

REFORMATION
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A historical perspective on Irish Baptists





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▶ **Editor**

Aaron Prelock

▶ **Associate Editors**

UK: Mostyn Roberts

USA: Michael Haykin

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'Surely Irish Zion demands our prayers'

*A brief history
of the Irish Baptists,
1640s–1840s*

MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN

Baptists have been in Ireland since the mid-seventeenth century.¹ Their origins lie with English Baptist officers who accompanied Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) during his Irish campaign in 1649. They planted churches in the garrison towns where they were stationed and, since these Baptist officers held high positions in the army, the growth and influence of the Irish Baptist movement was ‘both sudden and spectacular’.² Churches were planted predominantly in the south in such towns as Dublin, Kilkenny, Clonmel, and Cork and, though there was a loose associational network between them, they lacked cohesion. Due to the Cromwellian composition of their churches, leading early Irish Baptists, like Thomas Patient (d 1666) and Christopher Blackwood (1607/8–1670), were actually English.³ The first Baptist who was Irish by birth and whose life we can clearly delineate was Thomas DeLaune (d 1685). Converted from Roman Catholicism, he became a member of the Baptist church in Cork. He subsequently moved to London, where he co-wrote *Tropologia: a Key to Open Scripture Metaphors* (1682) with the influential London Baptist Benjamin Keach (1640–1704). The famed author Daniel Defoe (1660–1731) recalled DeLaune as a first-rate scholar, a man of merit and truly one of the ‘great men’ of his generation.⁴ He was eventually imprisoned at Newgate along with his family for his religious convictions, where he and his entire family died.⁵

Decline and revival

After the demise of the Cromwellian regime in the 1650s, the Irish Baptist population shrank, and, after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, it

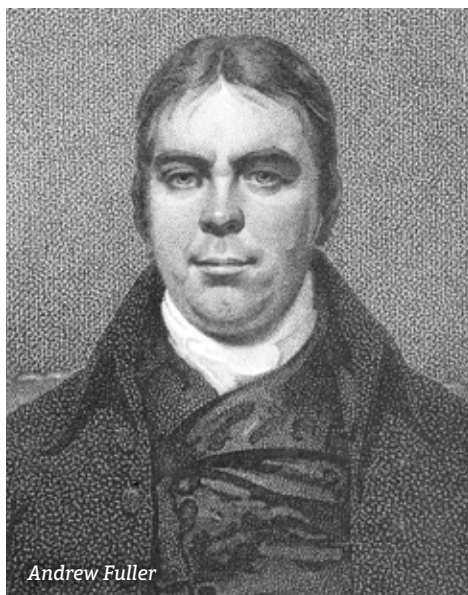
shrank even more. By the early eighteenth century, when a record was made of their meetings in Ireland, the Baptists had declined severely – only five churches had ministers, and most churches numbered under fifty members. Gribben says that the Irish Baptists also suffered from a ‘lack of doctrinal clarity’ and cites Oswald Edwards as an example. Edwards was a pastor of an independent Baptist church in Dublin whose preaching was ‘tinged with Arminianism, Socinianism, and “foul language”’.⁶ The result of such problems, Gribben notes, was that ‘by the end of the eighteenth century’, the Irish Baptist movement ‘was almost extinct’.⁷

In July 1795 Samuel Pearce (1766–1799), pastor of Cannon Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, was invited by Benjamin McDowell (1739–1824), the minister of the Presbyterian church in St Mary’s Abbey, Dublin, and by the General Evangelical Society of the city to engage in a number of weeks of preaching in Ireland.⁸ McDowell had been born in New Jersey and attended the College of New Jersey (Princeton) before moving to Scotland to study at Glasgow University. He was a key leader in the Ulster Synod, a defender of Presbyterian orthodoxy, and was involved in the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival.

When Pearce came to Ireland to preach for McDowell in May 1796, he found a Presbyterian stronghold with some two thousand in attendance. How different were the numbers at the Baptist cause at Swift’s Alley, which had been founded by Patient in the seventeenth century.⁹ When Pearce preached on 29 June 1796 for the Dublin Baptists, there were but forty or



Samuel Pearce



Andrew Fuller

so in attendance. In his memoir of Pearce, his friend, the missionary statesman and theologian Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) described Pearce's thoughts on the Baptist church: 'It much affected him to see the whole city given to sensuality and worldly conformity; and especially to find those of his own denomination amongst the lowest and least affected with their condition.'¹⁰

Under his regular ministry at the Baptist church, though, a number were converted and the attendance started to grow. An example of Pearce's positive gains in Dublin comes from a letter to his wife Sarah written on 30 June 1796:

The five o'clock meetings are miserably attended in general. In a house that will hold 1,500 or 2,000 people, you will hardly see above fifty! Yesterday morning I preached on the subject of public worship, from

Psalm v. 7, and seriously warned them against preferring their bellies to God, and their own houses to his. I was delighted and surprised, at the five o'clock meeting, to see the place nearly full.¹¹

Pearce was excited by the potential for the gospel in Ireland and, writing to a close friend, William Summers, he said, 'Come to Dublin, and come directly! I have been most delightfully disappointed. I expected darkness, and behold light ... The Lord hath of late been doing great things for Dublin.'¹² A Dublin deacon wrote to a friend: 'We have had a Jubilee for weeks. That blessed man of God, Samuel Pearce, has preached amongst us with great sweetness and much power.'¹³

Yet Pearce did not have illusions about the difficulties he had faced. Writing to William Carey (1761-1834) in India,

he explained the religious condition as he arrived: 'I found there were four Presbyterian congregations; two of these belong to the southern presbytery, and are Arians or Socinians; the other two are connected with the northern presbytery, and retain the Westminster confession of faith. One of these latter congregations is very small, and the ministry, though orthodox, appears to have but little success.'¹⁴

Gribben also highlights John Walker, a friend of Pearce's in Dublin, as another example of the spiritual decline in Ireland. Walker had seceded from the Church of Ireland after embracing Sandemanianism. This teaching, promulgated by two Scotsmen, John Glas (1695-1773) and Robert Sandeman (1718-1771), denied the fiduciary element of saving faith. In other words, it tended to equate saving faith with intellectual assent. In Gribben's words, Sandemanianism 'would so quickly corrupt the last vestiges of orthodoxy in the Irish Baptist churches'.¹⁵ Pearce's words, written to his wife Sarah, well expressed his concern: 'Surely Irish Zion demands our prayers'.¹⁶

In June 1804 Fuller followed in the footsteps of his late friend Pearce, who had died of tuberculosis in the autumn of 1799. As the secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), he went with the hope of gaining financial support for the mission, to confirm the work of Pearce, and to 'remove from those churches the frigid influence of Sandemanianism'.¹⁷ Things did not go well for him in Ireland, however. Like Pearce, he preached for McDowell and for the Baptists at Swift's Alley, but his experiences were not

encouraging. For the Baptists, Fuller wrote, 'I might preach, perhaps to fifty in the morning' and for the Presbyterians 'to two hundred in the afternoon, in a place that would hold a thousand'.¹⁸

He found the Baptists verging on Unitarianism and succumbing to the sinful world around them. In an attempt to stem the heterodoxy, Fuller led a contingent to appeal to the Irish Baptist Association, only to be rebuffed, resulting in a split in the already small church. As Gribben observes, 'the split of the principal Dublin Baptist congregation was certainly not the revival that Pearce appeared to have experienced and which Fuller might well have expected'.¹⁹ Nor did he manage to get the money for the BMS that he had hoped. He only managed to raise £150. In a letter to his father-in-law that he wrote from Ireland, Fuller noted, 'I have enjoyed but little comfort in Ireland; yet I hope I have derived some profit'.²⁰ Upon his return to England, Fuller wrote a report for the Baptist ministers in London, entitled 'Remarks on the State of the Baptist Churches in Ireland', where he addressed the problems he encountered.²¹

A bright future

The churches did begin to see some profit as John West, a Baptist minister from England, went to Ireland in 1811 as an itinerant minister. Two years later, he reorganised the Swift's Alley church. He also formed the Baptist Itinerant Society and sent out preachers into the locale around Dublin. By 1814 the Baptist Society for Promoting the Gospel in Ireland – later known as the Baptist Irish Society (BIS)²² – was formed 'with three principal objects, to employ itinerant evangelists,

to establish schools and to engage in the distribution of Bibles and tracts'.²³ Fuller was the first to give financial support and Carey offered advice from India to its new leaders.²⁴

The Society became a unifying force for Irish Baptists and from it, according to the English Baptist historian E A Payne, 'the main stream of corporate denominational life flowed'.²⁵ One itinerant, Isaac McCarthy, travelled 20,000 miles in his first four years with the BIS. He set up circuits in major towns, preached in English and Irish, and planted churches. As Gribben notes, 'God blessed it to the conversion of many people'.²⁶ Along with itinerant preaching, the Society also established Irish-language circulating schools; one thousand students attended the ten schools in the Society's first year. Learning from the failure of the Irish Reformation to translate the Bible into Gaelic, the Society translated the Bible and various theological works into Irish. For the next forty years the group saw nearly one church planted per year.

Gribben observes that there were no Baptist churches in the north-eastern counties of Ireland at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but within fifty years they were prevalent. Evidence of Baptist growth is seen in the ministry of the key Ulster Baptist Alexander Carson (1776-1844), pastor in Tobermore. Carson was an important apologist who wrote treatises in defence of biblical inspiration against higher criticism, the doctrine of the Trinity against Unitarianism,

and Protestantism in the face of Roman Catholicism.²⁷ Born in Annahone, County Tyrone, Carson was raised a Presbyterian and educated at Glasgow University. He pastored a Presbyterian church in Tobermore, though in 1804 he seceded from the Ulster Synod, in large part due to its toleration of Arianism and his own change in ecclesiological convictions. As an Independent, Carson came to Baptist convictions after being challenged about his baptismal beliefs by Scottish Baptist missionaries sent out by James and

Robert Haldane in Edinburgh. He subsequently wrote and published his most famous book on the subject, entitled *Baptism In Its Mode and Subjects*.²⁸ Carson's Baptist church in Tobermore had some five hundred members and at times he preached to crowds exceeding a thousand. As his ministry increased, Carson planted churches in Draperstown and Carndaisy.

For the next forty years the group saw nearly one church planted per year.

As a Particular Baptist, Carson upheld Calvinist orthodoxy and was also involved in promoting global missions. In 1844 he travelled to England to preach on behalf of the BMS. On his return home he fell off a Liverpool dock and eventually succumbed to his injuries in Belfast on 24 August of that year. At the time of his death, the Baptist cause in Ireland was beginning to flourish and the future for their congregations looked bright indeed. ■

Michael A.G. Haykin is Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality and Director of The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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General Enquiries

Stephen Dunning, 9 Ffordd Trem y Foel, Mold, Flintshire, CH7 1NG, UK
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Canada:

Janice Van Eck, 52 Paulstown Crescent, Guelph, Ontario, N1G 5H7, Canada
e: janicevaneck@rogers.com

USA:

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