

# Are Baptists ‘Reformed’?

## A Brief History of Baptist Identity

by

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**ABSTRACT:** Ever since credobaptists began promoting their views in the emerging Reformation, the terms “Baptist” and “Reformed” have lived in tension. On the one hand, Particular Baptists embraced Calvinist soteriology and championed the five solas; on the other hand, Baptists differed from the Reformers in baptismal practice, ecclesiology, and the relationship between church and state. Despite these differences, however, these canonical, covenantal, congregational, Calvinistic Baptists belong to the broad Reformed family of faith — and at their best, they have not only drawn from that tradition but made singular contributions to it.

For our ongoing series of feature articles for pastors, leaders, and teachers, we asked Timothy George, distinguished professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School, to explore the nature of Reformed Baptist identity.

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In October 1654, Henry Dunster, the first president of Harvard College, was forced to resign. His offense was neither sexual immorality nor fiscal impropriety. Rather, he had withheld from baptism his fourth child, a baby boy named Jonathan — and when his daughter Elizabeth came along, he refused to have her baptized as well. Dunster was a learned and pious leader of Puritan New England, and he possibly could have gotten away with his baptismal irregularities — if he had been willing to keep his mouth shut. But when he openly proclaimed that baptism was not for infants but only for penitent believers, he crossed a line that the authorities of Massachusetts Bay Colony could not ignore. Already, Obadiah Holmes, a Baptist preacher from Rhode Island, had been publicly beaten with thirty lashes on the streets of Boston for his religious views.

Henry Dunster not only lost his job, he was forced into exile because of his challenge to the baptismal practice of the Puritan established church. Though he himself was never rebaptized, his story connects to the saga of Baptist beginnings in New England and raises several important questions for Baptist

identity today.

### What's in a Name?

Matthew C. Bingham, a Baptist scholar from America who teaches now in England, has written an important book: *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution*.<sup>[1]</sup> He argues against the wholesale and generic use of Baptist for those seventeenth-century Puritan Christians who gathered churches and began to practice believer's baptism. It is not as though a group of congregationally minded, hot Protestants gathered in a coffeehouse in London in 1640 and said, "Brothers, let's start a new denomination and call ourselves Baptists!" The word *Baptist* was not a term of self-designation you might stamp on your stationary or paint on a church sign outside the house of worship, partly because, as Dunster's case shows, to challenge the baptismal practice of the established church in London, no less than in Boston, was to invite reprisals. *Baptist* was a kind of nickname, a byword, used first by Quakers and others as a sneer or term of abuse. Bingham's preferred moniker is "baptistic congregationalists," a more precise but no less anachronistic term. In this way, *Baptists* is like the word *christianoī*, which the New Testament uses three times to refer to the followers of Jesus — a derogatory name that stuck because it fit (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16).

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The first Baptists were not overly concerned about which word other people used to describe them. But they could get huffy about what they did *not* want to be called. Thus, the 1644 edition of the London Baptist Confession was put forth in the name of seven congregations "which are commonly, but unjustly, called Anabaptists." For more than a century, Anabaptism had connoted mayhem and violent revolution associated with the polygamous kingdom of Münster in 1534. "We are not like that!" the Baptists wanted to say clearly. When such Christians of the seventeenth century did refer to themselves in a positive manner, it was as "sister churches in London of the baptized persuasion," or "the baptized people and churches in Lincolnshire," or simply "the company of Christ's friends."

The framers of the 1644 Confession also rebuffed another charge leveled against them — namely, that of "holding free will, falling away from grace, denying original sin."<sup>[2]</sup> Such views could be found within the

“Arminianized” Church of England led by Archbishop William Laud, as well as among some baptistic Christians who had broken with the strong Augustinian consensus of mainline Protestantism. This latter group would later become known as “General” Baptists, from their belief that Christ had provided a general redemption for all, as opposed to the “Particular” Baptists, who held that “Christ Jesus by his death did bring forth salvation and reconciliation only for the elect,” God’s chosen people.<sup>[3]</sup> In their early years, Generals and Particulars had little to do with one another, and each group declined during the 1700s: Generals largely lapsed into unitarianism, while many Particulars were drawn toward a kind of hyper-Calvinism that squelched the free offer of the gospel for all. Both groups, by God’s grace, were touched by the fires of evangelical awakening in the later eighteenth century and played a role in the rise of the modern missionary movement.

John Bunyan, the “immortal dreamer,” was a Particular Baptist with a Luther-like passion for the gospel. He knew that labels can be libels, and he gave us wise words for a post-denominational world like ours no less than for his own pre-denominational one:

And since you would know by what name I would be distinguished from others; I tell you, I would be, and hope I am, a CHRISTIAN; and choose, if God should count me worthy, to be called a Christian, a believer, or other such name which is approved by the Holy Ghost. Acts 11:26. And for those factious titles of Anabaptist, Independents, Presbyterians, or the like, I conclude that they came from neither Jerusalem, nor Antioch, but rather from hell and Babylon; for they naturally tend to divisions: “you may know them by their fruits.”<sup>[4]</sup>

### **Which Tradition? Whose Reformed?**

To call the baptized Christians who first embraced the 1644 and 1689 London Confessions “Reformed Baptists” is to lapse into anachronese again, for it was not a term they used for themselves. “Reformed Baptist” as a term came into vogue only in the latter half of the twentieth century, apparently originating among some of the followers of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. But more broadly, the term does serve a useful purpose to underscore the continuity between the Baptist movement that emerged in the seventeenth century and the earlier renewal of the church spawned by Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Cranmer, and the Puritans. For example, the great Baptist pastor-

theologian Andrew Fuller was happy to acknowledge that his own ministry stood in the tradition of “Luther, Calvin, Latimer, Knox . . . and numerous others of our Reformation champions.”<sup>[5]</sup> Fuller and other Baptists like him were grateful for the Reformers, even though they did not look to any of them as a standard of faith. As Samuel Hieron put it in a verse that many other dissenters and non-conformists would have applauded heartily,

*We do not hang on Calvin’s sleeve  
Nor yet on Zwingli’s we believe:  
And Puritans we do defy  
If right the name you do apply.*<sup>[6]</sup>

“The Particular Baptist movement took shape as both a continuation and a pruning of the Reformation.” (Marginal Note on website)

When we keep this in mind, we can better see how the Particular Baptist movement took shape as a continuation and deepening as well as a pruning of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. This is how those who embraced the 1644 and 1689 confessions saw themselves and how, in retrospect, we should see them too. Four words describe these Baptists who subscribed to the defining confessions of the seventeenth century: canonical, covenantal, congregational, Calvinistic.

### **Canonical**

In the preface to the 1689 London Confession, these Baptists were concerned to show how closely linked they were with other orthodox believers “in all the fundamental articles of the Christian religion.” They had no itch, they said,

to clog religion with new words, but do readily acquiesce in that form of sound words which hath been, in consent with the Holy Scriptures, used by others before us; hereby declaring, before God, angels, and men, our hearty agreement with them in that wholesome Protestant doctrine which, with so clear evidence of Scriptures, they have asserted.

<sup>[7]</sup>

In other words, Baptists were good Protestants before they were good Baptists — and further, they were good Baptists *because* they were good Protestants. They affirmed the formal principle of the Reformation and denied church tradition as a second source of authority equal to the canonical Scriptures, the written word of God. The presuppositions of these Baptists

echoed the teaching of William Ames, who, in his *Marrow of Theology* (the first theology textbook used at Harvard College), declared, “All things necessary to salvation are contained in the Scripture and also those things necessary for the institution and edification of the church. Therefore, Scripture is not a partial but a perfect rule of faith and morals.”<sup>[8]</sup>

But search the Scriptures as they might, the Baptists could find infant baptism in neither the Old nor New Testament — not in the analogy from circumcision, nor in Jesus’s blessing of the children, nor in household baptisms, nor in the famous proof-text of 1 Corinthians 7:14. In the church of the apostles, baptism had been an adult rite of initiation signifying a committed participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism for believers only was simply the liturgical enactment of justification by faith alone.

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And how this act was to be done was vitally important. This is why, beginning in the 1640s, immersion, dipping, or plunging the whole body under water was considered the proper, biblical mode of baptism. The question was not about the amount of water. Rather, the very act itself proclaimed its threefold meaning: the washing of the believer’s sin in the blood of Jesus, his or her interest in Jesus’ own death and resurrection, and the promised resurrection at the return of Christ. In the era before indoor baptistries, immersion was often performed outdoors in the open air, in rivers, lakes, ponds, and sometimes the sea itself — and often under the cover of darkness to prevent discovery and arrest. This led to salacious gossip and rumors of sexual scandal based on reports of women baptized naked in the river and of “young maids . . . baptized about one or two o’clock in the morning.”<sup>[9]</sup> As the early Christians were falsely accused of turning love feasts into orgies and were called cannibals because they ate the “body and blood of Christ,” so too Baptists in this time had to fend off outrageous charges.

### **Covenantal**

No term was more often used in the writings of seventeenth-century Reformed theology than the word *covenant* — not *church*, not *grace*,

certainly not *baptism*. Congregationalists and Presbyterians alike defended infant baptism on the basis of covenant theology. Drawing on the construals of Zwingli and Calvin, their paedobaptist heirs in the seventeenth century found in Scripture one covenant in two administrations: what circumcision was to Abraham and his descendants in the Old Testament, infant baptism has become for Christians in the New.

Baptists agreed with the basic point that God had provided one, and only one, way of salvation throughout history — by grace through faith in the Messiah. But as Paul explained in Galatians, Abraham had a twofold seed — one according to the flesh, and one based on faith. The new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31 was fulfilled at the coming of Christ and the pouring out of the Spirit. As Samuel Renihan has said in his fine study *From Shadow to Substance: The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists (1642–1704)*, “The covenant of grace did not run in bloodlines.”<sup>[10]</sup> Nonetheless, the rite of circumcision does have a continuing positive meaning in the New Testament — not as the analogue to infant baptism, but rather as a type of regeneration and the new birth. So, Paul could say that in Christ we have received a “circumcision made without hands.” What counts now is a new creation (Colossians 2:11–12; Galatians 6:15).

### **Congregational**

It was a Baptist pastor William Kiffen who coined the term “the congregational way”<sup>[11]</sup> to describe the design of God for his people to live as “a walled sheepfold and watered garden,” a “company of visible saints, called and separated from the world to the visible profession of faith of the gospel.”<sup>[12]</sup> Henry Dunster’s reflection on this ecclesiology led him not only to withhold his own children from infant baptism but to disown national and provincial churches altogether — he called them “nullities.” Dunster’s decoupling of citizenship and church membership was not far from Roger Williams’s church-state separation, and a precondition for full religious liberty. It is not surprising that, as one observer noted, Dunster’s preaching became bold “against the spirit of persecution.”<sup>[13]</sup>

Baptists inherited from their English Separatist forebears a bipolar ecclesiology based on the Augustinian distinction between the invisible church of the elect — all of God’s redeemed people through the ages — and the visible church, a covenantal company of gathered saints separated from

the world and knit together into a “living temple” by the work of the Spirit (Ephesians 2:22; 1 Peter 2:4–5). It was also incumbent on such a body to separate back to the world (through congregational discipline) those members whose lives betrayed this profession. Baptists, with other congregationalists, were obsessed with what G.F. Nuttall has called “the passionate desire to recover the inner life of New Testament Christianity.”<sup>[14]</sup>

The Christological basis of the Christian life was developed by Calvin, Bucer, and other Reformers and was applied to the church in a distinctive way by early Baptists and other congregationalists. The threefold office of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King not only secures the salvation of the chosen elect, it also enables the worship and corporate sanctification of the gathered community. Prayer and preaching are sustained by Christ’s priestly and prophetic offices, while his royal office undergirds the governance and disciplinary life of the church.

### Calvinistic

Are Baptists Calvinists? This is what the French might call *une question mal posée*, because, as we have seen, the short answer is this: some are and others are not. Further, if a Calvinist is a person who follows strictly the teaching of the sixteenth-century Reformer of Geneva, then in three important ways Baptists, Generals and Particulars alike, are not and never have been such. Calvin was a paedobaptist; Baptists are credobaptists. In matters of church governance, Calvin was a Presbyterian; Baptists are congregationalists. Calvin believed that the civil magistrate had a religious duty to enforce both tables of the law, punishing heresy and rooting it out by capital punishment, if necessary; Baptists are advocates of religious freedom for all.

But Calvinism is not a monolithic historical entity irrevocably tied to one person. Nor can it be equated with a discrete denomination or an overarching confession with no soft edges. Historian John Balsarak has reminded us that “as a living body of doctrines, Calvinism exhibits a great deal of development, diversity, and ambiguity.”<sup>[15]</sup> The same, of course, could be said about Baptists, even if we count only those who claim the name for themselves, much less all the others who hold a baptistic view of the church. Perhaps it is better to listen to Alec Ryrie, who has described Calvinism, and the Reformed tradition more broadly, as “an ecumenical movement for Protestant unity.”<sup>[16]</sup> At the heart of such an ecclesial and spiritual impulse is

a heartfelt embrace of the unfettered grace of God set forth in the early church by St. Augustine and expressed with clarity in the five heads of doctrine promulgated at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) — all of which are embedded in the 1644 and 1689 London Baptist Confessions.

Baptists today, with many pulls and tears and their diverse rivulets and tributaries, belong to this historic Reformed family of faith. When Baptists have forgotten this and obscured their rootedness in the Protestant Reformation, they have lost sight both of their “near agreement with many other Christians”<sup>[17]</sup> as well as the theological basis of their own Baptist distinctives. They have become sectarian, distracted, and doctrinally unserious. But at their best, Baptists have not only drawn from the rich spiritual and theological traditions of the Reformation, they have made singular contributions to it. William Carey did so when he opened up a new era of missionary work by sailing to India. Charles Haddon Spurgeon did so from his pulpit (and in the slums) in Victorian London. George Liele and David George, both former slaves, did so when they proclaimed the great doctrines of grace from Georgia and Nova Scotia to Jamaica and Sierra Leone.

Anne Steele (1717–1778), the daughter of a Particular Baptist lay pastor, was a poet and hymnwriter whose work has blessed the entire church. Her poem “Entreating the Presence of Christ in His Churches” is based on the Old Testament text Haggai 2:7 and closes with a prayer that reflects her strong faith and confidence in the boundless power and grace of God:

*Dear Saviour, let thy glory shine,  
And fill thy dwellings here,  
Till life, and love, and joy divine  
A heav'n on earth appear.*

*Then shall our hearts enraptur'd say,  
Come, great Redeemer, come,  
And bring the bright, the glorious day,  
That calls thy children home.*<sup>[18]</sup>

## FOOTNOTES:

- [1] Matthew C. Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- [2] Introduction to the First London Baptist Confession.
- [3] First London Baptist Confession 21.
- [4] John Bunyan, *The Works of John Bunyan*, 3 vols., ed. George Offor (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth), 2:649.
- [5] Peter J. Morden, *Offering Christ to the World: Andrew Fuller (1754–1815) and the Revival of Eighteenth Century Particular Baptist Life*, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* 8 (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003), 33n35.
- [6] Quoted in Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought: 1600–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 544.
- [7] Introduction to the Second London Baptist Confession.
- [8] William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (1642; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 187.
- [9] Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena* (London: Ralph Smith, 1666), 67.
- [10] Samuel Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance: The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists (1642–1704)*, *Center for Baptist History and Heritage Studies* 16 (Oxford: Center for Baptist History and Heritage, 2018), 126.
- [11] Introduction to the Second London Baptist Confession.
- [12] First London Baptist Confession 34, 33.
- [13] Jeremiah Chaplin, *Life of Henry Dunster, First President of Harvard College* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1872), 209.
- [14] G.F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way, 1640–1660* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), 3.
- [15] John Balsarak, *Calvinism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), xvi.
- [16] Alec Ryrie, “‘Protestantism’ as a Historical Category,” *Transactions of the RHS* 26 (2016), 67.

[17] Introduction to The Baptist Catechism of 1695.

[18] Anne Steele, *The Works of Mrs. Anne Steele*, vol. 1 (Boston: Munroe, Francis and Parker, 1808), 88.

### Author

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