

**AN EARLY LETTER FROM THE CHURCH
AT NETHERTON, GLOUCESTERSHIRE,
TO THE CHURCH AT HAY-ON-WYE, POWYS,
20 December 1650**

The publication of the following letter, first prompted by Mrs Susan J. Mills, MA, ALA, Librarian/Archivist, Regent's Park College, Oxford, will hopefully provide an addition to existing Commonwealth Baptist material, but on a personal note comes as a plea for assistance in a more factual identification of a contemporary church.

The source of the letter is easily explained. In the course of preparing an edition of the 'Welsh' section of the so-called Ilston book, 1649-60, of the pioneer founder, John Myles, the writer, inevitably for purposes of collation, had recourse to the first register of the Baptist church of Llanwenarth near Abergavenny in Gwent, now in the custody of the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, and designated Deposit MS 409. The search disclosed transcripts of several letters which are common to both books, but also revealed arguably more important texts which were not recorded by the Ilston scribes, including the letter herein printed. In the following copy the punctuation has been revised according to modern usage and abbreviations similarly expanded, but the orthography, apart from the inconsistent and irregular use of capital and lower-case letters, remains unchanged. Square brackets, with occasional putative readings, represent marginal loss of the text.

Grace, mercy and peace from the wellspring of life and [] the Lord Jesus be exceedingly multiplied in you and vpon y[ou].

Intirely beloved,

In our tenderly loveing Lord and soveraygne the Lord Jesus. We have received yours dated 4th day of ye 10th month, wherein we take notice of your sympathising spirits. Truly our God discovers himselfe as a gracious Father to all his children, who rayseth soules from ye dunghill to sit in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, whereby ye riches of rich grace is a[m]plified and abundantly manifested. He hath made good his prom[ise] yt those yt sitt in the region and shadow of death light [] spring vpp, yea marvelous light to admiration. Blessed be his ever blessed and most glorious name. We cannot but take notice o[f] your love expressed towards vs and desires for vs yt ye Lord ?sa[yth] Amen to them, and we rejoyce with you in your joy for our Father[']s] goodnes towards you. Itt will not be the least of our joys to h[ear] of Christ more exalted among you. We can doe no less then answeare your desires in giveing you account of the gracio[us] dealings of our loveing Father towards vs, the unworthiest [of] all his servants. Itt hath pleased his Glorious Majesty to breake in vppon some of our soules in abundance of grace [and] mercy in most wonderfull wayes, to[o] long to declare and impos[si]ble to mention in the longitude and latitude of them, to ?spare peace, pardon, and salvation to vs, whereby our soules were d[] forth to enquire after him whom our soules loved, because [] manifested love to our soules with desire to obey him who deserves all obedience in all things by all his in especial, who requires the same to be performed

from a principle of love. 'If you love me', sayth Christ, 'keepe my commands', whose comands are not griveous to gracious soules. The Lord perswaded a few of us to set a day a part to seeke his fa[vour] concerning our walkeing in all ye way [*sic*] of God, according to his revealed will in his holy word, even the Scriptures of tru[th], and itt pleased our Father to give vs a gracious returne wherein we are bound to acknowledg his faythfulnes, who hath sayd, 'they yt seeke him he will be found of them, when they seeke him with their whole heart, which must be ye Lord [*sic*] worke alone to set ye heart in such a holy frame to seeke his face. The Lord caused five persons of vs, two brethren and three sisters, to submitt to his ordinance of baptisme, and, since, ye Lord hath added three sisters more to our society, and on ye 18th of this 10th month the Lord was pleased to affoord vs to communicate together in breaking of bread, being in number of vs eleven brethren and sisters who have given vpp our names to the Lord Jesus and each to other to walke together in all the wayes of God he shall be pleased to discover to vs wayting on the Lord for strength for the performance of his pleasure. We desire the improvment of your interest att ye throne of grace for vs, yt God would keepe vs from apostatizeing our coldnes, deadnes, neutrality or indiferency of spirit in the things of our God, that we might be noe occasion of sadding or woundeing the spiritts of our brethren, which shall be ever on your behalfe. We exceedingly rejoyce in your consolations and sweete communion you have with ye Father our Lord Jesus and ?saints. The Lord increase your comforts and comunion and furnish you with all spirituall guifts and graces, yt you may be a royall dyademe in ye hand of our God, the glory and light therof may be cleerely discovered and admired. Ye Lord cause you to increase more and more in the knowledge of ye mistery of God and Christ, yt you might be fylled with all the fullnes of God. Deare brethren, wee understand of some people about you yt are wayters for Syon's glory and enquireing the way [*sic*] which yet are not directed to walke in the footsteps of ye flocke. I meane the present practise that God hath drawn forth your soules to walke in. We beseech you to cast a tender eye on such and to walke in the bowells of Christ towards such, that if possible your sweete carriag might win vpon their soules a love and delight in your communion and desire of your society. Let love be the load-stoan to draw saynts rather than law to drive them, seing belivers are not vnder ye law but grace. Brethren, we know you know by blessed experience yt till ye Lord perswades a heart none can. That's ye Lord's owne worke to write the law in our hearts, wherby we may obey him, which he will performe in his due time to all his. Pray, therefore, yt ye Lord would give them an vnderstanding heart to feare his name, to obey his will. In the meane time walke winningly and wisely towards them with all tendernes, even as ye Lord Christ did towards vs before our soules were perswaded and as we would have had others caried themselves towards vs. Reason in much moderation, and love meeknes and swetnes, - this is ye way of God to soules. Breake not bruised reedes nor quench not smokeing flax, such tender soules yt have but ye budds or seedes of grace in their soules. Beloved brethren, itt will be much refreshing to our spirits to heare from you, to have counsell from you as oft as God shall put oportunityes into your hands, which will allsoe engage to answeare you and communicate to you ye Lord's proceedings with vs, who hath given vs a large taste

of his love, and are in hopes of a plentiful harvest in these parts. Thus with our cordiall salutation to you, with our earnest prayers for y[ou], we committ you to the safe guidance of our blessed guide [who] will never leave you but ever love you, and subscribe,

Yours in ye fayth and fellowship of ye Gospell,

Eliz. Holme, Mary Tombes, Richard Harrison, Wm Drew, John Lewis

Netherton in Dymock, 20th of the 10th moneth, 1650

There can be no doubt that the letter was addressed to the early church at the Hay, on the extreme eastern border of Gwent, which likewise features prominently in the proceedings of Ilston and its affiliated causes. Indeed, the savagely mutilated Llanwenarth book contains no local entries prior to 1700, and the context of its opening Commonwealth material points to an undisputable Hay provenance.

*The text of the letter is with equal certainty to be attributed to the church established in the township of Netherton, parish of Dymock, county of Gloucester, but the available information on the history of the cause is both meagre and unclear. Reliable sources (and I am grateful to Mrs Susan J. Mills for my references) regard it as one of the eight separate gatherings founded by John Tombes (1603?-76), adult Baptist disputant; see E. B. Underhill (ed. for Hanserd Knollys Society), Records of the Churches of Christ, gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys, and Hexham, 1644-1720 (London 1854), p.345; [W. T. Whitley], 'Baptist Churches till 1660', *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, 2, 1910-11, p.241; John Stanley, 'Was John Skinner ejected in 1662?', *ibid.*, 3, 1912-13, p.118; [W. T. Whitley], 'Early Days on the Cotswolds', *ibid.*, 4, 1914-15, p.209; B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 1983, p.102; and Geoffrey F. Nuttall, 'Edmund Skipp of Bodenham', *BQ* 33, 1989-90, pp.333-4. Some sources, however, tend to identify the church, as well as the name of Dymock, with Upton, and even to locate the township in other dispersed areas by the name of Netherton. More importantly, the confusion is compounded by the fact that this 1650 letter predates, by as many as three years, the earliest evidence hitherto gleaned on the subject, and that the intervening period seemingly remains to be documented.*

In conclusion, I have been informed by the Gloucestershire Record Office that no archives of the church have survived in county custody, and that according to MS G[loucester] D[iocesan] R[ecords] 381a, f.3, being one of five versions of a survey of the bishopric conducted a century later in 1750, there were then no Nonconformists extant in the parish of Dymock.

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