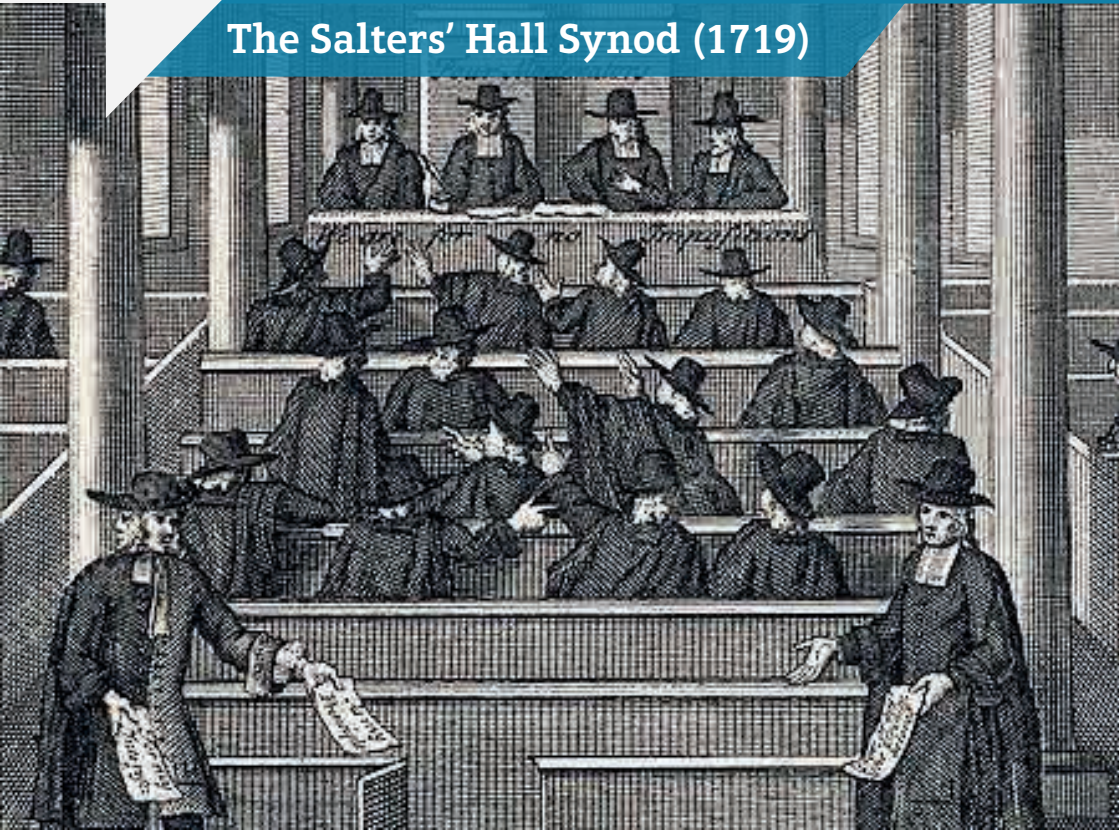


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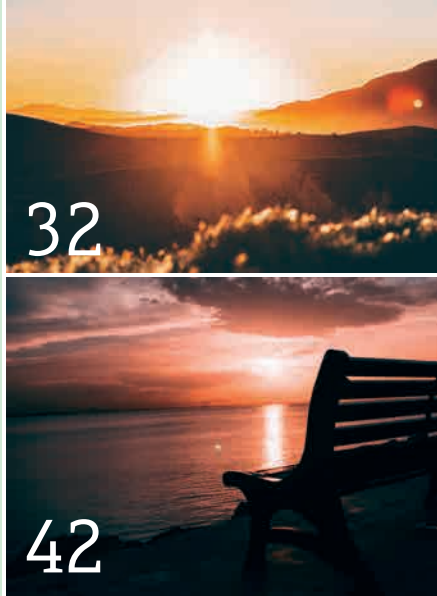
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Editorial

KEES VAN KRALINGEN

Most of the material in this issue is devoted to the history of the Salters' Hall Synod held in 1719, and therefore marks the 300th anniversary of this important event. I am especially grateful to Michael Haykin, our associate editor, for assembling a group of authors to write these articles. This material emphasises the importance of maintaining a proper doctrine of the Trinity, and this is still highly relevant 300 years after this event. For this purpose, the authors had to delve fairly deeply into both doctrine and church history, and this may in some places require a little stretch of the mind, but the result is well worth it. It is remarkable how these same issues are still relevant today: the primacy of Scripture whilst recognising what the Lord has given us in church history in the form of people remaining unswervingly faithful to Scripture as exemplified in the orthodox and reformed confessions.

The exposition of part of John 6 by Dr Allen Guelzo completes this issue of *Reformation Today* pointing us to Jesus Christ, who alone has the words of eternal life.

I want to apologise to our readers who were expecting the second part of the biographical article on John Bradford. Because of space constraints this will appear in the next issue.

Change in the trustees of the Reformation Today Trust

Many of our readers will know Dr Frederick Hodgson who has served the Reformation Today Trust for almost fifteen years. Frederick has been



Frederick Hodgson



Stephen Dunning

managing the finances of the Trust and has managed the financial and administrative side of the work of the *Reformation Today* magazine for all these years. You will have known him as the one handling your subscriptions. The trustees and I are profoundly grateful for his faithful and accurate work over all these years. Frederick has indicated that he wanted to step down in order to pay more attention to his work as an elder in his church in Whitby. May the Lord grant our brother still many more fruitful years for the benefit of the church and the glory of Christ.

We are also profoundly grateful that after a period of intensive searching we found Stephen Dunning willing to take on the role as trustee with special responsibility for the tasks Frederick carried out. Stephen is presently part-time pastor of the Village Temple Congregational Church, Mynydd Isa near Mold in North Wales. Stephen also has experience as manager of Christian bookshops in the UK. You will see Stephen's contact details on the inside of the back page. We welcome Stephen to this new role and ask you to remember him and all of us at RT in your prayers. ■



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Introduction to the articles in this issue

The Salters' Hall Synod and the debate over the Trinity in the eighteenth century

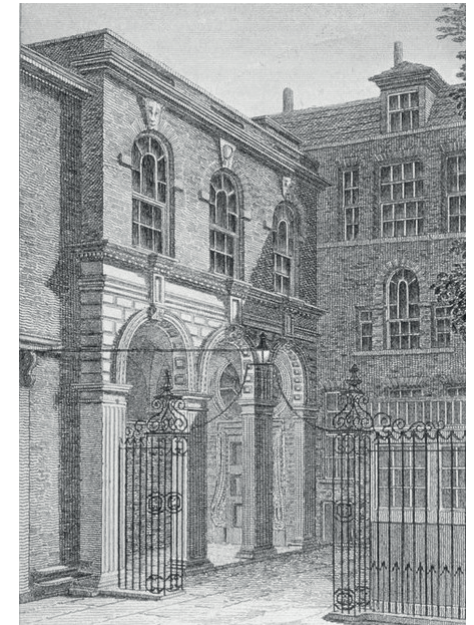
Lying in the immediate background to the Salters' Hall Synod, which took place three hundred years ago this past February, was the Exeter Controversy, which was a debate that stretched over the three years, from 1716 to 1719. It began with the controversial teaching of some Presbyterian ministers in Exeter who were teaching that neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit were fully God. In the history of Christianity, the teaching of these ministers has been described as Arianism. At an assembly of Presbyterian ministers convened in Exeter in September 1718 it was confessed, 'There is but one Living and True GOD, and ...

the Father, Word, and Holy Ghost are that One GOD.' This assembly thus drew a line that made a divide between orthodoxy and heresy. Despite this declaration, the division continued in Exeter and the Presbyterians sent letters to London ministers to assist in their dispute. The Exeter debate over the Trinity was thus spread to the capital.

The Salters' Hall Synod in February and March of 1719 involved a gathering of various dissenting ministers – not only Presbyterian, but also Congregationalist, Particular and General Baptist – in London. They discussed whether or not they should encourage their Dissenting brethren in Exeter to employ creedal statements in judging a minister's

orthodoxy. Or should they simply encourage their West Country brethren to judge orthodoxy on the basis of Scripture alone? But the Synod was unable to reach a conclusion for it found itself rent in two over the question of subscription. In fact, as the essay by Jesse Owens in this issue documents, at the second meeting of the Synod, on 19 February, the Synod was dramatically split when those who favoured non-subscription yelled, 'You that are against persecution, come upstairs!' while those who wanted to uphold subscription to an orthodox creed called out, 'You that are for the Doctrine of the Trinity, stay below!'

Creeds and confessions had been a part of Protestantism since the Reformation but this Synod revealed that there were many Dissenters in the early eighteenth century who were quite happy to dismantle the Trinitarian creeds that demarcated orthodoxy from heterodoxy. For them, Trinitarian errors were *adiaphora* (matters not regarded as essential to faith). To be sure, the question of freedom from authoritative texts of the Christian tradition was a key element of the debates at Salters' Hall. But from a larger perspective, the Salters' Hall Synod was an important event in the history of the Trinitarian debates of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The other essays in this issue document some of these debates from the vantage points of three important Baptist pastorateologians: Benjamin Keach, Hercules Collins, and John Gill. These essays remind us about the vital importance of the doctrine of the Trinity, which large tracts of Evangelicalism have sadly tended to ignore. Hopefully, the essays in this issue




Salters Hall

of *Reformation Today* will not only inform readers about these past debates but will also act as a powerful reminder of our need to be robustly Trinitarian.

All four of the essays on the doctrine of the Trinity in this issue were first given as papers at a conference sponsored by the Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies earlier this year on the campus of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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Michael Haykin is Professor of Church History and Director of The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, USA. ■



The Salters' Hall Controversy

*Heresy, subscription,
or both?*

In February 1719, over one hundred dissenting ministers gathered at Salters' Hall in London to determine how they might advise a group of Presbyterians in Exeter who were concerned that their ministers held heterodox views on the doctrine of the Trinity. The meeting at Salters' Hall, consisting of Presbyterians, Independents (better known as Congregationalists), and Baptists (both Particular – that is, Calvinistic – and General – that is, Arminian), was convened in order to help solve the controversy. But the Salters' Hall meeting became a controversy of its own as the ministers in London were divided on how to respond to the issue in Exeter. Their division did not fall solely along denominational lines. The Baptists, Presbyterians, and Independents were divided on this: whether or not ministers ought to be required to subscribe to extra-biblical words and phrases delineating the doctrine of the Trinity, particularly when a minister's orthodoxy might be in doubt. Fifty-seven of the ministers there were opposed to requiring subscription. Fifty-three ministers were in favour of this requirement, and of recommending it to those in Exeter. The two parties, who became known as 'Subscribers' and 'Nonsubscribers', sent two separate sets of advices or recommendations to Exeter. Neither group's advice had any influence in Exeter, as they arrived after a decision had already been made to remove the pastors in question there. A pamphlet

war quickly ensued as members of each party sought to not only declare their orthodoxy, but also to provide their account and interpretation of what had occurred at Salters' Hall.

A simple survey of the primary source material that came out of the Salters' Hall controversy reveals that as early as 1719 there were disagreements on how to interpret the events. Was the issue at

We can reasonably conclude that even if there were a few anti-Trinitarians among the nonsubscribers at Salters' Hall, many were opposed to the additional requirement of subscription to extra-biblical words and phrases – not to the doctrine of the Trinity.

hand subscription to extra-biblical words and phrases? Or, was opposition to subscription a thinly veiled disguise for anti-Trinitarianism? These are the questions that this article seeks to answer. In order to answer them there are several items that must be taken into account.

First, we need a better understanding of what occurred at Exeter since it was the controversy at Exeter that precipitated the controversy in London. Second, we need to briefly recount the proceedings at Salters' Hall before interpreting them.

This includes understanding the political setting just prior to 1719. Third, we must take into consideration some of the earliest accounts of Salters' Hall, particularly the accounts of the revered ministers Edmund Calamy, a Presbyterian who abstained from the controversy, and Edward Wallin, a Particular Baptist subscriber at Salters' Hall. Fourth, it must be noted that there was an orthodox, nonsubscribing tradition among the English General

Baptists and the English Presbyterians connected to Thomas Grantham and Richard Baxter respectively. In the end, we can reasonably conclude that even if there were a few anti-Trinitarians among the nonsubscribers at Salters' Hall, many were opposed to the additional requirement of subscription to extra-biblical words and phrases – not to the doctrine of the Trinity.

James Peirce, Joseph Hallet, and Exeter

The controversy at Exeter began in 1716 when concerns arose over Hubert Stogdon's theology of the Trinity. Stogdon had been educated in Exeter at Joseph Hallet's academy. In November 1716, Stogdon openly confessed to John Lavington, the youngest minister in Exeter, that he had come to affirm Samuel Clarke's 'new scheme' on the doctrine of the Trinity. Clarke's scheme had come to prominence in 1712 with the publication of his *The Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity*, which led many to re-examine whether or not the doctrine of the Trinity was a biblical concept. As Clarke explored the biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity, William Whiston sought to demonstrate that the doctrine of the Trinity, as it had been expressed by the end of the fourth century, was largely the creative work of Athanasius. Whiston's works *Athanasius Convicted of Forgery* (1712) and *Primitive Christianity Reviv'd* (1712) appeared in print the same year as Clarke's seminal work, and their influence had been noted in Exeter. One Exeter citizen wrote: 'Upon the coming out of Mr Whiston's books, these new notions about the Trinity were toss'd about by Mr Hallet's academics, with too much

fondness'. The people of Exeter were convinced that Hallet's academy was to blame for the spread of heterodoxy there.

Joseph Hallet and James Peirce (another minister from Exeter) came under suspicion for heterodoxy as well. Hallet and Peirce, apparently aware of Stogdon's heterodox views, sent him off to a neighbouring county with a letter of recommendation for his ordination to the ministry. The letter was dated 15 July 1717, and it included the name of John Withers who was also a minister in Exeter. Their recommendation for Stogdon's ordination was a source of great tension between Hallet, Peirce, Withers, and many of their congregants. Another source of consternation was Peirce's refusal to include the doxology giving 'Glory to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as one God' at 'the close of the psalm or hymn'. Peirce refused to continue this practice, believing that it was unscriptural. The cumulative effect was that many of the citizens of Exeter began to not only be concerned about the spread of heterodoxy among their youth, but they also began to question the orthodoxy of their ministers.

A neighbouring minister, John Walrond of Ottery, had sent a letter to William Tong, pastor at Salters' Hall, in the summer of 1718. In the letter he expressed his concern about the spread of Arianism in Exeter. A standing 'Committee of Thirteen' in Exeter, having made their concerns known to several neighbouring ministers, including Walrond, would eventually appeal to some of the ministers in London themselves. But Walrond's letter is important because in it Walrond not only conveys his concerns about Exeter,

but also states that it is his understanding that Arianism has spread among the London ministers as well. Tong thought the contents of the letter so important that he gathered twenty-five ministers to meet at Salters' Hall to discuss the letter and draft a response. Their response, which was premised upon how they would respond 'if ever we should be called to that ungrateful task', included five recommendations.

First, 'not to suspect any among us to be infected with these errors unless we have good ground.' Second, 'not to be harsh or hasty with those that are doubtful and wavering, but to give them time and what assistance we can for their better information and establishment.' Third, 'to represent to them faithfully and seriously the great danger of denying the proper Godhead of Christ and of the Holy Ghost, and the malignant influence it must have into the very vitals of the Christian state and worship.' Fourth, that those who maintain such errors will not be recommended 'to the office of the ministry by ordination.' Fifth, 'if any already in the ministry shall fall into that pernicious error, and persist in it, and teach men so, it will become our duty, as we have opportunity, to warn people of them'. Many of the ministers present at this meeting, which preceded the infamous meetings at Salters' Hall by approximately six months, were listed among the subscribers in 1719. At this point, however, they did not recommend subscription to those at Exeter.

The Committee of Thirteen at Exeter also appealed to London ministers on 22 November 1718. The reply from

London did not arrive until 6 January 1719, and included the names of such ministers as Edmund Calamy, Jeremiah Smith, William Tong, Benjamin Robinson, and Thomas Reynolds. The recommendation from London at that time was for neighbouring ministers to be brought in to help advise. They concluded that there are some theological errors so serious in nature that churches are justified in withdrawing from their ministers if they hold such views. Furthermore, they maintained that denying the consubstantial deity of Christ was in opposition to Scripture and the 'common faith of the Reformed churches'. And finally, that it is the duty of ministers to oppose dangerous errors and 'give reasonable satisfaction' of their own theological soundness.

It was at this point that James Peirce appealed to his London friend and member of Parliament John Shute Barrington, a well-known defender of Dissenting interests. A bill had been introduced in December 1718 by Lord Stanhope that, if passed, would repeal the Schism Act of 1714. Barrington was concerned that the Trinitarian controversy in Exeter might hinder the passage of the bill. According to Roger Thomas, Barrington put together a set of recommendations in order to keep the peace in Exeter and put them before 'an unofficial committee of ministers and gentlemen on 5 February'. The recommendations then went before the Committee of the General Body of the Three Denominations, which approved the recommendations after debate and some changes. It was then decided by the Committee to put these recommendations

before the gathered body of London ministers of the Three Denominations. The intended goal, according to Calamy, was to add weight to the final decision. This ultimately led to the infamous meetings at Salters' Hall.

The Salters' Hall controversy

There are seven key dates for understanding the Salters' Hall controversy, each occurring between February and April 1719. 19 February was the first official meeting at Salters' Hall when 'the body of Protestant Dissenting ministers in, and about, London, were called together, to consider a paper, containing advices [that is, the recommendations] for promoting peace, etc. This paper was recommended to them by their Committee of Three Denominations'. The ministers present on 19 February agreed to consider the recommendations paragraph by paragraph.

24 February was the second meeting at Salters' Hall 'at which time the names of all present were set down and then called over one by one, each denomination being to approve or disapprove of such as were reputed to belong to them.' After the recommendations were debated for several hours it was agreed upon by a majority vote of fifty-seven to fifty-three 'that a declaration concerning the Trinity should not be inserted in the paper of advices.' As Joseph Jekyl described the matter: 'The Bible carried it by four.'

The third meeting at Salters' Hall, which resulted in the division of subscribers and nonsubscribers, occurred on 3 March. The issue of inserting a declaration

concerning the doctrine of the Trinity was revived at this meeting even though it had been at least temporarily set aside in order to finish going through the recommendations. The group in favour of inserting the declaration, which would ultimately become known as the subscribers, was not satisfied with the proceedings. Therefore, 'Instead of this, they withdrew from our assembly, and went by themselves, to subscribe their names to a certain roll of paper, wherein was contained (as we were told) the First Article of the Church of England, and the 5th and 6th answers in the [Westminster] Assembly's [Shorter] Catechism'. In a more colourful, but potentially apocryphal account, it is claimed that during this verbal scuffle someone shouted: 'You that are against persecution, come upstairs!' Which was pretty evenly balanced by one on the other side, calling out, 'You that are for the doctrine of the Trinity, stay below!' The nonsubscribers continued to meet and consider the recommendations while the subscribers apparently withdrew. Following the 3 March meeting the two groups never met together again.

On 9 March the subscribers met to finalise their recommendations, which were to be sent to Exeter. The nonsubscribers met for the same purpose on the very next day, 10 March. The nonsubscribers' recommendations were sent to Exeter on 17 March, but the subscribers' recommendations were not sent until 7 April. Both sets of recommendations arrived too late as a decision had already been made in Exeter. James Peirce and Joseph Hallet had been locked out of their churches on 6 March.

The separate sets of recommendations and accompanying letters bear some resemblance, but also differ on key points. Both groups were in agreement that there were some doctrines so essential to the Christian faith that if rejected by a minister, the congregation was justified in withdrawing from that minister or the minister should withdraw from that congregation. Such cases should be 'managed clearly, calmly, and in the fear of God, with meekness and tender compassion towards all with whom they are concerned'. Both groups affirmed that ministers should be directly addressed by those in their congregation, and then assemblies or neighbouring ministers if necessary.

The primary difference in the two sets of recommendations appeared near the end of each. The nonsubscribers affirmed: 'We think the Protestant principle, that the Bible is the only and the perfect rule of faith', and that no one should 'condemn any man upon the authority of human decisions, or because he consents not to human forms or phrases'. Instead, he is only 'to be censured, as not holding the faith necessary to salvation, when it appears that he contradicts, or refuses to own, the plain and express declarations of holy Scripture, in what is there made necessary to be believed, and in matters there solely revealed.'

Yet this should not be interpreted as a total rejection of the value of human words and forms. The nonsubscribers contended: 'We further advise, that catechisms and other summaries of Christianity, and expositions of Scripture by wise and learned, though fallible

men, should be regarded as great helps to understand the mind of God in the Scriptures.'

The subscribers went further by stating that they affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity, and believed that, when rejected, it was an error worth separating over. They further declared their belief in the doctrine of the Trinity by including and subscribing to the first of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. This was inserted at the beginning of *A True Relation*. They further noted that they had subscribed to the fifth and sixth answers of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

We can conclude from this that the subscribers and the nonsubscribers at Salters' Hall shared some similarities in their recommendations to Exeter. The subscribers went to great lengths to demonstrate their own orthodoxy on the doctrine of the Trinity. The nonsubscribers, as will be noted in more detail below, were concerned to contend for their orthodoxy on the doctrine of the Trinity, but their recommendations focused primarily on the steps they thought fit for dealing with the disputes in Exeter. Yet the question of whether or not their lack of subscription necessarily served as a thinly veiled disguise for heterodoxy remains unanswered.

Early accounts of Salters' Hall

When William Tong called together twenty-five ministers to meet informally at Salters' Hall on 25 August 1718, to respond to John Walrond's letter concerning Exeter, they stated rather clearly in their response that they were not aware of any great progress of

Arianism among their ministers in the greater London area: 'We cannot say that we have no apprehension of the breaking forth of the like errors here, but we know of none among us, hitherto that have openly avowed them, and of but very few that own themselves to be in doubt and suspense about them.' Just six months prior to the controversy at Salters' Hall, some of the leading Presbyterian ministers in and around London could confidently declare that there was no great outbreak of Arianism among their ministers.

To return to the central issue at hand, the debate following Salters' Hall centred on what the source of the disagreement between the subscribers and nonsubscribers really was. Were the nonsubscribers merely opposed to requiring subscription to extra-biblical words and phrases and orthodox in their understanding of the Trinity? Or, was their opposition to subscription merely a disguise for their heterodox views on the Trinity? Subscribers and onlookers alike questioned the orthodoxy of some of the nonsubscribers from the outset. But the nonsubscribers openly declared their orthodoxy. They contended that they were opposed to forced subscription rather than a historic Christian theology of the Trinity.

The nonsubscribers' account

The nonsubscribers at Salters' Hall were insistent that they were not opposed to the doctrine of the Trinity. In their letter to Exeter dated 17 March 1719 they wrote:

'We add our earnest supplications that God would accompany them [the advices]

with his blessing to establish peace and truth among us: And freely declare, that we utterly disown the Arian doctrine, and sincerely believe the doctrine of the blessed Trinity, and the proper divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, which we apprehend to be clearly revealed in the holy Scriptures; but are far from condemning any who appear to be with us in the main, though they should choose not to declare themselves in other than Scripture terms or not in ours.'

Some took issue with this language, desiring even greater clarity on the doctrine of the Trinity, which could be found in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* or the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. As one critic insightfully noted, the nonsubscribers were willing to use extra-biblical words and phrases in this declaration.

Edmund Calamy

Even the respected Presbyterian pastor Edmund Calamy, who refused to involve himself in the controversy by joining either party, contended that the issue at Salters' Hall was subscription and not the doctrine of the Trinity. A Mr Chalmers urged Calamy the day before the 3 March meeting to be present in order that he might help defend the cause of orthodoxy. Yet Calamy was resolute that the issue at stake was not the doctrine of the Trinity. 'I told him', Calamy wrote, 'as for the true eternal divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ, I was very ready to declare for it, at that time or any other, and durst not in conscience be at all backward to it.' He continued, 'But I could upon good grounds assure him, that was not the point in question among those that were to meet



Edmund Calamy

together on the day following.' Chalmers, who apparently had been present at the meeting, upon his return visit with Calamy, 'was convinced most fully that I [Calamy] was in the right, and he [Chalmers] was in the wrong.' According to Calamy, the point in question at Salters' Hall was not the doctrine of the Trinity.

Edward Wallin

Edward Wallin (1678–1733), a well-respected Particular Baptist minister, was numbered among the subscribers at Salters' Hall. By all accounts, including that of the renowned John Gill, Wallin was a thoroughly orthodox, godly minister. Gill preached Wallin's funeral sermon and said of him: 'Besides a large experience of the grace of God, and a considerable

share of light and knowledge in the great truths of the gospel; he had an heavenly skill to lay open the wretchedness and miserable state and condition of sinners by nature, and to set forth the glory of Christ in his person, blood, righteousness, and sacrifice.'

Wallin recounted the Exeter and Salters' Hall controversies in 1720 in a letter to Elisha Callendar, a Baptist Minister in Boston, Massachusetts. In the letter Wallin provided a balanced interpretation of Salters' Hall, noting that there may have been some anti-Trinitarians present, but that the majority were orthodox, and concerned primarily with maintaining Christian liberty. After recounting the insistence of one party to subscribe to a declaration of their faith in the Trinity, and the other party's desire to continue considering the recommendations paragraph by paragraph, Wallin addressed the issue at hand. His account is worth quoting at length:

Wallin provided a balanced interpretation of Salters' Hall, noting that there may have been some anti-Trinitarians present, but that the majority were orthodox, and concerned primarily with maintaining Christian liberty.

'Some of the too warm among the nonsubscribers would fain fix the odious charge of persecution on the other, while they again, with full as much warmth, would fix the charge of Arianism upon them. But this severity is not

allowed by the greatest part of either side of the question; and I hope time will produce a better temper in both parties ... As I am satisfied that some among the nonsubscribers are gone too far into some of the distinctive notions of Arius,



Edward Wallin

so I think some of the subscribers have given too much ground to jealousy; they intended to set up those forms as a test of orthodoxy, and the signing of them as necessary to persons being useful in the ministry. But I dare say for the much greater part of both sides, that they intended no evil to their differing brethren; and that it was a zeal for the doctrine of the Trinity, and the real divinity of our Saviour, which made some subscribe to the articles, and not any desire to impose upon others; and that those who refused the subscription, did it with a design to maintain

Christian liberty, rather than any design to encourage or promote Arianism. There is no great difference in the number of either side; but I think there are not so many of our denomination among the nonsubscribers as are on the other side; and though I cannot say that there are none of our ministers who too much favour the new scheme, yet I may venture to say in general, that our ministers, especially those of the Particular [Baptist] denomination, are sound in the faith, as to the real divinity of Christ, and the true doctrine of the blessed Trinity. Therefore, those who upbraid you with their being contrary, act either from prejudice or misinformation. But such have been the visible consequences of this difference, that brotherly love and charity, that indispensable ornament of the Christian religion, has been greatly lost in these debates.'

Wallin's first-hand account provides several helpful insights. First, as Calamy noted, tempers and suspicion abounded during and after the meetings at Salters' Hall. Second, there were some anti-Trinitarians present at Salters' Hall. Third, the majority of the ministers at Salters' Hall were not anti-Trinitarians. Fourth, the disagreement at hand was primarily about what was most necessary at that time – subscription as a means of demonstrating one's personal orthodoxy, or, continuing with the examination of the recommendations to be sent to Exeter. Therefore, according to Calamy and Wallin, Salter's Hall should not be understood primarily as an acceptance or rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Conclusion: An orthodox, nonsubscribing tradition

In a letter to Samuel Mather dated 28 July 1731, John Walrond claimed, more than a decade after the Salters' Hall controversy, that there were 'three sorts' of Dissenters: 'those who have fallen into Arian or Arminian errors'; those that are 'very sound'; 'and a middle sort, the most numerous, that profess the same faith, but are so indifferent about it, and indulgent to the erroneous, that they seem to be with us in principle, but with them in interest, loving them better with their errors, than others with the truth as it is in Jesus.' It was Walrond who had been one of James Peirce's fiercest foes at Exeter. But Walrond's point is instructive for a balanced interpretation of Salters' Hall. For at Salters' Hall there seems to be a largely orthodox, nonsubscribing party, which, for the General Baptists and Presbyterians in particular, finds its historical and theological roots in Thomas Grantham and Richard Baxter respectively.

The case for the majority of the nonsubscribers at Salters' Hall being theologically orthodox regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, but opposed to the requirement of subscription to extra-biblical words and phrases, is

THE HISTORY OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH DISSENT PROVES THAT THIS LATITUDINARIAN SPIRIT, WHICH PERVADED SALTERS' HALL, DID OPEN THE DOOR EVEN WIDER FOR THEOLOGICAL DEVIATION.

strong. There certainly were some anti-Trinitarians at Salters' Hall. The decades following Salters' Hall saw an increase of anti-Trinitarianism throughout England, particularly in the Church of England, among the Presbyterians, and among the General Baptists. Yet the proliferation of anti-Trinitarianism in the decades following Salters' Hall does not necessarily entail a wholesale theological deviation from the doctrine of the Trinity among the nonsubscribers. The history of eighteenth-century English Dissent proves that this latitudinarian spirit, which pervaded Salters' Hall, did open the door even wider for theological deviation. The *Sola Scriptura* principle, which was in many cases more akin to *nuda Scriptura* ('the bare words of Scripture'), could

not stem the rising tide of heterodoxy. No matter how well-intended the nonsubscribers at Salters' Hall were, if they hoped to maintain any sort of theological orthodoxy on the doctrine of the Trinity, their categorical opposition to subscription proved unwise. ■

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'Three subsistences ... One substance'

The doctrine of the Trinity in the Second London Confession

Both the General and Particular branches of the seventeenth-century Baptists faced challenges in key areas of historic Christianity. Each group had prominent leaders in their movements embrace substandard positions on both the Trinity and Christology. For the General

Baptists, Matthew Caffyn (1628–1714) would lead many astray with his heretical teachings concerning the nature of the humanity of Jesus. Caffyn denied that Jesus had received his human flesh from the Virgin Mary. Among the Particular Baptists, Thomas Collier (fl 1634–1691)

proved to be a moving target in regard to his orthodoxy. Collier denied the historic understanding of the Trinity during the 1640s, passing through a period of orthodoxy in the 1650s and 1660s, before finally rejecting original sin, limited atonement and the incarnation in the 1670s. Both Caffyn and Collier would receive responses from capable pastor-theologians within their own respective traditions. While Matthew Caffyn received a thorough response from Thomas Monck, this essay will explore the Particular Baptist response to Thomas Collier and will argue that Hercules Collins' often over-looked writings identify that he was consciously committed to the orthodox Trinitarianism of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

Collier and the Particular Baptist response

Thomas Collier was a native of Somerset and a key leader in the Western Association's adoption of the Somerset Confession in 1656. His career, however, was riddled with doctrinal instability. In his Oxford dissertation on Collier, Richard Dale Land states 'that there were only relatively brief periods of Collier's career when he was unquestionably orthodox by what the Particular Baptists themselves published as their theological standards, namely *Confession* (1644) and *Confession* (1677)'. Indeed, Michael A G Haykin has labelled the doctrinal defection of Collier as perhaps the most pressing reason for a new confession of faith in 1677. In his 1674 *Body of Divinity*, Collier had denied

the Calvinistic doctrine of particular redemption while asserting the eternity of the human nature of Christ. In 1676, in a work titled *An Additional Word to the Body of Divinity*, Collier clarified his stance by strengthening his statements

Indeed, Michael A G Haykin has labelled the doctrinal defection of Collier as perhaps the most pressing reason for a new confession of faith in 1677.

regarding the universal provision of the atonement, the eternity of the human nature of the Son and his refusal to use the term 'Person' as in the historic Christian orthodox formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. The latter rejection reflects Collier's teaching on the subject three decades prior. In 1648, for example, Collier had denied the historic orthodox understanding of the Trinity. Collier wrote that God 'is not, first, as some imagine, three Persons yet one God, or three subsistings, distinguished though not divided; it's altogether impossible to

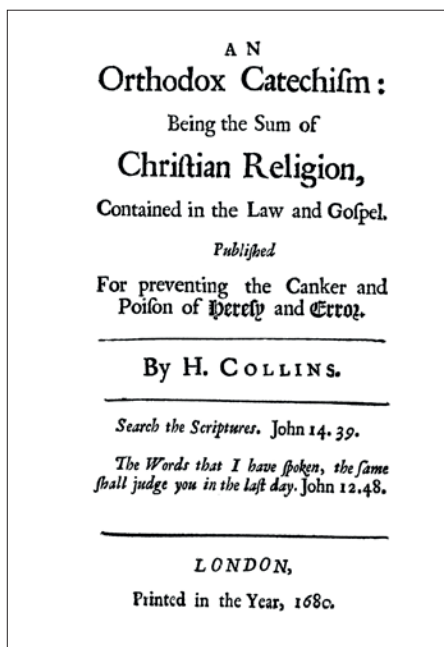
distinguish God in this manner, and not divide him; thus to distinguish is to divide; for three Persons are three not only distinguished, but divided: Some say there is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, yet not three, but one God; Let any one judge if here be not three Gods, if three then not one.'

In the words of Thomas Hall, an opponent of the Baptists, Collier was 'a most dangerous and blasphemous heretic', nothing less than an Arian, because he 'denied the Trinity'. Although Hall was aware that Collier's beliefs were not shared by the generality of the Calvinistic Baptists, others were not so discerning and took Collier's views as

representative of the whole of his one-time co-religionists. A response from the Particular Baptist community was therefore necessary. Nehemiah Coxe offered one such response in his 1677 *Vindicae Veritas*. Another response came the same year in the form of the *Second London Confession of Faith*, which was likely composed by Coxe and his fellow Petty France co-pastor William Collins. A largely overlooked response, however, came in the year 1680 from the pen of Hercules Collins.

Collins and 'An Orthodox Catechism'

In 1680, Hercules Collins published his *An Orthodox Catechism*. This modified version of the historic Protestant Heidelberg Catechism was published, as stated on the title page: 'For Preventing the Canker and Poison of Heresy and Error'. Collins was concerned with defending his fellow Baptists against charges of heresy while at the same time providing an instrument of instruction in order to prevent the spread of further false teaching among their number. Thus, the catechism had both polemical and pastoral functions. As seen above, the polemical focus of the catechism was necessary due to the fact that one of the leading church planters of the Calvinistic Baptist community in the early decades of their movement, Thomas Collier, had brought the Baptists into disrepute. Collins wrote primarily, however, as a pastor to safeguard the congregation entrusted to him. The catechism was addressed very specifically to 'the Church of Christ, who upon



Orthodox Catechism cover

For Collins, orthodoxy was not just doctrine to be believed, it was truth to be defended and taught to those under his responsibility as pastor.

Confession of Faith have been baptised, Meeting in *Old-Gravil-Lane London*.' Having become the pastor of the Wapping congregation only four years earlier, Collins modified *The Heidelberg Catechism* so as to use it as a tool in fulfilling his pastoral duties. A comparison of the two documents reveals a number of edits, a good number of which are best explained as Collins' attempts to make the catechism more accessible to his local congregation. Collins explicitly stated this concern for the spiritual nurture of the local congregation to which he

ministered in the following benediction that concluded his 'Preface' to the catechism: 'And for those whom the Lord hath committed to my Charge, that the Eternal God may be your Refuge, and underneath you everlasting Arms; that Grace may be opened to your hearts, and your hearts to Grace; that the blessing of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob may be upon you, and the eternal Spirit may be with you, shall be the Prayer of your unworthy Brother, but more unworthy Pastor'. For Collins, orthodoxy was not just doctrine to be believed, it was truth to be defended and taught to those under his responsibility as pastor.

Use of the creeds

The Heidelberg Catechism originally contained the Apostles' Creed. Collins, however, would follow the General Baptists' *An Orthodox Creed* in adding the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds. Thus, what Harmon has said of the *Orthodox Creed* as a confession of faith can equally be said of the *Orthodox Catechism* as a catechism, namely that it is the 'most explicit and thoroughgoing referencing of the patristic tradition' among Baptist catechisms. In his preface to *An Orthodox Catechism*, Collins would explain his rationale for including the three creeds from the patristic tradition:

'I have proposed three Creeds to your consideration, which ought thoroughly to be believed and embraced by all those that would be accounted Christians, viz

The Nicene Creed, Athanasius his Creed, and the Creed commonly called the Apostles; the last of which contains the sum of the Gospels; which is industriously opened and explained; and I beseech you do not slight it because of its Form, nor Antiquity, nor because supposed to be composed by Men; neither because some

that hold it, maintain some Errors, or whose Conversation may not be correspondent to such fundamental Principles of Salvation; but take this for a perpetual Rule, That whatever is good in any, owned by any, whatever Error or Vice it may be mixed withal, the Good must not be rejected for the Error or Vice sake, but owned; commended, and accepted.'

Here we see that Collins assumed that the classic Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy contained in the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds would 'be believed and embraced by all those that would be accounted

Christians.' Their content, he argued, should not be rejected simply because of their form, antiquity or because composed by humans. Collins also issued a pre-emptive strike against one of the main reasons many Baptists might have been averse to the creeds – their link to the Roman Catholic Church. Collins avers that truth must be recognised wherever it may be found, even if mixed with error. This insightful statement by Collins reveals not only how he utilised the creeds, but may also reveal how he would read the Church Fathers, and even the Puritans

Both *The Heidelberg Catechism* and its Baptist counterpart are desirous of affirming core elements of the historic catholic teaching of the ancient Church, of which the central one is the Trinity.

with whom he might have significant disagreements.

Both *The Heidelberg Catechism* and its Baptist counterpart are desirous of affirming core elements of the historic catholic teaching of the ancient Church, of which the central one is the Trinity. Thus, matching the Heidelberg word for word, the *Orthodox Catechism* asks: 'Into how many parts is this Creed divided?' The answer: 'Into three: the first of the eternal Father, and our creation: the second, of the Son and our redemption: the third, of the Holy Ghost, and our sanctification.' In clear contrast to the heterodoxy expressed by Thomas Collier with regard to the Trinity, the *Orthodox Catechism* then asserted the biblical doctrine in these words:

'Q. Seeing there is but one only substance of God, why namest thou those three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost?

A. Because God hath so manifested himself in his Word, that these three distinct Persons are that one true everlasting God.'

Collins, thus, clearly affirmed the historic orthodox understanding of the Trinity as *tres personae, una substantia* ('three Persons, one being'). Although, as historian Stephen Harmon has noted, this continuity with the patristic tradition may not be due to a 'conscious engagement with the patristic tradition as a source of religious authority', but rather reflects continuities 'retained from the ecclesiastical bodies out of which the confessing Baptist communities came

or by which they were influenced'. This means that Collins likely received his creedal commitments to the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person of Christ, not directly from the patristic tradition, but rather through Reformed statements such as the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, along with the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England. Nevertheless, the inclusion of the three creeds from the patristic era in the *Orthodox Creed* and *Orthodox Catechism* argues for a more direct influence, even though these creeds had likely been received by the Baptist community from their inclusion in the *The Book of Common Prayer*.

The patristic theology of Particular Baptists

The patristic era is noted for hammering out the important theological formulations of Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Trinitarianism and Chalcedonian Christology. All of orthodox Christianity is indebted to the meticulous work of the careful Christian theologians of the first four centuries of church history. The confessions of faith of the seventeenth-century Baptists clearly reflect this tradition, though they likely received this tradition through the Reformed confessions of their forebears and contemporaries. The *Second London Confession of Faith*, which Collins signed along with thirty-six other representatives of Particular Baptist churches in and around London, contained clear affirmations of these foundational doctrines including language that can be traced back to their classic formulations in the patristic era.

Regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, the *Second London Confession* states a clear affirmation of Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan theology:

'In this divine and infinite Being there are three subsistences, the Father, the Word (or Son) and Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and Eternity, each having the whole Divine Essence, yet the Essence undivided, the Father is of none neither begotten nor proceeding, the Son is Eternally begotten of the Father, the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son, all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and Being; but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties, and personal relations; which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our Communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him.'

Although much of this language can be traced to the *Westminster Confession* and *Savoy Declaration*, there are some unique Baptist contributions. For example, the *Second London Confession* added the following section to the language adapted from the Westminster and Savoy confessions: 'All infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and Being; but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties, and personal relations.' This selection came from the *First London Confession*, except the last phrase 'and personal relations'. This observation indicates that while the Baptists were desirous to use the orthodox language of their paedobaptist contemporaries, they were nevertheless both capable

and willing to strengthen the language where they deemed necessary. To this point, when describing the three distinct Persons of the Trinity, the framers of the *Second London Confession* parted from their esteemed Reformed contemporaries to use the term 'subsistence', a common English translation of the Greek term *hypostasis*, which is often translated 'Person'. This no doubt reflects that, at the very least, these Baptists had a theological vocabulary that was informed by the Trinitarian debates of the patristic era. The use of 'subsistence' also likely indicates that these Baptists were interested in specifically refuting the error of Thomas Collier who explicitly denied that God is 'as some imagine, three Persons yet one God, or three subsistings, distinguished though not divided'.

Collins' commitment to the classic formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is not only seen in his approbation of the *Second London Confession* as one of its original signatories, he also positively asserted this doctrine in his *An Orthodox Catechism*. As noted above, the *Orthodox Catechism* follows wholly the structure of the *Heidelberg Catechism* upon which it is based. The structure of the catechism is Trinitarian, with three sections focusing respectively upon the work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As also seen above, Collins reveals his own commitment to the historic formulation of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity in the question and answer regarding the one substance or essence of God (*substantia* or *ousia* [Greek term]) and the three distinct Persons (*personae* or *hypostaseis*) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In Collins' other writings, a clear commitment to the doctrine of the Trinity is also seen. In his manual on preaching, *The Temple Repair'd*, Collins recommended to prospective preachers 'Dr. Owen on the Trinity'. This was likely a reference to John Owen's *A Brief Declaration and Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, first published in 1669. This is yet another indication that Collins would have seen himself as sharing the Trinitarian theology of his Reformed contemporaries. Additionally, Collins clearly assumed the Triune God in his epic poem tracing the story of redemptive history, *The Marrow of Gospel-History*. In the opening scene, which begins in the throne room of God before the creation of the universe, Collins extolled the 'Everliving God' as existing:

In all his Will immutable,
For Changes he knows none:
How can that be, when perfect's he,
Three Persons yet but One?

This is a clear refutation of Collier's teaching, cited earlier, which explicitly stated that God is 'not ... three Persons yet one God'. Again, in poetic manner, Collins affirms the one essence and three Persons of the Trinity.

Elsewhere, Collins provided insight into his own thinking on the Trinity in his illustration to prospective preachers of how one might draw doctrines from a particular passage of Scripture. The eighth doctrine which Collins drew from Colossians 1:12 was a Trinitarian observation:

'That it is the Duty of all who are made meet for Heaven, to give Thanks to the Father. Mark one thing, tho it be said, that we should give Thanks to the Father, yet that doth not exclude the Son, nor the Holy Ghost, but it is to the Father as the Fountain of Grace, to the Son as the Procurer of Grace, to the Holy Spirit as the Applier of grace.'

This reflection indicates that Collins was influenced by Puritan thinkers such as John Owen who often spoke of the Trinity in precisely these terms. In *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, Joel Beeke and Mark Jones explained Owen's use of this terminology:

'Repeatedly Owen taught that there is a divine economy of operation where each Person takes a role in the work of God, a role that reflects the personal relations in the Trinity. The Father acts as origin, authority, fountain, initiator, and sender; the Son acts as executor of the Father's will, treasury of His riches, foundation, worker, purchaser, and accomplisher; the Spirit acts as completer, finisher, immediate efficacy, fruit, and applier. This is not to divide God's works and distribute them among the three Persons – the external works of the Trinity are undivided – but rather to recognise that in every work of God all three Persons cooperate in distinct ways.'¹

Collins was clearly quite comfortable in expressing his orthodox convictions on the Trinity in terminology made familiar to him by his Puritan contemporaries.

Although each member of the Godhead was considered as a distinct Person, there was a unity of purpose and cooperation within the Trinity in the accomplishment of that purpose. Again, this was a truth earlier denied by Thomas Collier in the middle of the seventeenth century. Collier asserted that it was 'altogether impossible to distinguish God in this manner, and not divide him; thus to distinguish is to divide; for three Persons are three not only distinguished, but divided.' For Collier, to distinguish the Persons of the Trinity in this way made three Gods and this could not be reconciled with the oneness of God. Collins' ruminations upon the Trinity, however, reflected not only the orthodoxy of the patristic period, but also the mature thought of the Puritan divines regarding the relationship between the one essence and three Persons of God.

Conclusion

Although admittedly difficult to comprehend fully, the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person of Christ were not matters to be avoided by the seventeenth-century English Baptists. Rather, these doctrines were considered to be vital to orthodox Christianity. Both the General and Particular Baptist communities

faced challenges to historic Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Trinitarianism and Chalcedonian Christology. The General Baptist response to Matthew Caffyn is found in the *Orthodox Creed*. Particular Baptists also responded to the doctrinal deviations of Thomas Collier with a new confession, *The Second London Confession of Faith* in 1677.

Hercules Collins, though an original signer of the *Second London Confession* at the General Assembly in 1689, also utilised the General Baptists' *Orthodox Creed* in the formation of his *Orthodox Catechism* in 1680. His commitment to the Christian orthodoxy of the patristic period is shown in his inclusion of three definitive creeds from the era. Furthermore, his writings are filled with references that demonstrate both a familiarity with

and a strong commitment to the classic definitions of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person of Christ hammered out in these early periods. ■

Collins' ruminations upon the Trinity, however, reflected not only the orthodoxy of the patristic period, but also the mature thought of the Puritan divines regarding the relationship between the one essence and three Persons of God.

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¹ Joel R Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 106.

Benjamin Keach and the Defence of the Doctrine of the Trinity¹

¹ Much of the material for this article can be found with more detail in the author's work: Arnold, Jonathan W *The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach (1640-1704)* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2013), especially chapter 4. Material here has been used with the generous permission of the publisher.

When Paul Best (1590–1657) and John Biddle (1615/16–1662) faced charges of blasphemy in the late 1640s, their hope for continued life – let alone for freedom – appeared bleak. Only three decades before, the English crown had seen fit to execute two men, Bartholomew Legate (d. 1612) and Edward Wightman (1580?–1612), for publishing anti-Trinitarian tracts, the same precipitating events that had resulted in the incarceration of Best and Biddle. In the earlier version of this scenario, authorities had not only seen fit to execute the two heretics, but they had also gathered the offending documents – including all copies of the infamous primer of anti-Trinitarian Socinian theology, the *Racovian Catechism* – and burned them in public, execution-style, in order to save England from the damnable heresies of Faustus Socinus (1539–1604) and friends.

On paper, precious little differentiated the teachings associated with the earlier heretics from the teachings of the men incarcerated in the Gatehouse, Westminster in 1647. Both events led to charges of Socinianism, complete with its blatant dismissal of Trinitarian orthodoxy, and to convictions at the hands of the establishment. Unlike Legate and Wightman, however, Best and Biddle lived to see freedom beyond their incarceration. Additionally, in the immediate aftermath of the Best and Biddle trials, the *Racovian Catechism* arose from the flames and found a permanent place in the English literary landscape, safe from the fires that had consumed them previously. Even more telling, John Biddle actually claimed to have developed his views on the Trinity independent of Socinus or his Bohemian

followers. Enough changes had occurred in England for a uniquely English heterodox underground to develop.

The same cultural shifts in England that came to a head in the Biddle and Best test cases laid the foundation for the Trinitarian discussions that took centre stage amongst the dissenting community in the second half of the century. Doctrinal issues that had earlier been, in the official words of the royal decree, 'extirpated' by James I carrying out 'one of the principal parts of that duty which appertains unto a Christian King', reappeared with a vengeance and begged for a response from the religious community still seeking a place in polite religious society. Standing outside the established church meant being the perennial target of heresy charges, necessitating an apologetic response that both distinguished the dissenting communities from the legitimate heretics and anchored the orthodoxy of the various dissenting groups. Amongst the burgeoning sect of Baptists, the task of defending the doctrinal legitimacy fell to passionate clergy who not only guided their congregations during the tumultuous seventeenth century but also laid out the theological systems that would influence future generations of Baptist dissenters.

One of the most vocal of the second generation of those pastoral apologists, Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), found himself awash in the Trinitarian debates that continued to thrive well into the 1700s. Keach's own literary mentor, the illustrious Independent theologian, John Owen (1616–1683), attacked John Biddle's arguments in his 1655 publication,

entitled *Vindiciae evangelicae or The mystery of the Gospel vindicated, and Socinianisme examined*. In that tome, Owen used nearly 700 pages to refute all of the major points of Biddle's theology. That volume by Owen only piled onto the already-lengthy list of publications defending the historical doctrine of the Trinity published by the more acceptable Dissenters as well as the establishment.

When the major groups of English Protestantism saw fit to publish their confessional statements around the middle of the century, the article on the Trinity, then, served as more than a merely perfunctory nod to classical creeds. Both the *Savoy Declaration*, penned by the Independents, and the Baptist congregations' *Second London Confession* explicitly declared that the 'doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our Communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him.' This specific adherence to classical Trinitarianism in no way calmed the noisy discussions instigated by Biddle and Best; rather, they often made the work of the average dissenting pastor even more difficult. In fact, by the time Benjamin Keach explicitly joined the published discussion, the fight over Trinitarianism had moved decidedly inside the bounds of acceptable religion. No longer were those who questioned the creeds seen as obvious heretics.

Keach's Trinitarian system

Despite coming of age at a time when Biddle and Best garnered nearly everyone's attention, Benjamin Keach did not directly involve himself in the Trinitarian discussions until the 1690s. Even then, his focus remained more on

the practical outworkings of the doctrine than on the often pedantic discussions regarding terminology. This silence from Keach stemmed from his understood calling as a pastor to Baptist laity rather than to any ignorance on Keach's part. Still, the fact that Keach did not publish a work directly on the Trinity until 1700 makes the work required for modern readers to understand Keach's Trinitarian theology more labour-intensive than comprehending, for instance, his views on baptism, Sabbatarianism, or even eschatology, given the number of polemical writings he published directly on those issues. That labour, however, does not come without rich rewards as Keach's Trinitarianism shaped in the midst of near-constant academic discussion provides unique insights into the foundations of Trinitarian theology for successive generations of Baptists.

Unsurprisingly, from his earliest forays into public ministry, Keach organised his theological teaching around a Trinitarian structure in use since the earliest days of the church. The first of his published works, a children's primer that – due to its anti-paedobaptist teachings and perceived radical eschatology – had been burned at the order of Judge Robert Hyde in 1664, almost certainly included the confession of faith that appeared at the end of the version he reportedly reproduced from memory in 1695. That work, like the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed or the Apostles' Creed, centred around several 'I believe' statements aligned in a clearly Trinitarian fashion.

'I believe with my Heart, and Confess with my Mouth, That God is one Almighty,

Eternal, Infinite and admirable Essence ... I also believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, who is the only begotten Son of God, being the brightness of his Glory, and express Image of his Person, and he is verily God of the substance of the Father; so he is truly Man ... I also believe in the Holy Ghost, who is one with the Father and Son, proceeding from them ... I believe also, God hath a holy and blessed Church on Earth, who are a select People, separated from the evil customs and worships of the World according to God's Holy Word. I also believe the Resurrection of the Dead, the Eternal Judgment, with the Life everlasting, Amen.'

Consequently, Keach made clear from the earliest stage of his career that he stood firmly in the Trinitarian camp. By identifying Jesus Christ as 'the only begotten Son of God' who is 'verily God of the substance of the Father' and 'the Holy Ghost, who is one with the Father and Son', Keach distinguished his brand of theology from any number of dissenting groups, including the group of Baptists who signed the so-called *Standard Confession* in 1660. That confession – signed by, among others, Joseph Keach, Benjamin's brother – notably did not contain explicit Trinitarian language save for the direct quotation of the already-controversial Comma Johanneum (1 John 5:7).

The use of tradition

The debate around Trinitarian terminology called into question the

relationship of the church to tradition as a whole. Those who shied away from the use of extra-biblical terminology did so consistently on the basis of an extreme biblicism that had come into vogue in England alongside the development of a native English anti-Trinitarianism. The infamous Paul Best, for example, grounded his own anti-Trinitarianism in the simple fact that he could not find direct scriptural evidence for the co-

Keach's Trinitarianism shaped in the midst of near-constant academic discussion provides unique insights into the foundations of Trinitarian theology for successive generations of Baptists.

equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. According to that view, defended explicitly by the anti-Trinitarian *Racovian Catechism*, an individual should reject any view that stood against right reason. On face value, this dependence on reason seemed appropriate for these children of the Reformation who believed in the priesthood of all believers, but in reality, this emphasis on reason required a willingness to discard the interpretations of the past should they be deemed to be in opposition to the reader's 'right reason',

leaving tradition a mere bit player on the hermeneutical stage.

For Keach, this dismissal of tradition and the relegation of the Bible as subservient to reason stood against historic Christianity. In response, Keach enumerated a clear hierarchy of authority which he utilised throughout his many theological writings, including those focused on the doctrine of the Trinity. Unsurprisingly, the first level



Benjamin Keach

of that hierarchy – the argument from ‘the Word of God’ – provided Keach with the most fodder for his doctrinal writings. After all, he, like the Reformers he willingly followed, held a well-developed view of the sufficiency of Scripture in all points of faith and practice. Without fail, then, Keach turned to the Bible first and repeatedly for his arguments. He also berated those of his opponents who did not see the obvious arguments from Scripture. To ignore the clear reading of Scripture in favour of tradition or reason meant succumbing to nothing more than ‘human’ arguments – one of the many shortcomings of the popish religion and

This method allowed him to hold a high view of Scripture in tension with a respect for historic Christianity and to engage the contemporary debates without losing sight of the final objective, namely, to understand God as he revealed himself in Scripture.

various other sects. Interestingly, Keach extended this defence of Scripture to include the clear meaning of Scripture, not merely the literal words of the text.

This understanding allowed Keach to harmonise his high view of the authority of Scripture with his argument for the use of ‘Universal Tradition’ and ‘the Testimony of most approved Writers’ – the second and third levels of his hierarchy, respectively. Those latter terms had distinctive meanings in Keach’s system. The ‘Universal Tradition’, or ‘Apostolical Tradition’, referred to the doctrines of the church as established by the earliest councils and accepted by all branches of Christendom. The final level of his hierarchical system allowed Keach to place himself in a broader contemporary

conversation without losing sight of the biblical theology that he believed should be the focus. Those ‘most approved Writers’, for Keach, included his favourite contemporary theologian, John Owen, Isaac Chauncy – Owen’s successor at the Independent Church meeting at Bury Street in London – any number of Baptist pastor-theologians, and those leaders of the Reformation who defended what he called ‘the Orthodoxy of Matter’. For Keach’s theological stance, this method allowed him to hold a high view of Scripture in tension with a respect for historic Christianity and to engage the contemporary debates without losing sight of the final objective, namely, to

understand God as he revealed himself in Scripture.

The doctrine

Despite his respect for human reason and tradition, Keach’s ultimate understanding of the Triunity of the Godhead fell into a category of divine mystery which, he argued, could only be accepted by faith. Keach, then, attempted to describe the three Persons according to the revealed unique, individual tasks accomplished by each, but he remained firm in his understanding of the essential union of the Triune God. No particular topic proved more beneficial for Keach to explore what could be understood of the Triunity of God than that of salvation.

For instance, in a sermon entitled ‘The Glory of the Lord Revealed’, Keach took the opportunity afforded by the quotation of Isaiah found in Luke 3 to explore the glory-revealing aspect of the divine work of salvation. According to his exposition, the Father served as the head of all divine operations, meaning simply that the Father was the divine Person who was injured by sin. Thus, the Father chose the Son and sent him into the world. The Father raised the Son from the dead, justified him (and his children in Christ), and secured union for the believer in the Son. Thus, Keach argued that the Father truly functioned as ‘the Fountain and Spring of this great Salvation’.

This view of the Father did not come without potential pitfalls, a fact Keach understood quite well. By seeing the Father as the injured upholder of justice, some, including the Socinians, held that this teaching rendered ‘the Son more

merciful and kind than the Father’. With a swift stroke of his pen, Keach dismissed this concern as nothing more than an absurdity because a correct understanding of the injured Father also recognised the Father as the initial contriver, or first author, of the entire salvation enterprise, making him the source of the mercy, love, and goodness experienced by the saved. Even more, Keach argued that the Father’s justice did not necessitate the relinquishing of his mercy. The unique glory of the salvific plan came in the fact that the Father could indeed be just as well as gracious.

At the most basic level, Keach’s understanding of the second Person of the Trinity closely followed his teaching on the Father. Whereas the Father’s glory was bestowed in his orchestration of the work of salvation, the Son’s glory was revealed in the actual carrying out of the plan. In fact, none of Keach’s teachings specifically on Christ would have surprised anyone who held to a classic view of the Godhead. He actively defended the basic teachings of Christendom: the divinity of Christ, the humanity of Jesus, and even the hypostatic union as defined by the Council of Chalcedon.

Discussions surrounding the second Person of the Trinity commanded a larger portion of Keach’s published works, especially as his readership struggled with the teachings of the General Baptist messenger, Matthew Caffyn (d. 1714), whose espousal of an aberrant view of Christ’s humanity led to Keach labelling him a rank heretic. Caffyn’s teachings, though uniquely associated with the still-developing Baptist associations in

the British Isles, were not unique in their attacks on this historic doctrine. Both Socinianism and Arianism presented their own unorthodox views of the second Person of the Trinity as did the Quakers who were quickly gaining popularity in the English world and who had claimed one of Keach's own daughters, Hannah, as a convert. Thus, Keach presented his apology of the Reformed orthodox view of Christ from a distinctly personal position. His writings on the subject provided a clear demonstration of that personal involvement, with his most passionate condemnations being reserved for those who questioned this historical view of Christ.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit garnered nearly the same opposition from the anti-Trinitarians as the doctrine of the Son. The debate once again involved the usual suspects with the Socinians, on the one side, referring to the Spirit simply as virtue or energy and the Quakers, on the other side, presenting the Spirit as simply the 'Light Within' or 'Christ within'. Both of those attacks made the Holy Spirit something less than a distinct, divine Person of the Godhead and required, in Keach's eyes, a robust explanation of biblical pneumatology that rightly represented the Holy Spirit as 'the voluntary Author of all Divine Operations' and the divine Person who 'enlighteneth, reneweth, regenerateth, sanctifieth, teacheth and guideth.'

The totality of Keach's teaching on salvation included all three Persons of the Trinity: the Father orchestrates, the Son achieves, and the Spirit applies the work of salvation. By enumerating

the unique roles of the Spirit, Keach provided a full-fledged discussion of his understanding of sanctification, or 'union with Christ'. This particular discussion had far-reaching implications for Keach's theology, directly affecting his definition of the church, his identification of the ordinances and their roles – which he noted included the usual baptism and Lord's Supper but also included (at some points in his writings) the practice of laying on of hands of new believers, and his understanding of assurance for the believer who could be absolutely certain that the Spirit would neither desert Christ nor the believer, thus rendering the union unbreakable. In each of those areas, the Spirit played the central role of divine activity. The very idea that the Spirit could be viewed as anything less than a distinct, consubstantial third Person of the Triune Godhead, then, made no sense to Keach's understanding of Scripture and of historic Christianity.

Despite spending significant time and space describing the unique roles performed by each of the divine Persons, Keach, in the end, felt compelled to remind his audience of the mystery shrouding the Triunity of the God of the Bible. Keach recognised the value of the hierarchical understanding of authority he enumerated for his audience: namely, when it was correctly applied, it protected the unsuspecting believer from the various pitfalls of theological heterodoxy that plagued the English landscape. More importantly for Keach, that theological hermeneutic led to nowhere other than the classical understanding of the Trinity as expressed by the great theologians of generations past, by Keach's compatriots

who stood against the anti-Trinitarian upstarts, and by Keach himself.

But Keach also recognised the inherent limitations of any human system, and he regularly highlighted those limitations even as he pointed his audience to God's Triunity. Even as he preached on the subject, he implored his hearers to remember that complete comprehension of the Trinity lay beyond human capacity. Even so, he argued that from the totality of the biblical record and from the full corpus of his own work (and that of so many other worthy divines), clear 'Scripture-Demonstrations' display the plurality of distinct Persons within the Godhead.

Thus, Keach could enjoin his congregation to sing about the mysterious truths that reached beyond human comprehension:

*Lord, thou art great and also good,
And first upon the mighty flood,
By whom all hearts are try'd:
Though thou art Three, yet art but One,
And comprehended art of none:
Thy name be glorify'd*

Outcomes

By the time Keach's ministry reached its zenith in the last decade of the seventeenth century, William III intervened in the Trinitarian debates, issuing a royal injunction in 1696.

Keach demonstrated his capabilities as a pastor-theologian, his awareness of the theological struggles common to his audience, and his passion for what he perceived to be matters of Reformed orthodoxy. Ultimately, he laid an auspicious groundwork for the discussions that would arise in successive generations as Trinitarianism continued to command the spotlight of English Dissent.

Parliament followed suit with the Blasphemy Act of 1697, in their attempt to quell the groundswell of anti-Trinitarianism that had become commonplace since Biddle and Best had successfully avoided execution a half-century earlier. Keach rightly saw that effort on the part of the establishment as too little, too late to serve as a legitimate defence of the doctrine that was foundational to every aspect of Christianity. Nearly all of his writings attacked, in one form or another, the increasingly acceptable forms of unorthodoxy. In that endeavour, he strove to deliver what he hoped was a clear, concise explanation of this key aspect of 'the Essentials of Christ's Doctrine of the

Principles of true Religion'. As he did so, Keach demonstrated his capabilities as a pastor-theologian, his awareness of the theological struggles common to his audience, and his passion for what he perceived to be matters of Reformed orthodoxy. Ultimately, he laid an auspicious groundwork for the discussions that would arise in successive generations as Trinitarianism continued to command the spotlight of English Dissent. ■

Jonathan Arnold serves as assistant professor of Christian Theology and Church History and director of the Augustine Honors Collegium at Boyce College in Louisville, Kentucky.

John Gill and

The Eternally- begotten Word

Eternal generation

The doctrine of eternal generation was an absolute necessity for Baptist pastor John Gill (1697–1771). Without it, none of the distinctions hold and the doctrine of the Trinity could not be supported. In his mind, it is fundamental to the Christian religion. The generation of the Son not only distinguishes between the Son and the Father, but it also reveals the distinction between the Father and Son, on the one hand, and the Holy Spirit, on the other:

‘If one of these distinct Persons is a Father in the divine nature, and another a Son in the divine nature, there must be something in the divine nature which is the ground of the relation, and distinguishes the one from the other; and can be nothing else than generation, and which distinguishes the third Person from them both, as neither begetting nor begotten. From generation arises the relation, and from relation distinct personality ... Upon the whole, it is easy to observe that the distinction of Persons in the Deity depends on the generation of the Son; take away that, which would destroy the relation between the first and second Persons, and the distinction drops.’

This relation within the Godhead between the Persons is tied to the divine nature of God and is thus eternal. Since ‘no moment or instant can be given or pointed at, neither in eternity nor in time, in which Christ was not the begotten Son of the Father’, he must be eternally begotten. Thus, Gill says, there is warrant for calling it ‘eternal generation’. Rather than thinking of eternal generation as a priority of time between the Father and

Son, Gill finds it prudent, when speaking of divine generation, to think of a priority of ordering. Thus, for Gill, eternal generation not only speaks to personal distinctions within the Godhead, but also of an order within the Godhead.

As Gill understands it, eternal generation is the begetting of person, not essence. This is abundantly clear in not only his doctrinal statements, but in his commentary on Scripture.

He writes, 'as in natural, so in divine generation, Person begets Person, and not essence begets essence.' And as it is a begetting of a person, it is done in the divine essence. Thus, Gill says, 'And this begetting is not out of, but in the divine essence; it being an immanent and internal act of God.' Eternal generation, for Gill, is an eternal act of God's life in himself. It distinguishes the Persons in the Godhead, and from it arise the distinct

personalities of the Father and Son that are mutually dependent on one another. Upon consideration of it, one must remove any impure, imperfect notions which allow for 'division and multiplication, priority and posteriority, dependence, and the like'. But the mode or manner of generation cannot be known; 'we must be content to be ignorant of it.'

The aseity of the Son

Gill's comments regarding the nature of God reveal his understanding of the aseity (self-origination) belonging

to each Person in the Godhead. In his famous *The Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (1769–1770), Gill sets out three basic guidelines for understanding God's nature. First, all concepts of God as corporeal must be thrown aside. Second, God is spirit, from which fact we must ascribe all the perfections of a spiritual Being to him. Third, God is a simple, uncompounded Being. He consists in no parts.

Eternal generation, for Gill, is an eternal act of God's life in himself. It distinguishes the Persons in the Godhead, and from it arise the distinct personalities of the Father and Son that are mutually dependent on one another.

According to Gill, God's spiritual and simple essence must be ascribed to all three Persons of the Godhead. Additionally, each Person must be understood to possess the essence of himself, without respect to imminent procession. Gill is emphatic on this point, and in his chapter in *The Body of Divinity* regarding the nature of God, he makes this clear. Of the way in which each Person partakes in the essence, Gill writes:

'This nature is common to the three Persons in God, but not communicated from one to another; they each of them partake of it, and possess it as one undivided nature; they all enjoy it; it is not a part of it that is enjoyed by one, and a part of it by another, but the whole by each; as "all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ", so in the Holy Spirit; and of the Father, there will be no doubt; these equally subsist in the unity of the divine essence, and that without any derivation or communication of it from one to another.'

Much of what Gill asserts in this statement is affirmed by all Trinitarians. All affirm that each Person fully possesses the fullness of the divine essence. All affirm that Father, Son, and Spirit each subsists in full equality in the divine essence. But: not all affirm the way in which this essence is possessed. Gill twice in this short excerpt denies a communication of essence between the divine persons. For him, the essence is shared in such a way that communication or derivation is unnecessary. Each fully partakes of the essence of himself.

Gill acknowledges that among those who are orthodox on the doctrine of the Trinity, there is disagreement on this point: 'I know it is represented by some, who, otherwise are sound in the doctrine of the Trinity, that the divine nature is communicated from the Father to the Son and Spirit, and that he is *fons Deitatis*, "the fountain of Deity".' Nevertheless, Gill finds this way of speaking to be theologically problematic, saying that these are 'unsafe phrases; since they seem to imply a priority in the Father to the other two Persons; for he that communicates must, at least in order of nature, and according to our conception of things, be prior to whom the communication is made; and that he has a superabundant plenitude of Deity in him, previous to this communication.' For Gill, a communication of the essence is problematic because it seems to suggest a priority of the Father. At the very least, it implies a priority in ordering, but it also may suggest temporal ordering. It additionally may suggest that one of the Persons possesses the Deity in a greater measure than the others. For these

reasons, Gill chooses to understand the sharing of essence in the following way: 'It is better to say, that they are self-existent, and exist together in the same undivided essence; and jointly, equally, and as early one as the other, possess the same nature.' Thus, there is not one Person who, in the personal ordering of the Trinity, communicates the essence to the others. There are simply three, who relate personally to one another in the essence, with each Person possessing the essence of himself.

In his earlier tract, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (1731/1732), Gill makes the same point in his discussion about the personality of the Father:

'Now when we call the Father the first Person in the Trinity, we do not suppose that he is the first, in order of nature, time, or causality; as if the Father was *fons Deitatis*, the fountain of the Deity; expressions which some good men have made use of with no ill design: But since an ill use has been made of them, by artful and designing men, 'tis time for us to lay them aside. As the Father is God of himself, so the Son is God of himself, and the Spirit is God of himself. They all three exist together, and necessarily exist, and subsist distinctly by themselves in one undivided nature. The one is not before the other, nor more excellent than the other.'

The rule, for Gill, is that each Person fully possesses the divine essence, in all of its perfection — of himself — and this in the same manner. Order and mode of subsistence do not factor into this possession in any way. The personal

relations are not considered with respect to how each Person partakes of the essence. Each Person, particularly considered as God, is God of himself. For Gill, neither the Son nor the Spirit has the divine nature bestowed upon them through any form of communicative action within the Godhead, regardless of how it is defined. As each Person is God, so each Person is God of himself.

The Word who is God

While Gill did not conceive of eternal generation as involving a communication of essence from the Father to the Son, he found help in Scripture for understanding the nature of eternal generation where the Scriptures speak of the Son as the divine Word.

Gill understood that the name, Word, indicated something of the eternal nature of the Son. And like other theologians before him, he found the analogy of the mind helpful for achieving further understanding of the Son. For Gill, the Son is the Word as the mental word, or thought of the mind. Just as a thought is generated in the mind, so is Christ begotten of the Father. This analogy demonstrates not only that he was eternally with the Father, but that he is distinct from him. Deity, eternity, as well as distinct personality are all included in this name. In what may be his fullest expression of the analogy, Gill writes:

‘He may be so called, because ... As the mental word, or the conception of the mind ... is the birth of the mind, begotten

of it intellectually, and immaterially, without passion or motion; and is the very image and representation of the mind, and of the same nature with it, yet something distinct from it: So Christ is the begotten of the Father, the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his

Person; of the same nature with him, though a Person distinct from him.’

There are four elements that come out of Gill’s reflection of the Son as Word: generation, image and representation, consubstantiality, and distinct personhood. One can see how the analogy of the mind may prove fruitful in understanding eternal generation. The analogy of the mind and thought provides another angle by which to behold this divine mystery. With respect

to generation, the picture points away from physical to spiritual generation, an understanding of generation which is more fitting to the nature of God as a divine Being.

The begotten Word

Gill explicitly connects the Word with eternal generation in his explanation of the Word-analogy provided in his *Doctrine of the Trinity*. The Son is the ‘mental word, or the conception of the mind’, which is ‘the birth of the mind’. This birth, or generation is to be thought of in a particular way in keeping with the nature of the subject. Thus, as the ‘mental word... is the birth of the mind, begotten of it intellectually, and immaterially, without passion or motion... So Christ is the

begotten of the Father.’ This connection reveals that the name of Word is closely tied to the name of Son, since it is the Son’s generation that is intended by the use of the name, Word. The name, as Gill understood it, helps explain the nature of the Son’s eternal generation. Thus, the name finds importance as it explains a fundamental doctrine of the Christian religion. In Gill’s mind, the doctrine of eternal generation was indispensable, as it provided the foundation not only for the Son’s deity, but was the means of explaining the distinction of Persons within the divine essence.

The importance of this understanding of the second Person as Word appears in Gill’s *Body of Divinity*, where he gives his most detailed analysis of eternal generation. In this place, Gill is defending eternal generation against Socinian criticism. Gill approaches the discussion from various angles, but explains that divine generation must be understood in a way that is reflective of God’s divine, spiritual nature: ‘When the Scriptures ascribe generation to the Divine Being, it must be understood in a manner suitable to it, and not of carnal and corporal generation; no man in his senses can ever think that God generates as man does; nor believe that ever any man held such a notion of generation in God.’ Gill thus removes misguided notions of the Father’s relation to the Son through generation and makes way for a proper understanding of the Son’s eternal generation from the Father. Gill spells out his own approach: ‘Generation must be understood of such generation as agrees with the nature of a spirit, and of an infinite uncreated spirit, as God is’.

It is at this point that Gill begins to rely upon the analogy of the mind, drawn from the meaning of the Son’s identification as Word. Additionally, it is at this point that Gill’s theology of the Word appears to be similar to that of Thomas Aquinas. Gilles Emery explains Aquinas’ theology of the Word in this way:

‘The Word is a Person who subsists in himself, distinct from the Father from whom he proceeds; being equal to, and of the same nature as, the Father, he is the perfect expression and presentation of the Father. The notion of the Word also enables one to grasp what it means for God to be Son, using an analogy which is adapted to the spiritual nature of God. To put it another way, it is the notion of the Word which, according to St Thomas, gives one an understanding of begetting the Son which is best fitted to God.’

Consonant with Emery’s assessment of Aquinas, it may be said of Gill that he finds the name, ‘the Word’, and the analogy that is signalled by it, to be a helpful means of understanding the Son’s divine nature by giving us an analogy for his distinctive relative property, to use Gill’s own phrase, that rightly accords with his nature.

Gill finds an example to further the analogy entailed in this name when he writes, ‘That spirits generate we know from the souls or spirits we have about us and in us; our minds, which are spirits, generate thought; thought is the conception, and birth of the mind; and so we speak of it in common and ordinary speech, I conceive, or such a man conceives so and so.’ This illustration

The rule, for Gill, is that each Person fully possesses the divine essence, in all of its perfection — of himself — and this in the same manner.



of the relation between a thought to the mind corresponds with the co-existence, the distinction of persons in the Godhead, and of the relation of Father and Son in generation: 'Now as soon as the mind is, thought is, they commence together and they co-exist, and always will; and thus the mind begets within itself; without any mutation or alteration in itself.' The internal and immaterial nature of generation is thus given shape by the analogy of the mind, to which this divine name points.

Gill provides further explanation of these analogies, quoting both Plato and Aristotle before providing his conclusion on the matter. The Son, who is the Word of God, is begotten from eternity. This biblical affirmation, however, does not mean that there was ever a time the Son was not. Nor does it mean that the Son is a created being – he is of the very same essence as God. All of this, Gill affirms, can be proved by this analogy, pointed at in the Son's identification as the Word:

'Now if our finite created spirits, or minds, are capable of generating thought, the internal word or speech, and that without any motion, change or alteration,

without any diminution and corruption, without division of their nature or multiplication of their essence; then in an infinitely more perfect manner can God, an infinite uncreated spirit, beget his Son, the eternal Word, wisdom, reason, and understanding, in his eternal mind, which he never was without, nor was he before it.'

These analogies are given, Gill writes, to relieve minds and help Christians understand the mystery of eternal generation.

In summary, John Gill understands eternal generation to be essential to establishing the distinctions among the Persons of the Trinity, yet without conceiving of eternal generation as a communication of the essence from the Father to the Son. And John Gill, like theologians before him – such as Thomas Aquinas – employed the analogy of the mind to understand

the Scripture's designation of the Son as the divine Word and the Son's eternal generation. ■

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In summary, John Gill understands eternal generation to be essential to establishing the distinctions among the Persons of the Trinity, yet without conceiving of eternal generation as a communication of the essence from the Father to the Son.

New Books

The following books have been published recently and are recommended for your attention:

- Sharon James, *God's Design for Women in an Age of Gender Confusion* (Darlington: EP Books, 2019), 318 pages, ISBN 978-1-78397-263-0. This is a substantially rewritten version of her book *God's Design for Women*, that first appeared in 2002. The new book takes account of current cultural trends, including the ever-increasing confusion about gender 'identity.' Its scope is also extended to include what is happening in other countries beyond the UK.
- Iain M Duguid, *Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi. EP Study Commentary series* (Darlington: EP Books, 2019), 248 pages, ISBN 978-1-78397-269-2.
- Jeremy Walker, *Our Chief of Days. The Principle, Purpose and Practice of the Lords Day* (Darlington: EP Books, 2019), 128 pages, ISBN 978-1-78397-246-3.
- Tim Chester, *Decisions Made Simple. A Quick Guide to Guidance* (Darlington: EP Books, 2019), 80 pages, ISBN 978-1-78397-261-6.
- Sarah Ivill, *Never Enough. Confronting Lies about Appearance and Achievement with Gospel Hope* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 160 pages, ISBN 978-1-60178-676-0.
- Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Volume 2: Faith in the Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 704 pages, ISBN 978-1-60178-675-3.
- David B McWilliams, *How Should the Sovereignty of God Strengthen Me?* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 32 pages, ISBN 978-1-60178-696-8.
- Ryan M McGraw, *How Should We Get Ready for Christ's Return?* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 32 pages, ISBN 978-1-60178-702-6
- Brian Vos, *How Can I Have Peace in Life's Storms?* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 32 pages, ISBN 978-1-60178-701-9.
- Geoffrey Thomas, *How Can I Please God in Everything?* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 32 pages, ISBN 978-1-60178-698-2,

And a number of new additions to RHB's booklet series:

Please note that we are unable to supply these books; please contact your local bookshop.



African Pastors' Conference News

Again a largely numerical update on the work of APC; conferences in well over 50 locations are nearly always repeated annually. The table gives an overview of conferences held in the period April – June 2019 with numbers of delegates and books distributed. The total number of books distributed through Southern Africa now stands at well over 150,000. We hope and pray that these conferences and the literature will all be a real blessing to the progress of the gospel in Africa and for the glory of Christ.

COUNTRY	LOCATION	DELEGATES	BOOKS Sold & Free
South Africa	Mokopane	43	827
Zimbabwe	Bulawayo	153	1076
Zimbabwe	Kwekwe	16	197
Zimbabwe	Harare	35	437
South Africa	Komatipoort	23	205
South Africa	Hazyview	8	84
Swaziland	Manzini	33	490
South Africa	Mayflower	29	237
South Africa	Barberton	43	345
Malawi	Lilongwe	41	331
Malawi	Mzuzu	40	222
Malawi	Karonga	15	63
Malawi	Blantyre	87	516
Malawi	Zomba	21	172
Zambia	Ndola	70	1304
Zambia	Kitwe city	24	303
Zambia	Kitwe rural	37	201
Zambia	Lusaka	174	2021

📷 Books drawing much attention at Lusaka APC



To whom shall we turn?

John 6:56-69

We always imagine that *more* is better. But that depends on what it is we want 'more' of. If it's more money, or more influence, or more control over events in our lives, we will usually discover after many years that more of those things never actually satisfies; that *more* only begets an anxiety to get more, and so it goes on in an endless – and sometimes destructive – circle.

Sadly, it's not so easy to decide at the very beginning whether the 'more' we want is going to turn out to be a 'more' worth having. Oliver Twist thought that asking Mr Bumble, 'Please, sir, I want some more,' would make him happier (or at least less hungry) and it certainly didn't. These verses from the sixth chapter of John's Gospel are also about people who wanted 'more,' but who had an utterly mistaken idea about what 'more' they should want. It's about the comparatively large flock of people from Capernaum who called themselves Jesus' disciples and who were offered an opportunity for a really extraordinary dose of 'more,' but who turned out to be hunting for a much more pedestrian version of it. The *more* they were offered was Jesus himself. But their response was to say, 'This isn't what we really wanted. We don't want more of Jesus. We followed him because we thought he could give us more of some other things which we think are more important.' And the results are not pretty.

In these verses, we are in the middle of the great chapter that began with the tremendous miracle of the feeding of

the five thousand. From next to nothing, Jesus had provided bread and fish to feed a crowd which, by the population standards of the day, must have included most of the people who lived around the Sea of Galilee. And from witnessing and enjoying this miracle, a large number of them drew a series of predictable, but mistaken, conclusions:

- » That Jesus was the leader who would deliver them from the hateful rule of the Romans and restore the old Jewish Kingdom of David and Solomon. So, we read in John 6:14-15, 'After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.'
- » That Jesus would confer miracle-working powers on them, too. This is what's behind the question they asked in verse 28, the day after the feeding of the five thousand: 'Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"'
- » That Jesus was the second Moses who was going to feed people on a continuous cycle of manna, free of cost, which seems to be what was on their minds in verses 32-34: 'Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.'

For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." "Sir," they said, "always give us this bread."¹

To watch people grasp at straws like this is almost pathetic. But there was a great deal in rabbinical teaching which had primed them to expect these things. The rabbinical commentators had written, "What did the first redeemer [Moses] do? He brought down the manna. The last redeemer will also bring down manna."² So, the crowd was not being entirely unrealistic if it assumed that what Jesus was offering them was exactly the deal they thought the rabbis had been predicting.

But he was not, and he made that very clear. *The bread that came down from heaven* is not like that which your ancestors ate, Jesus says (v58), because that was merely bread. It was the peculiar crusty delicacy which they called manna and which formed in the wilderness like dew in the morning. It could sustain ordinary daily life, but not more than that, and in the course of things, the people who ate the manna grew old and, Jesus adds, *they died* (v49). If that was all they thought he was doing with loaves and fishes, they would get no better from him than their ancestors had received from Moses.

The loaves and fishes were actually a sign of a different kind of feeding, a spiritual

feeding, an entrance into a power and a living relationship with Jesus Christ in which his words and his presence were the real loaves and fishes. It was not manna they should be looking for from him, much less loaves and fishes, but feeding directly on him. So directly, in fact, that he speaks of this spiritual intimacy as the equivalent of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Jesus said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me" (vv56-57).

At this point, the crowd balked. Some of them did so because they thought he was promoting some bizarre form of cannibalism. They began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52).³ But most of them got the point Jesus was making pretty plainly – and they didn't like it. Jesus was not offering them membership in a guerrilla army to overthrow the Romans – that, they could understand, and a large number might have been willing to volunteer for it. Jesus was not offering to confer miraculous powers on them – and certainly there would have been more than a few who would have enjoyed that. Nor was he going to be offering them an unending stream of free meals.

He was inviting them to something more – something more demanding than any of

these things – and that was a personal, living connection with him, in which they would follow his words, live by his commands and example, and place their whole trust for this life and the life to come into his hands as their Redeemer and Deliverer.

And that was just too much for them. They had not come to Jesus to surrender control over their lives, but to get more control over their circumstances; they had not come to Jesus to find a new life, but to give a somewhat bigger and more pleasant bang to the lives they were already leading. They now plainly saw that what Jesus was offering was big with risk – the risk of losing themselves to him. And from that, they drew precisely one conclusion: "On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" (v60).

This did not surprise Jesus. "Does this offend you?" he asked (v61). If it does, he warns, then you had better be prepared for even bigger shocks. Because the path Jesus would lead them on would include suffering, crucifixion, death and resurrection. Jesus exclaims, "What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before?" (v62). The truth was that the crowd had in view only how Jesus could give them more in a crass, material sense – more power, more control, more stuff, whereas he was offering them life itself. The words I have spoken to you – they are full of the Spirit and life, he says. (v63) The problem was not that he wasn't offering them 'more'; it was that he was offering them more of something they didn't really believe in. And the result is some of the saddest words to be found

in the New Testament: "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (v66).

Almost all of us have moments in our lives when we have made a decision which took us in one direction, and left behind all the other possible directions we might have taken. For some, that's simply a reflection on the inevitability of decisions in life; for others it becomes a source of lifelong torment.

*For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: 'It might have been!'*

It is almost beyond calculation to imagine what answer these people must have given when asked years later, "Did you actually hear Jesus of Nazareth? Did you actually see him work the miracle of the loaves and fishes?" and then to say in reply, "Yes, but we turned back and didn't follow him any longer." And it really is beyond calculation to imagine what reply they must give to God at the Judgment Day: Did you actually hear my Son? Did you see his miracle? and then reply, "Yes, but we turned back and didn't follow him any longer." We would think such people to be out of their minds. We would like to scream, "What more did you want?"

And yet, how many do it every day? How many have sat in pews, generation after generation, and heard the same words Jesus spoke then, and learned of the same miracle Jesus worked then -- and had more or less the same reaction? "Yes, but we turned back and didn't follow him any longer."

¹ C H Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), p83.

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1976), 2:160.

³ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1953), 1:242.

But not everyone. Jesus asked the Twelve – the core group of his disciples – ‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ (v67). It was almost a test, even, potentially, a rebuke, on the order of Julius Caesar’s last words to Brutus: ‘And you too, Brutus? But at that moment we swing on a great hinge?’ Because if the people who turned away represent the greatest lost opportunity in the history of the world, one man steps forward and retrieves it all in the most beautiful and simple words. Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’ (v68).

Simon Peter was not a rabbi; he was a fisherman. He was blunt, impulsive, and, in fact, there would come a time when he would deny his Lord. But not here. Because while the others have gone off to chase their little stores of more, he has understood that he really needs only one thing, and *that is the words of eternal life*, and that he can find them only from Jesus. For him, it’s a simple matter of elimination: there’s nowhere else to go to get *the words of eternal life*, so we’re staying put.

It is not always easy to stand with Peter. He was no philosopher, no mover-and-shaker of society. But he had this one thing right: if it’s spiritual and eternal life you desire, there is only one place where it can be found, and that is in Jesus Christ. And Peter is one of the first to see this too. Jesus is not the founder of some popular movement, or even a school of religion.

He is the Lord, and as such, he possesses *the words of eternal life*.⁴

Some people will choose Jesus because they admire his character, some because they respect his teaching. But at bottom, it is Peter’s reasoning which commands the greatest power. If it is *more* we want, the *real ‘more’* is in Jesus Christ. For he alone *has the words of eternal life*. ■

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If it is *more* we want, the *real ‘more’* is in Jesus Christ. For he alone has *the words of eternal life*.



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⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), pp388-39.

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