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How did William Kiffin join the Baptists?

THE history of the English Particular Baptists before 1644 is a great deal more difficult to reconstruct in detail than the authors of Baptist textbooks have normally been prepared explicitly to acknowledge. The documents are few, their interpretation is often uncertain and, in addition, some of the very scanty evidence which does exist appears to be in open conflict with the rest.

Some of these problems have to be faced in any attempt to discover exactly how William Kiffin (1616-1701) came to be, by 1644, the leader of a Baptist congregation. There are two opposing versions of this process. The earlier is Kiffin's own which leaves the clear impression that he joined a congregation of Independent Puritans about 1638 which gradually evolved, under his leadership, into the Baptist church of which he remained pastor until his death. The second account, given by Thomas Crosby in his *History of the English Baptists*,¹ suggests that Kiffin first joined an Independent church (perhaps that led by Henry Jessey), then joined John Spilsbery's Particular Baptist congregation and eventually, after a disagreement with Spilsbery, left that also, presumably to gather his own. It must at once be admitted that there is nothing intrinsically unlikely about either version in a period as turbulent spiritually as politically.

Whilst it might at first sight seem that Kiffin's own account is far more likely to be trustworthy both the fact that he wrote at least a quarter of a century after these early events took place and his motive for writing forbid the rejection of Crosby's record without careful discussion. In fact William Kiffin's own chronicle was neither intended to be the history of the development of his theological opinions nor a history of the congregation which he led. His manuscript was prepared in order to tell the story of God's dealings with him so that, he told his family, they should be encouraged² "to love, fear, and obey that God who will never fail nor forsake those who trust in him." Both the lapse of the years and the author's intention to edify should prepare the student for the possibility that the course of events could be simplified and matters vital to the interest of the later historian could be omitted.

It is in the light of such considerations as these that it must be remembered that Kiffin's account implies, but does not explicitly affirm, that he remained a member of the same congregation from *circa* 1638 to the time when he finally laid down his pen.

On the other hand, it may be said on Crosby's side that, although he wrote a century after the event and without knowledge of Kiffin's own version,³ he had access to certain nearly contemporary sources and probably to some reliable oral tradition.⁴

In order, therefore, to reconstruct the way in which Kiffin joined the Baptists it will be necessary (i) to give the version from his own autobiography, (ii) to give Thomas Crosby's account with a critical discussion of his sources and (iii) to give some other contemporary evidence.

(i) Kiffin's autobiographical account read as follows⁵: "Mr. Davenport, Mr. Hooker, and several other ministers, leaving the kingdom about this time, because they could not conform, I was put upon the examination of the reasons of their conduct, to this end I furnished myself with all the books and manuscripts I could get. Upon perusing of which I found, comparing what I read with the Scriptures, that God was always very jealous of his worship, and had left many examples of his severity on those who had added anything thereto . . . Yet being myself very weak, and finding many able ministers, that did conform, I applied myself for satisfaction to those I judged most able. . . . Finding myself greatly disappointed of what I had hoped I might have received from them, I was the more provoked to beg earnestly of God to direct me; and searched more closely the Scriptures . . . being much helped by hearing Mr. Glover, who went to New England, and Mr. Burroughs, who, a while after, went to Holland. Sometime after, I joined myself to an Independent congregation, with a resolution, as soon as it pleased God to open a way, to go to New England; being now arrived to the age of 22 years. But the providence of God prevented me, and soon after it pleased God to provide for me a suitable yoke-fellow, who was one with me in judgement, and joined to the same congregation. . . . At the desire of the church, I improved amongst them those small abilities God was pleased to give me; and although many times our meetings were disturbed, yet I was generally kept out of the hands of the persecutors."

Kiffin was born in 1616⁶ so this passage suggests that he joined the "Independent congregation" probably not later than 1638. The fact that his wife and "yoke-fellow" Hanna died 7th October 1682 after⁸ "nearly forty-four years" of marriage supports the view that he must have been a member of this congregation some while before October 1639.

When he remarked "I improved amongst them those small abilities God was pleased to give me" he was using a phrase which, in his circle was virtually a technical term for "preaching." The narrative also suggests further on that this group had no other leader for, in 1643,⁹ he visited Holland on a trading venture and¹⁰ "on coming home again, I was greatly pressed by the people, with whom I was a member, to continue with them." The context clearly indicated that they wanted him "to continue with them" as their pastor and that

this he agreed to do at no small financial sacrifice. Later in this record, which was probably completed about¹¹ 1692, he mentioned, in passing, the congregation¹² "with whom I have walked for more than fifty years."

The sequence of events in Kiffin's version seems straightforward enough: once convinced that conformity with Laudian Anglicanism was against Scripture he joined "an Independent congregation." With this group, who soon invited him to preach among them and then to be their pastor, he remained for the rest of his life.

(ii) Thomas Crosby's account of Kiffin's early days among the sectaries is both more brief and more complicated. He described him as¹³ "first of an *Independent* congregation, and called to the ministry among them; was one of those concerned in the conferences held in the congregation of *Mr. Henry Jessey*; by which *Mr. Jessey* and the greatest part of the congregation became proselyted to the opinion of the *Baptists*. He joined himself to the church of *Mr. John Spilsbery*; but a difference ensuing about permitting people to preach among them, that had not been *baptised by immersion*, they parted by consent, yet kept a good correspondence."

In seeking the sources for this section of Crosby's work three possible origins can probably be ruled out. First, there is reason to believe¹⁴ that he did not know Kiffin's narrative: hence the statement that Kiffin was "first of an *Independent* congregation, and called to the ministry among them" whilst supported by that narrative, must have some other source. Secondly, there was, apparently, no biographical sketch of Kiffin among Stinton's various MSS as there were of some others. Thirdly, there is no indication that this section came from a single document: rather does it seem a patchwork composition of Crosby's own.

Two of Crosby's authorities for this passage about Kiffin can still be recovered with a fair degree of certainty: the information about Kiffin's share in the discussions which led to Jessey's conversion to Baptist views almost certainly came from a transcript of an early document¹⁵ made by Benjamin Stinton and which had passed into Crosby's possession. Secondly, it is probable that the authority for Crosby's statement that Kiffin joined Spilsbery's church is to be found in a document already embodied in the first volume of the *History*.¹⁶ This document, which had probably been composed by Benjamin Stinton himself,¹⁷ inaccurately conflated some of the material in two of his transcripts and mistakenly asserted, on the basis of a misreading of his sources, that Kiffin had joined Spilsbery's congregation.

However, these two suggestions do not explain the source of the statement, already mentioned, that Kiffin was first "of an Independent congregation and called to the ministry among them," which has been seen to be supported by Kiffin's own account although this was probably quite unknown to Crosby. Nor do they indicate the source of the somewhat mysterious statement (since we do not know who

held which view) that there was a difference of opinion between Kiffin and Spilsbery "about permitting persons to preach among them, that had not been *baptized by immersion*" and its consequence that "they parted by consent, yet kept a good correspondence." This latter tradition can hardly have been invented by Crosby and so the possibility must be admitted that he may have had access to another source, containing some reliable information, which cannot now be traced. Whilst to argue further is to pass almost into the realm of unsupported conjecture it ought perhaps to be pointed out that, once the existence of such an anonymous source is postulated a further possibility must be admitted: that the statement that Kiffin "joined himself to the church of Mr. *John Spilsbery*" could also have originated there and not from Benjamin Stinton's mistake.

Nevertheless, should the other sources in section (iii) below lend no support to the view that Kiffin was at some point a member of Spilsbery's congregation before appearing as leader of his own at the time when he signed the 1644 *Confession* the tradition Thomas Crosby preserved must be rejected.

(iii) The other sources which bear upon this matter are:

- (a) the Stinton transcripts.
- (b) Kiffin's own early writings and one later work.
- (c) Daniel Featley's *The Dippers Dipt*, London 1645

(a) When the story given by the parallel accounts¹⁸ given in the Stinton transcripts is reconstructed it appears to support Kiffin's own narrative. It seems that, on 12th September 1633, a group of ten people who had until then been members of the Jacob-Lathorp congregation of Independent Puritans were, after much discussion, formally released from that church in order that they should form a separate congregation. This group believed that it was impossible for them to recognise the English parish churches as "true Churches" even in the limited sense allowed by the Jacob-Lathorp congregation: they represented the rigorist wing. After an undisclosed interval these first members were joined by eight more. One of the new members, Samuel Eaton, was reported "with some others" to have received "a further Baptisme." This was the group that was joined, again at a date not given, by "Mr. William Kiffin."

It should be noted that whilst Stinton's conflation seems to imply that Kiffin was a member of the Jacob-Lathorp congregation the "Kiffin Manuscript" does not. Furthermore, the fact that his name was not even mentioned in the "Jessey Memoranda" which seems to have reflected the records of the Jacob-Lathorp-Jessey church and in which all the seceding members appear to have been named also implies by this omission, that Kiffin was *not* a member. The next event, dated by the "Jessey Memoranda," 8th June 1638, was the dismissal of six more members to join "Mr. Spilsbery" on the grounds that they were "of ye same Judgement with Sam Eaton." Their conviction was, according to the reference in the "Kiffin Manuscript" to this same event, "that Baptism was not for Infants but professed

Believers." Whilst considerable uncertainties remain it does seem clear that Kiffin did not join the Jacob-Lathorp-Jessey church but a splinter group from it some of whose members already held "Baptist" views. The term "Independent" applied by Kiffin's own narrative to the congregation he joined could fairly be applied to this group at this stage in its evolution.

(b) Kiffin's own early writings were three, the Epistles to the Reader in John Lilburne's *The Christian mans trial* (1641)¹⁹ and the anonymous *A glimpse of Sions glory* (1641) and the notes of one of his own sermons entitled *Certaine observations upon Hosea the second the 7th & 8th verses* (1642). Interestingly enough none of these suggest he had yet come to Baptist convictions although all of them call for church reform in the direction of "the Congregational way." His convictions and his own policy at this stage are reflected in the following extract from his sermon on Hosea 2.7-8: ²⁰ "this let all men know, that *Christ* hath prescribed lawes already which are perfect and pure, by which he both hath, and doth, and will governe his Church, and therefore let this be the duty of us all, to labour to know what these lawes and rules are, that so we may be more and more subject unto them, that wee dishonour not *Iesus Christ*, by giving away any thing to any other, which is only of right due unto him."

Many years later, when he wrote his book defending closed-communication, William Kiffin looked back to this period and said,²¹ "When it pleased God of his free Grace to cause me to make a serious enquiry after Jesus Christ, and to give me some tast of his pardoning Love, the sence of which did ingage my heart with desires to be obedient to his will in all things. I used all indeavers both by Converse with such as were able, and also by diligently searching the Scriptures, with earnest desires of God, that I might be directed in a right way of Worship; and after some time concluded that the safest way was to follow the Footsteps of the Flock (namely) that Order laid down by Christ and his Apostles, and Practised by the Primative Christians in their times, which I found to be; that after Conversion they were Baptized, added to the Church, and Continued in the Apostles Doctrine, Fellowship, Breaking of Bread, and Prayer; according to which I thought myself bound to be Conformable, and having continued in the Profession of the same for these forty years . . ." Whilst such a round figure as "these forty years" is not a reliable means for dating Kiffin's acceptance of the Baptist position this account does suggest a similar development of his views to that implied in his own autobiography. It is clear that it was the continuance of the same questioning which had caused him in 1638 to become an Independent eventually brought him to be a Baptist

(c) Daniel Featley included in his *The Dippers Dip*²² "A true Relation of what passed at a meeting in *Southwark*, betweene *D. Featley*, and a company of Anabaptists, 17 October, 1642." Kiffin appeared in Featley's narrative as "Cufin" a form of his name which pointed back to the Welsh origins of his family and Featley provided

a marginal note that²³ "This *Cufin* is said to be one of the first that subscribed the Anabaptists confession printed 1644." Although it has normally been assumed that Kiffin came to this debate as a convinced Baptist, and it seems clear that Featley viewed him as one, the first contribution of the latter, if accurately reported, suggests a doubt: "I come not here to dispute, but to receive satisfaction of some doubts, which, if you can resolve me in I shall submit." The course of the debate, which led Featley to make a stinging attack upon "lay" preachers and which made Kiffin "very angry" drove that minister of Christ to assert, bluntly, "I am more lawfully called to preach the word than you." His ground for this was a further assertion that "He that is called by Saints to preach, is better called, than he that is called by godly men."

The evidence given by Featley makes it clear that at this time Kiffin certainly held a position of authority within one of the London sectarian congregations and that he was virtually committed, if not actually, to the "Anabaptist" position.

In summing up this review of the available evidence for how Kiffin joined the Baptists it can, I think, be argued that the documents cited, without exception, clarify and expand but do not contradict, the process suggested by Kiffin's own autobiography rather than that suggested by Thomas Crosby. Hence it must be concluded that, in default of any supporting evidence, Crosby's anonymous source must be rejected at least as far as it has been thought to bear upon Kiffin's biography before 1644: the tradition of the dispute with Spilsbery may have some substance and be related to another occasion, it seems too specific to be pure imagination.

The story of how Kiffin joined the Baptists can then be tentatively, and briefly, reconstructed as follows: in 1638 he joined a London congregation, rigidly opposed to the Anglican parish churches, some of whose members had already been baptised as believers although not by immersion. The group may have been previously led by Samuel Eaton but he was certainly in prison in 1638 and died in 1639. Meanwhile Kiffin was invited to preach among them and, presumably rather later, became their pastor. During this period he wrote a sympathetic introduction to a pamphlet by his friend John Lilburne and another commending the anonymous booklet *A glimpse of Sion's glory*. In the latter he insisted that Christ had committed His kingly power in His Church but²⁴ "not to a *Hierarchy*, neither to a *Nationall Presbytery*, but to a *Company of Saints* in a *Congregational* way." Even in 1642 when he published the notes of his sermon from Hosea, for which he had been imprisoned as a conventicler, he gave no sign that he had progressed beyond the position of an ardent Independent. By October 1642, however, he was, if not formally committed to the Baptist position, very sympathetic, and the debate with Featley did not apparently dissuade him. The following year saw the discussions about baptism within Jessey's congregation and 1644 found Kiffin a signatory of the London Confession which insisted upon baptism as

a condition of communion. He had reached the resting place where he was to abide. Finally, it may be said, the available evidence gives every reason to believe that the congregation which he joined in 1638, and soon was leading, shared in the evolution of his own views and this was the congregation which he represented in 1644 and was pastor to for the rest of his life.

NOTES

¹ Thomas Crosby, *History of the English Baptists*, London, 1738-40, Vol. III, p. 3f.

² William Orme, *Remarkable passages in the life of William Kiffin*, London, 1832, p. 2. A transcript of the original MS. is preserved in the Congregational Library, London.

³ Crosby, *op. cit.*, p. 6, "I have met with one piece which he published, intitled, *A sober discourse of right to church communion*." The implication here appears to be that if Crosby had known of any other writings he would have listed them.

⁴ For background to Crosby's writing and sources see B. R. White, "Thomas Crosby—Baptist Historian", *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XXI (1965-66), 4, 5.

⁵ Orme, *op. cit.*, pp. 13ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 162.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 162. But see p. 50, 5 October.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89 where Kiffin said it was "now sixty years since it pleased the Lord to give me a taste of his rich grace and mercy in Jesus Christ."

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹³ Crosby, *op. cit.*, Vol. III (published in 1740), p. 3f.

¹⁴ See note 3.

¹⁵ B. Stinton, MS., "A Repository of Divers Historical Matters. . . ." Number 4 (Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford).

¹⁶ Crosby, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 148f.

¹⁷ B. R. White, "Who really wrote the Kiffin Manuscript?" *Baptist History and Heritage*, Vol. I, No. 3, October, 1966 (Journal of the Southern Baptist Historical Society).

¹⁸ B. Stinton, *op. cit.*, Transcripts 1 and 2. *cf.* B. R. White, "Baptist Beginnings and the Kiffin Manuscript", *Baptist History and Heritage*, Vol. I, No. 4, January, 1967.

¹⁹ This book was first published in 1638 but no copy of the first edition is now known. If, as is likely, Kiffin provided the "Epistle to the Reader" in the first edition this would be his earliest published piece.

²⁰ William Kiffin, *Certain Observations*, 1642, London, p. 12f.

²¹ William Kiffin, *A Sober discourse*, London, 1681. Preface "to the Christian Reader".

²² D. Featley, *The Dippers Dip't*, 1645, pp. 1-13.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁴ *A glimpse of Sions glory*, London, 1641. Epistle to the Reader.

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