

Church History (38): Early English Baptists

Having given an overview of Puritanism in England and considered Puritanism in North America, in this lesson I want to return to England and examine early English Baptists. We will consider their origins, Churches, and Confessions.

I. Early English Baptists

1. *Baptist origins in England.* There have been three views of the origins of the Baptist in seventeenth century England. (1) Baptist Successionism. "This view argues for an organic succession of Baptist churches going all the way back to either the ministry of John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan river or the day of Pentecost. It is noteworthy that this view became popular in the nineteenth century, and is not to be found in the writings of Baptists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (Haykin).¹ This isn't to deny that there were always Christians with Baptist beliefs. But it denies a clear succession of Baptist Churches in the fullest sense. "Now, the major problem with the successionist view of Baptist origins is that it simply will not pass the scrutiny of historical examination. While the groups that are claimed by these historians to be genuine Baptists often have some similarities with later Baptists, other major differences invalidate the entire thesis" (Haykin).² (2) Anabaptist roots. "Another view is that Baptists are descended from the 'Radical Reformers' of the Protestant Reformation, those known as the Anabaptists (meaning 're-baptizers'). This opinion is advocated by those who believe that, while there is no continuation of organized churches linking the Baptists of today to those of the Anabaptists, there is a continuation of 'Baptist forms of faith and practice' that can be traced back to the time of these Anabaptists" (Thompson).³ The primary argument against this view comes from the seventeenth century English Baptists themselves. In 1644, when the Particular Baptists wrote their first Confession, they stated on the title-page of the Confession that they were "commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists." "They clearly wanted to dissociate themselves totally from the spectre of Anabaptism" (Haykin).⁴ (3) Puritan roots. "Both General and Particular Baptists emerged out of the English separatist Puritan movement during the first half of the 17th century" (Thompson).⁵ "Calvinistic Baptists emerged from the matrix of the English Puritan and Separatist movements of the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries. This view best fits and explains the historical evidence" (Haykin).⁶

What is absolutely clear from the historical record about Baptist origins is this: they emerged from the womb of English Puritanism in the early to mid-seventeenth century. The Puritans had appeared on the scene of history in the 1560s, confident that they could fully purify the Church of England from what they considered to be unbiblical practices of worship that had sprung up during the Middle Ages. Consequently, in the latter part of the sixteenth century, a number of Puritans came to the conviction that the Church of England would never be fully reformed, and they decided to separate from the state church and organize their own congregations. It was among these Separatists, as they came to be known, that believer's baptism was rediscovered, and Baptist congregations subsequently formed in the first half of the seventeenth century.⁷

¹ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 15

² Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 16

³ Michael Thompson, *Outside the Camp: John Spilsbury, the Pioneer of English Particular Baptists*, 10-11

⁴ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 18

⁵ Michael Thompson, *Outside the Camp: John Spilsbury, the Pioneer of English Particular Baptists*, 10

⁶ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 18

⁷ Michael Haykin, *The British Particular Baptists*, 1:16

2. *Baptist Churches in England*. Two types of Baptist churches formed in England in the first half of the seventeenth century: General Baptist who believed in a general atonement and Particular Baptist who believed in a particular or definite atonement. Michael Haykin suggested several important differences between the two groups: "First, the General Baptist not only retained the Arminianism of the Anabaptists, but remained more open to some of their extremes (i.e., a reluctance to erect church buildings and their strict enforcement of marrying in their own church); second, the General Baptist initially baptized by sprinkling or pouring; third, General Baptist regarded baptism primarily as an outward sign of the inner washing of the believer's heart, whereas Calvinistic Baptists (while affirming this), viewed baptism more from a covenantal and objective view."⁸ "Unlike the General Baptists, by maintaining the continuity of a common doctrine from the earliest days of the church, the Particular churches had a doctrinal foundation of commonality with other mainstream Christian denominations of their day. With the Church of England, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists, the Particular Baptists had no 'first-tier' doctrinal differences (i.e., the authority of Scripture, the nature of the Triune God, the nature of man, salvation, etc.)" (Thompson).⁹ "Apart from a few congregations, the General Baptist generally died out in the late eighteenth century in the wasteland of Unitarianism" (Haykin).¹⁰

(1) The Smyth and Helwys Church. This began in England in 1608 as a separatist congregation. John Smyth led the congregation to Holland in 1609 because of persecution. There he came under the influence of the Anabaptists. "In 1611 Thomas Helwys led the church remnants back to England, staking claim to the title as the first Baptist church on English soil" (Thompson).¹¹ "The Helwys congregation retained the Arminianism that they had adopted under Smyth's leadership, and thus became known as General Baptists. Helwys was thrown into jail almost as soon as the congregation returned to England, where he died around 1615. His small congregation – which must have consisted of no more than ten or so members when they first arrived to England, survived their leader's imprisonment and death, and eventually became the General Baptist denomination. The General Baptists thus clearly emerged from the womb of Puritanism and the Separatist movement. Yet, although they are the first English-speaking Baptists, it is the Calvinistic Baptists who were to become the leading Baptist denomination in the next couple of centuries" (Haykin).¹²

(2) The Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey Church. "There is one church in particular which lies at the fountain-head of the Calvinistic Baptists and that is the London-based congregation known to historians as the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church, so called because of the names of its first three pastors. Henry Jacob (1563-1624) and a group of like-minded believers in London had established the congregation in 1616" (Haykin).¹³ "Of the first seven Particular Baptist churches, five of them were directly descended from the church founded by Henry Jacob and served in succession by John Lathrop and Henry Jessey, and the other two were early connected with it" (Nettles).¹⁴ After Jacob left for Virginia in 1622, and Lathrop in 1634, Henry Jessey (1601-1663) became the new pastor in 1637. "A year or so after Jessey became the pastor of this church, the question of the validity of infant baptism arose. This led to two men leaving the church and starting Baptist churches" (Haykin).¹⁵ "Though the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church was not a Baptist congregation, from its ranks came people who formed the

⁸ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 26-27

⁹ Michael Thompson, *Outside the Camp: John Spilsbury, the Pioneer of English Particular Baptists*, 36-37

¹⁰ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 26

¹¹ Michael Thompson, *Outside the Camp: John Spilsbury, the Pioneer of English Particular Baptists*, 34

¹² Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 24-25

¹³ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 27

¹⁴ Tom Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity*, 1:112

¹⁵ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 28

first Particular Baptist Churches" (McGoldrick).¹⁶ Those men were John Spilsbury (1593-1668), William Kiffin (1616-1701), and Hanserd Knollys (1599-1691). Spilsbury started his church in 1638, Kiffin left with Spilsbury in 1638 and in 1640 led a group from that church to establish another church, and Knollys began his church in 1644. All three were Particular Baptist Churches located in various parts of London.

(a) John Spilsbury. "Apparently born in 1593, Spilsbury was involved with a secession from the London church under the ministry of Henry Jesse, and formed what was probably the first Particular Baptist church in 1638. In 1643, Spilsbury published a book on baptism, defending the increasing number of Calvinistic Baptist churches against the charge that their baptisms were invalid. In 1644, his church was one of seven that signed the *First London Baptist Confession of Faith*" (Haykin).¹⁷ In fact, it's generally agreed that Spilsbury was a primary author of the *First London Confession*. "As the principal author of the 1644 London Baptist Confession of Faith, Spilsbury was acknowledged not only as the associational leader of the Particular Baptists, but also as the foremost theologian of the group—quite an accomplishment for a commoner who had absolutely no formal theological or ministerial education or training" (Thompson).¹⁸ Spilsbury wrote important treatises in defense of Baptist theology: *A Treatise Concerning the Lawful Subject of Baptism* (1643), and *God's Ordinance, The Saints Privilege* (1646). The first was written against the paedobaptists, and the second was written "as an attempt to answer the objections of the so-called Seekers to the re-institution of baptism by immersion. They were an unorganized, but nevertheless influential, group, who argued that the ordinances, and even the true church, were lost during the ascendancy of Rome and its apostasy" (Renihan).¹⁹

(b) William Kiffin. "In 1640, at twenty-four years of age, Kiffin led a group from Spilsbury's church to establish a congregation at Devonshire Square (London). He presided over the congregation until 1701, when he was in the eighty-sixth year of his age" (Nettles).²⁰ William Kiffin held a unique place of honor and influence among the early English Calvinistic Baptists. For instance, of those who signed the *First London Confession of Faith* in 1644, only Kiffin remained alive in 1689 to invite representatives of Calvinistic Baptist churches throughout England and Wales to gather in London for their first national assembly. It was at this assembly that these representatives approved the *Second London Confession of Faith*. From the 1640s till his death at the beginning of the next century Kiffin was a source of strength and stability to the Calvinistic Baptist movement, and played a vital role in its growth and advance (Haykin).²¹ It is generally agreed, that along with John Spilsbury and Benjamin Cox, Kiffin was a co-author of the *First London Baptist Confession* written in 1644 and revised in 1646. "By 1644, there were seven Calvinistic Baptist congregations in England, including the one pastored by Kiffin. In that year, these churches issued the *First London Confession of Faith*, in the drafting of which Kiffin appears to have played a significant role" (Haykin).²²

(c) Hanserd Knollys. "By 1645, Knollys had already gathered a congregation of Baptists in London after separating from the congregation led by Henry Jessey, and Knollys joined several London Baptists in signing the 1646 *London Confession*" (Arnold).²³ "Knollys first located his church next to St. Helen's Church, where it was reported by some neighbors that as many as a thousand attended his

¹⁶ James McGoldrick, *Baptist Successionism: A Crucial Question in Baptist History*, 131

¹⁷ Michael Haykin, *The British Particular Baptists*, 1:22-23

¹⁸ Michael Thompson, *Outside the Camp: John Spilsbury, the Pioneer of English Particular Baptists*, 49

¹⁹ James Renihan, *The British Particular Baptists*, 1:32

²⁰ Tom Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity*, 1:132

²¹ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 42

²² Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 45

²³ Jonathan Arnold, *The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach*, 18

services. He was eventually turned out of there by the landlord and moved to Finsbury Fields" (Howson).²⁴ In December of 1645, Knollys, along with Benjamin Coxe and William Kiffin, published *A Declaration Concerning the Public Dispute Concerning Infant Baptism*. "The following year Knollys published two more works in defense of the Baptist cause. The first was the second edition of the *First London Baptist Confession of Faith* and the second was *The Shining of a Flaming Fire in Zion*. In this latter work Knollys emphasized that the church after the Apostles was to continue in the practice of the ordinances of Christ and that only those who had the gifts of the Spirit to preach the gospel, and who were approved by the church, were permitted to administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper" (Howson).²⁵

(3) The Petty France Church. This church took its name from the street it was located on, Petty France, which is a street in the city of Westminster in central London. The church was founded by Edward Harrison (1619-1673). When it was formed and became Baptist is unknown. By 1645 Harrison was publically refuting infant baptism and espousing Baptist views. "Benjamin Coxe (1595-1677) began as a minister in the Church of England, but came to Congregational and Baptist views by 1643/44" (Renihan).²⁶ Coxe and Harrison formed a close friendship, and in 1646 Coxe became an elder with Harrison in the Petty France Church. "When Coxe signed the 1646 edition of the *First London Confession*, he did so as a representative of the Petty France Church" (Renihan).²⁷ When the second edition of the *Confession* was published in 1646, an appendix by Coxe was added to it. It was entitled, *An Appendix to A Confession of Faith or A More Full Declaration of the Faith and Judgment of Baptized Believers*. Benjamin's son, Nehemiah Coxe, was a member of the church in Bedford (where John Bunyan would later become pastor). In 1675, the Petty France Church called Nehemiah Coxe to serve as an elder along side William Collins (d. 1702). "On 26 August 1677, a note was entered in the minute book of the Petty France Church: 'It was agreed that a Confession of Faith should be published.' Thus, it appears that the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* originated in the Petty France Church. This would, of course, mean that Nehemiah Coxe and William Collins are the most likely candidates to have served as editors of the document" (Renihan).²⁸

The Petty France Church was large and prominent in London. As one of the original seven churches, it had an historical stature, and this was increased as the membership of the church grew larger. The records of the congregation indicate a flourishing assembly: from 1675 to 1688-89, there seem to have been more than 530 people in membership. The vigor of this church is amazing, especially when one remembers that life in London was not easy. The fires of persecution flared against the Petty France Church, so much so that at times they could not assemble in their own meeting place. Nonetheless, they pressed on with the work to which they were called.²⁹

(4) The Horse-Lie-Down (Horselydown) Church. Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) was converted in 1655 and began to preach among the General Baptists in 1658. He adopted Calvinistic theology in 1672, and erected a church building for his congregation in Horse-Lie-Down, Southwark (South London). "This group became the core of Keach's congregation for the remainder of his life, growing eventually into the largest Particular Baptist church south of the river Thames" (Walker).³⁰ "In the production of expositional, sermonic, and theological material, Keach is rivaled in Baptist life by on-

²⁴ Barry Howson, *The British Particular Baptists*, 1:45

²⁵ Barry Howson, *The British Particular Baptists*, 1:45-46

²⁶ Samuel Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance*, 117-118

²⁷ James Renihan, *Covenant Theology from Adam to Christ*, 11

²⁸ James Renihan, *Covenant Theology from Adam to Christ*, 20

²⁹ James Renihan, *Covenant Theology from Adam to Christ*, 21

³⁰ Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, 92

ly John Gill. Having published forty-three separate works before his death, he was spoken of as the 'famous Mr. Keach' (Nettles).³¹ While Keach was engaged in a number of controversies, perhaps the most important was the hymn-singing controversy. "A key area in which Keach influenced future generations was in the sphere of public worship, in particular, with regard to the singing of hymns. The English Presbyterians and the Congregationalists were convinced that only the Psalms should be sung in public worship, and others, like the General Baptists and the Quakers, largely rejected the practice of any form of congregational singing. Keach first introduced the singing of a hymn between 1673 and 1675 at the conclusion of the Lord's Table" (Haykin).³² This not only created a great controversy within his church, but other Particular Baptists opposed the idea. "Keach responded in 1691 to these objections in his, *The Breach Repaired in God's Worship: or, Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, proved to be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ*. Keach was eager to defend the practice of congregational singing because he was convinced that one of the main reasons Baptist causes of his day were beginning to experience 'sad witherings' and a 'want of God's Presence, or liveliness of Spirit' was their neglect of this scriptural 'ordinance'" (Haykin).³³

In 1697, Keach published a book called, *The Glory of a True Church, and Its Discipline Displayed*, written for Baptist churches but "particularly to that under my care," that briefly described the ordering of a Gospel-Church, the work of a Pastor, the duty of church-members to their pastor, the reception of members, and the duty of members one to another. He ends the work with 15 things that "tends to the Glory and Beauty of a True Gospel Church." His first reason is the foundation upon the church is built: "That which Primarily tends to the Glory of a Church is the Foundation on which it is Built, which is Jesus Christ." Reasons 4-9 are: "It consists in the Excellency, Glory, and Suitableness of the materials as it's built with precious Stones, lively Stones, all regenerated Persons; It's Beauty and Glory consists in that all the Stones being not only united by the Spirit, to Christ the Foundation, but also to one another in sincere Love and Affection; It consists in the Holiness and Purity of the Lives and Conversations of all the Members; It Consists in the sweet Union and Concord that ought to be in the Church; In their having the divine Presence with them; In keeping out all unsanctified, or unclean Persons, or if they get in, to purge them out by a strict and holy Discipline, or else it will soon lose its Beauty."³⁴

(5) The Bedford Church. John Bunyan (1628-1688) was born in 1628 at Elstow, near Bedford. His father was a tinker (a trade he would continue). He was converted under the ministry of John Gifford in 1654, and became a member (along with his wife), of the Baptist church in Bedford. "In 1655, Bunyan began preaching to various congregations in Bedford. In 1660, Bunyan was arrested on the charge of preaching without official rights from the king. He was thrown into prison, where he wrote prolifically and made shoelaces to provide some income for twelve and a half years (1660-1672)" (Beeke).³⁵ Bunyan was appointed pastor of the Bedford congregation in 1672 where he served until his death in 1688 (except for a short return to prison from 1665-7). "After Bunyan's final release in 1672, he became pastor of the Church at Bedford, and so threw his life into Gospel labor, that his fame as a preacher increased until he was, perhaps, the most famous minister of his day" (Armitage).³⁶ He wrote more than sixty works in sixty years. "Bunyan's works are a treasure of scriptural, experiential truth. He was a Spirit-taught theologian who had the gift of interpreting evangelical

³¹ Tom Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 62

³² Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 92

³³ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 94

³⁴ Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline Displayed*, 84-87

³⁵ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 104-105

³⁶ Thomas Armitage, *The History of the Baptists*, 1:478

truth for the masses" (Beeke).³⁷ While he was greatly respected by the other Particular Baptists, he was engaged in an extended debate with William Kiffin on membership (often merely referred to as communion). "A great controversy on communion was rife amongst the Baptists, about the time that Bunyan took the pastoral charge of the Bedford Church" (Armitage).³⁸ The question concerned, whether non-Baptists were allowed to join Baptist Churches. Bunyan said yes, Kiffin (and many other Particular Baptists) said no. This resulted in a series of treatises on both sides. In 1677, Bunyan published his *On the Terms of Communion and Fellowship of Christians*, a part of which was called, *Differences in Judgment About Water Baptism, No Bar to Communion*. He wrote in the preface to the latter section: "All I say is, That the church of Christ hath not warrant to keep out of their communion the Christian that is discovered to be a visible saint by the word, the Christian that walketh according to his light with God."³⁹

3. *Baptist Confessions in England*. "The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1677/89, and its predecessor of 1644/46, are perhaps the two most influential Baptist Confessions in existence. In many ways, the more recent Confession eclipses the earlier in importance, for by 1689 the First London Confession had become scarce" (Renihan).⁴⁰ (a) The contents of the 1LBC. "The 1644 edition of the *First London Confession* consists of fifty-three articles. In the second edition of 1646 a further article was added which stated that it was perfectly legitimate for 'a Christian to be a Magistrate or Civil Officer' and 'to take an oath,' both of which the continental Anabaptists of the sixteenth century had disputed" (Haykin).⁴¹ (b) The sources of the 1LBC. "The primary source from which the First London Confession is drawn is the 1596 *True Confession* (the work of an English-Separatist congregation of Baptists in exile in Amsterdam). Approximately one-half of the text of 1LCF is drawn from the *True Confession*. Perhaps the second most important source for 1LCF may be found in William Ames's *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*" (Renihan).⁴² (c) The influence of the 1LBC on the 2LBC. As many who signed the 1LBC also signed the 2LBC, our Baptist fathers saw no substantial difference in the two Confessions. "The editors of 2LCF insist the theology contained in 1LCF and 2LCF is the same, and we ought to take them at their word" (Renihan).⁴³

It is now many years since divers of us (with other sober Christians then living and walking in the way of the Lord that we profess) did conceive ourselves to be under a necessity of Publishing a Confession of our Faith, for the information, and satisfaction of those, that did not thoroughly understand what our principles were, or had entertained prejudices against our Profession...and this was first put forth about the year, 1643, in the name of seven Congregations then gathered in London...And forasmuch, as that Confession is not now commonly to be had; and also that many others have since embraced the same truth which is owned therein; it was judged necessary by us to join together in giving a testimony to the world; of our firm adhering to those wholesome Principles, by the publication of this which is now in your hand. And forasmuch as our method, and manner of expressing our sentiments, in this, does vary from the former (although the substance of the matter is the same), we shall freely impart to you the reason and occasion thereof.⁴⁴

³⁷ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 109

³⁸ Thomas Armitage, *The History of the Baptists*, 2:532

³⁹ John Bunyan, *Works*, 2:617

⁴⁰ James Renihan, *Edification and Beauty*, 17

⁴¹ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage*, 35

⁴² James Renihan, *For the Vindication of the Truth*, 12-13

⁴³ James Renihan, *For the Vindication of the Truth*, 3

⁴⁴ Preface to Second London Baptist Confession of Faith