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“A True Visible Church of Christ”

The Contours of Calvinistic Baptist Ecclesiology

“A True visible Church of Christ consisteth both of Matter and Form, or of Subjects and Order, for it is Christs Kingdom; and those Subjects must be such visibly as Christ owns, and that Form and Order according to Christs rule, or else it cannot be his church.”¹

2.1 The Rule of Christ²

THE EMERGENCE OF PARTICULAR Baptist congregations in the 1640s caused many loyal church people to ask by what right lay people might form a conventicle and call it a true church. Robert Poole, for example, in his correspondence with William Kiffin, repeatedly pressed the question, what *warrant* have you to separate from the national church?, and, what *warrant* have you to form congregations? What *warrant* have you to be a minister of a Separate Congregation? How can you *vindicate* your schism and defection from the reformed Churches?³ Although the question of “warrant” had political implications, Kiffin’s defense was based on bibli-

1. Collier, *Right Constitution*, 1.

2. For the development of this conviction amongst wider Independents see Tolmie, *Saints*, 85–86.

3. Kiffin, *A Briefe Remonstrance*, 3. My italics. A similar style of argument concerning the authority by which independent churches might be set up under the authority of King Jesus is seen in Goodwin, *Works*, 11, 302.

cal and theological convictions, stressing that Baptist congregations were “erected and formed . . . according to the Rule of Christ.”⁴ In response to Poole’s third question about his own ministry, he responded,

but *JESUS CHRIST* is of the Father anointed to be the head of the Church, which is his body . . . and that we are commanded onely to heare him; and that whosoever will not heare and obey him, the Lord will require it at his hands, and hereby wee know wee love God, and hee loves us, when we keep his Commandments. Now then, if wee cannot keep faith and a good Conscience, in obeying all the commands of Christ, so long as we assemble ourselves with you, then are wee necessitated to separate our selves from you.⁵

Having asserted the primacy of the Christological imperative as the major premise in all matters of faith and conscience, Kiffin believed that the Baptists’ separation from the National Church was necessitated by the impossibility of maintaining faith and good conscience while in fellowship with them. The Christological imperative was the fundamental theological principle that separated Baptists from a National Church of whatever polity, whether episcopal or presbyterian. Kiffin stressed this point repeatedly to Poole:

so long as you denie to follow the rule of Jesus Christ, and are not obedient to his commands, but reject the Word of God, which is given by Christ for the purging of the wicked from the godly, and the separating of the precious from the vile . . . we are bound in obedience to *JESUS CHRIST*, to leave you, while you remaine obstinate to him, and joyne together, and continue faithfull in the order of the Gospel.⁶

The State Church, according to Kiffin, was corrupted by its impure members. Its policy of taking in all without the power “to voide the excrements” meant it “must needs become a rotten, filthie and unclean body.”⁷ Other corruptions included lack of discipline, compulsion in worship, “tythes and offerings by which a few clergy become rich at the expense of the poor,” refusing burial in consecrated ground to the poor, all of which have forced those who listen to the voice of Christ Jesus to make separation.⁸

4. *Ibid.*, 6.

5. *Ibid.*, 8. Irregular spelling and emphasis as original.

6. *Ibid.*, 8.

7. *Ibid.*, 9.

8. *Ibid.*, 10.

Among Particular Baptists the conviction that “Christ is both Lord and King of the Churches” was developed as part of their critique of the power and authority civil magistrates claimed to possess in establishing Church government.⁹ In response to the question of his invisible interlocutor: “What power the Civill Magistrate has in establishing Church Government?” Thomas Collier’s bold answer was, “They [magistrates] have none at all” because Christ is King of saints, of Sion, that is, the church. Collier regarded human power in spiritual matters as a usurpation of the prerogative of King Jesus. Any attempt by the State either to establish, or compel citizens, to conform to true religion was a violation of the rule of Christ, who himself compelled no one.

Christ overpowers the soule by his Spirit, and then men are willing, and till then, man is not to meddle with them in Spirituall things.¹⁰

The counter to the Baptist position was twofold, first by precept of scripture and second political. The biblical case was based on Luke 14.23 “*The Lord said unto his servants, Goe out into the high-ways, and hedges, and compel them to come in.*” Collier denied that this text had any bearing on the responsibility and power of the magistrate in religious affairs or the religious habits of individuals. In the first place it was descriptive of the ministry of Jesus, and derivatively it applied to Gospel preachers who try to persuade by the preaching of the Gospel.¹¹ The Presbyterian riposte was to warn of the religious anarchy that would result from such a policy:

But if the Magistrate should not set up Religion by Authority, but leave it to the liberties of men, there would be so many Religions and Opinions in the World, that a man should not know which to follow.¹²

This statement captured precisely the fears of clergymen like Thomas Edwards, whose extreme antipathy towards sectaries was energized by the threat they posed to the unity and uniformity of religion in the nation.¹³ Collier addressed directly the possibility of the multiplication of opinions, arguing that the Truth would draw saints together, and in any case it was beyond the power of any human to suppress opinions. His was an argument for broad toleration of religious convictions, a policy that Presbyterians in the

9. Collier, *Certaine Queries*, 24.

10. *Ibid.*, 24.

11. *Ibid.*, 25.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Edwards, *Gangraena*; Edwards, *Reasons Against Toleration*, 23.

Assembly and Parliament would not countenance. So does the Magistrate have any role in religion at all?, asks Collier. Somewhat provocatively he suggests that if they do they should use their power,

To dismisse that Assembly of learned men who are now called together for to consult about matters of Religion.¹⁴

His primary objection to the Westminster Assembly was that he knew of no scriptural precedent for such a gathering, and among the divines were some who had imprisoned saints for holding opinions contrary to their own. The very concept of a national religious settlement, sponsored by Parliament, devised by an Assembly, and imposed by the magistrate was as far from the Baptist way of organizing, and being the church, under the rule of King Jesus, as was possible to imagine.

The practical outworking of the commitment to King Jesus as Lord of the church is seen in Collier’s scheme of ten ordinances by which a church is to be rightly constituted. What were to others called sacraments Collier insisted be known as “ordinances,” because they were “ordained by Christ to be practiced by his people.”¹⁵ These were “*Baptism*,” which was “not only a constituting but an initiating ordinance into the Church of Christ.” Second, “*Prayer*,” by which every member of the body of Christ has free access to the throne of grace, “at all times and, and upon all occasions.” Third, “*Praise*, flowing from the souls interested [*sic*] in his love.” The fourth ordinance of Christ was “*Preaching* and prophesying, for the building up of the Church in the faith and knowledge of the Lord.” Fifth, “*Breaking of bread*, or communicating together in the Lord’s Supper.” Collier does not expand on the Baptist theology of communion, beyond saying it is precious as a sign of Christ’s love, our interest in him, and our union with him. The sixth ordinance, is to “*assemble together*,” to admonish, exhort, consider one another, provoke one another to love and good works, that all things may be done to edifying. Seventh is discipline: “that if any *fall through weakness, to restore such a one by the spirit of meekness, considering thyself*, and *Gal 6.1, 2. and to bear one anothers burdens, and so fulfil the Law of Christ*.” The eighth ordinance of Christ is disfellowshipping a fallen brother who resists the Church’s admonition:

This power hath Christ left with his Church, which oftentimes through the blessing of God proves an effectuall means for the recovering of souls out of the snare of the devil.

14. Collier, *Certaine Queries*, 27.

15. Collier, *Right Constitution*, 9.

Ninth, Christ has ordained that the Church should provide for the poor of the congregation. Tenth, “God hath ordained his people *to walk in every good work*, both of piety and charity.”¹⁶

Collier’s blueprint for the church, what might be called the Particular Baptists’ *notae ecclesiae*, was thoroughly Christological. Every ordinance, it was emphasized, was the word of Christ for his people. Christ made complete provision for the organization and business of the church, and the Baptist ecclesiological project was to conform their congregations to the ordinances of King Jesus.

In the wider literature of the Particular Baptists the principles of a true Church incorporated these features of Collier’s *notae* resulting in a series of convictions about the essence of the Church as Christ would have it established.

2.2 A Believer’s Church

Of first importance, Particular Baptists demanded a definite type of religious experience as a pre-requisite for membership, namely confession of faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁷ Michael Watts suggests the emphasis on conversion as essential for church membership emerged in the seventeenth century largely as a result of the teaching and influence of William Perkins,¹⁸ but Baptist leaders recognized this as a scriptural principal, a gospel imperative that should be experienced as a contemporary reality. The stress on the primacy of conversion is seen in Hanserd Knollys’ account of the manner in which churches were being gathered in London in the mid-1640s:¹⁹

Some godly and learned men of approved gifts and abilities for the Ministerie, being driven out of the Countries, where they lived by the persecution of the Prelates, came to sojourn in this great City, and preached the Word of God both publicly, and from house to house, and daily in the Temples and in every house they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ. . . . And when many sinners were converted by their preaching of the Gospell, some of them that believed, consorted with them, and of professors a great many, and of the chief women not a few.

16. *Ibid.*, 9–18.

17. Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 17–18.

18. Watts, *Dissenters I*, 171–73. On Perkins see Long, “William Perkins,” 53–59. See also Troeltsch, *Social Teaching*, 55, 57 and 993.

19. The theology of Knollys is the subject of Howson, *Erroneous and Schismatical Opinions*. Ecclesiology is treated 221–29.

And the condition which those Preachers both publicly and privately propounded to the people, unto who they preached, upon which they were to be admitted into the Church was Faith, Repentance, and Baptisme; and none other. And who-soever (poor as well as rich, bond as well as free, servants as well as Masters) did make a profession of their Faith in Christ Jesus, and would be baptized with water into the Name of the Father, Sonne, and Holy Spirit, were admitted Members of the Church.²⁰

In Knollys’ report we see the importance of Gospel preaching, the conversion of sinners, and baptism of those who repented of their sins in the formation of early Calvinistic Baptist congregations. Latent within this statement is a theology of the church comprised of professing believers in Christ, baptized, gathered, visible, and separatist.

The significance of a believer’s church was its contrariness to the concept of a national, or parochial church, into which members are born, and in which membership is considered obligatory, and by virtue of one’s national identity.²¹ To the Baptists this arrangement had become anathema, and the priority of faith in “the right constitution of a church” was asserted by Thomas Collier under the heading of, “The Materials or Subjects of a true visible Church of Christ,” where he stated, “A True visible Church of Christ consisteth of believers gathered out of the World by the preaching of the Gospel, by the powerful ministry of the Spirit.”²² Whatever such people are called, since the New Testament offers a variety of options, what mattered was the reality of their spiritual experience:

[they are] frequently called Saints, and holy Brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, the house of God, his Temple, the household of Faith, born from above of the Spirit, that they might worship in Spirit and Truth, all of which discovers the spiritualnesse of the Church of Christ, that they are or should be spiritual Believers.²³

When it came to explaining what was meant by a “believer’s church,” Collier described the common practice of Baptist congregations in dealing

20. Knollys, *Moderate Answer*, 19–20.

21. Early Baptist objection to the parochial church system is evident in the tract about Baptism published in the wake of a failed disputation between Baptist ministers and Edmund Calamy the elder, curate of St Mary Aldermanbury. See Cox, Knollys, Kiffen, *Declaration Concerning the Publike Dispute*, 9.

22. Collier, *Right Constitution*, 2.

23. *Ibid.*

with those who sought membership among them. Two things were required according to the precedent of the primitive New Testament church. First, evidence of faith and repentance, because “repentance or turning from sin to God” was the essence of Apostolic preaching in Acts 2.38, and therefore, “must needs be manifested before admission into the Church.”²⁴ Second, they must have received believers’ baptism:

“none are to be admitted [to the church] before Baptisme,” and,
 “none are to be baptized, but those that are able to manifest faith
 and turning to God.”²⁵

To stress the point Collier added, “so that wee have no Rule to Baptize any, till they are Disciples, that is, Beleevers.”²⁶ Only those who conformed to this twofold pattern of conversion and baptism, Collier insisted, may be “looked upon as members of the church.” Coxe, Kiffen and Knollys likewise affirmed, “The subject matter of Baptisme, according to the doctrine of the Disciples and Apostles of Christ . . . are such men and women as actually repent and believe.”²⁷ The same was asserted by Hanserd Knollys who argued on the basis of primitive precedent, “the Apostles propounded no other condition or termes for the making all and every one of them members of the Church, but Repentance and Baptisme.”²⁸

At a meeting of the West Country Baptist Association in 1654, overseen by Collier, it was asked, “whether any are to be received into the church of Christ only upon a bare confession of Christ being come in the flesh?” Even though there was scriptural warrant for such confession, Collier replied with a decisive No!, and continued to explain,

they may not be admitted on such terms without a declaration of an experimental work of the Spirit upon the heart, through the word of the Gospel and suitable to it, being attended with evident token of conversion, to the satisfaction of the administrator and brethren or church concerned in it.²⁹

Collier’s response may reflect something of an anti-intellectual approach to religion, down-grading *mere* intellectual conformity to creedal

24. Collier, *Certaine Queries*, 10.

25. *Ibid.*, 10, also 11. Many proof texts are appended to these statements demonstrating that this is the biblical pattern of the church.

26. *Ibid.*, 11.

27. Coxe, et al., *Declaration Concerning the Publike Dispute*, 9.

28. Knollys, *Moderate Answer*, 15, 18. The controversy continued in Bastwick’s riposte, *The Utter Routing of the Whole Army of all the Independents and Sectaries*.

29. *ARPB*, 56.

orthodoxy, and prioritizing faith as an existential, measureable, observable experience of Christ evidenced in transformation of character. Whatever the motive, he like others stressed the priority of visible godliness Baptists regarded as essential in a believer’s church, because it was essential in the post-Pentecost church.³⁰

2.3 Baptism, Infant Baptism, and Church Membership

The Baptist experiment in congregational ecclesiology, consisting of a voluntary church of professing believers, required a safeguard to entry into the church and for this they employed the rite of initiation, namely believer’s baptism.³¹ Article 39 of the 1644 London Confession stated:

That Baptisme is an Ordinance of the new Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed onely upon persons professing faith, or that are Disciples, or taught, who upon a profession of faith, ought to be baptized.³²

By way of contrast, within English Prayer-Book Protestantism the greater emphasis was on the sacramental, soteriological dimension of baptism.³³ According to the Prayer Book, a child was brought to baptism bearing the burden of sin and guilt inherited from Adam.³⁴ Baptism, therefore was understood to be an event of regeneration, an engrafting into the body of Christ.³⁵ In law baptism was to be administered to every child in the parish, indiscriminately, on the basis that they belonged to the national church. This arrangement of baptism, regeneration and *Volkskirche* remained unaltered in the proposals of the Westminster Assembly Directory for Public

30. See 2.4 below.

31. See Walker, “Relation of Infants to Church,” 242–62. Walker’s paper discusses the theology of infant baptism among early General Baptists as well as later Calvinistic Baptists. That the theology and practice of infant baptism was a hotly disputed subject is indicated by the record that between 1642 and 1660 Thomason collected over 125 tracts on this question, and Paul Lim reckons as many as seventy-nine public disputes were conducted. Lim, “Puritans and the Church of England,” in Coffey and Lim, *Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, 233.

32. In Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 167.

33. An Anglican defense of paedobaptism published in this period is that of Featley, *The Dippers Dipt*.

34. The Book of Common Prayer (1549), *Publike Baptisme*. See also Featley, *Dippers Dipt*, 20.

35. Featley, *Dippers Dipt*, 21.

Worship.³⁶ The political implication of this position was not lost on Baptist sympathizer, John Tombes, who wrote in 1645,

When a Nation shall receive the faith, that is, a great eminent part, the Governours and chief Cities, & representative body, shall receive the faith, that Nation shall in like manner have all their little ones capable of Baptisme, and counted visible members of the Church, as the posteritie of the *Jews* were in the time of that Church administration. This I guesse is the businesse that is now upon the anvil.³⁷

What precisely was upon the anvil was the meaning of the great commission in Matt 28.19, “to make disciples of all nations,” which could be taken to mean the conversion of nations *en bloc*, after the manner of *cuius regio, eius religio*,³⁸ or could refer to the making of individual converts within all nations. Presbyterians of the time such as Blake and Rutherford argued that this text was the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise that, “In thee shall Nations be blessed.”³⁹ Stephen Marshall used the text to assert that, “every Nation which should receive the faith, should be to him now as the peculiar Nation of the *Jews* had been in the past.”⁴⁰ Consequently, the text could be used as a justification for baptizing all born within the parish, advocating a “federall or externall holinesse of a believing or chosen nation, giving the right to the infants of that nation to be baptized.”⁴¹

Tombes argued against the Presbyterian position that national rulers could determine the faith of its citizens, insisting that disciples were to be made *within* all nations, and he further denied that any nation should be to God a peculiar nation as the *Jews* had been.⁴² He refuted the interpretation of Matt 28.19 which equated “them” (*autēs*) with “all Nations,” and instead restricted its reference to those who were taught, and by the means of apostolic teaching were made disciples.⁴³ It was therefore the disciples of all nations who were to be baptized. This was in accordance with apostolic

36. A Baptist perspective on the “new-devised-parish-church-worship,” especially baptism, was that it remained “as great an observance of the traditions of men, under the Classical Presbytery, as ever they were under the Lordly Episcopacy.” See Coxe, et al., *Declaration*, 12.

37. Tombes, *Examen of the Sermon*, 123.

38. Literally, “whose realm, his religion.”

39. Tombes, *Examen of the Sermon*, 122.

40. *Ibid.*, 123. Emphasis as original.

41. *Ibid.*, 127.

42. *Ibid.*, 123.

43. See also Coxe, et al., *Declaration*, 19.

precedent, as recorded in Acts, that hearing and believing were prior to, and the recondition for, baptism.⁴⁴ Tombes summarizes,

When Christ saith, Teach all nations, and baptize them, his meaning is, by preaching the Gospel to all nations, make them Disciples, and baptize those that become Disciples of all nations.⁴⁵

This being Christ’s clear instruction by which people ought to come to baptism there could be no deviation, according to Tombes. He asserted,

For the appointment of Christ, is the rule according to which we are to administer holy things, and he that doth otherwise, follows his own invention, and is guilty of will worship.⁴⁶

To those, like Tombes, with Baptist convictions, it was indisputable that Christ appointed one way into his church and it was by repentance, faith and baptism.⁴⁷

The theology of Presbyterians like Stephen Marshall drew from the tradition of Reformed theology which since the time of Zwingli argued for infant baptism on the basis of the covenant of grace.⁴⁸ This was clearly affirmed in the Heidelberg Catechism:

Should infants, too, be baptized? Yes, infants as well as adults belong to God’s covenant and congregation. Through Christ’s blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults. Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be incorporated into the Christian church.⁴⁹

On this dogmatic foundation Marshall built a defense of infant baptism consisting of a five-fold argument.⁵⁰ In the first instance he states,

44. Tombes, *Examen of the Sermon*, 126. He cites Acts 2.41; Acts 8.12, 38; Acts 10.48; Acts 16.15, 33.

45. *Ibid.*, 127.

46. *Ibid.*, 132; also Hobson, *Fallacy of Infants Baptism*, 3.

47. See Coxe, et al., *Declaration*, 14. In internal debate John Spilsbury argued against Thomas Kilcop that church foundation was by “covenantal collective” not baptism. This view was based on a desire to preserve the priority of faith in believer’s church, and to refute any hint of sacramentalism. See Spilsbury, *Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme*, 41. See Wright, *EEB*, 104–9.

48. Zwingli, *Refutation of the Tricks*, in *Selected Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, 219–37, 248–51.

49. Question 74.

50. Marshall, *Sermon of the Baptizing of Infants*. The General Baptists produced

*The Infants of believing parents are foederati, therefore they must bee signati: they are within the covenant of grace, belonging to Christs body, kingdome, family; therefore are to partake of the seale of his covenant, or the distinguishing badge between them who are under the covenant of grace, and them who are not.*⁵¹

Basic to Marshall's defense of infant baptism was continuity between the old covenant and the new, between old Israel and new Israel.⁵² In both covenants the one gracious purpose of God is revealed in election and redemption. Since the covenant made with Abraham is still in force, the blessings that were bestowed upon Abraham now "comes on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ."⁵³ Infants of those in the covenant are therefore to be reckoned covenanters with their parents.⁵⁴ Similar sentiments were found in other Puritan divines, including John Owen, Thomas Goodwin and Samuel Petto who, on the analogy of Abraham's institution of the rite of circumcision, saw no grounds for excluding children of believers from the seal of the covenant.⁵⁵

Marshall's argument for infant baptism served not only to define the relationship of infants of believers to the Gospel, but also specified their relationship to the church. To this end he stated,

Ever since God gathered a distinct, select number out of the world, to bee his Kingdom, City, House-hold, in opposition to the rest of the world, which is the kingdom, city, house-hold of Satan, he would have *The Infants of all who are taken into Covenant with him, to bee accounted his, to belong to him, to his church and Family, and not to the devils. . . .* thus hath the Lord ordained, it shall be in his kingdome and family; the *children*

their own response to Marshall. See Denne, *Antichrist Unmasked in Two Treatise*. A summary of the five arguments can be found in Marshall's *Sermon*, 33.

51. Marshall, *Sermon of the Baptizing of Infants*, 8. Emphasis as original.

52. Among Reformed theologians of the time, one notable exception to this view was that of John Owen. See "The Minority Report: John Owen on Sinai," in Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 293–303. It should be noted that Owen's affirmation of the newness of the new covenant did not preclude his continuing commitment to paedobaptism.

53. Marshall, *Sermon of the Baptizing of Infants*, 13.

54. *Ibid.*, 33.

55. Owen, "Of Infant Baptism, and Dipping," in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. Russell. vol. XXI, 547–56; Goodwin, "Of Election," in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* volume IX, 426ff.; Petto, *Infant Baptism of Christ's Appointment*, 11.

follow the Covenant-condition of their *Parents*, if he take a Father into Covenant, he takes the children in with him.⁵⁶

In speaking about the seal of the covenant Marshall again argued that continuity of the gracious promises of God brings together circumcision and baptism as seals of initiation administered to those who enter the covenant of grace. He reasoned,

Circumcision for the time of that administration which was *before* Christs incarnation, *Baptisme* since the time of his incarnation; both of them the *same* sacrament for the *spirituall* part, though differing in the outward Elements.⁵⁷

The ecclesiological implications of this hermeneutical commitment can now be given full weight as we see in Marshall’s assertion,

both of them [circumcision and baptism] the way and means of solemne entrance and admission into the Church; *both* of them to be administered but *once*, and none might be received into the *communion* of the Church of the *Jews* until they were *circumcised*, nor into the *communion* of the Church of the Christians until they be *Baptized* . . . and this our *Lord himselfe* taught us by his own example, who was *circumcised*, as a professed Member of the Church of the Jews, and when he set up the new Christian Church, he would be initiated into *it*, by the Sacrament of *Baptisme*.⁵⁸

From the perspective of the Particular Baptists, a new conception of the church, comprised of voluntary professing believers demanded a break from the inclusive policy of paedobaptism in the national Church. Paul Hobson argued the Baptist case saying, “That which doth not only present one, but make one a Member of a Church, before being called of God, That is inconvenient.”⁵⁹ For this reason, Particular Baptist attempts to deal with the subject of infant baptism also began with the question of the covenant. Once again, Paul Hobson made the point clearly on behalf of Baptists:

I shall unfold to you what I mean by that which was before Christ, and ended by Christ come in the flesh. That which was before Christ, was, That God made a covenant with *Abraham*, which covenant ran in the flesh, and was intail’d to generation;

56. Marshall, *Sermon of the Baptizing of Infants*, 14 and 15. Emphasis as original.

57. *Ibid.*, 26.

58. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

59. Hobson, *Fallacy of Infants Baptisme*, 12.

and not upon condition of Regeneration. . . . And this was that Covenant that Circumcision of Children had a reference to; and whosoever was a childe of *Abraham*, considered as a son of the flesh, had a right to it, and might and did plead for priviledges by it. But when Christ came the natural Branches were cut off, *Rom* 11.20, 21. And no man is now considered a son of *Abraham*, or the Seed of *Abraham*, but as he beleeveth.⁶⁰

Two emphases now emerged in Baptist thinking about the nature of baptism, namely the Gospel requirement of spiritual regeneration and faith prior to the ordinance,⁶¹ and second, an ecclesiological emphasis related to initiation into the visible church. Baptism was indeed, as other Reformed writers maintained, a seal of election and grace. Particular Baptists had not abandoned their Calvinist roots, but evidence of election was required in expressions of repentance and transformation of life before baptism could be administered. John Spilsbury argued this point in his tract on baptism, that according to scripture the blessings of the covenant of grace belong only to believers:

We shall find in the Scriptures of God, all the sweet promises of Grace under the New Testament, holding forth their blessings, and blessed priviledges onely to such as believe.⁶²

Paul Hobson saw things in the same way:

Now there is no promise that runs forth to any considered in reference to a carnal generation; but a spiritual Regeneration. Therefore when they came to *John* to be Baptized, He takes them off from pleading their priviledge considered in the flesh, and tells them, *say not in your heart, You have Abraham to your Father*, and so plead for Baptism: But he exhorts them to *Believe and Repent*.⁶³

Believing the visible church to be the only warrantable church, comprised of professing believers, it was impossible for Baptists to accommodate infant baptism since they were incapable of displaying observable signs

60. *Ibid.*, 7.

61. From the time of the grand immersion led by Richard Blunt, baptismal theology among the Calvinistic Baptists stressed the death and resurrection motif, which symbolized spiritual conversion. See First London Confession, articles XXXIX and XL. In Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 167. This is restated in Coxe, et al., *Declaration*, 9.

62. Spilsbury, *Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme*, 2.

63. Hobson, *Fallacy of Infants Baptisme*, 7.

of faith in Christ.⁶⁴ Tombes argued that since infants are entirely “passive” in the act of baptism, incapable of offering any indication by which they may be designated visible Christians, especially testimony of grace, they cannot be given the “note” of a member of the visible church.⁶⁵ Hobson asserted, “Baptism of Infants cannot be a Baptism of Faith and a baptism of Repentance.”⁶⁶ It is therefore in vain that infants are baptized.⁶⁷ Furthermore, if infant baptism is vain, then to confer the privileges of the visible church on infants, or to make them members of the visible church, “is but a dream.”⁶⁸ John Tombes stressed,

As for being members of the Church, if you mean the invisible Church, neither I nor you can affirm or deny; its in Gods bosom alone; if you mean the visible, you must make a new definition of the visible Church afore Infants baptized will be proved members.⁶⁹

Again he writes,

To make them [infants] actually members of the visible Church, is to overthrow the definitions of the visible Church that Protestant writers give . . . who make the *visible Church a number of Christians by profession*.⁷⁰

This step in the argument shows that for Tombes, the question of paedobaptism was not only a soteriological question, indeed most Baptists of the time were agnostic about the salvific status of children of believers,⁷¹ but equally a question of ecclesiology. Holding to the convictions of a believer’s church and believer’s baptism meant theology and practice were mutually determinative. Since the baptismal experience of children lay outside the sphere of conversion, they could never be reckoned members of the visible church.

As can be seen in the debate between John Tombes and Stephen Marshall the question about the privileges of descent brought into focus the analogy between baptism and circumcision. Particular Baptists denied

64. Coxe, et al., *Declaration*, 9.

65. Tombes, *Examen*, 42 and 161.

66. Hobson, *Fallacy of Infants Baptisme*, 11.

67. Tombes, *Examen*, 46.

68. *Ibid.*, 47.

69. *Ibid.*, 167.

70. *Ibid.*, 41.

71. Spilsbury, *Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme*, Epistle to the Reader.

there was any “fleshly privilege” for the children of believers. Francis Cornwell stated that the new covenant did not recognize “fleshly seed,” and Thomas Collier asserted that the new covenant only included such as are Christ’s.⁷² The “Scotchman” who debated baptism with Daniel Featley argued that while there was an express command in scripture to circumcise Jewish male infants there was no such express command for the baptizing of infants.⁷³ That neither precept nor explicit precedent for the baptizing of infants could be found in scripture was also decisive against the practice for John Spilsbury.⁷⁴

Since the biblical perspective on any matter was decisive for Baptists John Tombes set out his exegesis of Col 2.8–12 to demonstrate there was no textual support for Marshall’s claim that baptism and circumcision were continuous.⁷⁵ The main thrust of the argument centered on the achievement of Christ as the initiator of the new covenant, which lead to the conclusion:

The Apostle teacheth them that they needed not circumcision, but not because they had Baptisme in lieu of it, but because all was in Christ now, who hath abolished all these rites.⁷⁶

It is not baptism which has replaced circumcision, Tombes stressed, but Christ. All that was offered in Jewish rites and ceremonies finds fulfilment in Christ, not a new ceremony.⁷⁷ Close reading of the Colossians text made it clear that, “by putting on Christ, we come to be exempted from the schoolmaster, that is, the Law, and so from circumcision; that being planted into Christ, we walk in newness of life.”⁷⁸ In his interpretation of Col 2.11, 12, John Spilsbury similarly argued that circumcision sealed its subjects to temporal and carnal things, whereas baptism seals only to faith in Christ.⁷⁹

The Particular Baptist understanding of the covenant of grace thus excluded infants from membership of the visible church. They stressed that believer’s baptism initiated saints into the privileges and responsibilities of church membership. To grant baptism to a believer was to grant the right to communion.⁸⁰ The oneness which Christ intended between the sacraments

72. Cornwell, *New Testament Ratified*, 21; Collier, *Discourse of True Gospel*, 17.

73. Featley, *Dippers Dipt*, 9.

74. Spilsbury, *Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme*, A3.

75. Tombes, *Examen*, 91f.

76. *Ibid.*, 92.

77. *Ibid.*, 93.

78. *Ibid.*, 94.

79. Spilsbury, *Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme*, 24.

80. Hobson, *Fallacy of Infants Baptisme*, 13.

of baptism and the Lord’s Supper ought to be preserved in the church. To deny those who are baptized access to the Lord’s Supper, or for those who take the Lord’s Supper to be unbaptized, “doth make a separation and distraction in Christ’s conjunction.”⁸¹

In the mid-1640s the argument linking baptism, church membership and the Lord’s Supper was being made against opponents outside of their circle, a decade later the issue was debated within their own ranks. In the 1650s Baptists were wrestling with an increasing problem of mixed membership in their churches, that is, baptized and non-baptized believers admitted equally into the church. In Wales a hard line was taken against Thomas Proud who was excommunicated from his own church for a period for operating a policy of open membership,

Having grievously sinned against God by broaching yt [the] destructive opinion maintaining ye mixed communion of ye baptized and unbaptized invisible fellowship, and having endeavoured to draw other[s] to ye same judgement.⁸²

According to the records of the seventeenth meeting of the Abingdon Association in 1657, a question was raised about the status of believers who were baptized by “a Gospell preacher practicing and pleading for mixt communion of beleevers baptized and unbaptized in church fellowship.” If subsequently, a person baptized by such a minister desired full communion “with a true church” ought they to be re-baptized? The Messengers decreed that no further baptism be administered, even though it had been administered by a minister, and in a church, in “errour in judgement and practice about mixt communion.”⁸³

This response shows that the early Baptist practice of closed communion, which required believer’s baptism as necessary for church membership and the primary evidence of faith, though the majority view, was not universally maintained.⁸⁴ Even John Tombes, who defended believer’s baptism so strongly, did not press the necessity this far. He questioned “whether a Minister can justify it before God, if he reject such a *Christian* from the Lord’s Supper, because not baptized.”⁸⁵ On the other hand, there were a number of Baptists who clearly believed that churches practicing open com-

81. Ibid., 13.

82. Owens, *Ilston Book*, 20. Proud was “disfellowshipped” for approximately three and half months.

83. *ARPB*, 176.

84. See Bunyan, *Differences in Judgement*. Also, Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People*, chapter 24.

85. Tombes, *Examen*, 85. See also White, “English Particular Baptists,” 16–17.

munion were not “true churches.”⁸⁶ It further demonstrates they thought it desirable for baptized believers to belong to closed communion churches, where no compromise was permitted in regard to “believe and be baptized” as the foundation for a true church.

In summary, we can say that the opposition of early Calvinistic Baptists to infant baptism was based on the conviction that there was neither command nor example in the New Testament for such practice. The strength of their conviction against the practice is indicated by the assertion that to baptize a child was “a high contempt and injury to Christ,” the husband of the church, since it forced upon him an unnatural wife, by which was meant a church founded on natural birth, rather than born of the Spirit. Infant baptism, it was argued, “destroys the body of Christ,”

For in time it [i.e. the church] will come to consist of naturall, and so a nation, and so a nationall Generation, & carnall members, amongst whom if any godly be, they will be brought into bondage, and become subjects of scorn & contempt, and the power of government rest in the hands of the wicked.⁸⁷

The evidence available to us regarding the practice of baptism supports the proposal that Christology was the controlling principle of ecclesiology among the early Calvinistic Baptists, since the link between Christ and a truly constituted church required that the saints be precise in the matter of baptism. John Spilsbury said on their behalf: “for that Church where Baptisme is the true ordinance of God, in the administration thereof, is by the Rules of the Gospel a true Church.”⁸⁸

2.4 A Gathered Church

The concept of the gathered church⁸⁹ had its importance for early Particular Baptists as a consequence of the emphasis placed on individual conversion, which was maintained in balance with an equal stress on the corporate dimension of faith in Christ. Well aware of the criticism that sectarianism

86. Christopher Hill suggests that it was this hardline approach that decided John Bunyan to adopt the name “Independent” rather than Baptist, even though he was baptized in 1655. When the Bedford church took out its license in 1672 it was as “congregational,” not Baptist. Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People*, 293.

87. Spilsbury, *Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme*, 25.

88. *Ibid.*, 25.

89. The most comprehensive defense of the concept of the gathered church by a Puritan was Goodwin, *Government of the Churches of Christ*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* vol. XI.

minimized the communal dimension of faith in favor of individual freedom and personal responsibility, Thomas Collier insisted that a church is

not a company of Saints walking at liberty, not compacted together, as some have thought, but those that are the Church of Christ, are to walke in the order and forme of the Gospel.⁹⁰

Writing as Messenger to the West Country Baptist churches in April 1657 Collier reminded the believers there of the corporate nature of the church,

through the working of his holy Spirit he hath called very many precious souls out of Babylon’s wayes and worships and hath placed them together in families like a flock.⁹¹

The juxtaposition of the individual and the corporate is seen in another of Collier’s writings, where he drew first on the biblical metaphor of, “living stones”⁹² to speak of the election of believers called out of the world by the preaching of the Gospel: “By the Ministry of his Word, [God] diggs men, *living stones*, out of the dead quarry of mankind.”⁹³

This is the material from which the Lord builds his house, and none are to be taken for living stones except those who particularly hold forth faith and repentance, that is, turning to God.⁹⁴ Second, he argued that while believers constitute the formal “order” of the church, its true “form” is to be gathered and unified in one body:

there may be stones and timber all fitted and ready for the building, yet it is not a house till compacted together . . . no more is the spirituall Temple and house of Christ now in the Gospel, till it be brought into forme, and compact together. . . Thus you see now, that the Church of Christ is a Building, and a Building fitly framed together for an Habitation of God.⁹⁵

Changing the metaphor, but making the same argument Collier says that the Church of Christ is a body, and, “a body is compact together, else no body.”⁹⁶

90. Collier, *Certaine Queries*, 8.

91. *ARPB*, 89.

92. 1 Peter 2:5. Collier, *Certaine Queries*, 1.

93. *Ibid.*, 9.

94. *Ibid.*, 3.

95. *Ibid.*, 7.

96. 1 Cor 12:27. Collier, *Certaine Queries*, 8. The image of the Church as a “City compact together” occurs again in Collier, *Right Constitution*, 38.

According to the Messengers of the Midland Association in 1657, twelve or thirteen was the minimum number of disciples required to “sit downe as a church,”⁹⁷ presumably, though it is not stated, according to the pattern of the twelve apostles plus Christ. At the Abingdon Association General Meeting in 1653, the issue of baptized believers “who stand not related to any church of Christ,” was discussed as a matter of grave concern. Such persons were, “to be instructed and encouraged to joyne themselves to some true church of Christ.”⁹⁸ This, they stated, was to be the normal practice in all their churches for all members.

What this might mean in practice may be judged from a question raised at the Midland Association gathering in June 1656, where it was asked, “whether a competent number of baptized believers in a troop or regiment may there walke as a church.”⁹⁹ The answer given stated:

wee do not discerne that a number of disciples in a troop or regiment canne there walke as and act as a perticular church of Christ as seeing no Scripture to warrant it nor discerning them to be in a capacity to keep close to the rule of the worde in receiving of members, dealing with them in all cases as the matter shall require, and that they are continually liable to be dissolved.¹⁰⁰

It is not clear what was meant by the lack of “Scriptural warrant” for forming “a church” within the army. It might be interpreted to mean their concern was the composition of this church, since there was no precedent in the New Testament for a church comprised of soldiers.¹⁰¹ Alternatively, it might have been the location of the church, given that the New Testament has no record of a congregation of believers within the army, though Roman soldiers might have been members of a New Testament church. What is clear is that a group of believers within the army was deemed not competent

97. *ARPB*, 33. In the Abingdon Association the church at Watlington was eighteen strong and asked permission of the association to disband. This was refused on grounds that it would foreclose the holding forth of the word and way of Christ in Watlington. *ARPB*, 196.

98. *Ibid.*, 132.

99. White draws attention to a similar situation involving Cromwell’s Cambridge Troop, who proposed to make themselves into a church with Richard Baxter as Pastor. See *ARPB*, 41 n. 23. The account is told in *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, I.51.

100. *ARPB*, 27-8.

101. That Baptists were concerned about the spiritual status of soldiers is evident from a question about soldiers receiving communion discussed in the West Country Association. The issue was not their participation in militarism and bloodshed, but being subject to state power. See *ibid.*, 102.

to regulate their membership in order to maintain a believer’s church, that is, “keep[ing] close to the rule of the worde in receiving of members.” Why it should be more difficult for a group of believers in the army to assess the spiritual condition of another man is not elaborated. The Messengers did, however, make it clear that the threat of dissolution of the army undermined the “compactness,” or gatheredness, of a church, making impossible longevity of any church comprised of soldiers, an essential element in emerging Baptist ecclesiology.

The priority of the local gathered congregation in Baptist ecclesiology is evident when Collier discusses the form of government and discipline in a true Church which was in his view,

Not an Episcopall Government by Lord Bishops, not a Presbyterian Government of many, to rule over one.

But every Assembly of Saints thus gathered, . . . are to elect and Ordaine Officers, and to them Christ hath given full power to performe every duty of a Church, that is, to watch over one the other, to admonish one the other, to Censure such as are disorderly, in a word, to receive in such as they conceive the Lord hath added; to cast forth such as walke disorderly.¹⁰²

In contrast to the hierarchical structure of Presbyterianism, and the presbyterial oversight of Independency, Baptist ecclesiology asserted the authority of each gathered congregation of believers, under the Kingship of Jesus, to appoint its own officers and expel disorderly members.¹⁰³ With a hint of polemical tone Collier says,

You never read of any one Church in Scripture, exercising power over each other; you never find the Lord JESUS in Scripture, to charge any one Church to look to others, but to themselves.¹⁰⁴

While this vision of the church emphasized the status and responsibilities accorded to each church in the New Testament, there was the potential to develop an unhealthy isolation, one church from another. Particular Baptists, in reality, over the next decade, rejected an extreme form of independent congregationalism by cultivating associations of churches which might assist and help one another.¹⁰⁵

102. Collier, *Certaine Queries*, 22–23.

103. On the authority of Baptist congregations to try, elect and ordain their own minister see *ARPB*, 171.

104. Collier, *Certaine Queries*, 23.

105. For example, see *ARPB*, 129. Baptist associationalism is the subject of ch.5.

The primacy of the gathered congregation also determined Collier's understanding of the circumference of jurisdiction for Ruling Elders and the wider Eldership. Writing against the background of the Westminster Assembly, it cannot be coincidence that in his major defense of Baptist ecclesiology Collier asks, "What is meant by the Presbytery[?],"¹⁰⁶ in other words what is the nature of eldership in the church. In defining the word, he had nothing remarkable or particularly new to say, explaining that "*Presbyteros*, or Presbyterian is a Greek word meaning Eldership, or the Ruling Elders." His understanding of the domain of the Elder, however, is entirely congregational. He interpreted 1 Tim 5:17 to mean that Elders, or an Eldership, function in only one and the same Church, "not that one Eldership should have power over another, but all for the good of the same body."¹⁰⁷ The gathered congregation is the proper context and the boundary for the ministry of elders.

This understanding of eldership had a Christological perspective and derived from the core conviction that churches made ministers, not ministers churches, that the pastoral office was derived from the congregation, gathered in Christ's name, which chose and ordained them.¹⁰⁸ This pattern of congregational ministry was affirmed by the sixteenth meeting of the Abingdon Association of Baptists in 1656 which discussed the question, to whom were given the ministry gifts bestowed on the *church* by the ascended Lord, according to Eph 4.8–14. While it was acknowledged that Christ's ministry gifts had been given to the universal church, nevertheless, they noted verses 14–16 of this text were addressed specifically to the Ephesians, and so they concluded,

some of the gifts here, viz., pastours and teachers, which we conceive to be one office variously named, as elders, bishops, overseers and pastours, and with respect to the severall parts of the worke assigned to the office are such whose ministration is appropriated to the body of Christ considered in particular congregations.¹⁰⁹

106. Collier, *Certaine Queries*, 23. In the following paragraph italics and capitals follow the original.

107. *Ibid.*, 24.

108. Tolmie, *Saints*, 97. Thomas Collier's statement about ordination in a Baptist congregation lists 1. election by the church, 2. approbation by the church, 3. laying on of hands by representatives of the congregation. See Collier, *The Right Constitution*, 31–33.

109. *ARPB*, 170.

Although Ephesians 4 describes ministry gifts distributed universally to God’s people, ministers function only in particular congregations, in early Baptist polity, because Christ’s authority is mediated congregationally. The gifts of ministry are common to all churches, but exercised locally.

The experience of community in the gathered church is further treated in Collier’s essay *The Right Constitution*, where chapter six is devoted to the duties of members of the church to the Lord, to each other, and to all men.¹¹⁰ The principal duty of church members is to “walk in love,” to cultivate relationships of mutual edification and help. In this vision of the congregation the strong are to bear with the infirmities of the weak, to restore one another, to seek to please one another, to exhort, admonish, reprove, and do every duty of love to each other. When members of a congregation in the Midlands asked permission of their Messengers to absent themselves from the breaking of bread in their own church, in order to attend another church where there may be “more eminent brethren to minister,” their request was denied, “because the greater end of church fellowship is not answered in so doing.”¹¹¹ This was the strength and appeal of the gathered church, according to the Baptists, that members were taught to care one for one another, and each experienced support in the fellowship of believers.

For those outside of Baptist circles the congregationalist concept of the gathered church was not without dangers and therefore not a practice universally approved or welcomed even by Advanced Believers in the 1640s. Concerns about the Baptist insistence on prioritizing the local, particular, expression of church focused on the potential compromise of the principles of universality, uniformity and unity which had characterized the English church both pre- and post-English Reformation, and was prized by Episcopalians and Presbyterians alike.¹¹² Baptist polity, it was believed, inevitably resulted in ecclesiastical plurality, in which there was little regard for a national church. Indeed, this was true, and Particular Baptists directed their energies to forming congregations on the basis that where two or three were gathered in the name of Christ, he was present among them, confirming their competence to be fully a church.

110. Collier, *Right Constitution*, 38ff.

111. *ARPB*, 35.

112. Thomas Goodwin describes Presbyterianism as holding to the universality, uniformity and unity of the church, “even as every part of water hath the nature of the whole.” Goodwin, *Works XI*, 4.