
A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Abraham Atkins and General Communion

I

ON the death in 1718, at the early age of forty-three, of Benjamin Stinton, son-in-law and successor of Benjamin Keach as pastor of the Particular Baptist church in Goat Lane, Horsleydown, Southwark, the church entered a difficult period. A pressing invitation to supply the pulpit was sent to John Gill, a promising young man in his early twenties, who had begun preaching in his native town of Kettering and in neighbouring Higham Ferrers. After he had preached at Goat Lane for a couple of months Gill was invited to the pastorate by a sizeable majority of those present at a church meeting.

Unfortunately, however, a number of the deacons and older members objected that the majority had been secured by the votes of the women members and that it had never been "the practice of the females to vote". The matter was submitted to the meeting of London ministers at the Hanover Coffee-house, which came to be known as the Baptist Board. In October 1719 they tried to reconcile the parties by recommending delaying tactics. Let John Gill preach once on a Sunday for a while, but let decision about the pastorate be postponed. The compromise proved unacceptable and the church, then of more than three hundred members, decided to divide. One hundred and twenty-two members, including six deacons, remained for a while in possession of the Goat Lane property, while a new meeting-house was erected for them in Unicorn Yard, and they then called William Arnold from the West Country to be their minister.

Gill's supporters worshipped for a time in the school-house of Thomas Crosby, another son-in-law of Benjamin Keach. They consisted of ninety-nine members—twenty-four men and seventy-five women. When the Unicorn Yard folk had their own meeting-house, this company returned to Goat Lane and were there until the building of a new chapel in Carter Lane in 1757, by which time Gill was recognised as one of the most learned and influential ministers of the day. Carter Lane was later to be the scene of John Rippon's long ministry and the early triumphs of Spurgeon.

The records say that one of the six deacons of the Goat Lane church, who objected to the invitation to Gill in 1719, was Abraham Atkins. He "laid down his office" at the time. Almost certainly he moved with the others to Unicorn Yard, for sixty years later another Abraham Atkins, probably his son, initiated one of the most generous, if complicated, of Baptist trusts and one still in operation.

II

The Unicorn Yard church had as ministers, first William Arnold (1720-34), then Thomas Flower, jun. (1736-44), then Josiah Thompson (1746-61), assisted from 1757 to 1759 by Caleb Evans, later the

well-known President of Bristol College. Then came William Nash Clarke (1762-85) and after him Daniel Williams (1785-94). The days of the church's greatest prosperity were during the ministry of W. N. Clarke who, according to the historian Ivimey, raised it "from very low and dejected circumstances to being a strong fellowship". Clarke spent the last ten years of his life in Exeter and—again our informant is Ivimey—left a manuscript on "Open Communion". It is this that indicates the practice of the Unicorn Yard church and provides the clue to the five Abraham Atkins Trusts.

In 1783 Abraham Atkins, Esq., of Clapham, established the first of these. It consisted of certain properties on the south side of Clapham Common, including a Baptist meeting-house and manse. Its object was to safeguard the congregation which used the meeting-house "upon condition that such congregation doth not refuse general communion at the Lord's Supper". Atkins appointed as trustees Robert Robinson, minister of the St. Andrew's Street church, Cambridge, Thomas Dunscombe, minister at Coate, in Oxfordshire, William Wilkins, minister at Risington, in Gloucestershire, and four members of the Tomkins family, Joseph, sen., William, Benjamin and Joseph, jun., well-known supporters of the Baptist church in Abingdon. The trustees were given power to make up their number to seven, if vacancies occurred.

Three years later, Atkins, who possessed a country residence in Berkshire, executed a more elaborate trust. This included a "Chapel-house" at Kingston Lisle, Berkshire, which Atkins himself had built, and considerable farm lands—the Chimney estate—which lay across the county boundaries of Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Wiltshire. The object of this trust was to assist "the congregation of Protestant Dissenters, scrupling the Baptism of Infants, commonly called Baptists", who worshipped at Kingston Lisle, "upon condition that such congregation doth not refuse general communion at the Lord's Supper". The income from the farm rents was to be divided into two parts, one to be shared by the ministers of fourteen Baptist churches—those in Kingston Lisle, Stratfield Say, Faringdon, Wokingham, Buckland, Oxford, Coate, Burford, Lingfield, Colnbrook, Fairford, Cirencester, Stratton and Cambridge. The other half of the income was to go to the poor of the congregations or to the upkeep of the buildings, but would be forfeited if the churches "shall refuse such general communion". If this happened—or the churches dissolved—the buildings were to be kept in repair for future congregations ready to abide by the terms of the trust. To the trustees of the 1783 trust were added Daniel Turner, the Abingdon minister, and another member of the Tomkins family. The Chapel-house at Kingston Lisle was later leased to Edwin Martin Atkins in return for more conveniently situated premises, consisting of a chapel, a dwelling-house, out-houses and gardens.

Abraham Atkins had not finished his dispositions. In 1788 he gave to the same trustees the Baptist meeting-house in Unicorn Yard, Tooley Street, and its adjacent burial-ground. This had been leased by

Samuel Hawkins and his son to Thomas Flower in 1738 for seventy-nine years. Some property and land at Aston and Coate were also added to the trust. The proceeds were to benefit a school for Protestant Dissenters established in Southwark in 1714 (of which in 1788 James Woodward was master), a school at Kingston Lisle (of which Stephen Simms was master) and the ministers and congregations at Kingston Lisle, Buckland and Coate. Again the condition was added that the congregations must continue to practise "general communion".

In 1790 Atkins made a further gift to benefit the cause at Stratfield Say, later known as Beech Hill. Robert Robinson, of Cambridge, had died a few months earlier. In his place Edward Shepherd, Esq., of Basinghall Street, was appointed one of the trustees.

Abraham Atkins died in 1792. His will, made the previous year, left £2,000 East India Stock to the same trustees for the benefit of the ministers of the sixteen churches named in the earlier deeds, or their widows, with a similar stipulation regarding "general communion". The ministers were also charged to read a chapter from the Gospels, and one from the Old Testament, the Psalms or the remainder of the New Testament at each of their services.

III

Clearly Abraham Atkins was out to aid a cause, but what exactly did he mean by "general communion"? A few years ago the interpretation of the phrase involved the present trustees in a legal action. There can really be no doubt as to what was intended, but the phrase is an unusual one. At the time when Atkins was devising his trusts Baptists were engaged, not for the first or last occasion, in controversy over "terms of communion". It was more usual to speak, however, of "free", "open", "mixed" or "catholic" communion in contradistinction to "strict", "close" or "party" communion. All these phrases can be found in the literature of the period.

Henry Jessey (1601-63), baptized as a believer by Hanserd Knollys in 1645, and John Gifford (d.1655), of Bedford, were among the first to preside over churches in which difference of judgment about the rite of baptism was held to be no bar to a united church fellowship. Thanks to Gifford this was the view of John Bunyan. He set it out in 1672 in *A Confession of My Faith, and a Reason of My Practice, or with who and who not I can hold church fellowship, or the communion of saints.* In this Bunyan argued that water baptism and the Supper are not "the fundamentals of our Christianity". It is faith and holiness that are the necessities. What Bunyan urged failed to satisfy some Independents, who refused to admit Baptists to their churches. It was also unacceptable to Baptists like William Kiffin (1616-1701), who with Thomas Paul published a pamphlet attacking Bunyan. The latter replied in *Differences of Judgment about Water Baptism, no bar to Communion* (1673), to which he added an appendix supporting his attitude, which came from one of the writings of Jessey. Henry Danvers and John Denne took the other side, and Bunyan again answered in *Peaceable Principles and True* (1674). No agreement was

reached. The Angus Library contains an anonymous pamphlet of 1683 with the title *The Case for Mixt Communion,* but gradually the literary warfare died down. In the closing decades of the 17th century and the early years of the 18th there were a number of churches which admitted to their membership both Baptists and Paedobaptists.

Of the church in St. Andrew's Street, Cambridge, George Dyer says that in 1727 "after agitating the old question of strict or mixed communion, they settled on the mixed plan". When Robert Robinson settled there as minister in 1761, he included in his Confession of Faith: "That the Lord's Supper is an ordinance perpetually to be administered till the Lord comes; that as none ought to be forced into the church by baptism without his consent, so none are to be kept from the Lord's Supper who conscientiously, though erroneously, approve their own baptism in infancy" (Dyer, *Life of Robert Robinson,* pp.43, 431). By then we have reached the life-time and the circle known to Abraham Atkins. Though the majority of Baptist churches were probably composed only of those who had been immersed as believers, there were a number of leading Baptists like Robert Robinson and Andrew Gifford (1700-84), of the Eagle Street church, in London, who practised "open communion".

There were also churches of this type in New England. Isaac Backus speaks of them as practising "large communion" and describes his own searchings of heart and the public controversies that went on in the 1750s. "The arguments of the beloved Bunyan, for a free communion with all saints, had before appeared conclusive to him (i.e. the author) and others; but a review of them discovered his mistakes. . . . To commune at the Lord's table with any who were only sprinkled in infancy, is parting with truth, by practically saying they are baptized, when we do not believe they are" (*History of New England,* vol.II, p.214).

Public controversy revived in England in 1772, when two anonymous pamphlets were issued: *A Modest Plea for Free Communion,* by Pacificus, and *A Modest Plea for Free Communion at the Lord's Table, particularly between Baptists and Paedobaptists,* by Candidus. The identity of the authors was soon an open secret. Pacificus was John Collett Ryland, minister since 1759 at College Lane, Northampton, a man described by his contemporary and friend, John Stanger, as holding "Calvinistic sentiments and catholic communion". Candidus was Daniel Turner, minister in Abingdon since 1748. The historian Ivimey says: "The Rev. Abraham Booth appeared as the defender of those ministers and churches which were now first designated 'Strict Baptists' " (*History,* vol.IV, p.35). Booth was minister of London's oldest Baptist church, then situated in Prescott Street, and his *Apology for the Baptists, in which they are vindicated from the imputation of laying an unwarrantable stress on the ordinance of baptism; and against the charge of bigotry in refusing communion at the Lord's Table to Paedobaptists,* which appeared in 1778, if not his most effective publication, carried a good deal of weight. Three years later Robert Robinson entered the lists with a trenchant contribution on the other

side: *The General Doctrine of Toleration, applied to the particular Case of Free Communion.*

IV

Abraham Atkins's trusts were related to this phase of the controversy. In 1771 the term "free communion" occurs in the Church Book of Biggleswade in Bedfordshire. In 1774 a Baptist group separated from the Independent church in Saffron Walden, Essex, under the leadership of Joseph Gwennap, a nephew of Andrew Gifford. Ivimey describes Gwennap as "a Baptist minister of mixed communion principles" (*History,* vol.IV, p.484). In 1780 Daniel Turner, of Abingdon, who was to become one of the Atkins trustees, shared in the reconstituting of the church at New Road, Oxford, on a covenant which opened membership to both Baptists and Paedobaptists. In the same year Turner, Robert Robinson and Abraham Atkins himself were associated in a plan, which came to nothing, to establish a Dissenting Academy in the neighbourhood of Oxford. This also was to have been broadly based. The known practice of the churches in Abingdon, Oxford, Cirencester and Cambridge at the time Atkins was devising his trusts leaves no doubt as to what the phrase "general communion", whether his own or his lawyer's, was intended to mean.

Walter Wilson says of William Nash Clarke, minister of Unicorn Yard from 1762 to 1785: "Though connected with churches formed upon principles of strict communion, he was himself otherwise minded, and always discovered a dislike to bigotry under every shape" (*Dissenting Churches in London, etc.,* vol.IV, p.240). It must have been during the pastorate of his successor, Daniel Williams, that Abraham Atkins was able to help in introducing the practice favoured by Clarke. In 1794 Williams moved to Fairford, another of the churches benefited, on conditions, by Atkins.

On the death of Daniel Turner in 1798 his successor at Abingdon, John Evans, became an Atkins trustee, as did in time his successor, John Kershaw. Another early trustee was James Ebenezer Bicheno, a distinguished lawyer and the secretary of the Linnaean Society, whose father had been influenced in Cambridge by Robert Robinson. For many years the trustees met in Abingdon. Joseph Ivimey was himself a "strict communionist", but after giving details of Abraham Atkins's bequests, he writes: "The trustees of this property have conducted themselves towards the churches interested with great liberality of sentiment, as well as inflexible integrity" (*History,* vol.IV, p.413).

A decade after Abraham Booth's death, Robert Hall embarked on a comprehensive examination of his *Apology for the Baptists.* He had been minister at St. Andrew's Street, Cambridge, benefiting no doubt from Abraham Atkins's trust, and after a breakdown in health had become minister at Harvey Lane, Leicester. His lengthy pamphlet *On Terms of Communion, with a particular view to the case of the Baptists and Paedobaptists* was an eloquent plea for what would today be described as an ecumenical attitude: he admitted that strict com-

munion was still the general practice in Baptist churches, but claimed that "the abettors of the opposite opinion are rapidly increasing both in numbers and in respectability". A critical reply by George Pritchard, of Keppel Street, Holborn, *A Plea for Primitive Communion,* drew from Hall a further pamphlet, *The Essential Difference between Christian Baptism and the Baptism of John* (1816). Then Joseph Kinghorn, of Norwich, entered the fray with *Baptism, a Term of Communion at the Lord's Supper,* but admitted that younger ministers were not generally favourable to the stricter view. Hall and Kinghorn continued to argue the matter, Hall's *Short Statement of the reasons for Christians in opposition to Party Communion* appearing in 1826, the year he moved to Broadmead Chapel, Bristol.

By the middle of the nineteenth century probably the majority of Baptist churches had come to accept the view that free or open communion was more in accord with Christian principles than a fencing of the Table against any who had not been baptized as believers. Abraham Atkins and his friends had won the day.

The trust still continues. Not all that Abraham Atkins wished can now be carried out. The Unicorn Yard church and the schools have gone. There is no longer a Baptist church in Fairford. That at Colnbrook has become "strict". But with the advice and help of the Charity Commissioners a group of Baptist trustees still administer, with what they believe is "inflexible integrity", the hopes and intentions of a benefactor who was prepared to support his views with his substance.

ERNEST A. PAYNE.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

J. E. Morgan-Wynne, M.A., B.D.,
Regent's Park College, Oxford.

J. E. B. Munson, M.A., D.Phil.,
Oxford.

Geoffrey F. Nuttall, M.A., D.D.,
New College, London.

Ernest A. Payne, C.H., D.D.,
President, Baptist Historical Society.

Reviews: Keith Clements, Basil Hall, Roger Hayden, B. R. White.