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Child Dedication Services among British Baptists in the Seventeenth Century

TO Christians who adopted an anti-paedobaptist position in the Reformation Era, two practical questions presented themselves. First, ought they themselves to be rebaptised as believers or was their first baptism as infants sufficient? Secondly, ought some type of dedicatory service to be performed for their children who would not be baptised until they reached an age of accountability? The answer to the first of these questions for the early Baptists on the European Continent and in the British Isles is well known. It is also evident that services of child dedication were held among the Continental Anabaptists.¹ But evidence for the use of such services among the British Baptists of the seventeenth century is at best meagre.² R. L. Child who documents the employment of this "rite" in England in the latter half of the eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century, admits that its origin is obscure.³ In view of such obscurity the evidence of the use of child dedication services by British Baptists in the mid-seventeenth century discussed in the following pages would seem to be of considerable importance. But, as we shall see, that evidence appeared in tracts occasioned by events rather far removed from the question of child dedication.

In 1656, the Quaker James Nayler rode into Bristol in much the same manner in which Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem, with companions spreading their garments before him and singing words of praise.⁴ Among the condemnatory tracts published in reaction to this seemingly blasphemous act was that of Ralph Farmer. Farmer had been appointed lecturer at St. Nicholas by the Bristol Corporation in June of 1655, and in 1658 became the church's vicar. However, in 1660, he was removed from this position when the sequestered vicar was restored, whereupon he continued to preach in another parish in Bristol until the Great Ejection of 1662. He then withdrew to Hanham Abbots near Bristol where his own house became the place of his preaching to local colliers. Farmer died in 1670, leaving a wife and three children.⁵

Farmer's tract published in reaction to the Nayler episode was entitled *Sathan Inthron'd in his Chair of Pestilence. Or, Quakerism in its Exaltation. Being a true Narrative and Relation of the manner of*

James Nayler (that eminent Quaker's) entrance into the City of Bristol (1657). The Quakers, as was their custom, came to the defence of their position and issued countercharges as well. George Bishop of Bristol responded with *The Throne Exalted Over the Powers of Darkness* (1657) in which he referred to Farmer as "an unclean and Blood-thirsty Priest of Bristol."⁶ George Fox also replied in his *The Great Mistery of the Great Whore Unfolded* (1659). However, this was not Farmer's first printed effort against the Quakers, for in 1655, his *The Great Mysteries of Godliness and Ungodliness* was published, in which he referred to them as "deceivers" whose "Sathanicall depths, and Diabolicall delusions . . . are laid open."⁷ Indeed, of the five publications credited to him, four were directed against the Quakers.⁸ The fifth embodied a timely sermon of April, 1660, which included a defence against those "who (being ignorant in Scripture) reproach and revile Presbytery and Presbyters" and which thus indicated his "denominational" position among those who were to become non-conformists.⁹

Having devoted the major portion of his *Sathan Inthron'd* to the Nayler episode, Farmer directed his attention to that which he described on the title-page as "a Vindication of the Magistrates and Inhabitants of this City, in reference to the nestling of these Quakers amongst us. With a Declaration of the occasion, rise and growth of them in this City." The rise of Quakers and other schismatics, he argued, was in large measure the result of the religious confusion of the Commonwealth period and the toleration and protection afforded to such groups. Included in his category of schismatics were Anabaptists with whom he linked the Quakers in the person of Dennis Hollister, to whose house Nayler retired following his triumphal entry into Bristol.¹⁰ Hollister had indeed been a member of the congregation of Independents and Baptists which in 1660, would begin meeting in the old Priory in Broadmead, and which in 1654, had lost approximately one-quarter of its membership to the Quakers, Hollister among them.¹¹ Farmer denounced that congregation and its factionalism, claiming that "Faction never ends but in further mischief" as evidenced by the fact that several members had fallen "into direct Anabaptism" and others like Hollister into Quakerism.¹²

It was in the midst of his attack on "this choice Congregation," as he called it, that Farmer launched into a description of their child dedication service. So that the reader "may more fully discern the aptness and disposedness of this people to novelty, and uncouth ways and opinions," he declared, "I shall discover to you one of the most bold and daring attempts, that ignorance durst presume, or you have ordinarily heard of, even to set up a mock-Ordinance . . . of their own invention." Several of the members, he explained, had for some time refused to have their infants baptised. One of these members, "a great Woman among them," had three children who were thus unbaptised. But in conversation with one of her relatives it was apparently drawn to her attention that although her children were surely in a

better condition than the children of mere heathen, hers were like the children of heathen parents in not having been baptised. The woman consulted the Teacher of the church about this problem and he in turn consulted the congregation. The result, according to Farmer, was that "to give her satisfaction" the Teacher "findes out this invention."¹³

Farmer's description of the service was brief but informative. The three children were brought before the assembled congregation. There were prayers and other words spoken by some of the persons present. The Teacher, having explained why children ought not to be baptised, took the youngest in his arms and the other two by the hand. He then spoke their names and presented them to the persons assembled. In Farmer's words,

Their Church being solemnly convened, the three Children are brought into the presence, and something being prayed, and something spoken by one, and so by another (prayer before and after, is not much material:) The man (for I know not well what to call his Name of Office) having spoken against sprinkling of Infants, (being it may be the words of his institution to this new Ordinance) takes the Children, the one that was young into his arms; and the other two, who were able to go, by the hand; and having called them by their Names, presents them to the Congregation.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, the lecturer at St. Nicholas denounced the service as an "Imposture," a "dry Ordinance," a "dry Baptism." The mother, he claimed, having trusted in the leaders of her church was by them "put off with a shadow."¹⁵ Her children were as much heathens after the service as they had been before.

In his *Sathan Inthron'd*, Farmer did not designate the Teacher of "this choice Congregation" by name. However, he referred to him as "a Tailor out of Wales"¹⁶ who had travelled from Bristol to London to be baptized secretly by dipping and who was associated with the Baptist Henry Jessey of London.¹⁷ It was not difficult for Thomas Ewins to identify himself as the object of Farmer's attack. Ewins had been sent out as a preacher in Wales from the church of All Hallows the Great in London. In 1651, he had been invited to Bristol by the Commissioners for the Maintenance of Ministers for that city. Ironically, among the signatories to the letter of invitation appeared the name of Dennis Hollister.¹⁸ In Bristol, Ewins served as Teacher to the above-mentioned congregation of Independents and Baptists and also held several lectureships from which he was ejected in 1660. He afterwards was imprisoned on several occasions but persisted in preaching even in prison. He died in 1670, leaving a wife and son.¹⁹

Just as Farmer's attack on Ewins was only a small portion of a work directed against the Quakers, so Ewins' reply to that attack was only a minor part of a larger anti-Quaker tract. Entitled *The Church of Christ in Bristol Recovering her Vail out of the hands of them that have smitten and wounded her, and taken it away* (1657), the work included

portions by other members of Ewins' congregation. It was occasioned by the controversy with Hollister who, as we have seen, left that church to embrace Quakerism and took several of its members with him. He responded to a letter of admonition from the church with the tract *The Skirts of the Whore Discovered* (1656) to which *The Church of Christ in Bristol* was a reply.²⁰ This reply included, in the words of the title-page, "a word by Thomas Ewen, unto what concerns him in the said Pamphlet and also to the later part of another Book, called Satan enthroned in his Chair of Pestilence." In it Ewins did not object to being linked by Farmer with the Baptists, admitting that he had been baptised in London while denying that he had kept the baptism a secret.²¹ He did object, however, to Farmer's suggestion that the "mischief" of the Quakers in Bristol was in some way the responsibility of his congregation. His people, he asserted, suffered as much from the Quakers and testified as much against "those miserable deluded people" as Farmer did.²² But if Farmer could associate Hollister and the Quakers with Ewins and the Baptists, Ewins could do something similar with Farmer and Hollister. Addressing himself to the latter he wrote, "I find, that he hath often joyned you with me, therefore I think it not improper to coupple him with you . . .," and declared, "You are much alike Brethren in bitterness, against the people called Independents and Baptized. . . ."²³

Among Ewins' numerous other responses to charges made against him and his congregation in *Sathan Inthron'd*, was his clarification of the child dedication episode. It occurred, he explained, "about the time of my coming first to Bristol," perhaps, therefore, as early as 1651. He remembered only two children being involved in the service. One was about the age of two years, the other only a few weeks old. The congregation had often met in the house of their parents and on one such occasion the mother "desired that her Children might also be presented to the Lord by Prayer, . . ." which was done. Two years later the service was repeated for a newly born child of the same woman.²⁴ However, Ewins denied Farmer's charge that the service was simply an "invention to give her satisfaction" and claimed that no one in the congregation considered the action to be in any way a form of baptism.²⁵ Furthermore, he recommended such a service "to all sober Christians, especially such as are dissatisfied in their judgments and Consciences, about Infants Baptism, . . ." and cautioned such persons against being "too remiss in the duty of thankfulness, and too careless of the pretious Souls of their Children, &c." In his endorsement of the practice Ewins included additional information about it, suggesting that,

when any godly Woman, a Member of a Congregation, hath received such a mercy, she should at some convenient season present her self with her Child in the Church, that Praise may be rendred to the Lord on her behalf, presenting her Child also to the Lord by Prayer, &c. at which time the Parents may declare in the Congregation the name of the Child, that it may be entered

into the Book, where the names of the Congregation are written, as the Children of the Church, who upon occasion may be mentioned to the Lord as the seed of the faithful, that when, these Children come to age, and the Lord shall give them to profess Faith in Christ, and that they do believe with all their hearts as Acts 8. 37. they may then be admitted to the Ordinances of Christ, both Baptism, and the Lords Supper, as Believers were in Primitive times. . . .²⁶

But Ewins was careful to point out that not every member of his congregation was in full agreement with his position on baptism. Although he disliked infant baptism he professed that he would not condemn any godly persons who disagreed with him, being willing to "bear with them in love, as we desire them and others, to bear with us in other things."²⁷

From these two accounts we may now construct a brief description of the child dedication services performed by Ewins. He and the child or children and probably the parents came before the congregation. He took an infant in his arms or held an older child by the hand. Prayers and other words were spoken by some of the persons present, the content of which included thanksgiving for the birth of the child and dedication of the child to God. The name of the child was declared by the parents and perhaps by Ewins as well which name was later entered in the church book.

As indicated above, these services referred to by Farmer and Ewins took place early in the sixth decade of the seventeenth century. However, of further significance is Ewins' statement that these were not unique. The two services which he described were performed, he declared, "as it hath been done for many others upon the like occasion, and as I have known it often done in Wales. . . ."²⁸ It is to be hoped that more detailed evidence of these and similar occasions may be forthcoming.

NOTES

¹ George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (1962), p. 135.

² See Michael J. Walker's cautious statement concerning a possible allusion to such services in Thomas Grantham's *Christianismus Primitivus* (1678) in his article "The Relation of Infants to Church, Baptism and Gospel in Seventeenth Century Baptist Theology," *The Baptist Quarterly*, XXI (1966), 250.

³ R. L. Child, *The Blessing of Infants and the Dedication of Parents* (1946), pp. 3-4. For evidence of the use of child dedication services in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Germany and America, see R. E. E. Harkness, "The Dedication of Children," *The Chronicle*, XIII (1950), 38f.

⁴ See William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, second edition (1955), edited by Henry J. Cadbury, p. 241f. For a sympathetic approach to Nayler's action, see Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *James Nayler: A Fresh Approach* (1954).

⁵ A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised* (1934), s.v.

⁶ Title-page. For Bishop, see Joseph Smith, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Friends' Books* (1867), s.v.