

**QUESTION IN BAPTIST HISTORY: WHETHER
THE ANABAPTISTS IN ENGLAND
PRACTICED IMMERSION BEFORE
THE YEAR 1641? WITH AN APPENDIX ON
THE BAPTISM OF ROGER WILLIAMS, AT
PROVIDENCE, R. I., IN 1639**

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Question in Baptist History: Whether the Anabaptists in England Practiced Immersion before the Year 1641? With an Appendix on the Baptism of Roger Williams, at Providence, R. I., in 1639 by William H. Whitsitt

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WILLIAM H. WHITSITT

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A QUESTION IN BAPTIST
HISTORY:

WHETHER THE ANABAPTISTS IN ENGLAND PRACTICED IMMERSION BEFORE THE YEAR 1641?

WITH AN APPENDIX

ON THE BAPTISM OF ROGER WILLIAMS, AT
PROVIDENCE, R. I., IN 1639.

BY

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LOUISVILLE, KY.:

CHAS. T. DEARING.

1896.

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Mrs. Wm. W. Bishop
277
7-18-1928

TO F. W. W.

"AND SHE'S A' THE WORLD TO ME."

INTRODUCTORY.

The question does not relate to the origin of immersion. Immersion as a religious rite was practiced by John the Baptist about the year 30 of our era, and was solemnly enjoined by our Savior upon all his ministers to the end of time. No other observance was in use for baptism in New Testament times. The practice, though sometimes greatly perverted, has yet been continued from the Apostolic age down to our own. As I understand the Scriptures immersion is essential to Christian baptism. The question as to the origin and essential character of immersion is, therefore, not in issue. That is a closed question; it does not admit of being opened among Baptist people.

The issue before us is far different, namely: Whether the immersion of adult believers was practiced in England by the Anabaptists before the year 1641? Whether these English people first adopted immersion for baptism and thus became Baptists in or about the year 1641?

This is purely a question of modern historical research. It does not affect any items of Baptist principle or practice. These are all established upon the Bible. Our watchword for generations has been, "The Bible, the Bible alone, the religion

of Baptists!’ It is now too late in the day to alter our views and set forth any new battle cry. Baptists have always maintained that ‘the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God, and are the only sufficient, certain and authoritative rule of all saving knowledge, faith and obedience.’ Other foundation can no man lay. Whoever attempts it must inevitably fall into error. Let us stand by the old landmarks; let us walk in the old paths.

Several persons have undertaken original investigation at the British Museum to decide where the truth may lie in reference to this question. I had the honor to be of this number. My researches were prosecuted in the summer of 1880. The results of them are contained in a body of manuscript notices and extracts derived from various volumes, most of them found in that collection in the Museum which goes under the name of the King’s Pamphlets.

A brief account of King George’s Pamphlets may be recorded here. These were brought together by the royalist bookseller, George Thomason. When the Long Parliament assembled in the year 1640 there was a sensible relaxation of the authority both of Church and State in England. By consequence the public press was immediately employed by all sorts of people to a much larger extent than had been possible hitherto. Publications of every kind came teeming from it. About the year 1641 Mr.

Thomason conceived the idea of preserving these for the uses of history, and he began by collecting as many as he could lay his hands on from the preceding year. His enterprise was continued unweariedly for more than twenty years, down to the year 1662. Being himself a bookseller, and situated at the center of London trade, he enjoyed facilities that could scarcely be improved upon. Few publications of any sort escaped his attention. His materials were duly arranged in chronological order, and he was careful in most instances to inscribe with ink upon the title page the date on which the respective works appeared, together with indications regarding the authorship wherever the same might be known to him. They constitute a large library, and are unrivaled sources for the history of that period.

Thomason's collection remained in a measure unprotected from the year 1662, when the work ceased, down to the year 1762, at which time it was purchased by King George III. for three hundred pounds and presented to the British Museum, and therefore was named in his honor. It has been accessible to scholars for 134 years.

Another investigator was Rev. Henry Martyn Dexter, D.D., of Boston, Massachusetts, one of the foremost authorities for original research in the department of church history that has yet appeared in America. He spent "some days" at the Museum, for this purpose in the winter of 1880-81, and gathered the fruits of his labors into a volume entitled,

“The True Story of John Smyth, the Se-Baptist, told by Himself and his Contemporaries.” This work which appeared in the month of December, 1881, is of the highest importance. Though I had reached the conclusion that immersion was introduced into England in the year 1641, and publicly announced the same in September, 1880, I cheerfully concede the high merits of Dr. Dexter. He uniformly exhibits the best kind of learning, great thoroughness and patient accuracy. Moreover, at the time when he gave himself to this particular labor, he had enjoyed wide experience in the business of original historical research, and his acquaintance with the library of the British Museum was extensive and valuable.

Numbers of the citations which I had sought out in the year 1880, and which I still retain in manuscript form, I found reproduced in an independent fashion by Dr. Dexter in 1881. Likewise he fell upon a good many passages that I had not seen. In setting forth the facts of the case at this time I shall make use of the researches of this admirable scholar as well as of my own. It is my purpose to accord to him the fullest credit for all that he has done; therefore, when citations shall be given, no mention will be made of him in case they are derived from my own manuscript collections. But in every instance where they shall be taken from his volume mentioned above, that fact will be definitely stated.

A QUESTION IN BAPTIST HISTORY.

I.

RECENT INVESTIGATIONS IN BAPTIST HISTORY.

THE earliest author of note in this department of research is Thomas Crosby, who published a History of the English Baptists in four volumes, London, 1738-40. It is a work of real merit in many directions, and of the first importance to every student of Baptist history. Mr. Crosby was followed by Rev. Isaac Backus with a History of New England, with particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians called Baptists. Three vols., Boston, 1777-1796. He is in every sense the equal of his predecessor, and in some respects may be allowed to have gone beyond him. Rev. Joseph Ivimey next appears with a history of the English Baptists. Four vols., London, 1811-1830. The first two volumes are largely dependent upon Crosby, who covers most of the period occupied by them; nevertheless it is a praiseworthy performance, and has always been received with favor. The next work was by Rev. David Benedict, D.D., entitled A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World. Two vols., Bos-