

Church Planting in Early Baptist History

by

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Part I.

Almost as soon as Calvinistic Baptists appeared on the scene in 1640s England, they demonstrated a whole-hearted commitment to evangelism and church planting. They were not alone, for many of the Puritans expressed concern for the regions of their country not yet blossoming with Gospel assemblies.^[1] None of these men could be content enjoying their own privileges, but actively engaged in seeking to bring the message of Christ to others.

The growth of the early Particular Baptists^[2] is amazing. W. T. Whitley, in a 1910 article, estimated that in 1715 there were 220 Particular Baptist churches in existence in England and Wales, and about half as many General Baptist churches.^[3] Included in many of Whitley's entries is a figure of approximate attendance. After extensive comparisons with other extant records, Michael Watts concludes that the figures are generally accurate for the period.^[4] When one remembers that in 1641 there were no Calvinistic churches practicing believer's baptism by immersion, the statistics take on much meaning.

Among the Particular Baptists, the work of church planting was often done through evangelists. This was not an office in the church, though the men involved were often elders, but rather appointed emissaries charged with the task of spreading the gospel and establishing churches. They carried with them authority from the sending churches. Two early examples of the convictions present in these churches provide the basis for later actions.

In 1649, the Glaziers' Hall, London church held a day of prayer "to seek the Lord that he would send labourers into the dark corners and parts of this land."^[5] On the next day, John Myles and Thomas Proud appeared in their midst, concerned for the needs of Wales. They were apparently baptized and sent, within a fortnight, back to Wales for the purpose of planting churches. On 1 October 1649, baptisms began to take place, and the Ilston church was organized, having forty-three members by October 1650.^[6] Myles engaged in an aggressive plan to bring other churches into existence, so that within a

year of the first baptism two more assemblies had been formed, and the first “General Meeting”^[7] in South Wales was held on 6 and 7 November 1650.^[8]

White, citing the Ilston church book, states that the commission given to Myles and Proud by the London church was “to gather a ‘company or society of people holding forth and practising the doctrine, worship, order and discipline of the Gospel according to the primitive institution.’” He then comments,

“The terms in which they understood their mission are of considerable importance: they saw their task not only as concerned with the conversion of individuals to Christ but also with the foundation of congregations rightly ordered according to what they believed to be the one, unchanging, apostolic pattern.”^[9]

White is undoubtedly correct in this assessment. The well-ordered church was so central to the redemptive purposes of God that any kind of evangelistic thrust must seek, as its highest goal, to establish new assemblies. For these Welsh evangelists, one church was insufficient. The needs of the countryside were so great that only the founding of many churches would satisfy. This early perspective was active among the Particular Baptist churches.

Part II.

The London church under the ministry of Hanserd Knollys sent Thomas Tillam^[10] to another one of the “dark corners of the land,” the North (County Durham), in December 1651. He was appointed to a lectureship by the “Committee for the Propagation of the Gospel” established by Parliament in February 1649/50,^[11] and used this post as the base to plant a Baptist church in Hexham. In seven months, sixteen individuals were baptized and a church was formed. Tillam saw this as the great end of his mission:

“Upon the 21st day of the 5th month, 1652 . . . after serious consideration and some gospel preparation, a living temple began of these living stones. . . . These, solemnly giving themselves to the Lord and one to another, to walk in communion together, with submission to all the ordinances of the Gospel, I, Tho. Tillam, espoused to one husband; hoping that I shall present them a chaste virgin to Christ.”^[12]

The formula for church planting was at the front of this action. Evangelism

was not carried out simply to seek after conversions. Churches had to be planted. Those who received the gift of salvation were expected to become part of a well-ordered church. The Baptists could not conceive of evangelism apart from church planting. Converts were to be baptized, and formed into a church by a (to use Benjamin Keach's term) "wise master builder."

The difficulties of the Restoration Era hindered the spread of churches, but in the relative freedom of the 1690s, several attempts were made to form new congregations. Benjamin Keach argued that ministers should be active in preaching in the towns and villages near where they were located, so that new churches might be planted.^[13] The Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, church ordained David Crosley as an evangelist in 1692 stating "we by virtue of authority given unto us by our Lord Jesus Christ, have called our Brother forth to preach the gospel and baptize wheresoever the Providence of God shall open a door to his ministry."^[14] This "roving commission"^[15] was not simply to preach. It included the necessary attendant for converts, baptism, implying the next logical step, the formation of churches.

This evangelistic impulse was the driving force behind the 1689 London General Assembly's initiative to begin a fund intended (along with other purposes) "to send Ministers . . . to preach, both in City and Country."^[16] In the *Narrative* of the 1690 London General Assembly, the participating churches rejoice at the good work already done through the fund, "especially in *Essex* and *Suffolk*, where were no Baptized churches," because the mission was so well received that "two churches are like to be gathered."^[17] According to Murdina MacDonald, Richard Tidmarsh had been sent into those counties, with two new churches as the apparent result.^[18]

These examples give some indication, at least from among the leaders of the movement, for the spread of their message and the desire to see churches multiplied. For them, the church was not simply a society of holy people gathered for fellowship with one another, but was an instrument to bring light and life to the darkest places. When they were able, they encouraged and engaged in mission efforts within their capabilities. Undoubtedly, the relative poverty of many of the churches and their ministers hindered expansion^[19] But efforts were made, at times with positive results.

Part III.

The impetus for these actions was theological, embedded in the general Confessions published by the churches. The first London Confession (1644) states,

“Christ hath heer on earth a spirituall Kingdome, which is the Church, which He hath purchased and redeemed to himselfe, as a peculiar inheritance: which Church, as it is visible to us, is a company of visible Saints, called & separated from the world, by the word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of faith of the Gospel, being baptized into that faith, and joynd to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement, in the practical injoyment of the Ordinances, commanded by Christ their head and King.”^[20]

It should be noticed that the church consists of believers, brought out of the world to faith in Christ by means of gospel preaching, baptized, and united together to enjoy the ordinances given by Christ. This definition of the church is dependent upon earlier statements in the Confession describing the process and fruit of conversion:

“Faith is ordinarily begot by the preaching of the Gospel, or word of Christ, without respect to any power or capacitie in the creature; but it being wholly passive, and dead in sinnes and trespasses, doth beleeve, and is converted by no lesse power, then that which raised Christ from the dead.

That the tenders of the Gospel to the conversion of sinners, is absolutely free, no way requiring, as absolutely necessary, any qualifications, preparations, terrors of the law, or preceding ministry of the Law, but onely and alone the naked soule, as a sinner and ungodly to receive Christ, as crucified, dead, and buried, and risen againe, being made a Prince and a Savior for such sinners.

The same power that converts to faith in Christ, carries on the soule through all duties, temptations, conflicts, sufferings

All beleevers are a holy and sanctified people, and that sanctification is a spirituall grace of the new Covenant, and effect of the love of God, manifested to the soule, whereby the beleever . . . presseth after a heavenly and Evangelicall perfection, in obedience to all the

Commands, which Christ as head and King in His new Covenant has prescribed to them.”^[21]

The Baptists confessed that saving faith produced evangelical obedience, and this obedience was to be worked out in a gospel church. Dead sinners are brought to life through the power of Christ attending the preached word, and the resulting believers, sanctified by the grace of the new covenant, give themselves to “obedience to all the Commands.” The context for this obedience is the local church. This theological progression is unavoidable in the Confession. Churches are the result of Gospel preaching. Their evangelism was not merely “soul-winning” but rather a full-orbed attempt to see churches planted according to the Word of God.

The Second London Confession is no different in its emphases. The following words, found in paragraphs five and six of chapter 26 teach the same doctrine:

“In the execution of this power wherewith he is so intrusted, the Lord Jesus calleth out of the World unto himself, through the Ministry of his word, by his Spirit, those that are given unto him by his Father; that they may walk before him in all the ways of obedience, which he prescribeth to them in his Word. Those thus called he commandeth to walk together in particular societies, or Churches, for their mutual edification; and the due performance of that publick worship, which he requireth of them in the World.

The Members of these Churches are Saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing (in and by their profession and walking) their obedience unto that call of Christ; and do willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ, giving up themselves, to the Lord & one to another by the will of God, in professed subjection to the Ordinances of the Gospel.”^[22]

Christ calls sinners to himself, commanding them to be part of churches in which they demonstrate their obedience to his will. These men could not conceive of evangelism divorced from churches. The theology of evangelism itself required that converts be added to existing churches, or formed into new churches for the glory of God. Nothing less would fit the case.

In order to account for the remarkable growth present among the Particular Baptists, one must remember this fact. Evangelism is at the heart of the

doctrine of the church. New assemblies are planted as men and women are brought to faith in Christ. In these Confessions, practical theology is the necessary concomitant to ecclesiology. Doctrinal formulations are not merely theoretical constructions. They have very important implications and applications for life and ministry.

Historic Baptist theology brought together theology and practice. In the best puritan fashion, it was recognized that what we believe must influence what we practice, and that what we practice must rest on the theological truths we confess. These men and their churches sought to be faithful to that principle. As we strive to preach the whole counsel of God, and apply the principles of reformation in our churches, we must take hold of this perspective. Church planting ought to be at the very forefront of our agenda. In Particular Baptist Ecclesiology, the church was fundamentally the result of the personal and sovereign activity of Christ in calling sinners out of the world to salvation. From its roots in the New Testament, it was intended to be a holy community, separate from the world and focused on heaven. But, so important was the planting of churches that programs were established to promote their increase. Funds were raised, men were ordained and sent, and new congregations were organized. Does our theology of the church inform our evangelism? What more can we do?

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Cf. Christopher Hill, "Puritans and 'the Dark Corners of the Land,'" in *Change and Continuity in 17th-Century England*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 3-47. Hill demonstrates that a concern for the spread of the Gospel (and its attendant influences) was a significant concern among leading Puritans in the first half of the seventeenth century.

[2] This is the title most commonly given to the 17th century Calvinistic Baptists.

[3] W. T. Whitley, "The Baptist Interest under George I," *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* 2 (1910-11): 95-109. Whitley based his statistics on a document known as the "Evans Manuscript," supplementing it at several points. The Evans Manuscript is held at Dr. William's Library in London. It was an attempt to list "every Presbyterian, Independent, and Baptist congregation in England and Wales" in the period 1715-18. A detailed analysis of its statistics is found in Michael Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978), 267-89, and in the Appendix, 491-510. The quote is from Watts, 268.

[4] Watts, *The Dissenters*, 504.

[5] Cited from the Ilston Church Book by B. R. White, "John Miles and the Structures of the Calvinistic Baptist Mission to South Wales, 1649-1660," in Mansel John, ed., *Welsh Baptist Studies* (Llandysul: The South Wales Baptist College, 1976), 36; See also B. G. Owens, ed., *The Ilston Book: Earliest Register of Welsh Baptists* (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 1996), 32; Henry Melville King, *Rev. John Myles and the Founding of the First Baptist Church in Massachusetts* (Providence, R.I.: Preston & Rounds, Co. 1905); Joshua Thomas, "The Histories of Four Welsh Baptist Churches c. 1633-1770," in Carroll C. and Willard A. Ramsey, *The American Baptist Heritage in Wales* (Gallatin, Tenn.: Church History Research and Archives, 1976), 40-66.

[6] White, "John Miles," 37.

[7] i.e. Association.

[8] White, "John Miles," 40; White, *Association Records of the Particular Baptists* (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1971), 3-4.

[9] White, "John Miles," 36.

[10] Ernest A. Payne, “Thomas Tillam,” BQ 17:2, (April 1957): 61-66; David Douglas, *History of the Baptist Churches in the North of England, from 1648 to 1845* (London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1846), 8-69; E. B. Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ, Gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys, and Hexham. 1644-1720* (London: Hanserd Knollys Society, 1854), 289-96. Tillam used the phrase “dark corner” in the first entry to the Hexham records, and the church, in a letter sent to Knollys’ assembly in London, used the full phrase five months later, 289, 304.

[11] Underhill, *Records*, 304; Payne, “Thomas Tillam,” 61. On the “Committee” see Hill, “Puritans and the Dark Corners,” 32-44.

[12] Underhill, *Records*, 289.

[13] [Benjamin Keach], *The Gospel Minister’s Maintenance Vindicated* (London: John Harris, 1689), 92-96; cf. Keach, *Exposition of the Parables: Series Two* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1991 reprint), 362-63, where he likened ministers to “planters” whose fruit is to be “planted in a visible church of Christ.”

[14] Peter Wortley, transcriber, “Church Record Book, Volume One 1670-1715” (Bromsgrove: Bromsgrove Baptist Church and The Baptist Historical Society, 1974), 51.

[15] W. T. Whitley, *Baptists of North-West England, 1649-1913* (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1913). 76. See also Frederick Overend, *History of the Ebenezer Baptist Church Bacup* (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1912), 71.

[16] *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the General Assembly* (London: 1689), 12.

[17] *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the General Assembly* (London: 1690), 4-5, emphasis in original.

[18] Murdina MacDonald, “London Calvinistic Baptists 1689-1727: Tension Within a Dissenting Community Under Toleration,” Oxford D.Phil. Thesis, 1982, 42.

[19] In the 1689 *Narrative*, this point is explicit. They mourned the financial neglect of ministers who must be “so incumbred with Worldly Affairs, that they are not able to perform the Duties of their Holy Calling, in preaching the Gospel” 1689 *Narrative*, 5.

[20] William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 165.

[21] *Ibid.*, 163-64.

[22] *A Confession of Faith: Put Forth by the Elders and Brethren of Many Congregations of Christians* (London: Benjamin Harris, 1677), 87-88. While usually referred to as the 1689 Confession, it was originally published in 1677.