

The Signatories of the Orthodox Confession of 1679

ON 30th January, 1679,¹ fifty-four General Baptists met, probably at Aylesbury, to sign the Fifty Articles drawn up by Thomas Monk, Messenger in Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire, in order to unite all orthodox Baptists in opposition to the heresies maintained by the Kent and Sussex churches which cried up Matthew Caffyn "as their Battle Axe and Weapon of Warre."² The General Baptists in London and the south-eastern counties were strongly influenced by the anti-Trinitarian movement among the Mennonites and Remonstrants in the Low Countries; the Bucks. and Herts. Baptists, on the other hand, had English Lollard antecedents and regarded these continental tendencies with deep suspicion. "The soil had been prepared in the district by the Lollards. Foxe tells us of Hardings, Bennets and Treachers, of Dosset, Willis, Hobbs, Lee, Norman, Widmore, House, Dell, between 1506 and 1521 around Amersham, Chesham, Hitchenden (Hughenden), Missenden, Upton and Wycombe. All these names reappear after a century and a half in Baptist churches."³ Other surnames could be added. It is a happy coincidence, and perhaps more, that Richard Monk was leading the Buckinghamshire reformers in 1428 and Thomas Monk in 1654-79. The Orthodox Confession itself mentions "our worthy and famous antients." The connection was with the orthodox rather than the radical wing of Lollardy; the extremists became Quakers, and the Baptists in and around Buckinghamshire remained "stiff in their mode of faith"; they preserved the three Creeds, the threefold order of the ministry, and the historic structure of the Christian year. Like their Lollard ancestors, they rejected any form of music in worship. Their church discipline was severe, and they refused to seek any indulgence from the State. Within the Baptist denomination they were noted for constancy under persecution and strict adherence to the faith of Nicaea and Chalcedon.

It is unfortunate that Crosby, on whose work many subsequent historians have relied, was less well informed concerning the orthodox than the Caffynite wing of the General Baptists. He did not even transcribe the names of those who signed the Fifty Articles, and it is time that justice was done to them. Their firm stand arrested the drift into Socinianism, and their restatement of the doctrines of grace, a century before Fuller's, helped to reconcile

Arminians and moderate Calvinists. Mr. Eustace Little (1827-1921), treasurer of Ford, drew attention nearly fifty years ago to the importance of local records in presenting a more balanced picture than Crosby's. I have had access to some of his papers through the kindness of the Rev. Maxwell Berry of Princes Risborough.

Of the 54 "stars of the first magnitude" who subscribed the Confession, some 44 came from Buckinghamshire, six from Hertfordshire (including three from hamlets then in Bucks. but now in Herts.), and probably two from Bedfordshire, one from Berkshire and one from Surrey. Thirteen of the signatories were members of the church at Cuddington or Ford, which then comprised meetings throughout the Vale of Aylesbury and in the Chilterns; twelve or thirteen came from Benjamin Keach's old church at Winslow and six from the church at Wing, which between them covered most of North Bucks.; some ten others belonged to the church at Berkhamsted, Chesham and Tring, three came from Aylesbury, and at least one from Olney. The countrymen outnumbered the townsmen by about three to one. All the known signatories either had private means or followed secular callings. They included five gentlemen, two shopkeepers later described as gentlemen, a bookseller and publisher, two grocers, thirteen yeomen, farmers or husbandmen, a labourer, two carpenters, a currier, a retired naval officer, a barber-surgeon, and an ostler.

The following notes are based mainly on the Bucks. Quarter-Sessions records, calendared by Wm. le Hardy and G. Ll. Reckitt, the Episcopal Visitation Book of 1662, the Clergy Returns of 1669, the Church Books of Ford and Amersham and the minutes of the General Assembly, General Association and Buckinghamshire (or Aylesbury) Quarterly Association, edited by Dr. W. T. Whitley. Crosby, Taylor and Urwick made use of some records not now readily accessible. Other sources are mentioned in the text or foot-notes. I have taken no great pains to search parish registers,

where to be born and die
Of one and all makes all the history.

It is of more consequence to know what a man did in between. I have, however, been enabled through the kindness of the Vicar of Dinton and Cuddington to make use of his registers, now kept in the Muniment Room of Aylesbury Museum, but have consulted other documents preserved there only through the calendar published by the Records Branch of the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society.

1. THOMAS MONK of Bierton, farmer and theologian, is best known as one of the Twelve Confessors of Aylesbury, probably the last English Protestants to be sentenced to death for their faith. At some time before 1654 he was elected and ordained Messenger or Bishop of the General Baptist churches in Mid-Bucks. and Herts. The churches in North Bucks. were separately

organised under John Hartnoll, thatcher. With twelve other Messengers and twelve Elders, Monk signed the Humble Representation and Vindication, disclaiming any Fifth-Monarchist sympathies and professing willingness to submit to the civil power and to assist in public affairs, provided that liberty of conscience was maintained. In 1656 Monk and other leaders subscribed eighteen resolutions of the General Assembly, which declared confirmation by laying on of hands essential to communion, allowed recourse to common law, and prohibited mixed marriage, reckless speculation and the resignation of elders. One of these resolutions foreshadowed the coming struggle with Matthew Caffyn. "How is Jesus Christ David's Root and offspring? Thus: he that was with God and was God, as he was such, was David's Root. And he that was with God and was God, that same was made flesh, made of or born of a woman of the seed of David, and so was David's offspring." Caffyn held that Christ was "born of a woman" but not "made of a woman," His flesh not being derived from that of the Virgin but miraculously formed in her womb. In his later tract, *Envy's bitterness corrected*, Caffyn declared that the Eutychian error "at no time was, nor yet is by me believed"; but he held strongly that since the Fall man's body is under condemnation, and he therefore could not believe that "the Redemption of Mankind is no more pretious than the Death, and Blood-shedding of a body of Flesh, in the fallen Estate." Caffyn's friends said that he only meant that since Christ's natural body was formed by the power of the Holy Spirit, He was not subject to the law of sin; but there seems no doubt that Caffyn taught that Christ's body was not derived from the Virgin Mother, and was not a true human body similar to ours. Caffyn's form of words concerning the Incarnation was "that the true Messiah, whom the Father hath sealed to be the Blessed Saviour of the World, was conceived in the Virgin Mary, and there took our Nature, and our Form, and so was, in all points like unto his Brethren, sin excepted; the Son of Abraham, the Son of David, confessed to be, while the first Man was of the Earth, Earthy, the second Man the Lord from Heaven." This was read by some in a docetic, by others in an Arian sense. A Declaration of Faith issued in 1660 by Monk, Caffyn and others was also rather vague concerning the Incarnation; yet it became the standard brief confession of the General Baptists, was ratified by the Assembly in 1663, edited and versified by Thomas Grantham, reaffirmed with his additions in 1691 and revised at the instance of the General Association in 1702, and is still accepted by some American churches. Various recensions have been reprinted by Crosby, Underhill, McGlothlin and Whitley. The subscribers declared themselves "not only resolved to suffer Persecution, to the loss of their Goods, but also Life itself," rather than abandon their belief and practice. This profession was soon to be tested.

On 3rd May, 1661 Thomas Monk and six others issued the famous tract *Sion's Groans for her distressed*, a dignified and moving plea for universal toleration. Soon afterwards Monk, Caffyn, Grantham, Hartnoll and others presented a petition from the General Baptists of Bucks., Kent and Sussex, Lincolnshire, Dorset and Notts., asking that the Declaration of Breda be fulfilled. The printer, S.D., was probably the mysterious Simon Dover who published seven other Baptist pamphlets this year. The Dover family is often mentioned in the Ford records until 1788, but no Simon occurs.

The petition went unanswered, and persecution soon began in earnest. In July, 1662 Robert Sanderson, Bishop of Lincoln, began his primary visitation of Buckinghamshire and demanded that churchwardens should supply detailed information concerning Anabaptists and other sectaries. Thomas Monk was among fourteen dissenters (five Romanist and nine Protestant) denounced on 24th September by one of the Bierton churchwardens, the other two having failed to act. He was charged with "con-

temptuously absenting himself from the publique congregaon" and having four children unbaptized. Others accused were his wife Mary, William and Elizabeth Monk and Thomas and Mary Whitchurch. On 11th October the Bierton churchwardens reported that "William and Thomas Monke who usually do absent themselves from divine service are now in the goale for this county by the order of the justices of the peace, but whether for that reason or for being taken at conventicles wee are not certainly informed." On 30th September proceedings were started against twenty-one Aylesbury Baptists, including Stephen Dagnall (No. 2 below) elder of the church at Aylesbury, William Whitchurch, glover and deacon, Thomas Hill, linen-draper, William Welch, junior,⁴ tallow-chandler, Nathaniel Elliot,⁵ carpenter, Mary Jackman or Jakeman, a widow with six children, Samuel Hunt, William Trulove, John Verey, and Richard Dalby, schoolmaster, who fled to London. Before any further steps were taken the Bucks. magistrates decided not to wait for the ecclesiastical courts. Within a few weeks they filled the county gaol with nonconformists and had to secure two large annexes. Next they determined to revive "the old practice of punishing Hereticks with banishment and death."⁶ An Act of 1593 provided that conventiclers could, after three months' imprisonment, be declared felons without benefit of clergy, unless they either conformed or left the country after swearing not to return without permission. Proceedings were taken under this statute against Dagnall, Hill, Welch, Elliot, William Whitchurch, Richard Wilkinson,⁷ William Miles (see No. 26), John Toveye,⁸ William Franklin, a shoemaker called Brandon,⁹ Ann (or Jane) Turner, spinster, and widow Jackman, one of whose children fifty years later related the proceedings to Benjamin Stinton.¹⁰ According to her account those charged included Thomas Monk, but a copy of the Royal Warrant of 20th July, 1663¹¹ mentions only William Monke; both had been in prison since October, and Thomas's name may have dropped out in transcription; alternatively, if the Confessors were really twelve in number and not thirteen, William may be a slip for Thomas, as there were four other Williams in the list.

The prisoners threw themselves on the mercy of the court, declaring that they could neither conform nor abjure their native country. After a short adjournment, during which several magistrates left the bench in protest, the chairman, Thomas Farrer of Aylesbury (known to Stinton and Crosby as Farrow) sentenced them to death. They were returned to gaol and their goods were seized. Brandon, overcome by his wife's entreaties and by the fear of death, recanted and took the oaths, but later returned in the most abject distress to the prison and asked to be allowed to die with the others.

The Baptists were not numerous in Aylesbury, which had no tradition of Lollardy, but many, perhaps most, of the townfolk had Puritan sympathies; shops were closed and business came almost to a standstill. Meanwhile, Thomas Monk's son of the same name had ridden to London. William Kiffin, the most influential of the Particular Baptists, introduced him to Clarendon, who laid the case before Charles II. The King, who genuinely disliked persecution and needed Kiffin's money, seemed surprised that such a sentence was possible and granted an immediate reprieve, with which young Monk rode back to Aylesbury. His father and the rest remained in prison until next Assizes, when a pardon arrived and they were released. Next year a new and milder Conventicle Act was passed, but the older statute was not repealed, and as late as 1683 an attempt to invoke its provisions against a Quaker of Bristol failed only because of technical errors in the indictment.

After his release Monk continued to preach assiduously in all parts of his diocese. He was reported in 1669 from Bierton, where he and Stephen Dagnall taught thirty inconsiderable people in the house of Anthony Darvall, maltster (still active in 1690); from Redbourn in Herts., where he and John Russell preached; and from the old priory of St. Margaret de

Bosco which had become the mansion of George Cathedral (No. 36 below): The present writer's ancestors were then living a mile from St. Margaret's, and probably often worshipped there.

Persecution was fairly active during 1670-71, though in Bucks. neither civil nor ecclesiastical court records have survived. When in 1672 Charles II issued his Declaration of Indulgence Monk and the elders of his churches decided not to apply for licences. Only one Baptist in Bucks, was licensed, Thomas Taylor of Wycombe, lace buyer. Monk's fears were justified; the licences were soon recalled and sometimes served as evidence against those who had accepted them.

During the years of severe persecution, all Baptists made common cause, but even before the Indulgence the divisions within their ranks were widening, especially the cleavage caused by the opinion that Christ's natural body was not made of the seed of David. Richard Haines, in his pamphlet *New Lords, new laws*, calls this "an error that Caffin hath preached up, and owned, and had printed it too, had not some of the Brethren prevented it." The anonymous pamphlet *A Search for Schism*, probably published in 1668, enquires "whether ye may not . . . if that Notion of Christ's not taking flesh of the Virgin get but Proselytes enough, adopt that also into the number of Fundamentals." This startled Grantham in Lincolnshire. "Many of our Congregations never heard of such a thing, till the Searchers became their informers . . . I can do no less than protest against that Opinion as a most dangerous conceit."¹² John Griffith, writing in London, admitted that the "wicked and absurd opinion" that Christ was not of one substance with the Father "did get Proselytes, and found opportunity to make a Schism in the Body of Christ."¹³ About this time Monk had several conferences with Caffin's adherents. They asked of what matter the flesh of Christ was made; did He not bring it out of Heaven? "Not long since I communed with some men, who very confidently did affirm, that the eternal Word did not take any flesh of the Virgin Mary . . . it was Heavenly matter, viz.: the Divine Nature was turned into Flesh in the Virgin's Womb."¹⁴ Monk found worse heresies than this. "They deny (or at least doubt of) God's omnipresence; and, with the Anthropomorphites, think of God as if he were some old Man sitting in some one place on a Throne." By 1672 most General Baptists seem to have been persuaded that the Eternal Word ceased from being Creator to become a creature, and that the God-head was turned into flesh. In October Monk completed his book, *A Cure for the Cankering Error of the New Eutyrians: Who (concerning the Truth) have erred; saying That our Blessed Mediator did not take his Flesh of the Virgin Mary*. It was sold at the Elephant and Castle near the Royal Exchange, "the price of a shilling, well worth the money and reading," noted Haines. In spite of the title, not much of the book is polemical; in his preface Monk says truly: "I have had no mind to Dispute, much less to Write about these great Mysteries, which I humbly believe and adore." For many years Monk had instructed his churches in systematic theology; he recalls "this Article which we reason'd so much on in our Church-meetings, when we were upon the Creed." Hence even when addressing "the poorer sort of Christians," he used the scholastic vocabulary with some precision. He could write that God is "pure and simple act, without any Potentiality at all"; no doubt the terms had been explained in many sermons. Copies of his work were treasured in humble Baptist homes for generations, but as the book is not now generally accessible a few quotations may illustrate Monk's thought.

Of the Holy Trinity: "Seeing the Scripture doth not use the Name of the Trinity, doth the Church well to retain the same? Yea no doubt . . . the sense of it, and the very thing itself is found in the Scriptures."

Of the union of natures in the person of Christ: "Some of you have been as brands pluck'd out of the fire (I mean out of the Eutyrian Heresie).

. . . The right knowledge of Christ, and union of his Natures, is so absolutely necessary to salvation. . . . There is no Communication of the Essential Properties of these Natures, but in the concrete only (as Logicians speak) not in the abstract; as we may say truly, and according to the Doctrine of Godliness, that God died for us; but we may not say therefore, the Deity died for us."

Of the sacrifice of Christ: "Christ, as Man, is the Lamb, as God, the Altar; and, as God-Man, the Priest."¹⁵

Of the Sacraments: "As all the Ordinances of God's instituted Worship, as Sacrifices under the Law, so all the Sacraments under the Gospel, seem to have immediate relation to Christ, as God manifested in the flesh . . . they consist of two parts, the one Natural, the other Spiritual; the one External, the other Internal; the one as it were the Body, the other the Soul of it; the one representing the Humanity, the other the Divinity of Christ: so that every Ordinance of Worship is (as it were) a representation of Christ incarnate."

Of the Virgin Mary: "We do willingly honour her three wayes, First, by thanksgiving to God for her: Secondly, by a reverent estimation of her: Thirdly, by imitation of her excellent Vertues."

Of heretics and hypocrites: "Their Fathers, Mothers, Wives, Husbands, Children, Friends, Loves and Acquaintance . . . shall deride and laugh at them, forgetting all bonds and obligations of Nature, and rejoicing at the execution of God's Justice in their Condemnation."

Matthew Caffyn, the leader of those whom Monk was threatening with "the endless, easeless and remediless torments of Hell" considered that the best form of defence was attack. At the annual meetings in June, 1673 he "endeavoured to engage the whole Assembly against Mr. Monk, and also had prepared something in writing in the nature of a charge against him, in order to bring him under the Censure of the Church." It has been said, on D'Assigny's authority, that the charge was of fornication, but whether this implied more than marriage out of the connexion is not certain. The General Assembly acquitted Monk by a large majority, but Caffyn's teaching was not condemned, and the Assembly went on to hear the appeal of Richard Haines, whom Caffyn had excommunicated for patenting a method of cleaning trefoil or hop clover so as to improve the seed. According to Haines, Caffyn instructed his congregations not to have any dealings with Haines, and said: "Me, I can as freely have Communion or Fellowship with any Idolatrous or unclean person, as with a man that should obtain a Patent; and if he shall persist in it, he shall be dealt with or excommunicated. . . . It is my Privilege, and hath been my priviledge this twenty years, and what, do you think that I will lose it now?" Monk proposed that the appeal be heard at once: "We can chuse out a party, six or more persons, and refer the matter to them, who may determine it presently before we part." Caffyn demanded that the case should first be heard by another local church and then by the Quarterly Association for the county. The dispute was not finally settled until 1680, when the Assembly directed Caffyn to reverse his excommunication.

Until 1673 Caffyn, while in effect denying the reality of Christ's human nature, had accepted His Divinity. Soon afterwards, in an unguarded moment, he admitted to his fellow-Messenger Joseph Wright of Maidstone that he no longer believed that the Word was of the uncreated substance of the Father. As the Kent and Sussex Association would not assume jurisdiction over its own Messengers, Wright preferred a charge of heresy before the General Assembly, but Caffyn's somewhat disingenuous explanations led to his acquittal. At a subsequent Assembly at Aylesbury¹⁶ Wright obtained another (probably Monk) to join with him, but was again unsuccessful. The date of these proceedings is uncertain, as the Assembly minutes are missing, but we know from the Berkhamsted records that in 1677 the Assembly met

in London¹⁷; Monk seems to have failed to secure the adoption of unambiguous declarations concerning the Trinity and the Incarnation. In that year an overtly Arian Baptist Church was established at Biddenden with Caffyn's assistance. Monk thereupon drew up his Fifty Articles, which were signed by the leading General Baptists in and around Buckinghamshire in January, 1679 and published later that year. The title, *Orthodox Confession*, was justified; except perhaps for Article 7, on the communication of attributes, the Confession expounded the historic faith of Christendom, our common inheritance from Fathers, Schoolmen and Reformers.

Even in Buckinghamshire, some churches held aloof; on 24th April, 1679 the church at Amersham warned a member who desired "to sit down with Thomas Monk" that they would have her "Consider well what shee does least she fall into a snare." A reference in the Amersham church book to Berkhamsted as "ye Church under the Care of Thomas Monke" has misled Taylor and others. Berkhamsted was under Monk's pastoral care as bishop, not as presbyter; from 1676 or earlier until 1698 its sole elder was John Russell.

Monk sometimes used highly Arminian language, e.g. "How shall he pay them, that by Almes-deeds and holy Works, have lent unto him?"; but he was sound on justification by faith and was anxious to secure a reconciliation with the Calvinist Baptists, which "would be very much to God's honour, and the Churches' peace." To this end he wrote but did not publish an *Essay for a right stating of the question, whether Christ died for all men, or for the Elect only?* In this he anticipated later discussions concerning God's love of compassion and His love of delight, "which the Scriptures make distinct: But they are usually confounded by the inconsiderate." The Orthodox Confession does in fact define the position on which Particular and orthodox General Baptists converged over a century later. Meanwhile the churches whose representatives had signed it formed a union or "General Compact" which maintained the orthodox evangelical faith throughout the worst years of the eighteenth century, until the rise of the New Connexion revitalised the denomination.

Thomas Monk probably died soon after his Confession was adopted, and certainly before 1685, when his widow Mary was again charged with absence from church. Dr. W. T. Whitley¹⁸ was inclined to extend his career to 1699, but the Thomas who represented Aylesbury at the General Association that year was his son. Strangely enough, this Thomas Monk the younger acted as crier of Quarter Sessions until 1686, when he resigned. In a lease of a cottage in "Coblers Rowe in Castle Fee" dated 30th June, 1682¹⁹ he is called "scr." (? scrivener). He was constable of the Parson's Fee in Aylesbury in 1688 and of Bierton in 1695. The General Association which he attended issued an encyclical letter against Caffyn's heresies. "In vain it is for you to separate from such as err about the subjects and manner of baptism; if, at the same time, you maintain communion with heretics and idolaters; as those must needs be who deny the Deity of the Son of God, and the immensity and omnipresence of the Divine Essence."²⁰

Monk the younger was still living at Bierton in 1706, when he served as juror. Thomas Monk, who assisted the church at Ford about 1741, was perhaps his son. Other members of the family included Benjamin Monk junior and James and Joseph Monk, all of Bierton, presented by the grand jury on 30th April, 1685 for absence from church. Joseph Monk of Hulcott, presented in 1680 for "a new erectt cottage," was perhaps the same; it was illegal under 1 Eliz. 1 c. 7 to build a house without laying four acres of land to it, but the proceedings may have been merely vexatious. After the Revolution the meeting at Bierton was at the house of Elizabeth, widow of William Monk. Richard Monk of Aylesbury is mentioned in 1679 and was assisted financially by the Buckinghamshire Association in 1703. Susan Monk was baptized at Amersham in 1704-5. The genealogy of the family

needs working out: anyone should be proud to claim descent from Thomas Monk, that "remarkable farmer" who was a martyr in will though not in deed and a true Father in God to the churches which he fostered.

(To be continued)

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NOTES

¹ 1678 in the old style, in which the civil year began on 25th March.

² A. Taylor, *History of the English General Baptists* (1818), i. 168, citing Thomas Lawson, *An untaught Teacher witnessed against, or, The old Bottle's mouth opened* (1655), which describes a disputation at Southwater.

³ MS. "Summary of the history of the church" preserved with the minute books at Ford, to which Miss J. Welford, secretary of that ancient church, has kindly given me access.

⁴ Constable of Aylesbury in 1678, indicted for neglect of duty; apparently he had failed to sell the goods of convicted Nonconformists. He was indicted in 1684 for absence from church. In 1691 he is called a grocer. In 1693 a labourer and cordwainer of Aylesbury were fined for assaulting him.

⁵ By 1669 he had moved to Winslow, where Hartnoll was preaching to forty Baptists at his house. He was known to Stinton and Crosby as "Ellit, a teacher." In Bucks., Elliott was sometimes spelt and pronounced Ellet.

⁶ Crosby, *History of the English Baptists* (1739), ii. 181.

⁷ Probably of Newton Longville, presented for absence from church in 1683. William Wilkinson of Chesham was "denounced excommunicate" in 1662.

⁸ Probably one of two Turville Baptists called John Toovy, who were excommunicated in December, 1662 for not having their children baptized.

⁹ Probably Thomas Brandon the younger of Buckland, imprisoned in December, 1662 for being taken at a conventicle. In 1690 James Brandon built himself a cottage on waste land at Baker's Lane End, where the General Baptist meeting-house (demolished in 1938) was later erected: H. Parrott, *Annals of Aylesbury* (1952), p. 41. The present General Baptist church in Aylesbury and its chapel at Southcourt both date from 1930.

¹⁰ *Trans. Bapt. Hist. Soc.* (1910), ii. 88.

¹¹ *State Papers (Domestic)*, lxxvii. 26.

¹² T. Grantham, *A Sigh for Peace* (1671), p. 104.

¹³ J. Griffith, *The Searchers for Schism search'd* (1669), p. 54.

¹⁴ T. Monk, *A Cure for the Cankering Error* (1673), pp. 50-52, 116.

¹⁵ In 1802, the Norfolk and Suffolk Association included among the essential truths of the Gospel "the sacrifice of Christ's spotless humanity, presented to infinite justice upon the altar of his divinity."

¹⁶ Crosby, iii. 281.

¹⁷ Taylor, i. 233.

¹⁸ *Baptist Bibliography*, i. 223; *Trans. Bapt. Hist. Soc.* (1921), vii. 221.

¹⁹ 322/22 No. 4 in the County Museum, Aylesbury.

²⁰ For evidence that Caffyn's followers still denied God's omnipresence, see *A second Address to the Anabaptists* (1702), p. 22, citing *The Vail turn'd aside*, which I have not seen.