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John Collett Ryland, Daniel Turner and Robert Robinson and the Communion Controversy, 1772-1781

A SERIES of tracts published between 1772 and 1781 turned the attention of the English Particular Baptist churches to the question of who should be admitted to the Communion Table. Most churches still practised closed communion, restricting participation in the Communion Service to baptized believers.¹ In the 1770s and 80s, however, the case for open communion was powerfully advocated by three country ministers, John Collett Ryland of Northampton, Daniel Turner of Abingdon and Robert Robinson of Cambridge. Their most able opponent was Abraham Booth of Little Prescot Street Chapel, London. Joseph Ivimey referred to the controversy in his *History of the English Baptists*.² He wrote nearly sixty years after these events and his treatment of the part played by Ryland and Turner is not as clear as could be desired, while a mistaken date for Robinson's pamphlet has distorted his own account and led subsequent writers astray.

The Candidus-Pacificus Pamphlet

Referring to the pamphlets of Ryland and Turner, Ivimey wrote, "The two first of these were anonymous, under the assumed names of *Pacificus* and *Candidus*."³ These tracts were probably rare in Ivimey's day. The relevant volume of his *History* appeared in 1830. Subsequent bibliographers appear to have relied upon Ivimey's statement for the existence of the *Pacificus* tract. W.T. Whitley listed both, locating a copy of the *Candidus* tract in the Angus Library of Regent's Park College, but appealed to Ivimey as his authority for the *Pacificus* tract. Edward C. Starr also included both publications, indicating a further copy of the *Candidus* pamphlet at the New Orleans Baptist Seminary, but only referred to Ivimey for *Pacificus*.

A recent search, however, has revealed the existence of a copy of the *Pacificus* pamphlet in the Northamptonshire Central Library. It is a closely printed pamphlet of three pages, measuring 8 by 10 inches and is dated, June 15 1772. The *Candidus* tract on the other hand, measures 4½ by 7 inches and consists of sixteen well printed pages. It is simply dated 1772. Although they are not the same in appearance, the contents of these two pieces are identical, apart from two minor differences.

The first difference is in the heading. Daniel Turner (*Candidus*) wrote *A Modest Plea for Free Communion at the Lord's Table; Particularly between the Baptists and the Paedobaptists*. Ryland appears to state his sympathies in even more catholic terms, writing *A Modest Plea for Free Communion at the Lord's Table; between True Believers of all Denominations*.

The other difference is of one word in the section entitled 'Objections Answered' where the writers are facing the insistence of the closed communionists that Baptism is an initiating ordinance and logically precedes

the Lord's Supper. In reply Candidus conceded, "Though it be admitted that the order of Churches is of *some* importance", whereas Pacificus wrote, "is of *great* importance".

Thus the tracts are really one and must be the result of collaboration between Ryland and Turner. There is at present no evidence to show who took the initiative in writing or whether they appeared at the same time. The work takes the form of a piece of defensive writing to justify the practice of the authors and their churches in the face of criticism from "several of our *stricter brethren* of the *Baptist* denomination". Both men were already known as open communionists. According to William Newman, later his assistant at Enfield, Ryland had experienced some difficulty with his first church at Warwick, because of its closed communion practice.⁴ In 1758 Turner had made a cautious plea for open communion in his *Compendium of Social Religion*.⁵ In view of their common conviction, their similar titles and pseudonyms, it is perhaps surprising that the fact of the collaboration of Ryland and Turner has been overlooked for so long.

Robert Robinson's Pamphlet

Ivimey mistakenly dated Robert Robinson's *General Doctrine of Toleration, applied to the particular case of Free Communion* as 1771.⁶ He proceeded therefore to suggest that Abraham Booth's *Apology for the Baptists* was a reply to Ryland, Turner and Robinson, stating that, "his masterly work received no reply from his brethren".⁷ At least one modern historian has followed Ivimey at this point.⁸ In fact Robinson first published his work in 1781⁹ and while Booth clearly replied to Turner and Ryland, Robinson wrote in the light of Booth's arguments.

George Dyer, Robinson's friend and biographer, declared that the origin of the *General Doctrine of Toleration* was a series of sermons preached in Oxford in 1780 "to a little society of dissenters, then forming themselves into what is called *church order*".¹⁰ It was on 16 November 1780 that this little group of dissenters, Baptists and Paedobaptists covenanted to form themselves into a church, in which they would receive each other into membership and to the Communion Table, "because we can find no warrant in the Word of God to make such difference of sentiment any bar to communion at the Lord's Table in particular, or to Church fellowship in general; and because the Lord Jesus receiving and owning them on both sides of the question, we think we ought to do so too".¹¹

Interestingly it is Daniel Turner, who at this stage appears as a link with earlier developments. Ryland's collaborator was one of the witnesses of the Oxford Church Covenant,¹² which seems to owe something to the preaching of Robert Robinson.

NOTES

- 1 Andrew Fuller, *Works*, London, 1862, p. 855.
- 2 Joseph Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, IV, p. 35.
- 3 *Ibid*, p. 35.
- 4 William Newman, *Rylandiana*, London, 1835, p. 11.
- 5 Daniel Turner, *Compendium of Social Religion*, London, 1758, pp. 126-127.
- 6 Ivimey, op. cit. p. 35.
- 7 *Ibid*, p. 35.
- 8 Olin Robison, *The Particular Baptists, 1760-1820*, an unpublished Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1965, p. 220.
- 9 Robert Robinson, *General Doctrine of Toleration*, Cambridge, 1781.
- 10 George Dyer, *Memoirs of Robert Robinson*, London, 1796, p. 197.
- 11 *Church Covenant of the New Road Baptist Church, Oxford*.
- 12 *Ibid*, Daniel Turner, witness.

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