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Baptists in Barnstaple, Devon 1650-1652

THE LETTER addressed by John Collman¹ to John Miles² and transcribed below from the Ilston Churchbook³ provides the earliest known information about Baptists in Barnstaple.

Collman's letter, however, is not only of interest for this reason since it also provides evidence for the background of the thinking of the sectaries of the time against which such men as John Miles and Thomas Collier⁴ carried through their work. It also helps to explain the reason why the London Particular Baptist leaders had published *Heartbleedings for professors abominations* rather earlier in the same year.⁵ The spread, for example, of the views of the Ranters in various parts of the country, especially in 1649-50, has been quite recently discussed and the fact that a number of Ranter leaders had earlier been Baptists has been pointed out again.⁶

Collman, it seems, had been a Baptist earlier, presumably a Calvinistic Baptist since he was in touch with those who knew about Miles' mission in South Wales and Monmouthshire. But he, apparently like others of his acquaintance, had been caught up in the strange amalgam of antinomianism, mysticism, subjectivism and scepticism which was sweeping through the sectaries of the period. Different men tended to pick up and emphasise different aspects of this strange and manysided theological fashion which did much to prepare the way for the Quakers. Some went so far as to doubt the existence of a personal God and others, possibly less profound in their scepticism joined those of whom Collman spoke who "will not beleeve there is a Church in being anywhere".⁷

Whether or not Collman had been a member of a Baptist church in Barnstaple or elsewhere before is unclear but it seems certain that, if there had been a Baptist group in the town, it had been dissolved. Nevertheless, it seems clear that he was determined to form one and there is at least one fragment of evidence which suggests that he was successful. The membership list of the Ilston Churchbook records that "Ann Grose of the church at Barnstaple" was received into membership at Ilston on the 30th of the 11th month 1651—presumably January 1651/2.⁸

What eventually happened to the boastful and destructive James Hardyn is not recorded in the Ilston Churchbook. Nevertheless, the tone of the reference to him in the introduction to Collman's letter and the fact that the reference to him appears to have been the primary reason for the letter's transcription into the Churchbook does suggest that Hardyn attempted, and failed, to make good his promise: "our good Father prevented him by giving us timely warning by a faythfull brother liveing in Barnstaple . . . and by giveing wisdome to use such meanes as, through mercy, frustrated his malitious designe".⁹

Letter from John Collman of Barnstaple to John Miles dated 9 May 1650.

Deere Brother Myles,

Having of late heard by some of the country and alsoe by some of our brethren off London of your owning the way of God in dispensing the ordinances of the gospell in the due manner and order of the gospell, I could not but bless the Father on your behalfe, that he should preserve the consciences of some pure, even in that time wherin there hath byn such a generall appostasy as now there is on them who were sometymes professors of the same truth. Now, and on the other side, I can but mourne to consider of the sad events that hath befallen those who did appear to be glorious lights in their practises, in owneing the same truth, and walked sutable to that way in soe much that not only their practises did shine in stoping to it, but their lives and conversations were every way exemplary to others that did behould them soe farr as any could judg by the outward appearance.

Oh, what shipwracke there have byn made of faith and a good conscience since the disowneing of God in his precious ordinances! What communion had we with God! How could we spend and be spent for God's sake! What strong cryes did our soules putt upp to heaven against corruptions and Satan's temptations! O Lord, what answers had wee from heaven againe! Yea, wee were able through that strength we receaved to kill and mortifie then with ease. But, since that we left off fetching watter from that fountaine and cutt out to our selves cisternes, broken ones that would hould noe water, we have byn dry and wythered, in soe much that Satan tooke the advantage of it and burnt upp all the good which did appear in us, soe that in conclusion wee lived just like civill heathens. Nay, many of those that left the Lord in his wayes became scandelouse in their lives and have made the wholle Counsell of God null by their wickednesses insomuch as that they have not preached the law of God, in practise and judgment. For it is common heere with us for men and women to deny a Deity and, at best, if they doe acknowledg any, they say they are it, and the things wee doe see are it, and looke upon the Scriptures that declares (sic) what this Deity is, to be far worse the [?? book title] and more truthes in that, then in the Scriptures. Soe monstrous are some growne that it cannot almost be named without trembling.

But yet, through the great love of the Father he hath mett some in there way travailling to that land of darknes and, as they were begining to breath out against that great Jehovah slaughter, in denying that there was any such one. Yea, I say, almost ready to beleeve it, he met some of us and knockt us downe with dread feare and terrours not to proceed any further in breathing out destruction on the Deity. Yea, he peered us soe farr with his arrowes that we could not but beleeve it was from him whom wee had almost denyed in person, and in his woorkes and ordinances. Which, when wee sawe it was

from him wee were att a stand and, lookeing backe on our way, to see how farr wee had come in it, stood amazed and cannot doe less at this present day, when we see the daungerous rocks we passed by and the great marke that was made on some by strieking them. I say, when we saw this, wee were inforced to steere about another course very well seeing that there was nothing before us but blacknes and darknes which, had wee gonn further, wee had byn driven to darknes and lost. But our Father had compassion on us, lookeing on us to be poore weake silly sheepe and had broken out over the fould and had sufficiently bescratched our selues in the willdernes among the divell's thornes, hee spake kindly to us, and allured us to him by our former injoyments that we had when we walked close with him, in soe much that he brake our hearts in sunder with love. Yea, wee could not chuse but mourne with joy at the sight of our Beloved, who came with his old imbraces to us after he had overtaken us and laid us in the dust. And, ever since, through much mercy, wee have according to that measure wee have receaved, walked with our God and doe receive from him our old comforts and old imbraces which wee prize as our cheefest good. And wee trust that our former backslideings will be a warning to us when we run a whooring after other lovers. Truly wee can say from experience with David, it's good for me to draw nigh to God.

Deere Brother we know and could tell you the sadnes of backsliding and into what sad inconveniences it drawes poore soules into and into what amazement it brings the soule into, when it sees how far it's gone in wayes of darknes, I shall desire the Lord for you that none of you know what such wayes meane by experience, and I likewise desire you to let the Church to know of the dealing of God with us of late, that you and they may put up to the throne of grace some prayes to our God for his goodness towards us heere in this towne and some strong cryes to the father for us to keepe us for the future, that wee fall not againe from our deere Husband. And wee shall, according to that grace given us, praise the Father for you and desire him to counsell you from heaven, that you may walke worthy of the vocation whereunto he hath called you. And soe wee may have a stock going on[e] for the other though happily we never see each other's faces in the flesh.

Only I desire you to gratifie us with a few lynes that we may shew them to those that are fallen because some will not beleve there is a Church in being anywhere. And let us know of your affaires, how your state is, and of your faith and order and wee shall acquaint you of ours. Att present I am not joynd to any congregation since my revolt but intend to be speedily that wee may be in order heere. There are but two in this towne: only on[e] more is come off from his wandering notions about six weekes since and came to us about 11 dayes since. He was on[e] that was very eminent when he walked close with God: he is likewise under baptizme; he lives 7 myles from us but is resolved to be with us every first day if possible he can.

I cannot but give you notice of a most desperat blasphemers that came from London with another man's wife, whom he said was his wife. For which, it being knowne, they were both taken in hould and put in prison untill the last assizes. At which time the man made his plea, he knew not that shee was another man's wife when he married her (but this I know, he knew it before he brought her out of London), and soe was freed. And the woman is yet in prisson untill the next assizes. This fellow did more harme heere then ever was donn before for he hath broacht such new upstart oppinions that he hath made those that were fallen away so desperat almost as himselfe. This man is come over to Swanzey and, I supsue, to doe some mischeefe among you for, at a time he heard of your progress in the order of the Gospell, used these words: Oh, sayth he, if I were there among them I would quickly breake them in peeces. Not long after Mr Edward Bowen came over who liked well of his judgment and caried him over. The man can shape himselfe into any forme: he can be like them he is in company with be they whom they will. His name is James Hardyn. Thus much I thought good to give you to understand as touching the man. And for conclusion, I desire the great God and our Father to keepe you and all the church with you, in perfect love and peace and make you beare on[e] another's burdens and soe fullfill the law of Christ. Soe prayes him who is

Your affectionate brother

Present my deerest love
to all the Church.

in fellowship

John Collman.

Barnstable 9th May 1650.

NOTES

¹ "John Collman" does not seem to be mentioned elsewhere. A Baptist named "John Coleman" was active in Cork, Ireland, later in the 1650's (St. John D. Seymour, *The Puritans in Ireland 1647-1661*, Oxford 1912, 86, 155, 162f.).

² See *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Also: B. R. White, *Association records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660: part I. South Wales and the Midlands*, London (Baptist Historical Society) 1971, 2-17.

³ "Iiston Churchbook", 165ff. (National Library of Wales MSS 9108/9. This is a facsimile of the original in the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, U.S.A.)

⁴ See *Dictionary of National Biography*. Also: B. R. White, "Thomas Collier and Gangraena Edwards", *Baptist Quarterly*, vol. XXIV.3. July 1971.

⁵ Thomason's copy is dated 28th February, 1650.

⁶ A. L. Morton, *The world of the Ranters*, London 1970, especially chapters 4 and 5. Ranter leaders who had formerly been Baptists included Joseph Salmon (p. 94), Richard Coppin (p. 97) who denied being a Ranter but was influential among them, and Laurence Clarkson (p. 117).

⁷ This conviction made Roger Williams a Seeker and was reached, in his own way, also by William Erbery. See B. R. White, "William Erbery (1604-1654) and the Baptists", *Baptist Quarterly*, vol. XXIII, 114-125.

⁸ Another woman, "Jennett Philip", joined the Iiston Church on the 16th of the 3rd month, probably May, 1652, and was described as "of Barnstaple" but without any indication that she had been in membership there.

⁹ "Iiston Churchbook", 165.

B. R. WHITE.