

Benjamin Cox.

A NOTE in the last number of the *Transactions* of the Congregational Historical Society adds to our knowledge of one of the few clergy who in the Civil Wars became Baptist, and honourably retired from their parishes. A few inadequate notes were made by Benjamin Stinton and printed by Crosby, whence others have copied them with further deterioration. The following facts are drawn from contemporary sources.

Benjamin Cox was educated at Oxford, and in 1617 was at Broadgates Hall, according to Anthony Wood. This quite disposes of the legend that he was son of Bishop Cox, famous in Elizabeth's reign, for the bishop's five children were all born before 1568, and he died in 1581. It is possible that Benjamin was related in some way to Bishop Richard, but no evidence as to his parentage is available.

He became rector of Sampford Peverel, a village five miles north-east of Tiverton. In 1646 he was twitted by Thomas Edwards for having been zealous concerning Laud's innovations. This probably means that he did not fall in with the prevalent Puritan notions, and did appreciate an orderly service; for we find him stickling for such points afterwards. It is worth remembering that John Wesley earned his name of Methodist for similar punctilious observance of the prayer-book, insisting in Georgia on immersing instead of sprinkling. Edwards lived at Hertford and

had no special means of knowing the facts, while his *Gangræna* shows that he was concerned in raking together everything he could twist to the discredit of those he attacked.

As soon as Laud's power was broken, Cox took the lead locally in promoting a reformation. What troubled many conscientious clergy was the custom of admitting to communion all parishioners indiscriminately; on this point he wrote a long letter of fourteen quarto pages and sent it to Martin Blake, vicar of Barnstaple, in 1642. The letter was penned in that town, and this may indicate how widely his influence spread.

Once a man sets to work in earnest to limit communion to real believers, he is likely to be challenged with questions about confirmation and infant baptism. At Sampford Peverel, Cox was within easy reach of Tiverton, where the Baptists had been decidedly in evidence since 1626. It would seem that, even as Paul learned from the humble Ananias of Damascus, he got in touch with this church. For Baxter in 1650 said plainly that Cox forfeited his chance of preferment and influence among the Puritans by his adoption of Baptist tenets. And when the ordinance for forming the Westminster Assembly was passed on 12 June 1643, Cox was not on the list. Also a scrutiny of the Journals of the Lords and Commons, showing the numerous cases where they promoted and paid Presbyterian clergy, shows that they never favoured him in any way.

In the course of this year, he vanished from Sampford Peverel and never returned. He may have been helped to this departure by the victories of the Royalists under Sir Ralph Hopton; the west country was not comfortable for any clergyman who was not a staunch Episcopalian. In May 1656, John Hopkins was the minister, joining in the General Association

formed October 1655. Calamy obtained the name of Stephen Coven as ejected, and has no mention of Cox in any way.

Coventry was a stronghold of the Puritans in 1643, and Cox bent his steps thither. Doubtless he was helped in his choice by the fact that the Baptist churches at Coventry, and at Tiverton had been in touch since 1626. His arrival disconcerted the ordinary reforming clergy who teemed in this city of refuge; and Baxter tells how he challenged Cox to a debate on infant baptism, first oral, then in writing. This appears to have been about the close of 1643. The military committee in charge of the city did not appreciate the division of opinion, and as Cox would not keep silent, they imprisoned him. He was not released till 1644, and then without any intervention of Baxter, who was morally responsible.

One detail in Baxter's statement is curious; he says that Cox was present by invitation to assist at the formation of a Baptist church. Now the General Baptist church there had existed at least seventeen years; perhaps there were now some Calvinists who had arrived at the Baptist position, and desired to be embodied in a separate church.

The next light on Cox is from Captain Deane, in his well-known letter to Thomas Barlow, bishop of Lincoln. It relates to the period after the use of the Book of Common Prayer was forbidden. This tyrannical order was issued on 4 January 1644/5, but as no penalty was specified, it remained a dead letter till it was re-issued with stringent penalties on Bartholomew's Eve, 1645. The Presbyterians afterwards had bitter cause to rue that date, which was evidently chosen in 1662 as a deliberate retaliation for their bigotry now.

Some time therefore after January 1645, Benjamin Cox ministered at Bedford, according to Deane. It

seems implied that he had the use of a parish church. Gyles Thorne of St. Cuthberts had been reported to the Lords in 1642, and in February, 1642/3 had been ordered to pay Mr. Holden £20 yearly. Possibly for a short time Cox held this or a similar lectureship.

Baxter indeed says that Cox was sent for to Coventry from Bedford; but Deane's reference to the order of 1645 conflicts with this, and his sequence of events appears more natural.

In December 1645 he was in London, where Baptists were now stirring very vigorously, and it was advertised that he and Hanserd Knollys, another clergyman, assisted by William Kiffin, a young merchant, would hold a public discussion in the parish church of Aldermanbury, on infant baptism. Public interest had been challenged, first by a confession published for the London Baptists in 1644, then by a publication of Daniel Featley, a former official of the High Commission. In 1642 Featley had had a debate with Kiffin, of which he had kept notes; being now imprisoned by the Presbyterians, he had time to work these up, to compile some slanders about the Munster Anabaptists and insinuate that English Baptists were of the same kidney, to criticise the 1644 confession, and to send the whole undigested mixture to the press. He was promptly answered by others, and never returned to the charge, though his farrago was often reprinted. The excitement was such that the Lord Mayor forbade the debate contemplated by Cox, who thereupon issued a pamphlet explaining. Meanwhile Martin Blake of Barnstaple thought the time opportune to publish the letters of 1642, with further thoughts of his own; so that Cox found himself suddenly famous.

Now the confession of 1644 had been drawn up and signed by men who had had no theological training, all laymen from the former standpoint. Featley

had dedicated his book to parliament, asking that there be no tolerance of such opinions as he opposed, and no preaching by laymen. Therefore the confession was revised in the light of his criticisms, without retracting anything important, and was republished in January, 1645/6 with a dedication to parliament claiming religious liberty. This time it was signed also by Cox and Knollys, and it is probable they both helped in the revision.

Parliament was too busy to attend to the matter, for there was a three-cornered quarrel between the king (now a prisoner in the Scots army), the Scotch parliament, and the English army. Cox therefore was free in May to edit one of the works of a new friend, John Spilsbury. Some country brethren who had read Featley's slanders, sent some queries chiefly as to the mortality of the soul and anti-nomianism. To these he replied in several articles which he published in November as an appendix to the confession. He also deigned to take notice of the personal attack by Thomas Edwards, and issued a reply. And because the new Calvinistic Baptists were being charged with holding the medieval views of the Continental Anabaptists, he further put out a criticism of Pelagian errors, which called into the field the redoubtable Thomas Lamb, leader of the General Baptists.

Then he suddenly subsided, and is not heard of for nearly twelve years. The blank is perplexing. Of course he was still the legal rector of Sampford Peverell, and once the intolerance of the Long Parliament was rendered harmless by Pride's Purge, he might have returned and resumed his duties, until the intolerance of Cromwell towards Baptists manifested itself in 1654. That would account for Stephen Coven being inducted there in 1655. But it would not account for a silence as to him on the part of the Baptists in Devon and the west, and the fact that

the only dissent known even in 1672 at Sampford was Congregational.

There is another possibility, that his work at Bedford lay between 1646 and 1658, and was far more than a brief sojourn. This would account for his son Nehemiah being domiciled in the county soon after the latter date. But it does not appear that the Bedford open church founded by Gifford, which did enjoy the ministry of Nehemiah, has any tradition of Benjamin. Nor has his name yet been published as having used a parish church in Bedford; and he did not sign the nomination on 13 May 1653 of members to the Nominated Parliament for the county. It would be very curious should it turn out that Cox was steadily preaching Baptist principles there while Bunyan was still in garrison at Newport Pagnel.

The Midland Association organized in 1655, and at the ninth meeting, held at Moreton in the Marsh on 2 September 1658, he was the first of five men commissioned to sign the conclusions. It is not clear in what capacity he attended; comparison of the names of churches and delegates leaves it possible that he was representing Leominster-Hereford or Gloucester or Bewdley; but no tradition survives of any connection with these places. It is more probable that he was acting as the Messenger of the whole Association; such a post was filled at this period for the Western Association by Thomas Collier; such superintendence was disjoined from the care of one local church then, as it now is again in the very similar case of a General Superintendent.

With Cromwell's death, the obstacle was removed to his work in London, and we now have welcome evidence of his having resumed work there. John Hartopp succeeded to a baronetcy in 1658, when he was just of age, and he proved a powerful patron of Free Church ministers. He married Elizabeth, the

daughter of General Charles Fleetwood, son-in-law of Cromwell, supporter of the Irish Baptists, commander-in-chief in 1659; and in 1660 the pair procured a foolscap blank book, into which Sir John wrote out carefully 28 sermons he took down in short-hand for a year. They are not in chronological order, but are all dated. Every Sunday sermon, from April 22 to Dec. 30, is by "Mr. Cox," and there are fifteen of these. Evidently Sir John was a regular attendant on Cox's ministry, though there is no clue as to the place where it was exercised. No sermon in January 1661 is reported; in February the Hartopps began attending regularly on "Mr. Jenkyn," apparently William Jenkyn, vicar of Christchurch and lecturer at St. Anne's, Blackfriars. The book breaks off abruptly in the midst of a sermon by him.

These facts are new to this generation, and when we see that Cox's last sermon was on the words, "Exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through many tribulations enter into the kingdom of God," then we note the date 30 December 1660, and observe that on the previous day the Convention Parliament had been dissolved, without having passed any measure for toleration, thanks to the bigotry of Baxter. Cox clearly had no illusion as to what next year had in store, but he could not have foreseen the insurrection of the Fifth Monarchists in January, with the prompt proclamation forbidding all conventicles.

As the Hartopps ceased reporting his sermons, we may perhaps infer that he did not have the use of a parish church; and this is confirmed by the silence of Calamy, who could hardly have been ignorant of London affairs, and would not lightly have missed a gibe at a Baptist.

The Hartopps did not say where Cox was preaching; but in 1646 he signed as joint-pastor of one of

the original 1642 churches; and although this was soon led by Edward Harrison, vicar of Kensworth, who provided it with a home in Petty France, yet we find that on 28 January, 1660/1, when eight London Baptist churches joined in disclaiming all connection with Venner, Harrison was associated with Cox. True that the Christian name is given as John, but there are other mistakes, and no John Cox is known at this time. It would seem certain therefore that Benjamin came back to his old church.

This was a leading church in town, which had sent messengers to Wales and to Ireland, and had joined in the call of 1653 to all Baptist churches. It met in a building which the Hartopps would not be ashamed of frequenting, though it was private and not a parish church.

On 15 June 1662, the soldiers raided this place, wounded a boy with a sword, and carried off the preacher to prison; a fortnight later they repeated their visit, wrecked the place, and wounded several. This has nothing to do with the new Uniformity Act, which came into force two months later; it was a rather illegal action to execute the Conventicle Act of Elizabeth, reinforced by recent proclamations.

Under these circumstances the church, so rich in ministers, instituted three meetings in place of one. The spies of 1664 reported [S.P. Dom. Miscell. 26] "Mr Harson, Mr Toll, Mr Cox, pastors, joyne together. Hars meetes att his owne house & in Bunhill feilds. Cox in thames streete soper-brig. Mr Toll chepeside seaven starres."

This disposes of the statement made by Stinton fifty years later, that he conformed after 1662, repented, and died a non-conforming Baptist. The statement was inherently improbable, and could barely be reconciled with these contemporary notices; no evidence was stated by Stinton or Crosby, none is known.

Indeed, Cox, an "antient minister" in 1650, disappears in 1664.

In 1665 Seth Ward, bishop of Exeter, required returns to be made from all his clergy as to any non-conforming ministers, physicians, schoolmasters, midwives &c in their parishes. It was certified that Stephen Coven, "a wandering seditious seminary," was living at Halberton, three miles east of Tiverton; but there is no word of Cox, whether in his old diocese or in any other whence reports are preserved. Nor is he heard of again in 1669 or 1672.

Instead of the fathers come up the sons, both with Harrison and Cox. It may be added that his son Nehemiah was reported in 1669 from Maulden as a prominent dissenter, that in 1671 he was called to the ministry by the same Bedford church which then chose Bunyan as pastor, that in 1674 he was censured by the church for words and practices tending to make a division. This Bedfordshire sojourn may well have been facilitated by the father's brief stay at the county town. Then in 1675 Nehemiah was called to be joint-pastor with William Collins over the great London church of Petty France, where Harrison the late pastor had died before April 1674, and where Benjamin's name was still fragrant. Nehemiah was ordained on 21 September, this being apparently the first public dissenting ordination in London. Two years later his church adopted a Baptist revision of the Westminster Confession, which in 1689 became rather famous, and is still standard in the southern United States. This throws a light on Nehemiah's departure from Bedford, for that church was then trying to walk on the narrow path of open membership, forbidding all discussion of baptism. Neither Nehemiah nor Benjamin believed in hiding that light under a bushel. Nehemiah worthily upheld the great traditions of his father, blossomed out as M.D., and is heard of

as going about on his medical rounds with a gold-headed cane.

He had the opportunity of heaping coals of fire on the aged head of Richard Baxter, who was being dragged off to prison in 1683 when Cox met the party and certified that Baxter was too ill to endure a jail: Calamy and his copyists ignore the fact that the popular physician was also a Baptist pastor, and that he risked his own liberty by intervening. He received the dedication of Needham's Institutiones Medicæ, whence we learn that he was also an honorary F.R.C.P. He died in the year of the revolution, and was honoured with a handsome tomb in Bunhill Fields.

A Certificate of 1689.

NORTHTONSH. MEMORAND. that at the Genall Quarter Sessions of the Peace holden by Adjournment at Northampton in and for the said County of Northton this twelfth day of October in the first year of the Reigne of our Sovereigne Lord and Lady William and Mary by the grace of God King and Queen of England & Anno Dni 1689 It was certified to their Ma^{ties} Justices of the Peace in the said County then and there assembled according to the forme of the Statute in such Case made and provided That the dwelling house of Joseph Goodman at Braden in the County aforesaid is intended and appointed for a Place of meeting for Protestant Dissenters for the exercise of their Religious worshipp or service of God. As by the Records of the said Court doth Appear. Given under my hand and the seale of my office the day and year above written

p me Joseph Duckett
clicum pacis

N.B. The original document hangs on the wall of the house thus certified, still owned by a lineal descendant. The church "of Slapton" fitted up a second house at Towcester in 1723, and a third at Middleton Cheney in 1740; it built the present meeting-house at Weston by Weedon in 1794, whose registered number is now 11026.