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Christ's Holy Community

(Aspects of the doctrine of the Church held by the Particular Baptists in the 17th Century.)

THROUGHOUT the seventeenth century the General or Arminian Baptists, who traced their origin to the church of Helwys and Murton, continued their witness, but the more influential group of Baptists was the Particular or Calvinistic sect, whose history begins with the separation of certain antipaedobaptists from the Jacob—Lathrop—Jessy Church, so called because of its succession of pastors, which had been organised by Henry Jacob on his return to England from Holland in 1616. This new Church, like the Independents, whose theology it shared, was concerned to build its ecclesiastical theology on their conception of the Divine Law and their belief that the visible church is God's "holy community." The attitude of the Particular Baptists to Law is well demonstrated in the "Appendix" to the 1646 Confession, which speaks of the Law as having been fulfilled and having no more power over mens' lives, but adds that Christ commands men to follow the same way of righteousness and holds that even the first table of the Covenant, epitomised in the words, "thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, &c.," demands our obedience. Henry Jessy, the pastor of the parent church, who afterwards joined the newer Baptist group, holds that it is by our knowledge of Christ that we come to know and obey the divine Law. "When one knowes Christ in the Gospel of Christ, its the special way to teach them into the thinges of the Law."¹ Yet all Baptists are anxious to insist that the observance of the Law is not the true end of life; rather is it the means whereby the individual believer finds his freedom. Hanserd Knollys, whose name appeared at the foot of most of the Baptists' Confessions in this period, and who baptised Jessy, writes, "The yoke of Christ's spiritual lawes and holy ordinances put upon the neck of his disciples is no abridgement of their liberties, but an enlargement of their beauty and dignity."² Thus the Baptists with the other Separatists searched the Scriptures for God's Law concerning His Church. Yet, the Baptists were by no means as legalistic in their attitude to the problems of both Church and State as were the Independents of the same period. Indeed Samuel Richardson, one of the most influential Baptists in London, and famous for his work, *Of the Torments of Hell*, holds that human necessity must always be counted as a superior motive

¹ Jessy, H., *The Exceeding Riches of Grace*, 1647, p. 94.

² Knollys, H., *An Exposition of the First Chapter of the Song of Solomon*, 1656, p. 48.

for any action than the observance of the written Law; "a course in itself singular and unjustifiable, by reason of some circumstances falling in, may become, not only lawful, but a duty and a sin to neglect it."³ Yet Richardson, with his fellow-Baptists, recognises that the New Testament, being the Will of Christ, is full of His commandments and is thus the only Rule for the Church. This point of view is expressed in the Somerset Confession of Faith in 1656, Christ, "as he is our prophet, so hath he given us the Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, as a rule and direction unto us both for faith and practice."⁴ The Law of the Scriptures, as it is a covenant of works is abrogated by Christ, and as such has no more hold over us, yet the whole Bible remains valid as a direction for personal and ecclesiastical conduct.

The belief that the visible Church is "Christ's holy community" is constantly reiterated by both the Particular and General Baptists. Article XXIX of the London Confession of 1646 reads:—

"All believers are a holy and sanctified people, and that sanctification is a spiritual grace of the new covenant, and an effect of the love of God manifest in the soul, whereby the believer presses after a heavenly and evangelical obedience to all the commands which Christ, as head and king, in his covenant, hath presented to them."⁵

It is the work of the Church to translate this view of sanctification into ecclesiastical action, and so it was believed that Christ's purpose in creating the Church was to have a community of disciples separated from the world which would glorify Him in the purity of its life and, by this means, would convince those who were not of the Church. Baptism itself represented the experience of sanctification in the lives of believers. The Confession of 1656 holds:—

"That it is the duty of every man and woman that have repented from dead works, and have faith towards God to be baptized . . . therein to signify and represent a washing away of sin, and their death, burial and resurrection with Christ. And being thus planted in the visible church or body of Christ, who are a company of men and women separated from the world by the preaching of the Gospel, do walk together in communion in all the commandments of Jesus, wherein God is glorified and their souls comforted."⁶

Thus the act of baptism represents both the subjection of the Church to the law of its foundation and its essential sanctity.

Because of their adherence to these two principles the Baptists were as anxious as the other Separatist and Dissenting

³ Richardson, S., *An answer to the London Minister's Letter*, 1649, p. 2.

⁴ *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Hanserd Knollys Society), 1854, p. 83.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

groups, that no "human inventions" should be introduced into either the government or worship of the Church. The whole duty of man in his relationship to God, is plainly set forth in the Scriptures and to add or take away from the written Word is, for these men, a denial of the sovereignty of Christ over His own Church. Hanserd Knollys identifies the imposition of human laws, commandments and traditions upon the saints and churches of God, with the work of Antichrist.⁷ William Kiffin, probably the most famous of the Baptists of this period, holds to this same position and constantly repeats that his beliefs are founded on the fact that, "Jesus Christ is the only head and husband, Lord and Lawgiver of his church and people."⁸ In 1681, Kiffin wrote, claiming that it was as a result of his search for Christ's Law concerning His Church that he was led to forsake the Jacob—Lathrop—Jessy church. He desires no ecclesiastical order other than that laid down by Christ and the apostles, and practised by the primitive Church. "This order I found to be," he writes, "that after Conversion they were baptized, added to the Church, and continued in the Apostles Doctrine, Fellowship, Breaking of Bread, and prayer."⁹ The Baptists regarded their church order as nothing other than the plain sense of scripture. In this same work Kiffin deals at length with the significance of the sacrament of baptism. It is, "the Pledge of our Entrance into Covenant with God, and of the giving up of ourselves unto him in the solemn Bond of Religion, and we are hereby dedicated unto the service of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost"; he goes on, "then must it, of necessity be the First Ordinance, before that of the Lord's Supper."¹⁰ He emphasises that only believers who have made confession of their faith may be baptised and to deviate from this rule is to bring into the fellowship of the Church unregenerate men. As it is the Sacrament of "Regeneration, Institution and Incorporation" baptism cannot be repeated, being the seal of God's covenant once made by God with men."¹¹ Thus, for the Baptists at this time baptism was an ecclesiastical ordinance whose nature epitomised their view of the Church.

The Confessions of this period are of little help in enabling us to determine the relationship between the church polity of the Baptists and that of the Independents and Presbyterians. The 1646 Confession defines the visible body as:—

⁷ Knollys, H., *op. cit.* p. 15.

⁸ Kiffin, W. "Certain Observations upon Hosea 2. 7-8," 1642, p. 10.

⁹ Kiffin, W., "A Sober Discourse of Right to Church-Communion. Wherein is proved . . . That no Unbaptized person may be Regularly admitted to the Lord's Supper," 1681. The Address to the Reader.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* The Preface (p. 6).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

"a company of visible saints, called and separated from the world by the Word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel, being baptized into that faith and joined unto the Lord, and each to other, by mutual agreement, in the practical enjoyment of the ordinances commanded by Christ, their head and king."

Such a church has power given it to choose among itself elders and deacons, according to the directions laid down by the Scriptures, while any member who preached the Word was considered competent to dispense the rite of baptism. The one help this Confession gives us in our attempt to determine the relationship between these local churches is found in clause XL, which reads:—

"although the particular congregations be distinct and several bodies, every one as a compact and knit city within itself: yet are all to walk by one rule of truth; so also they (by all means convenient) are to have the counsel and help one of the other if necessity require it, as members of one body, in the common faith under Christ, their head."

The Somerset Confession of 1656 adds little to this, simply holding, "That it is the duty of the members of Christ in the order of the Gospel, though in several congregations and assemblies (being one in the Head) if occasion be to communicate each to other in things spiritual and temporal." That this point of view meant that, in most respects, the local church was regarded as "independent" is demonstrated by the decision of the Assembly of Elders and Messengers of the Particular Baptist Churches, which met in London, September 3rd-12th, 1689. This assembly said of its own powers:—

"We disclaim all manner of superiority and superintendency over the churches, and we have no power to prescribe or impose any thing upon the faith or practice of any of the churches of Christ . . . in those things wherein one church differs from another church in their principles or practices, in point of communion, we cannot, shall not impose upon any particular church therein, but leave every church to their own liberty to walk together as they have received from the Lord. . . That whatsoever is determined by us in any case, shall not be binding on any one church, till the consent of that church be first had, and they conclude the same among themselves."¹²

Yet it must not be assumed from these quotations that the Particular Baptists were not interested to determine the evangelical bond between the various congregations. Hanserd Knollys in particular exercised himself with this problem. In his *Exposition of the First Chapter of the Song of Solomon* (p. 17) he speaks of the mystical unity of the whole Church, "The Spouse of Christ is but one mystical Body, consisting of many spiritual members, compacted and fitly joined together." In his *Moderate Answer*

¹² Vide *The Baptist Annual Register for 1790*, p. 48f.

unto Dr. Bastwick's Book Called, *Independency not God's Ordinance*, Knollys is forced to consider how this spiritual unity must be translated into ecclesiastical practice. In this answer he differentiates between Presbyterian government which allows to the local congregation a large measure of independency and the government which demands that all local churches shall be dependent on the central presbytery. He writes:—

"If by Independent the doctor indeede mean (as it doth appear so to my understanding by many passages in this booke he doth intend) a Presbyterian Government which hath not Dependencie upon any in matters meerly Ecclesiasticall (but upon the Lord Jesus Christ, who is Head of the Church). And if by Dependent hee also intendeth (as in many other passages in his booke seemeth to me to be his meaning) a Presbyterian—Government which hath a Dependencie upon a supream Judicature of a Common—Councell of Presbyters, and who must in matters Ecclesiasticall be subject unto the Decrees, Sentences, Constitutions and Commandments of a Common—Councell, Colledge (sic), or Consistorie of Classicall, Provincially, or synodically Presbyters; Then I do not conceive the Doctor hath not proved (nor will he ever be able to prove) that the Presbyterian—Government—Dependent is Gods Ordinance."

Thus we see that while the Baptists insist upon the autonomy of the local church, especially as against the views of classical Presbyterianism, they do not preclude the establishment of an ecclesiastical relationship between their churches, though this is not fully defined. It is significant that in 1649 the fiery Welsh evangelist, Vavasor Powell, pleads that the controversy between these two forms of polity should be forgotten.

"The differences between Presbytery and Independency, is not so great in the principles (though they differ in several Circumstantialls) as it is in practice . . . but I humbly desire of God, and desire of you, that you would see whether you can reconcile these differences for the case of the nation requires it."¹³

As the Church, Christ's spiritual kingdom, is separate from the world the members of the Church can claim no rights within the secular state other than those which belong to all citizens, whether elect or pagan. The Confession of 1646 speaks of the Christian life as being, "a continual warfare and combat against sin, self, the world and the devil" and from this concludes that "whatsoever the saints possess or enjoy of God spiritually is by faith; and outward and temporal things are lawfully enjoyed by a civil right by them that have no faith." This attitude, is, of course, a denial of that belief in the integration of the "spiritual" and "temporal," which characterised mediaeval society, and which remained one of the presuppositions of the social thinking of many of the Reformers. In England, the Established Church, the Puritans and even the early Separatists had no desire to effect

¹³ Powell, V., *God the Father Glorified*, 1649, p. 57.

the complete separation of Church and State, though many desired to limit the right of the State to interfere in ecclesiastical affairs. The generally accepted social theory of the Baptists was that the Church must remain aloof from all secular matters, though this did not prevent many Baptists from taking an active part in various administrative aspects of the Cromwellian government. In a letter to the Baptists of Ireland in 1653-4, Kiffin complains that there seems to be "raised among you a spirit of great dissatisfaction and opposition against this present authority." He pleads with them to follow the Ordinance of Scripture and subject themselves to the civil authority, adding:—

"Truly, it is more unlovely for us to be found contending against powers, because we profess ourselves to be dead with Christ, being buried with him in baptism, and to be raised with him to this end that we may walk in newness of life, and, as strangers and pilgrims, declaring we seek another city, even that whose builder and maker is God. Therefore the Apostle concludes this, that though we are in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh; a Christians warfare being another matter to another end."¹⁴

In another work Kiffin insists that, in days when the State interferes in religious matters, thereby making men, not Christians, but "formall hypocrites," then it is "high time to hearken to the voice of the Apostle, Act 2. 40, to save ourselves from such a generation, and to come out from them."¹⁵

All Baptists asserted their belief that the invasion of the affairs of the Church by the civil State was a denial of the very nature of the Gospel.

"The preaching of the Gospel to the conversion of sinners is absolutely free; no way requiring, as absolutely necessary any qualifications, or terrors of the Law or preceding ministry of the law, but only and alone the naked soul, a sinner and ungodly, to receive Christ crucified, dead and buried and risen again as through the gospel shall be brought to believe on him."¹⁶

Yet this did not preclude any relationship between Church and State. They held it was the duty of the ruling Magistrate to create conditions in which the preaching of the Gospel might be more effective. The nation should be purged of all that hindered the expression of the truth. The Hanserd Knollys Society edition of *Baptist Confessions of Faith* contains an address from the "Baptized Churches" of Northumbria to Cromwell petitioning him to "suppress all profaneness, idolatry, atheism, blasphemy, the contempt of scriptures, ordinances and seasons of God's worship." This would mean that the State must preserve among its citizens a reverence for the Church, which would remain independent of it. Vavasor Powell, in 1649, fears that, "as

¹⁴ *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Hanserd Knollys Society), p. 322.

¹⁵ Kiffin, W., *A Brief Remonstrance*, 1645, p. 9.

¹⁶ The Confession of 1646 (p. 37).

heretofore liberty of conscience was too much denied: so now liberty to corruption is too much tolerated." ¹⁷ Hanserd Knollys uses the words of *Isaiah* xlix. 23 in much the same way as they were used by the early Separatists and Puritans:—

"If the Kings of the earth would be the Saints Nursing-Fathers, and the Queens their Nursing-Mothers (laying aside their coercive powers) to bring Zion's sons in their arms, and her daughters upon their shoulders to the Churches and Ordinances of the Lord, submitting themselves to the yoke of Christ, it would be their benefit and Zion's glory." ¹⁸

All Dissenting groups, at this time, desire that the Christian Magistrate shall use his power for the extension of Christ's Kingdom; they differ in their view, whether he may use his "coercive power" to this end.

All Baptist Confessions of Faith insist that it is the prime duty of the magistrate to "tender the liberty of men's conscience." This belief sprang, not from an assertion concerning the rights of man, but rather from their view of the nature of the Church. William Kiffin gives as the reason for his advocacy of toleration:—

"Our subjection to Christ and his Lawes . . . must be raised within us from the consideration of that excellency that is in Christ and his lawes, and from no by-end whatsoever." ¹⁹

Samuel Richardson in his *The Necessity of Toleration* (1647) gives much the same reason:—

"it is God's way to have religion free, and only to flow from an inward principle of faith and love, neither would God be worshipped of unwilling worshippers. It is His prerogative only to force religion, by working faith in men's hearts; for though religion be natural, yet true religion is supernatural, and proceeds from the Spirit of God." ²⁰

It is only in secular matters that the State has the right to interfere with the lives of its subjects. In 1659 a group of "baptized persons" declare:—

"Although we would have a tolleration of men in their several worships; yet we would not have the least tolleration in any person in Civill things, much less of our selves, but we earnestly desire that all unjust, dishonest and evil behaviour against men may be punished, by those who are magistrates, who ought not to bear the sword in vain." ²¹

In matters of religion it is accounted great sin for men to yield to the magistrate who prescribes a false worship. To claim that one's action in such a case was committed as the result of magis-

¹⁷ Powell, V., *God the Father Glorified*, p. 59.

¹⁸ Knollys, H., *An Exposition of the First Chapter of the Song of Solomon*, p. 40.

¹⁹ Kiffin, W., *Certaine Observations upon Hosea*, 2, 7-8, p. 13.

²⁰ *Tracts on Liberty of Conscience* (Hanserd Knollys Society), p. 254.

²¹ *Declaration of Several Baptized Believers*, Single Sheet.

terial compulsion is no excuse for such unlawful obedience. The other early Dissenting groups held that it was the duty of the ruler to tolerate the truth only, but the Baptists claimed that he owed to those who followed error:—

"1. Permission—for approbation he owes not to what is evil—as Matt. xiii. 30, for public peace and quietness. 2. Protection of the persons of his subjects, though of false worship, that no injury be offered to the goods or the persons of any."²²

Believing as they did that there could be no true religion apart from the personal relationship between man and God, expressed in the act of baptism, the Baptists were always concerned to emphasise that their churches were gathered on a voluntary principle, knowing no compulsion save that of the Spirit of God. The Law of these churches is that contained in the Scriptures and their worship must be according to the pattern of the New Testament. The Church is integrated by its covenant, made by the members with God and each other. Hanserd Knollys in the *Parable of the Kingdom of Heaven* (1674) defines the Church:—

"A true visible constituted Church of Christ under the Gospel is a congregation of Saints, 1. Cor. 1. 2. Called out of the World, Rom. 1. 7. separated from Idolators and Idol Temples, 2. Cor. 6. 16-17, from unbelieving Jews and their Synagogues and all legal observations of holy dayes, and Mosaical Rites, Ceremonies and shadows, Act. 19. 9, Col. 2. 16-17, and assembled together in one place, 1. Cor. 14. 23, on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, Act 20. 7. to worship God visibly by the spirit and in the truth, Joh. 4. 23. 24, in the holy Ordinances of God, 1. Cor. 11. 2, according to the faith and order of the Gospel, Col. 2. 5."

Thus it is with the nature of the visible Church, as a local congregation, that the Particular Baptists of the seventeenth century are concerned. Of the nature of the relationship between these congregations they have little to say, being content that the local churches should co-operate for the advancement of the Gospel.

D. MERVYN HIMBURY.

When God Goes A-Fishing, by C. T. Follett. (Independent Press, 4s.)

Here is a book to put into the hands of any who wish to make a start in personal evangelism. Or better still perhaps, in view of its brevity, it could be used as a basis for group discussion. As such it would provide admirable preparation for active service in this field. Most of the important points are touched on such as motive, message, qualifications. There are also two short chapters on Bible Study and Public Speaking. The book is simple, sane, and purposeful.

G. W. RUSLING.

²² *Tracts on Liberty of Conscience*, p. 271.