

The Early English Baptists

(The Baptist Reporter October, 1858)

This was the theme chosen by the Rev. B. Evans, D.D., of Scarborough, Chairman of the last session of the British Baptist Union, for his introductory address. Supposing that most of our readers have not had an opportunity of reading that address, we give the following extracts.

Men in all ages have desired to perpetuate the memory of the great and illustrious. The pen of the historian, the chisel of the sculptor, or the pencil of the artist, has achieved this. During the palmy days of republican Rome, the mansions of the great were adorned with images of those who had been distinguished in war or celebrated for their virtues. The design was noble. The young men, by contemplating their form, and becoming familiar with their virtue, would be excited to emulate their excellences, and rival them in devotedness to their country. We venerate the name of Copernicus, of Kepler, and Newton, for their discoveries in science; we raise monuments to Bacon, Locke, and others, for their large contributions to the laws of mind; and we lavish the wealth of the nation upon our warriors. Men tell us it is for the present and the future. Upon the rising and future generations of the kingdom it is to exert an influence. Brethren, we have had a glorious past. Men of the loftiest and purest principles, of heroic spirit, of ardent faith, and singular devotedness to the cause of our common Lord, have gone before us. Men whose example will challenge our imitation, and kindle in our minds the spirit of heroism. The past may teach the present. Forgive me, then, if, on this occasion, I confine my remarks to the early *founders* of our body in this country, *their principles, their struggles, and their triumphs.*

The origin of the Baptists must not be sought amongst those of modern sects. It dates long prior to the existence of any of those ecclesiastical organizations into which the Christian church is divided. It arose not from the scholarship of the Reformation, nor is it the fruit of its spirit. It prepared the way for its reception and facilitated its triumphs. In the depths of primitive antiquity, even Mosheim confesses we must look for it. We should find it at an earlier period still. From the apostolic age the stream of fact and evidence is uninterrupted.

Limiting the range of our remarks to about the time of the Restoration, we shall find, from the earliest dawn of our denominational history to this period, a class of men upon whom we may fix as the founders of our body in this kingdom—men whose mission was great and arduous, and who nobly executed it. It was an age of greatness. Bacon and Boyle had opened new fields of thought and inquiry, and had shed a charm on mental science. Shakespear, Milton, and Jonson, had poured the splendour of their genius upon the nation. Walton and Lightfoot, Castell and Pocock, Usher, Selden, and Pool, had largely contributed to extend the circle of biblical science; whilst the ministry was marked by some of the noblest sanctified intellects which had adorned any nation since the Reformation. With these the later founders of our churches lived. Chosen and prepared of God for a great work, their mental and moral fitness for it was unquestioned. Above the common mass they rose in virtue and moral dignity. No one would think of testing them by those rules which govern society at present. it would be unjust to them, and not less so to

ourselves. They stand before us only like the first rough draft of some great master-mind, the outline is massive and commanding, but it wants the finish and filling-up which give the beauty and life-like character to his picture. The softer and milder graces, which adorn with such exquisite charm the Christian character, result from retirement, and freedom, and culture. They grow not in the wilderness. The battle-field and the conflict produce them not. the bold, the masculine, the heroic, may be nourished in the perpetual struggles for life, but they that wear soft clothing dwell in kings' palaces. Nor are we prepared to contend for equal claims to all. In so many, wide differences of mind, of culture, and moral worth, exist. Still, looking at them in the mass, no one can doubt that their excellency was of no common order, and that humanity at large, and the church of God in particular, are laid under a vast debt of obligation, which they have but very slowly and reluctantly acknowledged. To some points we must more definitely refer.

In all the elements of moral worth they will bear a comparison with the highest of other bodies. Beatitude, or saintship, would have been awarded them in other ages. Amongst confessors and martyrs they would have been ranked. Men of ardent and strong faith, earnest, prayerful, self-sacrificing, and laborious, and to these they superadded the attraction of a holy life. Their piety was not only raised above the region of doubt, but it was commanding. Cut off from much that throws a charm around social life, exposed to the bitter scorn and fierce hostility of the Church and the State, their aspirations after heaven became more intense, and their converse with the invisible more intimate and unbroken. Nor was it less intelligent than elevated. Springing from the deep personal consciousness of the moral wants of our nature, of the spirituality and vital power of the religion of Jesus, and its full and eminent adaptation to their necessities, the cravings of their earnest spirits could only be satisfied with the daily study of God's word. To that they referred at all times. From churches, councils, creeds, and human authority, they retired to the only fountain of purity and life. From these records of our faith they drew their spiritual nourishment. In the strong meat, which the holy volume produces for Christian manhood, they luxuriated; from the lively oracles they drew their loftiest aspirations; and by it their course was regulated and their hopes sustained in the dangers, the contempt, the sacrifices, and the bonds and imprisonments, which ever and anon awaited them. If there were not all the blandness and lady softness of modern piety, it had, with more ruggedness, far greater power. If one has the varied beauty of some richly cultivated valley, the other exhibits the stern and massive grandeur of some lofty mountain range; and whilst the loveliness of the one may be crushed by the storm in a moment, the other still stands before you; and after the thunder has exhausted itself, and the lightning flashed around it, you gaze upon the same forms of majestic and imposing grandeur.

Nor must it be forgotten, that the period over which these remarks extend was one of active rather than contemplative life. The fountains of the great deep, in some portions of it, were broken up. The conflict of great principles was intense and protracted. The very framework of society was destroyed, and had to be reconstructed. The higher and more precious truth of religious freedom had to be struggled for, and the spiritual despotism courts and convocations had to be overthrown. Our present (political) constitution was without form, and had to be fashioned. Into all these great matters our fathers entered with all the earnestness of their nature. The rising genius of liberty spoke through them, and sought, by their efforts, to extend her empire. To us it appears unavoidable. Traitors to their high vocation they would have been, if any other course had been taken. All their deeply-cherished principles prompted and vindicated

their conduct. The absorbing motive, which prompted and sustained them in the struggle, was mainly a religious one. This was dearer than liberty—than even life. They felt that a false theory was imposed upon the people, which ruined more souls than it saved. Opposition to it was holy warfare. Defeat involved the destruction of Christ's church on earth; success, the triumph of holiness and truth. Upon this ground the prevalent religious element in the camp and the barrack-room, the ministry of distinguished officers, and the praying and psalm-singing tendencies of the common soldiers, cease to be a wonder. All parties agree that the baptist element pervaded the armies of the Commonwealth to a great extent. In this way it was widely diffused through the country. Their zeal, their self-denial, their labour and trials, were great. No danger unnerved them, from no sacrifice did they shrink; and to their prowess and heroic defence we are mainly indebted for one of the most splendid eras of British history. We stop not, brethren, to inquire into the fitness of such a course. We merely indicated the fact. To those who are disposed to question its rectitude, or censure their conduct, we would only say, Forget not that the liberty in which you luxuriated has been won by their suffering.

Many of them with others, and in the subtleties of the schools they were adepts. A glance at some of these may not be improper.

Smith, the opponent of Robinson, and no doubt originally an Episcopal minister, was no ordinary man. Bishop Hall styles Robinson only "his shadow." John Canne, who, if he did not give us the first example of illustrating Scripture by its own teaching, produced a volume which is still highly prized by the Church. Bunyan, whose glorious dream has enchanted the mind of the most brilliant essayist of this age, and is still read with new and intense interest, alike by the child and the philosopher; and whilst it sheds delight in the palaces of the great, inspires the mind of the Indian and the Kaffir with heroic fortitude in the holy war. Tombes, who is allowed by Dr. Wall to be "a man of the best parts in our nation, and, perhaps, in any other;" and Wood, who scarcely ever sees worth beyond his own circle, speaks of him as "a man of incomparable parts, and well versed in the Greek and Hebrew languages." Filling, for some time, the office of "trier," he still found leisure to expose the sophistry of the saintly but bitter Baxter, and to grapple with twenty-five antagonists at once, amongst whom were the most learned of the Episcopal and Presbyterian body. Knollys, who, to intimate acquaintance with the learned languages, united an intense love of soul-liberty, braved the dangers of the Atlantic, and sojourned amidst the swamps and savages of New England, that he might prosecute his ministry with freedom. H. Jessey employed his learned leisure in seeking and securing the sanctified scholarship of the Christian world, to procure for the nation a revision of the authorized version of the sacred Scriptures. Keach, whose "Travels of True Godliness" still finds many readers, and whose ponderous tomes on metaphors and parables are still a mine of theological wealth, from which many extract materials for the modern pulpit. Powell, with the zeal of a seraph, explored the moral waste of his native Wales, and shed the light of truth, of piety, and peace upon its somewhat wild and uncultivated inhabitants. The gratitude of their descendants still designates him as the modern Apostle of Wales; and Gosnold, upon whose lips thousands would hang in rapture, was, in pulpit power, the Spurgeon of his time.

Time would fail us to tell of Kiffin, great amongst the merchant princes of this metropolis; of Coxe, Collins, Bamfield, Danvers, Dell, Denne, Grantham, and others in the ministry. Much less can we even glance at those who, in the civil service of their country, won distinction, and aided

in the great struggle. Upon the pages of British history their names will live. But none will occupy a higher place in the affection of the wise and good than the Hutchinsons. The heroism and moral power of the one have been immortalized by the magic pen of the other. Lucy Hutchinson can never be forgotten, whilst the saintly purity of Christian womanhood, and the exquisite beauty of her composition, shall be admired. Brethren, they were a noble race, of which the world was not worthy.

On the great Christian dogmas their views were as sound as those of Owen and Howe. From the earliest dawn of our history, difference of opinion existed on some matters. Into two bodies, marked in the main by a difference of views on the doctrine of the atonement,—not of the fact, but of its design and extent,—our fathers were divided. With the teaching of other evangelical communities they were not at variance. In everything which was essential to vital union with the Saviour the union was perfect. Still, on other great truths, the difference was wide, and to us, all but unaccountable.

Some of these opinions marked them as a class, and separated them from other communities. No shade of their existence could be traced anywhere else. Rome and Lambeth, the Independent and the Presbyterian, alike repudiated them as dangerous to the commonwealth, and all but destructive to the Church of Christ. Their toleration by the State was wicked, and those that propagated them were held unworthy of civil rights. There were other truths, which, though held partially by other bodies, were grasped with a firmer hand and more harmonious consistency by our fathers. To the former of these only can we refer.

Fundamental, and from which all others sprang, was the fulness and sufficiency of Holy Scriptures. Councils, synods, convocations, creeds, were reprobated. The fulness of the sacred oracles, as the great standard of faith and practice, was held by both sections of the body with a depth of conviction and an earnestness of avowal, which allowed of no possible mistake. Second only in importance to this, was their doctrine of "Soul Liberty." Freedom of conscience lay at the basis of their ecclesiastical polity, not as an accident, but as an essential—not as resulting from concessions of men, but as the birthright of every man. From this their views of the power of the magistrate took shape and substance. Clearly defining the limits of his authority,—confining it to life, liberty, and protection,—his interference with the Church was rejected with an earnest firmness, which the cold, damp cell could never weaken, and which the martyr-fires could never consume. The Church was an institution in the world, but separate from it. Their union could never be. For a converted membership they pleaded. It was a communion of saints—the spiritual body of Christ. Fitness for its membership would only arise from a personal consciousness of guilt, and an intelligent recognition of the Saviour's claims. Now, as a consequence of their great and commanding principle, infant baptism was regarded as unscriptural and irrational. It was incompatible with every view they held. It would logically have overthrown their whole theory. With them it was not a question between age and youth, but simply of moral consciousness. Upon this the long controversy on baptism turned. The mode was a subordinate matter. The Abrahamic covenant more frequently meets you in the pages of these sturdy polemics than *Bapto* or *Baptizo*. The practice of immersion was too common; the validity of sprinkling was only so lately affirmed, except as clinical baptism, that few exhausted their energies on the mode. It was left to modern times for men to question what the scholarship of all ages had affirmed, and what the Church in all ages had, without exception, practised. Such is a simple sketch of those

peculiarities which distinguished them from all else, and which exposed them to the scorn and contempt of other Christians. The compactness, the unity, the symmetry of the whole, cannot fail to strike you.

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