." Eventually he was asked what he felt he could do to help the Croydon church, and as the congregation at Burgess Hill had been considerably depleted by the opening of new chapels at Hurstpierpoint and Haywards Heath, he expressed himself as willing to help them, if it was the Lord's will, as much as two Lord's days a month. Then in March several engagements were fixed both for Lord's days and Wednesdays during the remainder of the year; "and if at the end of the year it should still be the wish of the friends that he should take the oversight of the church at Croydon in connection with that of Burgess Hill, and his mind be led to accept it, the arrangements for next year would be that he should supply the church at Croydon the second and fourth Lord's days in each month, and when five occur, the fifth also. Mr. Ashdown suggested that in order that we might know more of him, the ordinance day should be changed from the first to the second Lord's day in the month after next month."

This was followed by a letter from the Croydon church to that at Burgess Hill, in which they wrote as follows: "The Lord in His providence and according to His sovereign will and pleasure having taken home to himself our late beloved pastor, Mr. Francis Covell, it has, we trust and believe, been laid on the hearts of many both of the church and congregation to entreat and wrestle with the Lord, if it was His will and pleasure, to send one of His own sent servants, a man qualified by His Spirit to go in and out before us, to break the bread of life, to fill up the breach made by the removal to glory of him who was so highly honoured of God for so many years. The eyes of a number of our friends were directed from the first to your dear pastor as being one whose ministry would be acceptable to the majority, should the Lord open up the way for his coming amongst us. We trust at the same time there has been a prayerful desire of seeing the hand of the Lord going before us, a watching for the moving of the cloud. With reference to your dear pastor, we felt the one bar to his coming amongst us was his being already the pastor of a church to whom he was much attached, and who also were greatly attached to him. But as he was very much away from you in the course of the year, we gathered you were unable to support him

entirely; and it has consequently been suggested, could he not confine his services to the two churches and so take the oversight of both? This seemed to us a little moving of the cloud, and we sincerely hope it is of the Lord.

"Now, dear friends, we sincerely trust that the steps We have taken in asking your dear pastor to supply for us the dates mentioned, with a view to his taking the oversight of us as a church, will not be thought unfriendly or wanting in Christian love towards you; for we earnestly desire to maintain the feeling of brotherly love and affection which you as a church showed us by allowing your pastor to come to us in a time of sorrow and need (after the funeral). It is our earnest prayer that the Lord will not allow Satan to make this a source of discord between the two sister churches; but that it may be a means of binding us closer together in that union which is so lacking in churches in the present day.

"Praying that the God of all grace may direct your minds and hearts in this matter, we are dear brethren and sisters, yours affectionately in Gospel bonds, .  
Thomas Wonham; J. B. Ridley; *Deacons*"

In the meantime, Mr. Ashdown, as may well be expected, was much exercised about the matter, and this exercise was greatly increased by his having received a call to the pastorate of the church at Zoar Chapel, Great Alie Street, London. To this he refers in a letter directed to Mr. Wonham in June, after a church meeting on the question had been held at Burgess Hill. In this letter Mr. Ashdown says: "No doubt you have had a note from our church by this time. They seem desirous to fall into the Lord's hands in the matter, and not to have a voice. I hope the Lord's will may be done in us and by us, however painful it may be to flesh and blood. As I have referred this matter to our church, I do not feel justified in taking it again from them now. They wish me to move in matters as my mind shall be led, but what the Lord's will is concerning me I know not. It would be right for me to inform you, I have had another unanimous call from the church at Zoar to take the pastorate over them. They beg of me not to give them a decided answer yet, but to watch and pray. Whether the Lord is about to move me from Burgess Hill I know not. No doubt you have the opportunity of watching the spirits of the friends at Croydon, as well as your own exercises in the matter. What we want is to know the Lord's mind and will; for whatever we undertake without His blessing will end in vanity and vexation of spirit. The time will soon - come for me to be with you again. Pray for me, that my mouth may be opened, that I may speak as I ought to speak, and that the Lord's name and honour may be dear to our souls. I hope you will not let the circumstance relating to the Zoar church influence your mind at all; but be sober, ponder the path of your feet. I would wish to be clay in His hands."

This intervening call from Zoar must at least have been very perplexing to the deacons and church at Croydon, and no doubt quickened their desires and anxiety to know what the Lord's purposes were. Mr. Ashdown became "more and more unsettled at Burgess Hill," and "felt bound and shut up in preaching there," which no doubt led him to think the Lord's will was to move him elsewhere. But would it be Croydon or Zoar? Which of these calls was to take effect, if indeed he was to leave his present charge? It is true, the former call at the time was only to a co-pastorate, which would mean his remaining over the church at Burgess Hill; whereas the latter call would entail his leaving that church for London. In this perplexed state he went to preach at Croydon on August 8th, 1880, having been favoured the previous day with a spirit of prayer in the matter. During the previous night he "felt a persuasion it was not the Lord's will to unite the two churches," and that he should not take the oversight of the church at Croydon.

On the Monday evening following this engagement, a church meeting was held at Croydon, and a resolution passed to the effect that, if after twelve months Mr. Ashdown's mind was not led to resign the pastorate at Burgess Hill and his connection there, the Croydon church would have the option to dissolve the agreement and invite another minister. Mr. Ashdown, who was in the vestry, was then informed of this resolution, and asked if he would consent to minister to them on these conditions; but he felt he could not unsettle himself and disengage himself from other churches on these conditions, and so place himself in their hands. The vote of the Croydon church was then taken as to whether Mr. Ashdown should be invited to take the pastoral care of them in conjunction with the church at Burgess Hill, and there was a majority against it. This was a relief to Mr. Ashdown, and confirmed the impression he had on the Saturday night; and so this first attempt of the Croydon church for a settlement on the pastorate question was brought to an unsuccessful conclusion (*See Memoir of Eli Ashdown, pp. 181-188*).

The Lord was nevertheless evidently with His people at Providence Chapel, and His blessing attended the labours of His servants as they supplied in the pulpit there. Mr. Samuel Curtis, late Pastor at Southill, is one who has testified of this. In the providence of God he had been moved from his native village in Oxfordshire to Wallington, and was there employed by a man who attended Providence Chapel. Samuel attended with him, but found the ministry very different from anything he had heard before.

"Sometimes," he says, "I felt encouraged" especially on one occasion under Mr. Dennett from the words, 'Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them' (Psalm. 107.5). But generally it was otherwise, especially when a law-work was contended for."

But it was under this particular visit of Mr. Ashdown in August of 1880 that this law-work was deepened in his soul "I went to chapel," he says, "with hopes and fears, and do not remember anything particular in the service until the text was given out. This was: 'Take heed, therefore, how ye hear,' &c. (Luke 8.18). He began to speak and, as I thought, very encouragingly. I really felt that my religion had proceeded from the Lord, when Mr. Ashdown paused and looked round upon the congregation, and said: 'But that is not religion, my friends.' During the whole of his morning's discourse he stripped me of everything that I had seemed to have. He took up the same portion in the evening, and continued to take away that which I seemed to have. I left the chapel, in my feelings, a lost man. and my case seemed more hopeless than it did at first. Now I began to feel the terrors of a broken law, which worked hardness, rebellion, and death."

Thus was Mr. Curtis brought down with hard labour, but found times of help and deliverance in Providence Chapel. Of one such occasion, when Mr. Prince was supplying one Wednesday evening, he writes: "I went, according to my feelings, for the last time. Mr. Prince took his text from Song of Solomon 2.14: 'O my dove' &c. He so described the features of that dove, and the word dropped with such power into my heart, that I felt I was the character set forth. He then spoke of where this dove was in the clefts of the rock, the Lord Jesus Christ. Then he showed how the Lord saw the face and heard the voice of these doves, in His house, ordinances, and in secret prayer, &c.. Also that He heard the sighs and groans of His people, which at times were a stench in their own nostrils. Yet they were comely and precious in the eyes and ears of God. Such were presented by the great High Priest and sprinkled with atoning blood. Here I feelingly raised my 'Ebenezer'." (*Memoir of S. Curtis, pp.11-15*).

The first attempt of the church at Croydon to obtain a successor to Mr. Covell in the pastorate having failed, they were of necessity thrown back upon the "Supply system," which can only be regarded as a makeshift provision for the pulpit in the absence of a pastor. However, they were favoured to have the sympathy and help of many of the good ministers of that day, so that the preaching of the Gospel was continued amongst them. Besides Eli Ashdown, already mentioned, there were Messrs. J. K. Popham, Eli Page, Grey Hazlerigg, George Prince, Gorge Mockford, Charles Hemington, John Warburton of Southill, John Newton, and others. These "Supplies" were entertained by a Mrs. Saxby in the house in Wandle Road where Mr. Covell had formerly resided. They received £5 for a week's services, together with their travelling expenses, and some of the poorer ministers, who often stayed for a fortnight and brought their wives with them, found the £10 with which they usually returned home to be a great assistance in their pecuniary circumstances. Mr. George Mockford gives a confirmation of this in his *Autobiography*. "My being called to preach at West Street Chapel, Croydon," he says, "has in the hands of the Lord been a wonderful help to me; in fact, it looks the only way by which I have been kept from getting greatly in debt, without any means of paying" (*p.63*).

Mr. J. K. Popham, who was pastor at Shaw Street Chapel in Liverpool, seems to have supplied in the pulpit at West Street, Croydon, first in August of 1880, the month of Mr. Ashdown's memorable visit, when his call to the co-pastorate was brought to an unsuccessful conclusion. In June of the following year Mr. Popham preached for the first time at Galeed Chapel, Brighton. These two engagements in the South, namely at Croydon and Brighton, soon bore fruit, as in January 1882 he received an invitation from the church at Croydon, and in February of the same year an invitation from the church at Galeed, both asking him to supply on probation with a view to the pastorate.

The letter from Croydon read as follows: " At our church meeting held on Monday evening, January 2nd, it was decided by the church, with the exception of three only, that we the deacons should write to invite you to supply for us for three months with a view to your taking the oversight of us as pastor.

"This decision may appear to be hasty, but in reality it is not so. From the time of the death of our late beloved pastor, Mr. Covell, with some of us there has been a constant crying to the Lord that, if it was His will, we might have another pastor to go in and out before us, who should feed us with knowledge

and understanding. From the time you supplied for us in August, 1880, you were laid upon the minds of some of the friends, but more especially your visit in October last, when the weight and savour which attended your ministry amongst us created an earnest wrestling spirit of prayer to the Lord in many, both of the church and godly of the congregation, that if it could be in accordance with the Lord's will you might be brought amongst us; but we have felt some hesitation lest we should hurt the minds of those over whom you are now placed, and lay ourselves open to the charge of trying to entice you away.

"The matter was however named at our previous meeting in December, when it was left to stand over for a month, that each of the friends might seek the Lord's guidance and direction in so weighty and important a decision. This we believe has been done, and we also believe it has been done with a sincere desire that the Lord's will may be done as regards ourselves as well as you.

"We therefore lay the request before you, begging you to give it your earnest and prayerful consideration, and may the Lord Himself, who is the Head of the church, so direct your mind to that decision that shall be most for His honour and glory, and the good of His church and people."

As may well be imagined, the reception of these two calls so closely one upon the other brought Mr. Popham into a state of much exercise. "From that day until March," he says, "I lived days and nights never to be forgotten by me. Croydon, dear Mr. Covell's church - he was most kind and encouraging to me in the early days of my ministry and on going to Liverpool - rich; my desire to educate well my young family; its contiguity to London; the obliquely - obtained medical opinion that in the event of leaving Liverpool no more suitable place than Croydon could be found for my wife, who was then not strong - all these considerations took hold of me. But on two occasions, when seeking divine guidance, the Lord very distinctly and mercifully and powerfully said to me: 'Ye are not your own.' Oh how humbly did I pray that He would not permit me to act as if I were my own!"

Mr. Popham was engaged to preach at Croydon on Wednesday evening, March 22nd, and at Brighton on the following Friday. At the former place he had liberty as on former occasions, but nothing more; whereas at Galeed he "had not spoken long," he says, "before my soul was filled with the peculiar love which I believe a pastor has to the people over whom the Lord places him; and when I sat down in the pulpit, I said in my heart, 'Thi~ is the place'." (*Memoir &c. of J. K. Popham, by J. H. Gosden, pp.66-70*).

It is not surprising therefore that, after these feelings, he should feel led to accept the call to Galeed; and how much that decision was approved of the Lord, time has revealed in the success given to his long pastorate there of fifty-five years. But the Croydon church was by this again disappointed, and left still without an under-shepherd.

On the first Lord's day in April of 1884, Mr. Hatton preached his last sermons at Croydon, and on the following Lord's day was suddenly taken ill and died. In the morning sermon on Neh. 9; 19, he spoke at one part of the Lord's people being brought close to the borders of Canaan, with only Jordan between it and them. "Sometimes He brings His people there, close to heaven, with only death between it and them; and they are ready and willing to die." In the evening he spoke of the death of the righteous, and afterwards administered the Lord's Supper for the last time. It seems that his approaching end was much on his mind, for as he left Croydon on the following morning, he said to a friend: "With me the bitterness of death is past, whenever it comes" (*Memoir and Sermons of Joseph Hatton, pp.39-43*).

Although still without a pastor, the congregation continued to be maintained and the chapel filled, to which fact Mr. Stanley Wakeley refers in a letter to his wife when he was on a preaching visit to Croydon in December of 1885. "We had a fine day yesterday," he says, "and a good number out. In the morning the chapel was very full, and I spoke from these words: , What think ye of Christ?' In the evening, from: ' As ye have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him.' The people got on better than I did. I felt I could not lift up the Lord Jesus as I wished, and after retiring to bed I was much exercised" (*Gathered Fragments, p.166*).

Indeed the congregation was so well maintained that it was considered advisable in the year 1890 to have the chapel enlarged. The cost of this, although well over a thousand pounds, was soon liberally subscribed by the friends. The re-opening took place on January 19th, 1891, when John Warburton of Southill preached from the words: "The place is too strait for me; give place to me that I may dwell."

By the year 1898 the chapel had been built fifty years, and to commemorate this fact, Jubilee services were held, at which Mr. Ashdown preached in the afternoon and Mr. Hemington in the evening. As there was no convenience for providing refreshments at the chapel, the friends were asked to take visitors home during the day, a duty of love which, as Mr. Woodhams has recorded, "was cheerfully done by many, who were not forgetful to entertain strangers'."

It must have been soon after this that Mr. Hemington received a call from the Croydon church to become their pastor. This he felt unable to accept, having evidence of the Lord's blessing upon his labours at Devizes in Wiltshire. "The Lord gave His servant many proofs that He had set before him an open door at Devizes, and that a divine blessing rested on his labour in word and doctrine among an affectionate people. These proofs prevented his acceptance of a warm and affectionate invitation to become the pastor of the church at West Street, Croydon. Where the Lord sent him, there he remained, much valued by his own church and congregation." (*Memorial of Charles Hemington, pp. 15 and 16*).

Mr. John Booth, who commenced his pastorate at Zoar Chapel, Bradford, in 1898, had several times supplied at Providence Chapel, Croydon, when in 1904 he received from the Croydon church a call to fill the pastorate, still vacant there. When he began at Bradford he said: "The people think they have had a good beginning. I trust it will be lasting, and if it be the Lord's will, be improved on. To Him be all the glory." This desire that the good beginning might continue and be lasting seems to have been granted, at least in that he remained pastor there until the end; for although he received twelve calls to other churches, he continued among his own people. The Croydon church was then to have the disappointment of another refusal, which they received from Mr. Booth as follows:-

"To the church of Christ meeting for divine worship at West Street Chapel, Croydon.

"My dear Brethren and Sisters in Christ Jesus, - After much exercise of mind and many errands to a throne of grace, I now attempt to write you on the subject which for some time past has been a source of anxiety to you as well as to myself. In the month of May I duly received an invitation from you through your deacons, asking me to become your pastor. I felt that, as living people and people of judgment, you could not have taken such an important step without due consideration. There are several things that have weighed much with me in my deliberations. First, I cannot but acknowledge that my ministry has been accepted among you. I have felt much of the presence of the Lord while I have been amongst you. It would confer great temporal advantage upon me. It would give a much larger field of usefulness. It would enable me to give my children a much better education, and it would enable me to provide for my family needs much more comfortably than at present. And yet none of these considerations have moved me. Neither did I think that you expected that these things, judged by themselves, would bring me to a decision. We acknowledge the great Head of the church - His sovereign right to guide and direct us, to place us here or there according to His sovereign will. Knowing I was subject to Him, I have humbly waited on Him. Realizing my own ignorance and insufficiency to judge righteous judgment, I have begged Him to lead me and bring me to aright decision. Amidst all this exercise of mind, nothing has been given me excepting the words: 'I dwell among my own people' (2 Kings 4. 13); and these have run through my mind so continually lately that I assuredly gathered that the Lord intended that I should remain for the present at Bradford. These words I took for a text yesterday and informed the people of my decision.

"And now, my dear Brethren and Sisters in the Lord, I hope you will not think I have slighted your desire, or ignored your kind invitation. I can assure you I have not carelessly or indifferently come to this conclusion. I have prayerfully considered your request, and this is my decision. I dare not move without a 'Thus saith the Lord.' I dare not come without His sanction. His servant I am" (*The Life &c. of John Booth, pp.54-56*).

It was doubtless with this refusal on his mind, and knowing what a disappointment it would be to the Croydon friends, that he sought to encourage them when next he preached at West Street on November 20th, 1904, taking as his text: "The street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times" (Daniel. 9.25). One reads through it all a desire to encourage the people in the troublous time of seeking a pastor and meeting with successive disappointments. Concluding his sermon on this occasion, he said: "During this year you have had trouble, no doubt; but what has it done? Has it not cemented you together? Trouble does this if it is sanctified" (*Life &c., p.106*). A mercy indeed, that this continual trial with regard to a pastor should be so sanctified as to unite them more closely together, rather than to work division.

## CHAPTER 3

### MR. BROOKE'S PASTORATE

About the time that Mr. Booth's call was under consideration, a new Supply had been asked to fill some of the vacant dates. This was Mr. Walter Brooke, who made his first visit to West Street in October of 1904, and some little account of him must now be given, as he was soon to become the succeeding pastor. He was born in 1863 in a village called Old Sodbury in Gloucestershire, and there, as others, he went astray from the womb, although at times the subject of checks of conscience. A sermon by his grandfather was the means of convincing him somewhat of his sinful state, which led to his seeking the mercy of God in Christ. In this however he found the opposition of Satan, who injected such blasphemous thoughts into his mind, that he feared he had sinned beyond all hope of recovery. Despairing of a remedy, he sought to forget his spiritual trouble in worldly thoughts and pursuits; but there he found no rest. Instead, he felt constrained again to seek the mercy of the Lord, and in doing so found the violence of his former temptation removed, and a hope given that a good work of grace had been begun in his soul.

The ministry of Mr. J. Spencer, of Bath, was made useful in encouraging him and leading him "into some establishment of hope in the mercy of God, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Once particularly he was sent on his way rejoicing after hearing a sermon on the words: "The Lord upholdeth all that fall, and raiseth up all those that be bowed down." Later on, he "received a sweet visitation from God, and the promise contained in Isaiah 45.2-4 was made sweeter than honey," so that he was constrained to join the church worshipping at Providence Chapel in Bath.

After eight years of exercise relative to the ministry, he received an invitation to preach at the Strict Baptist Chapel in his native village, which led him to venture in "weakness, fear, and much trembling." Other invitations came from neighbouring Causes, until in 1889 he received a unanimous call to the pastorate at Cheltenham, which he felt constrained to accept. Here he laboured for about nine years, and was then invited to become the pastor of Zoar Chapel, Cardiff, in 1899, which he also accepted. His first visit to West Street, Croydon, was in October of 1904, when "a warm feeling of attachment was manifested" to his ministry and after a few subsequent visits he received a cordial invitation to supply with a view to the pastorate. Feeling, together with the friends at Cardiff, that the hand of the Lord was in the matter, he accepted the call, and commenced his pastoral labours in January of 1907. After two years he wrote as follows: "I trust we have been enabled to realize the approbation of the Lord resting upon our union and fellowship in the Gospel. I feel I have around me many godly, earnest praying souls who love the truth of our covenant God, and who long to know it in its power and reality. My path has been a chequered changing one. It has pleased God to exercise me with many afflictions and distresses; but amid all my sinkings and fears, He has indeed supported and comforted me. And my desire is to testify of His loving-kindness and of His faithfulness to His eternal word of promise" (*The Sower*, 1934, pp.61-64).

In July of 1907, Mr. Grey Hazlerigg was staying in Croydon and heard the new pastor at Providence several times. Writing of this, Mr. Hazlerigg says: "His ministry seemed to me both sound and sweet. His matter was good, and his delivery very agreeable. At times I was struck with the pleasing originality of his remarks. ...My hearty good wishes are with pastor and people at West Street Chapel. If I have one fear on their pastor's behalf, it is that he may suffer through his over kindness of disposition" (*Preface to Sermons by Walter Brooke*, Vol. 1).

Mr. Brooke was doubtless himself alive to this danger, as he refers to it in his first sermon after accepting the pastorate. His text was the Apostle's word to the Galatian church: "For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ" (ch.1.10). Speaking on the second heading of his sermon, which was that "teachers and ministers are at times in great danger of being led into the snare of men-pleasing," he says: "I am not going to apply this to the Apostle Paul, but I do say it in reference to myself and my own poor ministry. I am not free from the danger. I shall not easily forget many years ago reading in faithful John Newton's letters what he says respecting the dangers attending ministers of having the good wishes and admiration of their hearers. It made an impression on my spirit. Popularity is a great ideal today among men." Later on in the same sermon he made this appeal to the friends: "My dear friends, if you ever say anything to me commendatory of my preaching, do follow it with prayer immediately. While you seek to encourage the minister of the Gospel, do pray that he may be kept faithful, sincere, and real before God" (*Sermons*, Vol. I, pp.46, 48). It is significant that this feature of

his disposition, and the danger attending it, should be thus referred to quite early in his new pastorate, as in course of time the appropriateness of it seemed to become evident.

In 1921 Mr. Brooke became afflicted with much spiritual darkness, which incapacitated him for his labours, until in 1924 he felt it necessary to resign his pastorate at Croydon. This painful trial, and its attendant silence in the ministry, continued until September of 1927, when he was favoured with a gracious deliverance. Singularly enough, this occurred at West Street, Croydon, as he sat among the congregation there to hear Mr. Henry Haddow. The reading of the 31st of Jeremiah by the minister on that occasion was made the means of delivering his soul, especially the words: "Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel!" "The prison doors were opened," he says, "and my liberated soul went forth, leaving the chains of bondage behind me. The promise was indeed fulfilled: 'Then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing; for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert' (Is. 35 : 6). The blessed Sun of Righteousness had arisen 'with healing in His wings'." (*The Sower, 1934, pp.61-72*).

This deliverance led to a resumption of his ministerial labours, the first sermon being preached at Hadlow Down Chapel. But his pastorate at Croydon had terminated, and in 1930 he received a call to Ebenezer Independent Chapel in Hastings, which he accepted. It was regretted by his Strict Baptist friends that in so doing he seemed to lay aside his Baptist principles and his adherence to strict communion, But he was not to continue there long, as death intervened and he passed away on February 11th, 1934, at the age of seventy-one.

## CHAPTER 4

### MR. CROFT'S PASTORATE

After Mr. Brooke's breakdown, the Croydon church was again thrown back upon Supplies, and among these was Mr. Walter Croft, who came from Sale, near Manchester. In his youth he walked according to the course of this world, much to the grief of his dear father, who was a minister of the Gospel. But the time came when the Lord, by an effectual work of grace, brought him to a knowledge of his sinful state, and turned him from the ways of sin to a real concern about eternal things. He was indeed brought low under the convincing work of the Holy Spirit, until on one memorable Saturday he was strongly tempted to jump into the canal on his way home. But this was mercifully prevented, although he arrived home full of misery. It was a beautiful evening in May, but his soul was full of trouble and distress at the thought that hell must be his portion. Being unable to take his tea, he reached a Bible and thought he would try to find the worst case that ever found mercy from God, and see if he could find someone as bad as himself. "Everywhere I turned" he said, "it was all about mercy. At last I got to Psalm 30, and in reading that, the Lord broke my heart all to pieces with this: 'For His anger endureth but a moment; in His favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning' (v.5). And it was morning," and I remember getting up from that table, and the tears were running down my face with sorrow and joy, because mercy had reached my soul."

He had to come away from the Arminians with whom he had become associated, and the doctrine of election began to exercise his soul. His establishment in this truth, together with the way in which it was turned to him for a testimony in his favour, he thus relates: "I got my first real hope from election. I had been in great trouble of mind in 1895, from August to November. I was in a state of misery and enmity against God, and God against me. But I went one Sunday morning to Rochdale Road Chapel, Manchester. Mr. Greenwood was the minister, and he gave out his text: 'Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our Gospel came not unto you in word only; but also in power, in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance.' Well, I listened in astonishment. He argued backwards. First he began with the word coming with power and in the Holy Ghost, and he described what I had gone through. I listened in astonishment. He might have been told what I had been going through. And from that he proved election, that those who had this work were the elect of God. I went out of the chapel as though I had heard something that was quite a revelation to me; that God was first. I had been trying to curry favour with God by doing all sorts of things. I was going to earn a passage to heaven. He put it the other way round. I could not understand it, but I do remember passing Shudehill Market that morning, and I said: 'Is it possible that God has elected me?' From what he had said, the things I had passed through were a proof of election, and the whole thing was turned right round. Instead of my electing God, He elected me. I was so astonished, I could not make it out. The streets were the same as I looked around, and yet, 'What if God after all has chosen me?'"

Mr. Croft's ministry was at first exercised among the northern churches, as he lived in Sale, and was employed in those parts as the cashier in a large shipping company. Finding the business and the ministry together to be too much for his strength, he was after a good deal of exercise led to come out of the former and give himself up to the latter, casting himself upon the providence of God. It was just at this time that he was expected at West Street, Croydon, to fulfil his first engagement there in the autumn of 1923. Being now free from business, he decided to spend a week in Brighton after fulfilling his Croydon engagement on the Lord's Day. Arriving at Brighton on the Monday, he learned that Mr. Popham was preaching at the Aged Pilgrims' Home there in the evening, and accordingly went. Speaking of this he says: "Oh how my heart did go out to the Lord, that He would tell me that night whether what I had done in leaving business was right, because we had to give up a good deal of income. My heart was all the time waiting to hear, and his text was: 'He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation.' He said, 'If you and I are not in that same right way, we never shall reach that city of habitation.' That is the way he began. Well, I listened to every word, and he seemed to say all along, 'You are in the 'right way'; and I quite believed it. On the Wednesday I heard him from the words: 'In His temple shall everyone speak of His glory.' That was a good time to me. On the Friday he read the 8th Romans, and spoke on the evidence of not being under condemnation, and so on. Oh it was a good week to me! And I went back on Saturday to Sale, but I had not the slightest thought that that journey was going to affect my whole life. I just fulfilled that engagement at West Street and went away, and never expected to hear any more from them. And then I had another letter, saying that the friends had been pressing for me to come again, and would I ask the people at Sale to let me off; and they did. That went on; until I got a letter asking me to let them know how I stood, and what

would my feelings or response be to a request for further services at West Street. It was very cautious, but I could see by the way it was written, there was something more in it. That led to my going twenty times the following year."

Mr. Croft received the invitation to the pastorate in 1926, and at the end of that year he gave the answer that he felt led to accept it. The agreement was made however that he should remain in the North during the following year 1927, so that he could fulfil his engagements there and come south at the end of that year. In the meantime, during 1927, Mr. Brooke had so far recovered from his breakdown as to recommence his ministry. This gave rise to a fear in Mr. Croft's mind as to whether the Croydon friends might ask their former pastor to return to them, which doubtless occasioned a good deal of exercise before the Lord. But this proved to be a temptation, as Mr. Brooke was not invited to return, and his resignation of the pastorate in 1924 was adhered to. It was in 1928 therefore that Mr. Croft's pastorate actually commenced. On the first day of that year, being the Lord's Day, he preached in the Croydon pulpit from the words: "This month shall be unto you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you" (Ex. 12.2). "No doubt," he said, "most of you here present have had some apprehensions of this particular day, and no doubt you have this morning felt some concern, anxiety, and perhaps fear, as to what would happen in it - would there be any proof or evidence of the Lord's hand being with us or not? And no doubt this concern has exercised both you and me from day to day for some time. Here is an instance in the Scripture in which similar fear, anxiety, and apprehension took hold of a man and of a people. The Lord knew all about it, and took into His own hands the management of all. He gave Moses instructions from time to time. Moses was not allowed to know in advance what the Lord would do, but had to wait for every word. ..Moses had to wait and listen, and having waited, listened, and heard, he must obey. Now that is God's order. The future is wisely hidden. Some things we must do, but they must be subservient always to the mind and will of God. When the Lord commands, it is our wisdom to obey, to leave Him to provide; and there the whole matter must be left. What the Lord gives, we shall gather; when He withholds, we shall not gather. But if He give, as I trust He will, it will be gathered to the praise and glory of His great and holy name." (*The Beginning of Months, by W. Croft, p.3*).

Later on in the same sermon, he refers to his own sense of insufficiency and need of the Lord's blessing: "If the Lord should make our souls His garden, if He brings forth from them the sweet odour of His pleasant fruits, it will be indeed His work and the granting of His favour; and that is what we need. I feel to need that. There never was a weaker creature called to preach the Gospel. I have sometimes felt so weak that I could scarcely stand when preaching, but the applied word revives and strengthens one to go on. We need the Lord to command the blessing, and when He does command it, who can withdraw it? In the early hours of Wednesday morning before we left Sale, I believe the Lord spoke to me this word very sweetly and blessedly: 'I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it.' This much comforted me, lifting me out of my despondency" (*p.9*).

On the following Wednesday evening, he spoke of his hope that the Lord was still among the people meeting at Providence Chapel, taking as his text the message of the Lord by His messenger Haggai: "According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remaineth among you; fear ye not" (Haggai 2.5). "I have hope," he said, "that this word is for us here as a people, and that His Spirit remaineth among us; that He is not removed, but that He will surely do us good. He *has* come to His people in this house. His power is not diminished. He will not take away His covenant word. No; He may scourge us if we stray or wander, but He will never take away His covenant promise. If He be among us we are safe" (*p.30*).

Very soon after Mr. Croft took over the pastoral care, the question of the standing of the church at West Street with regard to the separation of the Gospel Standard churches from other Strict Baptist churches was brought into prominence by the opposition of some on this point. It is necessary to emphasize that this separation was made, not from any pharisaical spirit of wishing to stand off from others, but out of love and zeal for the honour and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ as being really and properly the eternal Son of the Father in truth and love from all eternity. To ignore or attempt to break down this separation made for the truth's sake would be, not only to censure those godly men and ministers who felt it necessary for the honour of the Son of God to make it, but also to show a culpable indifference to the right and title of the Lord Jesus to the high honour of this eternal Sonship.

Mr. Croft had become established in the importance of maintaining this doctrine. Speaking of this on one occasion he said: "In the North, where I was, there were practically no Earthen Vessel chapels anywhere, but there was a growing spirit called the Northern Union. It was the pest of my life in those

days, when I saw they were beginning to curry unity with that system. I did not know much about this Earthen Vessel system until Mr. Popham took the editorship of *The Gospel Standard*. His first editorial pointed out the difference between the *Gospel Standard* and *Earthen Vessel* churches. That opened my eyes to see this distinction, and I remember very well being exercised about the doctrine that Mr. Popham was laying down about the eternal Sonship of Christ, and I thought a lot about it. I could see it was important, but had never been revealed to me, and I begged the Lord to show to me from some word of His that the Lord Jesus Christ was the eternal Son of God. And I remember now, that word came: 'No man hath seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.' It was those few words 'In the bosom of the Father,' which showed me the eternal Sonship of the only-begotten Son."

Being thus established in his own soul as to the importance of this doctrine and the separation it had occasioned, Mr. Croft was very troubled when, quite early in his pastorate, he discovered a laxity in the church at West Street on this point. Members of *Earthen Vessel* churches had been allowed to "sit down," and the new pastor found it necessary to make a stand. This aroused the opposition of some, and one in particular challenged him to show that the Croydon church was a *Gospel Standard* Church. Mr. Croft took up the challenge, feeling quite rightly that this point must be settled once and for all, and a church meeting was accordingly arranged to decide the matter. At this meeting Mr. Croft gave three reasons why the church must be regarded as being a *Gospel Standard* one. In the first place, Mr. Covell was one of the original trustees of the *Gospel Standard Societies*. Secondly, when Mr. Philpot left Oakham, he came to live in Croydon and preached in this chapel, being buried by Mr. Covell. Thirdly, the chapel was on the *Gospel Standard* List. He then invited his opponent to put his resolution to the meeting that members of *Earthen Vessel* churches should be allowed to commune with the Croydon church; but this he refused to do. So Mr. Croft put it for him, only to find that there was no one to support it. It was then moved and carried, with only one dissident, that the church be regarded as a *Gospel Standard* church, and the separation from the *Earthen Vessel* churches be maintained at the Lord's Table. Mr. Croft's wisdom in thus dealing with the matter at the outset, and obtaining the loyal support of the church thereby, is very evident, and no doubt prevented a good deal of contention and confusion in after days.

His ministry among the people at Providence Chapel has now been maintained for twenty years, and although during the greater part of that time he has been afflicted with almost total blindness, the Lord's goodness is to be observed in enabling His servant to continue both in the pulpit and in his pastoral visits among his flock. It is indeed remarkable how he has been preserved in his travels here and there, not only in Croydon, but to fulfil engagements in other parts of the country, and in serving the *Gospel Standard Societies* on their Committee. He was taught the Braille system, and copies of the Bible and Gadsby's Hymns executed in Braille were presented to him by the friends, so that he could continue to read these, both in private and in the pulpit. The continuance of this preservation during the recent years of war, both to himself and the majority of his congregation, and their being maintained during this period of so much imminent danger, is also to be thankfully remembered by all who regard these operations of the Lord.

Mr. C. V. Cockram has furnished the following particulars:

"Throughout the long history of the chapel there appears to be but one case of a minister being sent forth to preach with the full authority of the church. Instances certainly occur to mind of gracious ministers who, at some period or other of their earlier days, worshipped with the congregation, and among such was the late Mr. James Boorne of Greenwich, in whose memoir (*Memorialis of James Boorne*, pp.28-33) is given an account of a deliverance received under Mr. Covell in 1856; his brother, Mr. S. Boorne, a supply minister, attended the chapel in his later years. Of more recent days than James Boorne were the late Mr. Joseph Field, of Sedgley, and Mr. Herbert Dawson, the present pastor of Bethersden. However, in May, 1937, the church at West Street was constrained to send forth Mr. G. P. Ward, who for the past few years has been the settled pastor of Hope Chapel, Horsham. It may be mentioned that our esteemed friend, Mr. L. Murrell, well-known to many churches as a supply minister, joined West Street church about 1937, on being honourably released from the Clapham church. We have often been favoured with the support of other godly ministers, whose near proximity to the district has enabled them to support us in our prayer meetings.

"Though mercifully preserved from the concentrated devastation which fell upon many centres of population, Croydon in the Second Great War suffered a good deal of bombing, and was especially severely visited by the 'flying bombs' of 1944. However, in spite of the fact that there were a number of

bomb incidents in this part of the town, the chapel was preserved intact. On one occasion about 1941 an incendiary bomb fell through the roof during the night and was burning on the floor when it was put out by the united efforts of the aged and deaf chapel-keeper, Mr. Barnard, and some members of the Fire Guard who were watching in the vicinity. Apart from the possibility of a wall being shaken by the succession of bombing and anti-aircraft shelling, hitherto no serious damage has become obvious, and for this and for the preservation of the lives of our friends in this precarious area, we desire humble gratitude to our Covenant God. One cause for mourning was the death in a railway fatality of one member, the indirect cause being bombing; but through the Lord's mercy another lady, a member of the congregation, has been restored from injury sustained when her house was bombed. It may be mentioned as a further cause for gratitude that the second deacon, Mr. A. J. Farncombe, and his daughter were miraculously preserved uninjured when their house was completely destroyed about their ears, as it were, by a direct hit.

"Also it is desired to record gratitude to the Lord for His merciful preservation of the young people who were called 'during the recent war to their country's service. We have no intimation of any direct losses, though one young man was removed by death through illness contracted ostensibly while serving abroad; and another very young lad who attended the Godmanchester church and was closely connected with the West Street friends - often accompanying his grandparents to the services-was suddenly cut down in action in Belgium."

To conclude our account of Providence Chapel, mention may now be made of the occasion of Mr. Crofts' 70th birthday in September of 1946, when a special meeting was arranged and a presentation made to the pastor of a cheque for £125. On this occasion, a sermon was preached by Mr. Hayler, of Folkestone, from the words: "And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee these forty years in the wilderness," etc. In concluding his sermon Mr. Hayler said: "I hope, my dear friends, your minister has had a day of looking back. This is a marked day. He has reached his three-score years and ten. I was thinking of him early this morning. I expect he said: 'Few and evil have been the days of my pilgrimage.' I have no doubt he has had a mixed experience, mourning over the deadness of those seventy years, rejoicing in the goodness, and long-suffering, and faithfulness of his good God. I do not doubt but that he has had some thoughts about his ministry. He gave me his character in the vestry just now - said he was good for nothing; and one knows what that feeling is. But oh, I would rather he had that feeling, and rather I had that feeling myself, than be blown up with pride and self-importance! Well, God spare him to you, and favour him much with manifestations of more loving-kindness and tender mercy whilst he is here in the wilderness, and cause him often to remember all the way that the Lord his God has brought him."

After concluding the service with that beautiful prayer for a minister contained in hymn 373 (Gadsby's), the presentation meeting was held. Mr. Cockram, Senr., was asked to open it with prayer, and then Mr. Woodhams briefly stated the object of the meeting, namely, "to congratulate our dear pastor on attaining the 70th anniversary of his birth, and to present to him a token, as a desire to esteem him very highly in love for his work's sake, praying that the Lord will, in His mercy, spare him to us for many years to come."

Mr. Farncombe then read the following address, a copy of which had been made in Braille for Mr. Croft to keep and read for himself:-

"To Walter Croft, Minister of Providence Chapel, Croydon" Dearly Beloved Pastor,-

We, the Church and Congregation, assembling under your pastoral care, together with other friends, desire to tender our affectionate congratulations that through the goodness of the Lord you have been spared to reach the age of 70 years, and we desire to express heartfelt gratitude to the God of all grace, who has enabled you to minister in the Word both here and in many places, and pray that abundant blessing may follow, both to yourself and to those who come from time to time under your ministry.

"We take this opportunity of expressing our love towards you, and whilst not desiring to use flattering words, it is in our hearts to ask you to accept this cheque for £125 as a token of our appreciation of your work amongst us. We hope the Lord will long help you to be a faithful under-shepherd to His flock in Croydon, and that when the number of your days are ended you may have an abundant entrance into His kingdom." Mr. Hayler then made the presentation. "Love, my friend," he said, "is the top, and bottom, and middle of this meeting, and a very handsome and practical way of showing love, I know you will appreciate. I sometimes say in my blunt way - there is a great difference between lip love and heart love;

lip love is very cheap, but not love that comes from the heart. ....I do not think I am guilty of flattering sinners, nor do I believe your minister flatters you; but if God helps him, and helps unworthy me, to be faithful to sinners, and His truth gets into the heart, well then, according to the Scriptures, evidence of love is bound to follow. ..It gives me the greatest and warmest pleasure to hand you this cheque, with the names of all the subscribers. Why, you have got these pages full of friends - and a lot more that you do not know anything about. God bless you, old friend, and spare you, and be with you many years if His dear will."

Mr. Croft then replied as follows: "When I came to the chapel tonight, I told them in the vestry they had done something they had never done before - they had actually invited another minister to preach tonight without my knowledge. I was never consulted about it, and they told me practically in the same way that I was to sit still.

"Well, that is not usual, and I certainly do not know quite why this has been done. It is true it is my birthday, and the first figure in the number has changed from 6 to 7, and I cannot but feel that it has changed for the last time. ..I trust I have been enabled through the day, and several days. to remember, or try to remember, some of the things that the Lord has done for me, and some of the things that have been referred to tonight. It is almost exactly 23 years since I first came into this chapel. and I can assure you I felt very small then, and tonight I feel still smaller.

"Why should you make so much of my attempts to preach, and they truly are that? I am not trying to say something which is not true - it is that to me; they are poor in the extreme, and how it is that those who come here regularly can appear week after week is more than I can understand; but I do want to thank you. I cannot do more. There is no adequate language that I can think of, to thank you properly for this kind recognition. I have had warm support from the deacons, and from the members, and from many in the congregation. It has not been all easy. Sometimes it has been hard work to climb these pulpit steps. They have been very hard steps to me; but it has not been all sorrow. We have had some good days together. We have sorrowed together, and we have rejoiced together; and how long or short my remaining days may be, I hope I may be enabled to speak the truth in love, and when this flesh and heart shall fail, as one of our hymns puts it - 'and earthly comforts cease, then to possess within the veil, a life of joy and peace.'

"I do thank you once more. I feared I should not be able to say a word. Still, what I have said I mean, and I feel I can say - I love those of you who, in the course of my being here, have come to know me, and I you. There is a bond of love which I hope will not wane nor break. Thank you, and above all I thank the Lord."

The meeting was then closed with the singing of the Doxology.

Thus we have endeavoured to record the goodness of the Lord in establishing and maintaining His Cause of truth at Providence Chapel during the space of 100 years. The whole is thus aptly summarized by Mr. Woodhams: "The first pastor. Mr. Francis Covell. had an impediment in his speech. until he ventured by faith to speak in the Lord's name. when it was instantly removed. and ever after he spake plainly. The second pastor. Mr. Walter Brooke. was a cripple and was presented by some of the friends at West Street with a hand-propelled chair, with which he used to get about among his people and to and from chapel. The present pastor. Mr. Walter Croft. has for some years past suffered from blindness. and reads Braille which was taught him by a blind lady in the congregation when she was over 80 years of age. Thus out of weakness God made strong three of His faithful servants to preach the Gospel at West Street for a hundred years. except for the period when we had Supplies. 'What hath God wrought! ' (Num. 23. 23.) .The day shall declare it.' (I Cor. 3. 13.) The annual collection this year (1947) amounted to the amazing sum of, £406 12s. 6d. May the great Head of the church preserve us from being lifted up by this temporal prosperity. and grant that the godly amongst us may be enabled to seek for spiritual prosperity. and an increase in the church of those who shall ' adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things' (Titus 2. 10).