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Questions and Answers: an Eighteenth-century Correspondence

AMONG the valuable books and manuscripts in the Library of the Baptist College, Bristol, are a number of volumes in the hand of Joshua Thomas (1719-97), who from 1746 to 1754 was minister of the Baptist church at Hay, and then for forty-three years of the church at Leominster. Most of these volumes comprise his History of the Baptist churches in Wales at various stages of its composition: the History in its original form (it appeared in a Welsh translation in 1778); "Materials" for its revision; and the History as revised and extended. This second edition also appeared, much later (1885), in Welsh, but neither edition has ever been published in its entirety in its original English—a pity, for then as now ministers moved freely between pastorates in England and Wales and the work contains many references to ministers and churches in this country as well as in Wales.

One volume of a different character appears to have escaped notice.¹ It is a transcript in Thomas' hand² of a number of queries and their resolution in the course of correspondence during the years 1758-70 between Thomas and his friend Benjamin Francis (1734-99), who from 1759 until his death was minister of the Baptist church at Horsley, Gloucestershire. Their practice was for one of them periodically to send two or three queries to the other, who some months later sent his answers, together with fresh questions of his own, which in turn received answers, with new queries; and so on. The total number of queries is sixty-eight. They were despatched two or three times, each year, save that after December 1764 "a Silence of about 18 Months happened, as to Queries, occasioned by affliction, Death, &c. in Brother Benjamin Francis's Family"; for in 1765 Francis lost not only his (first) wife but his three youngest children, the eldest of them aged four (he characteristically published an *Elegy* on the occasion). At first the two friends sign their communications simply with their names or initials; but as the correspondence continues, their mutual confidence and intimacy deepens, and they begin to put "yours endearingly" or "unfeignedly" and even "indefatigably" or "inexpressibly". In October 1762 Thomas first signs "your cordial Brother Jonathan", in the following February Francis responds with "your most affectionate David", and from then on these are the names they use.

I am not sure how far queries were still brought from the churches for resolution to Association meetings, as was customary a century earlier. Apparently they sometimes were, for at one point Thomas writes of the queries he submits that they were "proposed at a Quarterly Meeting at Maes-y-berllan; to be answer'd at Pentre last April". However this may be, the peculiar interest of the volume is that it shows us what questions were engaging the minds and hearts

of two Baptist ministers *personally* during the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Although the first query was raised by Joshua Thomas, rather more than half the total number were framed by Benjamin Francis, who was fifteen years younger than Thomas and who, when the correspondence began, had only just begun his forty years of ministry at Horsley.

The categories run into one another, but the sixty-eight queries may roughly be divided thus: theological, with an interest in definition; biblical; ecclesiastical, with an interest in discipline; and matters of personal piety, with an interest in assurance. Speculative queries such as "What are your Thoughts concerning the Origin of the Soul? Is every individual created immediately of God, or otherwise?" (J.T.) or "Whence proceed the sufferings and death of the Beast, Fish and Fowl? From sin, in man, or some other cause?" (J.T.) are few. The theological queries are more commonly of the following types: "When doth Sin first infect the Man?" (J.T.); "How far is Man a free Agent?" (B.F.); "How does the justice of God appear, in imputing Adam's sin and transgression to his posterity, and punishing them for it?" (B.F.); "How to define Remission of Sin, with the Date thereof, *in Foro Dei & in Foro Consciencie*?" (J.T.); "How to define Justification, with the Date thereof?" (B.F.). To latter-day pygmies it is comforting to find Thomas replying to a query of this nature with the confession "Dear Brother, my Ignorance is so great, and Skill so little, that you can hardly propose any Question of Importance, but I am at a loss how to answer it. How thick the Vail! how dark the Understanding! Lord, Open mine Eyes". These men were keen inquirers and eager wrestlers for the truth, but they did not pose as know-all.

For the answers they predominantly, of course, searched the Scriptures. But Scripture's meaning and drift were not always any more transparent to them than to ourselves. Hence we find queries such as the following: "Your explanation of Prov. 22.6. Is the promise there always fulfilled?" (J.T.); "By what plain & easy rule may we distinguish betwixt that which is abrogated, in the Books of Moses, and that which is still in full force?" (J.T.); "What are your Thoughts concerning the 1000 Years mention'd in Rev. 20.2 &c.?" (B.F.); "What is the true & proper meaning of I Cor. 6.2, 3? Is Dr. Gill in the right? or are Dr. Hammond, Mr. Henry, &c.?" (B.F.). To this Thomas replies: "Hammond and Henry I have not, so know not what they say. Dr. Gill I have, but I think his Exposition there is rather forced and foreign. Tho I greatly regard the Doctor's Writings, yet in many Particulars he is too singular, I think". Gill is mentioned more frequently in the correspondence than any other writer. Thomas esteemed him less highly than did Francis, who when Gill died put his grief into an *Elegy*. Thomas on one occasion takes a mischievous pleasure in exhibiting "the great Rabbis Gill & Brine divided like David and poor Jonathan" and on another writes, "We are under no obligation to follow the good and worthy Dr. Gill as

an infallible Oracle, tho' he is so positive in his own way". Thomas was evidently a careful biblical student. He refers to Junius, Tremellius and Piscator, to "the Welsh Translation" ("I have 3 Welch Bibles, printed at different times") and to the Vulgate, Beza, Castellio, the Geneva Version, the Assembly's *Annotations* and Matthew Poole.

The queries relating to church discipline are of interest for the light thrown on the churches' customs and practice two centuries ago. When in the first query Thomas asks, "How do you examine those who propose for church-communion? apart or together/when more than one propose/close or sparingly?", Francis draws on his experience in the three churches in which he had served; "Always apart in Broad-mead, Sodbury and here". To the query from Francis "What are your Scriptures for, or against, Mixt-Communion?", Thomas' reply includes the confession, "Will you keep it as a Secret, if I tell you that I am a greater Latitudinarian in Conscience than many are aware of?"; and when Francis asks, "Shou'd a Member be put by from Communion for marrying one of the world, or no?", Thomas gives expression to his latitude by writing, "I don't think it unlawful to marry any pious Protestant. . . . If the Member be married to a pious Pedobaptist, I wou'd not put him by, merely for that". When Thomas returns with the question, "What are the proper Bounds of Church-Communion?", Francis replies, "I still make no manner of scruple to admit a Sabbatharian, or an Anti-Singer, provided they are Peaceable, and leave others to their Liberty, . . . but I can't say the same of Pedo-Baptists". Thomas later asks Francis, "What are your plainest and strongest scripture proofs & command for the present promiscuous and stated singing in the worship of God?", and in comment on Francis' reply writes that he expects singing "may be debated in our church soon"; "my scruples are not yet removed," he adds. When Francis asks, "What are the Rules concerning Church Discipline, which every particular Baptist Church should subscribe, and inviolably adhere to? I mean in your Judgment", Thomas responds with a number of Rules, which include the following:—

4. That a Meeting for Church Discipline be kept monthly or quarterly, or as it may be most convenient and necessary; but 10 Days or more before the Lord's Supper: and that all the Members shall attend to the utmost of their Power.
8. That Women may speak as evidence, or in their own Defence, or express their own Grievances; otherwise not to Debate.
9. That Cases decided or depending be minuted legibly & orderly in a Church Book.

"Our Church Discipline", he concludes, "is upon the 3d. Thursday in the month, which, here, is stately kept as a prayer Day, besides the preparation day, which precedes the Ordinance Day; The ordinance is administred always on the last Lord's Day in the Calender Month. J.T." I think this was pretty usual, but it is good to have it stated.

Some queries seek to elicit answers likely to aid in ministerial

effectiveness. "What Method do you take in Studying for the Pulpit?", Thomas asks near the outset of the correspondence. Francis replies: "I Study Discourses several Months, sometimes, before I deliver them. I always write a little: sometimes, perhaps, more than I deliver (in the Pulpit); and sometimes I carry the Heads and Proofs on a little Paper to the Pulpit, but hardly ever any more, and very often not that". Towards the conclusion (so far as recorded) Francis in turn asks "What is your Method in fixing your subjects for the Pulpit?". Thomas replies:

I have kept an Index of Texts ever since I came to Leominster. . . . by the Index I can at once turn to any of them since Novr. 1754 (and before I did not write for 8 or 9 years back). Yet I very seldom at home preach over old Sermons, except of late some at Lectures. But when I go abroad I always preach out of my *late* Notes, not *old* ones, lest I should preach from the same Text in the same place. I keep *no* Index of Texts preached abroad. I like to have a Text fixt on my mind in, or from religious Conversation with the People on visiting, which is the Case now and then.

"What is the best Method of praying in private for a Variety of Persons at a Distance," Francis asks, "and of recollecting the various cases we should in prayer?". Thomas' answer includes an interesting passage. After referring to an anonymous tract which he had found helpful, *An earnest invitation*, which came "I suppose, from the Godly Methodists, or the reformed Clergy, as some call them", he writes: "Wesley's People, and some others, have a particular Method. They have stock of Papers, called, I think, Cards; viz. perhaps an inch broad and two long, more or less." These, he explains, are sent to a friend with a Scripture passage and the sender's name; when the card is taken out, the name comes to hand. "There is something pretty in it," he continues, "yet I don't much like it. There seems to be too much formal stiffness in it and too little Heart work."

Both men were in close sympathy with the Revival. Queries such as the following are frequent: "How often should a Christian pray?" (B.F.); "What are the best means of revival when a person is flat or dead in his soul?" (J.T.); "Wherein doth communion and fellowship with God consist?" (J.T.); "How may a Christian overcome a dread of Death & an eternal world?" (B.F.). To the last question Thomas replies: "What made Darracott of Wellington, Somerset, and Hervey about 6 years ago . . . even to court death and welcome eternity? . . . I can look into the bottom of a grave now with a pleasant look". The query from Thomas "When may one conclude that he enjoys God in the Performance of Duty?" draws a lengthy answer from Francis. It includes this passage:

when his Heart is so filled with sacred Joy, & overpower'd with heavenly Light: and when the Holy Spirit witnesseth to his Spirit, his Election, Vocation, &c. so clearly and irresistibly, that he can't forbear breaking out in such Language as this, "O my GOD! My GOD indeed! now I can't question thy Love: Oh, I feel it! I feel

it! . . . ". My Friend is no Advocate for Enthusiasm, yet, I am persuaded, prizeth & enjoys what I have so confusedly mentioned. Thomas' comment on this is as follows: "Your Answer to my First was over my Head far enough . . . the latter part, which, I think, treats of the Tip-Top of Assurance, I am lame in many Particulars of it. Yet I fully believe, that every particular of it may be enjoyed here, without any delusive Enthusiasm".

Both friends could also be down-to-earth. When Thomas asks, "Wherein consists Mortification and self-denial? Wherein do they differ?", Francis replies, "My Abigail [he had married again] tells me smiling 'I am afraid you will not go close enough' ". "Mortification is what I am very deficient in, I fear", he confesses; "Lying a bed in the morning it has not subdued in me. Do in your next, lend it a helping Hand to conquer that stubborn Malecontent. Mr. Wesley is a good Master to teach us Mortification." Thomas duly replies:

You have not been able to mortify Lying a Bed in the Morning yet. *Aurora Musis Amica*. I served that enemy till I was about 21 years of Age, but ever since the year 1740 it had such a Blow, it was never able to stand upright since . . . then is the time to write to my Friends, Study, &c. I have gained . . . Strength of Body, Appetite, Health, Time, &c. *Surgere diluculo saluberrimum est* . . . sometimes I have rather overdone it . . . I judge it more conducive to my health &c. to be asleep and not hear the Clock striking 10, and to be awak'd by the Clock when it strikes 5, Winter and Summer. . . . I was formerly fond of sweet Things; but for many years I have neglected my Taste, and chiefly considered my Health. Plain Diet suit[s] my Health, Pocket, &c. remarkably well.

There are not many such personal touches in the correspondence. After Francis had answered a query from Thomas on a subject then keenly engaging men's minds—Doddridge published a tract on it by David Some—, "Is it right or wrong to inoculate the small Pox?" by balancing the pros and cons and coming down with an "I am against it", Thomas tells how he was taken by his mother to a neighbour's house, when he was about eight years old, to see children who had smallpox, and caught it himself. "That method is in some cases worse than inoculation; but I don't approve of either, nor of being over solicitous to keep from it. . . . Our two eldest had it in the Hay, we buried one of them. We don't hear of it being near now, but probably it will not be long, seldom is. My wife is for it, so are our Doctors." Death was never far away, whether by smallpox or not. To both men the query put by Thomas, "What wou'd you say to a Parent under great Distress on the account of a dying Infant's eternal State?", was an agonizing one. Francis tells how when in the previous year he buried "my dear Enoch", his wife was sure of the babe's salvation, and he did not question this for fear of increasing her grief, yet he could not feel confident himself. Three months later Thomas in turn records the story of his own bereavement: in January a daughter was born, "a fine, healthy, fat Girl", but she "was seized

with the hooping-Cough", and by March she was dead.

By historians, at least by Baptist or Welsh historians, the name of Joshua Thomas, the historian and scholar, is still remembered. He finds a place in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as well as in the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, where the late Professor R. T. Jenkins devotes a paragraph to his historical writing: "his standards were eminently judicial and scientific". "Almost alone among the older ecclesiastical historians of every colour, he hardly ever imposes upon his readers the task of discounting his prejudices, and (within the limits of his materials) his care for accuracy is scrupulous."³ Professor Jenkins also contributed a study of Thomas and his *confrères* at Leominster to the *Transactions* of the Welsh Baptist Historical Society.⁴ From this we learn that under William Llewelyn (1735-1803),⁵ who ministered to the Presbyterians from 1769 until his death, and who sometimes preached in Thomas' pulpit, numbers went up rapidly from six to two hundred but then dwindled again. The Presbyterian meeting-house was built in 1719, the Moravian in 1761, the (new) Baptist, under Thomas' inspiring ministry, in 1771. In this year Mrs. Marlow, whom Thomas mentions to Francis in 1768 as one of only six members "who were so when I came in 1754" and as contributing a guinea a quarter, gave a generous £5 to the new building. She had deserted the Moravians for the Baptists,⁶ which did not help relations between Thomas and the Moravian minister, L. T. Nyberg; but Thomas came into a tradition open to the Revival. His predecessor at one remove, John Oulton, the Baptist minister in Leominster from 1731 to 1748, supported Howel Harris and corresponded with him frequently, as he did also, at least once, with George Whitefield.⁷ During Thomas' own ministry Mrs. Marlow, and also William Llewelyn, were in correspondence with the Countess of Huntingdon.⁸

Benjamin Francis, pastor, poet and evangelist, is the subject of a short article in the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* but is now largely forgotten. Yet in his time he also was a leading minister, greatly loved and trusted, and the editor of two collections of hymns in Welsh entitled *Aleluia*.⁹ His friendship with Thomas he had celebrated in an *Elegy* when Thomas died, and it was no secret. John Ryland refers to their "constant correspondence" in his funeral sermon for Francis, *The presence of Christ the source of eternal bliss*, and writes: "his immortal spirit is regaling itself, with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob; with Owen and Bunyan; with Whitefield and Edwards; with his venerable Father; with his faithful correspondent Thomas . . ." During his long ministry at Horsley Francis preached more than four thousand sermons, baptized nearly 450 persons and excluded only 42; the number of communicants rose from 66 to 262; and the meeting-house was enlarged, so that in 1775 it was described as "a decent and commodious Place of Worship, about 40 F. by 60 F. and has 3 Galleries; a vestry and a stable are likewise erected to accommodate people who come from distant places".¹⁰ In 1830 the church was stated to be "one of the largest in the denomination".¹¹

At his funeral on 20 December 1799, when Ryland preceded the corpse carried on the deacons' shoulders, the pall was supported by six ministers, three Baptists (Thomas Ferebee of Sodbury, Joseph Burchell of Tetbury and Thomas Simmonds of Wotton-under-Edge) and three Independents (Thomas Jones of Chalford, John Thomas of Cam and William Harris of Stroud).¹² Such mutual support, then blessedly normal, was also expressed through the presence of Independents such as David Bogue of Gosport and William Kingsbury of Southampton in the meetings of the Baptist Western Association, which in Salisbury met at the Independent meeting-house.

Francis was an indefatigable evangelist, making "excursions monthly into the most uninstructed parts of Gloucestershire, Worcestershire and Wiltshire". "He was the first means of introducing evangelical religion into many dark towns and villages in all the neighbourhood round." He preached 130 times at Cheltenham, 136 at Tewkesbury, 137 at Pershore, and 180 at Upton-on-Severn; 282 times at Malmesbury, 84 at Christian Malford,¹³ 56 at Devizes, 90 each at Melksham, Frome, Trowbridge and Bradford-on-Avon; 394 times at Wotton-under-Edge, 350 at Uley and 802 at Minchinhampton. He preached 101 times in Bristol at Broadmead and 28 times at the Pithay; 22 times each at Portsmouth, Plymouth and Dock [Devonport]; and 20 times in Cornwall. He also preached more than 30 times in Dublin, and "repeatedly visited his native Country, and retained the Language, so as to preach in it with the greatest acceptance". It is in keeping with this that both Francis and Thomas introduce words and phrases in Welsh into their correspondence.

Both men were keen supporters of their respective Associations. Thomas was "one of the most influential figures in the Midland Association" and "a frequent visitor to the Welsh Association", of which he published a *History* (1795). Francis, who composed *Elegies* (besides those already noticed) for Whitefield as well as for his Baptist brethren Caleb Evans of Bristol, Robert Day of Wellington, William Williams of Cardigan and Samuel Pearce of Birmingham,¹⁴ also wrote a poem entitled "The Association". Like Thomas, he was frequently at the Welsh Association, for which he preached again and again, as he did for his own Western Association, which in 1779, 1783 and again in 1797 chose him as Moderator. His last sermon to the Association was at Bristol in 1799. He had been chosen to preach next year also at Bristol. But in his sermon on this occasion the Moderator, John Ryland, sadly records:

we have lost one, whose days we trusted were not fulfilled, and whose remaining vigor and activity encouraged our fondest hopes, that he might have blessed the Church of God for a longer period, and have added much, by his presence and services, to the pleasure of this assembly. Francis, dearly loved by us all, and by all the churches, is, however, no longer found, where he used so regularly to attend. We listen no more to his friendly counsel, nor join his fervent prayers; we hear no more his melodious voice, telling poor sinners the unsearchable riches of his compassionate Redeemer.¹⁶

NOTES

¹ Two pages are devoted to it in a survey of Thomas' manuscripts by B. G. Owens in *Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru*, 1961, pp. 9-11. For additional quotation from it, see now the biography of Joshua Thomas by the Rev. E. W. Hayden printed in the volume *The American Baptist Heritage in Wales* (Lafayette, Tennessee), published in 1976.

² On the flyleaf is written in pencil: "Mr. Maurice Jones, Tenby, who was at one time one of the successors of Mr. Joshua Thomas, Leominster, and well acquainted with his writing thinks this book was written by the said Joshua Thomas. Being in the possession of his son Timothy makes it probable. Thos. Jones, Clipston". Comparison of the script with that of the other volumes, which were presented by Timothy Thomas, Joshua's son, confirms this statement. For access to the manuscripts, and for ready help, I wish to thank the College Librarian, the Rev. Norman Moon.

³ R. T. Jenkins, "Nonconformity after 1715: Methodism", in *History of Carmarthenshire*, ed. Sir J. E. Lloyd (Cardiff 1939), vol. II, p. 230.

⁴ R. T. Jenkins, "Rhai o Gymdogion Joshua Thomas", in *Yng Nghysgod Trefeca* (Caernarfon 1968), pp. 62-82; repr. from *Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru*, 1935. Professor Jenkins also commends Thomas for his good humour and generous spirit: *Hanes Cymru yn y Ddeunawfed Ganrif* (Caerdydd 1945), p. 58.

⁵ Llewelyn also is the subject of an article in the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. His works (7 vols., published at Leominster and Gloucester) are preserved in the Library of Memorial College, Swansea.

⁶ Her desertion was as if in retort to the reverse journey travelled by Elizabeth Pugh, who with her husband Francis was responsible for planting the Moravian cause in Leominster; for Elizabeth was of the notable Baptist family of Keach (R. T. Jenkins, "La Trobe yn Neheudir Cymru", in *Er Clod: saith bennod ar hanes Methodistiaeth yng Nghymru*, ed. Thomas Richards (Wrecsam 1934), p. 79). Francis Pugh, again, is noticed in the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*.

⁷ M. H. Jones, *The Trevecka Letters* (Caernarvon 1932), inventory and pp. 179, 263.

⁸ Cheshunt College, Cambridge, MSS. A 3/6.24 and F 1. 1639.

⁹ J. Julian, *Dictionary of Hymnology*, s.v.

¹⁰ New College, London, Meen MS., p. 487.

¹¹ Joseph Ivimey, *History of the Baptists* (4 vols. London 1811-30), vol. IV, p. 479.

¹² All three Independents were Welshmen trained at Brecon: *Album Aberhonddu*, ed. T. Stephens (Merthyr Tydvil 1898), pp. 20-22.

¹³ At Christian Malford Francis will have preached for Cornelius Winter, who, "though he was a Paedobaptist, . . . was on terms of the most cordial friendship with Mr. Francis of Horsley", at what Winter called "my little Bethel": William Jay, *Memoirs of . . . Cornelius Winter* (Bath 1808), pp. 332, 158.

¹⁴ The Elegy for Pearce, whom, as the convert of one of his own converts, Isaiah Birt of Dock, Francis liked to call his "grandson", is printed at the conclusion of Ryland's funeral sermon for Francis (from the copy in the Bristol Baptist College Library it has unfortunately been detached).

¹⁵ For extended quotation from this poem, with some comment, see my paper "Assembly and Association in Dissent, 1689-1831", in *Councils and Assemblies*, ed. G. J. Cuming and D. Baker (Studies in Church History, VII, Cambridge 1971), pp. 303-4.

¹⁶ Most of the information in the concluding paragraphs above, including the statistics, is taken from a sketch of Francis' life by his son-in-law, Thomas Flint, annexed to Ryland's funeral sermon for Francis, *The Presence of Christ the Source of Eternal Bliss*, Bristol [1800]. The final quotation is from the Association's *Circular Letter* for 1800, p. 2. A copy of both pieces is preserved in the Library of New College, London.

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