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Thomas Tillam

EARLY issues of the *Transactions* of the Baptist Historical Society contain a number of references to Thomas Tillam, whom the late Dr. Whitley once summarily and somewhat cryptically described as "lecturer at Hexham, commissioned by Knollys church but disowned, organiser of Muggleswick, Seventh Day, emigration agent." The references in the *Transactions* are not all consistent with one another and they contain one or two obvious inaccuracies. Tillam has passing mention in the histories of both Whitley and Underwood.

Whitley more than once committed himself to the suggestion that Tillam was of Jewish origin. There seems little evidence to support this view except his later Sabbatarian and other vagaries. That he was a Roman Catholic in his youth he appears to have asserted in 1653 when hoaxed by a young Scotsman. Probably he first visited the continent in his early years.

At the beginning of the sixteen-fifties, Tillam came into association with the Baptist church in Coleman Street, London, of which Hanserd Knollys was pastor. He was clearly already an able and energetic personality. An exposition of *Revelation* xi, entitled *The Two Witnesses,* came from his pen in 1651 and the Coleman Street church felt ready to authorise him to preach and baptize. In the fashion of the time, he was designated a "messenger." Presumably because of the status thus achieved and partly, it appears, through the influence of Colonel Robert Lilburne, Tillam was able to secure appointment under the Commissioners set up by the Long Parliament to inquire into the state of religion in the four northern counties, and was given the "lectureship"—that is, the post of occasional preacher—established at Hexham Abbey some twenty years earlier by Puritans connected with the Mercers' Company.

Tillam threw himself into his new task and speedily convinced a number of persons of the truth of Believers' Baptism. A Baptist church was formed, which met at first in the Abbey precincts. One of those received into membership was Tillam's wife, Jane, who was connected with a Baptist church in Cheshire, perhaps Hill Cliffe. It seems possible that Tillam himself originally came from those parts or had early connection with them. Indeed, J. J. Goadby in *Bye-Paths of Baptist History,* says that Tillam was pastor at Hill Cliffe at the time of the outbreak of the Civil War. The Hexham

church showed itself very active in propaganda and evangelism, achieving notable success in the village of Muggleswick and at Stokesley, in Yorkshire. The members also looked northwards and had a share in the formation of a Baptist church in Leith.

These beginnings were propitious and Tillam was held in high regard. Troubles came in 1653, however. A Roman Catholic, of Scottish parentage, came to the neighbourhood by sea, masquerading as a Jew. He was introduced to Tillam by Paul Hobson—then army officer and Baptist leader in Newcastle—professed conversion and was baptized. But the stranger's real identity was discovered, apparently by Samuel Hammond, a Congregationalist, who, like Tillam, held an appointment under the Parliamentary Commissioners. Tillam was reluctantly convinced of the fraud and then showed himself displeased with the account of the matter published by Hammond and others. Tillam's own narrative appeared under the title *Banners of Love displayed over the Church.* There were already difficulties between the Newcastle Baptists and the Hexham Baptists. To judge by the surviving correspondence, they concerned matters connected with both the "blessing of children" (with the laying-on of hands) and congregational singing in worship, but soon became more personal in character. Thomas Gower (or Goare), who had signed the London Baptist Confession of Faith in 1644 with Paul Hobson, was now with Hobson in Newcastle. He took strong objection to some of Tillam's views and actions.

The Hexham church was in correspondence with the Coleman Street church regarding the formal recognition of Tillam as pastor. The original commendations of Tillam by the London friends had been in very eulogistic terms, though they admitted that their acquaintance with him had been brief. Now they felt that Gower's criticisms should be disposed of, but that in any case it was for the Hexham church to take its own decision about the pastorate. George Fox was travelling in the north at the time and had "a great meeting a-top of a hill" near Hexham. His preaching proved a further embarrassing influence on the local Baptists.

These various complications and troubles caused Tillam to visit London in 1653 or 1654. He was already an advocate of the "laying-on of hands" in accordance with *Hebrews* vi. 2. Indeed, the first baptism he had administered in Hexham had been followed by this rite. For some years a number of Baptists had been observing what they called "the fourth principle." Tillam made his position clear to the Coleman Street church and then set out to make contact with other groups who shared his views. So it was he came to know Dr. Peter Chamberlin, one of the most remarkable Baptists of his day.

> "I was by a blessed hand," wrote Tillam, "guided to my most heavenly Br. Doctor Chamberlin, one of the most humble, mortified

> souls, for a man of parts, that ever I yet met with, in whose sweet society I enjoyed the blessing of my God, by the laying on of their hands, and after a love feast, having washed one another's feet, we did joyfully break bread and concluded with a hymn: in all of which the singular majesty of Christ shined forth to the mighty conviction of some choice spectators."

The exact date of this letter is not known. At about the time it was written, Thomas Gower convinced the Coleman Street church that they should disown Tillam "and all that are in the practice of laying-on of hands." The church at Hexham then became divided on the issues that had been raised and Tillam's ministry there came to an end.

This final separation occurred, one supposes, in the spring of 1655. In February of that year, Tillam had, on behalf of the Hexham church, signed *The Representation and Petition of Christ's Servants, and your Highness's Loyal Subjects, walking in the profession of faith and baptism in Northumberland, Yorkshire and Derbyshire,* an address to Cromwell found among the papers of John Milton. Paul Hobson, it should be noted, was among those who opposed loyal addresses of this kind, being already among the critics of the Lord Protector.

Dr. Thirtle asserts that Peter Chamberlin became a Seventh-Day (or Sabbatarian) Baptist in 1651, so we may assume that it was his influence that caused Tillam to adopt similar views. Within a year or so both men were vigorously advocating the keeping of Saturday as the Christian Sabbath. Tillam's next pamphlet dealt not with this issue, however, but with the laying-on of hands and was part of his continuing controversy with Paul Hobson. He had meanwhile made his way to Colchester. There were considerable numbers of Dutch colonists in the town, some of them of Anabaptist sympathies. Tillam is said so to have impressed the Mayor of Colchester that he was allowed the use of the parish church. Within a short time he had baptized over a hundred persons. It is possible that while in Colchester he came to know the Rev. Theophilus Brabourne, a Norfolk clergyman who had earlier adopted Seventh-Day views. In July, 1655, Tillam staged a public debate "in the French school." The following year he began holding services in the parish church on Saturdays, but closed it on Sundays and urged people to carry on with their usual business. This brought him into conflict with the authorities and he was put in prison.

Like many other seventeenth-century prisoners, Tillam occupied himself in writing, sending forth from Colchester gaol his next and best-known work, *The Seventh-Day Sabbath sought out and celebrated: or The Saints' last Design upon the man of sin, with the advance of God's first institution and its primitive perfection.* This appeared in 1657 and was in form a reply to a pamphlet by William

Aspinwall, a leading Fifth Monarchist. In 1659 it attracted the attention of Edmund Warren, the minister of the Congregational church in Colchester, and also of George Fox. Twenty years later, Thomas Grantham alluded to Tillam's book in his *Christianismus Primitivus,* describing the author as an "apostate." There were, however, still sufficient Sabbatarian Baptists to secure its posthumous reprinting in 1683.

Tillam's pages are excited and confused. He refers incidentally to "a pretended conference at Peter's, Colchester," and quotes Thomas Shepherd's *Theses Sabbaticae* (1649) and John Rogers, of Dedham, as well as Aspinwall. In the dedication he mentions "the many brotherly favours and constant encouragements of that worthy instrument who first invited me to serve you"—presumably a reference to the Mayor. Tillam was already stirred by apocalyptic hopes. "The signs of his second coming who is the Lord of the Sabbath are so fairly visible that, although the day and hour be not known, yet doubtless this generation shall not pass, till new Jerusalem's glory shall crown obedient Saints with everlasting Rest" (pp. 1-2). But among the most interesting things to be found in the book are two hymns and a metrical version of Psalm 92. Benjamin Keach has come to be regarded as the pioneer of congregational hymn-singing in England, but it now appears that he had a number of predecessors. Keach's *Spiritual Melody,* a collection of three hundred hymns, did not appear until 1691, though many of his verses had been printed in the previous twenty years. In 1663 Katherine Sutton had published in Rotterdam a volume of religious verses, to which Hanserd Knollys, who was then on the continent, provided an introduction. If used at all in public worship, it would seem likely that these were sung by Katherine Sutton as solos. Tillam's productions claim notice because they appear to have been intended for general use, and because they date from 1657.

The first—consisting of six stanzas of four lines each—is headed "An Hymn celebrating the Lord's Sabbath, with joyful Communion in the Lord's Supper by 200 Disciples at Colchester, in profession of all the Law's Precepts, *Exodus* 20, and Gospel's Principles, *Heb.* 6." The second—consisting of seven four-line stanzas—is "An Hymn in honour of the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, *Acts* 2." The third is described as "That Psalm especially designed for the Sabbath." There are nine four-line stanzas and they are not unworthy of comparison with the versions of Sternhold and Hopkins and Tate and Brady. They are at least as good as most of Keach's verses. Six of the stanzas may here be quoted as a sample of Tillam's skill:

"To praise the Lord most thankfully,
it is an excellent thing,
And to thy Name, O thou most High
sweet Psalms of praise to sing.

To spread thy loving-kindness Lord,
When Morning's glory springs,
And all thy faithfulness record,
Each Night with heavenly strings:

For thou hast made me to rejoice
in work so wrought by thee,
And I triumph in heart and voice
thy handy works to see . . .

Those that within the house of God,
are planted by his grace,
In our God's Courts shall spread abroad,
and flourish in their place.

And in their age much fruit shall bring
delightful to be seen,
And pleasantly both bud and spring
with boughs and branches green,

The Lord's uprightness to express
who is a rock to me,
And there is no unrighteousness
in him, nor none can be.

Tillam's Colchester imprisonment cannot have been very lengthy, for in 1658 he was in London again and shared with Dr. Chamberlin and Matthew Coppinger in a lengthy debate on the Sabbath question with Jeremiah Ives, one of the leaders of the General Baptists, and an inveterate controversialist. We have Ives's account of this disputation, which lasted for three days and took place in the Stone Chapel, which was a part of old St. Paul's.

By then, Tillam's lively mind had become dominated by millenarian hopes. Exactly what part he played in the excitement and confusion which followed the death of Oliver Cromwell we do not know. It is unlikely he remained inactive in those months of petitions and counter-petitions, plots and intrigues. When, in 1660, Charles II returned to England and replaced Richard Cromwell, Tillam, like a number of other Baptists, found himself in prison. Again he took up his pen. Describing himself as "a prisoner of hope," he produced *The Temple of Lively Stones, or The Promised Glory of the Last Days,* a work of 400 pages. It contains a greeting by Christopher Pooley, an East Anglian Fifth Monarchist and Sabbatarian, who had already become one of Tillam's closest associates and who was to join him in his activities during the next few years.

Again Tillam cannot have been very long in prison, for in July, 1661, he was at Lowestoft with Pooley, busy with a scheme to transport his Seventh Day friends and their families to the Palatinate. What turned his eyes in this direction? Perhaps he had had earlier connections with the continent. Certainly he must have known something of the Anabaptist and Mennonite communities in

the area of the Lower Rhine. It may even be that through one or other of his acquaintances he had heard of Peter Cornelius Plockhoy van Zierickssee, whom Troeltsch describes as belonging to "the moderate Baptist movement" and who, while in England in 1657 and 1658, talked of the Anabaptist settlements in Moravia, Transylvania and the Palatinate, using them as an example of the kind of settlement he thought might be usefully established in this country. In any case, the contacts between England and the Low Countries were far closer than Baptist historians have sometimes realised, while the dangers likely to be experienced by radicals who remained in England were considerable. In November, 1661, John James, one of the London Baptist ministers, was executed at Tyburn for Fifth Monarchy views judged to be seditious. Tillam is said to have become convinced that the personal return of Christ was imminent and that it would take place somewhere in Germany.

Tillam and Pooley became agents for an emigration campaign that may have resulted in as many as two hundred families crossing the North Sea. Much of their time must have been spent in dodging the authorities. There was considerable unrest in the country and a number of small, abortive risings took place, including an outbreak at Farnley Wood, in Yorkshire, in which Paul Hobson was implicated, and another at Muggleswick Park, in which some of Tillam's former friends were involved. These two outbreaks occurred in 1663. In 1664, Tillam was in Rotterdam and his behaviour was adversely commented on. Two years later he was in Ireland and apparently associated with the notorious adventurer, Colonel Blood. By 1667 Edward Stennett and some of the quieter and more restrained Seventh Day Baptists felt it necessary to disown Tillam in a pamphlet entitled *A Faithful Testimony against the Teachers of Circumcision and the Legal Ceremonies, who are lately gone into Germany.* But it is known that the following year another batch of recruits left Harwich to join Tillam. These folk came from both East Anglia and the North.

What happened to them? In the sixteen-sixties a considerable number of Swiss Anabaptists made their way into the Palatinate. There for a generation they had a limited, if uncertain, toleration. In 1689 the French armies ravaged the country. Early the following century a movement of refugees across the Atlantic began and Mennonite settlements were established in America. Some day, perhaps, a continental scholar will be able to unearth details of what befell the English families who went to the Palatinate. Tillam himself died about 1676, an intriguing and quixotic figure. His zeal was by no means wise, but he had laid the foundations of Baptist witness in the North and his liveliness, versatility and courage make us wish we knew more about him.

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