

Robert Purnell {1606-1666}

Robert Purnell {1606-1666} was a carpet weaver by trade, an early Baptist, probably a native of Bristol, England. Purnell attended the Broadmead Church in Bristol {established in 1640,} of which church he was a member for many years. It is clear from the Church Records that the question of believer's baptism did not become an issue until 1653, when he, along with others, established the Broadmead Church along Baptist principles. The pastor of Broadmead, Thomas Ewins, *{Note: Thomas Ewins, who became the pastor at Broadmead in 1651 was later imprisoned for his preaching; and according to Edmund Calamy he was "No scholar, and yet . . . a judicious methodical preacher. He was remarkable for having but one eye." A political opponent said "Ewins is the most dangerous Anabaptist that ever lived, and has seduced thousands by his seditious teaching."}* and Purnell were both baptized in London by Henry Jessey, and Purnell became a ruling elder of the congregation. According to the official Church Record of Broadmead, we find the following entry, dated 1654, "our pastor, or teacher, Mr. Ewins, and the ruling elder that then was, namely, brother Robert Purnell - who, before that apostasy, *{speaking of Quakers that had infiltrated their assembly, and were taking un-established 'members' of the church captive; a thing not uncommon at this period. Interestingly Cromwell, in his speech to Parliament in 1654 declared "that emissaries of the Jesuits never came in these swarms, - referring to the Quakers - as they have done since these things were set on foot."}* was a deacon, but after was chosen an elder, and brother Moone chosen a deacon; I say, those two were pressed in their spirits to take up the ordinance of baptism, of which they were before enlightened; especially brother Purnell, for several years, had been convinced of his duty therein, but omitted the practice thereof. Thus, they being now stirred up to their duty, to glorify God in their day, in owning his commands in the gospel, and in laying aside the traditions of man in worship, these two, namely Mr. Ewins and Mr. Purnell, went to London, and took up the ordinance of baptism. And they were accordingly baptized by brother Mr. Henry Jessey, after which they came down, and proceeded in the church and work of the Lord. Thus there seemed to be hinted why the great breach was made, because they had not walked faithful to their light in the ordinances of God {such kind of fear was upon their spirits;} and that they had not kept close to the Holy Scriptures for the rule of worship, and to the footsteps of the flock, the example or path of the

primitive saints, recorded in holy writ; and they blamed themselves in that they had not rejected all notions of men whatsoever for matters of worship, than what is plainly laid down in the written word." Purnell wrote a number of books, his largest work entitled, *A Little Cabinet Richly Stored*, {1657,} is a large volume of 467 pages, and is in itself a small 'body of divinity,' which in effect also became a catechism for the congregation at Broadmead. He wrote: 1. 'Good Tidings for Sinners,' London, 1649. 2. 'No Power but of God,' London, 1652. 3. 'England's Remonstrance, or a Word in the Ear to the scattered discontented Members of the late Parliament ... likewise a Word to the present Assembly at Westminster and the Council of State,' 1653. 4. 'The Way to Heaven discovered,' Bristol, {in favor of the doctrine of grace and the true love of God,} 1653. 5. 'The Church of Christ in Bristol recovering her Vail out of the Hands of Them that have smitten and wounded Her, and taken it away,' London, 1657. 6. 'A little Cabinet richly stored with all Sorts of Heavenly Varieties,' London, 1657. 7. 'The Way Step by Step to sound and saving Conversion,' London, 1659. Purnell died in 1666; and we find the following entry in the Church Record book, in reference to the selection of an elder upon the death of their beloved friend and brother in Christ, "Before this time, our brother Purnell, the eldest ruling elder, being in the ninth month last deceased, the church had several times under consideration, whom to choose and make a ruling elder in his stead. At last, upon the third of the twelfth month, being the Lord's day, anno 1666, two of the brethren were proposed, that one of them might be chosen, namely, brother Richard White, and brother Edward Terrill, which were desired to depart; and accordingly they went to their homes. Then it being put to the vote, all the brethren were for brother Terrill, except the two principal, viz., Mr. Ewins, pastor, and brother Ellis, the only ruling elder left." Though Purnell was unquestionably firm in his attachments to the Gospel of God's Free & Sovereign Grace in Christ; nevertheless there is in his writings a subtle drifting away from the high-grace sentiments of a few of the earlier Baptists; namely the signers of the First London Confession, men like Kiffin, Spilsbury & Richardson ... as a subtle Conditionalism, flawed Christology...in line with men of mixed notions like Keach, Bunyan... began to rear their ugly head. MPJ