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HENRY DANVERS' *A Treatise of Baptism:*
A STUDY IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BAPTIST
HISTORIOGRAPHY

James M. Renihan

INTRODUCTION

Baptist historiography is a knotty subject. Several difficult questions confront anyone seeking to describe and delineate the lineage of Baptists. How do Baptists fit into Church History? Where, and at what point in history, do their origins lie? How do they relate to the long line of non-Baptists present in Church History? How do they relate to the various Baptististic groups present in North Africa and Europe during the centuries from the Apostolic Era to the modern era? These and other questions have vexed and divided Baptist historians for many years.

While there are many nuanced positions, it would seem fair to say that there are basically three different views with regard to Baptist history. Richard Weeks, in a Foreword to the recent reprint of Thomas Armitage's *A History of the Baptists*, delineates these three views as the Successionist, Anabaptist Spiritual Kinship, and English Separatist theories of origins.¹ The first theory is most famous for the so-called "Trail of Blood," a name coined in the booklet of the same name by J.M. Carroll.² This theory argues that "according to History . . . Baptists have an unbroken line of churches since Christ Baptists are not Protestants since they did not come out of the Catholic Church."³ Positing an unbroken succession of churches since the days of Christ, the advocates of this theory have appealed to many of the lesser known sects throughout the ages as illustrations of the existence of

¹ Richard C. Weeks, "Foreword," in Thomas Armitage, *A History of the Baptists*, (Watertown, Wis.: Baptist Heritage Press, 1988 reprint of 1890 edition). Weeks identifies Robert Torbet as the originator of this classification *schema*.

² J.M. Carroll, *The Trail of Blood* (Lexington, Ken.: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1931).

³ *Ibid.*, see chart attached to page 56.

true churches, seeking to discover firm links between these groups. They argue that Jesus' words in Matt 16:18, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it," must be literally fulfilled by the presence of a true church, defined by its ordinances, throughout all ages. Anything less would be tantamount to a failure of Jesus' words to be true. Since only a Baptist church can be a true church, there must always have been Baptist churches.

The Anabaptist Spiritual Kinship view is attributed by Weeks to Armitage, and was perhaps the most common opinion among nineteenth-century Baptist historians. This theory rejects any form of lineal apostolic succession of churches, arguing rather that churches ordered according to the Baptist understanding of the church have always existed through a succession of spiritual principles. Such a view still requires an appeal to some of the more marginal sects of church history, but it avoids the obvious difficulties of the successionist position.

The third view mentioned above, the English Separatist theory, is perhaps the most widely held opinion of the issue in the twentieth-century. The advocates of this position argue that modern Baptist churches emerged in England in the first half of the seventeenth-century as a development from emerging Separatism. Some would hold up John Smyth's congregation from the 1610s as the originating Baptist assembly, while others look to the London congregation of Henry Jacob and its various daughter churches of the 1640s as the original Baptist churches. In either case, the modern interpretation finds Baptist roots in the post-Reformation turmoil of seventeenth-century England.

Which theory is more correct? It is beyond the scope of this paper even to begin to wrestle with these issues. While the Successionist view would seem to be highly unlikely, and virtually impossible to document, the other two views have more substantial claims to attention. The hotly debated issues deserve much thought and investigation before any settled conclusion can be reached. However, a certain perspective may be gained through the study at hand. How did the seventeenth-century Baptists perceive their own heritage? How did they express their own relationship to the past, and to the churches of the past?

In 1673, Colonel Henry Danvers published a book entitled *A Treatise of Baptism*, followed by a second revised and enlarged edition in 1674.⁴ This remarkable work of almost 450 pages was something of a *Tour de Force* for its age, and has been regarded as such since then. William Cathcart wrote of this *Treatise*, it “was the ablest on the subject published by any Baptist till that time;” while J.M. Cramp said that Danvers’ book was “regarded as the most learned and complete work which at that time had been published on the subject.”⁵ In the book, Danvers sought to lay out in detail his own understanding of church history, and the place filled in it by Baptists. In doing so, he left an impressive display of learning, and evidence of a remarkable acquaintance with many movements throughout the centuries preceding his own. This paper is an attempt to investigate Danvers’ historiography, and determine how he, as a representative of the Baptists of his own age,⁶ regarded the past. Special note will be taken of Danvers’

⁴ Henry Danvers, *A Treatise of Baptism: Wherein, that of Believers, and that of Infants, is examined by the Scriptures. With The History of both out of Antiquity; making it appear that Infants-Baptism was not practiced for near Three Hundred years, nor enjoyned necessary, till Four Hundred years after Christ. With the Fabulous Traditions, and Erroneous Grounds upon which it was , by the Pope's Canons (with Gossips, Chrism, Exorcism, Baptizing of Churches and Bells, and other Popish Rites) founded. And that Famous Waldensian and Old British Churches, Lollards and Wickliffians, and other Christians witnessed against it. With the History of Christianity amongst the Ancient Britains and Waldensians. The second edition with large additions* (London: Printed for Fran. Smith, at the Elephant and Castle near the Royal Exchange in Cornhil, 1674). Throughout this paper, citations from this book will be made as they appear in the original, with spelling, capitalization and punctuation left as they appear in this edition.

⁵ William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia* (Paris, Ark.: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1988 reprint of 1881 edition), s.v. “D'Anvers, Gov. Henry”; J.M. Cramp, *Baptist History* (Watertown, Wisconsin: Baptist Heritage Publications, 1987 reprint of 1871 edition), p. 373.

⁶ One might wonder whether his work received the approbation of contemporary Baptists. It is clear that it did, as some of the most prestigious of London’s Baptist leaders, among them Hanserd Knollys, William Kiffin, John Gosnold and Thomas De Laune, came to Danvers’ defense when controversy erupted over his work in paedobaptist circles. See for example the pamphlet, *The Baptists Answer, to Mr. Obed. Wills, His Appeal against Mr. H. Danvers* (London: Printed for Francis Smith, at the Elephant and Castle in Cornhill, Near the Royal-Exchange, 1675) signed by these four men along with David Dyke and Henry Forty.

treatment of the Medieval period, and also of his attitude towards continental Anabaptists.

A few words about Henry Danvers are in order. Born early in the seventeenth-century, he became a colonel in the parliamentary army, and was governor of Stafford and a justice of the peace. He was "well beloved among the people, being noted for one who would not take bribes." Sometime during the reign of Charles II, he was an elder of a Baptist church in Aldgate, London. After the accession of James II, he was involved in some meetings "held to promote the treasonable designs of the Duke of Monmouth," and was forced to flee arrest by seeking refuge in Utrecht, Holland, where he died in 1687.⁷ Evidently, he was an educated man, as his writing demonstrates a good acquaintance with Latin and Greek, as well as a detailed knowledge of church history, and the writings of some relatively obscure figures. By all accounts, *A Treatise of Baptism* is a remarkably full work, and points toward a man of uncommon literary and historical ability. No record of Danvers' education is available, but the evidence would suggest that he was well-prepared for the task he took upon himself.⁸

THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENTS OF A TREATISE OF BAPTISM

The plan of *A Treatise of Baptism* gives indication of Henry Danvers' methodology. His table of contents page states, "The book consists of Two Parts, the first proving Believers; The second disproving Infants Baptism."⁹ However, before the body of the book is actually begun, there are several important supplementary materials. One is an index to the book, but even more interesting is "An Abstract of the History of Baptism throughout all

⁷ Leslie Stephen, ed. *Dictionary of National Biography* (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1888), s.v. Danvers, Henry. More information may be found in Richard L. Greaves, "The Tangled Careers of Two Stuart Radicals: Henry and Robert Danvers," *The Baptist Quarterly* 29 (January, 1981), 32-43.

⁸ R.L. Greaves, asserts that Danvers had been educated at Oxford, perhaps Trinity College. See Richard L. Greaves and Robert Zaller, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century* (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), s.v. Danvers, Henry.

⁹ Danvers, *Treatise*, page unnumbered.

Ages since Christ.”¹⁰ In this abstract, Danvers sets up three columns, entitled (1) Believers Baptism Instituted and Asserted; (2) Infant Baptism Instituted, Asserted and Imposed; and (3) Infant Baptism Opposed and Witnessed Against. He then begins with the first-century, and moves through the sixteenth, placing in the appropriate column the various witnesses for the different positions. Reference is made to the location throughout the book at which point these various writers are discussed. In this way, the reader has at a brief glance a reference for the classifications that Danvers uses throughout his book.

The first part of the book, consisting of seven chapters, is the shorter of the two sections, covering only 88 pages. Danvers presents a positive case for believer’s baptism by means of exegesis, theology and history. He argues that Christ instituted Baptism as an ordinance for believers, for the purpose of witnessing to several spiritual ends, namely, “To be a sign of the mysteries of the Gospel; To witness repentance; To evidence present regeneration; To represent the Covenant on man’s part; To be a sign of the covenant on God’s part; To represent the union betwixt Christ and Believer; [and as the means of] entrance into the visible church.”¹¹

Chapter seven of part one is an historical study, moving century by century through the Christian era, for the purpose of demonstrating that believer’s baptism has an eminent history in the church. One wonders if there had been some kind of charge of historical novelty laid against the English Baptists, and if Danvers’ writing was not meant as a counter to that charge. The title of this chapter, though lengthy, gives some indication of Danvers’ purposes:¹²

Wherein is an Account of Believers Baptism in a brief History thereof; not only from the Scriptures in the first Century, but from the Humane Authors also, confirming the necessity of Instruction and Profession of Faith before Baptism, in all the Centuries. And that the Children of Christians, as well as Pagans, were not otherwise baptized, whereof you have some famous

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, This material covers 5 unnumbered pages, following the index and preceding an advertisement for another of Danvers’ books.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-25.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Fourth Century, of several eminent Christians that deferred the Baptizing of their Children till they could give an Account of their Faith. Collected out of several Authors, especially the famous *Magdiburgensian* history.

In this chapter, Danvers seeks to demonstrate that there has been a positive testimony to believer's baptism throughout the centuries. He recognizes that the historical argument cannot be given the same weight that would be given to Biblical matters, but appeals to this "by way of *illustration* only; because they may be of *weight* with *some*, and whereby it may be *manifest*, that . . . *Antiquity* itself (which hath been so much *boasted of*) is altogether for *Believers*, and not for *Infants-Baptism*."¹³ This statement gives a clear indication of the author's concern. In his estimation, the argument from antiquity, apparently used to good success by paedo-baptists, is specious, and needs correction. For Danvers, antiquity stands as a testimony confirming his own views. Leaning heavily on the *Magdiburgensian* History, he constructs, or perhaps re-constructs, a Baptist reading of early church history, in terms of the subjects, administrators, place, time, manner and ceremonies of baptism. This is followed by quotes from Clement, Ignatius, and other writers. He even states, "The Ancient *Britains*, who practiced the *Baptizing* of Believers, did by *Evangelists* sent from the *Apostles* themselves, receive the *Gospel* under *Tiberius the Emperor*; as saith *Gildas*, in his book, called *De Victoria Aurelli Ambrosii*."¹⁴ For the second century, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Walafrid Strabo are cited as authorities testifying that baptism was only to follow faith and repentance, or an understanding of the Gospel. Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, and Cyril support the argument for the third-century, while Athanasius, Hilary, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, Ambrose, Arnobius, Jerome and others are noted as supporters in the fourth century. This methodology continues up to the sixteenth-century.

It must be stated that Danvers does not necessarily cite these authors as if they were adherents of his own position. He knows that some of them are not. Rather, his concern is to show that they had an understanding of the fact that baptism should follow conversion. Of course, the paedo-baptist

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48, emphasis his.

response would be that some, or many, of Danvers' quotations are to no avail, since no one would dispute that pagans who are converted ought to be baptized upon their profession of faith.¹⁵ The issue centers rather around the children of believers. Danvers argues that these types of statements, when found in paedo-baptist writings point up their theological inconsistency. This is an argument which has frequently been used by Baptist authors since Danvers. It asserts that the paedo-baptist position must propose two differing qualifications for baptism, one relying on the profession of faith, and the other upon the parental heritage of the subject. He would argue that this conclusion only came as a late imposition into the life of the church, and that it was unknown to the early Christians. He says, "The Truth is, I do believe *Paedo-Baptism*, how or by whom, I know not, came into the world in the second-century, and in the third and fourth, began to be practiced."¹⁶ In any case, for Danvers, the earliest records testify in support of believer's baptism.

As he progresses through the centuries of the Christian era, Danvers seeks to include testimonies for believer's baptism not only from those in the Roman Catholic stream, but also from others outside of it. For example, beginning in the twelfth-century, he turns his attention to those whom he calls the "old Waldenses."¹⁷ These followers of Peter Bruis and Henricus, according to Danvers, increased rapidly in number in southern France and northern Italy. They were persecuted by the Roman pontiff, but grew so dramatically "that their Itinerant Preachers (whereof they had many, whom they sent in most Countries) could, in their Travels from *France* to *Milain*, lodge every night at one of their Friends houses."¹⁸ This group bore a significant testimony for believers baptism, so much so that he actually calls

¹⁵Danvers anticipates this objection, and responds by stating that "their Words and Reasons appear substantial *Arguments for the Baptists*,... for it is not the Commission it self fully owned, the Order of it, and the Practice upon it, *viz.* That persons ought first to be taught in the Faith, before they are to be baptized into the same..." In Danvers' estimation, the recognition of these facts demands the consistency of accepting the Baptist position, and abandoning the unattested practice of infant baptism (*Ibid.*, p. 86).

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 64, emphasis his.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

them "Baptists."¹⁹ Danvers will later return in much greater detail to the Waldenses.

The second section of the book, beginning on page 89, should perhaps be divided into two sections itself, corresponding to the three columns of Danvers' "Abstract." The first six chapters of part two seek to demonstrate that the practice of infant baptism has no scriptural warrant, and is an imposition upon the pure ordinances of the gospel. These chapters cover a little more than 130 pages. However, chapter 7 of part two, entitled "Wherein there is an account of some eminent witness that hath been born against Infants-Baptism from first to last"²⁰ is itself over 135 pages long. It could easily have become the third part of the work.

The first six chapters of this section cover ground similar to part one, but from a slightly different perspective. Frequently appealing to the same authors, Danvers seeks to establish the fact that many have been highly inconsistent in their practice of infant baptism. He gives evidence of the unusual ceremonies that seemed to have accompanied the introduction of infant baptism, such as the baptism of bells, christening of churches, use of honey and milk, and many others.²¹ He also points out the sometimes slanderous reports that were made about those who practice believer's baptism, even by such as the well-known Richard Baxter, who recounted that in some cases contemporary Baptists in England had practiced baptism naked.²² For Danvers, such a slander serves an important polemic purpose. It evidences that at times, even the best of opponents of believer's baptism have fallen prey to misrepresentation and innuendo in their accounts of the life and practices of Baptists. As such, it may be that some of the reports put forward with regard to the continental Anabaptists were likewise slanderous and false, unjust accusations intended to discredit their practice without regard to truth. This does raise a serious issue. Is it possible that some groups, about whom little is known except through the reports of their adversaries, could have been misrepresented in church history, and deserve better treatment? Danvers would seem to indicate that this is in fact the case. He is not afraid to identify with some lesser known sects, because he

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

believes that they may well have been abused in the received accounts of their doctrines and practices.

The material presented in these chapters highlights an important issue, present in the writings of many paedo-baptist authors, councils and church synods cited by Danvers. He demonstrates that many proponents of infant baptism have admitted that there is little or no scriptural warrant for their position, and that it rests rather on theological, or even traditional arguments. The array

of admissions of this fact presented is impressive,²³ and serves Danvers' purposes well. Once again, an acquaintance with the details of church history has provided the author with many notable, and potentially embarrassing statements by those who held a position opposite to his own.

As noted above, chapter seven is virtually its own section, as by itself it is longer than either of the other two sections of the book. In this chapter, Danvers presents his most sophisticated historical argument, giving much space to a variety of important witnesses for the practice of believer's baptism, starting with Tertullian, proceeding to the Donatists and Novatians, the Ancient Britains, the Waldenses, John Wickliffe and the Lollards, and also responding to objections brought against his use of some of these witnesses.

Tertullian, so argues Danvers briefly, was the first to witness against the practice of infant baptism in the third-century, indicating that this was when it probably began to be introduced. The second important witnesses against the practice of infant baptism were the Donatists and Novatians. Citing several different sources, Danvers puts these two geographically diverse groups together, and presents their testimony to the practice of believer's baptism. Realizing that some will respond that these groups were adjudged to be heretics, he takes up this objection by offering an important and substantial response. In the first place, the label heretic in itself does not necessarily reflect the true status of a particular group. Secondly, he argues that an error on one issue or another should not therefore brand anyone as heretical. He offers "several gross Errors and Mistakes of Austin himself" as an example of this fact. Thirdly, Danvers states that in his estimation, especially regarding the Novatians, he "cannot find they were other than a

²³ Among others cited are Austin, Chrysostom, Bellarmine, the Councils of Trent and Basil, Eck, the Oxford Divines of 1647, and Richard Baxter; an interesting assortment from across a wide spectrum (*Ibid.*, pp. 132-150).

very Holy People.”²⁴ For these reasons, he judges the testimony of these two groups to be of importance. There is a certain amount of weight in Danvers’ reasoning. As noted above, it is possible that those who oppose one sect may to some degree be guilty of misrepresentation of that sect, and thus colour the judgments of historians who do not have access to other primary source material. In addition, it is true that some of the best theologians of the church have themselves held to views later considered to be erroneous. One could say that the only reason that the one is considered to be more highly regarded than the other rests upon the history written, or perhaps controlled, by those who hold a similar position. Danvers’ third point, then, sets up the guide for this. If in fact his investigation has been sound, then it may be that these groups were better than they have been sometimes judged. In reality, only a detailed study of primary source material from the era can lead one to any kind of conclusive opinion. Nevertheless, the point is well taken, and serves as a caution in the study of church history. It must be said however, that it is also possible to be guilty of revisionism simply for polemical purposes. In Danvers’ method of argumentation, an appeal to the ancients is of great value. The more substantial the appeal, the more numerous the witnesses, and the more able that he is to bring these groups into the mainstream of church history, the more successful is his case. From this distance, the issue itself is difficult to judge. But for Danvers’ purposes, at least in judging by the responses given to his work,²⁵ it was a very useful tactic indeed.

Since Danvers was a British author, the testimony of the Ancient Britons was of great importance for him. He accepted at face value the tradition that Great Britain was evangelized by apostolic delegates in the first-century, and that they, therefore, in their early history, reflected something of a pure church. In this, according to the author’s sources, the Ancient British church rejected infant baptism, and practiced believer baptism. It was not until the Romish interlopers arrived that the early British churches were forced away from this pristine position, and infant baptism was imposed. In a very

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

²⁵ No notice has yet been taken of the controversy that ensued upon the publication of Danvers’ books. Mention will be made in a subsequent section of the paper.

lengthy section of the book, Mr. Danvers focuses his attention upon the Waldenses. He says,²⁶

The next we shall produce, is the most eminent *Testimony* that was born by the *Waldenses*, those *French Christians*, who are so very famous in *Story*, for the defence of the Gospel against Antichristian Usurpations, that the learned *Usher*, in his Book of the *State* and *Succession* of the Christian Church, doth trace its succession through them in a *distinction* from, and *opposition* to that of the *Papacy*, the Romish Church.

This quotation highlights an important facet of Danvers' historiography. He is unwilling to grant that church history should only be written through the eyes of the Roman Catholic church, as if that stream was the only one during the previous centuries. It would seem that he would like to offer the reader an alternative church history, separate from Rome, and more akin to the Apostolic practice than was present in Rome. By citing Ussher, he is able to invoke an important authority, and give credence to his position. There is a point to be made here. Must church history only be viewed through the lens of the ups and downs of the Roman communion, especially in the Middle Ages, with the result that alternative groups are solely viewed as outside the pale of the true church? Or, is it possible to view the Christian era as a multi-layered complex, with different strands of doctrine and practice present at differing times and places? For Danvers, at least, this is an important consideration. He might argue that there was much light during the Dark Ages, not in the Roman communion, but scattered throughout Europe, especially among the people called the Waldenses. He would urge his readers to consider the possibility that authentic Christianity was carried on, apart from Rome, through this group.

Four major arguments are put forth to demonstrate that the Waldenses practiced believer's baptism. The first is drawn from their confessions of faith, the second from the writings of some of their "most eminent leading men," the third from the edicts of councils against them, as well as the testimonies of learned scholars, and the fourth from the persecutions

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

brought against many of the members of this sect.²⁷ All of these arguments demonstrate the reality of the practice of the Waldenses. Apparently, Danvers believed that the continental Anabaptists were the direct descendants of the Waldenses, as he immediately moves into a record of the persecutions against them in Switzerland, and other parts of Europe, during the sixteenth-century. He is not afraid, in this section, to call them Baptists, and thus to identify himself with them. Danvers was not unaware of the charges sometimes leveled against these sects, including that of Manichaeism, but he argues that by and large, most of these charges have been put forth by enemies, who were not bound to reflect the truth. Even in the case of the events at Munster, Danvers argues for caution in judgment. Some of the reports came from “malicious Papists . . . who have said bad things about *Luther* and *Calvin* themselves,” while others were said by “their most inveterate enemies, the Protestants who were willing to take up and improve such reports, to blast not only the whole party of Anabaptists, but their principles also.”²⁸ He then cites the famous case of the puritan author Thomas Edwards, whose book *Gangraena* was notorious for its slander and misrepresentation of many parties, English Baptists included. Danvers does not argue that the events did not happen, only that caution should be used in accepting the reports of those with a vested interest in discrediting the movement as a whole.

While Danvers readily identifies with the Waldenses, he distances himself from the continental Mennonites. He argues that their response to the events of Munster was to run to the opposite extreme, “refusing the bearing of Arms both Offensive and Defensive, or taking of Oaths, or bearing any Rule, Office, or Government in the Commonwealth.”²⁹ Since he himself was a military officer, and had served the Commonwealth in several positions, he probably had sharp opposition to such opinions.

In addition, according to Danvers, the Waldenses, or Anabaptists, also had a presence in England, from as early as the time of William the Conqueror.³⁰ This plays an important part in his alternative church history:³¹

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 239-257.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 326-327.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

I conceive, it may neither be unseasonable, nor altogether unacceptable, to give you a brief *Historical Account* of their *Christianity*, from our best and most approved Authors, whereby it may be manifested, That the Gospel, and the Truths thereof, did flourish in Power and Purity in these *Western* parts of the World, as received from the purest times, and were so far from being beholden to the *Romish Harlot* for Gospel-Light and Truth, as she lyingly and vain-gloriously boasteth saying, *Where was your Religion, Ministry, Churches, Ordinances, before Luther?* . . . A Consideration not unworthy the present juncture, wherein so much of her poysonous infection is so afresh cast about; and which you'll find is no small *Antidote nd Preservative* the worthy *Usher* prescribes against it, in his excellent Piece, called *The Succession and State of the Church*; renouncing any the least Succession from *Whorish Rome*; but from these faithful churches.

This last sentence is of immense importance. Danvers felt no compulsion to identify himself with history mediated through Rome. An alternative was greatly desirable, and it was to be found in groups such as the Waldenses. So, he gladly set himself the task of rehabilitating their reputation before the world. He says again, of the Waldenses,

That eminent and famous Christian People, who have not only given so large a Testimony to the Truth before treated; but by the Learned *Usher*, and many of our *Protestant* Writers, are owned to have been the True Church, and from whom the *Protestants* do derive, in opposition to the *Papacy*.

The lineage is here made explicit. Genuine Christianity always existed, even during the darkest and most corrupt days of Rome's ascendancy, in the Waldensian movement. Danvers does not indicate that there was some kind of lineal, physical succession, but he does indicate that there existed a spiritual kinship between these Medieval Christians and the contemporary Puritan movement of Britain. As such, Danvers would apparently be attracted to the Anabaptist Spiritual Kinship theory of Baptist origins, if it

was expressed properly, that is with the discernment to differentiate between earlier and later Anabaptist movements.

There is much more that could be said about the contents of Danvers' work. It is hoped that this material has been a fair and accurate summary of his views. At this point, it is important to turn to the issue of historiography.

Henry Danvers' Historiography

While several hints at the historiography of *A Treatise of Baptism* have been given thus far, it is important at this point to make this matter explicit. Appended to the back of the book is Danvers' "An Answer to Mr. Baxter's Preface." Baxter had written a treatise on *True Religion*, and had taken some exception to the first edition of Danvers' work in the preface to his treatise. Danvers thought it necessary to respond to these remarks of Baxter, and did so in this "Answer." A major part of the "Answer" is an explanation of Danvers' historiography.

Apparently, Baxter had accused Danvers of making many serious historical errors. Danvers' responded with a three-fold defense of his methodology. His first purpose was to show "that professing Believers have by the Ancients been *owned* to be the only and proper subjects of Baptism, for which you have such a multitude of instances and authorities."³² The appeal to the Ancients was of great importance to Danvers, and also to his readers and adversaries. Christianity was considered to be an historical religion, practiced first by the Apostles and the early church, and then passed down through the centuries until Danvers' day. It was not divorced from history, but intimately tied to it. As such, those who were closest to the original era were regarded as the best authorities; and the truth of the original views was validated in the continuing presence of the principle values and practices of the founders. Historical continuity was of great importance. It demonstrated that the principles were true and universally valid. In addition, if it was possible to demonstrate that one's own position was well attested throughout the era, the charge of historical novelty could be effectively obviated. This was Danvers' concern. If believer's baptism could not be demonstrated as the original practice of the Apostles, and by extension of the early church, it could not be claimed as an authentic

³² *Ibid.*, p. 364.

Christian practice. However, if the claim could be made convincingly, its validity would be nearly assured. For this reason, Danvers relied heavily on an appeal to the Ancients in order to substantiate his own position.

The second strand in his methodology was essentially a negation. Danvers stated that he wanted to prove "that *Infants-Baptism* was not in use for two or three hundred years after Christ, nor enjoined as necessary till the Fifth Century."³³ He believed that it was possible to demonstrate that paedobaptism was not a practice of the early church, and was not even extensively practiced in the church for several centuries. He knew that if he could make this charge stand, it would effectively cut out the foundation of infant baptism, and show it as a later innovation. To support this position, appeal to the Ancients was again used.

The third strand in Danvers' historiography was an attempt to show "that divers eminent men, *Churches and People*, have since its first appearing in the world, been *drawn* forth not only by *Word* and *Writing*, to witness *against* it, but by *Confiscation, Death and Bonds*, have seal'd to the same in so many Ages."³⁴ He argues that there are so many witnesses to this fact, that if some are found to be faulty they would only be a small part of the large amount extant. It was at this point that Baxter's criticisms especially faltered. Baxter had said, "no Authentick Witness was born against Infants-Baptism for many hundred years after Christ; no not before *Luther's* time."³⁵ Danvers was, however, well suited to respond to such a statement, and marshalled a huge amount of evidence against such an assertion. Again, because Christianity is grounded in history, true examples of Danvers' position could be cited in abundance.

One of the significant factors undergirding Danvers' polemic was the belief that infant baptism was essentially "Popish." He was a product of the well-developed separatism present in seventeenth-century England, and as such maintained a deep enmity to anything that smacked of popery. It was difficult enough for many of the dissenters to tolerate the National Church, and much more so to stand for anything related to Rome. Danvers, therefore, sought to establish his historiography apart from Rome, and as an alternative to it. He did not do so uncritically, but used primary sources as much as possible to substantiate his claim that believer's baptism was an

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

³⁵ Cited by Danvers, *Ibid.*, p. 367.

honoured and ancient practice. He used both positive and negative history to defend his position, and readily identified with those who went before and testified to the reality of this practice. In his estimation, there had been throughout history groups who maintained the purity of the church in the face of opposition.

Two further issues are important to mention. The first relates to the whole question of the Medieval period in England and Europe. It would seem that Henry Danvers would differentiate between two strands of Medieval Christianity. On the one hand, there was the Roman version, essentially corrupt in its power and prestige, and fallen from the truths of the Gospel. On the other hand, there were those movements, such as the Waldenses, who maintained the truths of the Gospel, even in the face of fierce opposition from the established and official church. True Christianity was to be found there, and he was not afraid to identify with these as his spiritual forebears. While Danvers did use the phrase “The Succession of Believers Baptism,”³⁶ he did not seem to use it to indicate some kind of direct lineal descent, passed on from one group to another. Rather, he simply looked for groups whose doctrines and practices reflected his own, and who would stand as spiritual ancestors to his own generation. So, the Medieval period was marked by these two competing strands of Christianity, one corrupt, and the other authentic.³⁷

The second issue relates to his treatment of the Waldenses, or continental Anabaptists. He gladly accepts the Waldenses as his Baptist predecessors, but carefully distinguishes them from the later Mennonites, who went to extremes that were unpalatable to his own convictions. He never argues that English Baptists developed out of continental Anabaptism, nor even that

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 321-322. The full quote is: “By all which you see by plentiful Evidence, that Christ hath not been without his Witnesses in every Age, not only to defend & assert the true, but to impugn, and to reject (yea even to death itself) the false Baptism. Insomuch that we are not left without good Testimony of a Series of Succession, that by God’s Providence hath been kept afoot, of this Great Ordinance of Believers Baptism even since the first times.” The marginal note on p. 321 refers to this as “The Succession of Believers Baptism.”

³⁷ Danvers also wrote a book entitled *Theopolis, or City of God, in Opposition to the City of the Nations* It would be interesting to study this treatise, comparing it with Augustine’s treatment, and seeking to determine if he articulates his views more fully there.

there was some line of descent from the Lollards or English Waldensians. Rather, he sees descent in terms of shared doctrines and practices concerning the church. In this way, it would seem that both the Spiritual Kinship theory, and the English Separatist Theory help to explain the background of modern Baptists. There are ties to the Waldenses, in terms of shared practices, but the actual genesis of recognizable churches in England did not come until the seventeenth-century. Probably, Danvers would endorse such a statement.

The Controversy Over Danvers' Work

Little has been said up to this point with regard to the reception of Danvers' book by his contemporaries. Just as most modern books provoke some kind of response from others in the field, so also did *A Treatise of Baptism*. The first response, no more than a page or two long, was made by Richard Baxter in the previously mentioned preface to his work on *True Religion*. Far more substantial was the response of Obadiah Wills in 1674.³⁸ Wills believed that Danvers' work was important, saying "There is great Cracking about it, and some cry it up for a None-such; that it is unanswerable."³⁹ Since no one else had yet come forward to reply, he did so, and set off a book war of no small proportion. Danvers responded again in a work of 192 pages,⁴⁰ to which Wills soon offered his own rejoinder of 154 pages, including an appeal to other Baptists to weigh the "strange forgeries and misrepresentations" by Danvers.⁴¹ This brought forth a pamphlet,

³⁸ Obadiah Wills, *Infant-Baptism Asserted & Vindicated by Scripture and Antiquity: In Answer to a Treatise of Baptism lately published by Mr. Henry Danvers* (London: Printed for Jonathan Robinson at the Golden Lyon in St. Paul's Church-yard, 1674).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, unnumbered page 1 of Preface.

⁴⁰ Henry Danvers, *Innocency and Truth Vindicated: or, A Sober Reply to Mr. Will's Answer to a Late Treatise of Baptisme* (London: Printed for Francis Smith, at the Elephant and Castle near the Royal Exchange in Cornhill, 1675).

⁴¹ Obadiah Wills, *Vindiciae Vindiciarum; or A Vindication of a late Treatise, entituled, Infant-Baptism Asserted and Vindicated . . .* (London: Printed for Jonathan Robinson, at the Golden-Lion in St. Paul's Church-yard, 1675). The quoted material is from the title page.

mentioned above, signed by six prominent London Baptists,⁴² as well as three more works from Danvers' pen.⁴³

Two issues seem to have especially troubled Wills. The first was his own perception of Danvers' use of history. In Wills' estimation, Danvers was guilty of misquoting and misrepresenting the sources that he had used. Wills' "Appeal to the Baptists" was an attempt to bring men of Danvers' own persuasion into the fray in his own support. He sought to have them investigate his charge that Danvers had knowingly falsified information in order to strengthen his own case. The six Baptists who took up the appeal issued a short pamphlet in reply, in which they respond to the specific charges leveled by Wills. While they recognize that there were some mistakes made by Danvers, for the most part they acquit him of Wills' charges and turn the issue back to the author of the "Appeal." So far as they were concerned, Danvers had accurately represented his sources, and could not be charged with falsehood.⁴⁴

The second issue that troubled Wills was his sense that Danvers' writing advocated a kind of Baptist exclusivity that was harmful in an era which needed expressions of peace. He argued that there were other Baptists, including the noted Henry Jessey, who were open to closer fellowship with paedo-baptists than Danvers seemed to be.⁴⁵ Perhaps in this issue, Wills' concerns were more appropriate. The Particular Baptists were at this time, at least to some degree, engaged in a controversy over the issues of baptism, church membership and the Lord's Table, and Danvers seems to have advocated the stricter⁴⁶ position among them. In any case, Wills himself was

⁴² *The Baptists Answer.*

⁴³ Henry Danvers, *A Rejoynder to Mr. Wills his Vindiciae*, (London: Printed for Francis Smith, at the Elephant and Castle, near the Royal Exchange, 1675), 77 pages; *A Second Reply in Defense of the Treatise of Baptism . . .* (London: Printed for Francis Smith, at the Elephant and Castle, near the Royal Exchange in Cornhill, 1675), 266 pages; *A Third Reply; or a Short Return to Mr. Baxter's Brief Answer to my Second Reply . . .* (n.p: no publisher, printed Anno. 1676), 14 pages.

⁴⁴ *The Baptists Answer*, pp. 3-14.

⁴⁵ Wills, *Infant Baptism*, unnumbered p. 4 of preface.

⁴⁶ As an example, William Kiffin and John Bunyan engaged in a print discussion over the issues, Kiffin arguing for a consistent Baptist position, and Bunyan arguing that "water baptism is no bar to communion."

guilty of severe treatment in his responses to Danvers, and was mildly rebuked by the Baptists for such.⁴⁷

This skirmish of books and pamphlets, while only lasting two or three years, produced several interesting and intriguing expressions of the thought of the era. They evidence the concern of many for an historically defensible and accurate ecclesiology.

Conclusion

Several things need to be said in evaluation of this treatise. It is, without question, a serious attempt to grapple with history, and the application of history to contemporary controversies. As a polemical work, it convincingly presented the ideas and lineage of Baptists in a positive light. Wills acknowledged that many went over to the Baptist side as a result,⁴⁸ and the paedo-baptist community seemingly took the challenge to their views very seriously.

As a piece of scholarly work, it stands up as an excellent example of the scholarship of the age. While Danvers does not himself indicate the place at which he did his research, it is evident that a large amount of source material was available to him. Wills states that he searched the "Publick Library" at Oxford in order to ascertain the accuracy of Danvers citations,⁴⁹ and was able to find much of the resources appealed to by Danvers. This demonstrates that there was a high level of availability of important manuscript material during the era. These men apparently searched diligently into the records, and constructed their case based upon a mass of authorities.

Danvers did not use his sources uncritically. He often anticipated objections, and responded to them at the appropriate juncture. Without doubt, he sought to portray his perceived predecessors in the best of light, but was not afraid to expose their weaknesses and errors. He may have been guilty, at times, of being too willing to palliate the accusations made against

⁴⁷ *The Baptists Answer*, 4.

⁴⁸ He said, "He hath not only proselyted many of the *Vulgar* sort, but some also of the *Ministry*. It is very certain, that at its first appearance last Summer, divers persons were Dipped in these parts, and as I have been informed, 7 or 8 in a day in the City of Bristol." Wills, *Infant-Baptism Asserted*, unnumbered first page of Preface.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Unnumbered page seven of Preface.

some of the sects, but usually he offers reasons for doing so. In this way, his work was not merely a blind polemic, but was thoughtful and serious. It was intended to be an historical record that would carry weight in the minds of his readers. Since most, if not all, of the material would be available for examination and inspection by others, he knew that caution had to be exercised. He thoroughly documented his citations, and used the best of authorities to present his case.

One wonders, however, about Danvers' willingness to appeal to some of the more marginal sects of church history. Most twentieth-century historians would argue that some of these groups were indeed heretical, and thus outside of the realm of orthodoxy. It is interesting to note though, that modern historians themselves express a similar caution about some of the charges laid against certain Anabaptist groups. In an unsigned article appearing in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, a differentiation is made between "sober" and "fanatical" Anabaptists. Even, however, in the discussion of the events at Munster, in the "fanatical" Anabaptist section, it is said, "the reports come from prejudiced sources."⁵⁰ Not all of the events of the past can be judged with clear and certain convictions, and a certain amount of ambiguity must be permitted. In a sense, this is all that Danvers was seeking. He did not deny that there may have been serious problems, at certain times, and in certain places. He simply appealed for a balanced evaluation of the data, recognizing that prejudice may have jaundiced the record. In any case, his major support does not come from the more marginal sects. His substantial appeal rests upon groups whose place within orthodoxy is secure as judged by modern scholarship.

Danvers' unwillingness to accept church history as exclusively mediated through Rome is of some importance, and deserves serious reflection. It is true that many significant, and indeed earth-shaking events have occurred in the history of the church as it relates to the growth, development and decay of the Roman communion. However, when history is only considered through this one grid, certain alternative but important factors may be overlooked or marginalised. It cannot be that Rome's church was the only expression of Christianity throughout most of the Christian era. The other

⁵⁰ *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 1908 ed., s.v. "Anabaptists."

strands of Christianity, whether buried in the mountain valleys of southern France or confined to the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, deserve study. They may contribute valuable information for the understanding of Christianity. Danvers' objection to a Rome-centred historiography is well-taken, and deserves serious response.

It is evident that Henry Danvers' work was a substantial piece of historical scholarship, and deserved the place given to it by the Baptists of the age. He studied well, and presented a convincing argument in support of the Baptist position. Perhaps his work had a substantial part in the legitimation of Baptists. It deserves an honoured place in Baptist historiography.