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**JOHN MYLES (1621-83)
AND THE FUTURE OF ILSTON'S PAST
Welsh Baptists after three and a half centuries***

Although the name Ilston has become synonymous with the witness of those believers who, during the Commonwealth period, established 'a company or society of people holding forth and practising the doctrine, order and discipline of the Gospel according to [the] primitive institution',¹ the Christian faith had taken root in that part of Glamorgan's Gower peninsula over a thousand years before. For the parish of Ilston - Llanilltud-yng-Ngŵyr - traced its ancestry back far beyond the Reformation and the earlier enforced amalgamation between Canterbury and the indigenous Welsh Church to that period in our history which we still delight in calling 'the Age of the Saints'. Ilston's patron was Illtud (c.475-c.525), the grandson of Amlawdd Wledig, King of Britain, and a courtier who, according to medieval tradition, was converted from a life of privileged worldliness to a severe ascetic discipleship much influenced by the example of St Anthony of Egypt and, closer to home, St Martin of Tours. The father of Celtic monasticism in Wales, Illtud's principal settlement in the Vale of Glamorgan drew not only those who felt called to a simple community life of prayer but others who sought to combine asceticism with learning, culture and missionary zeal. Samson, later the leader of the Breton Church; Paul whose name would become entwined with the primitive Christian tradition of Cornwall; the scholarly Gildas, author of that early Jeremiad *De Excidio Britanniae*; and the great Dewi himself, 'St David of Wales', were all trained in Christian discipleship and service at the monastery of Llanilltud Fawr. As well as taking the Gospel along the western seaways to other parts of the Celtic world, Illtud's followers evangelized at home and his cult is commemorated in a dozen *llannau* between Monmouthshire and Merioneth, though concentrated mostly in Glamorgan, Breconshire and on the Gower. With the creation-centred romanticism of 'Celtic spirituality' currently in vogue, it is tempting to seek parallels between Illtud's spartan monasticism in the early sixth century and John Myles' vision of restoring 'the primitive institution' in the seventeenth. It is a temptation which must be resisted!, though I will be returning to the Celtic theme and to the question of the continuity of a general Christian witness, before the end. What is true however, is that each of Myles' churches was established in or near places which, a millennium earlier, had been dedicated to Illtud's name.

John Myles was born at Newton Clifford on the northern edge of the Archenfield district of Herefordshire. Geographically in England, Archenfield - the ancient kingdom of Erging - was culturally Welsh, though nothing is known of Myles' specific family or linguistic background. After having matriculated from Brasenose

* This was the Benjamin Henton Lecture 1999.

College, Oxford, in 1636 when he was fifteen, he disappears from view only to re-emerge in the summer of 1649 at Ilston having been commissioned by the London Calvinistic Baptists to evangelize in south Wales. Why he selected Ilston as a base is impossible to tell, were it not that the home of Thomas Proud, his colleague in the mission, was in nearby Llanddewi, and that Puritan influence on the Gower was already fairly widespread. Nevertheless the fact is that by the end of the year a Particular Baptist church embodying the theological and ecclesiological precepts of the 1644 *Confession of Faith* had been established in that place. 'Thus', recounted the churchbook, '... it pleased the Lord to choose this dark corner to place his name here, and to honour us, undeserving creatures, with the happiness of being the first in all these parts among whom was practised the glorious ordinance of baptism, and to gather here the first church of baptized believers'.² The achievements of Myles' subsequent career, as an 'Approver' of the Act for the Better Propagation and Preaching of the Gospel in Wales (1650), his staunch support after 1653 in the face of severe radical and Fifth Monarchy dissension for Oliver Cromwell's protectorship, the anti-Quaker polemic of his *Antidote against the Infection of the Times* (1656), his appointment by the state to a Puritan lectureship at Llanelli, Carmarthenshire, and, a year later in 1657, to the incumbency of the Ilston parish church, would prove less enduring than his work in establishing the modern Baptist movement among the Welsh people. He stood, in the words of one recent authority, 'like a Colossus above all other Welsh Baptists in the period ... In many ways the history of early Welsh Baptists is the history of John Miles'.³

The principal characteristic of the Ilston church and of Myles' mission up to the Restoration and beyond, was their exclusive, corporate and inter-congregational nature. Unlike previous Baptist missionaries in Wales whose emphasis had been more on making individual converts than establishing specifically ordered churches on the basis of a Calvinist creed,⁴ for Myles a theologically valid Christian fellowship was only possible where believers, having been baptized through immersion, covenanted together to form a community of faith. When, in early 1650, the Independents of Llanigon, Brecknockshire, wavered a little before seeking believers' baptism at the hands of the Ilston missionaries so as not to cause consternation among their fellow non-Baptist Dissenters, Myles' response was unequivocal:

And whereas you say that you would not have breach of communion made on your side, first, if you should mean, as we conceive you do not, that it is a church communion, then there can be no breach made, for you are not yet in any true church order while you are unbaptized.⁵

Whereas he had no desire to deprive them of their Christian status or to forbid them enjoying fellowship with other believers whatever their baptismal convictions (he did, after all, count among his colleagues within the Puritan leadership such noted non-Baptists as Walter Cradock, Morgan Llwyd and Ambrose Mostyn), yet he was equally sure that the only valid form of church order was in accordance with the convictions of the Particular Baptists as laid out in their 1644 *Confession*. The

'communion of scattered brethren or saints', although valuable in itself, did not constitute a true church order, and for Myles ecclesiology was not an optional extra but intrinsic to the nature of the Gospel itself.

Full fellowship, though, 'according to the primitive institution', could not be restricted to the life of single, individual congregations. Though retaining their sovereignty, congregations were not to maintain their witness independently of one another and certainly not in opposition to one another, but in concert and by so doing fulfil the unity of their faith and calling. According to the *Confession*:

There is a like relation betwixt the particular churches each toward other, as there is betwixt particular members of one church. For the churches of Christ do all make up but one body or Church in general under Christ their head And in his body there is to be no schism ... Wherefore, we conclude that every church ought to manifest its care over other churches as fellow members of the same body of Christ in general.⁶

So the congregations which stemmed from the efforts of the Ilston mission, firstly at Hay-on-Wye, Breconshire, established in early 1650, then soon after at Llantrisant in the Vale of Glamorgan, so becoming 'another golden candlestick set up in those dark parts', thirdly at Carmarthen in west Wales, where, on 22 January 1651, 'there was a very considerable number baptized and joined in church fellowship ... who now be another city of God in that town where Satan's seat was',⁷ and finally, at least during John Myles' tenure,⁸ at Abergavenny, Monmouthshire, in August 1652, were knitted together within the same body by means of what the Calvinistic Baptists called their 'General Meetings' and which subsequent generations would refer to as Associations. It was here that advice would be given, especially over controversial matters of doctrine and polity, that needy congregations were granted financial support, that mission strategy was discussed and implemented, and that a common mind was sought and perfected thus creating a communal spirit within the movement. The South Wales Association, like those of the Midlands, the West Country, Ireland, Abingdon⁹ and their successors, would become the focus for debate, co-operation and inter-congregational alliance for the next 350 years.

Of the six general meetings held during Myles' oversight of the south Wales movement, perhaps the most significant was the one held at Llantrisant on 30-1 August 1654. By then the churches together possessed perhaps 250 members with women outnumbering men at a ratio of approximately 3:2. Ilston was numerically the largest and geographically the most extensive of the five churches with a membership spread between the parish of Llan-non on the Carmarthenshire border and Aberavon far to the east, to say nothing of those who lived around Swansea and on the Gower. Worship was held each Sunday morning between 8 a.m. and around mid-day and included, for the church members, preaching, bible exposition, exhortation, praise and prayer, leading to a public sermon to which non-members and the unbaptized were invited and the Gospel proclaimed. There was also a public sermon under the auspices of the congregation each Sunday afternoon at the Ilston

parish church, while a communion service, to which all the baptized were expected to attend, was held once a month. Members were also charged to present themselves at weekday meetings in their different localities, with 'house churches' having been established in Carmarthenshire, at Aberavon and at Ilston itself.

The general meeting of August 1654 set out a blueprint for the five churches which had already been practised, for the most part, at Ilston for some time. The ministry of apostles and prophets and the manifestation of extraordinary or miraculous spiritual gifts having long ceased, the church was now to be regulated according to the precepts of the New Testament whose officers included 'pastors', 'teachers' and 'helpers' or alternately 'elders', 'bishops' and 'watchmen'. The pastor, among other things, was to 'administer all ordinances in the church' and to 'lead the sheep, he is to be the mouth of the whole'. The teacher's role was to expound the scriptures while the elder or helper was 'to oversee the lives and manners of men'. This three-fold ministry was complemented by that of other church officers including deacons, 'widows' or deaconesses, and 'ordinary prophets', viz. preachers or exhorters who were encouraged to use their gifts among the membership rather than preaching publicly or function outside the gathered congregation as evangelists or missionaries. During this meeting representatives from the Abergavenny congregation issued 'a query concerning singing Psalms' which may have reflected Puritan scruples over the prospect of joint worship between the unconverted and the baptized. The answer was deferred to the next meeting but, as the Ilston churchbook carries no records of what happened in subsequent general meetings, we can only guess as to what the decision was. There was a further enquiry as to whether a fast day, decided upon by 'the churches of *England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales*', should be continued. In this case the solidarity of the wider Calvinistic Baptist movement demanded that the answer was to be a positive one. The practical matter of organising the worship of a growing church scattered over a large area was also addressed:

In regard to the bigness of the church, distance of members, want of discipline and government, which necessarily followeth, for want of often meetings together; it is desired, that they should divide into three parts, and that a ministry and maintenance for the same be provided for each of them; to the end that brethren may be better edified, governed, and spared long journeys to the church meetings, the work may more prosperously go on in each part of the country, and peace and holiness better preserved.¹⁰

From then on devolution occurred with Ilston's three 'house churches' functioning as three separate congregations though preserving their character as a single church. It is details such as these which illustrate how the ministry developed, how discipline was applied, how fellowship was preserved and how the movement evolved during the formative years between Ilston's establishment in 1649 and the end of the Puritan ascendancy in 1660. It was here that the Baptist tradition in Wales was born.

In considering the future of Ilston's past, we cannot be content with reflecting

on a history which emerged fully formed in 1660. It is in the nature of tradition to evolve. As Newman suggested, that which is alive must change and that which is most alive changes often. The energetic and disciplined missionary enterprise over which John Myles, before his emigration to the Plymouth Colony in 1663, presided, the blurring of denominational distinctions which occurred when Protestant Dissenters of all convictions were forced into illegal or semi-legal conventicles during the harsh years of persecution up to 1688, the solid if unspectacular gains made during the civilised years of the Older Dissent, leading to the dramatic revitalization of the movement of the 1770s and '80s in which it spread well beyond its former heartland and into north Wales, constitute a dynamic history in which emphases were changed, characteristics added and convictions expanded according to the demands of the time. By the 1820s, when Christmas Evans and other hugely effective evangelistic preachers were in their prime, Wales itself was being transformed from a rather peripheral, rural wilderness, into a modern, advanced industrial nation, and with the securing of much more widespread political rights during the early Victorian era, its separate social and cultural identity was both strengthened and particularized by the seemingly unstoppable progress of a Nonconformity in which Baptists played an essential part. In one way the confined Puritan exclusiveness of Myles' Ilston has little in common with the expansive, confident and much more world-affirming witness of late Victorian Welsh Baptists, while such twentieth-century developments as biblical criticism and a fairly mild theological liberalism may seem incongruous in the light of the literalism of the earliest years. Yet even this is less clear-cut than at first appears. Diversity has been present throughout; not all seventeenth century Welsh Baptists were Calvinistic Baptists; there were those who did not approve of Myles' zeal for the Puritan political establishment and such close co-operation between church and state, while even Thomas Proud, Myles' fellow missionary of 1649, was not wholly convinced of the propriety of closed communion and an exclusivist church polity. The presence within the movement of such contrasting figures as the conservative Christmas Evans and the radical Morgan John Rhys, an anti-revivalist (and sectarian) high Calvinist like J.R.Jones, Ramoth, and an anti-revivalist Arminian like William Richards, Lynn, and during more recent times the witness of fundamentalist separatists of the calibre of R.B.Jones, Porth, and erudite liberals like J.Gwili Jenkins and others, has added to rather than detracted from the vitality of the tradition and conferred upon it a diversity which, given the exigencies of historical development, was inevitable. What all Welsh Baptists have held in common has been a loyalty to scripture, an explicit confession of Christ made manifest in their baptism, and a conviction that church fellowship should embody the ideals of God's kingdom which has the dynamic to transform even secular concerns. And the context of their discipleship has been Wales with all its foibles, complexities and glory.

It would be foolish to claim that the Baptists in Wales face the twenty-first century with ebullience or even much equanimity. Of all the Christian traditions it

is Nonconformity which has suffered most grievously during the last fifty years, its residual puritanism being out of kilter with an increasingly affluent society and its unsacramental Word-centredness being either too cerebral, or, paradoxically, too superficial, to engage with a culture in which the visual, symbolic and imaginative reign supreme. Even by mid-century the superb pulpit gifts of a Walter P. John or a Lewis Valentine hardly succeeded in maintaining a hearing for the Gospel to say nothing of stemming the irreligious tide. What we witnessed during the secular 1960s, the sceptical 1970s, the materialist 1980s and the post-modern 1990s has been, with few exceptions, a diminution of Baptist strength and failure of collective vision. Welsh Nonconformity can hardly be said to be on the cutting edge of contemporary Christianity, either spiritually or intellectually, and there is a dearth of theological creativity in our churches which is disturbing to say the least.

Chastened as we are by the realities of our more recent history, there are positive points which can, and must, be made. There is a continuity between Ilston's past and our present which can serve, even now, as a focus for renewal and a challenge for the new millennium. There are, moreover, discontinuities created by seismic shifts in perception socially and psychologically as well as theologically and ecclesiological, which may also, in the openness of God's future, have a bearing on what is to come. Vastly changed circumstances and sensibilities may demand that we formulate convictions in a way in which even our immediate forefathers and mothers would have found alien and disconcerting. Yet our core beliefs - God's gracious self-revelation in the person of Christ and the authority of his Word - will remain.

The essence of John Myles' churchmanship was a disciplined and costly faith leading to a definite church order which facilitated, in turn, co-operation and interaction between different congregations. It implied, using Bonhoeffer's phrase, a faith in 'Christ existing as community', though that community was wider than the individual congregation. His exhortation of February 1650 to the Llanigon Independents who were contemplating seceding from their parent body to form a Baptist church, retains its effectiveness still: 'Go on and prosper in the name of the Lord ... Christ is for you, Scriptures are for you, all right ordered churches are for you ... Quit yourselves like men'.¹¹ Whatever future Welsh Baptists have in the twenty-first century, if they do not retain this emphasis on personal conviction, ecclesiological integrity and inter-congregational unity, they will perish. There is no doubt that the call to conversion and an appeal to embody the claims of faith within a disciplined though caring and compassionate fellowship, will retain its drawing power and preserve a continuity with our past.

There are, however, certain problems in replicating these ideas directly within our own generation. Despite working with non-Baptist 'Approvers' in applying the Act for the Better Propagation and Preaching of the Gospel in Wales (1650) which installed Puritan - and not specifically Baptist - clergy into each of the parishes of the formerly Anglican establishment, Myles had no compunction about drawing

members away from officially constituted Congregational churches (to say nothing of Anglican parish gatherings) and forming them into Baptist congregations. Not recognising the validity of their baptism, he did not accept that they belonged to regularly constituted churches at all. Baptism, therefore, correlated directly with churchmanship: a defectiveness in one constituted the invalidity of the other. Few contemporary Welsh Baptists would follow Myles in this (though some would still). For many the link between baptism and churchmanship is no longer as clear cut as it was in the past, while an aversion to sectarian attitudes and to creating the possibility for schism would be far more common than before. To complicate matters further, many Baptist churches now accept Christians into full church membership, usually by transfer, without insisting that they be baptized as believers, either because they accept the validity of their previous (paedo)baptism, or on the basis of their faith and good standing in the non-Baptist churches from whence they have come. Both attitudes constitute a radical departure from the previous norm, as did the earlier abandonment - perhaps two generations ago - of the insistence on closed communion. Whereas former generations would have seen each of these developments as a break with tradition, contemporary Baptists see them as a legitimate development of that tradition, which, in fact, they are. The whole issue does, however, raise serious questions as to the future of the Welsh Baptist movement, whether it will preserve its autonomy and character or merge, either imperceptibly or deliberately, into a wider church grouping. Some congregations already feel themselves closer to baptismally 'mixed' churches within the Nonconformist tradition, and they would be attracted to membership of the proposed United Church of Wales, if, and when, that body comes into existence. Other congregations, especially those in the English-language wing of the Baptist Union of Wales, would see any attempt at inter-denominational unity as a threat to their sovereignty and the integrity of their Baptist witness, and would reject the prospect outright.

As far as theology and doctrine are concerned, Ilston was a church of Calvinistic Baptists, and the prevailing tradition among mainstream Welsh Baptists for two-and-a-half centuries was Calvinism. The 1689 *Confession of Faith*, which was loyal to the doctrinal emphases of the 1644 London *Confession*, remained normative for the churches throughout the eighteenth century and became the standard around which the hugely expanded and evangelically renewed nineteenth century denomination rallied.¹² If, by the twentieth century, Calvinism as a system was in decline, the sovereignty of God in salvation was generally still proclaimed and the churches were happy, by and large, to affirm the older emphases even though the terminology had been updated. God's transcendence was maintained, biblical orthodoxy was upheld, and despite some alteration in tone and idiom, at its best Baptist preaching reflected a continuity with the past. (It is hardly surprising that such powerful preachers as J. Ithel Jones and Lewis Valentine were equally influenced by the restatement of Calvinism connected with the thought of Karl Barth.) The theological fashions of the

twenty-first century will be very different from those of even a fairly recent past, and will reflect significantly different concerns: ecological wholeness, gender equality, brokenness even more than the sinfulness of humankind, and God's active participation in the life of his creation. The vogue for 'Celtic spirituality', as we mentioned at the beginning, is already tapping into these current anxieties. Baptist spirituality will obviously be required to respond to the ever-changing needs of the age, but the long history of the Church has shown that biblical orthodoxy has within it the means of answering people's deepest questions and fulfilling their profoundest needs. Calvinism's strength has always been its grasp of the reality of God's transcendent objectivity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and his triune graciousness in creation and redemption. However God's self-revelation is formulated in the new millennium, Baptists would be wise not to spurn such a rich doctrinal heritage.

Which brings us, finally, to the context of Baptist witness and presence in the years to come. John Myles, like all his fellow mid-seventeenth century Puritan leaders, was involved in the huge social and political upheavals of his age. Although it would be misleading to suggest that the political motivation was uppermost in his mind, nevertheless he appreciated the fact that Christ's lordship had secular and governmental implications which could not be denied. Following the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Baptists in Wales as elsewhere retreated from such involvement into an understandable quietism in an attempt to prove their loyalty to the prevailing authorities, and it was not until the 1790s, with Morgan John Rhys among the radicals and a little later with Joseph Harris, 'Gomer', among the orthodox, that they began taking an interest in temporal affairs and developed a more rounded social theology. For all its creativeness and novelty Ilston never possessed a prophetic voice, and its existence was foremost a challenge to the prevailing ecclesiastical establishment rather than the social structures of the day. It was not until the nineteenth century with the widening of the franchise and consequent radicalization of the Welsh working class, and the early twentieth century development of a Nonconformist social gospel, that the need to establish and preserve social justice was seen to coinhere with a commitment to Gospel preaching and the salvation of individual souls.

26 May 1999 saw the opening of the National Assembly, and for the first time since Owain Glyndŵr, Wales has the opportunity, however circumscribed, to take responsibility for her own political, social, and to a lesser extent economic destiny, according to the will of her own people, with decisions made on her own soil. It may not have seeped through to Westminster or to the metropolitan media yet, but the fact is that, in Wales, these are exciting times. However we interpret the evidence from Ilston's past, it is clear that, in order to be true to the totality of the Gospel and to the wholeness of the Christian faith, Ilston's future will be bound up with the needs, problems and aspirations of the Welsh people, both spiritually and temporally, as they too evolve into the next century within the wider community of Europe and the world.¹³

NOTES

- 1 B.G. Owens (ed.), *The Ilston Book: earliest register of Welsh Baptists*, Aberystwyth 1996, p.31; the spelling of all quotations has been modernized.
- 2 *ibid.*; for the 1644 Confession, Myles' contribution to the London Baptists' missionary endeavours and his place within contemporary Baptist life generally see B.R. White, 'The doctrine of the church in the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644', *Journal of Theological Studies* (NS) 19 (1968), pp.570-90; *idem*, 'John Miles and the structures of the Calvinistic Baptist mission to south Wales, 1649-60', in Mansel John (ed.), *Welsh Baptist Studies*, Cardiff 1976, pp.35-76; *idem*, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 1983, pp.76-9 esp.
- 3 Geraint H. Jenkins, *Protestant Dissenters in Wales, 1639-89*, Cardiff 1992, p.30; despite the general tendency to use the form Miles, the style which the subject used invariably was Myles.
- 4 See T.M. Bassett, *The Welsh Baptists*, Swansea 1977, ch.1.
- 5 Owens (ed.), *The Ilston Book*, p.35.
- 6 Quoted in White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, p.69.
- 7 Owens (ed.), *The Ilston Book*, pp.40, 42.
- 8 Rhydwylym, on the border between Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire, was established in 1668 during the era of persecution following Myles' emigration to the Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts; see B.G. Owens, 'Rhydwylym Church 1668-89: a study in west Wales Baptists', in John (ed.), *Welsh Baptist Studies*, pp.92-106.
- 9 See B.R. White (ed.), *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660*, 3 Vols., 1971-4.
- 10 See White (ed.), *Association Records*, Vol.1, pp.9-13.
- 11 Owens (ed.), *The Ilston Book*, p.97.
- 12 See D. Densil Morgan, 'Cefndir, Cymreigiad a chynawys Cyffes Ffydd 1689', *Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru*, 1990, pp.19-34.
- 13 For aspects of the historical background mentioned above, see D.Densil Morgan, "Smoke, fire and light": Baptists and the revitalization of Welsh Dissent', *BQ* 32, 1988, 224-32; *idem* 'Welsh Baptist theology, 1714-60', *Journal of Welsh Ecclesiastical History* 7 (1990), 41-54; and *idem* 'Christmas Evans and the birth of Nonconformist Wales', *BQ* 34, 1991, 116-123.

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BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING 2000 'Baptists, Human Rights and Religious Liberty'

This will take place on 13 May 2000 at Bristol Baptist College. The President, the Revd Dr Roger Hayden, will deliver the Society's Annual Lecture on Caleb Evans and the Slave Trade. Malcolm Evans will speak on human rights and the law, and Brian Haymes on theology and human rights. The Society's annual general meeting will also take place during the day. More details later, but members are asked to note the date now.