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Innocency Vindicated; or, Reproach Wip'd Off

AFTER the Revolution of 1688, the Baptists were often accused of having betrayed the cause of civil liberty in order to secure toleration. It was said that their leaders had exalted James II's dispensing power in language as adulatory as any used by the High Church party, and that some of them had accepted royal nomination to municipal office in defiance of statute in order to despoil the Anglicans. The General Baptists, most of whom lived quietly in remote villages and farmhouses, and abstained from civil contentions, were scarcely concerned in this controversy; but the first General Assembly of the Particular Baptists in 1689 deemed it necessary to reply to these charges in a declaration entitled *Innocency Vindicated; or, Reproach wip'd off*, a single folio sheet printed by J. Darby, of which the only accessible copy appears to be that in the Bodleian Library. This defence was also incorporated in the *Narrative* of the Assembly, subsequently published; it was reproduced almost *in extenso* by Crosby,¹ and extracts were given by Ivimey² and Goadby.³ It appears advisable, however, to reprint the original text, to list and identify the signatories, and to consider to what extent they represented the denomination, and whether their view of the events of 1686-8 can be accepted.

Innocency Vindicated; or, Reproach wip'd off

The Assembly of Elders, Messengers, and Ministering-Brethren, sent by, and concerned for, more than one hundred Baptized Congregations of the same Faith with themselves from many parts of England and Wales, met together in London, (from Sept. 3 to 12, 1689) to consider of several things relating to the well-being of the same Churches. And having that Opportunity, judged it their Duty to clear themselves from those Reproaches cast on them, occasioned by the weakness of some few of their Perswasion, who in the late King's Reign, were employed as Regulators of Corporations, etc., for the Support of his Dispensing Power.

There having been many Reflections cast on us, under the name of *Anabaptists*, as such, as having in the late Times, for our Liberties-sake, complied with the Popish Party, to the hazard of the Protestant Religion, and the Civil Liberties of the Nation: We being met together, some from most parts of this Kingdom, judge it our Duty to clear ourselves from the said Reflections cast upon us. And we do first declare, That to the utmost of our Knowledge, there was not one Congregation that had a Hand, or gave Consent to any thing of that

¹ *History of the English Baptists* (1740), iii. 255-8.

² *History of the English Baptists* (1811), i. 501.

³ *Bye-paths in Baptist History* (1871), p. 206.

Nature, nor did ever countenance any of their Members to own an Absolute Power in the late King, to dispense with the Penal Laws and Tests; being well satisfied, that the doing thereof by his sole Prerogative, would lay the Foundation of Destruction of the Protestant Religion, and Slavery to this Kingdom.

But yet we must confess, that some lewd Persons (from their own Sentiments) which were of our Societies, used their Endeavours for [page 2] the tauffing off the Penal Laws and Tests; and were employed by the late King *James* to go into divers Countries, and to several Corporations, to improve their Interest therein; but met with little or no Encouragement by any of our Members: though, considering the Tempations some were under (their Lives being in their Enemies Hands; the great Sufferings, by Imprisonments, Excommunications, etc. that did attend from the Ecclesiastical Courts, as also by the frequent Molestations of Informers against our Meetings, by means whereof many Families were ruined in their Estates, as also deprived of all our Liberties, and denied the common Justice of the Nation, by the Oaths and Perjury of the vilest of Mankind) might be some Abatement to the severe Censures that have attended us, though if some amongst us, in hopes of a Deliverance from the heavy Bondage they then lay under, might miscarry, by falling in with the late King's Design. It being also well known that some Congregations have not only reproved those among them that were so employed, but in a Regular way have further proceeded against them. From whence it seems unreasonable, that for the Miscarriage of a few Persons, the whole Party should be laid under Reproach and Infamy. It being our professed Judgment, and we on all Occasions shall manifest the same, to venture our *All* for the Protestant Religion, and Liberties of our Native Country.

And we do with great Thankfulness to God acknowledg his special Goodness to these Nations, in raising up our present King *William*, to be a blessed Instrument, in his Hand, to deliver us from Popery and Arbitrary Power; and shall always (as in Duty bound) pray that the Lord may continue Him and his Royal Consort long to be a Blessing to these Kingdoms; and shall always be ready to the utmost of our Ability, in our Places, to joyn our Hearts and Hands with the rest of our Protestant Brethren, for the Preservation of the Protestant Religion, and the Liberties of the Nation.

William Kiffin (1616-1701; City merchant; pastor, Devonshire Square)

Hanserd Knowllys (1598-1691; ex-clergyman; pastor, Broken Wharf)

Andrew Gifford (1649-1721; Bristol, ordained 1677)

Robert Steed (co-pastor, Broken Wharf)

Thomas Vauxe (1672 Pyrton; 1689 pastor, Broadmead, Bristol)

John Tomkins (1632-1708; bottle-maker; minister, Abingdon)

Toby Wells (subscr. Somerset Confession, 1656; pastor, Bridgewater)

George Barret (Fifth Monarchist; mealman; pastor, Mile End Green)

Benjamin Keach (1640-1701; Winslow, G.B.; pastor, Horsleydown)

Samuel Buttall (minister, Plymouth)

Isaac Lamb (pastor, Penington Street)

Christopher Price (minister, Abergavenny)

Robert Keate (minister, Wantage)

Richard Tidmarsh (pastor, Oxford City)

James Webb (pastor, Devizes)
 John Harris (pastor, Joiners' Hall)
 Thomas Winnel (1658-1720; pastor, Taunton)
 James Hitt (1662 Exeter jail; 1689 preacher, Dalwood; 1692 Plymouth)
 Edward Price (pastor, Hereford)
 William Phips (pastor, Exeter)
 William Facey (pastor, Reading)
 John Ball (Tiverton)
 William Hankins (pastor, Dymock, Gloucestershire)
 Paul Fruin (pastor, Warwick)

The situation of the Protestant Dissenters had never been less hopeful than at the end of 1685. Monmouth's revolt in the West had convinced even moderate men that every Nonconformist was a potential rebel. The best indication of the severity of the persecution is the virtual cessation of Puritan publications. Hitherto the Baptists had found no great difficulty in defending their principles in print. During 1684-85 works by Bunyan, Grantham, Keach, Delaune, De Veil, James Jones and the Stennetts had appeared; even Hercules Collins, who was in Newgate, had published a vigorous quarto on the deaths of his fellow-prisoners Bampfield and Marsden. In the following year the only publication of any kind by a Baptist seems to have been Bunyan's harmless *Country rhimes for children*. Meeting-houses were closed,⁴ pastors imprisoned, and congregations broken up. Dissenters were most readily harassed where they were weak; in some districts they were protected by their numbers and social standing. On 4th July, 1686, episcopal injunctions were issued in several dioceses requiring parish officers, whose zeal was beginning to flag, to be diligent in presenting offenders against the penal statutes.

James II, however, had already made preparations for a change of policy, and soon Dissenters whose health and fortunes had been half ruined by repeated imprisonments and fines were being assiduously courted. Some Nonconformists whose families had adhered to the King during the Civil War and suffered under the Commonwealth had been protected by Charles II, and James quietly extended the procedure. Henry Forty, pastor of Abingdon, and several members of his church, facing trial at Berkshire Assizes, secured a patent in this common form, were discharged on Saturday, 10th July, and returned to Abingdon in time to clean their meeting-house for the Sunday services, which were attended by large and orderly congregations. It soon became known that such dispensations could be bought quite cheaply; the Abingdon patent protected twenty-five Baptists and their families, and cost only £26. The

⁴ A common misapprehension, shared by Macaulay and the Victoria County Histories, is that meeting-houses for public worship were not built before 1687. In the penal times, it was sometimes less costly to build than to meet in private houses.

ostensible object was still to protect those who had testified their loyalty and affection for the royal cause, but the patent protecting Forty and his flock was granted merely on a certificate by two justices (who knew nothing about them) that "to the best of their knowledge" those named had demeaned themselves peaceably and quietly towards the Government.

The documents which issued in an increasing stream from the Dispensation Office were not only pardons for past offences but also licences to break the penal laws in future. To accept them was to admit the dispensing power in its fullest extent. The London Baptists were sharply divided on this question. Nehemiah Coxe and William Collins, pastors of the important church in Petty France, who had edited the standard Particular Baptist Confession, accepted licences without scruple, recovered their premises and in March, 1687, presented a servile address to the King. "It is the sense of this invaluable Favour, and benefit derived to Us from your Royal Clemency, that compels us once more to Prostrate our selves at Your Majesties Feet." This was not merely an Oriental figure of speech; the sight of Dr. Coxe kneeling before the King, while Popish courtiers tried to conceal their amusement, was often recalled after the Revolution with some sharpness. James Jones, another London pastor whose congregation at his coffee-house in St. Olave's had been broken up in 1685,⁵ adopted similar views. Thomas Plant, pastor of the wealthy Barbican church, and Benjamin Dennis of Stratford went even further. In *The mischief of persecution exemplified*, published with the official imprimatur, they declared that James's indulgence would be to his immortal honour. "We confess we most willingly fall in with His Majesty's gracious designs, and shall to our utmost endeavour carry them on." There was much more concerning "the divine person and councils of the king, by whom we sit under our vine and fig-tree."

William Kiffin, pastor of the Devonshire Square church since 1644 and acknowledged leader of the Particular Baptist denomination, was deeply disturbed. He had re-opened his meeting-house on 1st March, 1687,⁶ but had not acknowledged the dispensing power and now urged his brethren not to recognise it or to thank the King for its exercise. "But, for the sense they had of their former sufferings, and the hopes of finding all things as was promised, I could not prevail." Kiffin's views were shared by Bunyan, Knollys and Stennett, but many Baptists in London were prepared to procure licences, and some to co-operate more actively with the Government.

⁵ A branch at Watford survived, and is now represented by the Beechen Grove church.

⁶ Ivimey (i. 470) quoting a contemporary manuscript source, gives the year as 1686, doubtless forgetting the change of style.

On 4th April, 1687, James II published his Declaration of Indulgence, purporting to grant, by his sole prerogative, complete liberty of conscience to his subjects, authorising adherents of all Christian sects to meet publicly for worship, and abolishing all religious tests for offices under the Crown. The persecution of Dissenters had greatly slackened; now it ceased abruptly. For example, in Buckinghamshire, where the penal laws had hitherto been vigorously enforced in most districts, the only presentments for absence from church heard at the sessions on 7th April were from two remote parishes whose constables were perhaps not yet aware of the Declaration.⁷

A group of Presbyterian and Independent ministers, whose services the King had already secured, spared no effort, by personal contact and correspondence, to induce Dissenting congregations to express their thanks. Coxe's fulsome address, which had already been signed by some Baptist ministers in and about London, was published on 14th April. After a pause of some weeks, there appeared in quick succession addresses purporting to come from the Baptists of Leicestershire (10th May) and Exeter (14th), the Independents and Baptists of Gloucestershire (17th), the Baptists of five Midland counties (21st), of Bristol (28th), and of Kent (18th June). On 29th June came a further loyal address signed by Baptists in sixteen counties, but the vagueness of the *London Gazette* concerning the number and standing of the signatories suggested that many were obscure individuals, with no authority to commit their churches or associations. An address from the Baptists of Oxford, Abingdon and Wantage provides more definite evidence that in some churches the royal clemency had produced the full effect which James desired. After the Revolution a pamphleteer⁸ who recalled these facts remarked: "It was six weeks after the Anabaptists e'er any other Sect advanced, the poor Men of the West only excepted (who being Pardoned their Lives, had just cause to be thankful)." However, the same pamphlet admits that Presbyterians, Independents and Quakers "came in altogether of a Cluster" as early as 30th April.

The Presbyterians had good reason not to commit themselves too far, since they still hoped to be comprehended within the Established Church. Baptists and Quakers, on the other hand, could expect nothing from the Anglicans except bare toleration, and James offered them more than this. He was prepared to use his powers of regulating municipal corporations in order to replace rebellious Anglican aldermen by Roman Catholics and compliant Protestant Dissenters, and was particularly anxious to obtain Kiffin's

⁷ *Calendar to the Sessions Records* (1933), i. 219.

⁸ *A Brief History of the Rise, Growth, Reign, Supports and sodain fatal Foyl of Popery* (1690), p. 11.

services. During the previous reign Kiffin had been in close touch with the Court, and had advanced large sums to Charles II. Twenty-four years earlier his intervention had saved the Twelve of Aylesbury from the gallows, but after the Western rebellion he had failed to save his own heirs. His two grandsons had been hanged, one of them at the King's instance after Jeffreys had granted a respite. No Baptist had greater influence, or more reason to abhor the Government; if he were secured, who would stand aloof? Macaulay has vividly recounted the combination of blandishments and threats to which Kiffin finally yielded. He accepted office as an Alderman of the City of London, resolving not to act as a magistratè and to do as little harm as possible. One consideration which had some weight with him was that as Alderman he could do more for some causes which were near his heart, such as the welfare of orphans. He was appalled to find that the King was determined to expel from the City Companies all liverymen who might oppose the royal policy. Conscience and statute both demanded Kiffin's resignation; yet it might be followed by ruinous confiscations. He was devoutly thankful when the restoration of the old charters released him from an impossible position.

The Baptists of Abingdon showed less reluctance when the corporation was purged in November, 1687; five of them accepted aldermanic seats forthwith. Throughout the country, Baptists had to settle this question for themselves. They were too scattered and disorganised to act together without a clear lead from the London churches, whose wealth and influence set them in a class apart. The General Assembly was probably correct, however, in claiming that the great majority of Baptists remained faithful to the rule of law.

The dispute concerning the dispensing power did not lead to any lasting split in the denomination. Kiffin and Knollys soon rallied the churches in support of the new régime. Coxe died shortly after the Revolution, but his co-pastor, William Collins, attended the Assembly both before and after it adopted *Innocency Vindicated*, though he could obviously not sign that manifesto.⁹ Henry Forty was no doubt in the same position, but John Tomkins, one of the intruded aldermen of Abingdon, signed for his church, as did ministers from Oxford and Wantage. Perhaps it was as an act of discipline that Tomkins endorsed this condemnation of his own conduct. Numerous pastors of churches in the south-western counties, which had suffered severely in 1685 and had enjoyed James's belated clemency, also signed. Benjamin Dennis was apparently not present, but he returned to the Assembly in 1693. The

⁹ He probably signed the *General Epistle to the Churches*, though there was another William Collins who was pastor of Hatfield Broad Oak ("Hatfield-Braddock") in Essex.

Barbican church held aloof and prospered greatly, but drifted into Arianism and was ultimately absorbed by Glasshouse Yard General Baptist Church, now at Winchmore Hill.

It is instructive to compare the twenty-four signatories of *Innocency Vindicated* with the thirty-two who issued the Assembly's *General Epistle*, as there is a presumption that the eight who signed the latter but not the former found themselves unable consistently to condemn the dispensing power. Three of them were London pastors, William Collins of Petty France, Hercules Collins, formerly of that church but now pastor of Wapping, and Leonard Harrison of Limehouse. The other five came from Hertfordshire and North Bucks. They were Samuel Ewer of Hemel Hempstead, to whose church the Watford congregation attached to James Jones' church had gravitated; Daniel Finch, minister of Kensworth, whose church included village meetings for many miles round St. Albans; Richard Sutton, pastor of Tring; Robert Knight, pastor of Stewkley in Buckinghamshire; and John Carter, presumably the Olney preacher who had signed the Orthodox Confession in 1679, though Olney is not listed among the churches represented at the Assembly, and there may be some confusion with John Carver of Steventon. The churches at Kensworth, Hemel Hempstead, Tring and Stewkley belonged to a Hertfordshire Association which had long been in close touch with the Petty France church and with the Abingdon group.¹⁰ It may also be significant that at the general election of 1698 the church at Amersham, which though unassociated was probably an offshoot of this Hertfordshire group, ordered its members not to oppose a very conservative candidate belonging to the ancient Lollard house of Cheyne.¹¹ But although not all Baptists took a Whiggish view of the events leading to the Revolution, it is clear that none of them remained Jacobites.

It must be concluded that although James II did not win the support of the Baptists, he had some success in neutralising them. As a body they did little to bring William of Orange in, though nothing to keep him out. The most that can be said is that, after a generation of Anglican persecution, the Baptists resisted the temptation to give way to revenge, and that almost all of them ultimately came to see that if civil liberty and the rule of law were sacrificed, religious liberty would be held on a base and uncertain tenure. In both Europe and Asia in more recent times this lesson has been frequently enforced.

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¹⁰ Ivimey, i. 516; E. A. Payne, *Baptists of Berkshire* (1951), pp. 36, 53-5. Representatives from the Hertfordshire and Berkshire churches met at Wormsley in 1652, probably through the efforts of Edward Harrison, vicar of Kensworth, later pastor of Petty France. After his death in 1673 Henry Forty maintained or revived the link.

¹¹ *Church Book of Amersham*, ed. W. T. Whitley (1912), p. 236.