

Dutch Dissenters and English General Baptists.

Dear Sir,

I have read the paper on the above subject by Sir W. J. Collins with much interest. I have for years taken a deep interest in the history of the Mennonites of Holland and Germany, and have collected some interesting facts which I hope to make public when I find time. But my only purpose in writing this note is to make two corrections in Sir William's valuable paper. It is not correct to translate the Dutch "Doopsgezinde" as "General Baptist," or "Baptist Society." The above is the name by which the Mennonite Community is known in Holland, and to my personal knowledge leading members and ministers of this body deny vehemently that they are or have been Baptists. The name "Baptism—persuasion" has no doubt misled the writer as it did me during my first visit to Holland in 1883. Seeing the above name in Baedeker, I found out some of the leading members of the "Doopsgezinde" at Harlem, and presented myself as a "brother Baptist," but only to be repudiated as belonging to an alien body. As a matter of fact this Church—a very influential one in Holland—does not dip but pour, or rather as I saw the ordinance observed, the minister dips his hand in a basin and then applies it (the wet hand) to the forehead of the subject. The persons thus "baptised" (?) are not necessarily Christians in the evangelical sense, not even by profession: they have been instructed in certain Christian principles and they have attained the age of 12. The majority of the Mennonites that I have met are virtually Unitarian in Doctrine, just as the Old General Baptists of Great Britain were when Dan Taylor founded the New Connection of General Baptists. I feel it an honour to have been one of the successors of this great and good man in the presidency of the New Connection General Baptist College which he founded. It is quite inaccurate and misleading to translate the German "Die Taufgesinnten in den Niederlanden" by "The Baptists in the Netherlands." A far more correct rendering would be "The Mennonites," or "Anabaptists in the Netherlands." My friend, Dr. H. J. Elhorst, Professor of Hebrew in the University of Amsterdam is a Mennonite and an advanced Old Testament critic. Of course the Dutch "doop"

corresponds to the German "Taufe" (which both mean "Baptism") and the English word "dip." But the denomination that calls itself the "Dipping Community," does not dip in Baptism, and even deny that Simon Menno, their founder, was a "dipper," though they are probably wrong in this contention. Luther himself was thought by contemporary Baptists to favour their views because in his translation of the Bible he used German words for baptism (Taufe - dipping) which implies immersion. He was not long in disabusing their minds, for he was a rather bitter opponent of the Baptists.

Yours truly,

J. Witton Davies.

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Sir,

I have to thank you and Professor Witton Davies for the courtesy of permitting me to see the latter's communication to you in reference to my article under the above heading which appeared in the September number of the Transactions.

I gather that the Professor does not dispute that etymologically the Dutch word *Doopsgezinde* and the German word *Taufgesinnte* may be translated by the English word Baptist, but he holds that in view of the fact that those thus described do not now practise immersion these words would be better rendered by the term Mennonite.

If the word Baptism was always used as the equivalent for immersion doubtless there would be much force in the argument. The object of my article was, however, to trace an affinity between the old English General Baptists and the *Doopsgezinde* community of the Netherlands.

Not only in matters of faith and ritual, or rather in their disregard of creed and ceremony in favour of practical piety and guidance by the inner light—but also in their attitude towards baptism is a parallelism to be found between the old English General Baptists and those Dutch anti-Calvinists Dissenters who are known as Mennonites.

The earlier Mennonites not improbably practised immersion as did also (according to Mosheim) the Collegiants at Rijnsburg. At the Horsley Down and the Barbican Chapels of the London General Baptists there were baptisteries, in which immersion was practised. In 1717 (according to J. Evans) these were the only baptisteries then in London. Later the Mennonites appear to have relinquished immersion in favour of sprinkling or pouring from a bowl, which I understood from Dr. Fleischer of Winterswijk, is still their practice. Similarly

immersion seems to have fallen into disuse among the General Baptists during the nineteenth century.

It was not until 1770 that Daniel Taylor inaugurated the New Connexion of which Professor Witton Davies speaks with enthusiasm.

While therefore I agree with him that Mennonite is a synonym for the Doopsgezinde community which still survives in Holland, I think that the old General Baptists, prior to the secession of 1770, may be regarded as representatives of the same or a very similar faith as that held by the followers of Simons Menno, and by the Collegiants or Rijnsburgers, who eventually merged with the Mennonites.

While the New Connexion adheres to immersion the earlier churches both here and in Holland appear to have relinquished it. In corroboration of the above general statement I might cite the particular case of the General Baptist (now called Free Christian) Church at Horsham, which presents in its own history an epitome, as it were, of the history of the whole connexion. Matthew Caffin, the "battle-axe of Sussex," with whose memory the church is associated, originally practised immersion in the mill-pond at Broadbridge, near by. The church was built with a baptistery, which I am informed by Miss Kensett, still exists. Here baptism by immersion was, I understand, practised down to about 1849, when it was discarded. Admission to the community was then effected by the laying on of hands, while this again has been superseded by the admission of new members on the vote of existing members.

Yours faithfully,

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The ambiguity of the title Doopsgezinde is frankly acknowledged in Kramer's dictionary, which gives two translations:—"Baptist; in Holland, Mennonite, Mennonist." As a matter of etymology, Doop once meant Dip, but its modern usage seems to be almost entirely ecclesiastical, so that it and all its derivatives mean Baptize, Christen, &c. And there is no doubt that the usual act of baptism in Holland is not dipping; when de Hoop Scheffer wrote a pamphlet on baptism by immersion, he made his point clear by using another word, Onderdompeling. This word or its associations calls up a smile on the average Dutch face, showing how unknown is the act, or the body which practises it.

The Doopsgezinde, however, are a body well known in Holland, and Kramer offers as the best English equivalent, Mennonite. This communion was organized by Menno about 1537, several English immigrants joined the Amsterdam church next century, and it remained on friendly terms with the English General Baptists till 1696 at least.

In 1791, Rippon published a long list of its ministers and churches, styling them Baptist and ignoring all difference, though they were not and never had been Calvinist, and in Holland they had never used immersion. To-day, the Mennonites are chiefly in Holland and America, since the refusal to bear arms, maintained ever since 1537, has compelled emigration from most parts of Europe. They had the honour of printing the first Bible in America in a European tongue, at Germantown, 1743. In America the name has been variously translated; Dunker, Tunker, German Brethren, Mennonite, are some local usages. In no case do these churches join with the Regular Baptists.

The Collegiants were a community rejecting ministers, and cultivating Bible-study. They originated in 1619 at the village of Rijnsburg, and circles were soon formed at several large Dutch towns. On Saturday evening they met for Bible-reading, Sunday morning for the Lord's Supper, evening for thanksgiving, Monday morning for a closing discourse. An annual convention was held at Rijnsburg, the sentimental home which like Keswick gave its name to a wide movement; at this convention a few people were occasionally immersed on profession of their faith. The practical work of the Collegiants was charity; orphanages and almshouses were maintained. The whole movement collapsed in the Napoleonic wars; the last convention was held in 1787, the Amsterdam orphanage was sold to pay taxes in 1801. The chief documents passed into the library of the Mennonites, with whom the Amsterdam Collegiants had been very friendly.

The Dutch Baptists originated in 1845, when a little company of seceders from the Established Calvinistic Church in Drenthe, was persuaded by Köbner, the German pioneer, to adopt Believers' Baptism. There are to-day 24 churches with 1736 members, the largest being at Groningen, Stadskanaal, Hengeloo and Sneek. They form the Dutch Baptist Union, which is in membership with the Baptist World Alliance. The Doopsgezinde have no relations with the Alliance or with the Dutch Baptists, who use a different title, Unie van Gemeenten van gedoopte Christenen in Nederland. But so clumsy is this title, and so little important is it for Dutchmen to identify Baptists at all, that Kramer admits the use of the word Doopsgezinde to stand for Baptists outside Holland, though in Holland it means the very different but well-known Mennonites. The double usage is certainly confusing.

W. T. Whitley.