

# Revival

## “THE REVIVAL OF PARTICULAR BAPTIST LIFE IN IRELAND, 1780–1840”

CRAWFORD GRIBBEN



THE REVIVAL OF PARTICULAR BAPTIST  
LIFE IN IRELAND, 1780–1840



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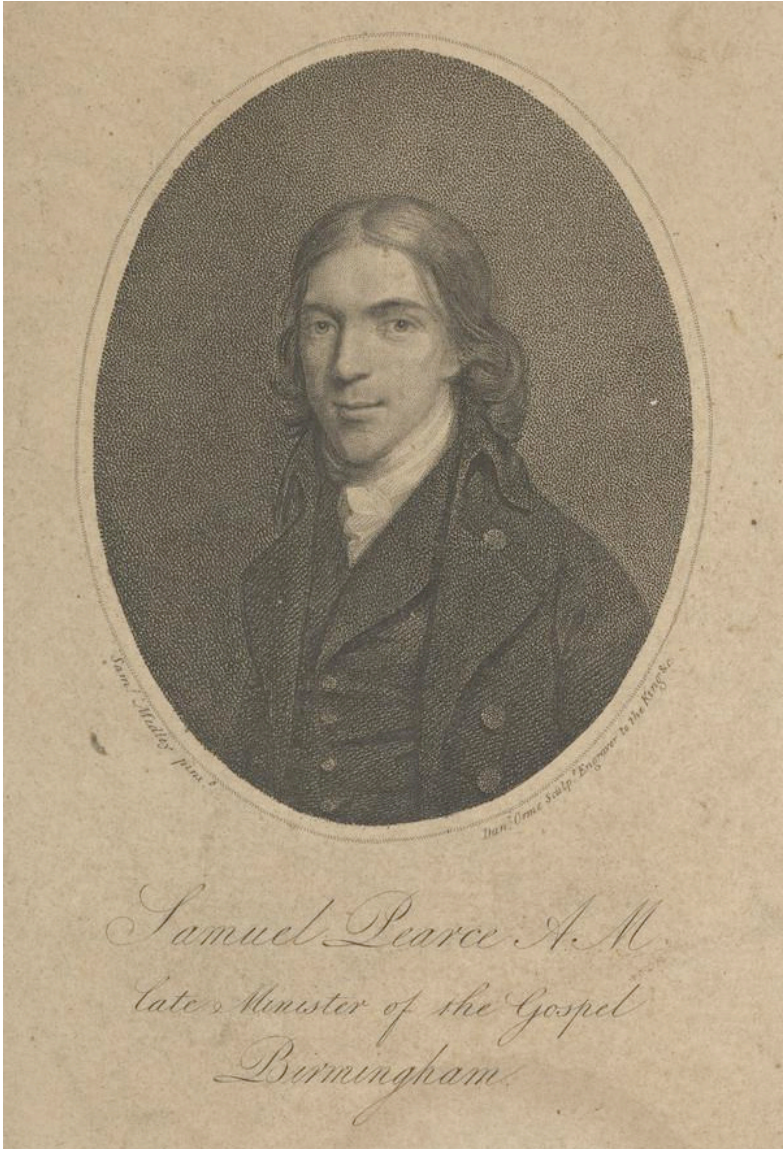


## PREFACE

BY MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN

Having been raised in an Irish Roman Catholic family, I have always had a deep interest in Ireland since my conversion. At the beginning of my academic work this interest especially manifested itself in the study of Patrick of Ireland and the Celtic Church from the fifth through to the eighth centuries. In more recent years, I have been actively involved in theological education at the Cork-Kerry area in the Munster Bible College in the south of Ireland. As a Baptist, of course, I have also been deeply interested in the progress of Baptist witness in the island. Working on the memoirs of Samuel Pearce revealed Baptist involvement in the long eighteenth century and led me to investigate seventeenth-century Baptist origins in the island. And so I was thrilled to read Prof Crawford Gribben's succinct and provocative study of the revival that came to Baptist ranks through the likes of men such as Pearce, his friend Andrew Fuller, and the Irish itinerant Isaac McCarthy. I hope Prof Gribben's essay gets a wide reading, for in a small compass, he undertakes a brilliant analysis of the decline of the Baptist cause in the eighteenth century and its revival at the close of that tremendous era—a period with much to teach the present day.

Michael A.G. Haykin  
Louisville, KY  
September 11, 2018.



SAMUEL PEARCE (1766-1799)



## “THE REVIVAL OF PARTICULAR BAPTIST LIFE IN IRELAND, 1780–1840”<sup>1</sup>

Ireland, at the turn of the nineteenth century, was a very different place from the Ireland of today. The population was large—at around 9 million inhabitants, it was about double that of the present. The upper classes were generally associated with the Church of Ireland, “by law established,” and this small Anglican and anglicised community dominated the legal and political life of the period. The common people were generally marked out as different from the governing classes by their poverty, by their use of Gaelic language and by their religion, for the overwhelming majority of the population adhered to traditional and sometimes pre-Tridentine varieties of Roman Catholicism. The Church of Ireland’s island-wide geographical spread and its legal precedence had not prevented the growth of Presbyterianism in the north-east counties, where the Scots settlements of the early seventeenth century had evolved into a strongly localised, ethnically and linguistically distinct community, the religious practices of which drew heavily on those of the established church of Scotland, and whose confidence was often reflected in the description of the Irish Presbyterian church as an “established church in waiting.” There also existed a number of other groups of protestant dissenters, most of whom traced their origins to the Cromwellian invasion, including, most obviously, Congregationalists, Quakers and the tiny handful of Baptist churches surviving from the 1650s. But there was little sense of a common protestant cause. Throughout Ireland, Catholics and protestant dissenters suffered together under the discrimination of the Anglican establishment, which, for example, routinely invalidated Presbyterian marriages and prevented Catholics from owning land. The injustices were real, and felt. For several decades, the

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<sup>1</sup> Second edition. The first edition of this pamphlet was published as *The revival of Particular Baptist life in Ireland, 1780-1840* (Dunstable, UK: Fauconberg Press, 2011). This lecture was presented at the Grace Baptist Assembly, May 2011.

island had been passing through violent social and political turmoil, as the events of successive American and European revolutions fed into discontent with the structures of British—and therefore Anglican—rule. The rebellion in 1798 shook the Anglican establishment as it demonstrated that Catholics and protestant dissenters could threaten political violence to shake off the stranglehold of British rule—and that they could combine together with the support of the French. For Ireland’s turmoil at the end of the eighteenth century developed in the context of a wider European war. British protestants trembled at the consequences. Andrew Fuller, in a letter to William Carey, then serving as a Baptist missionary in India, described the convulsions of the sister island: “We have had an awful struggle in Ireland. 40,000 United Irishmen it appears have been slain!”<sup>2</sup> But Fuller knew that a more difficult struggle was about to begin.

Fuller’s concern about the political state of Ireland was soon to be replaced by a concern about its religious needs. His awareness of Ireland’s troubles reflected his own concern for the future of global Christianity. As he put it in a letter to Benjamin Francis in 1788:

When I think what vast numbers are hasting the downward road; how few walk the narrow way; and, comparatively speaking, what little success attends our preaching, and what little ground Christ gets in the world, my heart fails and is discouraged. But it did my heart good last night to read Isaiah xlii, 4, “He shall not fail or be discouraged till he have set judgement in the earth!” I could not but reflect that Christ had infinitely more to discourage him than I can have to discourage me; and yet he persevered! But, methought, judgement is not yet set in the earth, except in a small degree. And what then? May I not take courage for that the promise has not yet spent its force? Christ has much more yet to do in the world; and, numerous as his enemies yet are, and few his friends, his heart does not fail him; nor shall it, till he has spread salvation throughout the earth, and leavened the whole lump.<sup>3</sup>

This was the context of the revival of interest in Ireland among the English

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2 Angus Library, Regents Park College, Oxford, Typescript Andrew Fuller Letters (4/5/1 and 4/5/2): Andrew Fuller to William Carey, 22 August 1798. For general accounts of eighteenth-century Ireland, see T. W. Moody and W. E. Vaughan (eds), *A New History of Ireland, Volume IV: Eighteenth Century Ireland, 1691-1800* (Oxford, 2009), and Ian McBride, *Eighteenth-century Ireland: The long peace* (Dublin, 2009).

3 Angus Library, Regents Park College, Oxford, Typescript Andrew Fuller Letters (4/5/1 and 4/5/2): Andrew Fuller to Benjamin Francis, Horsley, 3 July 1788.

Particular Baptists at the end of the eighteenth century: the island was dominated by a minority establishment supported by a discriminating political system, its majority population blinded by adherence to a hostile religious system, and its protestant dissenters caught in the middle, perpetually tempted to resort to political violence and aspirations for worldly power, to seek political solutions to spiritual problems. The times were certainly unhappy, and, by the end of the eighteenth century, the Irish Baptist movement, which had always been vulnerable, had almost entirely disappeared.

### **The origins of the Irish Baptists**

The origins of the Irish Baptist movement can be dated to the 1650s, when invading Cromwellian soldiers had formed Baptist congregations in the major garrison towns, and when the civil and political administration of the island was at times dominated by Baptist influence.<sup>4</sup> In the first half of the 1650s, Baptists took advantage of military networks, and the growth of their movement was sudden and spectacular. By 1653, Baptist congregations had been planted in Dublin, Kilkenny, Waterford, Clonmel, Cork, Kinsale, Bandon, in county Kerry, Limerick, Galway and Carrickfergus. The location of these towns, overwhelmingly southern, reflected the importance of the Baptists' social base in the English military. But that dependence on an occupying force could not be sustained after the collapse of the Cromwellian administration, and the growth of Baptist congregations did not last. At the Restoration, those Baptists landowners who had remained in Ireland lost significant portions of their estates. This loss of economic strength was a crucial factor in the gradual and then accelerating decline of the Irish Baptist churches through the later seventeenth century. In 1725, a record was made of Baptist meetings in Ireland.<sup>5</sup> The decline was obvious, for the number and size of Baptist congregations had dramatically decreased. Only five churches had settled ministers—the congregations in Dublin, Waterford city, Cork city, Lower Ormond in county Tipperary, and Legacorry in county Armagh. Most of the churches were small, with few exceeding 60 members, although the Dublin congregation numbered over 150. And alongside these viable but often struggling churches there existed the “remains of some other congregations.”<sup>6</sup> The church in Cork numbered around five female members at the end of the seventeenth century, but with the financial assistance of Major Edward Riggs

4 Robert Dunlop, “Dublin Baptists from 1650 onwards,” *Journal of the Irish Baptist Historical Society* 21 (1988-89), pp. 5-16; Crawford Gribben, *God's Irishmen: Theological debates in Cromwellian Ireland* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 79-98.

5 The following details are derived from Kevin Herlihy, “The Irish Baptists, 1650-1780” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Dublin, 1992), chapter 5.

6 Backus MS, appendix, pp. 4-7.

it was able to call a new minister in 1704, while meeting on the Riggs estate.<sup>7</sup> The new minister in Cork was in turn able to support the failing meeting in Clonmel, which managed to survive until 1729, when its premises were sold. By contrast, there were six Baptist churches meeting in Leinster, with three of these congregations based in Dublin. In 1725, only one of the Dublin churches was aligned with the Baptist Association, while the other two existed independently of the association and each other. But the circumstances of these congregations were not encouraging: the congregation of one of these independent ministers, Oswald Edwards, contracted to such an extent that its members “could be held in one pew.”

The decline of the Irish Baptist community reflected its difficult relationship with its host environment. In its politically and economically demarcated society, members of Baptist churches suffered terribly by temptations to wealth. Traditionally, Irish Baptist families had been upwardly mobile, and a number had been involved in the emergence of the Irish banking sector.<sup>8</sup> Their wealth brought them into contact with social circles which had adopted a very different lifestyle, but their strict lifestyle shut them out from the environment in which they could best trade. For, as Kevin Herlihy has noticed, “as the financial and social fortunes of such leading families increased their commitment to the Baptist community was marginalized ... Economic success, the main motivation for these families coming to Ireland, was also the main factor driving them from the Baptist fold.”<sup>9</sup>

Irish Baptist churches also suffered from a lack of doctrinal clarity. One early historian of the movement admitted that, as early as 1725, the Baptist churches had lost their earlier doctrinal uniformity.<sup>10</sup> As that long theological contraction continued, the Dublin congregation served by Oswald Edwards, whose preaching was tinged with Arminianism, Socinianism and “foul language,” would attempt to raise finance for a church building project by entering a lottery.<sup>11</sup>

What had gone wrong? Simply, the churches, which had been founded on Particular Baptist principles, were not advancing on the basis of a common confession. The problem had also existed in England: the confession of faith

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7 Cork Church Book, pp. 21-6, 330.

8 O’Kelly, E., *The Old Private Banks and Bankers of Munster* (Cork, 1959), p. 38.

9 Herlihy, “The Irish Baptists, 1650-1780,” chapter 5.

10 Backus Ms., appendix, p. 6.

11 Kevin Herlihy, “‘The faithful remnant’: Irish Baptists, 1650-1750,” in Kevin Herlihy (ed.), *The Irish Dissenting Tradition, 1650-1750* (Dublin, 1995), p. 76; Moravian Church House, Muswell Hill, London; typescript of the journal of John Cennick, p. 32.

that had guided the English Baptist movement from its inception in the early 1640s was not reprinted after 1653 and appears to have passed into some degree of oblivion: Benjamin Keach, a leading Particular Baptist preacher in London, first heard of the existence of the earlier confession in 1691.<sup>12</sup> But English Particular Baptists addressed this doctrinal lacuna by commonly subscribing to a confession of faith drawn up in 1677 in their General Assembly of 1689. The Irish Baptist churches shared no similar vision for the importance of a common confessional standard. Irish Baptists were teaching their faith, of course: Irish Baptist families did transcribe sermons, which they re-read before evening family prayers.<sup>13</sup> But it is possible that the content of those sermons had also begun to change: a recent survey of the earliest library assembled for pastoral training in Ireland notes its inclusion of an “astonishingly small” number of books by Baptist authors and the “overwhelming predominance” of Anglican authors.<sup>14</sup> The contents of this library provide further evidence that Baptist piety in the three kingdoms “ceased to be really unique after the Glorious Revolution, except in relation to the administration of baptism.”<sup>15</sup> And that preference in spirituality for the excitement of teaching by preaching, which may have been changing in content and was almost certainly occasional in nature, over the discipline of teaching by catechism and confession, with its systematic fixity of ideas, may be one cause of the protracted crisis of conviction.

In the same period, Irish Baptist churches also lacked organisation, and, paradoxically, the ability to pursue congregational autonomy. Rural churches grew too dependent upon the ministers and economic resources of congregations in the capital. In the early years, the Association meetings rotated between congregations throughout the country, but by 1757 they were being hosted by the Dublin church every second year.<sup>16</sup> But these meetings were not well supported. Some churches failed to send representatives to the association meetings, and the church in Cork generally failed to attend meetings convened in Dublin. And in 1762, when the Association meeting

12 Raymond Gillespie, *Reading Ireland: Print, reading and social change in early modern Ireland* (Manchester, 2005), p. 118; Benjamin Keach, *To all the Baptised Churches and Christian Brethren in England and Wales* (1692); Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (Dundas, ON, 2004), p. 215.

13 Raymond Gillespie, “‘Into another intensity’: Prayer in Irish nonconformity, 1650-1700,” in Kevin Herlihy (ed.), *The Religion of Irish Dissent, 1650-1800* (Dublin, 1996), p. 39.

14 Elizabethanne Boran, “Education and Dissemination of the Word: A Baptist library in the eighteenth century,” in Kevin Herlihy (ed.), *Propagating the Word of Irish Dissent, 1650-1800* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 117-18.

15 Herlihy, “A gay and flattering world,” p. 58.

16 Cork Church Book, pp. 56-7, 72-5, 79-80, 87-8, 99, 111; Backus MS, appendix pp. 4-7.

rotated to Cork, not one of the other churches sent a messenger.<sup>17</sup> The churches do not appear to have been committed to one other. The isolation of many congregations—and sometimes their deliberate isolationism—combined with theological ambiguity and increasing wealth to drive the decline in numbers within the Irish Baptist community. The failure to recruit new members became pathological, until it became apparent that most children born into Irish Baptist families were leaving the movement—which, by the end of the eighteenth century, was almost extinct.<sup>18</sup>

### **Samuel Pearce and the stirring of English interest**

But help was at hand. The English Particular Baptists’ interest in Ireland began in earnest with the visit of Samuel Pearce, one of the finest preachers of the period, in the summer of 1796. Pearce had been invited to Dublin by Benjamin McDowell, the Presbyterian pastor of Mary’s Abbey, Dublin, who was involved in an evangelistic association that had already invited a number of prominent English Baptists, including John Rippon, to preach in the Irish capital. McDowell himself was a remarkable figure, and Pearce evidently enjoyed the time he spent with him. McDowell had trained for the ministry in Glasgow and Princeton, and was called to the Dublin church in 1778, when its membership comprised no more than half a dozen families, but, under his ministry, the congregation began a period of remarkable growth and would eventually number some two thousand.<sup>19</sup> Pearce’s experience in the Mary’s Abbey congregation must have thrown his encounter with the Dublin Baptists into sharp relief. He preached for the main Dublin Baptist church, the historic Swift’s Alley congregation, on 29 June 1796, to a congregation of around 40 members. But under his preaching, attendances began to grow, and a number of conversions were recorded. Writing to his wife on 31 June 1796, Pearce described his emphases:

I thank God that I possess an abiding determination to aim at the consciences of the people in every discourse. I have borne the most positive testimony against the prevailing evils of professors here: as sensuality, gaiety, vain amusements, neglect of the Sabbath, etc.; and last night, told an immense crowd of professors of the first rank, “that

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<sup>17</sup> Cork Church Book, pp. 72-5.

<sup>18</sup> Herlihy, “The Irish Baptists, 1650-1780,” chapter 5.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Gordon and revised Myrtle Hill, “McDowell, Benjamin” in H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), 35:334; Myrtle Hill, “McDowell, Benjamin” in Donald Lewis (ed.), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography, 1730-1860* (Oxford, 1995), 2:716-717.

if they made custom and fashion their plea, they were awfully deluding their souls; for it had always been the fashion to insult God, to dissipate time, and to pursue the broad road to hell; but it would not lessen their torments there that the way to damnation was the fashion.”<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, he continued,

I do assuredly believe that God hath sent me hither for good. 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. Surely this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in my eyes. Never, never did I more feel how weak I am in myself,—a mere nothing; and how strong I am in the omnipotence of God. I feel a superiority to all fear, and possess a conscious dignity in being the ambassador of Christ. O help me to praise! for it is he alone who teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight.<sup>21</sup>

The martial imagery was not to be inappropriate. Pearce networked vociferously, and mentioned to his wife that

I have formed a most pleasing acquaintance with several serious young men in the University here, and with two of the fellows of the College; most pious gentlemen indeed, who have undergone a world of reproach for Christ and his gospel, and have been forbidden to preach in the churches by the Archbishop: but God has raised another house for them here, where they preach with much success, and have begun a meeting in the college, which promises fresh prosperity to the cause of Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

He was clearly excited by the prospects of a renewal in the Dublin churches. Writing to a friend, he exulted in the conquests of Christ:

I say, Come to Dublin, and come directly! I have been most delightfully

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20 Andrew Fuller, *Memoirs of the late Samuel Pearce* (Boston, 1801), p. 67.

21 Fuller, *Memoirs of the late Samuel Pearce*, pp. 67-68.

22 Fuller, *Memoirs of the late Samuel Pearce*, p. 68.

disappointed. I expected darkness, and behold light; sorrow, and I have had cause for abundant joy. I thank God that I came hither, and hope that many, as well as myself, will have cause to praise him. Never have I been more deeply taught my own nothingness; never hath the power of God more evidently rested upon me. The harvest here is great indeed; and the Lord of the harvest hath enabled me to labour in it with delight ... The Lord hath of late been doing great things for Dublin. Several of the young men in the College have been awakened; and two of the fellows are sweet evangelical preachers. One of them is of a spirit serene as the summer's evening, and sweet as the breath of May. I am already intimate with them, and have spent several mornings in College with various students who bid fair to be faithful watchmen on Jerusalem's walls. But I hope you will come; and then you will see for yourself.<sup>23</sup>

Pearce delighted himself in his Baptist brethren, and on his final Sunday in the city, led a communion service in the Swift's Alley congregation, the principal Baptist place of worship in Dublin, where he preached on the subject of brotherly love.

The visit had been a success, but Pearce left Ireland with a strong awareness of the difficulties of the Dublin churches. Writing to Carey, he complained of Arianism in two of the four Presbyterian churches in the capital, lamenting that “there is not one Independent church in the whole kingdom,” and finally noted the state of the Baptist cause: “There were ten Baptist Societies in Ireland: but they are now reduced to six; and are, I fear, still on the decline.”<sup>24</sup> And the decline across the denominations was to continue. For in 1804, John Walker, one of the most promising of Pearce's contacts in Dublin, would secede from the Church of Ireland to spread the Sandemanianism that would so quickly corrupt the last vestiges of orthodoxy in the Irish Baptist churches.

### **Fuller's visit**

When Andrew Fuller arrived in Dublin, in summer 1804, Sandemanian ideas had taken firm hold in many of the dissenting churches. These ideas redefined the nature of saving faith, which, following the founder of the sect, John Glas, their adherents described as “bare belief of the bare truth.” The idea sounded orthodox, was easily combined with the essential structures of historical orthodoxy, and sounded plausible in contrast to the very different soteriological claims of the Roman Catholic Church. But it was a rot that challenged central

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23 Fuller, *Memoirs of the late Samuel Pearce*, pp. 69-70.

24 Fuller, *Memoirs of the late Samuel Pearce*, pp. 681-82.



elements of the gospel as it had been understood by evangelical dissenters—and it was spreading fast.

Fuller's visit therefore contrasted entirely with that of Pearce. He had left his church with deep emotion: on the last Sunday before he travelled to Dublin he had baptised five candidates, but left two seriously ill children, one of whom would die during his month-long absence in the Irish capital.<sup>25</sup> Fuller was resolute about undertaking the journey, "hoping not only to receive pecuniary aid for the mission from the wealthy professors of religion in Dublin, but to confirm the important services rendered to the churches of that city and neighbourhood by ... Pearce, and establish a connection which, while it tended to remove from those churches the frigid influence of Sandemanianism, might prove mutually beneficial to the spiritual interests of both countries."<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, in contrast to the experience of Pearce, Fuller's visit was not to be successful. "My heart is dismayed to see the state of things here," he wrote in an early letter home. Pearce's achievements had not been consolidated:

The great body of the people are papists ... The [protestant] congregations are only a few genteel people scattered about the place ... A middle class of people is wanting; and the poor are kept distinct by what appears as strong as the caste in India. I preached at the Baptist meeting, in Swift's Alley, morning and evening, and for Dr. M'Dowal, at the Presbyterian chapel: I might preach, perhaps to fifty in the morning; to two hundred in the afternoon, in a place that would hold a thousand and to fifty more in the evening.<sup>27</sup>

Fuller was "grieved to find the principal Baptist community in Dublin under the influence of the most pernicious errors in doctrine and practice. Many of the members had imbibed principles which, to say the least, verged on Socinianism, while the amusements of the theatre and the card-table were tolerated, even defended," his biographer explained.<sup>28</sup> And so, quite unlike Pearce, Fuller refused to join the Dublin Baptists at the Lord's Table. He led the orthodox remnant in the Swift's Alley church to appeal to the Association for assistance in stopping the doctrinal and moral rot, but this appeal failed, and so Fuller "encouraged the more godly portion of the church [Swift's Alley]

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25 J.W. Morris, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (Boston, 1830), p. 100.

26 Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. Joseph Belcher (rpr. Harrisonburg, VA, 1988), 1:82.

27 Fuller, *Works*, 1:82.

28 Fuller, *Works*, 1:83.

to form themselves into a separate community.”<sup>29</sup> This engineering of 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. And Fuller’s disappointment must have been made all the worse by the revelation that John Walker—one of Pearce’s most hopeful contacts—was now appearing as an enemy of the faith he had once professed. Fuller was not impressed by the Dublin Baptists. His visit to the city succeeded in raising £150 for the Baptist Missionary Society, but it was evidence of the differing theological and economic circumstances of the Dublin churches that £106.15.7½ came from the Presbyterian church at Mary’s Abbey.<sup>30</sup>

Fuller returned to England to face the tragedy of the loss of his child, to complete his expository discourses on Genesis, and to reflect upon his experiences.<sup>31</sup> He read some “Remarks on the State of the Baptist Churches in Ireland” to a meeting of Baptist ministers in London, and the address was published by the Baptist Missionary Society.<sup>32</sup> The “Remarks” described the problems that Fuller had discovered in the Irish churches. But the Irish churches responded with vigour, using their circular letter of 1805 to entirely reject Fuller’s claims. Yes, they admitted, they were experiencing some difficulties, but nothing of the seriousness that Fuller had observed, and they published their rebuttal in a monthly journal, the *Theological and Biblical Magazine*.<sup>33</sup> Fuller offered a reply in the same magazine, lamenting that the Irish churches’ statement made “no mention of an atonement, or imputed righteousness ... the article on the Trinity is worded in so cautious a manner, as to be capable of being understood of a modal or Swedenborgian trinity.” Fuller feared that the effect of the theological statement would be “mere subterfuge.”<sup>34</sup> And the Irish churches had shown no “avowed intention of supplying their acknowledged deficiency in discipline.”<sup>35</sup>

These were unhappy times, but Fuller and his Particular Baptist brethren would not give up hope. For, as Fuller put it in another letter to Carey, “dark clouds overshadow us as a nation; but we are all happy in God. Infidelity threatens to swallow up Xnty; but however those who are interested in its

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29 Morris, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, p. 103; Fuller, *Works*, 1:83.

30 *Periodical Accounts relative to the Baptist Missionary Society* (Clipstone, 1803), 2:548.

31 Morris, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, p. 61.

32 Fuller, *Works*, 1:83; Morris, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, p. 103.

33 *Theological and Biblical Magazine* (1805), pp. 387-92.

34 Morris, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, p. 104.

35 Fuller, *Works*, 1:83-84.

emoluments may tremble, we have no apprehensions. Instead of waiting for the attack of the Enemy, we are acting offensively: The Xtn world almost is laying its accounts with nothing but victory, & commencing its operations ag<sup>t</sup> the strongholds of heathenism.”<sup>36</sup> And, though Fuller may not have realised it, the “operations against the strongholds of heathenism” in Ireland were about to begin.

### **The Baptist mission**

The beginnings of the Baptist Irish Society demonstrate that the Irish mission developed in harmony with but independently of the Baptist Missionary Society. John West, a pastor from England, arrived in Ireland in 1811, and dedicated several months to supplying the pulpit of the church in Waterford. Two years later, he was called to be minister of the Swift’s Alley church in Dublin, out of which Fuller had called the orthodox remnant, and began to re-organize the congregation, to very good effect. As effective discipline and orthodox doctrine began to be re-established, evangelistic concern was revived. Recognising the spiritual needs of the wider Dublin area, West formed the Baptist Itinerant Society, and set apart two younger men, one of them named Isaac McCarthy, for missionary work in the towns and villages in the immediate vicinity of Dublin. The results were immediate. In May 1813, representatives of the Society wrote to the Baptist Missionary Society—Fuller’s organisation—describing 70 conversions and asking whether the Irish work could be taken under the English Society’s care. But the leaders of the Baptist Missionary Society believed that the Irish work would be best facilitated under the auspices of a separate organisation. The proposals were set out in the *Baptist Magazine* in January 1814, in an article written by an English pastor recently returned from a tour of the island. This “Address on behalf of the Baptist Churches in Ireland” prompted the formation, in the Jamaica Coffee House in April 1814, of the Baptist Society for Promoting the Gospel in Ireland, what became known as the Baptist Irish Society. Andrew Fuller was the first to subscribe financial support, and Carey wrote from India to offer advice to the leaders of the new work. The “operations against the strongholds of heathenism” in Ireland had begun.

The work of the new organisation was advanced by the extraordinary zeal of its itinerant preachers. Isaac McCarthy, for example, travelled 20,000 miles in his first four years with the Baptist Irish Society, setting up circuits based around major towns, such as Tullamore, county Offaly, preaching regularly in English and Irish, and founding churches as far apart as Clonmel and Athlone.

<sup>36</sup> Angus Library, Regents Park College, Oxford, Typescript Andrew Fuller Letters (4/5/1 and 4/5/2): Andrew Fuller to William Carey, 17 April 1798.

As the number of evangelists increased, West and other settled pastors joined in the itinerant work. The work was humbling and demanding, and God blessed it to the conversion of many people. The work was also advanced by its Scripture readers, itinerants whose task it was simply to read the Bible with as many people as they could. The Baptist Irish Society translated into Irish Fuller’s tract, “The great question answered.” The work was also advanced by the decision to establish Irish-language circulating schools. In fact, the Baptist Irish Society schools may have been the first protestant educational institution to use the Irish language. The schools’ purpose was simple – teaching basic literacy through the medium of Scripture. One thousand pupils attended the Society’s ten circulating schools in the first year of the organisation. English churches adopted Irish schools, and other Irish denominations lent their assistance to the remarkable scheme.

The work was demanding and ceaselessly entrepreneurial—and it was divinely blessed. As the Baptist preachers and Scripture readers moved steadily north and west from their numerical and financial centre in Dublin, they saw Particular Baptist churches planted at the remarkable rate of almost one per annum for a period of forty years. The movement strengthened in its Leinster base, but expanded steadily to the west. Some of the new congregations appear to have had no connection with the Baptist Irish Society—a testament to the appeal to the biblically obvious that so firmly undergirded the Baptist witness—and others were planted in the aftermath of Alexander Carson’s celebrated secession from the Presbyterian Church. And so the centre of Baptist witness shifted north. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there do not appear to have been any Baptist churches in the north-eastern counties that now form Northern Ireland. But by the middle of the nineteenth century, the preponderance of Baptist churches could be located in that area.<sup>37</sup> C. H. Spurgeon’s visit to Ireland, so often described in his sermons, confirmed the Baptist advance, even as it recognised its difficulty, for, as he memorably put it, “they who wear soft raiment will never win Ireland, or Africa, or India, for Christ.”<sup>38</sup>

But the Baptist advance in the southern counties of Ireland was not to be continued. Famine and emigration took their toll. It has been estimated that 3,000 Baptists from the southern counties of Ireland left for America during and immediately after the terrible years of the potato famine in the 1840s. A number of Baptist ministers distinguished themselves by their service to the

<sup>37</sup> This section depends upon details outlined in Robert Kingdon, *Baptist evangelism in nineteenth-century Ireland* (privately published, 1967), and the reports of the work in Ireland printed in successive editions of the *Baptist Magazine* (1815-1820).

<sup>38</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (London, 1871), 16:253-64.

hungry and the dying during these years—such as Charles Hardcastle, pastor of the Waterford Baptist Church, who, along with his wife, died of typhus caught as a consequence of ministering to the starving.<sup>39</sup> But their cause was fatally weakened, and the Baptist community in the southern counties was again on the verge of extinction.

The political changes of the early twentieth century made the sustention of the Baptist community even more difficult. After the partition of Ireland, in 1922, protestants in Northern Ireland generally adopted a defensive posture, regarding the Free State and then the Republic through a political rather than an evangelistic lens, as a jurisdiction to be feared and resisted, rather than as fields white for harvest. And that may explain why so much of the recent advance of evangelical Christianity in Ireland happened as it did, largely independently of evangelicals in the north, who could have done most to assist it.

Today, it may be the case that the community of Bible churches in Ireland is stronger than it has been for a very long time. Between 1980 and 2006, the number of Irish evangelicals trebled, and many of the new fellowships reflect the inclination towards Calvinistic and baptistic theology with which the movement began.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps this is no more than what Andrew Fuller expected. After all, as he recognised, “Christ has much more yet to do in the world; and, numerous as his enemies yet are, and few his friends, his heart does not fail him; nor shall it, till he has spread salvation throughout the earth.”<sup>41</sup>

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39 Kingdon, *Baptist evangelism in nineteenth-century Ireland*.

40 Mary Cagney, “Ireland’s evangelical moment,” *Christianity Today*, [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/april/7.21.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/april/7.21.html), accessed 20 July 2011.

41 Angus Library, Regents Park College, Oxford, Typescript Andrew Fuller Letters (4/5/1 and 4/5/2): Andrew Fuller to Benjamin Francis, Horsley, 3 July 1788.

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