

WERE THE FIRST BAPTISTS SACRAMENTALISTS?

DR. LLOYD HARSCH*

From their earliest days, Christians have expressed their understanding of theology and polity into confessions of faith and doctrinal treatises. Baptists have been no exception to this practice, particularly when stating their views on baptism. Recently, a dispute has arisen among Baptists regarding the how the first Baptists understood the purpose of baptism.

It has long been a commonly accepted belief that Baptists observe ordinances, not sacraments. Within the past decade, some Baptists have questioned the historical accuracy of that belief and introduced a new perspective on the ordinances. Known as Baptist Sacramentalists, these advocates assert that early Baptists were more sacramental in their understanding of baptism than has been commonly accepted among modern Baptists. They contend that this view was lost in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, only to be recovered in the latter part of the twentieth century.¹

Two leading North American advocates of Baptist Sacramentalism are Americans Philip E. Thompson and Stanley K. Fowler. Fowler is Professor of Theology at Heritage Theological Seminary in Cambridge, Ontario, where he has taught for the past quarter of a century. He has received degrees from Purdue University (B.S.), Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M.), and Wycliffe College University of Toronto (Th.D.).² Fowler's comprehensive work, *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism*, is the leading authority on the subject.

Thompson earned his degrees from Mars Hill College (B.A.), Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (M.Div.) and Emory University (Ph.D.) and is currently Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Heritage at North American Baptist Seminary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.³ He has written several articles on the issue and is

*Dr. Lloyd Harsch is Associate Professor of Church History at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

¹Stanley K. Fowler, *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery Baptismal Sacramentalism*, with a Foreword by William H. Brackney, Studies in Baptist History and Thought Series (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2002), 4.

²Heritage Theological Seminary, "Heritage Faculty," [world wide web page online]; available from http://www.heritage-theo.edu/Faculty/Stan_Fowler.html; accessed 8 March 2004; Internet.

³North American Baptist Seminary, "Faculty," [world wide web page online]; available from <http://www.nabs.edu/academics/index.php?id=71&entryid=48>; accessed 31 October 2004; Internet.

one of the series editors of the “Studies in Baptist History and Thought”, published by Paternoster Press, which produced *More Than a Symbol*.

William H. Brackney, in his foreword to *More Than a Symbol*, concisely describes the viewpoint of this emerging movement.

[Fowler’s] thesis is that in the twentieth century leading British Baptist pastors and theologians recovered an understanding of baptism that connected experience with soteriology, and focused on the forgiveness of sins rather than a witness of the completed experience of union with Christ.⁴

The two sources for information on the theological perspective of early Baptists are their confessions of faith and their doctrinal writings. This paper will first examine early Baptist confessions of faith, followed by a study of select doctrinal writings of some of the earliest Baptists and their detractors. The focus will be upon the ordinance of baptism because that was the subject on which Baptists spent the most time delineating their beliefs.

DEFINITION OF ORDINANCE AND SACRAMENT

Augustus H. Strong describes the traditionally accepted Baptist position by distinguishing the meaning of “symbol,” “rite,” and “ordinance.”

A *symbol* is the sign, or visible representation, of an invisible truth or idea . . . A *rite* is a symbol which is employed with regularity and sacred intent. Symbols become rites when thus used. . . An *ordinance* is a symbolic rite which sets forth the central truths of the Christian faith, and which is of universal and perpetual obligation. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are rites which have become ordinances by the specific command of Christ and by their inner relation to the essential truths of his kingdom. No ordinance is a sacrament in the Romanist sense of conferring grace; but, as the *sacramentum* was the oath taken by the Roman soldier to obey his commander even unto death, so Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are sacraments, in the sense of vows of allegiance to Christ our Master.⁵

Baptists observe baptism because Jesus ordained their observance, not to receive an additional measure of grace.

The term “sacrament” conveys different meanings within the various Christian denominations. Broadly defined, “sacraments are acts of worship that are understood by the worshipers to give access to an intimate union with the divine and to be efficacious for

⁴William H. Brackney, forward to *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery Baptismal Sacramentalism*, by Stanley K. Fowler, Studies in Baptist History and Thought Series (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2002), xiii.

⁵Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium Designed for the Use of Theological Students*, 3 volumes in 1 (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1907), 930.

salvation.”⁶ Fowler states that “to say that baptism is ‘sacramental’ is to say that it mediates the experience of salvific union with Christ, i.e., that one submits to baptism as a penitent sinner in order to experience the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, rather than as a confirmed disciple in order to bear witness to a past experience of union with Christ.”⁷ Therefore, *More Than a Symbol* is an apt title for his work since he argues that baptism was more than a symbol to early British Baptists. It is the efficaciousness for salvation that Baptists have generally opposed.

CONFESSIONS OF FAITH

The majority of Baptists’ earliest writings focused primarily on the proper subject and mode of baptism, with little space given to how God operated within the ordinance. Therefore, doctrinal statements that do expound on the meaning of baptism carry substantial weight. In addition, Fowler observes that “ordinance” and “sacrament” were used interchangeably by early Baptist writers. Because of this, he argues that a sacramental meaning cannot be dismissed simply due to the replacement of term “sacrament” with “ordinance.”⁸

General Baptists

John Smyth is credited with forming the first congregation from which the General Baptists eventually emerge. His congregation cannot truly be considered Baptist since it did not practice believer’s baptism by immersion. However, since the movement which he began eventually adopted immersion, the views of these early proto-Baptists can be instructive.

In 1610, Smyth came to the conclusion that he should not have baptized himself and sought membership with the Waterlander Mennonites in Amsterdam.⁹ To that end, the Mennonites requested that Smyth’s congregation review their confession, drawn up in 1580 by Lubbert Gerrits and Hans de Ries.

The result was almost total agreement with the confession. Article 30 relates to baptism. Fowler focuses on the last sentence of the article:

⁶Mircea Eliade, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1987), s.v. “Sacraments: Christian Sacraments,” by Monika K. Hellwig.

⁷Fowler, 6.

⁸Fowler, 14.

⁹William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959; rev. ed., 1969), 97-102. Background information comes from this source unless otherwise noted.

The whole dealing in the outward visible baptism of water, setteth before the eyes, witnesseth and signifieth, the Lord Jesus doth inwardly baptize the repentant, faithful man, in the laver of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, washing the soul from all pollution and sin, by the virtue and merit of his bloodshed; and by the power and working of the Holy Ghost, the true heavenly, spiritual, living Water, cleanseth the inward evil of the soul, and maketh it havenly, spiritual, and living, in true righteousness or goodness. Therefore, the baptism of water leadeth us to Christ, to his holy office in glory and majesty; and admonisheth us not to hang only upon the outward, but with holy prayer to mount upward, and to beg of Christ the good thing signified.

Fowler suggests that the phrase “leadeth us to Christ” implies a vital connection between baptism and the person’s experience of salvation, which for him indicates a sacramental understanding of baptism.¹⁰ However, it seems more in context to see the connection as symbolic. The powerful imagery of baptism illustrates what has already happened (witnesseth and signifieth). It leads one to Jesus and encourages the one baptized not to rely upon the outward symbol of baptism as the anchor of one’s faith, but to earnestly seek a deeper relationship with the risen Savior.

General Baptists in London responded to the growing Quaker influence among their ranks by issuing as their own, a confession previously prepared by Thomas Lover, *The True Gospel-Faith Declared According to the Scriptures*.¹¹ Article XII states: “That God gives his Spirit to believers dipped through the prayer of faith and laying on of hands.” Fowler is uncertain of its meaning, suggesting that while the phrase may describe one’s initial salvation, it might also relate baptism to a further empowering of the Holy Spirit.¹² A more likely context is an expression of the emerging Six Principle movement which would soon become prevalent among General Baptists. Six Principle Baptists used Hebrews 6.1-2 as a basis for their practice of laying hands on new members for the reception of the Holy Spirit. The six principles are: repentance, faith, baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, eternal life.

The General Assembly of General Baptists issued the *Standard Confession* in 1660 to calm the fears of the king of the newly restored monarchy, Charles II.¹³ Fowler suggests a connection between the laying on of hands and baptism as a means of sanctification.¹⁴ The portion of the confession in question (Article XII) reads:

¹⁰Fowler, 13.

¹¹Lumpkin, 188-95.

¹²Fowler, 14.

¹³Lumpkin, 219-35.

¹⁴Fowler, 15-16.

That it is the duty of all such who are believers *Baptized*, to draw nigh unto God in submission to that principle of Christs Doctrine, to wit, Prayer and Laying on of Hands, that they may receive the promise of the holy spirit, . . . whereby they may *mortifie the deeds of the body*, . . . and live in all things answerable to their professed intentions, . . .

This connection seems tenuous. The laying on of hands was an encouragement to live by the Holy Spirit's power whose coming was promised by Jesus (John 14.26).

One year after the Particular Baptists issued their *Second London Confession* (1677), General Baptists set forth their *Orthodox Creed*.¹⁵ Written to counter Matthew Caffyn's Hoffmanite Christology, the confession spends considerable time on the trinity. It also loosely follows the *Westminster Confession* (see below). Using "sacrament" and "ordinance" interchangeably, the confession states in Article XXVIII:

Baptism is an ordinance of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, to be unto the party baptized, or dipped, a sign of our entrance into the covenant of grace, and ingrafting into Christ, and into the body of Christ, which is his church; and of remission of sin in the blood of Christ, and of our fellowship with Christ, in his death and resurrection, and of our living, or rising to newness of life.

Fowler acknowledges that there is no sacramental meaning here.¹⁶

Particular Baptists

England in the 1640s was in turmoil. Civil war was breaking out between King Charles I and Parliament. It was during this time that seven Particular Baptist congregations issued the *First London Confession*.¹⁷ Modeled after the Separatist Ancient Church's *True Confession*, it is the first confession to specify immersion as the proper mode of baptism and uses "ordinance" in place of "sacrament".

Of even greater importance is the revision of the confession in 1646. This revision was presented to Parliament in the hope of receiving legal toleration. In spite of this, the article on baptism is even clearer on the symbolic nature of baptism.

THAT the way and manner of dispensing this ordinance, is dipping or plunging the body under water; it being a sign, must answer the things signified, which is, that interest the saints have in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ: And that as certainly as the body is buried under water, and risen again, so certainly shall the bodies of the saints be raised by the power of Christ, in the day of the resurrection, to reign with Christ.¹⁸

¹⁵Lumpkin, 295-334.

¹⁶Fowler, 19.

¹⁷Lumpkin, 144-71.

This is particularly significant when this edition is compared with the *True Confession* on which it is modeled. The *True Confession* (Article 35) describes baptism as “signes and seales of Gods euerlasting couenant, representing and offring to all the receiuers, but exhibiting only to the true beleeuers the Lord Iesus Christ and all his benefits vnto righteousnes, sanctification and eternall lyfe, through faith in his name to the glorie and prayse of God.”¹⁹

In order to present Particular Baptists in the best possible light to Parliament, one would expect that baptism would be described in clearly Calvinian terms. Instead, the phraseology is quite different and clearly symbolic.

Scarcity of copies and ignorance of the document coupled with a desire to show doctrinal unity with their fellow Dissenters in the face of renewed persecution during Charles II's reign led Particular Baptists to pen the *Second London Confession* in 1677.²⁰ Its chief editor/author was Benjamin Keach and was modeled after the Presbyterian's *Westminster Confession of Faith* as modified by the Congregationalists in the *Savoy Confession*.

The *Savoy Confession* is a modification of the *Westminster Confession* as amended by Parliament. For the most part, changes made at Savoy were retained by the Baptists who then made additional alterations. Most of the changes are minor editorial modifications where some sections are reworded, merged, rearranged or added for clarification or emphasis.

The Savoy closely mirrors Westminster regarding the sacraments. The Second London diplomatically renames chapter XXVIII, “Of the Sacraments,” as “Of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.” However, it omits sections 1, 2, 3, and 5 which refer to the sacramental elements and their meaning.

The Second London changes references to baptism as a “sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace” to a “sign of his fellowship with [Christ], in his death and resurrection” (XXIX.1). It rearranges sections 2-4, restricting the recipients to adult believers only and presenting immersion in water as the correct method. The Savoy and Westminster allow pouring or sprinkling. The Second London also omits sections 5-7 which state that it is a sin to omit baptism, that it does convey grace, and is given only once in life.

Fowler acknowledges the importance of any changes in the Westminster or Savoy made by the Baptists. He notes the change from “sacrament” to “ordinance” and the clear

¹⁸“First London Confession of Faith - 1646 Edition” [world wide web page online]; available from <http://www.geocities.com/sovgracenet/1646.html>; accessed 10 March 2004; Internet.

¹⁹Lumpkin, 79-97.

²⁰Ibid., 235-95.

omission of sacramental language.²¹ In response, he reminds his readers that these terms were used interchangeably by Baptists of that era and cautions that this change not lead to an “assumption that there is a conscious rejection of any sacramental idea.”²² He then notes that the Baptists retained the spiritual presence language when describing the Lord’s Supper. Since this is not a purely symbolic understanding of this ordinance, he argues unconvincingly that “there is no reason to think that an instrumental understanding of baptism would be foreign to the mind-set of the confession.”²³

DOCTRINAL WRITINGS

Baptists began writing specifically about baptism in the 1640s. The earliest writings focused primarily on the proper subject and mode of baptism, with little space given to how God operated within the ordinance. However, doctrinal statements that expound on the purpose of baptism lie buried within this larger discussion and deserve close attention.

The first such work in English was Edward Barber’s 1641 work, *A Small Treatise of Baptisme, or, Dipping: Wherein is Cleerly Shewed that the Lord Christ Ordained Dipping for Those Only that Professe Repentance and Faith*.²⁴ This General Baptist’s brief monograph initiated a pamphlet war on the subject. Parliament’s authorization of the Westminster Assembly in 1643 opened the door to an even wider discussion on the topic.

While the first generation of Baptists present an initial glimpse of foundational Baptist theology, the second generation will provide a maturing view and providing an indication of the trajectory of Baptist thought on the issue. After examining three first generation Baptists, two leading second generation Baptists will be studied. These latter writers are both claimed by either implication or direct argument as sacramentalists by proponents of Baptist sacramentalism.

Edward Barber

Edward Barber described himself as a “Citizen and Merchant-Taylor of London; late Prisoner, for denying the sprinkling of Infants . . .”²⁵ He argues forcefully that the only

²¹Fowler, 14-15.

²²Ibid., 15.

²³Ibid., 17.

²⁴Lumpkin, William L., *A History of Immersion: Scanning Christian History to Show that Immersion Has Ordinarily Been Recognized as the Normal Mode of Baptism* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1962), 33-34.

²⁵Edward Barber, *A Small Treatise of Baptisme, or Dipping. Wherein Is Cleerly shewed that the Lord Christ Ordained Dipping for those only that professe Repentance and Faith* ([London]: np, 1641), [vi].

proper subjects for baptism are believers. “Thus it is cleere, that the Institutions of Christ, as also the practise of the Apostles, concerning Dipping, was only to administer it upon such, and such onely as did manifest faith and Repentance, desiring it, and this is cleere in the Apostles words, Heb. 6.1.2.”²⁶ Barber emphasizes that the proper subjects for baptism are “persons of yeares” (7) and “a Beleever of ripe yeeres” (26), not infants.

If taken out of context, some of his comments can be misunderstood as supporting a sacramental view. Barber states, “God doth by this holy ordinance, assure, and manifest, that he hath washed us from all our sinnes, by the blood of Jesus Christ, Acts 22.16. And doth truly and visably receive us into the Covenant of grace, . . .”²⁷ However, the context shows that Barber’s intent was to demonstrate that baptism signifies something that has already taken place. He later describes “dipping of Infants” as “that false Constitution of Rome to beget grace”.²⁸ This clearly separates grace from baptism.

Of baptism, Barber states that “their outward washing is but a signe . . .”, not a seal of the a covenant of grace.²⁹ He unambiguously asserts that “the faithfull . . . ought to dip those, and those onely that profess repentance, and faith at the command of Jesus Christ; and that because Christ hath commanded it, Matth. 28.19, 20.”³⁰ In addition, Barber uses the term “ordinance” throughout his work. He never refers to baptism as a sacrament.

This inaugural work does not does not present a sacramental view of baptism. To the contrary, it sets the stage for subsequent, stately non-sacramental essays.

Thomas Lamb

Thomas Lamb (or Lambe) was a chandler and soap-boiler who later became pastor of the General Baptist congregation at Bell Alley in London.³¹ He is also one of the earliest General Baptists to write on baptism by immersion.³² Two of his extant works are written debates on baptism published by his critics. They were printed in 1644 and 1645, in the earliest years of Baptist life.

²⁶Ibid., 3-4.

²⁷Ibid., 11.

²⁸Ibid., 12.

²⁹Ibid., 14.

³⁰Ibid., 19.

³¹Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978; reprinted 1992), 71, 112.

³²William H. Brackney, *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999), 247.

In both of these discussions, Lamb is criticized for his non-sacramental understanding of baptism. In *The Anabaptists Groundwork for Reformation*, Lamb spars with John Etherington. The arguments deal with the subject and mode of baptism but give a clear indication of their views on what happens either before or during baptism. Lamb contends that baptizands described in the Bible “did professe they had justifying faith.”³³ He later states that believers “must manifest repentance for every evill known, before they be received to baptism.”³⁴

Lamb is clear that baptism be administered only to those who have already experienced salvation. Etherington is equally clear that baptism conveys saving grace to the recipient, though not in the Catholic sense where baptism is necessary to salvation. He remarks, “whosoever is so circumcised, or baptized, hath put on Christ, is regenerate, and shall be saved.”³⁵

In *The Lawfulness of Infants Baptisme*, Robert Fage lists, then responds to, Lamb’s views on baptism. To Lamb’s claim that infants were not fit subjects for baptism because they could not confess their sins, Fage asserts that “submission to Baptisme was itselfe a Confession of sin, and profession of Repentance . . .”³⁶ Fage further asserts that “being beleevers Infants *profession of faith and repentance may be appropriated unto them visibly . . .*”³⁷

The discussion then shifts to the proper understanding of the covenant of grace. For Lamb, one entered the covenant of grace when one intentionally placed one’s faith in Jesus for salvation. He asserts that baptizing infants “overthrows the nature of the covenant of grace, because persons have interest therein no otherwise then by faith . . . anything else concluded so, makes the promise or covenant void.”³⁸ This echoes an earlier Particular Baptist, Thomas Kilcop (or Killcop), who discounted “that the child thus baptised is regenerate and borne anew: and that Jesus Christ hath sanctifi[ed] the river Jordan, and all

³³John Etherington and Thomas Lamb, *The Anabaptists Ground-work for Reformation, or, New Planting of Churches, That no man, woman, nor child, may be baptized, but such as have justifying Faith, and doe make profession thereof, before, to the Baptizer, Found false, with all things depending thereon*. (London: M. Simmons; Imprimatut: James Cranford, 1644), 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 24.

³⁶Robert Fage, Jr. *The Lawfulness of Infants Baptisme. Or an Answer to Thomas Lamb his eight Arguments, entitled, ‘The unlawfulness of Infants Baptisme.’ And may serve also to the false minors, an old out-worne Arguments in the late book of C. Paul Hobson, till a more particular and compleat Answer come forth to anatomise the fallacies of the said Book, entitled, ‘The fallacie of Infants Baptisme’* (N.p.: W. Wilson, 1645), 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12 (emphasis original).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

other waters to the washing away of sins, which is horrible blasphemy, attributing that to water which is peculiar to the blood of Christ.”³⁹

Fage responds by restating a sacramental understanding of the covenant of grace. Infants are part of the covenant of grace because “*when God draws a people from the world into fellowship with himself, their little children are distinguished from the world, as so many perfecters of the praise of God . . . and are owned freely in his Son Christ before faith or workes manifested actually in their owne persons.*”⁴⁰ The same emphasis on the sacramental understanding of the covenant of grace undergirds a reaction to Francis Cornwall’s defense of believer’s baptism.⁴¹

Fage concludes by stating: “*Those who deny the infants of beleevers thus to be in Gods visible house, must necessarily hold justification not to goe before actuall faith, which is Arminius tenet, or deny originall sin, or conclude al infants damned, or else that those who are saved, are saved some other way then by the Gospel.*”⁴² As a General Baptist, Lamb did in fact adhere to an Arminian understanding of scripture, but even Particular Baptists believed that faith preceded justification.

It seems clear that Lamb’s critics believed they needed to emphasize the sacramental nature of baptism when responding to his arguments. This would hardly have been necessary if he held a sacramental position.

John Tombes

John Tombes was an Anglican priest who became a Particular Baptist pastor.⁴³ As he wrestled with the issue of infant baptism, he submitted his objections to the Westminster

³⁹Thomas Kilcop, *A Short Treatise of Baptisme: Wherein is declared that only Christ’s Disciples or beleevers are to be baptised. And that the baptising of Infants hath no footing* (1640), 5-6. Handwritten copy of original in possession of the Rare Books Collection of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

⁴⁰Fage, 11 (emphasis original).

⁴¹*A Declaration against Anabaptists: To stop the Prosecution fo their Errours, falsly pretended to be a Vindication of the Royall Commission of King Jesus, as they call it. Briefly and fully answering all their Allegations, and clearly proving the Anabaptisticall Doctrine to be against the glory of God, the honour of Christ and his Church, against the Covenant of grace, and against the word of God, and priviledges of the Church made over to them by promise; And also against the Solemne League and Covenant of the three Kingdomes. In Answer to a book, by Francis Cornwall presented to the house of Commons, on Friday last, for which he is committed.* London: Ja:Cranford; Printed for R.W., 1644.

⁴²Fage, 11 (emphasis in original).

⁴³William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopædia: A Dictionary of the Doctrines, Ordinances, Usages, Confessions of Faith, Sufferings, Labors, and Successes, and of the General History of the Baptist Denomination in All Lands: with Numerous Biographical Sketches of Distinguished American and Foreign Baptists, and a Supplement* (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts, 1881), 2:1156-7.

Assembly of Divines for consideration. While the Assembly took little notice of his efforts, others responded vigorously to his positions.

Tombes directs his arguments to the notion that infants are participants in the “Gospel-covenant” and are fit recipients of baptism. In the process, he gives a useful historical overview of who should be baptized and when. As with others, Tombes believes the covenant of grace is established when adults are saved by grace through faith.

Tombes is quite comfortable referring to baptism as a sacrament. The issue is what he means by that term. He bluntly states, “The grace of God is not tied to Sacraments, neither do Sacraments give grace by the work done, and therefore grace is not restrained, though Sacraments be never granted, . . .”⁴⁴ His seventh argument against infant baptism lists four errors which the practice birthed or fostered. The first two of these are:

1. That Baptisme conferres grace by the work done.
2. That Baptisme is Regeneration.⁴⁵

Tombes asserts the traditional understanding of ‘sacrament’ as inadequate. He notes, “And here I think it is to be minded, that the usuall description of a Sacrament, and such as are like to it, That it is a *visible signe of invisible grace*; hath occasioned the misunderstanding of both Sacraments, as if they signified a divine benefit, not our duty, to which in the first place the Institution had respect.”⁴⁶ It appears obvious that while Tombes uses the term ‘sacrament’, he understands it to mean ‘ordinance.’

Stephen Marshall⁴⁷ and Thomas Blake⁴⁸ voice the same complaint against Baptists such as Andrew Ritor and Tombes respectively. William Hussey emphasizes his belief about the sacramental nature of baptism throughout his response to Tombes. “Now, sacramentally men are ingrafted into Christ by baptism, . . .”⁴⁹ Hussey also highlights his contention that

⁴⁴John Tombes, *An Exercitation About Infant Baptisme; Presented in certaine Papers, to the Chair-man of a Committee of the Assembly of Divines, Selected to consider of that Argument, in the years, 1643, and 1644. With some few Emendations, Additions, and an Answer to one new Objection.* Translated out of Latine, by the author. (London: M.S. for George Whittington, 1646), 8.

⁴⁵Tombes, 30.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 34 (emphasis original).

⁴⁷Stephen Marshall, (B D. Minister of the Gospel, at Finchingfield in Effex), *A Sermon of the Baptizing of Infants. Preached in the Abbey-Church at Westminster, at the Morning Lecture, appointed by the Honorable House of Common.* (London: Printed by Richard Cotes for Stephen Bowtell, 1644).

⁴⁸Thomas Blake, *Mr. Blakes Answer, to Mr. Tombes his Letter. In Vindication of the Birth-Priviledge, or Covenant holinesse of Beleevers, and their Issue, in the time of Gospel. Together with the right of Infants to Baptisme* (London: Printed by R. L. for Abel Roper, 1646).

children of believers belong to the covenant of grace. “Now I conceive both circumcision and baptism doe signe or seale sacramentally, and by divine institution; . . .”⁵⁰ Hussey counters Tombes’s conception of baptism by stating it cannot be symbolic and repeats this assertion in several other places. Hussey would not go to such great lengths to redefine Tombes if it was not clearly understood that Tombes was advocating a non-sacramental position. In fact, Hussey acknowledges Tombes’s non-sacramental position outright when he complains that Tombes denies “sacraments to be visible signes of grace, . . .” and that “Mr. Tombes doth prove that men must confesse their faith before baptisme, because baptisme is a signe that the baptized sheweth himself a disciple, and confesseth himselfe a disciple.”⁵¹

Benjamin Keach

Benjamin Keach was a multi-faceted leader among Particular Baptists. He wrote on a wide variety of subjects, including baptism, produced catechetical works for new believers and was the primary shaper of the *Second London Confession of Faith*. Strongly Calvinian in his theology, Keach would be a likely prospect for bringing Calvin’s sacramental theology into Baptist life. Fowler sees four areas where “modest but clear evidence for a sacramental understanding of baptism” can be found in Keach’s monograph on baptism, *Gold Refin’d; or Baptism in its Primitive Purity*.⁵²

First, Fowler states that when Keach refers to “the special ends of this holy Sacrament”⁵³ that Keach does not contrast ordinance and sacrament. The passage which Fowler cites is in the chapter title which reads in whole, “Proving Believers the only true Subjects of Baptism from the special ends of this holy Sacrament.”⁵⁴ There are several problems with this modest evidence. Keach regularly employs the language of his opponents when addressing them directly. Such seems to be the case here. When describing his own views, Keach employs much different language. In the final chapter, where Keach

⁴⁹William Hussey, *An Answer to Mr. Tombes his Scepticall Examination of Infants-Baptisme: Wherein Baptisme is declared to ingraft us into Christ, before any preparation: And the Covenant of the Gospel to Abraham and the Gentiles is proved to be the same, extended to the Gentiles children, as well as to Abrahams: Together with the Reason, why Baptize children, is not so plainly set down in the Gospel, as Circumcise children, in the Law, and yet the Gospel more plain then the La.* (London: [Printed for] John Saywell, 1646), iii-iv.

⁵⁰Hussey, 15.

⁵¹Hussey, 57.

⁵²Fowler, 29.

⁵³Benjamin Keach, *Gold Refin’d; or Baptism in its Primitive Purity* (London: Nathaniel Crouch, 1689), 78. While type face was updated to a modern font in the following quotations, original spelling and capitalization have been retained.

⁵⁴Ibid., 78.

summarizes his points, he uses “ordinance” almost exclusively, amounting to some twenty-eight times.⁵⁵ In contrast, “sacrament” appears only nine times: six in quotes of others and three as Keach addresses paedobaptists in their own terms. Keach then proceeds to explain that the special ends of baptism are outward representations of what has already taken place in salvation. He states, “Another End of Baptism is, (as one well observes) to evidence present Regeneration; whereof, saith he, it is a lively Sign or Symbol — Hence ‘tis called *the Washing of Regeneration*; . . .”⁵⁶

Keach’s use of “washing of regeneration” suggests to Fowler a second way in which Keach may be sacramental. However, for Keach, baptism is the “washing” that symbolizes that one’s sins were already washed away at salvation. His discourses on believers as the proper subjects of baptism bear this out.

Fowler supports his third point, that for Keach, “baptism looks forward to salvation as its goal,”⁵⁷ by quoting parts of two paragraphs. Here Keach lists three promises to believers seen in baptism: Jesus’ presence, salvation (remission of sins) and the Holy Spirit. He concludes with, “See what great Promises are made to Believers in *Baptism*.”⁵⁸ Earlier, Keach discusses Abraham, circumcision and the covenant of grace. He argues that circumcision was a seal of a pre-existing faith. “Circumcision was only a Seal to *Abraham’s* Faith, or a Confirmation of that Faith he had long before he was Circumcised; . . .”⁵⁹ As for a seal in the New Testament, Keach contends, “we know nothing called a Seal of the New Covenant, but the holy Spirit, which the Saints were said to be sealed with after they believed . . . unto the day of Redemption; God by setting his Seal upon us assures us that we are his, and that we shall have Eternal Life.”⁶⁰ In fact, in the sentence prior to the section Fowler quotes, Keach calls baptism “a Badg of Christian Profession . . .”⁶¹ Keach does not see baptism looking forward to salvation. On the contrary, baptism looks *back* to one’s salvation.

Fowler’s last assertion stems from Keach’s positive assessment of a portion of Puritan Stephen Charnock’s work on regeneration. Fowler correctly observes that Keach was arguing that baptism does not mechanically bring regeneration to its subjects. Fowler concludes that Keach “argued this point, with Charnock’s help, by asserting that the true

⁵⁵ Ibid., 171-83.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 83 (emphasis original).

⁵⁷ Fowler, 29.

⁵⁸ Keach, *Gold Refin’d*, 173, (emphasis original).

⁵⁹ Ibid., 104, (emphasis original).

⁶⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁶¹ Ibid., 173.

way in which baptism works is as an instrument of the Spirit who sovereignly employs it in the regeneration of conscious believers.”⁶²

While this may be Charnock’s position, it is not Keach’s. Keach immediately follows this quote with, “*Amesius saith, outward Baptism cannot be a Physical Instrument of Infusing Grace, because it bath it not in any wise in it self.*”⁶³ Keach quotes a portion of Charnock’s passage again later, noting that adults are the proper subjects for baptism because they have already experienced regeneration. Keach contends:

8. Has God ordained Baptism to be an Ordinance to save the Souls of any Persons, either the Adult or Infants? is the *Opus operatum* of Baptism, think you, a likely way or means to beget or bring forth Children to Christ, or make Disciples of them? Baptism signifies no thing (it being but a Sign) where the inward Grace signified by it is wanting.⁶⁴

Keach is not approving Charnock’s sacramental theology. His pleasure is in finding an ally who discounts the efficaciousness of infant baptism on all recipients. For Keach, grace is conveyed in salvation by faith prior to baptism. He explains: “The Apostle in the fourth of the *Romans* shews, that *Abraham* was not justified by Works, nor by Circumcision, but by Faith, which he had long before he was circumcised; and so but a Seal or Confirmation of that Faith he had before, and to assure him of the Truth of the Promises made to him and to his Carnal and Spiritual Seed.”⁶⁵

Removing all doubt about his position, Keach bluntly states: “Doth Baptism confer Grace or regenerate the Child? Though some have ignorantly asserted that, yet we find many of you of another mind.”⁶⁶ Later on he asserts, “Baptism cannot be a Fundamental of Salvation . . .”⁶⁷ This calls into question Thompson’s assertion, largely based upon Keach, that “the Baptists esteemed the ordinances called sacraments as the means of grace appointed by God to strengthen the faith of believers, . . .”⁶⁸ It is clear that Keach was not sacramental in his theology.

⁶²Fowler, 30.

⁶³Keach, *Gold Refin’d*, 129 (emphasis original).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁶⁸Thompson, “People of the Free God”, 233.

Thomas Grantham

A pastor and messenger among General Baptists, Thomas Grantham is one of the more difficult writers to understand. His language seems clearly sacramental, a fact which Fowler and Thompson readily recognize. This is easily seen in Grantham's influential work, *Christianus Primitivus*, written in 1678. This volume expounded his theology in a systematic manner but requires careful reading to avoid misunderstanding the author's meaning.

Thompson draws upon Grantham almost exclusively in his article on how early Baptists viewed their relationship with adherents of other traditions.⁶⁹ In an earlier essay, Thompson makes wide-spread use of Keach and Grantham, particularly when examining early Baptists' understanding of the ordinances.⁷⁰ Fowler, writing at a later date, builds upon the foundation which Thompson laid.

Fowler quotes a section on the necessity of baptism which begins, "And thus was our Lord himself the chief founder of the Gospel in the Heavenly Doctrine of *Faith, Repentance* ann [sic] *Baptism for the remission of sins.*"⁷¹ The phrase "baptism for the remission of sins" seems clearly sacramental.

The passage later continues with: "2. This Baptism is joyned with this Gospel repentance, that as repentance being now necessary to the admission of Sinners into the Church of Christ, even so Baptism being joyned thereto, by the will of God, is necessary to the same end."⁷² Fowler notes, "The impression given . . . is that repentance, faith, and baptism are all related to forgiveness and church membership in the same way."⁷³ However, Grantham's succeeding remarks focus on baptism as a necessary sign for membership in a local congregation. One could interpret Grantham to mean that just as repentance and faith are necessary for joining the universal church, so baptism is necessary for joining the visible church. Grantham notes the existence of universal and local expressions of the Church at the beginning of this part of the book.⁷⁴ With this understanding, baptism is not practiced in

⁶⁹Thompson, "New Question".

⁷⁰Thompson, "People of the Free God".

⁷¹Fowler, 27-28 cite of Grantham, Book II, part 2, chapter 1, section 5, page 19 (emphasis original).

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Fowler, 28.

⁷⁴Thomas Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus: or, the Ancient Christian Religion, in its Nature, Certainty, Excellency, and Beauty, (Internal and External) particularly Considered, Asserted, and Vindicated, from The many Abuses which have Invaded that Sacred Profession, by Humane Innovation, or pretended Revelation, Comprehending likewise The General Duties of Mankind, in their respective Relations; And Particularly, the Obedience of all Christians to Magistrates, And the Necessity of Christian-*

order to obtain the remission of sins, but in recognition that this act has already taken place. Repentance, faith and baptism are related, but not in the same way.

Thompson refers to a second description of regeneration by Grantham, in which the original reads:

*Of regeneration there are two parts; Mortification, and Vivification, that first is called burial with Christ; the second, a rising with Christ; the Sacrament of both these is Baptism, in which we are overwhelmed or buried, and after that do come forth and rise again; It may be said indeed, but Sacramentally, of all that are Baptized, that they are buried with Christ, and raised with him, yet really only of such as have true Faith, mark that!*⁷⁵

The problem here is that these are not Grantham's words. He is quoting Zanky's remarks regarding Colosians 2.12. Grantham notes that the language clearly suggests immersion, the application of which eludes Zanky. In immersion, "burial with Christ" and "rising with Christ" are vividly portrayed. Grantham comments, "strange it is that men of such wisdom should not be more consistent in their practise with their own Doctrine."⁷⁶

It must be acknowledged that Grantham makes free use of the term, "sacrament." He places a strong emphasis upon the necessity of the physical operation of the ordinances. Again, context is important. Grantham was writing to people for whom the term "sacrament" had meaning. He was also writing with one eye firmly on the Quakers, who spiritualized the ordinances, eschewing their practice. There can be a tendency to overstate one's position in order to drive home a point. In such a situation, the use of sacramental language is more understandable.

CONCLUSION

It is refreshing and encouraging to see Baptists actively examining and interacting with their heritage. As Thompson has suggested, I welcome further dialog on this issue.⁷⁷ He is correct when he states that understanding the past gives insight to the present. Too often we assume our theological positions spring fully formed out thin air or that all Baptists in all times have held the same beliefs as do modern Baptists.

It seems clear that from their infancy, Baptists have been non-sacramental in their understanding of baptism. Their confessions of faith intentionally distance themselves from the prevailing sacramental view. Early doctrinal writings are consistent with this stance.

Moderation about things Despicable in Matters of Religion, with Divers Cases of Conscience Discussed and Resolved (London: Francis Smith, 1678), 2-3.

⁷⁵Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus*, Book II, part 2, chapter 2, section 4, page 29 (emphasis in original to indicate quotation).

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Thompson, "People of the Free God", 223.

Lamb and Tombes, first generation General and Particular Baptists, are decidedly non-sacramental in meaning and application.

One point that Fowler repeatedly makes is that the terms “ordinance” and “sacrament” were used interchangeably by seventeenth-century Baptists. Therefore, one should not automatically rule out a sacramental understanding of the text. His point is well taken. However, the reverse is also true. Just because the terms were used interchangeably does not automatically imply that Baptists understood sacrament in the same way as did the Presbyterians or Congregationalists.

There are explanations other than a sacramentalism for retaining the term, sacrament. Keach often presents arguments in the sacramental language of his opponents. In some cases the journey from Anglican or Reformed Separatist to Particular Baptist was a continuing process. The nomenclature may not have advanced as quickly as the theology. Tombes is a good example of this. For others, sacramental theology may have been an issue with which they were still struggling. It is important to note in the trajectory of the Baptist movement that “sacrament” does fall out of usage, leaving “ordinance” as the pre-eminent term among Baptists.

Continued investigation will be significant for understanding Baptist identity and distinctives. Such studies have implications for the origins of modern Baptists. English Separatists, out of which Baptists emerged were Calvinistic. A sacramental view would have been quite natural for them as they brought their theology from their Separatist past into Baptist life. However, if as the evidence currently suggests, that even the earliest Baptists espoused a non-sacramental view, then the question arises, “From where did this theological modification come?”

Baptist Sacramentalists write confidently of a sacramental view of the ordinances among early British Baptists. Their contention that early Baptists espoused a sacramental view of baptism invites further study. However, based upon the evidence, it seems that support for a distinct sacramental theology emerging from seventeenth-century Baptists is lacking.

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