

Foreword

IT IS HARD TO imagine the ordinary life of the congregation Henry Jacob founded in Southwark in 1616. For three decades they met illegally, rarely numbering more than a few dozen, seeing some of their number arrested and imprisoned, enduring multiple schisms amongst the few that remained, seeking through all such setbacks to find an agreed way to follow the Lord ‘in ways known and to be made known’.

In the early 1630s, the very future of the church must have seemed precarious. There was a lasting schism over the issue of fellowship with parish churches, leading to a breakaway congregation pastored by John Spilsbury. Jacob’s successor as pastor, John Lathrop, was imprisoned about this time, and plea-bargained his release into exile, taking a good chunk of the congregation across the Atlantic with him. The main congregation was left without a minister for three years after his departure, and when they finally called Henry Jessey, six more of their number left in protest, and joined Spilsbury’s congregation.

This last sad departure of six believers, however, marks one of the great turning-points in Protestant history, akin to Wesley’s Aldersgate experience or what happened at Azuza St. These six had come to the conviction that the ordinance of baptism should be given to believers only, not to infants; their departure and joining with Spilsbury marks the probable beginning of the very first Calvinistic Baptist congregation.

Today, Baptists are regularly described as the largest Protestant denomination, numbering comfortably over 100 million. Almost all Baptists are, via various twists, turns, and ingraftings, the spiritual descendants of those six believers, Spilsbury, and those with whom they covenanted together. (Although the beginnings of the General Baptists under Smyth was earlier, and although the two traditions developed in parallel for some decades, it was essentially the Particular Baptists and those descended from them or joining with them

who blossomed and spread into the worldwide movement of today.) From that early beginning, in two decades they spread across the UK, organised, and defined themselves as a self-conscious denomination.

Because of the temporal priority of General Baptist beginnings, historians have focused their interest there, and neglected the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church and its baptistic offshoots. For all of us who stand in historic Baptist traditions today, however, this is the 'rock from which we were hewn'; Sabine Staesmore, Richard Browne, and the rest are our mothers and fathers in the faith. For others less personally connected, this is still the origin of one of the most significant ecclesial traditions of modern times, and the arguments and agreements of those few believers have become remarkably determinative for church history. The story deserves to be told, and to be told well.

Dr. Birch tells it well. His interests are theological, asking what ideas shaped these early Calvinistic Baptists. Of course, social and economic historians will have something to say (as will historians of gender; the remarkable Independent preacher and church planter Katherine Chidley stands in the background of this story, and other women rise to remarkable positions of leadership and influence in the newly-formed Baptist churches in the early years). It is right, however, to give intellectual history, and particularly historical theology, the primary word; these early Baptists were seeking to obey the call of Jesus, often putting themselves in great personal hardship and danger to do so, and simply out of respect for them, the primary interpretation of their story must be theological.

If their intentions were theological, however, they lacked a theologian. There is no magisterial writer who interprets their vision for them and for others in this early period (or, to be honest, in any later day). The arguments which they were prepared to break fellowship over, to suffer persecution for, must be reconstructed from slogans, sermons, and suggestions. Much of the strength of Dr. Birch's account is his patience with these fragmentary and un-systematic sources, and his patient weaving together of the threads that we have to make a convincing tapestry, a picture of the underlying belief system.

With Dr. Birch as our sure guide, we discover a community committed to following Jesus as King, to creating and maintaining pure communities of faith, to enabling all to minister so that the body may be built up, to connecting together in love and fellowship. There is much to celebrate in this vision; no doubt there are also questions to be asked of it. Dr. Birch enables us to see and appreciate the vision of these early Particular Baptists that was historically to prove so powerful over the centuries; for that, we owe him a great debt. He tells his story clearly, convincingly, and compellingly; this is an excellent book, which I commend unreservedly.

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