



by Ron Pollard



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James Love



The First Baptist Church

The Early Years



The first one hundred years of the history of Falkirk Baptist Church have been recorded for us by the noted Falkirk historian James Love when in 1906 he wrote the article 'Falkirk Baptist Church - Some Notes On It's History' which appeared in a Public Bazaar commemorative booklet published by the church that year. James Love is considered as one of the outstanding historians of the town, and his work gives us a valuable record of the early years of the Baptist Church in Falkirk. In his article, Love records that "The foundation of Falkirk Baptist Church may be traced to the great evangelical movement which began in Scotland during the closing years of the eighteenth century. Through the instrumentality of the brothers Robert and James Alexander Haldane and others, a religious awakening took place throughout Scotland".

Religious Awakening

This religious awakening led several inhabitants of Falkirk to build a church "where the truth as it is in Jesus shall be preached", and in 1802 an Independent, or Congregational, church was built in Bank Street. Differences, however, arose over the 'plurality of elders' and other matters, and to these differences, and especially the adoption of Baptist views by the Haldanes in 1808, Falkirk Baptist Church owes its origin. Love continues, "Although no records of the Falkirk Independent or Congregational Church seem to exist, the title-deeds show there was almost a complete change of managers about this time. The history of the early years of Falkirk Baptist Church is much chequered, and not a little confusion seems to exist; it is so much a case of formations, divisions, and unions. It may be stated with some degree of certainty that the first Baptist Church of Falkirk was established about the close of the year 1807, or

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the beginning of 1808, although prior to this there were people in the area who had adopted Baptist views, although their number does not seem to have been such as to warrant them founding a church”.

This first Baptist Church of Falkirk followed an ‘English’ pattern of church government, the way all Scottish Baptist churches are today. Churches following the ‘English’ system normally had one full-time minister. In addition, Falkirk had in 1820 two ‘Scotch’ Baptist churches, which merged in 1826. ‘Scotch’ Baptists were a body of Scots who worked out their own distinct principles and methods. Only baptised believers were admitted into membership, and churches were independent and self-governing. Normally the pastorate was shared between two or three elders who supported themselves by secular employment. Although they were perfectly recognisable as Baptists, they did not operate along the same line as churches in England and the name ‘Scotch Baptist’ had a definite and distinct meaning.

Love’s history then maps the course followed by the Scotch Baptist Church and the original Falkirk Baptist Church, paying particular attention to the men who were pastors of the churches and the different buildings in which the congregations met. He wrote the following of his task : “Much research has been entailed in trying to make the record continuous, but in this we fear we have not been entirely successful”. It appears that until the early 1880s, there was normally at least two congregations in the town following Baptist principles. The present church is a result of the ‘formations, divisions, and unions’ of these early Baptist congregations which Love wrote of, and its heritage and history can therefore be traced back to each one.

The first meeting place of the original Baptist

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Church was in the Kirk Wynd, and the first pastor was Daniel Dunbar. He was ordained in 1809 and ministered in Falkirk until his death in 1835. This group split and both groups met in the same building but on different levels, each



Callendar Riggs

with their own entrance. This caused them to be known as the 'split Baptists', although both groups joined again later. After Mr Dunbar's death, the church moved to the Congregational church in Bank Street, which had dissolved two years earlier. In 1837 Rev Alexander Smith was ordained as pastor. He had two spells of ministry, from 1837 until 1840 and from 1841 until his death in 1844. In between these ministries he was the minister of Ayr Baptist Church.

The Scotch Baptists opened a building for public worship in 1842 in Callendar Riggs. Men who were pastors of that congregation were Hugh Mitchell, John Gillon, James Thomson and Rev William Walbran. In 1850 ten people joined them from a Baptist church in the town of unknown origin which had dissolved. It appears that over time this church changed from 'Scotch' Baptist to the 'English' system, for in 1860 when William Downs took over the work it is known that he did not follow 'Scotch' Baptist views. Oliver Flett and others ministered here while students.

Howgate Church

Between 1860 and 1865 there was little Baptist witness in Falkirk. Both of these churches had all but ceased to exist, with only small numbers

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Howgate Church

remaining in each place. William Downs considered the work in Callendar Riggs to be 'uphill and laborious'. The small congregation there split, for in 1865 William Downs opened a new building in the Howgate but some remained behind in Callendar Riggs. Rev Peter Gibb ministered for one year in the Howgate church, and wished to be united with the Baptists at Callendar Riggs. This union did not happen until the ministry of his successor, Rev John MacDonald.

But no sooner had the two congregations joined in 1868 when they split again following a disagreement between Mr MacDonald and Mr Downs. Mr MacDonald left with the new-comers, although they did not go back to Callendar Riggs but went instead to Wilson's Hall. Mr Downs found a new pastor for the Howgate church in Mr John L Spence who worked for two years until 1870 when, as a church, they decided to dissolve. Mr Spence died later that year, and a few years later Mr Downs sold the Howgate chapel before continuing Baptist work in Dumfries and Ayr.

Union of Churches

The church at Wilson's Hall became the main Baptist congregation in the town, although remnants from other Baptist causes still existed. Mr MacDonald was ordained pastor there in 1869, and the church joined the newly formed Baptist Union of Scotland. Ministries by Rev George Fisher, Mr George Wilson, and Rev Duncan MacPherson followed, although it wasn't until Mr James Wilson and his family came to reside in Bantaskin estate in Falkirk in 1880 that divisions

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were healed and a union of Baptists in the town took place. In many ways it was a collection of fragments. Mr Wilson gave great encouragement to the Baptist cause in Falkirk, and in August 1883 a call was made to Rev Walter J Mathams who was inducted to the pastorate of the church in October that year. A preacher of great power, Mr Mathams soon gathered together a congregation which the hall they met in could not hold. With the generous offer from James Wilson to meet half of the required cost of £500, the church decided to build an iron building in Melville Street for use as a church, as the congregation considered they could not afford a stone building at that time. Iron churches were quite common then, and were seen as the answer for churches which needed their own premises but had limited financial resources. Completed in 1885, this building was soon unfortunately referred to as the 'tin kirk'. (The building later became a picture-house, and is now used as a farm building near Edinburgh). Mr Mathams, who was also an author and hymn writer, ministered in Falkirk Baptist for five years before accepting an important charge at Wycliffe Baptist Church, Birmingham. He wrote the children's hymn 'Jesus Friend Of Little Children' which is in the Baptist hymnal, and he was a regular contributor to the Scottish Baptist Magazine. After his departure for Birmingham, a call was made to Rev Alex Paterson in 1889 and his ministry lasted for nearly thirty-three years until 1922.



Walter J Mathams



The 'Tin Kirk'

This summary of Love's work gives an outline of early Baptist witness in Falkirk. The intention of

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this book is to record the history of Falkirk Baptist Church since 1906, the year James Love's history was published. Love records little on the then minister Rev Alex Paterson, so this particular history of Falkirk Baptist Church begins with the ministry of Rev Alex Paterson, the man who turned Falkirk Baptist into one of the main evangelical forces in the town.