

**“TRULY REFORMED IN A GREAT MEASURE”: A BRIEF DEFENSE
OF THE ENGLISH SEPARATIST ORIGINS OF
MODERN BAPTISTS**

James M. Renihan

The question of Baptist origins is like a carpet worn thin from more than a century of debate and discussion. Scholars and students alike have anxiously paced across its fabric, tracing their steps into familiar paths contoured upon the threads. In places edges have become frayed and shabby, and sometimes, like sunshine daily beaming through a window onto the textile, the light of examination has been so bright that colors have faded, retaining only a hint of their former glory. This is a sad reality, for the subject is, in itself, important. But its importance has perhaps created the present circumstance—in the absence of consensus, positions harden. Doctrinaire conclusions are reiterated seemingly *ad infinitum*, so that little or no substantial progress toward consensus is achieved. I do not hope, in this essay, to achieve a meeting of the minds, but perhaps simply to contribute some perspectives which might assist scholars of good-will to step back and see the beauty that remains in the fabric of our history.

I do hold the English Separatist view of Baptist origins, but I have great sympathy for the Anabaptist Kinship position, and I think I understand the spiritual motivation behind the Landmark view. In no way do I wish my remarks to disparage the proponents of these two positions. But as all scholars should do, I have to take a position somewhere, and my own labors have led me to see our churches developing out of the matrix of the English Reformation. The story of John Smythe and his journey from the Church of England through separatism and into the practice of believer’s baptism is well-known. Likewise, the story of London’s Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church, the progenitor of the Particular Baptist line, has frequently been reported. In these cases, many able scholars have demonstrated the direct relationship these men had with both branches of English Baptists. But it is not the result of reading the works of scholars that has brought me to this conclusion. Rather, it is wide reading in the Seventeenth Century primary sources that convinces me of this point. It must be remembered that the question has direct reference to *English* Baptists and the manner by which modern Baptists around the world descend from them. For this reason, their testimonies about their own history are crucial. In some cases, these men (or their paedobaptist critics) experienced the events they described; in other cases, they wrote in the next generation, while some of the first participants were still vigorous partakers in the lives of the churches. We have an abundance of eye- and ear-witness testimony which demonstrates the validity of the English Separatist view. Space does not permit me to canvass every instance—what follows is a sampler of material I have found. I will collect it under two heads: 1. The Continuing Reformation; 2. The Recovery of a lost ordinance.

The Continuing Reformation.

The recovery of the Bible in northern Europe produced massive religious changes. As people read and considered its pages, they recognized that the doctrines and practices of the Roman communion were, not just deficient, but largely antichristian. Unwilling to endure the continuation of these abominations, they set out on a relentless quest to renew and reform their faith and life. This was a persistent pursuit of conformity to the pattern of the primitive church. For the English Baptists, this quest provided a perfect apologetic tool in defense of their own identity and existence. In their historiography, they considered themselves to be the logical (and perhaps more pointedly the proper *theological*) conclusion to the Reformation. Three examples may be cited:

Five London Pastors (and a Sixth from Dartmouth)

Writing in 1690, five pastors from churches in London produced something of an introduction to Philip Cary's vindication of believer's baptism, *A Solemn Call*. It was a brief epistle simply titled "To the Reader." In that short letter, they set the stage for Cary's work, framing their comments historically. Among the signatories was William Kiffin, a man who had been part of the Baptist churches for five decades. They wrote

We are doubtless brought forth in a day to which many glorious prophecies contained in the Holy Scriptures have a special reference Antichristian darkness hath so covered the European nations for many hundreds of years, that the truths and ordinances of Christ were generally corrupted and obscured; till our blessed Reformers, Luther, Calvin, &c. were raised up in some good measure, to detect the corruptions of Antichrist, and to bring to Light that blessed doctrine of justification by faith, in the blood of Christ, with several other truths of great importance.

And since that, God has been pleased to raise up many learned men, namely Dr. Ames, Mr. Ainsworth, and Dr. Owen, with others, who have learnedly, and with much clearness and strength of argument made it appear, that a true gospel visible church, is to consist only of such as are saints by profession, and who give up themselves to the Lord, and one to another by solemn agreement, to practice the ordinances of Christ.

And now of latter years, the Lord hath been pleased to raise up some worthy and learned men to detect the vanity of infant baptism, who by solid arguments have made the unlawfulness thereof appear. . . .

We freely acknowledge, that many learned and holy men, whom we much honour, do differ from us in the point of baptism, yet we must not let go any truth of God for their sakes: and we doubt not, but the time is drawing nigh, when God will cause the light of his holy word so to shine forth, that all remaining darkness on the minds of the Lord's people shall vanish away; and then Sion's builders shall no more take a stone for a corner, nor a stone for a foundation of Babylons rubbish.

Signed, Will. Kiffin, John Harris, Rich. Adams, Rob. Steed, Ben. Keech.¹

This historiography is very clear. The reformation began well, but it was not complete in the first, or even the second generation. The inexorable forward movement drawn from the light of Scripture brought change to the church in stages—first a recovery of the gospel, then a revival of a proper doctrine of the church, and then a rejection of infant baptism and the retrieval of believer’s baptism.

Later on in the same book, Cary made a similar point:

In these last ages, when the Reformation first began to be set on foot in the world, the *doctrinal* part of the gospel was first notably cleared up, whilst yet there remained a very great corruption in point of *discipline*, or in respect of the primitive purity of *Gospel-worship*: As in the case of Luther and many others of the first reformers, who notwithstanding their zealous pleading for the doctrine of free justification, by the blood of Christ, in opposition to popish merits &c. yet held fast images in churches, consubstantiation, bowing to the high altar, the surplice in preaching, the cross in baptism; and many other things which the after reformers could not but see them, to be clearly defective in. So that the light of God’s people comes not up to its proper acme all at once, but by degrees. And suitably hath the Reformation advanced, and the truths and ordinances of Christ been cleared up, and recovered from encroachments and corruptions of the man of sin: One age recovering one part; and another, another; making good that word, Prov. 4.18. ‘The path of the just is as shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day’; which holds good in reference to the general dispensations of God’s providence toward his people, as well as in particular cases.²

In this case, Cary was responding to the objection that many “learned and pious men . . . throughout so many generations cleave to infants baptism” while so few hold to believer’s baptism. His response was historical: darkness was deep and light came gradually.

Benjamin Keach

A year earlier, Benjamin Keach had replied to essentially the same objection, but in much briefer terms:

Light and knowledge of divine truths have broken forth gradually. When reformation first begun, those godly men labored to restore the doctrinal part of

¹ Philip Cary, *A Solemn Call*, (London: John Harris, 1690) ‘To the Reader.’ While this citation hints in this direction, space does not permit us to consider the fact that the Baptists considered congregations of differing faith and order to be true churches. For another example, see Benjamin Keach, *A Counter-Antidote to purge out the Malignant Effects of a Late Counterfeit prepared by Mr. Gyles Shute* (London: H. Bernard, 1694), 53-54, where Keach states of the paedobaptist Independent churches “I doubt not but they are true churches, as well as we, they being godly Christians”. I have modernized spelling and orthography in citations from primary sources.

² Cary, *A Solemn Call*, 155, emphasis his.

the gospel, and yet great corruptions remained in point of discipline (which errors God hath since by degrees discovered).³

In these cases, Baptist pastors responded to objections of novelty by pointing to the historical circumstances. Their doctrine and practice was the result of the lengthy process of reformation. This was their self-identity. Their roots were in the Reformation.

Edwards Terrill's 12 Steps of Reformation

Perhaps the most interesting description of this kind is found in Edward Terrill's narrative of the founding of the Broadmead, Bristol church. Terrill was an elder in that church, and kept a copious manuscript of the church's founding and subsequent activities. At one point he delineates the history of the church in twelve steps. Here are some of them:

Ye Lord led them by degrees, and brought them out of popish darkness into his marvelous light of ye gospel.

First of all, ye Lord alone, by his Spirit, (*not by might nor by power*), opened their eyes, and made them cast off ye body of false doctrine of ye Church of Rome, that had so long deceived ye nations, and made them drink ye wine of her fornication, worshipping under pretence ye true God in a false manner, Wrestling ye holy Scriptures to their own Damnation, saying ye real presence of Christ was in ye Sacrament that signified his body by a Transubstantiation, and teaching man's works merit salvation, and works of Supererogation, &c.

Secondly, Ye Lord put it into ye hearts of some in authority in this nation to cast off ye body of ye worship of Rome (as well as their doctrine), namely, the nest of idolaters; even to cast out ye Monks, Friars, Abbots, Priests, Masses, Advocation of saints, with Praying for ye deceased, &c. These things were done long before; for which ruff and rough work God chose and fitted rough spirits to do it; more for their own Interest and concern, than aiming at God's glory. So through men's own private ends, ye wise Lord managed his own good pleasure; Witness K: Henry VIII

Thirdly, It pleased ye Lord, in these latter days to raise up a people, and make them come a step further in Reformation, even to come from under ye skirts of ye whore; and to cast off Popish scraps of doctrine and worship

Fifthly, Ye Lord made them to embrace and adhere to, follow, love, and cleave to lively and powerful preachers. . . .

Eighthly, They cast off the cross and other ceremonies at their sprinkling children; which was a good step, though the people could not see through to reform in that particular, to cast off the thing of sprinkling itself, which was the mere invention of men three hundred years after Christ, not mentioned of in Tertullian's time—the fruit of the apostasy that the church fell into, from one thing to another, until at last they lost the substance of religion, and kept only a shadow thereof. From

³ Benjamin Keach, *Gold Refin'd; or, Baptism in its Primitive Purity* (London: Nathaniel Crouch, 1689), 155.

baptizing souls, as they entered into the church, in a river, they made a *vaunt*, and placed it in their public places, near some great door; in all such places signifying or resembling the entrance into the church. Secondly, from dipping the children in the font, they by degrees took up sprinkling them. Thirdly, from a font, in process of time, they used a bason in their place called a church. Fourthly, from a bason in their church they brought it to a bason in the house. Fifthly, From men, their parsons, to sprinkle, they allowed women to do it, in case of necessity, as they called it, to seal their wills, and seal that which they never read by the party's profession or confession, or saw by their conversation; thus leaving the examples in holy scripture, and the commands of the Lord. *In vain do they worship him, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men*, Mark vii. 7, or traditions of men; setting up their posts by the Lord's.

Eleventhly, They cast off hearing ye common prayer—that *Nurse of Formality and Chain of Security*. . . .

Twelfthly, They were holpen by ye Lord to cast off this also, and to step this further in their Reformation, That at last they would not hear those men that did read Common prayer, that thereby declare themselves to own or partake in any parte Consentingly to ye Worship of ye Beast.

Thus I have briefly recited twelve steps that doth complete a demonstration that they, this church, in their beginning, were truly reformed in a great measure, in turning from ye worship of Antichrist. And it is prayed and hoped ye Lord will in his due time, not only turn them from Antichrist, But that he will also turn them perfectly to himself, and make them so to wait upon him until he Come, Rev. ii. 25; xxii. 20.⁴

This is fascinating. Beginning with the global events which took place more than a century before on the continent, continuing through the strange religious acts of King Henry VIII, Terrill brings the Reformation to the local level—in his own church. From his perspective, the Broadmead assembly was the direct fruit of the Reformation. This is the same historiography as above, now applied to a specific church.

In each of these cases, the Baptists defended their legitimacy by means of an explanation of God's providential workings in the process of Reformation. In Cary's case, he argued at length that this was the process seen throughout Scripture. When an "ordinance" of worship was corrupted (such as happened with regularity during the period of the kings of Judah and Israel) the Lord raised up men to reform His work, but they seldom were thorough in their task. From his perspective, the previous century and a half of English history was a contemporary illustration of this same process. The church had been corrupted by the antichristian acts of Rome, including the practice of believer's baptism. It should not be a surprise that a full repriming would only come gradually. And this was the case with believer's baptism. This leads us to our second consideration.

⁴ Roger Hayden, ed. *The Records of a Church of Christ in Bristol, 1640 to 1687*, 1974, 93-96

The Recovery of a Lost Ordinance

When the Baptists began to be noticed in London and the countryside, they faced objection from two groups, paedobaptists and seekers. Though their perspectives were very different, the objection was essentially the same: “you have no succession of baptism.” For the paedobaptists, there was a reluctant admission that their baptism was proper albeit it came to them through Rome;⁵ for the Seekers, the depth of apostasy during the Roman ascension was so profound that true ordinances were lost and could not be recovered without a new Pentecost and new apostles.⁶ The Baptist reply was consistent: the validity of any ordinance (including baptism) is to be derived from the command of Christ as revealed in his word. In the same way that the Israelites restored the feast of tabernacles (Nehemiah 8:13ff.) so now Christians could restore the lost ordinance of baptism. The evidence is overwhelming.⁷

Looking back, Benjamin Keach wrote,

Now as the commission authorizes the disciples of Jesus Christ to preach to the end of the world, so it equally impowers them to baptize; and the same argument that is brought against baptizing, *viz.*, not having an extraordinary mission, holds as strong against preaching, and the practice of all ordinances whatsoever as well as that; therefore how dangerous a thing is it for any to plead for the non-continuance of baptism in the church, or to say it ceased when the extraordinary gifts ceased, sith [since] there is no other commission that injoyns Christ’s disciples to preach, &c. but that which as well injoyns them to baptize those who are discipled by the word.

Object. But since the practice of baptism in water was lost in the apostacy, how could it be restored again without a new mission?

Answ. That makes against the restoration of other Gospel-ordinances which were lost as well as baptism, in respect of the purity of them, as practiced in the primitive times: But as the children of Israel had lost for many years the ordinance of *the Feast of Tabernacles*, yet by reading in the Book of the Law there was such a thing required, they immediately revived it and did as they found it written without any new mission, or extraordinary prophet to authorize them so

⁵ See for example Praisegod Barebone, *A Discourse Tending to Prove the Baptisme in, or under the Defection of Antichrist, to be the Ordinance of Jesus Christ* (London, Benjamin Allen, 1643); James M. Renihan, “An Examination of the Possible Influence of Menno Simons’ *Foundation Book* upon the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644,” *American Baptist Quarterly*, XV, No. 3 (September, 1996), 190-207.

⁶ The first part of John Spilsbury’s *God’s Ordinance, the Saints Priviledge* (London: M. Simmons, 1646) addresses the Seeker objection at length.

⁷ Once again, space prohibits a thorough canvassing of the primary sources. There is more evidence from Baptist writings than mentioned here; there is also evidence from their opponents. One should consult the previously cited work of Barebone; another example is from the Scots Commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, Robert Baillie in his *Anabaptism, the True Fountaine of Independency, Brownisme, Antinomy, Familisme . . .* (London: M.F., 1647), 70, 163. Baillie states that the Baptists only took up ‘dipping’ ‘the other year.’

to do; even so ought we to act, God's Word being a Warrant sufficient to justify us in so doing.⁸

But Keach was not alone in making this argument. Among others Thomas Patient, John Spilsbury, John Gosnold, and Hercules Collins make this point. Here are their comments.

In 1654, Thomas Patient wrote:

Now therefore let such tender souls who have the fear of God in them, lay this to heart

First, That this Solemn Ordinance for many hundred years, hath been neither preached, nor practiced, by abundance of such which (in Charity) we cannot but judge, might have many good things found in them. **[Margin:** The Ordinance of Baptism long neglected, and an Idol set in its room.]

But here lyes that which makes the case sad and lamentable, that in the room of this precious Ordinance of God (which Christ confirmed by his blood) should be set up, that Idol of sprinkling of Carnal poor Infants, for doubtless, if there be an Idol now practiced in the world, or set up amongst men, this must needs be one. . . .⁹

Nearly half a century before Keach, Patient acknowledged that for 'many hundred years' baptism had been 'neglected' and an 'idol' erected in its place. He was himself part of the first group of Particular Baptist churches to appear in London in the 1640s. This candid admission was not an embarrassment, it was a verifiable fact. While his adversaries might make capital of this reality, Patient sought to turn it around, claiming that their practice was itself idolatrous.

Of course, this fact caused other difficulties for the Baptists. John Spilsbury, wrestling with the objection that the restoration of baptism would necessitate the action of an unbaptized administrator replied

By virtue of this union they [i.e. the local church] have with their head Christ, the body thus jointly considered, hath the power & authority of Christ within her self, to choose and make use of any one, or more of her members, as occasion offers, and authorizes him or them to administer baptism upon the whole body, and so upon themselves in the first place, as a part of the same. . . . Where a thing is wanting, there must be of necessity a beginning to reduce that thing again into being.¹⁰

Spilsbury argued that the church has a right to appoint its own administrator(s) of baptism, who are thus authorized to restore the ordinance without prior baptism. Another author, John Gosnold, pastor of the Barbican church in London from 1669-1678, writing in a work entitled *Of the Doctrine of Baptisms, or, A Discourse of the Baptism of Water and of the Spirit* says

⁸ Benjamin Keach, *Gold Refin'd.*, 23-24.

⁹ Thomas Patient, *The Doctrine of Baptisms and the Distinction of the Covenants* (London: Henry Hills, 1654), 23.

¹⁰ J[ohn] S[pilsbury], *A Treatise Concerning the Lawful Subject of Baptisme* (London: n.p., 1643), 38.

If any shall object, that at first amongst us in this Nation an unbaptiz'd person did Baptize, and so could be no lawful Administrator We conceive the answer is ready and at hand, that the first Baptizer must of necessity be unbaptiz'd, even John the Baptist himself, and yet judged a fit Administrator of so excellent a subject as our Lord himself was.¹¹

Gosnold's words imply that the first administrator of baptism was in fact unbaptized. Lest it be thought that Gosnold was referring to John Smyth, the words of another Baptist leader need to be heard. In his 1691 work *Believers Baptism From Heaven and of Divine Institution*, Hercules Collins wrote with some vehemence in response to the charges of one Mr. Wall,

Could not the Ordinance of Christ, which was lost in the Apostacy, be revived, (as the Feast of Tabernacles was, tho lost a great while) unless in such a filthy way as you falsly assert, viz. that the English Baptists received their Baptism from Mr. John Smith? It is absolutely untrue, it being well known, by some yet alive, how false this Assertion is.¹²

For Collins, association with John Smith was completely undesirable. The oral testimony of still living eye witnesses (William Kiffin was still alive and active among the London Baptists at this time) was sufficient to refute such a notion. Se-baptism was not the method that had been used. To the contrary, it was that consistently expounded in their polemical works: a church had the right to appoint its own administrator and thus revive a dormant ordinance.

Conclusion

All of these statements (and there are many more)¹³ point to an inevitable outcome. The English Baptists restored baptism from within their own contemporary circle. The constant examination of the Bible, and the resulting application of its teachings to their own circumstances, drove them to re-institute a lost practice. When we listen to their voices, we hear their replies to the paedobaptists and the Seekers: “we have the right, even the necessity of obeying our Lord Jesus

¹¹ John Gosnold, *Of the Doctrine of Baptisms, or, A Discourse of the Baptism of Water and of the Spirit* (London: Printed by J.S. for the Author, 1657), 7.

¹² Hercules Collins, *Believers Baptism From Heaven and of Divine Institution* (London: J. Hancock, 1691), 115. Curiously, the title page indicates that the latter portion of Collins' book is a reply to Thomas Wall's *Baptism Anatomiz'd*, while the text of the book states in several places that his opponent was John Wall. Thomas is the proper name. In 1692, Wall replied to Collins in *Infants Baptism from Heaven and of Divine Institution* (London: G. Croom). There is an interesting anecdote about John Smith and the English Baptists. Apparently Wall sought and was granted an interview with William Kiffin and others (Benjamin Keach was present). In that interview, Kiffin ostensibly justified his rejection of infant baptism and acceptance of the new practice of believer's baptism from Matthew 28:18-20, stating that the Apostles baptized, not as apostles, but as 'common-gifted disciples.' If Wall's report of the incident is factual, it would confirm the testimony cited above—the church has the right to appoint administrators from among its gifted men. See pages 22-24.

¹³The reader might consult the lengthy discussion, along similar lines, found in Daniel King's *A Way to Sion Sought Out* (London & Edinburgh: Christopher Higgins, 1656); In briefer compass, Christopher Blackwood, *Apostolicall Baptisme* (London: 1645), 77.

Christ as he speaks in His word.” This is the beginning of the modern Baptist movement. Their eyewitness testimony restores some beauty to the old carpet.