Who were the Baptists?

(II)

In the Baptist Quarterly, July, 1956, there is an article dealing with the old question of the relations between the continental Baptizers' movement (Anabaptists) and the origin of the English Baptist churches. It is well known that there have been different opinions on this historical question. The author of the article just mentioned is Dr. Winthrop S. Hudson, and he takes a definite stand for an indigenous origin of the English Baptist movement, quite independent of the Baptizers' movement on the Continent. It is an interesting article and will certainly stimulate further research in its
area. Some scholars, however, will not be convinced by the arguments put forth in Dr. Hudson's article, and as to myself I have put several question marks in the margins. Here, I am going only to make these known; not build up an argument by references and notes.

First of all it seems to me that the question is not one of identity, still less a question of "succession." The latter idea could be left aside altogether, as the historian should have no other interests than the historical facts according to source material and conclusions in analogy with happenings in human fellowship. When Dr. Hudson speaks of "the identification of the Baptists with the Anabaptists," I am not sure that he gets to the real point of modern research. I don't know of any historian who ever would try to make such an identification, and to give arguments against an identification is an easy task. But the question is not solved by that. In the same way one would not be able to show an identification of the General Baptists with the Particular Baptists in England, but in spite of that one must admit, that both were of the Baptist movement, with the basic characteristics in common.

Exactly the same problem must be faced in the question of Baptist-Anabaptist relations. One should not lay stress on special, sometimes peculiar differences between the two movements. If one used the same method on the Baptist unions within the Baptist World Alliance today, one would be able to show that there is such a diversity, that an identity could not be spoken of, but still we know that the basic Baptist teaching is common also in dissimilar unions. But now to the arguments put forth in the article by Dr. Hudson, "Who were the Baptists?"

It is true that the English Baptists in the seventeenth century complained against the term Anabaptist as a name of reproach unjustly cast upon them. But such a protest had been heard ever since the Baptizers' movement started in early Reformation times. Balthasar Hubmaier in a writing about paedobaptism in 1527 emphatically denied that he and his followers were Anabaptists. After the fanatical Münster revolution of 1534-35 the representatives of the sound and peaceful Baptizers' movement refused to use the name Anabaptists. In the eastern branch they had the name Hutterites and in the western movement Mennonites or, early in the sixteenth century, only Doopsgezinden (Holland). The peaceful Mennonites tried to prove that there was no connection between them and the revolutionary Anabaptists. In spite of thus rejecting the name of Anabaptists all these branches had "the distinctive features" common to the original Anabaptists. If now the early English Baptists did the same, that is to say, rejected the name of Anabaptists, this surely cannot be taken as an evidence of their independence of the continental movement. In fact, they only
followed the example of the many Dutch Mennonite refugees in England during the sixteenth century.

When one nowadays, for historical reasons, uses the name Anabaptists, one may apply it to the whole movement represented by the Baptizers from 1525 through the sixteenth century. But then one must not lay stress on details and variations as community of goods, a strict negative attitude towards state and community, or practising of feet-washing and the like. In several Baptist unions today there are conscientious objectors to military service, and many also refuse to take oaths or go to court to get their rights, but they do not cease to be Baptists because of that. No, “the distinctive features” were the ones that we in the whole family of Baptizers have held since Balthasar Hubmaier in his Nicolsburg days in 1527 wrote the following clear statement about the order of the “gathered church”: “This is the sequence: first, Christ; second, the Word; third, faith; fourth, confession; fifth, baptism; sixth, church.” He also said: “He who teaches aright Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, teaches faith and love aright.”

This teaching also had many representatives in England in the sixteenth century, and the refugees from the continent at that time certainly drew attention to their teaching, as many legal actions in courts and several edicts clearly show. This Anabaptist teaching was not derived largely from the humanists of the Northern Renaissance but from an eager study of the Scriptures, as the original writings of the pioneers in the sixteenth century clearly show. The Anabaptists of the 1520’s came out of the Reformation in Switzerland and Southern Germany, and no one perusing their letters, pamphlets and books can avoid the impression that they had their doctrinal basis in a faithful Bible reading, and therefore demanded a more thoroughgoing evangelical reformation than they found in the movements led by Zwingli and Luther.

Another thing is that among the English Baptizers in the beginning of the seventeenth century there developed two branches, one more like the continental type as to the doctrine of grace, another with a strong trait of Puritan Calvinism in it. The latter naturally made good progress, because it had a congenial field for recruiting within the strong Puritan movement. But it is not their variations that are distinctive traits in Baptist churches, nor other theological questions as to Christology, open or closed Communion and the like, because we well know that among Baptists to this day there are various opinions on such matters. One ought to go back to Hubmaier and find the characteristics from the very beginning: Christ, the Word of God, a “living faith,” a personal confession (when all the brethren and sisters should kneel down and pray for the candidate), then the Baptism and as a result the building up of the church, gathered around the Lord’s table.
If the Baptizers came from the Zwinglian reformation, from Lutheranism or from Puritan congregations in England or in Holland, this fact can in itself offer no explanation for their status as Baptizers. There is also still the open question of the influence of Dutch refugees in Norwich on the first clearly Congregational church under the leadership of Robert Harrison and Robert Browne in the beginning of the 1580’s. Some historians lay stress on that, and I see nothing strange in such an influence by a closed group of foreigners with a distinctive religious teaching and practice. At that time, people were certainly not less interested in the customs and ideas of refugees than we are in our days. The Calvinist Congregationalists certainly lost several members to the Calvinistic Particular Baptists, and sometimes there were no clear borderlines between the two movements, as Dr. Hudson also points out. But were the Particular Baptists more Baptistic, so to speak, than the General Baptists, who as to the doctrine of grace evidently followed the continental Baptizers (Anabaptists)? Naturally there was a leftward “spiritual pilgrimage” in the Puritan movement, but the question is why this should have started in Norwich, where the many Dutch refugee Baptizers had their dwelling. Earlier “gathered churches” in England had been organised because of occasional reasons, i.e. more out of expediency than of principle. As the recently published writings of Harrison and Browne show, something new had come into the arguments.

Let me also emphasise the historical fact, that the “spiritual pilgrimage” of Puritans into the Baptist camp did not take place until Puritan Congregationalists had settled in a country (Holland), where the Baptist’s movement (Anabaptists) had been active for more than seventy years. A historian must lay some stress on such a fact, as he always must remember the old saying, that “life precedes literature.” If John Smyth did not agree with the Dutch Mennonites in all details and Helwys and Murton openly disagreed with them, still they had in common the distinctive features, that Hubmaier already had laid stress on: a living faith, individual confession, Baptism, the gathered church, and the Lord’s Supper.

I have thus added some question marks to Dr. Hudson’s article. There is, however, still one point that I must deal with a little more, and this is his presentation of the Anabaptist theology and activity “in the early years of the movement.” Here one has the subject for a treatise, but I venture to point out that the early Anabaptist leaders did not represent “the understanding of the Christian faith which was characteristic of the Northern Renaissance and which found its most eloquent spokesman in Erasmus,” and that they did not repudiate the doctrine of justification of faith. There may have been examples of such repudiation later, but among the early Baptizers one finds quite another teaching. As early as Hubmaier’s
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writing, *A Summary of the entire Christian life*, in 1525, one will find this confirmed: "We find that there is no health in us, but rather poison, wounds and all impurities," and in himself man finds no help and is a miserable thing. But Christ is come in this world "to make the sinner righteous and godly," and Jesus, according to his own words, is "the only gracious, reconciling interceding peacemaker with God our Father." In faith God makes these Gospel teachings "to live, wax green and bear fruit." From Christ, the sinner derives his life, and he can with Paul say, "that it is not he that lives, but Christ that lives in him." Having in this way, inwardly and by faith, surrendered himself to a new life, a man has outwardly to testify to it to the brethren and sisters in the church, "who live in the faith of Christ." Thereafter he testifies to it publicly by being baptized in water.

A whole pamphlet could be filled by such quotations from the writings of the first theologians among the Anabaptists. In his important book about the Christian doctrines, "which every man before he is baptized should know," Hubmaier speaks about Christ having "paid for our sins and already overcome the devil and hell." Christ died for our sins, and rose to be our righteousness, that "our sins might be atoned," and we reconciled to God. I could quote similar words from other sources. When the Baptizers' movement started among the Zurich left wing group in 1525, it had the character of a revival with tears, wailing, and confession of sins. And in the writings of that time one will find the stress led on the forgiveness of sin and the new life through faith in the work of Jesus Christ. As to Conrad Grebel and his relations to the humanists, I think that Harold S. Bender has cleared that problem well in his large book on Grebel.

In the so-called Schleitheim articles (1527), it is stated that Baptism should be administered to those "who believe truly, that their sins are taken away by Christ and who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ." About twenty years later another theologian among the Anabaptists, Peter Riedemann, taught that the propitiation and redemption of Christ was fully accomplished for our justification, but Christ is not only the justification for us, but he also works righteousness and godliness in us. By means of repentance and faith we must come into possession of salvation and sanctification acquired through Jesus Christ. We are grafted into the true vine, and therefore we have the power to bear the fruits of a Christian life. Similar doctrines were characteristic also of the Dutch Baptizers who had the Schleitheim articles translated into Dutch in the 1550's. Calvin's refutation of them was translated into English a decade earlier. Here a historian must ask, why?

The teachings of Menno Simons and other Dutch writers cannot be dealt with here, but the distinctive features of their doctrines
pertain to the "living faith," individual confession, Baptism in water, the gathered church and the Lord's Supper. Common to all Baptizers was strict church discipline and excommunication according to Matthew xviii. In other points there were variations.

With these remarks I feel obliged to point out the necessity first of all of studying the original texts of the Anabaptist fathers to find out their real teachings about the main doctrines and, second, to pay keen attention to the historical significance of the lively communications between the Continent and England during the sixteenth century. For my part I cannot cut off the Baptizers' movement through the centuries after the Reformation from the very source of it in the 1520's.

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Thomas Tillam

EARLY issues of the Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society contain a number of references to Thomas Tillam, whom the late Dr. Whitley once summarily and somewhat cryptically described as “lecturer at Hexham, commissioned by Knollys church but disowned, organiser of Muggleswick, Seventh Day, emigration agent.” The references in the Transactions are not all consistent with one another and they contain one or two obvious inaccuracies. Tillam has passing mention in the histories of both Whitley and Underwood.

Whitley more than once committed himself to the suggestion that Tillam was of Jewish origin. There seems little evidence to support this view except his later Sabbatarian and other vagaries. That he was a Roman Catholic in his youth he appears to have asserted in 1653 when hoaxed by a young Scotsman. Probably he first visited the continent in his early years.

At the beginning of the sixteen-fifties, Tillam came into association with the Baptist church in Coleman Street, London, of which Hanserd Knollys was pastor. He was clearly already an able and energetic personality. An exposition of Revelation xi, entitled The Two Witnesses, came from his pen in 1651 and the Coleman Street church felt ready to authorise him to preach and baptize. In the fashion of the time, he was designated a “messenger.” Presumably because of the status thus achieved and partly, it appears, through the influence of Colonel Robert Lilburne, Tillam was able to secure appointment under the Commissioners set up by the Long Parliament to inquire into the state of religion in the four northern counties, and was given the “lectureship”—that is, the post of occasional preacher—established at Hexham Abbey some twenty years earlier by Puritans connected with the Mercers’ Company.

Tillam threw himself into his new task and speedily convinced a number of persons of the truth of Believers’ Baptism. A Baptist church was formed, which met at first in the Abbey precincts. One of those received into membership was Tillam’s wife, Jane, who was connected with a Baptist church in Cheshire, perhaps Hill Cliffe. It seems possible that Tillam himself originally came from those parts or had early connection with them. Indeed, J. J. Goadby in Bye-Paths of Baptist History, says that Tillam was pastor at Hill Cliffe at the time of the outbreak of the Civil War. The Hexham
church showed itself very active in propaganda and evangelism, achieving notable success in the village of Muggleswick and at Stokesley, in Yorkshire. The members also looked northwards and had a share in the formation of a Baptist church in Leith.

These beginnings were propitious and Tillam was held in high regard. Troubles came in 1653, however. A Roman Catholic, of Scottish parentage, came to the neighbourhood by sea, masquerading as a Jew. He was introduced to Tillam by Paul Hobson—then army officer and Baptist leader in Newcastle—professed conversion and was baptized. But the stranger's real identity was discovered, apparently by Samuel Hammond, a Congregationalist, who, like Tillam, held an appointment under the Parliamentary Commissioners. Tillam was reluctantly convinced of the fraud and then showed himself displeased with the account of the matter published by Hammond and others. Tillam's own narrative appeared under the title Banners of Love displayed over the Church. There were already difficulties between the Newcastle Baptists and the Hexham Baptists. To judge by the surviving correspondence, they concerned matters connected with both the "blessing of children" (with the laying-on of hands) and congregational singing in worship, but soon became more personal in character. Thomas Gower (or Goare), who had signed the London Baptist Confession of Faith in 1644 with Paul Hobson, was now with Hobson in Newcastle. He took strong objection to some of Tillam's views and actions.

The Hexham church was in correspondence with the Coleman Street church regarding the formal recognition of Tillam as pastor. The original commendations of Tillam by the London friends had been in very eulogistic terms, though they admitted that their acquaintance with him had been brief. Now they felt that Gower's criticisms should be disposed of, but that in any case it was for the Hexham church to take its own decision about the pastorate. George Fox was travelling in the north at the time and had "a great meeting a-top of a hill" near Hexham. His preaching proved a further embarrassing influence on the local Baptists.

These various complications and troubles caused Tillam to visit London in 1653 or 1654. He was already an advocate of the "laying-on of hands" in accordance with Hebrews vi. 2. Indeed, the first baptism he had administered in Hexham had been followed by this rite. For some years a number of Baptists had been observing what they called "the fourth principle." Tillam made his position clear to the Coleman Street church and then set out to make contact with other groups who shared his views. So it was he came to know Dr. Peter Chamberlin, one of the most remarkable Baptists of his day.

"I was by a blessed hand," wrote Tillam, "guided to my most heavenly Br. Doctor Chamberlin, one of the most humble, mortified
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souls, for a man of parts, that ever I yet met with, in whose sweet society I enjoyed the blessing of my God, by the laying on of their hands, and after a love feast, having washed one another's feet, we did joyfully break bread and concluded with a hymn: in all of which the singular majesty of Christ shined forth to the mighty conviction of some choice spectators."

The exact date of this letter is not known. At about the time it was written, Thomas Gower convinced the Coleman Street church that they should disown Tillam "and all that are in the practice of laying-on of hands." The church at Hexham then became divided on the issues that had been raised and Tillam's ministry there came to an end.

This final separation occurred, one supposes, in the spring of 1655. In February of that year, Tillam had, on behalf of the Hexham church, signed The Representation and Petition of Christ's Servants, and your Highness's Loyal Subjects, walking in the profession of faith and baptism in Northumberland, Yorkshire and Derbyshire, an address to Cromwell found among the papers of John Milton. Paul Hobson, it should be noted, was among those who opposed loyal addresses of this kind, being already among the critics of the Lord Protector.

Dr. Thirtle asserts that Peter Chamberlin became a Seventh-Day (or Sabbatarian) Baptist in 1651, so we may assume that it was his influence that caused Tillam to adopt similar views. Within a year or so both men were vigorously advocating the keeping of Saturday as the Christian Sabbath. Tillam's next pamphlet dealt not with this issue, however, but with the laying-on of hands and was part of his continuing controversy with Paul Hobson. He had meanwhile made his way to Colchester. There were considerable numbers of Dutch colonists in the town, some of them of Anabaptist sympathies. Tillam is said so to have impressed the Mayor of Colchester that he was allowed the use of the parish church. Within a short time he had baptized over a hundred persons. It is possible that while in Colchester he came to know the Rev. Theophilus Brabourne, a Norfolk clergyman who had earlier adopted Seventh-Day views. In July, 1655, Tillam staged a public debate "in the French school." The following year he began holding services in the parish church on Saturdays, but closed it on Sundays and urged people to carry on with their usual business. This brought him into conflict with the authorities and he was put in prison.

Like many other seventeenth-century prisoners, Tillam occupied himself in writing, sending forth from Colchester gaol his next and best-known work, The Seventh-Day Sabbath sought out and celebrated: or The Saints' last Design upon the man of sin, with the advance of God's first institution and its primitive perfection. This appeared in 1657 and was in form a reply to a pamphlet by William
Aspinwall, a leading Fifth Monarchist. In 1659 it attracted the attention of Edmund Warren, the minister of the Congregational church in Colchester, and also of George Fox. Twenty years later, Thomas Grantham alluded to Tillam's book in his *Christianismus Primitivus*, describing the author as an "apostate." There were, however, still sufficient Sabbatarian Baptists to secure its posthumous reprinting in 1683.

Tillam's pages are excited and confused. He refers incidentally to "a pretended conference at Peter's, Colchester," and quotes Thomas Shepherd's *Theses Sabbaticae* (1649) and John Rogers, of Dedham, as well as Aspinwall. In the dedication he mentions "the many brotherly favours and constant encouragements of that worthy instrument who first invited me to serve you"—presumably a reference to the Mayor. Tillam was already stirred by apocalyptic hopes. "The signs of his second coming who is the Lord of the Sabbath are so fairly visible that, although the day and hour be not known, yet doubtless this generation shall not pass, till new Jerusalem's glory shall crown obedient Saints with everlasting Rest" (pp. 1-2). But among the most interesting things to be found in the book are two hymns and a metrical version of Psalm 92. Benjamin Keach has come to be regarded as the pioneer of congregational hymn-singing in England, but it now appears that he had a number of predecessors. Keach's *Spiritual Melody*, a collection of three hundred hymns, did not appear until 1691, though many of his verses had been printed in the previous twenty years. In 1663 Katherine Sutton had published in Rotterdam a volume of religious verses, to which Hanserd Knollys, who was then on the continent, provided an introduction. If used at all in public worship, it would seem likely that these were sung by Katherine Sutton as solos. Tillam's productions claim notice because they appear to have been intended for general use, and because they date from 1657.

The first—consisting of six stanzas of four lines each—is headed "An Hymn celebrating the Lord's Sabbath, with joyful Communion in the Lord's Supper by 200 Disciples at Colchester, in profession of all the Law's Precepts, Exodus 20, and Gospel's Principles, Heb. 6." The second—consisting of seven four-line stanzas—is "An Hymn in honour of the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2." The third is described as "That Psalm especially designed for the Sabbath." There are nine four-line stanzas and they are not unworthy of comparison with the versions of Sternhold and Hopkins and Tate and Brady. They are at least as good as most of Keach's verses. Six of the stanzas may here be quoted as a sample of Tillam's skill:

"To praise the Lord most thankfully,  
  it is an excellent thing,  
And to thy Name, O thou most High  
sweet Psalms of praise to sing."
To spread thy loving-kindness Lord,
When Morning's glory springs,
And all thy faithfulness record,
Each Night with heavenly strings:

For thou hast made me to rejoice
in work so wrought by thee,
And I triumph in heart and voice
thy handy works to see . . .

Those that within the house of God,
are planted by his grace,
In our God's Courts shall spread abroad,
and flourish in their place.

And in their age much fruit shall bring
delightful to be seen,
And pleasantly both bud and spring
with boughs and branches green,

The Lord's uprightness to express
who is a rock to me,
And there is no unrighteousness
in him, nor none can be.

Tillam's Colchester imprisonment cannot have been very lengthy, for in 1658 he was in London again and shared with Dr. Chamberlin and Matthew Coppinger in a lengthy debate on the Sabbath question with Jeremiah Ives, one of the leaders of the General Baptists, and an inveterate controversialist. We have Ives's account of this disputation, which lasted for three days and took place in the Stone Chapel, which was a part of old St. Paul's.

By then, Tillam's lively mind had become dominated by millenarian hopes. Exactly what part he played in the excitement and confusion which followed the death of Oliver Cromwell we do not know. It is unlikely he remained inactive in those months of petitions and counter-petitions, plots and intrigues. When, in 1660, Charles II returned to England and replaced Richard Cromwell, Tillam, like a number of other Baptists, found himself in prison. Again he took up his pen. Describing himself as "a prisoner of hope," he produced The Temple of Lively Stones, or The Promised Glory of the Last Days, a work of 400 pages. It contains a greeting by Christopher Pooley, an East Anglian Fifth Monarchist and Sabbatarian, who had already become one of Tillam's closest associates and who was to join him in his activities during the next few years.

Again Tillam cannot have been very long in prison, for in July, 1661, he was at Lowestoft with Pooley, busy with a scheme to transport his Seventh Day friends and their families to the Palatinate. What turned his eyes in this direction? Perhaps he had had earlier connections with the continent. Certainly he must have known something of the Anabaptist and Mennonite communities in
the area of the Lower Rhine. It may even be that through one or
other of his acquaintances he had heard of Peter Cornelius Plockhoy
van Ziericksee, whom Troeltsch describes as belonging to "the
moderate Baptist movement" and who, while in England in 1657
and 1658, talked of the Anabaptist settlements in Moravia, Tran-
sylvania and the Palatinate, using them as an example of the kind
of settlement he thought might be usefully established in this
country. In any case, the contacts between England and the Low
Countries were far closer than Baptist historians have sometimes
realised, while the dangers likely to be experienced by radicals who
remained in England were considerable. In November, 1661, John
James, one of the London Baptist ministers, was executed at Tyburn
for Fifth Monarchy views judged to be seditious. Tillam is said to
have become convinced that the personal return of Christ was
imminent and that it would take place somewhere in Germany.

Tillam and Pooley became agents for an emigration campaign
that may have resulted in as many as two hundred families crossing
the North Sea. Much of their time must have been spent in dodging
the authorities. There was considerable unrest in the country and a
number of small, abortive risings took place, including an outbreak
at Farnley Wood, in Yorkshire, in which Paul Hobson was implic-
cated, and another at Muggleswick Park, in which some of Tillam's
former friends were involved. These two outbreaks occurred in
1663. In 1664, Tillam was in Rotterdam and his behaviour was
adversely commented on. Two years later he was in Ireland and
apparently associated with the notorious adventurer, Colonel Blood.
By 1667 Edward Stennett and some of the quieter and more re-
strained Seventh Day Baptists felt it necessary to disown Tillam in
a pamphlet entitled _A Faithful Testimony against the Teachers of
Circumcision and the Legal Ceremonies, who are lately gone into
Germany_. But it is known that the following year another batch of
recruits left Harwich to join Tillam. These folk came from both
East Anglia and the North.

What happened to them? In the sixteen-sixties a considerable
number of Swiss Anabaptists made their way into the Palatinate.
There for a generation they had a limited, if uncertain, toleration.
In 1689 the French armies ravaged the country. Early the following
century a movement of refugees across the Atlantic began and
Mennonite settlements were established in America. Some day,
perhaps, a continental scholar will be able to unearth details of what
befell the English families who went to the Palatinate. Tillam him-
self died about 1676, an intriguing and quixotic figure. His zeal
was by no means wise, but he had laid the foundations of Baptist
witness in the North and his liveliness, versatility and courage make
us wish we knew more about him.

_Ernest A. Payne_