A man who can read the New Testament and not see that Christ claims to be more than mere man can look all over the sky at high noon on a cloudless day and not see the sun.

W. E. Biederwolf

It is Christ himself, not the Bible, that is the true Word of God. The Bible read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers will bring us to him.

C. S. Lewis

Stop trying to discover God by pursuing thoughts, fancies, and feelings of your own, in disregard of God’s revelation. Our knowledge of him and his revelation to us are correlative realities; and you do not have the first without the second.

James I. Packer

Idle speculation about God is a fool’s errand. If we wish to know him in truth, we must rely on what he tells us about himself.

R. C. Sproul

The Bible would not be the book of God if it had not deep places here and there which man has no line to fathom.

J. C. Ryle

A SPIRITUALITY OF THE WORD: THE SCRIPTURES IN EARLY BAPTIST LIFE AND THOUGHT

Michael A. G. Haykin

The Baptist movement emerged from the womb of British Puritanism in the early to mid-seventeenth century. The Puritans, in turn, were children of the sixteenth-century Reformation, which had sought to purify the Church of the doctrinal error, superstitions, and idolatry that had characterized Medieval Christianity. Reformation had come to England and Wales during the reign of Henry VIII (r.1509-47), but it was not until the reign of his son Edward VI (r.1547-53), and particularly his youngest daughter Elizabeth I (r.1559-1603), that it was placed on a firm footing. After Elizabeth I ascended the throne there was no longer any doubt that England and Wales were firmly in the Protestant orbit. The question that now came to the fore, though, was to what extent the Elizabethan church would be reformed. By the 1560s it was evident that Elizabeth was content with a church that was “Calvinistic in theology, Erastian in church order and government, and largely mediaeval in liturgy.”

It was as a response to this ecclesiastical “settledness” that Puritanism arose, seeking to reform the Elizabethan church after the model of the churches in Protestant Switzerland, in particular those in Geneva and Zürich. In these continental churches there was a distinct attempt to include in the church’s worship only that which was explicitly commanded by Scripture. For instance, John Calvin (1509-64), one of the leading reformers in Geneva, could
declare with regard to the worship of the Church that "nothing pleases God but what he himself has commanded us in his Word." Puritanism experienced such strong opposition from Elizabeth and the established church, however, that by the 1580s and 1590s a number of Puritans had come to the radical conviction that the church in England and Wales would never be fully reformed. They decided to take matters into their own hands and, "without tarrying for any," separate from the state church and organize their own congregations. It was among these Separatists, as they came to be known, that believer's baptism was rediscovered, and Baptist congregations subsequently formed in the first half of the seventeenth century.

The earliest Baptist denomination to develop was that of the General Baptists, so called because of their conviction that Christ died for all men and women. Wedded to this conviction was a firm commitment to Arminian theology. By 1630 there were five General Baptist congregations in England with around 150 members. The vitality of these General Baptists mostly petered out in the eighteenth century, so that modern-day Baptists ultimately trace their lineage back to a second Baptist group, the Particular Baptists. So denominated because they upheld the Calvinistic assertion that Christ's death was solely for the elect, the Particular Baptists did not appear until the late 1630s. By the mid-1640s there were at least seven Calvinistic Baptist congregations, all of them located in the metropolis of London. A third group, the Seventh-Day Baptists, who worshiped on Saturday, were Calvinistic in doctrine, but nowhere near as large a body as either the General or Particular Baptists. By 1660 these three Baptist bodies had established around 200 churches in the British Isles, of which roughly 60 percent were congregations of the Particular Baptist persuasion.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Baptist growth during the seventeenth century was nowhere near as dramatic. Despite transatlantic links with British Baptists, there were only twenty-four Baptist churches in the American colonies by 1700, and from then till the Great Awakening they all but ceased to grow. On the eve of this revival, Baptists in America were, as Winthrop S. Hudson notes, "a small, undistinguished and little-noted religious group." Their meteoric rise to become eventually the largest religious body in the United States would not take place until after the American Revolution.

Despite the disparity in size between these two Baptist communities, they shared in common a set of distinct convictions, in particular, a deep reverence for the written Word of God and a desire to live under its authority.


Seventeenth-century Baptists found it needful to define their distinctive convictions not only over the various paedobaptist communities to their right, but also against groups on their left, in particular, the Quakers. The Quaker movement arose in the late 1640s when George Fox (1624-91), a shoemaker and part-time shepherd, began to win converts to a perspective on the Christian faith which rejected much of orthodox Puritan theology. Fox and the early Quakers proclaimed the possibility of salvation for all humanity, and urged men and women to turn to the light within them to find salvation. We "call All men to look to the Light within their own consciences," wrote Samuel Fisher (1605-65), a General Baptist turned Quaker; "by the leadings of that Light . . . they may come to God, and work out their Salvation." This emphasis on the light within, which the Quakers variously called the indwelling Christ or Spirit, often led them to elevate it above the Scriptures.

At the heart of early Quakerism was the conviction that
the Spirit was speaking in the Quakers as he had spoken in
the apostles. They did not deny that God could and did
speak to people mediately through the written text of Scrip-
ture, but insisted that they also knew and enjoyed immedi-
ate inspiration like the saints of the New Testament era.13
In the words of the Quaker theologian William Penn
(1644-1718), immediate experiences of the Spirit “once
were the great Foundation of both their (i.e., New Testa-
ment believers) Knowledge and Comfort, though now
mocked at . . . with great Derision in a Quaker.”14 When
some Baptists in Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire
became Quakers they were quick to assert that henceforth
the “light in their consciences was the rule they desire to
walk by,” not the Scriptures.15 In a letter that Isaac Penin-
gton the Younger (1616-79), who “remains a prime example
of the intellectual sophistication” of early Quaker
converts,16 wrote to fellow Quaker Nathanael Stonar in
1670, Penington told his correspondent that one of the
main differences between themselves and other “profes-
sors” was “concerning the rule.” While the latter asserted
that the Scriptures were the rule by which men and women
ought to direct their lives and thinking, Penington was con-
vinced that the indwelling Spirit of life is “nearer and more
powerful, than the words, or outward relations concerning
those things in the Scriptures.” As Penington noted:

The Lord, in the gospel state, hath promised to be present
with his people; not as a wayfaring man, for a night, but to
dwell in them and walk in them. Yea, if they be tempted and in
danger of erring, they shall hear a voice behind them, saying,
“this is the way, walk in it.” Will they not grant this to be a
rule, as well as the Scriptures? Nay, is not this a more full
direction to the heart, in that state, than it can pick to itself
out of the Scriptures? . . . The Spirit, which gave forth the
words, is greater than the words; therefore we cannot but

Penington here affirmed that the Quakers esteemed the
Scriptures as “sweet and precious,” but he was equally
adamant that the indwelling Spirit was to be regarded as
the supreme authority when it came to direction for Chris-
tian living and thinking.18

This desire to live by what they regarded as the dictates
of the indwelling Spirit rather than by the written Word
sometimes led the early Quakers into quite bizarre patterns
of behavior. Probably the oddest has to have been the prac-
tice of “going naked as a sign”!9 One Quaker who appears
to have been something of an “expert” in this type of
behavior was Solomon Eccles (c.1618-83). When he first
went naked in 1659 he asserted that he did so because by
the same spirit [which moved Isaiah and Ezekiel] hath the
Lord raised me up, to go as a Sign to this dark Generation.”
The practice of “going naked as a sign” was a relatively
infrequent occurrence after the restoration of the Stuart
monarchy in 1660, and the introduction of the repressive
Clarendon Code which sought to curb, if not eliminate,
religious dissent outside of the Church of England. This
phenomenon well illustrates the tendency inherent in
Quakerism to exalt the Spirit at the expense of the Word.

For Baptists, on the other hand, since the Scriptures
were, as a 1651 Particular Baptist tract against the Quakers
asserted, “the infallible word of God . . . declaring his
mind, making known his counsel, being able to make the
people of God wise unto salvation,” they were “not to be
slighted and undervalued as a dead letter, a bare history, a
carnal empty story.”20 The inspiring work of the Spirit in the
authors of Scripture thus was unique and restricted to the
past. The Spirit was now illuminating that which he had
inspired, and all Christian experience of the Spirit was to be tried by the Scriptures. As the Lincolnshire General Baptist leader Thomas Grantham (1634–92) explained: “When the Quakers tell us that they have the Holy Ghost, and that what they speak they speak as they are moved by the Holy Ghost, etc. Then indeed we say we are to try what they thus tell us, by what the Spirit hath said in the Scripture.”

A succinct summary of Baptist convictions regarding the Scriptures can be found in the Second London Confession of Faith, which would become the classic expression of transatlantic Particular Baptist doctrine until the mid-nineteenth century. This confession was published first in 1677 and then issued again in 1689 following the Act of Toleration which secured religious liberty for trinitarian Dissent—Baptists, Independents or Congregationalists, and Presbyterians, as well as the more radical Quakers. It closely paralleled two other Puritan statements of faith: the Westminster Confession of Faith, the doctrinal standard for both the Church of Scotland and the English Presbyterians that had been issued by the Westminster Assembly in 1646, and the Savoy Declaration, drawn up in 1658 by such leading Independent divines as John Owen (1616–83) and Thomas Goodwin (1600–80).

**THE SCRIPTURES—THE ONLY SUFFICIENT, CERTAIN, AND INFALLIBLE RULE**

Following the order of the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration, the Second London Confession begins with a lengthy article on Scripture. Apart from an introductory sentence and a concluding phrase it reproduces verbatim the parallel articles of the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration. This introductory sentence, though, is a valuable gauge as to where seventeenth-century Baptists stood with regard to the nature and authority of Scripture. “The Holy Scripture,” it states, “is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience.” “Only,” the first of four terms that have been carefully chosen to describe the nature of Scripture, emphasizes that apart from the Bible there is no other source of ultimate religious authority. The implications of this term are spelled out further on in the Confession. Neither “new revelations of the Spirit”—a remark aimed at the Quakers and other radicals like the Muggletonians who asserted that Lodowicke Muggleton (1609–98) alone had the power to properly interpret Scripture—nor the “traditions of men”—a statement which probably has in view the Church of England—can be elevated to authoritative status alongside Scripture. To quote The London Baptist Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), the “Sacred Scripture is our just Confines.”

A second attribute of the Scriptures is that they are “sufficient.” Quaker tracts argued that the written Word by itself was not a sufficient rule for believers, since the Holy Spirit was needed to unlock its meaning. Sufficiency was thus better attributed to the Spirit. While Baptists were quite prepared to concede the need for the Spirit’s guidance in understanding the Scriptures, they feared complete doctrinal confusion would result if the sufficiency of Scripture as a standard for faith was replaced by the Spirit. As the Wiltshire Baptist, Thomas Hicks (d. c.1688), noted: “Then if George Fox do but say ‘tis reveal’d to him the Earth is flat, it must be believ’d, because I have no rule wherewith to disprove his pretended Revelation.” This opening sentence of the Second London Confession thus proceeds to assert that, while God does reveal himself in ways other than the Scriptures, for instance through the created realm, only Scripture is “sufficient” to “give that knowledge of God and his will which is necessary unto salvation.” Or in the words of Article 1.6 of the confession: “The whole Council of God concerning all things necessary for his own
Glory, Man’s Salvation, Faith and Life, is either expressly set
down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture.”32 The
written Scriptures are necessary for God to be properly glo­
riﬁed by men and women, as well as being vital for men
and women to come to a saving knowledge of God, and
then to develop a world-view33 and lifestyle in accord with
their salvation. Thus, from the Baptist point of view, the
Quakers were guilty of making an unbiblical cleavage
between the Spirit and the Word. As Keach declared in
1681, in a direct allusion to the Quakers: “Many are confi­
dent they have the Spirit, Light, and Power, when ’tis all
meer Delusion. The Spirit always leads and directs accord­
ing to the written Word: ’He shall bring my Word: saith
Christ, ’to your remembrance’” (d. John 14:26).34

The next two terms of this sentence are similar, but not
identical, in their import. Scripture is “certain,” that is, it
does not contain error. Scripture is also said to be “infalli­
ble,” a term that has a long history of usage in Christian
theology, and which identiﬁes Scripture as possessing the
quality of being entirely trustworthy and reliable.35

The strengthening of the opening article on Scripture in
the Westminster Confession and Savoy Declaration by the
addition of this one sentence in the Baptist confession is
almost deﬁnitely a response to the threat of Quakerism.
But in this emphasis on Scripture as the supreme arbiter for
the Christian life, these seventeenth-century Baptists were
simply reﬂecting the broader Reformation and Puritan cul­
ture, for both the Reformation and Puritanism were ﬁrst
and foremost movements centered on the Word.36

Finally, lest it be thought that the early Calvinistic Bap­
tists, in their desire to emphasize the authority of the Scrip­
tures, went to the opposite extreme and depreciated the
importance of the work of the Spirit in the Christian life,
one needs to note the words of the Second London Con­
fusion 1.5, where it is stated that “our full persuasian, and
assurance of the infallible truth” of the Scriptures comes
neither from “the testimony of the Church of God” nor
from the “heavenliness of the matter” of the Scriptures, the
“efﬁcacy of [their] Doctrine,” and “the Majesty of [their]
Stile.” Rather it is only “the inward work of the Holy Spirit,
bearing witness by and with the Word in our Hearts” that
convinces believers that God’s Word is indeed what it
claims to be.37

THE PULPIT—A PLACE OF NURTURE,
OF FIRE AND LIGHT38

Given this estimation of the Scriptures, it is not surpris­
ing that preaching was regarded by the Calvinistic Baptists
as the preëminent aspect of worship. For instance, in the
association records of the Northern Baptist Association,
which was composed of Baptist churches in the old coun­
ties of Northumberland, Cumberland, Westmoreland, and
Durham, we read the following answer to a question raised
in 1701 as to who may administer the ordinances of the
Lord’s Supper and baptism: “Those Persons
that the
Church approves of to
Preach
the gospel we think it safe to
Approve likewise for ye Administering other Ordinances
Preaching being the greater
work.” In 1703, when a similar
question was asked, it was stated that “those whom the
Church Approves to preach the Gospel may also Adminis­
ter the
Ordinances
of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper
Preaching being the main and principal Work of the Gospel.”39

Is this biblical? Yes indeed. As the apostles said in Acts 6:3
when a serious contention arose regarding the care of the
Greek-speaking Jewish widows in the Jerusalem church: “It
is not right that we should neglect the Word of God in
order to wait on tables.”

The architecture of early British Baptist churches also
spoke of this emphasis on the preached word in worship:
the central feature of these simple structures was the pulpit.
In the words of D. Mervyn Himbury, early Baptist chapels were "meeting houses designed for preaching." These meeting-houses were generally square or rectangular structures, some of them from the outside even resembling barns. Thus, one critic of the Baptists and their fellow dissenters in the early nineteenth century could describe their faith as "the religion of barns!" Inside the meeting-house the pulpit was made prominent and was well within the sight and sound of the entire congregation. Sometimes a sounding board was placed behind the pulpit so as to help project the preacher's voice throughout the building. There was a noticeable lack of adornment in Baptist meeting-houses, with nothing to distract the attention of the worshipers. During the following century, large clear windows were provided so that light was available to all to read the Scriptures as the Word of God was expounded.

Given the prominence attached to preaching by verbal and architectural statement, it should be no surprise to find leading Baptist preachers from this early period emphasizing that good preaching required hard work and preparation. Hercules Collins (d. 1702), the pastor of Wapping Baptist Church, London, from 1676 till his death, could state in his The Temple Repair'd (1702) that "he doth the best Work and the most Work, that labours most in his Study, with a dependance upon God for a blessing." While Collins was well aware that ultimately it was the Spirit that made men preachers of the Gospel—"tho it be granted," he wrote in the same work, "that human literature is very useful for a Minister, yet it is not essentially necessary; but to have the Spirit of Christ to open the Word of Christ is essentially necessary"—yet study was still vital. There were some, he noted, that "think it unlawful to study to declare God's Mind, and will contemptuously speak against it, as if we were to preach by Inspiration, as the prophets and apostles of old did." In response to such reasoning, Collins cited 2 Timothy 2:15 and asked "What can be a better Confutation of those Men than [this] Text? Which commands Ministers to study to shew themselves good Workmen?"

Finally, it should be noted that the Calvinistic Baptists of this era never lost sight of the fact that, just as it is the Spirit alone who makes preachers, so it is the Spirit who alone can empower the words of the preacher and make them efficacious to the winning of the lost and the building up of God's people. Benjamin Beddome (1717-95), though from the next century, well expressed the views of the seventeenth-century Baptists when he declared: "Ministers lift up their voice, and God makes bare his arm; ministers persuade, and God enables, nay, constrains, men to comply. . . . Ministers stand at the door and knock; the Spirit comes with his key, and opens the door."

CONCLUDING THOUGHT

Now, the culture in which we live and move today is particularly hostile to the idea that there is indeed such a thing as "the truth." Its delight in relativism and its desire to count as rubbish all metanarratives can never be embraced by a people who have long been convinced that the pages of Scripture do indeed contain a metanarrative that is the truth and which has for its focus God's work in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. In our culture, proclaiming this metanarrative through the medium of preaching will inevitably be counter-cultural. But this would not be the first time Baptists have had to row against the stream of their culture. As one famous seventeenth-century Baptist, John Bunyan (1628-88), put it, when describing his preaching: "I have really been in pain, and have as it were travailed to bring forth children to God; neither could I be satisfied unless some fruits did appear in my work: if I were fruitless,
it mattered not who commended me; but if I were fruitful, I cared not who did condemn.\(^{47}\)

**Author**


**Notes**

3. These words come from the title of an influential book written by the father of the Separatist movement, Robert Browne (c.1550-1633): *A Treatise of Reformation Without Tarrying for Anie* (1582).
15. Reay, Quakers, 34.
17. Letters of Isaac Penington. 2nd. ed., Reprint. (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1829), 202-03. For access to these letters I am indebted to Heinze G. Dachankilic of Cambridge, Ontario.
18. See also the remarks by Richard Dale Land, "Doctrinal Controversies of English Particular Baptists (1644-1691) as Illustrated by the Career and Writings of Thomas Collier" (Unpublished D. Phil. thesis, Regent’s Park College, Oxford University, 1979), 205-11. In the words of Richard Bauman (*Let Your Words Be Few*: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], 38): "The Quakers were intensely devoted to the Bible, not as a source of traditional authority, but as historical validation of the patterns and dynamics of their own charismatic prophetic mission."
19. For an excellent study of this phenomenon, see "Early Quakers" and "Going Naked as a Sign." In *Quaker History*, (1978), 67:69-87. The following paragraph is indebted to this study. See also Bauman, *Let Your Words Be Few*, 84-94.
20. Underhill, Edward Bean, ed., *Heart Bleedings for Professor Abomina-


23. While most of the articles in the Savoy Declaration are taken word for word from the Westminster Confession, there are a number where the authors of the Savoy Declaration have either altered the wording or added brand new articles. For some of these changes, see Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism*, (Swengel, Pennsylvania: Reiner Publications, 1973), 77-84; Robert W. Oliver, "Baptist Confession Making 1644 and 1689" (Unpublished paper presented to the Strict Baptist Historical Society, March 17, 1989), 11-12.


26. Second London Confession 1.6 (Baptist Confessions, 250).


29. Let it be thought that seventeenth-century Baptists, in their desire to emphasize the authority of the Scriptures, see below, 82-83.


32. Second London Confession 1.6 (Baptist Confessions, 250).

33. So Bush and Nettles interpret "faith" in the opening sentence of the Second London Confession (Baptists and the Bible, 68).


36. "Doctrinal Controversies", 205.


38. This description of the pulpit is that of Michael J. Walker, *Baptists at the Table: The Theology of the Lord’s Supper amongst English Baptists in the*...