

Brief Biographical Sketch

Henry Denne, {1606? - 1660,} who began his ministerial labors as an English Anglican Clergyman, but after being convinced of the tenent of believer's baptism came over to the Baptist Persuasion, is identified as the son of David Denne of Kent, educated at Latton, Essex under his uncle, Thomas Denne. He was admitted as a sizar {student receiving financial assistance} at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge in 1621, graduating B.A. in 1625 and M.A. 1628. In 1630 he was ordained by Theophilus Feild, Bishop of St. David's, and soon afterwards became curate {parish priest} of Pirton, Hertfordshire, a preaching position he held for more than ten years; and, being a more frevent and lively preacher than most of the clergy in his neighborhood, was greatly beloved and respected by his parishioners.

In 1641 he was one of the ministers selected by the committee of the House of Commons for advancement; and in that same year he preached at Baldock at the visitation held there, in which sermon he freely exposed the sin of persecution and took occasion to lash the vices of the clergy with so much freedom as gave great offence and occasioned many false reports.

In the sermon he freely censured the principal evils of the time, and laid open the numerous vices of the clergy; particularly their pride, covetousness, idleness & drunkenness. Regarding the latter vice, he made this comment in reference to the temperate diet of John the Baptist; "John's practice {of eating locusts & wild honey, &c.,} is no precept, neither doth it take away our Christian liberty herein, yet it is sufficient to condemn our excess and riot, when we rise up early to drink wine, and sit till night, till we be inflamed. A breach that is made both by ministers and people. Who would have thought that the true Church of Christ should have been troubled with such a swinish brood? Had I a hundred mouths and so many tongues, I could not express the lewdness of this generation! What censure on earth sharp enough! What place in hell deep enough? Why are ye not ashamed of your doings?" Although he did expose the moral corruption of the 'Church' in that message; the true offence came from his charge that the pure message of the Gospel {proclaiming Christ, all in all, in the work of salvation,} was being turned into {by 'Gospel' taskmasters, destitute of the Truth,} a legal system of law righteousness, based upon conditions that had to be met {faith, repentance, &c} in order to qualify one for salvation; which could for the most part, be traced to their inability to rightly discern {because of the blindness of their heart} the difference between the Law and the Gospel. Denne writes, "what is the reason that amongst men professing the same Christ, and reading the same Scriptures, so many irreconcilable controversies do daily arise? Is it not chiefly from hence; that men distinguish not rightly between the Law and the Gospel? He that shall search into the most material controversies, even between the Protestant and the Papist, and look into the original of them, he shall find the error of the Papists to arise chiefly from hence; the want of distinction between Law and Gospel. From this fountain proceeded the troubles of the Church of Antioch, Acts 15, from this fountain proceeded the apostasy of the Church of Galatia; and from this fountain proceed the perverse disputations of the Popish Schoolmen about repentance. And what heresy is it that hath not a part, either more or less, in this? - It is the part of a faithful minister, to divide the word aright, which in Martin Luther's exposition, is aptly to distinguish between Law and Gospel. It was prophesied by Luther, that after his time the difference between the Law and Gospel should be neglected. Our age hath proved him too true a Prophet, for it is a thing not ordinarily observed. But will some

say, what; shall not the Law now be preached? I say not so. I wish we could hear it oftener than we do; for I know that the Law is good, if a man use it lawfully; but the fault is not rightly to apply it; as when we apply it to troubled consciences to give satisfaction. Let us take heed of mingling these two, and so producing a confounded and compounded doctrine. Let us not sow the Lord's field with mingled seed, nor clothe them with a linen woollen garment, {Lev.19:19,} for whom the Lord hath provided a vesture of fine linen. Take we good heed that we present not unto the sheep of Christ water, that we have puddled with our feet, Ezek.34:19. What are puddled waters? What is a linen woollen garment? What is mingled seed; but confused and obscure doctrine?"

It is alleged that during the delivery of the sermon, some of the clergy could hardly exercise patience to hear it out; and afterwards there was so great a noise in the country, and so many false reports were propagated against both the preacher and the sermon, that he was obliged to publish it in his own defense; which he entitled the 'The Doctrine and Conversation of John Baptist.' 1642.

From this time he began to be much noticed, not only as a man of considerable parts, but as one spiritually qualified & equipped to help forward the Reformation of the Church. The revolution which soon after took place in the country {English Civil War: 1642–1651} occasioned a material alteration in the affairs of religion. Many learned men were led to a closer study of the sacred scriptures, as well as a more accurate investigation of some doctrines then generally received as true. Of this number was Mr. Denne, who, judging that the baptism of infants had no foundation in scripture, or in the purest ages of the church, publicly professed himself a Baptist, and, about the year 1643, was baptized by immersion. He immediately joined himself to Mr. Lamb's church, meeting in Bell Alley, Coleman Street, London. In reference to this Thomas Lamb {apparently there were 2 'Baptist' ministers by that name during this time,} we insert these remarks from Wilson's History, "*there are, at least, three publications extant by Mr. Lamb. The first, a small octavo pamphlet, entitled, "The Fountain of Free Grace opened." The second, a larger pamphlet, in quarto, published in 1642, entitled, "A Treatise of Particular Predestination, wherein are answered three Letters; the first tending to disprove particular Predestination; the second to show the Contradiction betwixt Christ's dying for all, and God's election of some; the third to prove that the soul doth not come from the parent, and consequently that there is no original sin."* The title of Mr. Lamb's third piece, which was published in 1656, and dedicated to his Highness the Lord Protector, was, "*Absolute Freedom from Sin, by Christ's Death for the World, as the Object of Faith, in Opposition to Conditional, set forth by Mr. John Goodwin, in his book entitled, 'Redemption Redeemed;' and the final Perseverance of the Saints proceeding from Election, by the Grace of God alone, maintained and sweetly reconciled with the aforesaid Doctrine. And the great Question of God's eternal Decree of reprobating the unbelieving world, cleared from that odium cast upon it by Mr. Goodwin."* From these publications, it is evident how grossly Mr. Edwards has misrepresented the fact, in stating that Mr. Lamb maintained and taught the Arminian tenets. On the contrary, it is very clear that, upon the subjects in dispute, he was a strict Calvinist." Walter Wilson {History of Dissenting Churches, Vol.2.}

Sadly, this assessment is incorrect, as Wilson obviously never read much of Mr. Lamb's writings, but merely based his deduction, that Lamb was a 'strict Calvinist,' from the titles of the afore mentioned works. For though Lamb was a firm Predestinarian in points respecting the Absolute Sovereignty of God in the salvation of His elect in Christ; yet he embraced a general notion of the redemptive work of Christ that somehow severed it from

God's unconditional election in asserting that Christ's death had a universal scope. Lamb's treatise entitled "Particular Predestination, 1642," was chiefly written to "manifestly declare Christ's dying for all, and Particular Election to stand together." This gross inconsistency was apparently embraced to some extent by Denne as well, for his book entitled, "The Drag-Net of the Kingdom of Heaven; or Christ's drawing all Men," printed in early 1646, {a book which, it seems, has been lost to the ages,} was opposed by the Particular Baptists Spilsbery & Knollys later in that same year. In the book by Robert Garner, entitled, "Mysteries Unveiled," {printed in 1646,} we find this statement written by Knollys in the Preface to the work: "Considering with myself the usefulness of this little Treatise {through the Blessing of God} as also the seasonableness thereof at this time, when so many doubting and wavering in their Judgment, concerning the Doctrine of Redemption, I cannot but commend it unto your serious perusal, and the rather because, you are able to judge of the hope of this work for the Benefit not only of the Churches, but also of all the people of God, who shall read the same. The Doctrine of Redemption by Jesus Christ flowing from the glorious grace and everlasting love of God to Mankind, is handled herein plainly, and spiritually: Also the most usual Scriptures {which are alleged by Master Denne, Thomas Moore, Thomas Lamb, and others to prove the Universality of the Death of Christ, extended to all persons} are explanted, and freed from the corrupt sense, and unsound interpretations, which are put upon them." Robert Garner {Mysteries Unveiled; wherein the Doctrine of Redemption by Jesus Christ, flowing from the glorious Grace, and everlasting Love of God, the very fountain of Life and Salvation unto lost Sinners is Handled, 1646} In John Spilsbery's book {Peculiar Interest of the Elect in Christ; otherwise known as "God's Ordinances,"} printed in 1646; we find another Reference to Denne on page 46. There on the left column we find the name of Den, along with mention of his Dragnet book {also printed in 1646.} In the body of the book Spilsbery speaks of the "new doctrine of our adversaries," apparently in reference to Denne teaching this strange admixture of truth & error.

Again; there is no doubt that Thomas Lamb held these notions throughout his ministry, for in his book written in 1656, {"Absolute Freedom from Sin by Christ's Death,"} against the Heretical Arminianism of John Goodwin {1594-1665} in which Lamb emphasizes an Unconditional Eternal Election in Christ, Effectual & Irresistible Grace, Absolute {to use his own terminology} Perseverance of the Saints unto Salvation &c., along with, {again, to use his own terminology,} his confession that "God's Decrees are Absolute and Personal of such and such by name to Faith & Salvation - in this New Covenant of Grace God gives and does all - God's will is the only cause why some only are elected above others - men's accounting the Covenant of Grace Conditional overthrows the nature thereof" &c.; which doctrinal truths are sacred to every believing heart; yet, notwithstanding such a foundational bulwark against the encroachments of Antichrist, {in that system known as Arminianism,} we find a gross deviation in that Lamb devised a system which in essence denies the substitutionary satisfaction & sovereign imputation of sin to Christ, as Mediatorial Head & Representative of all {his elect,} for whom he died. Lamb maintained that "the Decree of God in reprobating the unbelieving world in no ways obstructs the Death of Christ for the sins of all men;" accompanied with this clarification that "God's New Covenant of Grace freely gives eternal life by remission of sins through Christ unto all and only those in whom the doctrine thereof begets the True Faith thereof." {Absolute Freedom, 1656} Again, a strange and toxic admixture! This brief inquiry into the beliefs of Thomas Lamb is deemed

necessary and warranted by the fact we believe that Mr. Denne, who was in close communion with Lamb for many years held the same doctrinal sentiments.

Thomas Edwards, {a frantic & delusional Presbyterian,} whose often unreliable and fabricated tales can be found in his three volume work entitled Gangraena {1646;} says in regards to the preaching of Denne in London that, "his usual theme of discourse is Christ's dying for all, for Judas as well as for Peter - Men were only damned for not believing in Christ, and for nothing else." According to Edwards, the year 1646 was employed in a similar way, "going up and down the countries," says Edwards, "spreading his corrupt opinions, and dipping." {Gangraena Vol.1, 23, Vol.3, 86} With no surprise, the Baptist 'Historian' Adam Taylor {History of the English General Baptists, 1813} latched onto this remark of Edwards, and transformed Denne from a High-Grace Predestinarian to one of his own party. I say, with no surprise, because Taylor himself was a rank Arminian, and so attempted to clothe Denne in his own Christ denying garb. To some credit, Taylor does preface his remarks on the life of Denne, in the following cautionary footnote: "Though several late authors have classed the Congregation in Bell-Alley among the Particular Baptist Churches and have asserted that Mr. Lamb and Denne were strict Calvinists; yet we, without hesitation, rank them among the General Baptists. Mr. Edwards, who was their cotemporary, and had good opportunities of knowing their sentiments, constantly represents them as zealous assertors of the universal love of God to man. The reports of this calumniator ought, it is readily allowed, to be received with caution; but when he so repeatedly and circumstantially states a fact of which he could not be ignorant, and which, had it been false, thousands of his readers could have contradicted, he surely deserves some credit." {Taylor, Vol.1, pg.99} On the contrary, Edwards, for the most part deserves no notice for many of his wild speculations; although in regards to his assessment of Denne he comes close to hitting the 'mark.'

Denne was also accused, along with Samuel Richardson, Tobias Crisp & Robert Towne of Antinomianism; chiefly on account of the fact that he contended most enthusiastically for the truth that Christ's righteousness is made ours by God's imputation "before the act of our Faith." Faith was not a condition of salvation or justification; as he maintained that "the act of our faith is a consequent of our justification;" and likewise that "remission of sins is even as ancient as satisfaction for sin and at what time Christ Jesus taketh our sins upon Himself, at the same time are the persons of God's elect just before the Tribunal of Almighty God." {Doctrine & Conversation of John the Baptist, 1642}

This change in Mr. Denne's sentiments {his adopting Believer's baptism} exposed him to the resentment of the rising powers, who put frequent obstructions in the way of his preaching and public usefulness. In the year 1644 he was apprehended in Cambridgeshire, by the committee of that county, and sent to prison for preaching against infant baptism. After he had lain in Cambridge jail for some time, his case, through the intercession of some friends, was referred to a committee of the House, and he was sent to London, where he was confined in Lord Petre's house in Aldersgate Street until, his case having been investigated, the committee ordered his release.

At this time there was confined in the same prison, the learned Dr. Daniel Featly, famous for his opposition to the Baptists. The doctor having just published his book, entitled, "The Dippers Dipt; or, the Anabaptists Ducked and Plunged over Head and Ears, at a Disputation in Southwark," it was laid in the way of Mr. Denne, who having read it, thought himself called upon to defend his principles. He therefore challenged the doctor to a

disputation, which being accepted, Mr. Denne is reported to have had the best of the argument, and that the doctor declined proceeding further, under pretense that it was dangerous so to do without a license from the Government. Mr. Denne, upon the invitation of the doctor, immediately set about answering the book, {Samuel Richardson also defended the Baptist position in answering Featly's book in the same year - 1645,} and in the course of a few weeks produced a very learned and ingenious reply; entitled 'The Foundation of Children's Baptism Discovered and Razed; an answer to Dr. Featley,' &c. {1645,} which showed great learning and ingenuity, and was for a considerable time a standard authority among the Baptists.

Shortly after his release Denne obtained the living of Eltisley in Cambridgeshire, and, though strongly opposed to both Presbyterians and Episcopalians, managed to retain it for several years. The committee of the county endeavored to prevent his preaching at St. Ives, but on being interrupted he left the building, and going into a neighboring churchyard preached from under a tree to an enormous congregation, 'to the great mortification of his opponents.'

In June 1646 he was apprehended by the magistrates at Spalding for baptizing in the river. According to the Baptist historian Crosby, Lucy Hutchinson, the wife of Colonel John Hutchinson, Parliamentary Governor of Nottingham Castle during the Civil War, in her "Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson," records how she and her husband came to adopt Baptist views after reading literature confiscated from Baptist soldiers in the Castle. She speaks of the Presbyterian ministers being unable to defend the baptism of infants "for any satisfactory reason but the tradition of the church ... which Tombes and Denne has so excellently overthrown." In 1646, Denne preached several times in Spalding in the house of a merchant, John Makernesse. As a result four people were converted. Their names were, Anne Stennet and Anne Croft, who were servants of Makernesse, and Godfrey Root and John Sowter. It was arranged that these four should be baptized at Little Croft a few days later, the baptism to take place at midnight to avoid interference by the authorities. One of the women unwisely told a friend about the baptism who passed on the information to the magistrate. As a result Denne was arrested and committed to Lincoln Jail.

Soon thereafter, it would appear that much hardship, continual persecution and misrepresentation eventually took a toll on him; inasmuch that he resigned his living and became a soldier in the parliamentary army, {taken part in the war which overthrew the king, and ended in his death by execution, and in the creation of a republic,} where he gained a 'great reputation' for zeal and courage.

By 1649 he had become a Cornet, {a Cornet was originally the third and lowest grade of a commissioned officer in a British cavalry troop, after Captain and Lieutenant,} and became a leader of the Levellers at Old Sarum, challenging the authority of the Rump Parliament; and so on the 15th of May, General Thomas Fairfax surprised his regiment at Burford, and condemned to death Denne, along with three other reputed ringleaders of the Levellers. {The Levellers were a political movement during the English Civil War which emphasized popular sovereignty, extended suffrage, equality before the law, and religious tolerance, all of which were expressed in the manifesto "Agreement of the People." They came to prominence at the end of the First English Civil War - 1642/46, and were most influential before the start of the Second Civil War - 1648/49. Leveller views and support were found in the populace of the City of London and in some regiments in the New Model Army.}

The Lord, in accordance with his Providential Reign & Grace delivered him from certain death. The following paragraph is taken from a Newspaper of the Time: "Saturday, May 19. — This day also came intelligence of the surprisal of the revolted troops about Burford in Oxford-shire, they being twelve troops were all taken; very few escaped, some of the chief of which were immediately condemned to suffer death, viz.; Cornet Tompson and Henry Denne, or as we call him, Parson Den, and two corporals, Church and Perkins; these being found guilty upon the articles of mutiny, are thereupon adjudged to die. Denne, being a man of parts, and one who had been esteemed for piety and honesty, received his sentence with great manliness and fortitude of spirit, yet with so much relenting and acknowledgment of the just hand of God, the justice of the sentence, and his submission thereunto, that he seemed to rejoice with willingness to suffer under so righteous a sentence, and he professed openly, that although his heart could not accuse him of an evil meaning, yet was he convinced of the evil of the action and dangerous consequences of it; that if they had but continued three or four days longer, the land had been plunged in misery and ruin, and that the invasion of the Scots, and the insurrections in Wales and other parts of the nation, last year was not so hazardous as this. The four condemned persons were one after another brought to the place of execution, in the sight of the rest of the soldiers. Cornet Tompson, brother to him called Captain Tompson, a declared rebel by the Parliament, was the first that suffered. He said not much at his death, the man in outward appearance having little of God in him; only he confessed the judgment was righteous, and that God was offended with his disobedience, whereof he was guilty. The two corporals {Church and Perkins} died, saying very little or nothing before their death. Denne being called out, came with much composure of spirit, expecting to die, but the general having commanded the Lieutenant-General {Oliver} Cromwell to let him know at the place of execution that his excellency had extended mercy to him, he soberly and suddenly replied, 'I am not worthy of such a mercy; I am more ashamed to live than afraid to die,' — weeping bitterly." {Modest Narrative of Intelligence fitted for the Republique of England & England, Num.8, 1649.}

The death of three of his companions was sufficient to bring about the submission of the rest, and leniency might well be shown to one so highly esteemed as was Mr. Denne, by members of Cromwell's own family. On Mr. Denne's conduct in this affair we shall offer no opinion, for his own judgment of himself will suffice. While awaiting death, as he thought, his meditations led him to see the absolute justice of God's ways, for he says, "justly did the Lord disown us, to teach all men that he is a God of order, and not of confusion; to teach us that he needeth not our disobedience to superiors, or any evil action to consummate this determination. These things have I declared for this end, that I may manifest unto my fellow soldiers, that I am ashamed of the late proceedings, and do conceive great indignation against myself, for being accessory to such rash attempts; that I may give warning unto others, that they may beware and fear to do any such thing. Oh! How necessary it is at all times to draw near unto God for wisdom and understanding, to guide us and direct us in all our ways." {The Levelers Design Discovered; or the anatomy of the late unhappy mutiny; presented unto the soldiery of the army under the command of his Excellency, the Lord Fairfax, for the prevention of the like in others. Written by Henry Denne, an actor in this tragedy London 1649.}

At the conclusion of the Civil War he again took to preaching, and took every opportunity of defending his principles. In 1658 he held a public dispute, lasting two days,

concerning infant baptism with Dr. {afterwards Bishop} Gunning in St. Clement Danes Church. In one of his last publications, Mr. Denne, oddly enough comes to the defense of the Quakers, and of the celebrated "Tinker" of Bedford {John Bunyan,} against the 'frivolous' charges of an old Cambridge friend of his, a Mr. Thomas Smith. It seems that Mr. Smith fancied the Quakers were papists, because they would not take the oath of abjuration. Denne, like Samuel Richardson {who wrote much in defense of liberty} was a firm advocate for civil & religious liberty; and especially against the spirit of religious persecution. As for Bunyan, "You seem," says Denne, "to be angry with the Tinker because he strives to mend souls as well as kettles and pans. The main drift of your letter is to prove that none may preach except they be sent." In Denne's judgment, it was enough that the church of Bedford had called the "Tinker" forth to preach the gospel. He needed no higher commission than that. Denne's death is supposed to have taken place soon after the Restoration of the English monarchy in 1660. He was full of zeal and decision, and his preaching is said to have been persuasive and affectionate. Indeed, he was accounted by one who had a considerable hand in the public affairs of the nation, "the ablest man in the kingdom for prayer, expounding, and preaching."

His writings are as follows:

1. Grace, Mercy & Peace. Originally Published in 1640, and reprinted in 1696.
2. Doctrine and Conversation of John the Baptist, Delivered in a Sermon on Dec.9, 1641.
3. Seven Arguments to Prove, that in order of Working God doth justify his Elect before they do Actually Believe. 1643.
4. Conference Between a Sick Man and a Minister. 1643.
5. The Foundation of Children's Baptism Discovered and Razed; an answer to Dr. Featley, &c. 1645.
6. Man of Sin Discovered, whom the Lord will destroy with the brightness of His Coming. 1646.
7. The Drag-Net of the Kingdom of Heaven; or Christ's drawing all Men. 1646.
8. Levellers Design Discovered. 1649.
9. Contention for Truth; in two several Disputations at St. Clement's Church, between Dr. Gunning and Henry Denne, concerning Infant Baptism. 1658.
10. The Quaker no Papist, in answer to The Quaker Disarmed. 1659.
11. An Epistle recommended to all Prisons in this City and Nation, to such as choose Restraint rather than the Violation of their Consciences, wherein is maintained: (1) The Lawfulness of an Oath; (2) The Antiquity of an Oath; (3) The Universality of it; with the most material Objections answered. 1660.

The following sources were utilized and consulted in gathering together this brief biographical sketch: Crosby's History of the English Baptists; Wilson's History of Dissenting Churches; Brook's Lives of the Puritans; Neal's History of the Puritans; Edward's Gangraena; Howard's Looking-Glass for Baptists; Taylor's History of the English General Baptists; Barclay Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth; and Underhill Records of the Churches of Christ, gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys, and Hexham.