

STRANGER THAN FICTION

The Life of William Kiffin



B. A. Ramsbottom

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by

B. A. RAMSBOTTOM

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Repaired & engraved

William Kiffin.

Aetate 50. Anno. 1667.

From an original Painting.

In the Possession of the Rev.^d Rich.^d Frost, Dunmow.

Published Feb'y 1. 1809. by Maxwell & Wilson Skinner Street.

LIST OF EVENTS

1603	JAMES I
1616	William Kiffin born
1620	The Pilgrim Fathers
1625-49	CHARLES I
1628-88	John Bunyan's Life
1629-40	King rules without Parliament
1642-45; 1648	Civil War
1643	Westminster Assembly begins
1644	Particular Baptist Confession of Faith
1649	Charles I executed
1649-58	COMMONWEALTH
1653	Cromwell becomes Lord Protector
1658	Death of Cromwell
1660-85	CHARLES II
1661	Clarendon Code — start of persecution for nonconformists
1662	Great Ejection of ministers from the state church
1665	The Great Plague
1666	The Great Fire
1685-88	JAMES II
1685	Monmouth's Rebellion
1688	The Glorious Revolution
1688-1702	WILLIAM III
1689	Bill of Rights Particular Baptist Assembly and Confession of Faith
1701	William Kiffin dies

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, now may Israel say;

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us:

Then they had swallowed us up quick, when their wrath was kindled against us:

Then the waters had overwhelmed us, the stream had gone over our soul:

Then the proud waters had gone over our soul.

Blessed be the Lord, who hath not given us as a prey to their teeth.

Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped.

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 124

CHAPTER 1

Stranger than Fiction

It has often been said that truth is stranger than fiction. But what writer of the most extravagant fiction could have thought up such a life as that of William Kiffin? A poor orphan becoming one of the wealthiest merchants in the country; dearly loved and bitterly hated; a preacher and pastor for sixty years yet a Member of Parliament; a confidant of two monarchs and yet in and out of prison; accused of the most fantastic plots yet remarkably delivered; and at last dying quietly at home in a ripe old age. Such is the life of Kiffin!

William Kiffin's two biographers, writing many years ago, both seem impressed by this fact of truth and fiction — as a well-known poet aptly put it: "Tis strange but true; for truth is always strange; stranger than fiction, if it could be told." One saw a remarkable resemblance between Kiffin and the legendary Dick Whittington; the other thought that Sir Walter Scott's famous novel *Peveiril of the Peak* was based upon Kiffin's life! No doubt there is more weight in Joseph Ivimey's comparison of Kiffin to Joseph, David and Mordecai.

But this is not fiction. Here is a godly man, called by God to preach, who in days of deep adversity and *amazing* prosperity honoured the Lord, "choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season." What earthly honours this man might have had if he had so chosen!

If there are many strange things connected with the life of William Kiffin, the strangest of all is this: Why is it that a life both so remarkable and interesting is so little known today? Mention Kiffin, and there is a bewildered frown, or the innocent question: "Who was Kiffin?" We dare not begin to suggest why this should be so; but, sadly, it is. Yet begin to speak of Kiffin's life and immediately interest is aroused — though sometimes the incredulous hint that perhaps things are being exaggerated.

Rather over a hundred years ago, G. Holden Pike writing in *London's Ancient Meeting Houses* expressed the same surprise — that Kiffin was so little known. But he also expressed his desire that one day "a good

life” of Kiffin might appear. Well, this is an account of the life of William Kiffin. Only the reader can decide what epithet it deserves.

Interestingly, Kiffin himself believed that there was great value in reading the lives of God’s people, and also that it is eminently scriptural to write them. When asked to write an “Epistle to the Reader” for *The Life and Death of Hanserd Knollys*, he wrote:

“It was the special charge God gave to His people of old that the many signal providences and mercies that they had received from Him should by them be recorded and left to their children’s children, to the end that the memorial of His goodness might cause them to love and fear His name; and therefore they are required to bless the Lord from the fountain of Israel, from the very beginning of all His favours towards them. It is no small favour the servants of God are made partakers of that His people of old have left so many testimonies of the gracious goodness and providences of God towards them; being a means to strengthen the faith of His people, in a dependency upon Him, in all those variety of dispensations that do attend them in this world: that whatever troubles they meet withal in this life, they may know that God deals no otherwise with them than He hath done to those that formerly have feared His name; and may be comforted with the same comforts and supports which His servants formerly have received from God.”

CHAPTER 2

Early Days

1625 was a terrible year in London. One of those dreadful plagues which again and again had troubled England (thought to be carried by black rats) had again visited the capital, and it is estimated that about a third of the population was wiped out.

Among those suffering from the plague was a nine year old boy. He had no less than six of those deadly plague boils — yet, miraculously, he recovered. That young boy was William Kiffin. God had a purpose for his life so, to use the well-worn saying, he was “immortal till his work was done.” Sadly though, both his parents perished in the plague.

Nothing is known about his background and ancestors, but the name “Kiffin” suggests that his family had originally come from Wales — “Kiffin” signifying “a borderer” in Welsh. He himself sometimes spelled his name “Kiffen” and sometimes “Kiffin.”

William Kiffin’s life (1616-1701) almost spans one of the most turbulent centuries in English history. Gunpowder Plot, the appearance of the authorised version of the Bible and the voyage of the Pilgrim Fathers were all recent memories in that fateful plague year — which was the year, also, when Charles I succeeded his father on the throne.

So Kiffin’s life was to witness the Civil War, the execution of the King, the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, the Restoration of the Monarchy and the attendant bitter persecution of nonconformists under Charles II, reaching to the days of toleration following the Glorious Revolution, and not ending till the turn of the century.

What important years these were! Recently they have been described as “the most turbulent, seditious and factious years of recorded English history.” And Kiffin is surely one of the most remarkable and interesting men of his age, from any point of view.

Sadly the young orphan’s early days were not easy. What relatives and friends he had seemed more concerned to avail themselves of his parents’ property than to look after the parentless child.

At the age of 13 he was bound apprentice as a brewer’s clerk in London. All the old accounts speak of him as being apprenticed to the

celebrated John Lilburne but obviously there is some error here. Lilburne himself was only a year or so older than William Kiffin so could have been but 14 or 15 himself at the time. It seems more likely that they were apprentices together.

John Lilburne was one of the most turbulent men during that turbulent age. Leader of the Levellers (who sought to abolish the monarchy and the House of Lords), he was a republican agitator who spoke and published against Charles I, fought against him as a lieutenant-colonel in the Parliamentary army, and later opposed Cromwell's government. On one occasion when put in the pillory by the Star Chamber, he fulminated so against the bishops, and his language was so insolent, that his persecutors were compelled to gag him. On another occasion, after enduring terrible sufferings in gaol, he escaped by setting the gaol on fire! It was said that "if the world were emptied of all but John Lilburne, Lilburne would quarrel with John, and John with Lilburne." He certainly managed to enter into most of the controversies of his day. Whipped, pilloried, imprisoned, banished, he survived all and at last died in peace — as a Quaker!

This, then, was William Kiffin's companion at the brewery. "A very mean calling," Kiffin later described his situation, and he was far from happy. Because of his conditions, he became quite melancholy, and after a year or more he resolved to quit.

Very early one morning, before anyone was awake, young Kiffin crept from the place where he lodged, determined never to return. It was, of course, a serious thing for an apprentice to break with his master, but the poor boy felt he could stand it no longer.

Wandering aimlessly through the city, he came to St. Antholin's Church. These were the days of the Puritans and to his amazement he observed people flocking into the church even at that early hour. Without any particular purpose Kiffin followed them in; he had no special religious interest, but what else was there to do?

The preacher was Thomas Foxley, a learned and zealous Puritan who later suffered much under Archbishop Laud.

The subject was the Fifth Commandment: "Honour thy father and thy mother." Most remarkably the preacher dealt with the commandment as meaning the obedience of servants to their masters just as much as children to their parents. Much of what was said the

poor boy could not understand, but he thought that the minister must know all about his running away, and was speaking personally to him!

Accordingly William Kiffin hurried back to his lodgings as quickly as he could. And no one had missed him! It was still early — so creeping back into the house, he was able to carry on as if nothing had happened. But all this had left a deep impression on his mind. From now on he became a regular hearer of the Puritan preachers.

CHAPTER 3

The Puritan Preachers

Being now deeply impressed by the reality of divine things, William Kiffin began to have serious thoughts. Going back again to St. Antholin's, the place where God had met him, he heard a minister named John Norton, a man who spent whole days in prayer and who was described as "another Augustine." Norton's text was: "There is no peace saith my God to the wicked" (Isa. 57.21). He clearly showed what true peace is, and insisted that no one could ever obtain it "without an interest in Christ."

"Which sermon" (wrote Kiffin) "took very great impression on my heart, being convinced I had not that peace, and how to obtain an interest in Christ Jesus I knew not; which occasioned great perplexity in my soul. I every day saw myself more and more sinful and vile. Pray I could not, nor believe in Jesus Christ I could not, and thought myself shut up in unbelief; and, although I desired to mourn under the sense of my sin, yet I saw there was no proportion of sorrow suitable to that evil nature which I found working strongly in my soul. As the only thing I could do I took up resolutions to attend upon the most powerful preaching, which accordingly I did; by means of which I found some relief (many times) from the sense of a possibility that, notwithstanding my sinful state, I might at last obtain mercy. I resolved also to leave sin; but, although to will was present sometimes, yet how to perform I had no power."

Here, then, was this boy, about 15 years old, feeling himself a sinner, and attending diligently to the most powerful preaching he could find.

After some time he went to hear John Davenport, "a princely preacher" (as he was described), at the church in Coleman Street. At this time Mr. Davenport was very fervent and even vehement in his preaching. On this occasion he preached from the beautiful text: "And the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1.7). He spoke of the wonderful efficacy of the blood of Christ both to pardon and cleanse from sin, and answered many objections which an

unbelieving heart would raise against the full satisfaction which Christ made for sinners.

“Many of which” (says Kiffin) “I found to be such that I made in my own heart: as the sense of unworthiness, and willingness to be better before I would come to Christ for life, with many other of the like kind. This sermon was of great satisfaction to my soul; and I thought I found my heart greatly to close with the riches and freeness of grace, which God held forth to poor sinners in Jesus Christ. I found my fears to vanish, and my heart filled with love to Jesus Christ. I saw sin viler than ever, and my heart more abhorring it.”

Soon afterwards, he heard Mr. Norton again, this time from Luke 1.69: “And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David.” Kiffin wrote of this occasion:

“He showed that Jesus Christ was mightily accomplished with power and ability to save His people. My faith was exceedingly strengthened in the fulness of that satisfaction which Jesus Christ had given to the Father for poor sinners, and was enabled to believe my interest therein. Then I found some ability to pray, and to meditate upon the riches of this grace; so that I could say with David, ‘When I awake, I am still with Thee.’ I found the power of inbred corruption scatter, and my heart set on fire with holy love to Christ.”

Interestingly, both these ministers, so blessed to William Kiffin, soon after emigrated to New England in North America, Norton becoming minister at Boston and Davenport at Stanford. The testimony concerning the latter following his death was: “A man never yet praised enough, and never to be named without praise.”

These, then, were the kind of preachers Kiffin heard.

Like many young converts, Kiffin did not yet really know himself and the deceitfulness of his heart. He could not understand older Christians complaining so much about the strength of sin in their hearts. “I thought I should never find the power and strength of sin that they found daily in their souls.”

“In this frame” (he said) “of peace and rest, I continued for near three months, rejoicing in the grace of God, and was ready to say that

by His favour He had made my mountain so strong that I should never be removed. But a new storm began to arise in my soul; for under the comfort and peace I enjoyed, I thought the power of inbred corruption had been so broken within me that I should never have found it prevail over me any more. I began to feel my confidence in God to abate, my comforts to lessen, and the motions of sin to revive with greater strength than ever. In every duty I performed, my heart was so carnal that it were a burden to me, and by reason thereof I was a burden to myself. My comforts were gone, and in all the duties of religion, I was as a man that had no strength; yet durst I not omit the performance of any, having some secret hopes that the Lord would not utterly cast me off in displeasure, although my fears were stronger than my hopes. I was daily questioning whether all that I formerly enjoyed might be any more than such a taste of the good Word of God, and powers of the world to come, as those had enjoyed who nevertheless fell away.”

For many weeks this distress of mind continued and the boy was too ashamed to ask anyone about it. He was further troubled, in listening to a conversation, by what he *thought* he heard a godly man say: “The least measure of true grace is for a man to know that he *has* grace.” Of course, he had misheard — but understandably his darkness and distress were increased. He concluded that he must be destitute of grace.

He received some relief through hearing a sermon preached by a Mr. Moulin at London-Stone church. This was probably the French Protestant, Lewis de Moulin, who became a professor at Cambridge. To his amazement, and comfort, the preacher dealt with the very point which was troubling him:

“He fell upon that question, what the least measure of grace was? and before he gave a positive answer, proved that for a man to know he had grace could not be the least measure but a very large degree of grace, being a reflex act of faith. He then gave several characters of the least measure of true grace. I greatly wondered within myself to hear him fall upon that which did so greatly and particularly concern me, and also found in my own soul some small beginnings of those signs of true grace which he laid down. This wonderfully relieved my hopes again; God being pleased to give me some strength to depend upon His grace more than I had received for many weeks before; my resolutions being

strengthened to follow God, and to wait upon Him in every duty, whatsoever His pleasure might be towards me at the last.”

He was also greatly encouraged by two passages of Scripture which were brought to him with great power. One was Isa. 30.18: “Therefore will the Lord wait, that He may be gracious unto you, and therefore will He be exalted, that He may have mercy upon you: for the Lord is a God of judgment: blessed are all they that wait for Him.” He writes:

“Meditation on these words filled me with astonishment — that the great God of heaven and earth should reckon Himself exalted to show mercy to poor sinners, and to encourage such to wait, and not be discouraged.”

He was brought to feel that as God is a God of judgment, so He knows the best time to give longing souls what they are waiting for.

The other word was Isa. 50.10: “Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of His servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.” This text was greatly blessed to him in reading the well-known work on the subject by the eminent Puritan divine, Thomas Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness* (a similar work to the sermon by J. C. Philpot preached on the same subject many years later).

Through these two scriptures he was saved from the temptation not to trouble about waiting upon God. Yet another temptation continually harassed him:

“Yet I was ready to run to my own righteousness; I mean to an expectation of something in myself by which I might get greater victory over sin, and more love to God and His ways, before I should believe in Christ for pardon.”

In recording God’s dealings with his soul, Kiffin realised on looking back that all his perplexities sprang from his trying to find something *in himself* whereby he might the better approach Christ. Sadly his perplexities were aggravated by one of the special characteristics of some Puritan preaching — not only pressing the necessity of a deep conviction brought about by the preaching of the law but insisting on

a rigid standard of experience. (He specially mentions Thomas Hooker's *The Soul's Preparation for Christ*.) Young Kiffin (now about 17 years old) was very deeply convinced of sin, yet, as he examined his own heart with a tender conscience, he thought that he had never been convinced deeply enough. Thus he almost came to conclude that he was deceived and that God had never dealt graciously with him.

But how mysterious is God's sovereignty! About this time John Goodwin settled in London. Goodwin (not to be confused with the more famous Thomas Goodwin) was a preacher usually regarded with some suspicion. But this was the very man God used to set Kiffin's soul at liberty. His eyes were drawn away from himself to Christ and now he found a sweet resting place.

“I had for some time seen the want of Christ, and believed that it was by Him only I must expect pardon; and had also seen the worth and excellencies that were in Him above all other objects: so that I now felt my soul to rest upon and trust in Him.”

For some time, understandably, he attended the preaching of Mr. Goodwin.

CHAPTER 4

Which Church?

At this time there was true zeal in young William Kiffin's religion. He found there were a few other apprentices he met who like himself were deeply concerned about the things of God. They would meet together at five o'clock in the morning to speak together of their souls' concerns and of the Lord Jesus, and also to pray. Afterwards they would attend the six o'clock lecture at Cornhill or at Christ Church.

What days were these when young, uneducated apprentices would spend their precious spare moments with one desire, to find out more about Christ and His gospel!

William Kiffin writes:

“After a little time, we also read some portion of Scripture, and spoke from it what it pleased God to enable us; wherein I found very great advantage, and by degrees did arrive to some small measure of knowledge. I found the sound of the Scriptures very pleasant and delightful to me, to which I attended as it pleased God to give me an opportunity.”

And this seems to be the key to Kiffin's life — his love of the Word of God, and his desire to follow it whatever the cost.

As a number of godly ministers were leaving England because they were dissatisfied with the established Church, Kiffin began to consider the whole subject of nonconformity. Was the state Church scriptural? What did the Word of God teach? He obtained various books and manuscripts and compared them carefully with Scripture.

One thing that struck him was the way in which “God was always jealous of His worship, and had left many examples of His severity on those who had added anything thereunto.” He seemed specially affected by the solemn judgments which fell on Nadab and Abihu and on Uzza for departing from God's order.

Yet he felt to know so little and realised that very able ministers did conform to the state Church. So he sought their help — but did not receive any! They seemed to despise his youth and showed “more

passion than reason.” Perhaps conscience was pricking them. In later years some of them had to condemn the very things they were now upholding.

So William Kiffin had to turn away from man to God. He says, “Finding myself so 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.” Two preachers were a special help to him at this time. One was Jeremiah Burroughs, the well-known author of *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, a strong advocate for the independency of churches. The other a Mr. Glover (probably John Glover who Cotton Mather lists as one of the New England divines).

Soon after this, Burroughs left for Holland and Glover for New England — where William Kiffin felt that soon he himself would go. However, he had to prove that though “man proposes, God disposes.”

So little by little, deeply burdened and concerned, William Kiffin was at last led to become both an Independent and a Baptist — holding firmly the doctrines of free and sovereign grace, and upholding baptism by immersion for believers only, and the necessity of this before coming to the Lord’s supper. In other words, by conscience he became a “Strict and Particular Baptist.”

The history of the Baptists at this period is somewhat confused and not as clear as older historians believed. The popular, older account is that when he was 22 years old (in 1638) he joined an Independent church in London under the pastoral care of Henry Jessey. After a time he and some other members united with a Particular Baptist congregation at Wapping (usually counted the first in England), with John Spilsbury as pastor. His third move was when Kiffin himself led an amiable separation to form a second church, the church in Devonshire Square, of which he became pastor until his death. A more modern view is that the church he first joined, Independent then Baptist, was the church where he remained the whole of his life — though again this has been disputed. An ancient document known as “the Kiffin manuscript” (though it is not certain that it really was written by Kiffin) has been

closely followed, but it can be read in different ways and with different conclusions.¹

What is certain is that many years later he wrote:

“When it pleased God of His free grace to cause me to make a serious enquiry after Jesus Christ, and to give me some taste of His pardoning love, the sense of which did engage my heart with desires to be obedient to His will in all things, I used all endeavours 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 primitive 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 have continued in the profession of the same for these forty years.”

It is clear that the exercises of soul which led him to become an Independent eventually led him to become a Baptist — at a time when to be a Baptist meant scorn and persecution.

Happily at this time his marriage took place to a member of his own congregation, Hanna — “a suitable yoke fellow, who was with me in judgment.” She was about 22 or 23 years old and was to be the partner of his joys and sorrows for almost 44 years.

¹ The matter is discussed by B. R. White in an article: “How Did William Kiffin Join the Baptists?” (Baptist Quarterly, Vol. 23) and by M. Tolmie in *The Triumph of the Saints*.

CHAPTER 5

In Prison and Sickness

Quite early it was the will of his fellow-members that William Kiffin should preach or, to use the ancient terminology, “improve amongst them the abilities God had given him.” It seems that soon afterwards he was appointed the pastor. As this was a time when severe measures were used against nonconformists (the time of Archbishop Laud), the congregation had to meet early morning or late at night to escape persecution. Even so, often the meeting was disturbed.

One Lord’s day, as he was leaving a meeting held in a house on Tower Hill, a few ruffians began to hurl stones at him. One hit him in the eye though mercifully he was not injured. Remarkably about a year later William Kiffin was asked to visit a poor man, a blacksmith, in Nightingale Lane. He turned out to be the ringleader of those who had caused the disturbance on Tower Hill. Now wasted away almost to a skeleton (Kiffin said his bones nearly came through his skin), he said he had been in perfect health at the time of the disturbance, but was taken ill immediately afterwards. It was his desire that William Kiffin should pray for him. Later the same day he died.

Not long after William Kiffin was seized at a meeting in Southwark and taken before the Justices of the Peace. The next day the Judge sent him to prison (the White Lion Prison) where he was kept for some time. Some of his fellow-prisoners had been guilty of daring robberies. Whilst there one of the prisoners developed a bitter hatred against him and also poisoned the minds of the other prisoners against him. This mysterious enemy resolved to stop at nothing and planned his murder. A number of the prisoners abruptly entered Kiffin’s cell where he was enjoying a brief visit from his family. One had a great truncheon in his hand. However, they were so kindly welcomed that all their prejudices dissolved. Indeed, it was not long before Kiffin himself had to intervene to prevent the prisoners injuring the one who had stirred them up against him. Yet the bitter hatred still continued, and Kiffin was accused of speaking slanderous words against the King.

Later, in the providence of God, the Judge who had committed him to prison was himself impeached by Parliament and committed to the Tower of London. So eventually Kiffin was set free.

“Thus it pleased God to deliver me out of the hands of malicious men, causing the rage of men to praise Him, and the remnant thereof He restrained.”

Baptist historians and students of William Kiffin’s life seem to have missed the fact that the sermon Kiffin preached before his arrest he later published. It was “printed for William Larnier, at the Bible in Little-East-cheap, 1642,” and bears the title *Certaine observations upon Hosea the second the 7th and 8th verses*. This is followed by a most interesting subtitle: “As they were delivered at a friends House who had broken his legg, for which meeting the author was committed to the White-Lyon by Sir Thomas Mallett late Judge of Assize for the County where he remained Prisoner of Jesus Christ.”

The pamphlet (of over twenty pages) is dedicated to “The right worshipfull the Justices of peace for his Majesties County of Surrie.” Kiffin tells us in this dedication that they had asked him why he should preach when he had not been to university nor had been ordained by the Bishops. His reply had been that he had a warrant from scripture from Scripture: “As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4.10). Also some of them had asked what he had said — which gave him the opportunity to publish the sermon and dedicate it to them. So his address at the end of the dedication is given as the “White Lyon” prison, where they had committed him.

In this preface he makes an interesting comment on his position:

“Though I am accused and condemned for being at a conventicle, truly if praying for the King and Parliament and edifying one another in our most holy faith be keeping conventicles, then I am guilty. But if a conventicle be such a meeting as in the least measure is against any of these, then I detest it and abhor it.”

This remained Kiffin’s position for the rest of his life. He fought for liberty of conscience; but he was never a rebel, either against the King,

Parliament or Cromwell. However, the great interest this pamphlet has for us is that it gives us the only idea we can ever have of Kiffin the preacher. What kind of preacher was he?

Well, this is an excellent sermon in true Puritan mould, with the usual divisions and uses. Indeed, had no name appeared we might easily have thought that it was preached by Flavel or Manton or one of the well-known Puritan divines. Perhaps one thing stands out. It is clear that the preacher is one who knows what it is to suffer for righteousness' sake. At the end he makes the following statement:

“These being the observations and this the substance of all the matter which God was pleased to help me to deliver where I was apprehended, as I am publicly called by many to suffer for them, so I am not unwilling, being requested, to declare them to all, to such, and unto any it pleaseth God by His good providence to dispose of them, desiring that all persons would ‘try all things, and hold fast that which is good’ (1 Thess. 5.21).”

A summary of the sermon appears at the end of this book.

William Kiffin was now about 25 years old: pastor of a church, engaged in secular employment, exposed to the insults of enemies of the truth — yet determined to obey God rather than men. Also, he had the care of a young family, and at this time few means to support them.

About this time he fell seriously ill and both his friends and his doctors gave him up. He was to all appearance a dying man.

In her great distress Kiffin's wife was prevailed on to go to see a Doctor Trigg. However, the doctor on seeing him pronounced his condition dangerous, and refused to have anything to do with it. At length, though, he was persuaded to have a try and God's blessing rested upon the treatment.

For three months Dr. Trigg cared for him, often coming twice a day. When asked about payment he would say, “Leave it till he is well. I will have it all together.” But this was a great burden to Kiffin and his wife. How could he pay? Sadly both his own and his wife's relations had concluded that, because of their religion, they would soon be ruined, and so kept money that should have belonged to them for themselves. They pacified their consciences by saying they would one day have to provide for the Kiffin children.

Remarkably Mrs. Kiffin noticed eminent people offer Dr. Trigg two golden sovereigns if he would visit one of their sick relatives; but he refused. And then he would slip off to see her husband.

At length when Kiffin was much restored, he plucked up courage to ask how much he owed. He had no money, and he did not feel it right to borrow. At last the doctor told him: “A French crown” — a mere trifle. Kiffin thought he was joking but, no, he would not have a penny more.

Dr. Trigg had been an utter stranger, and yet he said that he never tried harder to save a man’s life — and with God’s blessing he succeeded.

William Kiffin himself comments:

“This providence I looked upon to be very great to me at that time, and did wonderfully lead me to cleave unto the Lord in the discharge of my duty, that good word being made good: ‘Trust in the Lord, and do good, and verily thou shall be fed.’”

CHAPTER 6

“The Grand Ringleader of that Seduced Sect”

It seems difficult today to imagine the abuse which was heaped on the early Baptists. Some of this appears to have arisen from misunderstanding but there was a considerable degree of malice and bitterness. Above all the accusations were unjust. On the one hand the Baptists were accused of all manner of doctrinal error whilst on the other hand the most ridiculous suggestions were made concerning their practices — for instance, statements that they baptized women naked.

As a young minister who was beginning to take a leading part among the Baptists, William Kiffin had to bear more than his share of opprobrium.

On October 17th, 1642 (about the beginning of the Civil War) Kiffin and three other Baptists held a disputation in Southwark with Dr. Daniel Featley, a celebrated champion of the cause of infant baptism. Featley was at one time a member of the famous Westminster Assembly of Divines. All our information of what took place is found in a scurrilous work written by the doctor which went into six editions. It is entitled, *The Dippers dipt: or, the Anabaptists duck'd and plung'd over head and ears, at a Disputation in Southwark. Together with a large and full Discourse of the original, several sorts, peculiar errors, high attempts against the State, capital punishments, with an application to these times.* Dr. Featley loads his adversaries with plenty of abuse and relates some remarkable stories about them to prove them “ 1. an illiterate and sottish sect. 2. a lying and blasphemous sect. 3. an impure and carnal sect. 4. a cruel and bloody sect. 5. a profane and sacrilegious sect.”

Throughout, Dr. Featley refers to William Kiffin contemptuously as “Cufin” or “this Cufin.” We have no account from the Baptist side but it appears that the Baptists stood their ground courteously, though of course Featley claims the victory. The name “Anabaptists” was used by Kiffin’s opponents, the word signifying “those who have been baptized again,” most of those being baptized as believers having, of course, been already sprinkled as infants. But the word “Anabaptist” also had a forbidding aspect because there had been a group of fanatics at Munster

who, in the previous century, had worked havoc, and *they* had been known as Anabaptists.

Featley dedicated his account of the disputation to the House of Lords claiming that the Anabaptists

“preach and print and practise their heretical impieties openly; they hold their conventicles weekly in our chief cities and suburbs thereof...they flock in great multitudes to their Jordans, and both sexes enter into the river and are dipt.... And as they defile our rivers with their impure washings, and our pulpits with their false prophecies and fanatical enthusiasms, so the presses sweat and groan under the load of their blasphemies.”

It was largely in response to such attacks that in 1644 the London Baptists issued a Confession of Faith. The clear Calvinism of this Confession and its moderate, scriptural terminology made it apparent to any unbiased mind that the Baptists were not fanatics, blasphemers, heretics, or any such thing; but that they were sober, law-abiding Christians who loved the doctrines of grace, commonly called Calvinism, and were more or less in agreement with their opponents on all vital matters, though differing on the *subjects* and the *manner* of baptism.

The Confession is entitled:

“A Confession of Faith of seven congregations or churches of Christ in London, which are commonly but unjustly called Anabaptists.”

This Confession did much to disarm antagonism and opposition from fair-minded people, and remained the established statement of Baptist belief till, being difficult to obtain, it was superseded by the Confession of 1689. It still abides, though, as a noble and gracious stand, soberly made, for the truth. Really England was amazed by the discovery of such moderation and orthodoxy, and even Daniel Featley could find little to which he could take exception!

The 1644 Confession was subscribed in the names of seven churches in London and, among others, signed by William Kiffin and Thomas Patience on behalf of the church at Devonshire Square. Kiffin was to be a signatory to every important Baptist document for the next fifty years

or so. His wisdom, doctrinal understanding, firmness and moderation did much for the establishing of the churches and in contending against opposition. Later copies of the 1644 Confession were also signed by Hanserd Knollys, who with Kiffin was to take the lead during the next fifty years. Some eighteen years older than Kiffin, and a former clergyman, Hanserd Knollys was to live to the advanced age of 92, and the two were to remain friends, though differing in many ways.

Typical of the Calvinism of the Confession is:

“Article 21. That Christ Jesus by His death did bring forth salvation and reconciliation only for the elect, which were those which God the Father gave Him; and that the gospel which is to be preached to all men as the ground of faith, is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the ever-blessed God, filled with the perfection of all heavenly and spiritual excellencies, and that salvation is only and alone to be had through the believing in His Name.”

It was this belief in “particular redemption” which gave rise to the name “Particular Baptists.”

There is also the clear statement on baptism — both the persons and the mode:

“Article 39. That baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed only upon persons professing faith, or that are disciples, or taught, who upon a profession of faith, ought to be baptized.”

“Article 40. The way and manner of the dispensing of this ordinance the Scripture holds out to be dipping or plunging the whole body under water: it being a sign, must answer the thing signified, which are these: first, the washing the whole soul in the blood of Christ: secondly, that interest the saints have in the death, burial and resurrection; thirdly, together with a confirmation of our faith, that as certainly as the body is buried under water, and riseth again, so certainly shall the bodies of the saints be raised by the power of Christ, in the day of the resurrection, to reign with Christ.”

It has been supposed that the preface and conclusion were written by Kiffin. The conclusion ends:

“We confess that we know but in part, and that we are ignorant of many things which we desire and seek to know: and if any shall do us that friendly part to shew *us, from the Word of God*, that which we see not, we shall have cause to be thankful to God and them. But if any man shall impose upon us anything that we see not to be *commanded* by our Lord Jesus Christ, we should in His strength, rather embrace all reproaches and tortures of men, to be stripped of all outward comforts, and if it were possible to die a thousand deaths, rather than to do anything against the *least tittle of the truth of God*, or against the light of our own consciences. And if any shall call what we have said, *heresy*, then do we with the apostle acknowledge ‘that after the way they call heresies so worship we the God of our Fathers’; disclaiming all heresies (rightly so called) because they are against Christ; and to be steadfast and immoveable, always abounding in *obedience* to Christ, as knowing our labour shall not be in vain in the Lord.”

(Some of the quotations are from the better known 1646 edition of this Confession.)

Soon afterwards, in 1645, *A Looking Glass for the Anabaptists* was published. In its title William Kiffin was mentioned by name as “the author and grand ringleader of that seduced sect” — so it is obvious that, at least among his opponents, he was regarded as the leading Baptist figure of the day. The full title reads:

“A Looking Glass for the Anabaptists, and the rest of the separatists: wherein they may clearly behold a brief confutation of a certain unlicensed, scandalous pamphlet, entitled, *The Remonstrance of the Anabaptists, by Way of Vindication of their Separation*. The impertinencies, incongruities, non-consequences, falsities and obstinacy of William Kiffin, the author and grand ringleader of that seduced sect is discovered and laid open to the view of every indifferent-eyed reader that will not shut his eyes against the truth. With certain queries, vindicated from Anabaptistical glosses, together with others propounded for the information and conviction, (if possible) reformation, of the said William Kiffin and his proselytes. By Josiah Ricraft, a well-willer to the truth.”

This was a curious tract of twenty-six pages written by a London Presbyterian merchant, who displayed much bigotry.

Yet another bitter opponent was a Presbyterian preacher, Thomas Edwards, whose *Gangraena* appeared about the same time. Edwards openly attacks Kiffin accusing him of many extravagances, and comparing him to a mountebank. As an example of his writing:

“Another of these fellows who counts himself inferior to none of the rest of his seduced brethren, one, whose name is Will. Kiffin, sometime servant to a brewer, (whose name is Lilburne, who was lately put into Newgate, upon occasion of scandalizing the Speaker of the honourable House of Commons), this man’s man is now become a pretended preacher, and to that end hath by his enticing words, seduced and gathered a schismatical rabble of deluded children, servants and people without either parents’ or masters’ consent. (This truth is not unknown by some of a near relation to me, whose giddy-headed children and servants are his poor slavish proselytes.) For a further manifestation of him in a pamphlet called, *The Confession of Faith of the Seven Anabaptistical Churches*, there he is underwritten first, as metropolitan of that fraternity. I could relate, if time would permit, of somewhat I have had to do with him, in which he appeared to me to be a mountebank.”

These were stirring times in both church and nation, but what Kiffin had to endure at least seems unchristian! Mercifully by showing Christian patience and forbearance, the Baptist cause was established. A letter sent by William Kiffin to Edwards is preserved:

“Sir,

You stand as one professing yourself to be instructed by Christ, with abilities from God to throw down error; and therefore to that end do preach every third day. May it therefore please you, and those that employ you in that work, to give them leave whom you so brand, as publicly to object against what you say, when your sermon is ended, as you declare yourself; and we hope it will be an increase of further light to all that fear God, and put a large advantage into your hands, if you have the truth on your side, to cause it to shine with more evidence, and I hope we shall do it with moderation as becometh Christians.

1646

Your’s,
William Kiffin.”