

# Early Baptist Leaders

Baptists have no single historical figure like a Luther or Wesley as founder and leader. But since its beginnings men and women of faith and courage have been instrumental in developing its theology and extending its witness. A selection of examples is presented.

## HANSERD KNOLLYS 1599–1691

Educated at Cambridge, he took Anglican orders, becoming a Puritan and then a Separatist. He immigrated to Massachusetts in 1638, but returned to London in 1641. By 1645 he had become a Baptist and led a church in London the rest of his life. Interested in education, he published Hebrew, Greek and Latin grammars, and also an exposition of the Book of Revelation. He had Fifth Monarchist sympathies, which brought him into tension with the state, leading to several spells in prison. Differences in political understanding did not prevent Knollys and William Kiffin working together as leaders among the Particular Baptists.

## BENJAMIN KEACH 1640–1704

A tailor by trade, Keach became pastor of the General Baptist church at Winslow, Buckinghamshire. He published a primer for children's education, and was tried in 1664 for its attitude to the Book of Common Prayer. Keach was pilloried and all copies of the book were burned. He rewrote his *Child's Delight*, and it ran to several editions.

Keach moved to London in 1668, and became a Particular Baptist, and Pastor at Horslydown, Southwark—the church which many years later was to call the young Charles H. Spurgeon to London. Keach was an enthusiastic advocate of congregational hymn-singing. Horslydown was probably the first church in England to sing hymns, as opposed to psalms and paraphrases. Keach's hymnbook, published in 1691, provoked heated debate in the 1692 Assembly of Particular Baptists.

## DR. JOHN GILL 1697–1771

Dr. Gill was the foremost theologian of the first two centuries of Baptist history. He was the learned pastor of a London church for 50 years. A high Calvinist, his *Body of Divinity* was "considered as almost an essential part of the library not only of ministers, but of private Christians of the Baptist denomination who could afford to purchase them. They were read almost exclusively to the neglect of other works of divinity."

His works did not appeal in the same way to the next generation of Particular Baptists, who were keenly evangelical. Robert Hall was to describe Gill's works as "a continent of mud," so much had theological outlook changed.

## ANDREW FULLER 1754–1815

"Tall, stout and muscular, a famous wrestler in his youth," this self-taught farmer's son became a champion for Christ, "the most creatively useful theologian" of the Particular Baptists. His book *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, 1785, restated Calvinist theology for Baptists influenced by the Evangelical Revival. His Doctorate of Divinity was bestowed by Brown University, Rhode Island. Fuller was minister at Kettering, where the Baptist Missionary Society was formed in 1792, with Fuller as the energetic first Secretary.

## DAN TAYLOR 1738–1816

Dan Taylor worked in a Yorkshire mine from boyhood. He was converted by the Methodists, and began to study Greek, Latin and Hebrew in his spare time. In 1762 he left the mines to become the minister of a local church in Lancashire, which left the Methodists and became Baptist, forming links with the surviving Armenian Baptists which led to the New Connection of General Baptists in 1770. Taylor remained a leader of the New Connection, moving to a London church in 1785. He believed in education for the ministry, and founded the Midlands Baptist College in 1797. His Methodist background and its emphasis on revivalism equipped him to be a vital force for evangelism.

## WILLIAM CAREY 1761–1834

Carey was a minister within the Northamptonshire Association which became a center of evangelical activity among Particular Baptists. In 1792 Carey published *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, in which he concluded that Christ's command to teach all nations remained binding, and considered in detail the religious state of the nations of the world and the best way to tackle missionary work. In that year too, he preached his "Deathless Sermon," with the famous lines, "Expect great things from God! Attempt great things for God!" Soon Carey went to India as first missionary of the Baptist Missionary Society. He was himself evangelist, teacher, translator, social reformer and botanist, while his first colleague was a doctor. Carey believed missionary activity should be wide-ranging.

#### ROGER WILLIAMS 1599–1683

The "gentle radical" prepared for the Anglican ministry at Cambridge University where he had matriculated in law. Following his ordination to the priesthood, Williams developed strong opposition to the liturgy and hierarchy of the Church and embarked for Massachusetts in 1631. There he became an extreme Separatist and spent time at Boston, Plymouth Plantation, and Salem. Although he had the support of his congregation at Salem, colonial leaders labeled him a schismatic and summoned him repeatedly to appear before the General Court. After a lengthy debate over the issue of liberty of conscience, Williams was banished from Massachusetts in 1635. In search of a haven free from persecution, Williams and others settled at a place he called "Providence" and gave birth to the colony of Rhode Island, based upon the principle of complete religious freedom. He adopted Baptist sentiments and, with Ezekiel Hollimann, established a Baptist Church at Providence in 1638, usually thought to be the oldest in America. Williams later despaired of ever seeing the true visible church and moved away from a close relationship with any formal group. He returned to England to plea for a charter and published his major work, *The Bloody Tenant of Persecution* (1644), in which he made an eloquent statement in favor of the total liberty of conscience for the sake of peace. His legacy includes the first published lexicon of an Indian language and generations of congenial relations with Native Americans. Though perhaps a Baptist only for a short time Roger Williams agreed with the principle of believer's baptism and the irenic spirit of the group.

#### ADONIRAM AND ANN JUDSON

Adoniram (1788–1850) was the son of a Congregational minister in Massachusetts. Judson was educated at Brown University and Andover Seminary and early expressed an interest in foreign missions. The zeal of Judson and other New England students led to the formation of the American Board of Commissions for Foreign Missions which, in 1812, appointed Judson and five others to be America's first foreign missionaries. On board ship during the long voyage to India, Judson studied the Scriptures and was converted to a Baptist position and, upon arriving in India, was baptized by William Carey. Judson soon found that he could not remain in India and that he lacked the support of any American group since his change in views. This led to the establishment of the Baptist General Missionary Convention and Judson's own removal to Burma, a new field. He concentrated his efforts on preparation of linguistic tools, but political opposition soon set in and Judson was imprisoned for nine months. Eventually he was quite influential in concluding a peace between Burma and England in the War of 1824. He finally completed a translation of the Bible in Burmese and trained countless indigenous workers at the mission. Judson became the role model for overseas missionaries.

Ann Hasseltine Judson (1789–1826) was the first wife of Adoniram Judson and exerted a profound influence upon the role of women in the nineteenth century and the proclamation of the gospel in Burma. Her roots were in Massachusetts, yet she shared the global vision of her spouse when he was appointed in 1812. She agreed with his change in attitude about baptism, and she, too, was immersed by William Carey. She assisted in the preparation of Judson's Burmese Bible, and during his incarceration in Burma, she made numerous attempts to secure his freedom and to continue his work. Her sacrifices were recaptured in several books and were widely read in nineteenth-century America. One writer has asserted that Ann Judson provided an ideal role model for young Christian women and a catalyst for organized women's endeavors though most of her life was spent outside the United States.

#### JOHN CLARKE, M.D. 1609–1676

Born in Suffolk, England of an ancient family, Clarke was university-trained and took up medical practice for a profession. His early religious sentiments were strongly Puritan, and under a wave of persecution, he emigrated to Boston in 1637. In Massachusetts he also found religious persecution, and he with several friends resolved to plant a colony beyond Massachusetts Bay, predicated upon full religious liberty. In 1638 Clarke and his company settled on Aquidneck Island (now Newport), and Clarke wrote the frame of government and gathered a gospel church. In 1651 he returned to England to fight for charter rights, and he secured in 1663 a guarantee for a "lively experiment" in which full religious liberty would be enjoyed. He was active in evangelistic endeavors, and this led to the establishment of a Baptist Church at Boston and the first free school in America. His personal confession of faith illustrates a strongly Calvinistic bent with a persuasive argument for believer's baptism.

#### OBADIAH HOLMES 1606–1682

Little is known of Holmes' early life except that he emigrated to America about 1639. From his diary it is known that he became a Baptist about 1650, probably under the influence of Dr. John Clarke. For the next three decades Holmes was active in the affairs of the Newport Church and a pastoral figure amid controversy with Quakers, Six Principle advocates, and Sabbatarians. Holmes is best remembered for the foray into Massachusetts that he and others made in 1651 to visit a friend and hold evangelistic services there, for which they were arrested. Unlike his two companions, who were released on payment of fines, Holmes was detained for several months and publicly whipped with thirty-nine lashes in Boston Common. He turned the spectacle into a testimony of his faith.

#### ISSAC BACKUS 1724–1806

Backus grew up in a home that had deep religious sentiments and opposed the compromises of the Saybrook Platform. He was converted in 1741 during the Great Awakening and later responded to a call to preach. He was ordained in the Separate (Congregational) Church at Middleborough, Massachusetts in 1748, where he soon began to struggle with the issue of baptism. After his own baptism, he labored as an evangelist until 1756 when he organized a Baptist congregation in Middleborough. Active in the Warren Baptist Association, Backus was chosen their agent in 1774 to write a defense of religious liberty which he and others presented to members of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Following the Revolution he worked tirelessly for the separation of church and state and wrote a bill of rights for Massachusetts. Backus was a towering figure in New England Baptist life in part because of his prolific writings, the best remembered of which were his histories of New England and the Baptists, first published in 1777.

#### MORGAN EDWARDS 1722–1795

Born in Wales and educated at Bristol College, young Edwards preached in Ireland and England for nine years before he came to First Baptist Church, Philadelphia in 1761. Edwards was an advocate of strict congregational discipline, and under his leadership, the church prospered. He was also active in the Philadelphia Association where he promoted evangelism and the establishment of a Baptist institution of higher education. This latter dream was realized in 1764 when he helped to obtain a charter for the College of Rhode Island (now Brown University). At the outset of the Revolution, Edwards served as an itinerant evangelist and collected materials toward writing a history of Baptists in America. During the War he was known as a Loyalist, which nearly destroyed his reputation. Edwards was remembered as an eloquent preacher who also designed the first plan for a comprehensive union of Baptists in America.