

ARTICLE XI.  
CRITICAL NOTE.

DID BAPTISTS IN ENGLAND IMMERSE PRIOR TO 1641?

IN his article in the *BIBLIOTHECA SACRA* for October, 1896, Dr. B. B. Warfield says: "The original Baptists apparently did not immerse; and Dr. Dexter appears to have shown that even the first English Baptists who seceded from the Puritan emigrants and formed a congregation at Amsterdam, baptized by affusion. It would seem that it was by the English Baptists of the seventeenth century that immersion was first declared to be essential to valid baptism; and the practice of immersion by them can be looked upon as a survival from an earlier time only in the sense that it was a return to an earlier custom, although with the variation of a single instead of a trine immersion" (pp. 603, 604).

Dr. Dexter, in his "True Story of John Smyth," argues that immersion was not practiced in England prior to 1641, and was at that time introduced from Holland. He relies upon statements of various authors soon after 1641, to the effect that immersion was "new." It would be easy to show that Dr. Dexter has strangely misused many authorities quoted. Take a single example: On page 51 of his "True Story of John Smyth," J. Parnell is quoted, the quotation professing to come from "The Watcher; or, The Stone Cut from the Mountain," p. 16, as follows: "Now within these late yeeres . . . they (the Anabaptists) say . . . they must be dipped in the water, and that they call baptizing." Now in the original document the words "now within these late yeeres" are more than a page removed from the words "they must be dipped in the water and that they call baptizing"; while the words "they (the Anabaptists) say," are not found at all. Dr. Dexter has put two fragments of sentences, more than a page apart, together, and inserted words of his own invention, and made the whole into a single statement. This is but one of many instances; and Dr. Warfield should not rely upon Dr. Dexter's citations, without verification.

But conceding that there were English authors about the middle of the seventeenth century who called immersion "new," it by no means follows that it was then new in England. When it is remembered that not till August 1st, 1641, were the persecuting courts of High Commission and of Star Chamber abolished, it is not to be wondered at that the Baptists should then have shown themselves as they had not done before. The

fact that they appear about that time, here, there, and everywhere in England, proves that they existed there before; and it also explains why many should regard their practices as new. This is a point Dr. Dexter has wholly overlooked in his discussion.

In 1644, the Baptists put forth their famous confession of faith of that year, in which immersion is insisted upon as essential to valid baptism. It is admitted that at this time the Baptists were immersionists. Now if they began to immerse in 1641 and in 1644 the practice had become universal among them, we have the most remarkable change ever known in the history of the world. That a denomination as independent and scattered as the Baptists should, in so short a time, have completely changed their initiatory ordinance, is little short of a miracle. That immersion was universal among them in 1644 proves they did not begin the practice in 1641.

The Westminster Assembly in 1644 voted down immersion by a majority of only one. That a new rite introduced only three years before could have taken such strong hold of those divines, is well-nigh incredible. They are known to have been men remarkably tenacious of their opinions. That they voted immersion down by only one majority in 1644, proves that the rite was not introduced into England in 1641.

But there is not lacking direct testimony to the practice of the immersion of believers in England prior to 1641. Edward Barber in that year published "A Small Treatise of Baptisme or Dipping, wherein it is clearly showed that the Lord Christ ordained dipping for those only that profess repentance and faith." In this treatise he takes immersion for granted, and argues that only believers should be immersed. He advocates believers' dipping as opposed to infants' dipping, and not immersion as opposed to affusion. For example, on page 16, we read: "But for infants' dipping there is no express description of the persons, condition, time: whereas true dipping, which is that one dipping (Eph. iv. 5) which is the dipping of repentance for the remission of sins (Mark i. 4), it is most evidently and faithfully set downe for persons, condition, and time."

This is not the language of a man who is introducing immersion among those who knew of no such practice. Moreover, Barber answers objections to immersion. On page 3 he replies to the objection that "there was no plain text of the dipping of any woman." Had there been no dipping of women before that time this objection could not have arisen. Again, on page 43, he replies to the objection: "Lastly, whereas the clothes or vestments are said to bee holy, which they weare when they receive the Ordinance of Dipping, they being dipt into the death of Christ." It is evident that people who did not practice immersion could not have been charged with regarding as holy the clothes in which they were immersed.

We find on page 7 another utterance of Barber's which is decisive on

this point. He says: "In like manner lately, those that professe and practice the dipping of Jesus Christ, instituted in the Gospel, are called and reproached with the name of Anabaptists, although our practice be none other than what was instituted by Christ himself," etc.

It is not that those who lately began to "professe and practice the dipping of Jesus Christ," were "called and reproached by the name of Anabaptists," but those who all along had been professing and practicing this dipping, were lately thus "called and reproached." The professing and practicing of the dipping, according to Barber, preceded the name Anabaptist.

Dr. Daniel Featley in his "Dippers Dipt, or the Anabaptists Ducked and Plunged over head and eares," bears testimony to the practice of immersion in England prior to 1641. In the Epistle Dedicatory of the above book, written January 10th, 1644, he tells how these Anabaptists "flock in great multitudes to their *Jordans* and both sexes enter into the river and are dipt after their manner, with a kind of *spell* containing the heads of their erroneous tenets," etc. A little later in this same Epistle Dedicatory, Featley gives as a reason why he arrayed himself against these sectaries, that they had shown themselves "near the place of my residence, for more than twenty years." He dates the origin of these "Dippers," against whom he is writing, at 1525 (p. 28), and he connects them with the Donatists of A. D. 380 and the Novationists of A. D. 250.

Thomas Blake in his "Birth Privilege," published in 1644, says: "I have been an eye witness of many infants dipped, and I know it to have been the constant practice of many ministers for many years together" (p. 33).

William Kiffin, the leading English Baptist of his time, wrote his "Brief Remonstrance," etc., in 1645, in which he answered the charge of Robert Poole that the Baptists were erecting "new framed congregations" and interfering with the work of the Reformation. Kiffin says: "To the first, it is well known to many, especially to ourselves, that our congregations were erected and framed according to the rule of Christ, before we heard of any Reformation," etc. (p. 12).

Likewise Thomas Grantham in 1678 thus answers the charge that the Baptists were a new sect: "That many of the learned have much abused this age, in telling them that the Anabaptists (i. e. the Baptized churches) are of a late edition, a new sect, etc., when from their writings the clean contrary is so evident."<sup>1</sup>

Thus the Baptists of that period denied the charge that they and their baptism were "new"; although they seemed new to many as they came forth from their hiding-places when the hand of persecution was lifted by the abolition of the courts of High Commission and of Star Chamber. Leonard Busher, "citizen of London," in 1614 published his "Religious Peace," etc., in which he incidentally speaks of baptism and says:

<sup>1</sup> Christianismus Primitivus, pp. 92, 93.

"And therefore Christ commanded his disciples to *teach all nations and baptize them*; that is, to preach the word of salvation to every creature of all sorts of nations, that are worthy and willing to receive it, he hath commanded to be baptized in the water; that is, dipped for dead in the water" (p. 59).

This shows that immersion was practiced in England in 1614. Going back to the sixteenth century we find John Penry was put to death May 20th, 1593, at St. Thomas-a-Watering, "at the early age of thirty-four"; of whom Joshua Thomas says: "Possibly he was the first that preached believers' baptism openly and publicly to his countrymen since the Reformation. I am strongly inclined to think that he was the first that administered that ordinance by immersion upon a profession of faith in and about Olchon. . . . A. Wood in Ath. Oxon . . . speaks out plainly that Penry 'was a notorious Anabaptist of which party he was the coryphæus.' . . . Strype owns that Penry expressed great concern for his native country, yet charged him with Anabaptistry."<sup>1</sup>

Bishop Horn, writing to Henry Bullinger of Zurich in 1575, speaks of baptism in England as follows: "The minister examines concerning their faith, and afterward dips the infant in water."<sup>2</sup>

It was in 1562 that John Fox published his well-known "Book of Martyrs." He says: "There are some Anabaptists at this time in England who came from Germany. Of these there were two sorts: the first only objected to the baptizing of children, and to the manner of it, by sprinkling instead of dipping. The other held many opinions, anciently condemned as heresies; they had raised a war in Germany, and had set up a new king at Munster; but all these were called Anabaptists from their opposition to infant baptism, though it was one of the mildest opinions they held."<sup>3</sup>

Here, then, were Anabaptists in England who practiced immersion and objected to affusion in 1562. From aught that appears, both classes of Anabaptists held to immersion; but the latter class held to many heresies besides.

The catechism of Edward VI. (A.D. 1553) provides for the immersion of believers. It says: "Him that believeth in Christ: professeth the Articles of the Christian religion and mindeth to be baptized (I speak now of them that be grown to ripe years of discretion, sith for young babes their parents' or the church's profession sufficeth) the minister dippeth in or washeth with pure and clean water only, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Thomas Fuller, who wrote his "Church History of Britain" in

<sup>1</sup>Hist. Bapt. Ch. in Wales, p. 43, MS. in Baptist College, Bristol.

<sup>2</sup>Zurich Letters, 2d Series (Parker Society), p. 356.

<sup>3</sup>Alden ed., p. 338.

<sup>4</sup>The Two Liturgies, etc. (Parker Society), p. 516.

1656, speaking of the condition of England in 1539, says of the Anabaptists: "Their minds had a by-stream of activity more than what sufficed to drive on their vocation; and this waste of their souls they employed in needless speculations, and soon after began to broach their strange opinions, being branded with the general name of *Anabaptists*. These Anabaptists, for the main, are but 'Donatists new dipped'; and this year their name first appears in our English chronicles," etc.<sup>1</sup>

The force of this testimony is sought to be evaded by supposing that Fuller meant "new named" when he said "new dipped." But this is a mere conjecture, and a most improbable one. No instance is cited where in that age the word "dip" was used to mean "name"; and to suppose Fuller used it so is wholly gratuitous. Moreover, Fuller puts quotation marks around "Donatists new dipped," indicating that it was a common designation in his day. And even if it be conceded that the Anabaptists of that day were but Donatists new named, since the Donatists confessedly practiced immersion, the Anabaptists must have done the same.

In the year 1523, the Anabaptists of Holland published a book called "The Sum of the Holy Scriptures," which was translated and circulated in England. On the subject of baptism, among other things, this book says: "So we are dipped under as a sign that we are, as it were, dead and buried, as Paul writes, Rom. vi. and Col. ii. The life of man is a battle upon earth, and in baptism we promise to strive like men. The pledge is given when we are plunged under the water. It is the same to God whether you are eighty years old when you are baptized, or twenty; for God does not consider how old you are, but with what purpose you receive baptism."<sup>2</sup>

Mosheim, in speaking of the "Anabaptists or Mennonites" in England in the sixteenth century, mentions the Baptists of England of his own day (1755), and says of them: "The Baptists of this latter sect settled chiefly at London, and in the towns and villages adjacent; and they have departed so far from the tenets of their ancestors, that, at this day, they retain no more of the peculiar doctrines and institutions of the Mennonites, than the administration of baptism by immersion, and the refusal of that sacrament to infants and those of tender years."<sup>3</sup> According to Mosheim, therefore, the "Anabaptists or Mennonites" of England in the sixteenth century administered "baptism by immersion." It is true that Mosheim might have been mistaken, but it has not been shown that he was so.

Many other authorities might be cited to the same effect. These have been selected because they speak of different periods between 1641 and 1509, beyond which latter date, it is admitted, immersion was practiced in England.

Add to this that there are Baptist churches in England to-day which antedate 1641. These churches claim to have practiced immersion from

<sup>1</sup> Vol. ii. p. 97. <sup>2</sup> Armitage, Hist. Bapt., p. 409. <sup>3</sup> Vol. iv. pp. 462, 463.

their origin, and there is no evidence of their ever having practiced affusion. For example, the Baptist church at Warrington was organized in 1522; the churches at Braintree, Eythorne, and Sutton, in 1550; those at Crowle and Epworth in 1599; those at Bridgewater, Oxford, and Wedmore in 1600. Let it be noted that, while there were those who called Baptists "new" and "upstart," after the abolition of the High Commission and Star Chamber made it safe for them to advocate their views, there is no record of any one's charging them with ever having changed their initiatory ordinance from sprinkling to immersion. Wherever there were Baptists they practiced immersion.

Let it be borne in mind that positive evidence is not to be set aside by negative evidence. However many there were who, soon after 1641, did not know of the practice of immersion in England before that date, this does not set aside the testimony of even one who had such knowledge. The Irishman, in the story, who sought to offset the testimony of the two men who said they saw him take the horse, by producing twenty who did not see him take it, was very properly held for the crime. Hence if any of the testimony I have cited be valid, the thesis falls to the ground, that immersion was not practiced in England previous to 1641. It is absolutely necessary to that thesis that *all the evidence* to the contrary be proved to be invalid.

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