

## Early Baptist Letters (I)

*Two letters from John Clarke to Robert Bennett, 1655, 1658.<sup>1</sup>*

JOHN CLARKE of Rhode Island (1609-1676) was born at Westhorpe, Suffolk, England, and arrived in Boston, Massachusetts during November 1637. His sympathies with the defeated Massachusetts Antinomians seem to have led him, in 1639, to move out of the Bay colony and to settle at Newport, Rhode Island. When he became a Baptist is unknown but, from 1644 at the latest, he was leading a Baptist church at Newport. In July 1651 Clarke returned with two other Baptist friends, John Crandall and Obadiah Holmes, to Massachusetts. The three were arrested at the town of Lynn for teaching believer's baptism and for acts of rebaptism.<sup>2</sup>

Having secured his freedom John Clarke was dispatched with Roger Williams later in 1651 to protect the interests of Rhode Island in London and, eventually, to obtain its charter in 1663 from Charles II. Clarke also took the opportunity in London to publish his version of his experiences at the hands of the Massachusetts authorities in the tract *Ill neues from New-England* (London 1652). This contained a letter from Obadiah Holmes addressed to John Spilsbury and William Kiffin whose heading made it abundantly plain that Holmes, Crandall and Clarke considered themselves "members of the same Body" with the London Calvinistic Baptist leaders.<sup>3</sup> Another indication of Clarke's links with this group is provided by Thomas Tillam who identified John Clarke of Rhode Island as pastor of a "Baptized church at Worcester house in London" *circa* 1658.<sup>4</sup>

The first letter printed here shows Clarke's continuing close links with the London Calvinistic Baptist leadership in the persons of Richard Deane and Hanserd Knollys and, from a rather different circle, Sir Henry Vane the Younger. Vane is known to have taken a close interest in the affairs of Rhode Island in 1651-52.<sup>5</sup> Clarke's second letter reflects some of the hopes and fears of those who supported the "Good old cause" during the anxious and uncertain winter that followed the death, on 3rd September 1658, of Oliver Cromwell. Evidently, like a number of others, John Clarke was going to have to modify his republicanism.

*John Clarke to Robert Bennett,<sup>6</sup> 25th August 1655.*

25.6.55<sup>7</sup>

My much honoured and very highly esteemed in our Lord Jesus,  
Your loving and precious lines were not more longed for by your

poor unworthy brother before they came than welcomed and joyfully accepted and embraced when brought to hand. In the perusal whereof I will assure you mine eye did very much affect my heart with joy and, I hope, with spiritual rejoicing in the Lord to see and read that in so large and lively characters the Spirit of life and love from Christ our Head acting in you and even transporting of you, I dare not say above yourself or that rate of life and love at which you live, but I may boldly say, far above the rate of most I know and that of such also as do most highly pretend to live that life of love which is so far above.

Dear brother, while I make mention hereof as I cannot do it without hearty thanks unto the Father of mercies who hath made so happy an exchange in your soul as to place light and life there in the room of darkness and death and love there in the room of enmity that was so fixed in your mind against himself, so I cannot leave it without an earnest request unto the same God of grace who hath thus graciously begun to work in you that he would be pleased, even for his name's sake, that is called upon you and deeply engaged in you, that he would be pleased, I say, to carry on his work begun unto perfection with so much power that they that run may read and clearly discern that great Workman in so suitable a work: that these things may not only be found remaining in you but to increase with the increasings of God and so to abound as you may be as a burning and a shining light in that dark corner of the earth where God by his providence hath for the present bounded your habitation.

As for the dispute you mention which was in your breast to whom to write where it seems myself came into competition with Brother Deane,<sup>9</sup> I judge if it had been cast into an equal balance it might have soon had an issue and your labour of love run out upon him whom, in soberness, I do infer and is to be preferred in many respects and by many degrees above myself who am in truth but an empty reed. And, therefore, if I know my own heart, I should not have taken it amiss, if so it had been provided that in his you had given me a hint by which I might have been directed faithfully to discharge the labour and service of love I stand indebted unto yourself and to our worthy friend Sir Henry Vane in reference to that token of his to you and others wherewith I stand charged. But sith your love hath given such an issue unto that dispute, it hath greatly obliged me to make your apology to our dear brother Deane who, understanding the matter as I shall relate it, will without question (I so well know the frame of his spirit) accept of the excuse.

Your calling to mind with thankfulness to the Lord and to us the many spiritual consolations and invaluable benefits and advantages which you received while you were among us put us in mind of and give us a check for our great ungratitude both to him and to you in that we were not so wise as to improve the privilege and advantage that was then put in our hands while you were among us. We know better how to prize a mercy when we miss it than to improve it while we enjoy it. However, I trust we shall not forget your labour of love

among us, and some of that savour you left behind you will remain fresh on our spirits till we see you again. Your lines being read in the ears of brother Man<sup>9</sup> and his wife were of very good refreshment unto their spirits who did earnestly desire me to present their hearty respects unto you, together with their thankful acknowledgement for your kind remembrance of them in your letter. Our dear brother Deane does the like, who also this day did inform me that he hath received the letter you mentioned and forthwith delivered the enclosed to brother Perry<sup>10</sup> to convey it according to the subscription to Mr. Knowles.<sup>11</sup> Further account of it he could not give. Neither have I an opportunity for present [sic] to be further informed therein by reason that it was late yesternight before yours came to hand and this morning I have some more vacant time to return you an answer.

I bless the Lord with you for the health you enjoy and for that strength you obtained to withstand that offer. There is a regiment, a royal one, wherein you are listed, which though for the present endure hard service and seem to be worsted yet shall at last have the conquest and be everyone crowned. Mount then, Colonel, upon the white horse of sincerity and truth and take unto you the whole armour of God; but, above all, the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit. March courageously after that Captain who, ere long, will gloriously appear to be the Lord of hosts and Prince of kings. Follow him, I say, closely and fully whithersoever he shall lead you and take not counsel from sense or reason as to the issue for this is our victory, even our faith.

I have sent two of Sir Henry Vane's books<sup>12</sup> this day by [the] Exeter carrier and superscribed them according to your direction: one of them is for Mr. Carew<sup>13</sup> to whom I do earnestly desire to have my unfeigned love and due respects presented, being ashamed that I have not as yet given him a visit by a line or two. We have no further account of our great preparations for the western island<sup>14</sup> than the taking of an obscure island called Jamaica [sic].<sup>15</sup> The court were fasting two days since but we know not for what. Let us still bear in mind the words wherewith you concluded viz., that the kingdom to which we belong is as yet but a kingdom of patience,

Yours,  
John Clarke.

My due respects to yourself, your dear yokefellow and our sister the virgin. My wife does salute you all in the Lord. I shall present yours to Sir Henry Vane and the rest.

*Address* "To his much honoured friend Colonel Robert Bennet these present. Leave these with Mr. John Vigurs of Exeter, merchant, to be carefully conveyed as is above written."

*Endorsement* "Brother Clarke's answer from London 6th August 1655."

*John Clarke to Robert Bennett, 25th December 1658.*

Westminster 25.10.58<sup>16</sup>

Much honoured and very highly esteemed Friend and Brother,

I hope it will not offend you that by this paper I give you a gentle jog thereby a little to rouse you up out of your too familiar melancholy mood in which although for the present you may seem to lie secure and at ease, yet I fear you may be too much taken off thereby from following and fearing the Lord in answer to his great designs in the present generation in which we live. I am fully satisfied that there are two special designs which the Lord of Hosts hath very much on his heart to prosecute and to appear glorious in, in and about the days and times in which we live. The one is to bring in and set up that great and glorious kingdom of Christ. The other is to cast out and throw down the kingdom of Antichrist. And how well will it become the servants of the Lord to make it their business to wait upon him for wisdom and light whereby they may be directed to know their work, even that which doth most suit with the designs of their Lord, that so they may be at it, yea abounding therein, and that continually. Many considerations might be hinted at to stir us up and to provoke us hereto, as the consideration that it is our duty, oft commanded, much commended, it is a duty which that great, that free, that ancient, that unchangeable love of God commended to us in the blood of his Son, the height and depth and length and breadth whereof is past finding out, have deeply engaged our souls unto. Again it is upon the point the only way by which we can demonstrate our love to him whose servants we are and whereby we can glorify him in our generation. Again, our being about the work, the proper work of our Lord, yea, our abounding therein and that continually, is that which answers the end of many a word of the Lord with respect unto us. Hereby we shall in some measure answer the end of our creation, renovation, predestination, redemption, high calling wherewith we are called whether of servants in relation to so high a Lord or of sons in relation to so high a Father as he is after whom we are called; and, lastly, because I need not hint much to you of this nature, the consideration that such labour as this shall not be found labour in vain in the Lord is, no doubt, effectual motive to stir us up to shake off slothfulness and to become fervent in spirit serving the Lord.

Well, dear friend, let us by these and such like means in this slothful and drowsy watch of the night in which we live, wherein the wise virgins as well as the foolish, according to prophecy, will be found slumbering if not sleeping, I say, let us provoke one another and be provoked one by another unto love and good works, yea, to be up and at the work of our Lord abounding therein and that continually.

Now, although the general work of the Lord is either such as wherein we have more immediately to do with himself and such are works of piety, which is the contents of the first commandment, or else such as wherein we have more immediately to do with our

neighbour and such are works of justice and works of mercy which are the contents of the second commandment, yet the particular works of the Lord answering to the great designs of his relating to our day is either to bear our clear, constant, faithful testimony against that self-seeking, imposing, oppressing, persecuting spirit that is in the world as that which directly tends to the casting out and throwing down the kingdom of Antichrist; or else our cleaving to and constantly promoting of as much as in us lies lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth as that which directly tends to the bringing in and setting up that glorious kingdom of our Lord, according to that which is recorded.<sup>17</sup> The sceptre of thy kingdom is a righteous sceptre, thou lovest kindness and hatest iniquity, therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows. Let the same mind therefore be in us which was in him, let it appear as at all times so at this that we have it much upon our hearts to [love righteous]ness and hate iniquity.

And, in pursuance hereof, if it shall please the righteous Lord so to move upon the hearts of the good people of this nation in this juncture of time to act vigorously for the choosing of such as are so minded they love righteousness and hate iniquity and oppression, I shall have my hopes much revived as to the recovery of the good old cause and good old spirit by which it was managed. It is much on my heart to think and judge that the state of things are at this present upon the turning [point] and that this next Parliament<sup>18</sup> will be an instrument either very much for the better, if there should appear such a hand of God in so unlikely a way to bring together a considerable number of free, public spirit[ed], righteous principled men, or else very much for the worse in case they should be a private spirited, self-seeking generation. It is true that it will be *miraculo proximum* if it be otherwise, considering what work hath been made to the contrary by the many flattering addresses which have been brought in as also that the election is put into the old way so that the House will chiefly consist of corporation men,<sup>19</sup> yet herein we may observe a providence that the presbyters have hereby far less advantage than they had before. And I shall give you one notable hint as if the Lord were at work to raise up a spirit in this unlikely way to recover his cause and to revive the hearts and lift up the heads of his people. Two days since they proceeded to the electing of their knights for Hertfordshire and, to our amazement here and at the court, they chose for one Major Packer<sup>20</sup> and, indeed, it being the first election that we hear is made it is the more remarkable that this man, when he was in favour at the court, Major General of those parts, stood for it to his cost near a hundred pounds and at a time when there were five to be chosen that then he should miss it. And now, when he is out of favour at the court, out of his major generalship, stood not for it and at a time when but two are to be chosen that he should be one, no doubt it is wonderful. I perceive the good people of the city are stirring also for four that are good honest public spirited men. Also they are stirring in and about

Westminster to have Lieutenant Colonel Ludlow<sup>21</sup> for one; at Reading to have H. Nevell<sup>22</sup> who, though he have nothing as to religion, yet he is a public spirited commonwealth's man. That friend of ours [who] sent you a book by my hand will, no doubt, be one. Let the good people in your parts so bestir yourselves that out of your corporations which, as I hear, are many,<sup>23</sup> you may send us many free public and righteous spirited men and I hope the Lord of Hosts will be with them to take away our reproach.

Thus with my due respects to you both I take my leave and subscribe myself,

Yours to my power for Jesus' sake,

John Clarke.

*Address* "For Colonel Robert Bennet at Hexworthy near Launceston in Cornwall these to be left with Mr. John Vigurs, merchant in Exeter, to be sent as above with all speed. Exon.

*Endorsement* "Mr. Clarke his opinion of God's intentions in these days and Parliamentary elections. December 25th ('58)."

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These two letters are published by permission of the Librarian of Southern Baptist Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, in whose care they are. They were bought for the Seminary subsequently to a sale at Sotheby's, 26 June 1974. The punctuation and spelling have been modernized throughout and abbreviations have been spelled out in full. Square brackets indicate where the editor has had to supply a word.

<sup>2</sup> W. H. Allison, in his article on John Clarke in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, argues that it is unlikely that John Clarke of Rhode Island was the John Clarke involved in the English Fifth Monarchy movement during the 1650s since he thinks it unlikely that "the Rhode Islander would have proceeded so rapidly in his task of securing the charter for that colony if he had not been quite free from political suspicion". I am inclined to agree with this judgment, even though in these letters Clarke seems closely linked with republicans in the 1650s, since there was another John Clarke who definitely did hold Fifth Monarchy views. This second John Clarke was not involved with the "closed membership" Calvinistic Baptists but signed the Fifth Monarchy declaration of 1654 as a member of Jessey's congregation, supported the more extreme Fifth Monarchy members of John Simpson's "open membership" congregation c.1656-8 (*The old leaven purged out*, 1658, 28) and was arrested in 1658 in the company of Canne, Belcher and Day (*Trans. B.H.S.*, II, 269). This man, therefore, seems the more likely signatory of the *Complaining Testimony* at Abingdon in 1656 than John Clarke of Rhode Island. But cf. W. T. Whitley, "The English Career of John Clarke, Rhode Island", *Baptist Quarterly*, I, 368-72 and B. S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men* (1972), 246.

<sup>3</sup> John Clarke *et al.*, *Ill newes from New-England or a Narrative of New-Englands persecution* (London 1652), 17-23. The letter heading reads: "Unto the well beloved Brethren Iohn Spilsbury, William Kiffin, and the rest that in London stand fast in that Faith, and continue to walk stedfastly in that Order of the Gospell which was once delivered unto the Saints by Iesus Christ".

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Tillam, *The Lasher proved Liar* (1658?), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Violet A. Rowe, *Sir Henry Vane the Younger* (London 1970), 198ff.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Bennett (1605-1683), of Hexworthy, Launceston, Cornwall, fought for Parliament in the civil wars and, while of lesser gentry stock, had great influence in Cornwall during the 1650s. It is uncertain when he joined the Calvinistic Baptists. He was of consistently moderate republican views. Joined the Council of State 30 April 1653; represented Cornwall in the Parliament of the Saints; was a member of the interim Council of State; M.P. for Launceston and Looe 1654 and for Launceston, January 1659. See *D.N.B.* and Mary Coate, *Cornwall in the Great Civil War and Interregnum 1642-1660* (1933) *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> This, according to the style of dating followed at the time, would be 25 August 1655. The endorsement upon the letter (presumably by Bennett) giving 6 August 1655 is probably the consequence of an absentminded failure to translate the date accurately into the form which Bennett obviously preferred.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Deane (cousin of the Admiral of the same name who died earlier in 1655) was joint Treasurer at War (with John Blackwell) under Cromwell from 1653. It was noted in 1693 that he had been a Baptist "for above forty years" (Preface to *A copy of a brief treatise*, 1693). He signed the London letter read at the May 1657 meeting of the Abingdon Association, represented London at the May 1658 meeting of the Western Association and attended the Abingdon Association meeting in September 1658 (*Association Records*, 175, 96, 186). He seems also to have been one of the London preachers who served the Watford congregation in the 1650s (*B.Q.*, XXVI, 205-8).

<sup>9</sup> A "John Man" signed *The humble apology of some commonly called Anabaptists* (1661) with Edward Roberts and Z. Worth who were, apparently, of the same congregation.

<sup>10</sup> John Perry signed a letter with Hanserd Knollys from Swan Alley to Hexham in January 1653, was named as leader with Knollys at Swan Alley in a Hexham letter in March 1653, signed a Swan Alley letter first and without Knollys later in that same month and signed a further letter from Swan Alley as "elder" in September (probably 1653), (*Hexham Records*, 310, 313, 321, 340). He also signed the London letter to the churches enclosing the Irish correspondence in June 1653 (*A.R.*, 112).

<sup>11</sup> Perry's name indicates that "Mr. Knowles" is Hanserd Knollys (?1598-1691) who was a leader among the Calvinistic Baptists from 1645 until his death. See: William Kiffin, *The life and death of . . . Mr. Hanserd Knollys* (1692); Alexander Gordon's article in *D.N.B.*; James Culross, *Hanserd Knollys* (1895); Pope Duncan, *Hanserd Knollys: seventeenth century Baptist* (Nashville, Tennessee, 1965).

<sup>12</sup> The books referred to were probably copies of Vane's newly published *The retired man's meditations* (1655)—Thomason's copy was dated 2 July.

<sup>13</sup> John Carew (d. 1660) was a regicide and was executed at the Restoration. His "re-baptism" with that of Hugh Courtenay and those of Major-General and Mrs. Harrison was reported in the *Publick Intelligencer*, February 1-8, 1658. The *D.N.B.* article was by W. P. Courtney.

<sup>14</sup> The "western island" was Hispaniola.

<sup>15</sup> See A. Fraser, *Cromwell our Chief of Men* (1973), 530-2, for an account of the trials and tribulations of the Jamaica expedition.

<sup>16</sup> That is, 25 December 1658.

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 45.6f. This quotation accords more closely with the Authorized Version than with the Geneva Version.

<sup>18</sup> For a review of the situation at the time of the elections to Richard Cromwell's parliament see G. Davies, *The Restoration of Charles II 1658-1660* (1955), 45-8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>20</sup> William Packer, soon after the assembly of Richard's parliament, was deprived of his seat and his opponent at Hertford declared elected (*Commons Journal*, VII, 619). Packer is usually considered a Baptist (*Trans. B.H.S.*, IV, 58) and there is an article on him by C. H. Firth in *D.N.B.*

<sup>21</sup> Edmund Ludlow (1617?-1692) was a leading republican. See C. H. Firth in *D.N.B.*

<sup>22</sup> Hugh Neville was also a leading republican politician (G. Davies, *op. cit.*, 54).

<sup>23</sup> Cornwall, under the constitution enforced for this election, returned forty-four members (G. Davies, *ibid.*, 46).

B. R. WHITE.

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### PRIZE ESSAY

The Committee of the Baptist Historical Society has decided to offer a prize of £50 for an essay in Baptist history.

The conditions of entry are as follows:

1. Essays may only be submitted by members of the Baptist Historical Society.
2. Entries should not exceed 10,000 words excluding footnote references.
3. Subjects may include any aspect of Baptist history before 1950.
4. The Judges shall normally be the President and Secretary of the Society together with the Editor of the *Baptist Quarterly* and any others whose assistance they shall seek.
5. The closing date for the entry of essays for the prize shall be 31st December, 1978.
6. The winning contribution shall, at the discretion of the Committee of the Baptist Historical Society, be published in the *Quarterly*.
7. The Judges' decisions concerning the suitability and quality of the entries shall be final.

All entries must reach the Secretary by 31st December, 1978:

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