

Semănătorul (The Sower)

The Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research

Volume 1, Number 2.

Articles published by the Faculty of Theology in Emanuel
University of Oradea and International Contributors,
March 2021.

Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania

“Live Coals Separated, Soon Die”: The Early Baptist Vision of the Church & Associations

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ABSTRACT

From the very beginning of Baptist witness in the seventeenth century, both in England and New England, Baptists gave a lot of thought to the nature of the Church. In some ways, what is distinctive about being a Baptist is having a particular way of doing church. They were not alone in such a focus. Numerous Christians in the British Isles during the seventeenth century—usually denominated “Puritans”—were also deeply concerned to discover from the Scriptures what constituted the true form of church life and government. The Anglican and Presbyterian understandings of the church held the view that that it comprised all living within a certain geographical boundary, the “parish church.” On the other hand Baptists argued for a completely different church model. In the twenty-first century not many seem deeply concerned about these matters but how the church is ordered is basic as far as its witness or effectiveness is concerned.

KEY WORDS: Episcopacy, congregationalism, Presbyterianism, local church, Baptists.

The early Baptist vision of the local church

In the seventeenth century, in England and New England, there was a great deal of discussion regarding the nature of the Church. Some, members of the state church in England and Wales, argued for episcopacy. Others, belonging to the state church in Scotland and also found in the ranks of the Puritans in England and Wales, argued for Presbyterianism. Yet others were convinced that the New Testament supported congregationalism, or what John Owen (1616–1683), an important advocate of this perspective, once called “the old, glorious, beautiful face of Christianity.”² Today, different controversies energize Christians and this passionate concern about what is the true form of church government seems a mere relic from the past, interesting possibly from an antiquarian viewpoint but

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² *A Vindication of The Animadversions On “Fiat Lux”* (*The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold [1850–1853 ed.; repr. Edinburgh/Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965], 14:311).

of little relevance for the present day. Yet, this early modern discussion should be of importance to us, for at its heart lies a distinct desire to recover what made early Christian churches alive and vital.³

Over against the Anglican and Presbyterian understandings of the church as being comprised of all who live within a certain geographical boundary—what is called the “parish church”—Baptists argued for a completely different church model. In the words of an early Baptist statement of faith, *The First London Confession of Faith*, which was drawn up in 1644 by seven Particular Baptist congregations in London, a local church

is a company of visible saints, called & separated from the world, by the word and the Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel, being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement.⁴

In other words, the local church should consist only of those who have experienced conversion and who have borne visible witness to that experience by being baptized. This vision of the church as a body of converted individuals who have been baptized after their conversion clearly ran counter to a major aspect of the thinking of seventeenth-century Anglicans and Presbyterians. These two Christian communities conceived of church as an established state entity, where religious uniformity was maintained by the arm of the state and infant baptism required for citizenship.

Baptists, on the other hand, were convinced that the church is ultimately a fellowship of those who have personally embraced the salvation freely offered in Christ, not an army of conscripted men and women who have no choice in the matter. This conviction is underscored by the phrase “being baptized into that faith” in the passage cited above from *First London Confession of Faith* being placed after the words “profession of the faith of the Gospel.” It is those who have knowingly professed faith, and those alone, who should be baptized. Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), the most important theologian of the English Particular Baptist movement at the end of the seventeenth century, thus defined the church in his book on Baptist polity, *The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline display’d* (1697), where he wrote:

³ Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way 1640-1660* (1957 ed.; repr. Weston Rhyn, Oswestry, Shropshire: Quinta Press, 2002), 1–3.

⁴ *The First London Confession of Faith* XXXIII (William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* [Rev. ed.; Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969], 165). The spelling and capitalization in citations from this work have been modernized.

A Church of Christ, according to the Gospel-institution, is a congregation of godly Christians, who as a stated assembly (being first baptized upon the profession of faith) do by mutual agreement and consent give themselves up to the Lord, and one to another, according to the will of God...⁵

Especially noteworthy in this passage and the text from the *First London Confession* is the “mutualism” in the description of the church.⁶ In the words of the *First London Confession*, believers are “joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement.” Keach puts the very same idea this way: “Christians... do by mutual agreement and consent give themselves up to the Lord, and one to another.” These texts are both emphasizing that a church is not simply a group of individuals who have put their faith in Christ. It is a *community* of belief—men and women who have owned Christ, been baptized as believers, and in so doing committed themselves to one another.⁷

Then, congregational church government is clearly affirmed in five articles of the *First London Confession*: Articles XXXVI, XLII to XLV. Thus, on the basis of Matthew 18:17 and 1 Corinthians 5:4, it is affirmed that “Christ has ... given power to his whole Church to receive in and cast out, by way of excommunication, any member; and this power is given to every particular congregation, and not one particular person, either member or officer, but the whole.”⁸ The members of the local church acting together have the authority and power to receive new members into their midst as well as to disfellowship those who refuse to walk under Christ’s lordship as revealed in Holy Scripture.

Furthermore, “every Church has power given them from Christ, to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of pastors, teachers, elders, deacons.”⁹ It was also stressed that “none other have power to impose” leaders on the congregation from the outside.¹⁰ While later editions will limit the names of the leaders of the congregation to “elders” and “deacons,” there will be no retreat

⁵ Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline display’d* (London, 1697), 5–6. The spelling and capitalization have been modernized in this and subsequent citations from this text. For Keach, see Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (2nd rev. ed.; Kitchener, ON: Joshua Press, 2015).

⁶ For this term, see Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, “‘A Company of Professed Believers Ecclesiastically Confederate’: the message of the Cambridge Platform” (http://www.firstparishyarmouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ucc.org-_Company_of_Professed_Believers_Ecclesiastically_Confederate_the_message_of_the_Cambridge_Platform.pdf; accessed June 7, 2019). This paper was given as part of a conference marking the 350th anniversary of the *Cambridge Platform* (1649).

⁷ Hambrick-Stowe, “A Company of Professed Believers.”

⁸ *First London Confession of Faith* XLII (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 168).

⁹ *First London Confession of Faith* XXXVI (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 166).

¹⁰ *First London Confession of Faith* XXXVI (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 166).

from the fact that “the ministry was ... firmly subordinated to the immediate authority of the covenanted community.”¹¹ B.R. White has pointed out that this jealous concern for congregational autonomy was motivated by a deep desire to be free to obey Christ and not to be bound by the dictates of men and human traditions.¹² Undergirding this concern for congregational autonomy also appears to have been a profound concern for God’s freedom to be Lord of his church. Human religious traditions that were not sanctioned by God’s Word were seen as an affront to God’s sovereign freedom and a violation of his prerogatives.¹³

An early Baptist view of the association

Balancing this strong affirmation of congregational autonomy, which could easily lead to isolationism, was Article XLVII, in which it was declared:

Although the particular congregations be distinct and several bodies, every one a compact and knit city in itself; yet are they all to walk by one and the same rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help of one another in all needful affairs of the Church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their only head.¹⁴

First of all, the autonomy of each local congregation is recognized as a biblical given: every congregation is “a compact and knit city in itself.” But, second, the authors of this confession are also cognizant that each congregation ultimately belongs to only one body—here, in essence, is the idea of the universal church—and that each congregation shares the same head, the Lord Christ. Reinforcing the idea of the unity of these seven congregations is the fact that they all “walk by one and the same rule,” that is, Scripture.¹⁵ It was incumbent upon local congregations, therefore, to help one another.

The biblical basis of the thinking of those who drew up this *Confession* can be discerned in the proof texts that were placed alongside this article in both its 1644 and 1646 editions. The biblical texts cited in the first edition of 1644 are as follows:

¹¹ B.R. White, “The Doctrine of the Church in the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 19 (1968): 581; *idem*, “The Origins and Convictions of the First Calvinistic Baptists,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, 25, no.4 (October, 1990): 46. The first of these articles by White is particularly helpful in thinking through the ecclesiology of this *Confession*. On the fact that there should be only two church offices, those of elder and deacon, see the remarks of Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 15–16.

¹² White, “Doctrine of the Church,” 584.

¹³ Philip E. Thompson “People of the Free God: The Passion of Seventeenth-Century Baptists,” *American Baptist Quarterly*, 15 (1996): 226–231.

¹⁴ *First London Confession of Faith* XLVII (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 168–169).

¹⁵ White, “Doctrine of the Church,” 583–584.

1. 1 Corinthians 4:17, which speaks of the links between the churches in the Apostolic era.
2. 1 Corinthians 14:33, 36—these verses stress that there was common teaching as it relates to worship practice and at the same time assume that these churches were not islands to themselves—they were to be united under the Word of God (“one and the same rule”).
3. 1 Corinthians 16:1, which refers to the collection of money that Paul gathered from congregations in Greece and Asia Minor for the poor in the church at Jerusalem.
4. Matthew 28:20: reinforces the fact that churches received one and the same teaching.
5. 1 Timothy 3:15: there is a uniformity of praxis.
6. 1 Timothy 6:13–14: churches must adhere to the truth—this explains what is meant by “one and the same Rule.” Common teaching as relates to doctrine. The *Confession* envisions the association as a means of helping preserve congregational integrity and orthodoxy.
7. Revelation 22:18–19: the same point seems to be made here as with previous verses.
8. Colossians 2:6: the word “walk” is the key term—it is used in the article to refer to the churches’ agreement to walk together under the “one and the same Rule.”
9. Colossians 2:19, which highlights the unity of the churches in Christ “their only head.”
10. Colossians 4:16, in which the church at Colossae is urged to share Paul’s letter to them with the church at Laodicea and vice versa.

In the 1646 edition, some proof texts were dropped—namely, Matthew 28:20; Revelation 22:18–19; Colossians 2:6, 19; 4:16—and some added:

1. Psalm 122:3: source of the origin of the phrase “compact and knit city.”
2. Ephesians 2:12, 19, which speaks of the unity of different ethnic groups in Christ.
3. Revelation 21 describes the heavenly Jerusalem—churches are a reflection/manifestation of this.
4. Acts 15:2–3, which deals with the Jerusalem Council—churches meeting together to discuss doctrinal matters. In other words, the authors of this *Confession* envisioned the churches giving advice with regard to doctrinal and ethical matters.
5. Song of Songs 8:8–9, which is understood as a call to help weaker churches in light of the fact that this text is interpreted as an allegory of Christ’s love for the Church and vice versa.
6. 2 Corinthians 8:1, 4, which has to do with the collection of money for the church at Jerusalem. Inclusion of this text means that the framers of the

Confession envisioned churches helping one another in areas of financial need.

7. 2 Corinthians 13:14: this verse is very important, the key phrase for Article XLVII is “communion of the Holy Ghost.”

These proof texts bear witness to “the active concern of the men of 1644 with unity of doctrine, polity, and action among the churches and their recognition that the tool for building that unity was ‘the counsel and help of one another’.”¹⁶

These early Baptists were thus convinced that when they gathered together as believers the Spirit was present in power to bring glory to Christ by binding them together in submission to him as their sole Lord. What was true for individual congregations was also true for their fledgling associations. In other words, the conviction of these early Baptists about these associations was that they were not organizations as much as entities indwelt by the Spirit. These associations were manifestations of the one true Church that had Christ alone for its head.

Further insight from the Abingdon Association

The seven churches that drew up this *Confession* are the first example of a Baptist association.¹⁷ Five of them had their origins in a semi-Separatist congregation in London in the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey, where they learned the importance of associational life, a key feature of this congregation.¹⁸ By 1660, at least five other associations had been formed:

1. 1650: The South Wales Association
2. 1652: The Abingdon Association
3. By 1653: The Western & Irish Associations¹⁹
4. 1655: The Midlands Association

These associations were critical to the expansion of the Particular Baptists from 7 congregations in 1644 to 130 in 1660.²⁰

¹⁶ White, “Doctrine of the Church,” 583.

¹⁷ B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (Rev. ed.; London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 68.

¹⁸ White, “Doctrine of the Church,” 586.

¹⁹ It would be out of the Western Association that the leading Baptist seminary in the eighteenth century, the Bristol Baptist Academy, would be formed in the early decades of that century.

²⁰ See B.R. White, “The Organisation of the Particular Baptists, 1644–1660,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 17 (1966): 209–226.

Further insight regarding the purpose behind the formation of these associations comes from the inaugural statement of the Abingdon Association in 1652.²¹ In this text, the following reasons for working together are cited:

1. For advice and mutual help in times of controversy (they cited Acts 15 for support).
2. To help with financial needs (they referenced 1 Corinthians 16 as support). A good example in this regard took place in 1657 when Abraham Cheare (1626–1668) informed the churches in London about the poverty of a number of Baptist ministers in the West Country. The London churches responded by seeking to set up a fund for their help.²²
3. “There is the same relation betwixt the particular churches each towards other as there is betwixt particular members of one church.”²³ This is a key theological principle for creating Associations. Churches are bound together as believers are bound together.²⁴ These Baptists rightly discerned that in the New Testament the call to follow Jesus Christ, while intensely personal and directed at the individual heart, inescapably involves being part of a community of disciples and maintaining firm links with other like-minded churches. In other words, as David Kingdon has put it: “Inter-church fellowship is no more an option than is church membership for the individual believer in the local church.”²⁵ When Benjamin Keach thus observed near the conclusion of his *The Glory of a True Church* that “Live coals separated, soon die,”²⁶ this has application to not only individual believers, but also local churches.
4. To help keep each other pure.²⁷
5. As “proof of their love to all saints.”²⁸
6. So that “the work of God” might be “the more easily and prosperously carried on by a combination of prayers and endeavors.”²⁹ These

²¹ *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660. Part 3. The Abingdon Association*, ed. B.R. White (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1974), 126–127. References to this text will be cited thus: *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3 with the appropriate page.

²² White, “Organisation of the Particular Baptists,” 226.

²³ *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3:126.

²⁴ White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 69.

²⁵ David Kingdon, “Independency and Interdependency” in James M. Renihan, ed., *Denominations or Associations? Essays on Reformed Baptist Associations* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press/Carlisle: PA: The Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America, 2001), 13–14.

²⁶ Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 67.

²⁷ See White, *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 69.

²⁸ *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3:126.

²⁹ *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3:126.

associations were critical to the halcyon days of Particular Baptist growth during the 1640s and 1650s.

7. To help “quicken [each other] ... when lukewarm, to help when in want, assist in counsel in doubtful matters and prevent prejudices in each against other.”³⁰
8. Finally, as an expression of the unity of the Body of Christ—John 17: “to convince the world, for by this shall men know by one mark that we are the true churches of Christ.”³¹ Would that believers today had a similar passion!

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³⁰ *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3:127. See, for example, the Letter of the Abingdon Association to its member churches, April 11, 1656 (*Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3:148–150).

³¹ *Association Records of the Particular Baptists*, 3:127.

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