

The Early English Baptists, 1603–1649

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John Briggs

Wright's volume is very much to be welcomed moving as it does beyond the traditional debates concerning the relationship between General (Arminian) and Particular (Calvinist) congregations, and the argument as to whether Baptist origins are to be found in continental Anabaptism or more domestically in Puritan Separatism. Wright asks new questions, and examines a formidable range of new evidence to provide at least some of the answers to these new questions. In short this book is a valuable piece of reconstruction using a wide range of sources, old and new, which he handles like a skilled detective. Thus he seeks imaginatively to retell the story from these documents rather than from the inherited assumptions of received historiography, which, accordingly, comes under new scrutiny. A book for the cognoscente, who will be stimulated by Wright's evidence and arguments to take a new look at this part of the story of radical dissent, it will prove hard work for any general reader.

In the General Baptist tradition Wright identifies two schools, 'one clericalist and pacifist, influenced by the Dutch Mennonites, and one reflecting the English traditions of erastianism and local lay predominance in religion'. John Smyth, the se-Baptist, who had a long history of contention with his diocesan authorities in his Puritan period in England, differed from his colleague, Thomas Helwys, over that act of [re]baptism. Smyth came to have doubts as to whether all churches were so corrupt as to justify such a radical new beginning as reflected in his se-baptism, and sought to join the Waterlander Mennonites, a knotty process only concluded for his erstwhile colleagues in January 1615, long after Smyth's death. Helwys, by contrast, convinced that there could be no institutional ecclesial succession, and treasuring that new start made by Smyth and himself, returned to England to found the first Baptist church in England. Whilst not unsympathetic to some general linkage with continental anabaptism, Wright posits connections with a more popular native free-will tradition; even one dating back to the Lollards.

However the absence of evidence for anabaptist congregations in England in the last quarter of the sixteenth century argues against institutional continuity, whilst Smyth's se-baptism argues against any meaningful contact with, or recognition of, the validity of the Mennonite Church at that point. But this does not argue for a total absence of association. Wright wisely observes that, 'the Waterlanders and the English Baptists were not so close as to achieve inter-communion in the 1620s, but not so alien to each other to forbear from trying' (pp. 9–10). In addition, Wright, who is deeply suspicious of inferring continuity between the prewar General Baptist tradition of Helwys and Murton and the general redemptionist groups which emerged in the 1640s, is sceptical of there being distinct General and Particular denominations, or even proto-denominations prior to the issuing of the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644. Before that date he argues that the division in the churches was not over a theology of grace and election but over the proper way to order churches. Indeed the division between those upholding particular and general redemption in the earlier period could occur within, rather than between, congregations, as demonstrated by the leading 'General Baptist', Thomas Lambe, pastor of the Bell Alley church, penning a book entitled *A Treatise of Particular Predestination* in 1642. Lambe, as also Henry Denne and others, was at this time anxious to uphold both general redemption and particular election.

Wright is particularly interested to date the restoration of immersion as the mode of baptism among the English Baptists, which he identifies as first appearing amongst the 'Generals'. Crucial to this argument is the differentiation, by an adroit mixture of skilful detective work and speculative reconstruction, of the Dutch Anabaptist, Jan Batten, from the English Baptist, Timothy Batte. The argument also suggests that at this time there were not separate General and Particular denominations, but a cluster of London churches within which issues of grace and freewill were the subject of, as yet, not divisive discussion. Such division as there was, as London Baptists moved in the early 1640s towards immersion as the correct mode of believers' baptism, occurred over the terms of membership, not the privileges of the elect. On the other hand there is little evidence of communication amongst the different groups of London Baptists, especially those open membership Independent churches only slowly moving towards an accommodation of the Baptist position. Thus a number of unconnected congregations simultaneously moved towards replacing affusion by immersion between 1640 and 1641–2. In so doing they raised just those issues of true succession within the church that had occupied the minds of Smyth and Helwys, with once more the administrator himself not being baptized by the new method at the time of his first administration. The question was also raised as to whether the immersion mode was just for new members or for all, and consequently the appropriateness of immersing those who had already received baptism by affusion as believers. For some of these emerging Baptists, baptism, properly administered to believers only, rather than consent to the church covenant, became the act which constituted the church, which of itself confirmed the logic that such a baptism could not be obtained from a church not so constituted. According to the language of the time: 'no baptism no church'. By contrast, others argued that faithful disciples obedient to scripture were already in a church state prior to receiving the sacrament, which could not therefore be the critical means of forming a church, or joining oneself to it.

Denominational history was as much shaped by external pressures as internal conflicts. The rise of Laudianism within the established church immediately created a more radical context for all puritans and

former puritans. As the civil war progressed, what measure of authority to accord to the state and the magistrate became divisive issues. Those of a more Calvinist view tended to grant a more positive role to the magistrate than those of a free-will persuasion. These were more inclined to emphasize the radical freedom of the believer, and to champion a wide-ranging tolerance, alongside granting freedom to the local saints to form new churches and to engage in the 'dangerous' deployment of lay preachers. And dangers there were, for the Generals tended to have more leakage to sects of the far-left than the Particulars. Differences of order amongst the wider reformed family with the eventual breakdown of relationships between the Independents and Presbyterians, necessarily made its impact, with the Independents hovering between the centrally-regulated religion of the Presbyterians, and the Baptists, as the most moderate of the emerging sectaries. For their part, the Particular Baptists' desire to be seen as part of an ongoing socially-safe separatism, close to that espoused by the Independents, was one of the forces provoking them to issue their 1644 London Confession (and its 1646 variant), the first marker of the emergence of denominational consciousness with its stresses on doctrinal orthodoxy and the associative principle of congregational relationship. In this they were not always successful, for if the 'General' Baptists may have been too sympathetic to the Levellers in the 1640s, Particular Baptists had to take care to distance themselves from the Fifth Monarchists in the 1650s, illustrating the dangers of becoming politically entangled.

On the 'General' side there is a danger of placing too much emphasis on the views and activities of Thomas Lambe's highly idiosyncratic, increasingly radical, and much publicized congregation. There was less obvious coherence in belief and practice amongst the advocates of free will and general atonement, especially as the laying on of hands introduced a new area of division. Notwithstanding this, there was an emerging group of churches displaying such views in Kent, the Fenlands, and London. The creation of the denomination was, it is here suggested, largely post-Restoration, for the authority of the General Assemblies of 1654 and 1656 was not recognized by a number of churches who preferred to guard their independence from any wider than local authority. But after the Restoration, the Kent churches in particular were to face problems of Christological heterodoxy.

The study ends with five appendices dealing with specific topics, two of which have to do with Benjamin Stinton as a source for early Baptist history, one with more detective work on Robert Barrow, here separated from many of the claims made about him, another with the recovery of Robert Stookes of Colchester as the author of *Truth's Champion*, the only extant copy of which is dated 1651. But the most useful, in my judgment, is the ten-page appendix that identifies for the reader the geographical range of Baptist groups existing in early 1645.

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[2]

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