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Michael A. G. Haykin

The Baptist Identity: A View From the Eighteenth Century

Michael A. G. Haykin, who is Professor of Church History, at Heritage Baptist College and Theological Seminary, London, Ontario, examines the transformation in Particular Baptist identity that took place in the eighteenth century.

I. The Baptist Identity in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries

In the past century, there has been considerable debate as to the roots of the Baptist tradition. It has been argued by some scholars that Baptist origins should be traced back to the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement on the European continent and its offshoots in England. On the other hand, there have been Baptist historians who have maintained that Puritanism and its struggle during the late 1500s and the first half of the 1600s to thoroughly reform the Church of England is the matrix of the Baptist tradition and one need look no further for other sources of the early Baptist perspective on the Christian life. Indeed, whatever the merits of the argument that the Anabaptists are among the forebears of the Baptist movement, there is no gainsaying the fact that the early English and Welsh Baptist leaders were nearly all Puritans before becoming Baptists.[1] And when they became Baptists, they brought with them typical Puritan concerns, especially those that dealt with the reformation of church life and its structures.

Among the Puritans it was a common assumption that careful study of the New Testament would yield a blueprint by means of which the church could be reconstituted. Although they differed on the details of this blueprint, they were fundamentally agreed that

[1] Eric H. Ohlmann, 'Baptists and Evangelicals' in Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston, (eds.), *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Knoxville, 1991), 149. For a good summary of the discussion about Baptist origins, see Martyn J. Whittock, 'Baptist Roots: The Use of Models in Tracing Baptist Origins', *EQ*, 57 (1985), 317–326.

such a blueprint did exist. One significant consequence of this assumption was that once this blueprint was believed to have been discovered and the church reconstructed accordingly, it could only be considered a betrayal of fellowship if there was any fraternization with churches that refused to be reformed according to the details of the blueprint.[2] Given this background, it is not at all surprising that the early English Baptists developed a robust ecclesiology, in which pride of place was given to the idea that a true local church is a congregation of 'visible saints.' In the words of the *First London Confession of Faith*, an early Baptist confession that was first published in 1644, the local church is 'a company of visible saints, called & separated from the world, by the word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel, being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord and each other by mutual agreement.'[3] The mention of baptism after 'profession of the faith of the Gospel' distinguished these early Baptists from their fellow Puritans who continued to affirm the practice of infant baptism. By admitting only baptized believers into the membership of their local congregations, the early Baptists narrowed the boundaries of the local church and consequently owned a distinct identity in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English society. Underlying this restriction of membership was the conviction that 'religion is a matter of private conscience rather than public order, that the church is a fellowship of believers rather than an army of pressed men' and women.[4]

Now, although this conviction about the nature of the local church was common to all Baptists throughout the seventeenth century, differences over other aspects of Christian theology caused them to separate into two quite distinct camps: the General Baptists, so denominated because they argued that Christ's death was for all men and women; and the Particular or Calvinistic Baptists, who upheld the Calvinistic assertion that Christ's death was solely for the elect, and was thus a particular one. A third group, the Seventh-Day Baptists, who worshipped on Saturday instead of Sunday, were

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[2] B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1983), 10–12; *idem*, 'The Origins and Convictions of the First Calvinistic Baptists', *Baptist History and Heritage*, 25, No.4 (October, 1990), 42–43; *idem*, 'The Twilight of Puritanism in the Years Before and After 1688' in Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan I. Israel and Nicholas Tyacke, (eds.), *From Persecution to Toleration. The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England* (Oxford, 1991), 308–309.

[3] *The First London Confession of Faith* 33 [1644 ed.; repr. William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, 1969), 165]. The spelling and punctuation have been modernized.

[4] B. R. White, 'The Doctrine of the Church in the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644', *JTS*, N.S., 19 (1968), 580, 582, 590; Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford, 1978), 34.

Calvinistic in doctrine, but nowhere near as large a body as either the General and Particular Baptists. By 1660, these three Baptist groups had established around 200 churches, of which roughly 60 per cent were congregations of the Particular Baptist persuasion.[5]

These halcyon days of growth and expansion, however, were not to last. By the 1720s, the General Baptists were largely moribund, their growth arrested by a variety of factors. Four in particular merit mention: the General Baptists were restricted in their geographical distribution, they had a distinct reluctance to erect church buildings, they strictly enforced a policy of endogamy, and were ultimately unwilling to censure Trinitarian and Christological heresy. The last-named concerned the views of Matthew Caffyn (1628–1714), a General Baptist pastor who, finding his mind unable to fathom the mysteries of the Trinity and the deity of Christ, concluded that neither could be true. By the mid-1700s, Caffyn's way of reasoning was that of the majority of the General Baptists. As Dan Taylor (1728–1816), a General Baptist who sought to bring renewal to his denomination in the latter part of the eighteenth century, put it: 'they degraded Jesus Christ, and He degraded them.'[6]

The Particular Baptists, on the other hand, remained firm in their commitment to Trinitarian Christianity, but many of them found themselves shunted into the wastes of High Calvinism by two of their most prolific theologians, John Gill (1697–1771) and John Brine (1703–1765). The High Calvinism enunicated in the works of these two London-based pastors laid particular stress on eternal justification —the notion that the justification of the elect properly takes place 'prior to the foundation of the world' and thus before the elect actually exercise faith—and rejected the idea that saving faith is required of all men and women by God. Gill, for instance, stated that he knew of no scriptural passages 'that exhort and command all men, all the individuals of human nature, to repent, and believe in Christ for salvation.' Those texts that appeared to have such a thrust, Gill was quick to explain, had in mind 'an external repentance and

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[5] White, *English Baptists*, 7–10; William Henry Brackney, *The Baptists* (New York, 1988), 9. On the other hand, J. F. McGregor estimates that by this date there were more than 250 Baptist churches: 'The Baptists: Fount of All Heresy' in his and B. Reay, (eds.), *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1984), 33. On the Seventh-Day Baptists, see B. R. White, 'The Frontiers of Fellowship Between English Baptists, 1609–1660', *Foundations*, 11 (1968), 251–252.

[6] Cited W. E. Blomfield, 'Yorkshire Baptist Churches in the 17th and 18th Centuries' in *The Baptists of Yorkshire* (2nd. ed.; Bradford/London, 1912), 105. On Caffyn, see B. R. White, 'Caffyn, Matthew (1628–1714)' in Richard L. Greaves and Robert Zaller, (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century* (Brighton, 1982), I, 115–116; Frank Louis Mauldin, 'Truth, Heritage, and Eighteenth-Century English Baptists', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 35 (1993–1994), 213.

reformation, and an historical faith in, or assent to, Jesus as the Messiah.[7] It is the refusal to believe that Jesus is the Messiah that Gill designates as the 'damning sin of unbelief,' not the lack of faith in him as Saviour and Lord. Since this latter type of faith is possible only as a gift from God, God cannot justly send a person to hell for failing to exercise it. Consequently, men and women outside of Christ are under no obligation at all to believe that Christ died for sinners. Preachers who followed this line of thinking thus generally refrained from pressing upon their hearers the vital need to trust in Christ alone for salvation. In essence, the writings of these two theologians, as C. H. Spurgeon (1834–1892) later observed, helped to promote a system of theology that 'chilled many churches to their very soul, for it. . .led them to omit the free invitations of the gospel, and to deny that it is the duty of sinners to believe in Jesus.'[8]

There were other factors, of course, for Particular Baptist decline during the first half of the 1700s. Certain legal restrictions enacted during the previous century that were designed to curtail the participation of non-Anglicans in the mainstream of English life and society remained in force. When it came to evangelism, these restrictions effectively closeted Baptist preachers in their meeting-houses. Moreover, many Particular Baptists seem to have acquiesced to this legal discrimination and for much of the eighteenth century limited their horizons to the maintenance of congregational life. Their basic concept of the local church gave them an intensity in their fellowship not found in the traditional parish church, and it was all too easy to close ranks, become insular, and take delight in their heritage as God's 'walled sheepfold and watered garden.'[9] The geographical location of a good number of Particular Baptist churches was a further source of weakness during this period. Nearly half of their congregations were in small market-towns, villages, and hamlets. Contact between them was especially difficult during the winter and bad weather, when poorly maintained roads became well-nigh impassable. And not only was communication between the churches hindered because of their rural location, but also their working together in such joint endeavours as evangelism and church-planting. These factors, when coupled with the denomin-

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[7] *The Cause of God and Truth* (Repr. London, 1855), 166–167.

[8] Susannah Spurgeon and J. W. Harrald, (eds.), *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography* (London, 1899), I, 310. See also the discussion of Gill's preaching in Peter Naylor, *Picking Up a Pin for the Lord: English Particular Baptists from 1688 to the Early Nineteenth Century* (London, 1992), 187–191.

[9] *First London Confession of Faith* 34 [Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 166]. The phrase 'watered garden' is drawn from Ct 4:12, a favourite ecclesiological proof-text of the Particular Baptists during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

ation's High Calvinism, led to a marked decline of the Particular Baptists during the first half of the eighteenth century. In 1715 there were roughly 220 Particular Baptist congegations in England and Wales; thirty-five years later the number had fallen to around 150.[10]

II. The Particular Baptist Identity during the Early Years of the Evangelical Revival

Coniciding with this period of Particular Baptist declension was the Evangelical Revival, which began in the mid-1730s and in which the open-air preaching of George Whitefield (1714–1770), John Wesley (1703–1791) and his brother Charles (1708–1788), Howel Harris (1714–1773) and Daniel Rowland (1711–1790) to literally thousands played such a prominent part. For close to forty years the Particular Baptists were generally quite cool, indeed one might say frigid, towards the revival and its leaders. In part this coolness can be traced to the fact that two of the key figures in the revival, the Wesleys, were firmly committed to Arminianism, which most Particular Baptists, if not all, regarded as a damnable heresy alongside Arianism, Deism, and Roman Catholicism.[11] Whitefield, though, like many of the other leaders in the revival, was a Calvinist. Yet, only a handful of Particular Baptist pastors—among them Andrew Gifford (1700–1784) in London and John Oulton in Leominster—openly associated with him. Many Particular Baptists had distinct problems with Whitefield's pressing men and women to put their trust in Christ, and complained of his 'Arminian dialect' and 'Semi-pelagian addresses'![12]

Equally problematic for these Particular Baptists was Whitefield's ecclesiology. Whitefield eschewed any attempt to make ecclesiologi-

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[10] For further discussion of Particular Baptist decline during the 1700s, see Michael A. G. Haykin, ' "A Habitation of God, through the Spirit": John Sutcliff (1752–1814) and the revitalization of the Calvinistic Baptists in the late eighteenth century', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 34 (1991–1992), 304–305.

[11] For Gill's views in this regard, see Curt D. Daniel, 'Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinbugh, 1983), 370. Gill had a running controversy with John Wesley over the issue of the perseverance of the saints during the 1750s; see *ibid.*, 368–370; Alan P. F. Sell, *The Great Debate. Calvinism, Arminianism and Salvation* (1982 ed.; repr. Grand Rapids, 1983), 81–82.

[12] L. G. Champion, *Farthing Rushlight. The Story of Andrew Gifford 1700–1784* (London, 1961), 26; George Whitefield, Letters to John Oulton, 6 April 1742 and 27 May 1742 [in *Letters of George Whitefield for the period 1734–1742* (1771 ed.; repr. Edinburgh, 1976), 381–382, 393–394]. For the Particular Baptist description of Whitefield's preaching, see Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London, 1823), III, 280.

cal issues central to his preaching. As he told John Oulton towards the end of May, 1742:[13]

> If the Lord gives us a true catholic spirit, free from a party sectarian zeal, we shall do well. I am sorry to hear that there is so much narrowness among some of the brethren in Wales. Brother [Howel] H[arris] complains sadly of it. I hope dear Mr. O[ulton] will be kept free, and not fall into disputing about Baptism or other non-essentials; for I am persuaded, unless, we all are content to preach Christ, and to keep off from disputable things, wherein we differ, God will not bless us long. If we act otherwise, however we may talk of a catholic spirit, we shall only be bringing people over to our own party, and there fetter them. I pray the Lord to keep dear Mr. O[ulton] and me from such a spirit.

Such evangelical catholicity was perceived by many Particular Baptists as a threat to their identity. They had inherited from their seventeenth-century forebears a definite understanding of the nature of the church, which they regarded as fully biblical and which gave them a distinct identity among the various groups that comprised English Christianity. The revival, if embraced, might topple the walls of their 'enclosed gardens' and submerge their treasured identity in a sea of non-denominational evangelicalism. Benjamin Wallin (1711–1782), the pastor of Maze Pond Baptist Church in London and a friend of John Gill, spoke for many in his denomination when he maintained *vis-à-vis* the revival:[14]

> They who neglect. . .divine institutions on a pretence that inward and spiritual devotion is all God requires, are under a plain delusion. . .More is required in Gospel-worship than barely to hear the Word in the assemblies of the faithful. . .We learn from the New Testament that they who received the Word were soon baptized and joined the disciples, who in every place were with one consent united in a church-state and communed together under their several officers in the ordinances of the Lord.

In other words, any attempt to revive the church without giving due consideration to believer's baptism and the principles of congregational church government was essentially defective.

Moreover, despite his catholicity, Whitefield showed no inclination to leave the Church of England, a body that most Baptists regarded as an apostate institution. The Church of England, John Gill wrote, giving

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[13] Letter to John Oulton, 27 May 1742 [*Letters of George Whitefield*, 393–394].

[14] Benjamin Wallin, *The Folly of Neglecting Divine Institutions* (London, 1758), iv-v. The capitalization and punctuation of this text have been modernized. See also the remarks of Geoffrey F. Nuttall, 'Methodism and the Older Dissent: Some Perspectives', *The Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, 2 (1978–1982), 272.

expression to a belief common among his fellow Baptists, 'has neither the form nor matter of a true church, nor is the Word of God purely preached in it.'[15] Outer form and inner vitality were, in the minds of many Particular Baptists, fused together in an infrangible union.[16]

III. Re-thinking the Particular Baptist Identity, 1780–1820

By the time that Whitefield died at Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1770, however, the revival was beginning to make inroads into the English and Welsh Particular Baptist community. A number of younger Baptist leaders had been converted under Whitefield's preaching or that of other preachers in the revival, and had a perspective on the revival that differed considerably from that of older Baptists like Gill and Wallin. John Fawcett (1740–1817), for example, the pastor of the Baptist cause at Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire, and a powerful force for renewal in the north of England, was converted under the preaching of Whitefield and subsequently received his earliest Christian nurture from another Anglican Evangelical, William Grimshaw (1708–1763). Fawcett later hung a portrait of Whitefield in his study and, in the words of his son, 'the very mention of his name inspired the warmest emotions of grateful remembrance.' The experience of having heard Whitefield's strongly evangelistic preaching left an indelible impression on Fawcett's mind which 'remained unabated to the end of his life' and laid down the model upon which he was to pattern his own ministry.[17]

In the 1780s, moreover, the tenacious hold of High Calvinism on the Particular Baptist denomination was effectively challenged through the publication of *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* (1785). Written by Andrew Fuller (1754–1815), the pastor of Kettering Baptist Church in Northamptonshire, this book convincingly demonstrated from the Scriptures that 'faith in Christ is the duty

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[15] Cited Dafydd Densil James Morgan, 'The Development of the Baptist Movement in Wales between 1714 and 1815 with particular reference to the Evangelical Revival' (Unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, 1986), 39.

[16] *Ibid.*, 39.

[17] [John Fawcett, Jr.,] *An Account of the Life, Ministry, and Writings of the Late Rev. John Fawcett*, D. D. (London/Halifax, 1818), 15–19, 107. Also see the remarks of Sell, *Great Debate*, 77. On Whitefield's influence on the Baptists in general, see Olin C. Robison, 'The Particular Baptists in England 1760–1820' (Unpublished D. Phil. thesis, Regent's Park College, Oxford University, 1963), 145–153; Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1986), 76–82.

of all men who hear, or who have opportunity to hear, the Gospel.'[18] If such was the case, Fuller concluded, then preachers of the Gospel have a corresponding obligation to urge upon all and sundry the vital necessity of believing in Christ for salvation. It was a timely and epoch-making work that enunciated a position that a good number in the denomination—individuals like Fawcett—had already arrived at or were fast approaching. In its wake came the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society (the B.M.S.), and thus the launching of what has been termed the modern missionary movement. These two events—the publication and ready reception of Fuller's book and the formation of the B.M.S.—are illustrative of the transformation that took place in Particular Baptist ranks between 1780 and 1820. From an inward-looking body preoccupied with primarily preserving its own ecclesial experience and heritage, the Particular Baptists were transformed into a denomination that was outward-looking and fervently committed to evangelism, both at home and abroad. While completely accurate statistics of Particular Baptist growth throughout this period are not available, by 1812 the denomination had grown to around 588 churches in England and Wales.[19]

Accompanying this rapid influx of converts was understandably fresh reflection on what it meant to be a Particular Baptist. An excellent vantage-point from which to view this reflection are a number of small items written by John Sutcliff (1752–1814), the pastor of Olney Baptist Church, Buckinghamshire. Sutcliff had been baptized as a teenager by Fawcett at Hebden Bridge. After a period of study at Bristol Baptist Academy, he was called to the Olney church in 1775. Here he served faithfully till his death just before the end of the Napoleonic Wars. It is noteworthy that early on in his pastorate he made the acquaintance of Andrew Fuller, in whom he

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[18] *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* [*The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. Joseph Belcher (1845 ed.; repr. Harrisonburg, Virginia, 1988), II, 343].

[19] Ernest A. Payne, *The Baptist Union. A Short History* (London, 1959), 267. For further discussion of this transformation, see Geoffrey F. Nuttall, 'Northamptonshire and *The Modern Question*: A Turning-Point in Eighteenth-Century Dissent', *JTS*, N.S., 16 (1965), 101–123; W. R. Ward, 'The Baptists and the Transformation of the Church, 1780–1830', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 25 (1973–1974), 167–184; L. G. Champion, 'Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 28 (1979–1980), 196–208; Deryck W. Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People. Itineracy and the transformation of English Dissent*, 1780–1830 (Cambridge, 1988).

recognized a kindred spirit, and the two men quickly became fast friends.[20]

In the spring of 1791 the two friends were asked to preach at a ministerial meeting of the Baptist Association to which each of their churches belonged, namely, the Northamptonshire Association. Sutcliff entitled his address *Jealousy for the Lord of Hosts illustrated* and based it on the statement of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19:10, 'I have been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts.' In the course of the sermon, Sutcliff asserted that genuine zeal for God results in an evangelistic lifestyle. He went on to describe this lifestyle by means of imagery drawn from Jesus' declaration in the Sermon on the Mount that the people of God are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

> Are they [i.e. God's people] not the *Salt* of the earth? It is not proper that the *Salt* should lie all in one heap. It should be scattered abroad. Are they not the *Light* of the world? These taken collectively should, like the Sun, endeavour to enlighten the whole earth. As all the rays, however, that each can emit, are limited in their extent, let them be dispersed, that thus the whole globe may be illuminated. Are they not *Witnesses* for God? It is necessary they be distributed upon every hill, and every mountain, in order that their sound may go into all the earth, and their words unto the end of the world.[21]

God's intention for the local congregation of believers is that it be an aggresive evangelistic body, seeking 'to enlighten the whole earth.' The emphasis on vigorous evangelism as an intrinsic part of the make-up of the local church was, as we have seen, quite foreign to the thinking of many Particular Baptists during the early decades of the 1700s. Impacted by the Evangelical Revival, however, Sutcliff is clearly involved in re-evaluating what had constituted the identity of many Particular Baptist churches for much of the eighteenth century.

Earlier in this sermon Sutcliff had noted that zeal for God is invariably accompanied by a deep appreciation of the Scriptures as an 'infallible guide' and 'unerring rule,' in which there is 'no defect' and 'nothing superfluous or improper.' He admitted, though, that some things enjoined in the Scriptures, when 'comparatively viewed, are of greater importance than others.'

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[20] For studies of Sutcliff's life and theology, see Michael A. G. Haykin, 'Revival: The Perspective of John Sutcliff (1752–1814)', *Kairos*, 1, No.2 (Spring 1988), 8–9, 12, 14; *idem*, 'John Sutcliff (1752–1814) and the revitalization of the Calvinistic Baptists in the late eighteenth century'; *idem*, 'John Sutcliff and the Concert of Prayer', *Reformation & Revival Journal*, 1, No.3 (Summer 1992), 65–88.

[21] *Jealousy for the Lord of Hosts illustrated* (London, 1791), 14–15. For further discussion of this sermon, which was an important step on the road to the

> Yet nothing that bears the stamp of royal authority, no edict that is issued out under the broad seal of Jehovah, should ever be considered as a trifling article, or represented as a matter of indifference. . . . If, when some articles of faith, some modes of worship are represented as *indifferent*, no more is intended than that comparatively viewed they are not of equal importance with some others, in certain cases the fact will be allowed. But if this phrase means that such doctrines or parts of worship are of *no importance*, . . . this is denied.[22]

In the context of this quote Sutcliff did not elaborate as to what 'articles of faith' or 'modes of worship' he considered 'indifferent.' Eleven years later, in the introduction that he wrote for the English publication of the memoirs of Susanna Anthony (1726–1791), a member of the Congregationalist church in Newport, Rhode Island, Sutcliff gave a clear example of what he placed among the things 'indifferent.' Sutcliff had noted that there was a considerable variety of experience and conviction amongst 'the most eminent Christians,' whose Christianity 'we cannot justly call in question.' Susanna Anthony, for instance, regarded 'sprinkling' as the 'the scriptural mode of baptism.' Sutcliff, a convinced Baptist, disagreed with her, but he was conscious that such 'contrarieties in the views and feelings' of Christians are like 'the accidental spots in the human countenance. The great and essential principles of Christianity are found in every Christian, no less than the distinguishing properties of humanity are found in every man.'[23] In other words, baptism was not among the 'essential principles of Christianity,' and must therefore be an issue upon which there could be legitimate disagreement. In arguing thus, Sutcliff shows himself to be an heir of the Evangelical Revival and such proponents of it as Whitefield rather than of the early Baptist movement and its later protagonists like Gill. While he was certainly not prepared to renounce his Baptist convictions, the priority in Sutcliff's life were the 'great and essential principles of Christianity,' their dissemination, and the bonds of fellowship that these principles created between all genuine Christians. And in making these the priority of his life he is representative of many Particular Baptists of his generation.

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formation of the B.M.S., see Haykin, 'John Sutcliff (1752–1814) and the revitalization of the Calvinistic Baptists in the late eighteenth century', 311–313.

[22] *Jealousy for the Lord of Hosts*, 6.

[23] 'To the Christian Females of Great Britain' in his, John Ryland, Jr., and Andrew Fuller, (eds.), *Memoirs of Miss Susanna Anthony* (Clipstone, 1802), vi-viii. The punctuation and capitalization of this passage have been modernized. The names of Ryland and Fuller together with that of Sutcliff appear as co-authors of the introduction, but it appears that Sutcliff was chiefly responsible for writing the introduction.

A more detailed discussion of the Baptist identity in terms of the nature and purpose of the local church occurs in an address that Sutcliff gave in 1802 at the ordination of Thomas Morgan (1776–1857) to the pastoral oversight of Cannon Street Baptist Church, Birmingham. Sutcliff noted that the history of English Protestantism had been wracked by 'great controversies' over the nature of a local church and commented that 'an intimate acquaintance with these [controversies] would tend very little to godly edifying.'[24] This is a somewhat remarkable admission in view of the fact that Sutcliff's seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Baptist forebears had had no small share in fomenting these controversies. However, despite this negative reflection on his own heritage, Sutcliff displayed no essential retreat from the ecclesial convictions embedded in that heritage. For he went on to state that:[25]

> We suppose a Christian church to be a society of professsing christians, voluntarily united for spiritual purposes . . . Men are not born Christians. They are made such by the Holy Spirit. They are not members of a Christian church by natural birth; but become such by their own act and deed. Possessing one common principle, the principle of love, having drank into one spirit, the Spirit of Christ, they naturally associate.

Alongside this approach to the nature of the local church the Particular Baptist heritage had also defined the local church in terms of the distinctive marks (*notae*) singled out in the Calvinist tradition as being indicative of a genuine church of Christ. In the traditional Calvinist understanding, the church is present where the Word of God is faithfully preached, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper administered, and discipline upheld.[26] Thus, the earliest Calvinistic Baptist book focused exclusively on ecclesial polity, *The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline display'd* (1697) by Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), maintained that a true church of Christ is composed of 'Converted Persons,' is a community where 'the Word of God and Sacraments are duly administered, according to Christ's Institution,' and has 'regular and orderly Discipline.'[27]

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[24] 'Introductory Discourse' in his, John Ryland, and Andrew Fuller, *The Difficulties of the Christian Ministry, and the Means of surmounting them; with the Obedience of Churches to their Pastors explained and enforced* (Birmingham, 1802), 2–3.

[25] *Ibid.*, 3. The punctuation and capitalization of this passage have been modernized.

[26] See, for example, the teaching of Martin Bucer (1491–1551), well summarized by Paul D. L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (Atlanta, 1981), 48–50.

[27] Cited James Barry Vaughn, 'Public Worship and Practical Theology in the Work of Benjamin Keach (1640–1704)' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of St. Andrews, 1989), 326–327. See also the texts cited in this regard by Philip George

Sutcliff did not deny the validity of this perspective on the identifying characteristics of the church. But it was the proclamation of the Word of God which took precedence in Sutcliff's understanding of the church's nature.[28] This fact is clearly seen in the way that Sutcliff outlines what he regards as the purposes for which local churches exist. When Sutcliff listed these purposes in his address at Morgan's ordination, he specifically mentioned 'the honor of Christ, the advancement of his cause, and their [i.e. the members of the church] own profit.'[29] Given his remarks in *Jealousy for the Lord of Hosts*, 'the advancement of [Christ's] cause' can only mean uninhibited evangelism at home and abroad. Again, in *Qualifications for Church Fellowship*, which Sutcliff drew up in 1800 as a circular letter for the churches of the Northamptonshire Association, he stated that local churches have been brought into being for two principal reasons: the edification of believers and 'the promotion of the cause of Christ at large.'[30] These various reflections on the nature of the local church are well encapsulated in a statement of his good friend Andrew Fuller:[31]

> The *true* churches of Jesus Christ travail in birth for the salvation of men. They are the armies of the Lamb, the grand object of whose existence is to extend the Redeemer's kingdom.

What Sutcliff appears to be doing is re-thinking the Baptist identity in terms of one of the leading characteristics of the Evangelical Revival: an activism that was largely focused on the quest for the salvation of the lost.[32] The distinctive features of Baptist ecclesiology were thus being harnessed to the explosive power of fervent evangelism.

Finally, it should be noted that Sutcliff—like so many of his Baptist contemporaries—rejected the rigid walls of demarcation that earlier Baptists had erected between themselves and other denominations, in particular, the Anglican communion. When Sutcliff came to Olney in the summer of 1775, the Anglican curate in the town was the

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Allister Griffin-Allwood, 'The Canadianization of Baptists: From Denominations to Denomination, 1760–1912' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986), 30–33.

[28] This is also true with respect to Andrew Fuller's understanding of the nature of the local church; see the remarks of Griffin-Allwood, 'Canadianization of Baptists', 33–34.

[29] 'Introductory Discourse', 3.

[30] *Qualifications for Church Fellowship* (Clipstone, 1800), 3.

[31] *The Promise of the Spirit, the Grand Encouragement in Promoting the Gospel* (1810) [*Works*, III, 359, italics added].

[32] On activism as a mark of the revival and evangelicalism in general, see especially David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain. A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989 ed.; repr. Grand Rapids, 1992), 10–12.

celebrated John Newton (1725–1807). Although their respective ministries in Olney only overlapped for five years, Newton was always a welcome visitor at Baptist functions in the town. Prior to Sutcliff's coming to Olney, for instance, Newton had encouraged the Baptists and Anglicans in the town to develop the habit of holding joint services at the beginning of the new year. Sutcliff heartily endorsed this custom. Thus, the Anglican evangelical was able to write in his diary for January 2, 1776:[33]

> I put off the evening meeting that the people might hear the sermon to the youth at the Baptist Meeting. The text was Prov. 4,7. I thought Mr. Sutcliff spoke well and there seemed a great attention. Do Thou, O Lord, command a blessing . . .

Newton was also present at Sutcliff's ordination later that year on August 7. His diary records that he attended the services for the entire day and was greatly impressed with most of the preaching that he heard. Newton particularly appreciated the sermon of Benjamin Beddome (1717–1795), the Baptist minister and hymnwriter, who saw much fruitfulness during the many years of his ministry at Bourton-on-the-Water in the heart of the Cotswolds.[34]

Newton left Olney for London in 1780, but the cordial relationship that had existed between himself and Sutcliff continued to characterize Sutcliff and Newton's successors. For example, in March, 1792, Sutcliff, together with James Bean, the Anglican minister, and Thomas Hillyard, the pastor of the Congregationalist church in Olney, worked side by side in the town to obtain signatures on a national petition calling for the abolition of the slave trade.[35] And later, when Christopher Stephenson became vicar of the parish church, it was apparently not at all uncommon to see Sutcliff, Stephenson and Hillyard walking 'arm in arm' in the town.[36]

Particularly noteworthy is the way in which members of these three evangelical causes in Olney worked together to evangelize villages in the surrounding neighbourhood. In 1797 Hillyard wrote to a fellow Congregationalist, Samuel Greatheed in nearby Newport Pagnell, about the way in which 'three or more young men . . . from the several congregations at Olney' would go out to these villages to

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[33] Maurice F. Hewett, 'Sutcliff: The Meeting and the Man' (Unpublished typescript, Bristol Baptist College Library, n.d.), 59–60. Page references are from a copy made in 1951 by K. W. H. Howard (d. 1992), a former pastor of the Baptist work in Olney, and now in this author's possession.

[34] *Ibid.*, 61. On Beddome, see the 'Memoir' in *Sermons printed from the manuscripts of the late Rev. Benjamin Beddome* (London, 1835), ix-xxviii.

[35] *Ibid.*, 93.

[36] *Ibid.*, 94.

hold meetings, at which they would sing, read a portion of Scripture, pray, and then read a sermon—'plain, practical, awakening sermons, which hold out human depravity and misery by the fall, and salvation by Christ.' Sometimes, Hillyard informed Greatheed, 'a Churchman, an Independent, and a Baptist join in the same visit.'[37] It was this experience of a 'true, practical unity' and 'co-operation between like-minded individuals' in the town of Olney,[38] as well as a deep appreciation for and wide exposure to English-speaking evangelicals outside of Baptist circles, that led Sutcliff to make the following comments. They come from his address at the ordination of Thomas Morgan.

> Cheerfully we own, that the established church is honored with a noble list of worthies. Their names we love. Their memories we revere. . . . Numbers in that connexion, are zealous for truth, and are patterns in holiness. For their usefulness, we pray; and in their success, in turning sinners from darkness to light, we rejoice.[39]

Although Sutcliff is specifically talking about evangelicals in the Established Church, his comments would be equally true of his feelings regarding other non-Baptist evangelicals. They are sentiments which few Particular Baptists would have owned fifty years previously.

IV. Conclusion

After a number of decades of stagnation in the mid-1700s, the English and Welsh Particular Baptists underwent a profound rejuvenation and transformation from the 1780s through to the 1820s. In the wake of this dramatic renewal came a fresh evaluation of what constituted the parameters of the Particular Baptist com-

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[37] S. Greatheed, '[Letter] to the Editor', *The Evangelical Magazine*, 5 (1797), 278–279. I am indebted to Dr. D. Bruce Hindmarsh for this reference.

[38] This description of the ecclesial situation in Olney during the time of Sutcliff is that of Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People*, 35.

[39] 'Introductory Discourse', 5. Andrew Fuller expressed a similar position on more than one occasion. For instance, in an ordination sermon that he gave in 1787, he noted that time would fail him if he were to recount 'all the great souls, both inspired and uninspired, whom the King of Kings has delighted to honour.' He then went on to give a list of nine specific individuals, which included two American Congregationalists—Jonathan Edwards and David Brainerd—one Anglican—George Whitefield—and no Baptists. These men, Fuller said, 'were men of God; men who had great grace, as well as gifts; whose hearts burned in love to Christ and the souls of men' [*The Qualifications and Encouragement of a Faithful Minister Illustrated by the Character and Success of Barnabas* (*Works*, I, 143)].

munity. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries these parameters had been oriented around the concept of the church as a congregation of baptized believers. This focus among Particular Baptists on ecclesiological issues and their linking of spiritual vitality to church order, however, received a direct challenge from the Evangelical Revival. The participants of this revival, who knew themsleves to be part of a genuine movement of the Spirit of God, were mainly interested in issues relating to salvation. Ecclesial matters often engendered unnecessary strife and, in the eyes of individuals like Whitefield, robbed those who disupted about them of God's blessing. By the end of the century many Particular Baptists agreed. John Sutcliff, who typifies this change in thinking, was not prepared to deny his commitment to Baptist polity, but nor was he willing to remain fettered by traditional patterns of Baptist thought about their identity. Retaining the basic structure of Baptist thinking about the church he added one critical ingredient drawn from the experience of the Evangelical Revival: the vital need for local Baptist churches to be centres of vigorous evangelism. There is no doubt that this amounted to a re-thinking of Baptist identity. From the perspective of Sutcliff and those like him, Baptists were first of all Christians who needed to be concerned about the spread of the Gospel at home and abroad. In thus re-minting the Baptist identity, Sutcliff and those who were like-minded helped the Particular Baptists of their generation avoid what Andrew Fuller had predicted would happen to them if revival did not come their way: they 'would have become a perfect dunghill in society.'[40]

Abstract

During the late eighteenth century the English Particular (or Calvinistic) Baptists experienced a deep and profound revitalization that witnessed their transformation from an inward-looking denomination primarily concerned with the preservation of their ecclesiological heritage into a body that was outward-looking, vitally involved in vigorous evangelism at home and abroad, and centred on the proclamation of the gospel. This article examines this transformation of the Particular Baptist identity primarily through some of the writings of John Sutcliff (1752–1814), pastor of the Baptist cause in

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[40] Cited J. W. Morris, *Memoirs of the the Life and Writings of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (London, 1816), 267.

Olney, Buckinghamshire, and a close friend of William Carey. The influence of this transformation had far-reaching significance and its reverberations were still being felt in the 1870s and 1880s, when the English Baptists had become one of the leading bearers of nineteenth-century British Evangelicalism.