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Baptist Beginnings in Watford

THE FOLLOWING document has been transcribed¹ from the first Churchbook of the Baptist church now meeting at Beechen Grove, Watford.

"An account taken from an ancient disciple of Christ concerning the first planting of the baptized church at Watford. Note: this account was taken in shorthand about 20 years ago.²

When we first had meeting in this town about 50 or 60 years ago³ we were not then in a church state but were a branch of a church in London meeting at a place called Coal harbour,⁴ Mr. John Spilsbury being pastor.⁵ After some years it pleased God to increase our number and it was considered on [sic] that there being some additions there was a number sufficient to set us down by ourselves in a church state. And the churches in London which were of the same faith and order with us being in association⁶ consulted the case together and agreed that we should be set down in a church state at Watford upon certain terms which were agreed to:

first, wholly to disown the Church of England and the ministry of it, first, because we could not own their ordination, and secondly, because we could not own their administration of the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, for we concluded from the Word of God they were wrong in the subjects of both ordinances; thirdly, we disowned their mixed marriages and their service read over the dead, fourthly, we disowned the consecration of their holy places or churches as they call them, fifthly, we disown their surplice and common prayer.

Having thus agreed in these matters the churches did think it meet to propound to us some terms of communion among ourselves.

as first, faith in the Son of God in both natures, divine and human, as very God and very Man;

secondly, that we did believe that he came into the world to bring about the salvation of sinners that [?to] have laid down his life by suffering death upon the cross;

we declared our faith in his resurrection and ascension into heaven and [that he] sat down at the right hand of God the Father and will come again the second time without sin unto salvation;

we also declared our belief concerning the doctrines he preached when personally upon earth and by the mouth of his holy prophets and apostles was the foundation of our faith.

And upon these terms the churches did agree to assist us in all matters we stood in need of and to supply the ministry in this town

once a month with preaching and breaking bread. The persons that supplied in [the] meeting in the absence of the London ministers were brother Richard Coleman, brother George Eve, brother John Crawley and brother John Reeve.⁷ The ministers from London were brother John Spilsbury, Mr. Tippin,⁸ Mr. Caffin,⁹ Mr. Hanserd Knowls,¹⁰ Mr. Merriman,¹¹ Captain Den,¹² Mr. Lock.¹³

Thus we stood in this state about twenty years and then there was a breach and we were in great confusion. At length we concluded that we would give up our names to some other church but we could not agree about it. For though brother Coleman was the mouth of the church to give liberty to everyone to sit down where they could yet afterwards he would have us continue to gather in the same church which could not be agreed to.

So we gave up our names to the church of Christ meeting at Holsely Down¹⁴ of the same faith with us (brother Jones¹⁵ being pastor) and thus we stood some time, till a breach happened in the church which broke them in pieces. And then Mr. Benjamin Keach¹⁶ and Richard Coleman with others supplied our meetings at Watford till we could agree together to give up our names to Hempsted¹⁷ (brother Pope,¹⁸ pastor) and the church promising to supply us with preaching the word and the administration of the ordinances.

Brother Coleman with others stood off and would not give up their names to Hempsted church but continued their membership at Horsely down and Mr. Keach and Mr. Harrison¹⁹ supply [sic] the meeting at Watford on their days which was once a fortnight and both parties meet [sic] together and prayed and preached together. Brother Coleman their minister dying, the church at Horsely down (Mr. Benjamin Keach being pastor) gave liberty to those members in and about Watford to take their places in what other church they thought good. So we, the branch belonging to Horsely down people, for the most part gave up our names to the church of Christ at Hempstead²⁰.

NOTES

¹ The Churchbook, whose entries begin in 1707, is kept at the church and is here transcribed by kind permission of the Minister and Deacons. In the transcription, with the exception of proper names which are spelled exactly as in the manuscript, all spelling has been modernized. Words in square brackets have been added by the transcriber.

² These pages, 73f. of the Churchbook, are dated 28th October 1719.

³ It seems likely that the figures "50 or 60 years ago" come from the original shorthand since there is evidence that, by 1659, the branch of Spilsbury's congregation meeting in Watford was set down "in a church state independently". At the Abingdon Association meeting held at Tetsworth 5-7th April 1659, Watford was reported as one of the "associated churches of Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire" with eight members who were not only gone off to "the 7th day Sabbath but also quite neglected the church meetings and refused communion with the church and, having been often admonished, refused to amend". (*Association Records of the Particular Baptists . . . to 1660*, 193.)

⁴No place of meeting for Spilsbury's congregation was listed by W. T. Whitley, *The Baptists of London* (n.d.) 103f. although he confidently identified it with the church now meeting at Church Hill, Walthamstow. In this he was followed by E. F. Kevan, *London's oldest Baptist Church* (1934), 23f. However, at the Abingdon Association meeting at Tetsworth 20-22nd May 1657, the churches were advised to write "to the messengers at London meeting weekly at brother Spilsberie's house in Cole-Harbour in Thames Street" (*Association Records*, 175).

⁵John Spilsbury was active as a Calvinistic Baptist in London before signing the 1644 *Confession* and was a recognized leader at least as late as 1660 (E. B. Underhill (ed.), *Confessions of Faith* (1854), 348). In *Baptist Bibliography*, I.228 Whitley gave Spilsbury's dates as "1593-1668?" and in *The Baptists of London*, 104, said "He died about 1662".

⁶Churches "of the same faith and order" were, of course, Calvinistic Baptists and this reference provides not only the earliest known reference to an "association" in London but it also gives an example of the churches discussing, and advising upon, a question which was, primarily a matter concerned with the internal affairs of a member congregation.

⁷Of these three men only John Crawley is otherwise known for he is recorded to have been teaching in his own home as an "Anabaptist" in 1669 (G. L. Turner, *Original Records of Early Nonconformity* (1911), II.883.)

⁸"Mr. Tippin" may well have been George Tipping who signed the 1644 *Confession* with John Spilsbury and Samuel Richardson. Tipping also signed the 1646 edition with Thomas Munden (possibly "Munday").

⁹"Mr. Caffin" is likely to have been William Kiffin (1616-1701). For Kiffin cf. *D.N.B.* "How did William Kiffin join the Baptists?" *B.Q.*, 23, 201-207 and "William Kiffin—Baptist Pioneer and Citizen of London", *Baptist History and Heritage*, 2, July 1967.

¹⁰"Mr. Hanserd Knollys" (Knollys, 1598-1691) was one of the outstanding London leaders of the Calvinistic Baptists from his signature of the 1646 edition of the *Confession* through the remainder of his life. Cf. *D.N.B.*; William Kiffin, *The life and death of the late reverend divine, Mr. Hanserd Knollys* (1692); J. Culross, *Hanserd Knollys* (1895); P. A. Duncan, *Hanserd Knollys: Seventeenth-Century Baptist* (1965), Nashville, Tennessee.

¹¹"Mr. Merriman" was probably Richard Mariman who signed the address to the Protector, 3rd April 1657 (*Confessions*, 335-8) and the London letter to the Abingdon Association meeting in May 1657 (*Association Records*, 175).

¹²"Captain Den" (who appears as "Captain Don" in James Stuart, *Beechen Grove Baptist Church, Watford* (1907) 10) was almost certainly Captain Richard Deane, a minor but significant member of the Cromwellian administrative machine during the 1650's, who is not to be confused with his namesake and cousin the Admiral (G. E. Aylmer, *The State's Servants: the Civil Service of the English Republic 1649-1660* (1973), 244, 419. Also: *Association Records*, 96, 98, 108, 175, 214).

¹³"Mr. Lock" is not otherwise known.

¹⁴W. T. Whitley, *Baptists of London* (n.d.), referring to Southwark (4); Herts (9) and Southwark (22) on pp. 105, 107f., 116, spoke with more confidence than the fragmentary available evidence could justify about the early history of the Watford Baptists and their links with Horsleydown.

¹⁵"Brother Jones" was presumably James Jones who was licensed under the Declaration of Indulgence in Southwark, 1672. He signed the letter from the London Calvinistic Baptist leaders to Andrew Gifford 18th January 1675/6 (*Ivimey* 1.417-20) and wrote several pieces in the 1680's (See *Baptist Bibliography*, I.221). Cf. "James Jones Coffee House", *B.Q.* 6.324-6.

¹⁶Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) had been brought up first among the General Baptists in Bucks. (baptized in 1655); in 1668 he came to London and settled in Southwark as minister to a small congregation whose elder had been William Rider. This usually met in Tooly Street, Southwark, in a private house but later a meeting house was built at Goat Yard, Horsleydown, Southwark. (*Crosby*, 4.269-73.)

¹⁷ "Hempsted" was, of course, Hemel Hempstead and it first appears as joining the Abingdon Association, 11th March 1656 (*Association Records*, 145) and as sharing in the proposal that Kensworth and other eastern churches should form a separate association, 13-16th October 1657 (*Association Records*, 180). By the 1689 London Assembly Samuel Ewer was pastor and was to remain so until the independent re-foundation of the Watford congregation in 1707.

¹⁸ "Brother Pope, pastor" was probably James Pope who was present at the meeting of the Abingdon Association, 27-30th May 1656, (*Association Records*, 161) but whose church was not identified although at the meeting held 24-25th April 1660 he was present as a representative of the Hertfordshire and other churches (*Association Records*, 198).

¹⁹ "Mr. Harrison", presumably from London may have been Thomas Harrison (1667-1702) as Stuart (*op. cit.*, 12) suggested; the suggestion becomes more plausible the later the joint preaching of Keach and Harrison is placed since, even as late as 1689 Thomas Harrison would only be twenty-two. However, Keach himself had only been eighteen when "called to the work of the ministry" (*Crosby*, 4.270).

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