

I

The Longest Journey Begins

Arminians in the Vicinity

Baptist life began in England with a division between the Arminian and Calvinistic Baptists. The General Baptists, so-called because of their affirmation of general atonement, had their origin in the life and thought of John Smyth and his loyal but self-motivated church member, Thomas Helwys. While they began within the stream of Calvinistic Puritanism and Separatism, under the influence of the Mennonites in Holland they came to reject some of the more prominent features of Calvinism and affirmed the anti-Augustinianism of the Anabaptists.

Smyth himself went to the point of considering the peculiar Christology of the Mennonites a matter of indifference. He also affirmed their view of justification, a view similar to that of medieval Roman Catholicism, excepting sacraments.

In his *Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles*, Smyth confesses that Jesus was conceived “in the womb of the Virgin Mary” but does not exclude the possibility of Mary’s being a receptacle for a new kind of flesh created from heaven. By contrast, Helwys affirms that Jesus received his flesh “of hir substance.” In addition, Smyth forsook the doctrine of justification by faith as understood by the Reformers and replaced it with the Roman Catholic synthesis between justification and sanctification:

That the justification of man before the Divine tribunal (which is both the throne of justice and of mercy), consists partly of the imputation of

the righteousness of Christ apprehended by faith, and partly of inherent righteousness, in the holy themselves, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, which is called regeneration or sanctification: since any one is righteous, who doeth righteousness.¹

This construction of justification lays to waste all the gains of the Reformation. Sanctification in Reformation thought, though essential and inevitable in the justified person, is not to be construed as a part of justification. Rather, justification is to be seen solely in terms of the imputed righteousness of Christ, as Paul affirms in Philippians 3, and as Helwys sought to protect in his Confession of Faith when he said, “Man is justified onely by the righteousness off CHRIST, apprehended by faith.”²

In addition to his attempt to maintain justification by faith, Helwys believed total depravity to be a biblical doctrine. Men are “by nature the Children off wrath,” are born in “iniquitie and in sin conceived.” Other features of his former Calvinism simply appeared too harsh. Falling by the wayside were particular atonement, irresistible grace, unconditional election, and even perseverance of the saints. In Article 7 of his Confession, Helwys openly asserts that “men may fall away from the grace off God ... and from the truth, which they have received & acknowledged.” In light of this, Helwys warns, “Let no man presume to thinke that because he hath or had once grace, therefore he shall alwaies have grace.”³

General Baptist life had severe problems with a form of Unitarianism in the late seventeenth century, leading to the publication of a confession entitled *The Orthodox Creed*. The next century also saw a massive falling away into Unitarianism, leading to the formation of the New Connection of General Baptists under the leadership of Dan Taylor. Eventually the New Connection was the only strain of General Baptists who survived until the formation of the Baptist Union in 1891.

Exsurge Calvinistice

Particular Baptists arose out of the context of a Separatist congregation named after its three pastors: Jacob, Lathrop and Jessey. Having adopted believer's baptism in 1638, they affirmed baptism by immersion in 1641 and by 1644 produced a Confession of Faith. In large part this state-

¹ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 101.

² Ibid., 118.

³ Ibid., 118, 119.

ment, the *First London Confession*, was based upon a Separatist confession written by Henry Ainsworth, a member of the Separatist congregation of Francis Johnson.

John Spilsbury, the first pastor of a clearly identifiable Particular Baptist congregation, also had a powerful influence on the production of this confession. He viewed the formation of a church as incomplete without a commonly owned confession of faith to be acknowledged publicly by each individual. He summarized the content in a brief confession of ten articles. The confession affirms total depravity, the necessity of irresistible grace, the death of Christ for his elect, and the certain perseverance of those that are so elected, reconciled, and called. Spilsbury believed that Arminianism tended to destroy the gospel and make the enemies of God triumph. The rejection of original sin, the affirmation of free will, the assertion of universal atonement, and the affirmation of apostasy Spilsbury believed to be “a doctrine from beneath, and not from above, and the teachers of it from Satan, and not from God, and to be rejected as such that oppose Christ and his Gospel.”⁴

As an expression of Spilsbury’s theology and the other Particular Baptist pastors of London, the *First London Confession* was decidedly and clearly Calvinistic. For example, touching election, the confession states in Article III:

... and touching his creature man God had in Christ before the foundation of the world according to the good pleasure of his will foreordained some men to eternal life through Jesus Christ to the praise and glory of his grace leaving the rest in their sin to their just condemnation to the praise of his justice.”⁵

The confession confirms with equal clarity that fallen man is so depraved that he would never turn and convert himself without the irresistible movement of the Spirit of God. Article XXIV states:

... faith is ordinarily begot by the preaching of the gospel or word of Christ without respect to any power or capacity in the creature but it is wholly passive being dead in sins and trespasses, doth believe, and is converted by no less power, than that which raised Christ from the dead.⁶

⁴ John Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme*, (London, 1643), 44

⁵ Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 157.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

This served as reaffirmation of Article XXII, which said that faith is the *gift* of God *wrought* in the hearts of the elect by the Spirit of God, whereby they come to see, know and believe the truth of the Scriptures, and so on.

Nor was the doctrine of particular atonement veiled in any cloak of mystery, for Article XVII states, "... touching his priesthood Christ being consecrated hath appeared once to put away sin by the offering and sacrifice of himself and to this end hath fully performed and suffered all those things by which God through the blood of that his cross in an acceptable sacrifice might reconcile his elect only." Likewise, Article XXI says that "Christ Jesus by his death did bring forth salvation and reconciliation only for the elect which were those which God the Father gave him."

Article XXIII is one of the most beautiful and noble statements of the preservation of the saints that appears in any confession:

Those that have this precious faith wrought in them by the Spirit, can never finally nor totally fall away; and though many storms and floods do arise and beat against them, yet they shall never be able to take them off that foundation and rock which by faith they are fastened upon, but shall be kept by the power of God to salvation, where they shall enjoy their purchased possession, they being formerly engraven upon the palms of God's hands.⁷

It should be noted, however, that this is only half of the true doctrine of perseverance.

Other articles in this confession appear equally strong in affirming the providence of God and his sovereignty over every activity of all of his creatures.

Almost incredibly, William Lumpkin characterizes the theology of the confession as a "moderate type" of Calvinism. One wonders what "moderate" must mean in such a context, for every major and peculiar tenet of Calvinistic soteriology finds unmistakable expression in the confession. Lumpkin further states that "there is no teaching of reprobation."⁸ Article XIX, however, stands in stark contrast to such an affirmation:

Touching his Kingdome, Christ being risen from the dead, ... doth spiritually govern his Church, exercising his power over all Angels and Men, good and bad, to the preservation and salvation of the elect, to the overruling and destruction of his enemies, which are Reprobates. ... And ... ruling in the world over his enemies, Satan, and all the vessels of wrath,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 146.

limiting, using, restraining them by his mighty power, as seems good in his divine wisdom & justice to the execution of his determinate counsel, delivering them up to a reprobate mind, to be kept through their own deserts, in darkness and sensuality unto judgement.⁹

That Confession of Faith, written during the Puritan revolution, was satisfactory to introduce Baptists to their contemporaries. It had a marvelous effect in repressing scurrilous rumors about the Baptists. Many times and in numerous writings, Baptists had been identified with the extreme radical revolutionaries on the Continent. This confession did much to alleviate the suspicions under which they toiled.

The next forty years brought unparalleled changes in the political situation in England. A king's army was defeated by his own subjects, and the king, Charles I, was beheaded; Oliver Cromwell, a commoner, was raised to the position of Protector of England; and the fifth monarchy movement wooed many Baptists into vigorous and revolutionary political activity, even against Cromwell. After the death of Cromwell, the profligate Stuart line was restored to the throne. The Clarendon Code, a series of four repressive acts, came into effect in the years 1661–1665, bringing Baptists and other Protestant dissenters under great persecution.

In light of these changes, Baptists felt the need to identify themselves with a large body of non-Anglican Protestants. In 1646 the Westminster Assembly adopted the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. In 1655 the Congregationalists, with a few changes, virtually duplicated this in a confession they called *The Savoy Declaration*. Following suit, Baptists in London adopted a second statement, appropriately called "The Second London Confession." In the introduction to this document, the Baptists restated the reasons for having written the *1644 Confession*, affirmed their pleasure at its results, and then stated:

... and for as much as that Confession is not now commonly to be had; and also that many others have since embraced the same truth which is owned therein; it was judged necessary by us to join together in giving a testimony to the world; of our firm adhering to those wholesome Principles by the publication of this which is now in your hand.¹⁰

They went on to affirm that though the method and manner of expressing their thoughts varied, "the substance of the matter is the same." They felt constrained to explain the reason for this procedure. In their ef-

⁹ Ibid., 161, 162.

¹⁰ Ibid., 244

fort to show their great agreement with the other Protestant bodies, they decided to “make use of the very same words with them both in those articles which are very many wherein our faith and doctrine is the same with theirs.” In a humble spirit they stated that “we have no itch to clog religion with new words, but to readily acquiesce [sic] in that form of sound words which hath been, in consent with the holy scriptures, used by others before us.”¹¹

Although none could doubt the very clear soteriological Calvinism of this confession, it would be too presumptuous not to quote at least one or two articles. In chapter three, concerning God’s decree, paragraphs three and four state:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory some men and Angels are predestinated, or fore-ordained to Eternal Life, through Jesus Christ, to the praise of his glorious grace; others being left to act in their sin to their just condemnation, to the praise of his glorious justice.

These Angels and Men thus predestinated, and fore-ordained are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain, and definite, that it cannot be either increased, or diminished.¹²

This chapter also contains an admonition to great care in the use of the high doctrine of predestination by stating that it is “to be handled with special prudence and care,” so that the doctrine will not detract from the glory of God but rather will “afford matter of praise, reverence and admiration of God and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.”

In addition, the confession asserts that man’s fall has made him “utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good” so that he has lost all “ability of Will, to any spiritual good accompanying salvation.” Such a man is unable to convert himself; he is saved only when by effectual calling he is enabled to “embrace the grace offered” by no less power than that which raised Christ from the dead. Only those predestinated unto life are effectually called and, therefore, “freely justified.” The possibility of such a salvation was purchased by Christ, the Mediator. By his perfect obedience and sacrifice, he has fully satisfied the justice of God and has obtained reconciliation and purchased an everlasting inheritance “for all those whom the Father hath given unto him.” Those thus elected, redeemed, called, justified, and sanctified by the Spirit “can neither totally nor finally fall from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved.”

¹¹ Ibid., 245.

¹² Ibid., 254.

This perseverance of the Saints depends not upon their own free will; but upon the immutability of the decree of Election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ and Union with him, the oath of God, the abiding of his spirit & the seed of God within them, and the nature of the Covenant of Grace from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.¹³

Seeing that the doctrine of perseverance rests upon such a foundation, a ripping asunder of the foundation will ultimately cause the collapse of the superstructure. Those who seek to maintain “once-saved-always-saved,” without the supporting doctrines of at least unconditional election and effectual calling, may be hard-pressed to make their case.



Benjamin Keach

One of the Baptists most instrumental in the adoption of this confession of faith was the pastor at Horse-lie-down—Benjamin Keach. Cathcart records about Keach that “at first he was an Arminian about the extent of the atonement and free will, but the reading of the Scriptures and the conversation of those who knew the will of God more perfectly relieved

¹³ Ibid., 273.