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*Christopher Blackwood:
Exemplar of the Seventeenth-Century
Particular Baptists*

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The Need for a Historiographical Exemplar

If historiography is the discipline, not merely of chronicling but of evaluating various approaches to history,¹ Baptist historiography must be concerned with the methodological evaluation of competing models of Baptist history. Since the Enlightenment, historians have been granted some arbitrage over historical and scientific truth. Afterwards, historiography developed as a means of arbitrating the truth claims of the historians themselves. Similarly, Baptist history is a field of study replete with truth claims regarding not only denominational history, but also denominational identity. As a result, there is a critical need for a Baptist historiography that draws upon the best of academic historiography in order to evaluate the claims of Baptist historians.

This academic exercise takes on poignancy for the churchman as the historians' claims about historical sources have begun to shape the church's self-perception. Exactly who are the Baptists? What is it that characterizes the people known as Baptists? Does Scripture alone provide the key to their identity? Or, must we also rely upon history and the historians for an interpretation of the Baptist peoples, who are in turn extremely interested in the interpretation of Scripture? And if we must draw upon history, then whose historical interpretation is correct? Although Baptists are a people of the Book, they recognize they are an embodied people dwelling in a context of congregations that inhabit a history of theological interpretation. The question of Baptist identity, then, is bound with history, and history, if it is not to be taken naively, or presented dishonestly, must be evaluated by historiogra-

¹Historiography developed as historians discovered that history was "more than a chronicle." Historiography is concerned with the scientific evaluation of histories and the methodologies they employ: "in this field the primary object of study has always been the development of a more technical form of scholarship, the rise of a more scientific history, and the progress in the critical treatment of sources." A most useful aspect of historiography is that it produces better research students, because it calls for the examination of the historian's assumptions. Herbert Butterfield, *Man on his Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 10, 15, 22-26.

phy. In other words, the arbitration of competing histories with their diverse claims for Baptist identity must have resort to the discipline of historiography.

Recognizing the urgent need for historiography, the following paper is not only an exercise in a particular history, the history of seventeenth-century Particular Baptists, it is also an exercise in historiography, the evaluation of competing histories of those Baptists. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there are two historians of the seventeenth-century English Baptists that stand heads and shoulders above the field, due to the depth and the breadth of their scholarship in this area. One of those historians, Barry White, former Principal of Regent's Park College, is now retired. White's immense and life-long efforts in historical scholarship found their final display in the concise but paradigmatic *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*.² The other historian, Stephen Wright, is younger and less known, but his *The Early English Baptists, 1603-1649*, offers a challenge that may overturn the dominant denominational paradigm.³

White, along with other denominational historians, places a sharp distinction between the development of the General Baptists, on the one hand,⁴ and the development of the Particular Baptists, on the other hand.⁵ The General Baptist congregations are traced back to the position of universal atonement adopted by the early gathered, separated church of Gainsborough, which reinstated believers-only baptism while residing in Amsterdam. The Particular Baptist congregations are traced back to the position of atonement only for the elect, adopted amongst the gathered, separated, baptizing churches of London originally affiliated with the semi-separatist congregation led successively by pastors Henry Jacob, John Lothrop, and Henry Jessey [the so-called JIJ church]. Both congregational traditions are treated in a successionist manner, as if they were two separate developments: the one tracing its history to the strict rejection of Reformed theology and ecclesiology in 1609; the other tracing its history to a milder rejection, but a rejection nonetheless, of Reformed theology and ecclesiology in 1633 or 1638.

Wright, however, has challenged the established pattern. Through careful and exhaustive research, Wright traced the historical development of both the General and Particular Baptists. He concluded that the later denominational division should not be anachronistically ascribed to the earliest

²B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, A History of the English Baptists 1 (Didcot, Oxfordshire: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996).

³Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603-1649* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2006).

⁴A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Baptist Union, 1947), ch. 2; White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, ch. 1; Roger Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage*, 2nd ed. (Didcot, Oxfordshire: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2005), ch. 2.

⁵Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, ch. 3; White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, ch. 2; Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage*, ch. 6.

English Baptists. For instance, when it came to the beginning of immersionist baptism in England, it was a General Baptist, Edward Barber, who first accepted the Christian theory of baptism by immersion only, in June 1640. It was another General Baptist, Thomas Lambe, who may have been the first publicly known practitioner of immersion, having baptized converts in the Severn near Gloucester sometime between September 1641 and February 1642. It was not until January of 1642 that the Particular Baptists began to practice believers-only baptism by immersion,⁶ although John Spilsbury reached the preparatory but insufficiently Baptist theory⁷ of believers-only baptism perhaps by 1638.

Although Wright's reconstruction of Timothy (or John) Batte's involvement—an involvement that would make the Particular Baptists dependent upon the General Baptists for their baptism, at least ideologically, if one accepts the older paradigm⁸—will be challenged, there seems little doubt that the General Baptists and Particular Baptists arrived at the immersionist position concurrently, while in communication, even communion, with one another. Moreover, Wright demonstrates that the subsequent separation between the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists was neither clean nor immediate. There was vigorous and widespread ecclesial and theological interchange between the various churches, their members, and their leaders, for several years. The division began with the conservative political movements of the signatories of the 1644 confession, continued through the debates over Calvinism, and culminated with the alignment in London of some of those who became General Baptists with the Levellers and of many of those who became Particular Baptists with the Independents and the Cromwellian establishment. For political and theological reasons, then, the General Baptists divided from the Particular Baptists. Wright believes the realignment was substantially complete by the end of the crisis over the Leveller manifesto in 1649.⁹

Which paradigm, then, is proper: the clean separation typically presented by White and most historians of the seventeenth-century English Baptists, or the mutual beginnings, vigorous interchange, and eventual separation pictured by Stephen Wright? Although we do not have time to answer fully this historiographical query in the time given, we may perceive the lineaments of an answer, with the test case of an exemplar. The exemplar we have chosen is Christopher Blackwood, an early convert to Baptist views, who later aligned with the Particular Baptists, but retained some typically General Baptist positions.

Blackwood makes a good exemplar for seventeenth-century Baptist

⁶Wright, *The Early English Baptists*, ch. 3.

⁷*The Baptist Faith and Message* 2000, art. 7.

⁸Wright, *The Early English Baptists*, 85-89. Moreover, as Stephen Wright reminded me in subsequent comments upon this essay, Batte was himself a high Calvinist, even though he belonged at the time to a church later identified with the General Baptists.

⁹*Ibid.*, 223-27.

history and historiography, because of his conversion narrative, his substantial corpus, his wide travels amongst Baptists and other non-conformists, his interactions with the JIJ church and its children, his ecumenical relations, and his political movements. Theologically, Blackwood makes a good exemplar because of his understanding of the centrality of Christ and the cross, and of the important doctrines of conscience, church, and Calvinism. Christopher Blackwood, known by the establishment as “the oracle of the Anabaptists in Ireland,” is an exemplar for the historiography, history, and theology of seventeenth-century English Baptists.¹⁰

Baptist History through a Baptist Life

Birth and Education

Christopher Blackwood was born in 1605 in Yorkshire as the youngest son of William Blackwood.¹¹ He matriculated in 1621 at Pembroke College in Cambridge, receiving the BA degree in 1625. After being ordained a priest by the bishop of London in 1628, having apparently been granted the MA degree in the interim, he served as an interim vicar at Stockbury, in the north of Kent, for three months in 1631. He became curate at the parish church in Rye, in the east of Sussex, from 1632 to 1635, enjoying a pious and appreciated ministry amongst the Puritans. Interestingly, he subscribed in 1633, thus identifying himself, at least for a time, with the conformists.¹²

America, Land of Liberty?

However, Puritan clerics were tiring of the compulsion of conscience under Laudianism, which had encouraged, legislated, and prosecuted so that the English churches might become increasingly formal or Arminian in worship. The Calvinistic Puritans despaired of the persecution of Carolingian England, and many turned their hearts and bodies toward the hope of freedom in New England. Like many other Puritans—Hanserd Knollys, Thomas Patient, Thomas Harrison, and John Lothrop, for example—Christopher Blackwood migrated to New England. Lothrop, formerly pastor of the London semi-separatist congregation, established a church in Scituate, Massachusetts, in early 1635. On the first of November in 1640, however, Lothrop sold his home and lands in and around Scituate, Massachusetts, to Timothy Hatherly, in favor of a new settlement in Barnstable. Within a month of Lothrop’s sale of the property for £80, Hatherly sold the same property to Christopher Blackwood for £60. The loss to Hatherly may have accrued in part to Blackwood’s benefit, perhaps as a bonus for the new min-

¹⁰Thomas Harrison to Secretary Thurloe, 17 October 1655, cited in T. W. W. Smart, “Original Letters, Hitherto Unpublished, of the Rev. Christopher Blackwood, An Eminent Minister of the Seventeenth Century,” *The Baptist Magazine* 59 (1867): 371. [Hereinafter, “Original Letters.”]

¹¹He described himself as “being in the last moneth of my sixty-third year” in August 1669. “Original Letters,” 582.

¹²Anne Petter to Anne Jeake, 23 January 1632, cited in “Original Letters,” 375.

ister to take up the clerical office vacated by Lothrop.¹³

Unfortunately, the exuberant expectations of the Puritan millenarians were dashed to pieces during the antinomian crisis revolving around Anne Hutchison. The desire for “the sweet experimental breathings of a Christ within,” as Thomas Tillam put it, was stifled by the Massachusetts authorities’ rigorism and intolerance in the application of church discipline.¹⁴ The American Baptist John Clarke, in his *Ill Newes from New England*, described the situation thus: “That while old *England* is becoming new, *New-England* is become Old.”¹⁵ In other words, those who flocked to New England in search of toleration for their piety and nonconformity were met with the same persecution they hoped to leave behind in England. It has been noted that, in part as a result of the oppression, many New Englanders, often the educated clergy, returned to England, especially in the early 1640s, when London shed itself of royal tyranny.¹⁶ These intellectuals returned to the homeland in order to take prominent places in the universities, the churches, and the Parliamentary bureaucracy, especially the Army.¹⁷ Blackwood was in their number, having sold his Scituate property within one year of purchasing it.¹⁸

Conversion

The next time we hear of Blackwood, it is 1644 and he is residing in Staplehurst, Kent, where he was known as “one of the clergy,”¹⁹ affiliated in some way with the nearby parish of Cranbrook.²⁰ In that year, Francis Cornwell, a General Baptist leader and army chaplain, argued that infant baptism was “an Antichristian Innovation, a humane Tradition, and that it had neither precept, nor example, nor yet true deduction from the Word,”²¹ during a clerical gathering at the parish church in nearby Cranbrook. As a result of

¹³*Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England*, ed. David Pulsifier (Boston: William White, 1861), 1: 66-68.

¹⁴Cited in Andrew Delbanco, “Looking Homeward, Going Home: The Lure of England for the Founders of New England,” *The New England Quarterly* 59 (1986): 380.

¹⁵John Clarke, *Ill Newes from New England: Or a Narrative of New-Englands Persecution* (London, 1652), title-page.

¹⁶Robert Zaller, “The Figure of the Tyrant in English Revolutionary Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54 (1993): 585-610.

¹⁷William L. Sachse, “The Migration of New Englanders to England, 1640-1660,” *The American Historical Review* 53 (1948): 251-78.

¹⁸*Records of the Colony of New Plymouth*, 1: 81-82. Some biographers have assumed he sold the property in 1642, but that was when the deed was recorded. He signed the deed on 1 October 1641, having recuperated his £60.

¹⁹The account of the Original of the Church of Spilshill in Staplehurst, as collected by Daniel Medhurst, one of the Deacons of that Church,” partially transcribed by J.H. Wood, “Baptist Churches which Have Become Unitarian,” *The Baptist Magazine* 53 (1861): 768. The 1861 issue of this journal has a number of citations and vigorous discussion regarding the Medhurst account. Cf. 575-76, 714-15, 767-68.

²⁰Smart, “Original Letters,” 370.

²¹Christopher Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist, In his two last and strongest Garrisons; Of Compulsion of Conscience, and Infants Baptisme* ([n.p.], 1644), 2.

that event, both Richard Kingsnorth and Christopher Blackwood were won to Baptist views, and were subsequently baptized by the General Baptist Messenger, William Jeffrey. Kingsnorth and Blackwood became co-ministers of the fledgling congregation at Staplehurst, a church still in existence as an orthodox General Baptist church in the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, Blackwood was converted as a result of the preaching of a General Baptist chaplain, baptized by a General Baptist messenger, and became minister in a church affiliated with the General Baptists.²²

We possess two contemporary accounts of Blackwood's conversion in 1644 and his early ministry amongst the Baptists: Blackwood's relation in the preface of his first book, published in the same year as his conversion, and the minute-book of the Staplehurst Baptist congregation. Apparently, Cornwell's sermon was followed by a vigorous defense of believers' baptism by immersion as delivered by William Jeffrey. Blackwood agreed with the other clergy that each of them would examine the issue in their studies for a fortnight. Two weeks later, Blackwood turned the tables on his fellow clerics by presenting a treatise in which he now argued for believers' baptism by immersion and against infant baptism. One of the other clergy borrowed Blackwood's treatise for review and prayer, but after five weeks of inactivity, Blackwood retrieved the manuscript and published it under the title, *The Storming of Antichrist*.²³

On the basics of this narrative, the Blackwood and Staplehurst accounts largely agree; however, the Staplehurst account proceeds to the next event, while Blackwood falls silent. Although Blackwood and Kingsnorth ministered to the new congregation together, eventually they parted ways. The euphoria of their rediscovery of the proper interpretation of the commission of Christ was replaced by controversy over the extent of the atonement. Richard Kingsnorth defended "the doctrine of universal redemption in opposition to the doctrine of particular personal election," and the congregation sided with him, passing over Blackwood in order to ordain Kingsnorth as their elder.²⁴ Blackwood, who always seems to have held strict-Calvinist views, thus found himself a minority in the new Baptist congregation.

Proponent of Baptist and Free Church Principles

Rather than refuting universal atonement, Blackwood turned his energies outward to a defense of his new Baptist faith. *The Storming of Antichrist* prompted a number of opposing treatises by Anglicans and Presbyterians that wanted to defend both paedobaptism and religious intolerance. Among his literary interlocutors were Stephen Marshall, Thomas Blake, Thomas Cobbett, and Thomas Edwards. The interchange with Thomas Blake was the most extensive, for in *The Storming of Antichrist*, Blackwood had criticized Blake's 1644 *The Birth-Priviledge*. Blake responded in 1645 with *Infants*

²²Medhurst, "The account," 575-76.

²³Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist*, 2-3.

²⁴Medhurst, "The account," 768.

Baptisme, Freed from Antichristianisme, and Blackwood closed the debate with Blake in *Apostolicall Baptisme* in 1646. A summary of *The Storming of Antichrist* may be helpful here, especially since he began by defining his theological method.

First, paralleling the fundamental theological claims made by other Baptists and free churchmen throughout history, Blackwood argued that he must follow Christ's command regarding baptism. Being a thorough disciple of Jesus Christ was not going to be easy, because he fully recognized "that the Crosse of Christ was like to attend the confession of this tenent."²⁵ Second, paralleling the developmental theological claims made by other Baptists and free churchmen throughout history, Blackwood argued that he had received further light regarding the Lord's will. He was convinced of the correctness of his new faith, "being thereunto led by a cleere light."²⁶ He then debunked the three Vincentian arguments raised against believers' baptism, including the appeals to antiquity, consent, and universality.²⁷ So far, he focused upon issues of theological method.

However, he quickly turned to the two major crises facing his day and age: the errors of infant baptism and compulsion of conscience, both of which, he believed, had been established by the Antichrist. With regard to the compulsion of conscience, he presented thirty reasons why Christians should never be compelled, nor submit to compulsion. He then answered twenty-four objections to liberty of conscience. With regard to the second crisis, he believed that paedobaptism and religious intolerance were intimately bound with one another. He presented twelve arguments against infant baptism and answered twenty-six objections to believers-only baptism by immersion.

Defensor Libertatis

When exactly Blackwood departed from the Staplehurst congregation is not indicated. However, we do know that like the General Baptists, he advocated the six principles of Hebrews 6 as fundamental for Christianity. He also supported the practice of laying hands on new baptizands, a practice advanced by Cornwell and Jeffrey. The practice was just beginning in late 1644 and 1645, and continued to be a major issue amongst the General Baptists in the 1650s. Calvinistic Baptist leaders such as William Kiffin and Thomas Collier were firmly opposed to the practice,²⁸ but the stricter Calvinist Blackwood defended it at length as late as 1653, and never denied it later.²⁹ In other words, it is likely that Blackwood was still in communion with

²⁵Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist*, 3.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷For more on the theological method of the free churches and a further evaluation of the arguments of Vincent of Lérins, see my *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007).

²⁸Wright, *The Early English Baptists*, 138-40; White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 39.

²⁹Christopher Blackwood, *A Soul-searching Catechism, Wherein is opened and explained,*

the Staplehurst General Baptist congregation in 1645, when the practice of laying on of hands first became a matter of attention, and probably stayed in communion with the church until he departed Kent.

From 1646 to 1652, Blackwood's letters indicate that he resided in the nearby village of Marden, Kent. In March of 1646, he wrote a courageous letter to the mayor and jurors of Rye, where he had held the curacy before his American sojourn. Apparently, a poor but zealous Baptist preacher by the name of Nicolas Woodman, who had been baptized by William Kiffin in the icy winter of 1644, was arrested for praying in a gathering at a private home. Blackwood challenged the Rye magistrates on both legal and scriptural grounds for the arrest. How dare they "imprison any of ye saints of God for conscience?" Magistrates should be careful not to offend one of "these little ones that believe" in Jesus, for they will be vindicated by God. Woodman must worship God according to the spiritual light he has or he will violate his conscience, which is a grievous sin. And the magistrates must be careful not to commit the spiritual error of persecution. If there is a heresy, they should suppress it only by admonition. This was a brave challenge, for Blackwood was confronting the Presbyterians, who, ascendant in Parliament in 1646, sought to suppress lay preaching.³⁰ The year 1646 thus provides the first evidence that Blackwood was in contact with those who would later become known as the Particular Baptists.

For Blackwood, liberty of conscience, proper worship, and taking the cross after Christ are intimately related to one another. In the 1648 *A Treatise concerning Deniall of Christ*, he struck a Lutheran note, even an Anabaptist one: "he that hath not studied the Crosse of Christ, how notionall soever in his mind, and how glorious soever in his profession, is yet a stranger from the Lord, and hath not aright learned the mysteries of godlinesse."³¹ A person will either deny Christ or confess Christ. The one who confesses Christ is a true Christian, but must be ready to carry the cross. Confession includes confessing not only Christ, but the truth he taught. This truth is available in Scripture, which is described as "the Map of Divine Light."³² Quoting a tragically flawed Protestant martyr by the name of Francis Spira, Blackwood argued that this truth includes proper worship: "for as often as a Christian doth dissemble a known truth, so often as he approves of false worship by presenting himself at it, so oft he denies Christ."³³

In other words, one who violates the commands of Christ by following improper worship forsakes the cross, surrenders his liberty of conscience, and

Not onely the Six Fundamental Points set down Heb. 6.1. But also many other Questions of highest concernment in Christian Religion (London, 1653), 55-59.

³⁰Christopher Blackwood to the Mayor and Jurates of Rye, 11 March 1646, in "Original Letters," 435-38; Wright, *The Early English Baptists*, 161-62, 247.

³¹Christopher Blackwood, *A Treatise Concerning Deniall of Christ* (London, 1648), "To the Reader," A2.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., 11. Cf. Nathaniel Bacon, *A relation of the feareful estate of Francis Spira, in the year 1548* (London, 1638).

denies his Lord. He provides other tragic examples of such dissembling in the false confessions of Berengar and Thomas Cranmer regarding the Lord's Supper. Blackwood later described baptism as a fundamental (not secondary or tertiary) point of Christian worship, as defended in his exposition of the six principles of Hebrews 6.³⁴ In his treatise on denial, Blackwood answered the question as to whether one denies Christ if one affirms anything contrary to the fundamentals of the faith: "I wil in this difficult question leave others to their light; onely I say, to me, in my conscience, it would be a denial of Christ, which I am drawn so to think, because every child of wisdom is bound to justify wisdom, and to defend the rest of the Hearers from seducement in things that are fundamentally destructive."³⁵ If one will not defend the liberty of the truth, including the truth of proper worship, one denies Christ, and is thus open to being denied by Christ before the Father.

"The Oracle of the Anabaptists in Ireland"

Blackwood's willingness to enter the political lists alongside the Calvinistic Baptists centered in London was providential. At the end of a 1651 letter filled with religious, financial, and legal advice to a wealthy young relative, he noted that providence had offered him a "present opportunity." Soon after, he revealed that he had joined the Parliamentary Army under the leadership of Colonel Duckenfield, the governor of Chester.³⁶ His last letter from Marden was in August 1652,³⁷ and before June 1653, he resided in Ireland, his name appearing on an associational letter at that time.³⁸

The Rump Parliament in 1650 decreed the evangelization of Roman Catholic Ireland, and in 1654, preachers were promised £50 per annum for settling on the western isle.³⁹ Blackwood himself received £150 from the civil list in 1653-1654, a not insubstantial sum of government funds dedicated to the conversion of the Irish.⁴⁰ Although he was willing to receive civil pay for his ministry, paradoxically Blackwood remained a staunch defender of religious liberty and an unrelenting critic of the errors in other Protestant communions. When approached by Henry Cromwell, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and the Lord Protector's son, regarding the possibility of ecumenical services, Blackwood gave an unsatisfactory answer in Henry's eyes. Blackwood told the Lord Lieutenant that the Baptists would continue to hold

³⁴Blackwood, *A Soul-searching Catechism*, 42-54.

³⁵Blackwood, *A Treatise Concerning Deniall of Christ*, 15.

³⁶Christopher Blackwood to Frances Hartridge, 30 May 1651 and 11 June 1651, in "Original Letters," 439-40, 519-20.

³⁷Christopher Blackwood to Frances Jeake, 9 August 1652, in "Original Letters," 521.

³⁸"For the Churches of Christ in London," in *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660*, Part 2. The West Country and Ireland, ed. B. R. White (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1973), 112-21.

³⁹Douglas Brown, "Christopher Blackwood: Portrait of a Seventeenth Century Baptist," *The Baptist Quarterly* 32 (1987): 31.

⁴⁰Richard L. Greaves, "Blackwood, Christopher," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004-2007) [hereinafter *ODNB*. Note that all *ODNB* articles cited were obtained through an online service in August 2007].

their own separate worship and that, although “most of them could sometimes join us,” they would not cease from criticizing the Paedobaptists for “not observing the order of the Apostles by baptism.”⁴¹ Afterward, Henry Cromwell complained about “the inconsiderable persons of the anabaptiste judgment,” and sought to undermine Lord Fleetwood on account of his being “too deeply engaged in a partial affection to the persons of the Anabaptists.”⁴² Blackwood only reinforced Henry’s anger by dedicating his massive commentary on Matthew to Lord Fleetwood, and a collection of treatises to Lady Fleetwood, who was also the Lord Protector’s daughter.⁴³ It is perhaps a serendipitous providence that in spite of Henry’s repeated complaints about the doubtful loyalty of the Irish Anabaptists, his own son saw fit to marry into the family of William Kiffin, the godfather of the London Anabaptists.⁴⁴

Blackwood manifested a tough-minded yet engaging ecumenism. He was not averse to learning from ministers and members of other Christian traditions. Indeed, his writings are filled with quotations from every major period of Christian history, and when he cites a patristic or continental source, he provides the translation from the Greek or Latin. His ease with history and the original languages is apparent, and fostered a high reputation amongst his peers.⁴⁵ Moreover, he recommended that readers of his Matthew commentary look to a number of Puritan and Reformed writers as a “guide” for the proper understanding of justification, including Peter Martyr Vermigli, Zacharias Ursinus, and William Ames.⁴⁶ Blackwood also recommended the writings of two conformists in the Church of England for the personal edification of a close associate.⁴⁷

Blackwood also refused to engage in the name-calling that higher churchmen like Thomas Blake, Daniel Featley, and Thomas Edwards favored.⁴⁸ Displaying an attitude unusually open-minded for 1646, he argued the three dissenting denominations could learn from one another. He wished that Christians would “condiscend to another.”

⁴¹Harrison to Thurloe, cited in “Original Letters,” 371.

⁴²Peter Gaunt, “Cromwell, Henry,” *ODNB*.

⁴³Christopher Blackwood, *Expositions and Sermons upon The Ten first Chapters of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, according to Matthew* (London, 1659), “The Epistle Dedicatory,” A3; idem, *Some Pious Treatises* (London, 1654), “To the Right Honorable Lady,” unpaginated.

⁴⁴Alfred W. Light, *Bunhill Fields: Written in Honour and to the Memory of the Many Saints of God whose Bodies Rest in this Old London Cemetery*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (1915; reprint, Stoke-on-Trent: Tentmaker Publications, 2003), 1:94–103.

⁴⁵Samuel Fisher, *Baby Baptism Meer Babism* (London, 1653), cited in “Original Letters,” 372.

⁴⁶Blackwood, *Expositions and Sermons upon [...] Matthew*, 830.

⁴⁷Christopher Blackwood to Samuel Jeake, 1 March 1669, in “Original Letters,” 581. Smart identifies the two as Ralph Brownrig, the Bishop of Exeter, and William Fenner, Rector of Rochford, Essex. *Ibid.*, 582.

⁴⁸He explicitly forgave Blake before responding to the latter’s offensive retort. Blackwood, *Apostolicall Baptism*, 1.

Let the *Presbyter*, and nicknamed *Independent*, or *Congregationall*, consent to the nicknamed *Anabaptist*; in exploding infant baptism: and let the *Independent*, whether the meer *Separate* or *Antipaedobaptist*, yeeld to the *Presbyter*, in giving more power to the Elders, to prevent tumults and breaches; (but let it be onely in the respective Congregations.) Let the *Presbyter* yeeld to the *Independent*, in changing the matter of Churches from mixt multitudes, to visible Saints; that the World and the Church may be severed: Without every of which, I am doubtfull of the Churches attainment to Scripture perfection in Reformation.⁴⁹

And yet, in spite of his friendly openness to learn, Blackwood never would compromise the light he gained with the truth of believers' baptism by immersion. This explains in part why Henry Cromwell reacted so harshly to him. Echoing the first English Baptist, Thomas Helwys, Blackwood was adamant that Paedobaptism was a "deceivableness of unrighteousness the mysterie of iniquitie hath a long time wrought."⁵⁰ Indeed, he repeated without criticism the harsh claims made by Cornwell above, and then added many of his own. The practice of baptizing babies is "point-blank against the Commission of Christ, Matth. 28."⁵¹ It brings to the churches a litany of doctrinal and moral "mischiefs":

1. It fills the Church with rotten members.
2. It confounds the world and the church together.
3. It causes reproach to christianity.
4. Wicked persons rest in the baptisme they had in their infancy without seeking after knowledge or grace.
5. It's a Nest-egge and groundwork for traditions.
6. It fills the conscience with scruples.
7. Infants Baptisme destroyes two of the principall marks of a particular church.
8. It makes the Preachers assertions of Baptisme and the peoples practicalls to jar with one another.
9. Infants Baptisme produces many absurdities.
10. Infants Baptisme is a foundation for the Arminians to maintain falling from grace.
11. Many by infants Baptisme are received into communion of Baptisme, who are excluded from the communion in the Lords Supper, whereas the communion in both is one and the same.⁵²

⁴⁹Blackwood, *Apostolicall Baptism*, "To the Godly Reader," A2^v.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., 2.

⁵²Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist*, part 2, 15-19.

While residing in Ireland, Blackwood also exhibited leadership in the establishment of new churches, in fostering associationalism amongst British Baptists, and in publishing edifying works. One of his first activities in Ireland was to gather a Baptist church at Wexford, on the coast directly south of Dublin, as the 1653 associational letter indicates.⁵³ He then took a leading role in the church at Kilkenny, inland and southwest of Dublin, where he penned the first few chapters of his commentary on Matthew. Finally, he was called as the “*Overseer* of a Church of Christ in *Dublin*,” whence he completed his commentary on the first ten chapters of the Gospel of Matthew.⁵⁴ His ministry at Kilkenny began by June 1653 and his ministry in Dublin began by June 1656.

A second associational letter, this one sent by the Dublin church to the Welsh Baptists, has Blackwood listed second, after Thomas Patient.⁵⁵ Patient, as you will remember, was a signatory with Kiffin to the 1644 confession, served in Henry Ireton’s command, and played a role in the Particular Baptist rejection of both the Levellers and the Fifth Monarchists.⁵⁶ A third associational letter, sent in 1657, announced the Irish Calvinistic Baptists’ support for the Lord Protector during a political crisis.⁵⁷

Among the books published by Blackwood in his first Irish period were *A Soul-searching Catechism* (1653), *A Treatise Concerning Repentance* (1653), *Four Treatises* (1653), *Some Pious Treatises* (1654), and the commentary upon Matthew (1659). These writings are typically sermonistic in style and characterized by an invitation to piety and faithfulness toward Christ.

Exile for Liberty of Conscience

The Baptists gained tremendous ground during the heady days of freedom that came with the fall of William Laud, the persecuting Archbishop of

⁵³“For the Churches of Christ in London,” 118, 120.

⁵⁴Blackwood, *Expositions and Sermons upon [...] Matthew*, “To the Reader,” unpaginated.

⁵⁵Patient, Blackwood, et al, 12 June 1656, transcribed in Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists: Including an Investigation of the History of Baptism in England from the Earliest Period to which it Can be Traced to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1811), 253-55. Greaves places Blackwood in Dublin by 17 October 1655. Greaves, “Blackwood, Christopher,” ODNB.

⁵⁶Patient signed the 1644 confession as a leader of Kiffin’s church. *The Confession of Faith, Of those Churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists* (London, 1644), in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. William L. Lumpkin (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 156. In the late 1640s, Patient led with Kiffin in the Particular Baptist refutation of the Levellers, through publishing a Baptist declaration. Wright, *The Early English Baptists*, 174, 217. In 1661, Patient may have signed the declaration that separated the Particular Baptists from the Fifth Monarchists, under the name of “Thomas Penson.” There is no “Penson” mentioned as a Baptist, prominent or not, in any other source of which I am aware. *The Humble Apology Of some commonly called Anabaptists, In behalf of themselves and others of the same Judgement* (London, 1661), 14. Patient rejoined Kiffin’s church as the great man’s co-pastor and died in 1666. Richard L. Greaves, “Patient, Thomas,” ODNB.

⁵⁷B. R. White, “Blackwood, Christopher (1606-1670),” in *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Richard L. Greaves and Robert Zaller, 3 vols. (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), 70.

Canterbury, who was impeached in 1640 and executed in 1645. James I famously quipped, “No Bishop, No King.” And when his son Charles I lost his favorite archbishop, it became the precursor to the loss of his realm, indeed of his head. As is well known, Baptists were identified with the Regicides, for during the Interregnum, the Baptists came into their strength. But with the Restoration of the Monarchy in May 1660, they entered a dark period. The General Baptists sought to defend themselves by issuing a confession of faith in March of that year.

The Particular Baptists, intimately intertwined with the Cromwellian establishment, at first wanted to meld quietly into the framework of the new situation. Unfortunately, the prevailing assumption was that religious dissent was an integral factor in the fostering of political revolt, and the Baptists had proved themselves religious dissenters extraordinaire. Since the debacle of Münster, any “Anabaptist,” continental or British, was considered a revolutionary in waiting. Richard Greaves says Blackwood’s life was threatened in Ireland soon after the Restoration of the Monarchy.⁵⁸ Perhaps seeking safety, Blackwood arrived in the midst of the London Baptists.

But the Fifth Monarchists made sure that Blackwood transitioned from the proverbial frying pan into the fire. The Fifth Monarchy insurrection led by Thomas Venner in early January 1661 was followed by the execution of John James, a Seventh Day Baptist, who held Fifth Monarchy views. Even before the execution of James, however, the Baptists were being accused of co-conspiracy with the apocalyptic Fifth Monarchists.⁵⁹

In rapid response mode, William Kiffin led a group of prominent Baptists, both General and Particular, to issue a denial that the Baptists were revolutionaries. Among the signatories were John (or Timothy) Batty, the General Baptist who was instrumental in the Particular Baptist adoption of immersion in 1642; Thomas Lambe, the popular pastor of the Bell Alley church of General Baptists; John Spilsbury, an early advocate of believers’ baptism among Particular Baptists; and, Christopher Blackwood. The document summarized the history of both peaceful and belligerent Anabaptists, and then demonstrated in detail how the English “Anabaptists” over the years issued statements that were socially conservative and submissive, “*not only for wrath, but for conscience sake*,” to the magistrate. They also denied, somewhat disingenuously, that Baptists were involved in the Fifth Monarchist movement: “the persons not being of our belief or practice about Baptism, but, to the best of our information, they were all (except one) assertors of Infant-Baptism, and never had communion with us in our assemblies.”⁶⁰

Providing themselves with tools against any more potential revolutionaries, the ascendant Episcopalians pushed through Parliament a series of Acts that trapped all dissenters in a legal vice. The Clarendon Code—with its Corporation Act (1661), Act of Uniformity (1662), first Conventicle Act

⁵⁸Greaves, “Blackwood, Christopher,” *ODNB*.

⁵⁹White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 98-101.

⁶⁰*The Humble Apology*, 8, 14, 17. Italics in original.

(1664), and Five Mile Act (1665)—were a nightmare for many Baptists, both Particular and General, as well as Congregationalists and Presbyterians, not to mention the Quakers. The Church of England demonstrated that it yet possessed some competency for persecution further with the second Conventicle Act (1670) and the Test Act (1673).⁶¹ Moreover, the dissenters found themselves with a dilemma. If they supported the Declaration of Indulgence issued by Charles II in 1672, they might find themselves allied with the Roman Catholics. But no true Protestant could conceive of such, especially Blackwood, who considered Baptists the proponents of a “thorow Reformation.”⁶²

Rather than surrender the liberty of conscience he had enjoyed in the Interregnum, Blackwood decided to follow the trail blazed by earlier dissenters. The Netherlands had developed into a beacon of toleration during the sixteenth century, due to the brave claims of such intellectuals as Dirck Coornhert and to the inability of the strictly Reformed party to gain unrivalled sovereignty over state and church.⁶³ The Separatists, following Robert Browne in the late sixteenth century, and Francis Johnson and John Robinson at the turn of the century, established a presence in the merchant community in the Netherlands. Some Separatists, following John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, actually became Baptists after having fled to Amsterdam. Early seventeenth-century English Baptists, indeed, still looked to the Dutch Anabaptists for advice regarding ecclesiological issues. Perhaps knowing of these earlier movements and interchanges, Blackwood planned to go to Holland in order to preserve his prized liberty of conscience. He wrote Samuel Jeake in June 1661, “I am now on my journey for Holland, whereunto I have appointed the better part of my goods alreadye.”⁶⁴

In spite of the intentions expressed in this letter, Blackwood did not leave London for some six months. In September, he explained that he had not departed yet, “by reason of p[re]sent liberty of conscience,” which, however, he did not expect to last beyond the winter. Indeed, Blackwood was well aware of the moves being made against liberty of conscience in the English Parliament and in the Irish council.⁶⁵ With the adoption of the Corporation Act in December 1661, Blackwood knew that liberty of conscience in England, especially for such a prominent Baptist, was gone. In January 1662, from his new residence Blackwood described Holland in glowing terms, in spite of the drop in trade caused by the desolations of the Thirty Years War, as a place where “consciences [are] free without force or mulct.” He coun-

⁶¹Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, 95-96; White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 100-11.

⁶²Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist*, titlepage.

⁶³Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “The Development of Religious Liberty: A Survey of its Progress and Challenges in Christian History,” *The Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry*, forthcoming.

⁶⁴“Original Letters,” 522.

⁶⁵Blackwood to Jeake, 14 June 1661, and Blackwood to Jeake, 26 June 1661, “Original Letters,” 521-22.

seled his brother-in-law to be careful not to sin against his own conscience by conforming to the worship of the Church of England: “but this I counsel you, do any thing rather than sin.”⁶⁶

Embracing the Cross in Ireland

Blackwood kept his contacts with the London Baptist community open. He had moved his assets to Holland through bills of exchange arranged by that wealthy merchant, William Kiffin.⁶⁷ In a sudden change of direction, however, he reappeared in London later in 1662, explaining that he was on his way back to Ireland. He did not leave Holland “out of any dislike to the country.” Rather, he was returning to Ireland because “I had some tye of conscience as I judged, obliging of me.” Blackwood does not clarify exactly what this bond of conscience was, but it was strong enough to overcome his concern about persecution. “I can look out for nothing but prison or other troubles, but God’s will be done!” Indeed, he recounted the arrest of two other Baptists as he wrote of his resolve.⁶⁸ In light of the loyalty to the local church that characterized the early Baptists, the bond that drew him back to Ireland may have been his church, for he specified Dublin.

Then again, the point of conscience may have regarded his children, for only his wife is mentioned as being in Holland with him. Moreover, the remainder of his life was dedicated to the education and provision of his children. In 1664, he apprenticed his son, Christopher, to Colonel Richard Lawrence, now a prominent merchant in Dublin;⁶⁹ noted that his son, Timothy, had set up shop in Dublin “in a privileged place;” and saw his son, Phineas, off to Boston.⁷⁰ (In 1669, Phineas moved to Virginia.⁷¹) And in his will, which was probated in September 1670, he provided money and goods for his wife, Mary, all three of his sons, and his granddaughter, Mary. His estate was worth £416 at his death, a substantial amount at the time. Although the persecution of the dissenters waxed and waned until the Toleration Act was passed in 1689, with the arrival of William of Orange as the new King of England, Blackwood’s personal life reached a level of prosperity and happiness he never expected during such dark years of persecution.

Blackwood interpreted life through the providences of God, which meant that God’s people might experience seasons of mercy and seasons of the cross. He lamented that his British “Sion is in travell,” but the Irish context was surprisingly stable and free. “All things hear are very still, and *God’s people have much liberty*, blessed be God!” But for his oppressed brothers and sisters in England, he cried out, “How long, Lord?” For some obscure eschatological reason, he believed that Zion would not be delivered for at

⁶⁶Blackwood to Jeake, 18 January 1662, “Original Letters,” 523-24.

⁶⁷Blackwood to Jeake, 4 May 1662, “Original Letters,” 524.

⁶⁸Blackwood to Jeake, 2 October 1662, “Original Letters,” 579.

⁶⁹Toby Barnard, “Lawrence, Richard,” *ODNB*.

⁷⁰Blackwood to Jeake, 28 March 1664, “Original Letters,” 580.

⁷¹Blackwood to Jeake, 1 March 1669, “Original Letters,” 581.

least another two centuries. In the meantime, the subjects of the kingdom of Christ are “exposed to the crosse.” And he counseled his loved ones, “Prepare for the crosse: if better come, count it all gaine.”⁷² Christopher Blackwood began his exemplary Baptist life with his eyes on the cross and his conscience clear, and ended it in the same way.

Theology According to a “Servant of Jesus Christ”⁷³

We have seen that the cross, as a manifestation of divine providence for the development of the Christian conscience, was central to Blackwood’s theological understanding. Perhaps it would be helpful to outline the major emphases of this leading seventeenth-century Baptist’s theology in a more systematic format. This shed some light on the theological emphases of the seventeenth-century Particular Baptists. If divine providence manifested in the cross of Christ were central to Blackwood’s theology, than it was worked out in his understandings of conscience, the church, and Calvinism.

On Conscience

The first part of the first treatise published by Blackwood was dedicated to liberty of conscience,⁷⁴ and the conscience was thereafter a prominent theme within his preaching and teaching. The conscience figured greatly in his ruminations on repentance, confession, and politics, as well as in his personal admonitions to friends and family. Blackwood is not alone in this, for conscience, especially liberty of conscience, was a frequent concern of the seventeenth-century Baptists, from Thomas Helwys forward. Blackwood, as an exemplary Baptist, was also an exemplary theologian of the conscience.

Systematically, Blackwood treated the conscience under hamartiology, anthropology, soteriology, and the Christian life. The conscience is one of the five faculties of the human soul, which are, in turn, “Understanding, Will, Conscience, Affections and Memory.”⁷⁵ The natural man possesses a conscience, but the “natural conscience” is corrupted. In the natural conscience reside “benumbedness and other defilements.”⁷⁶ The converted man also has a conscience, but unlike the natural man, he may not only think of divine truths but also apply them to his conscience and strive to keep his conscience pure.⁷⁷ The converted conscience assures the Christian of spiritual life not only by its urgency “to press the soul to its duty,” but also by making a man “do his duty towards God and Man” by reason of faith, love, and service toward God. The assurance of spiritual life also comes through conscience by letting a man know he is fully justified and by remaining busy within

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Blackwood typically identified himself on the title-pages of his publications as a “Servant of Jesus Christ” and, sometimes, “of His churches.”

⁷⁴Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist*, “The First Part,” 13–35.

⁷⁵Blackwood, *A Soul-searching Catechism*, 21.

⁷⁶Ibid., 14, 25.

⁷⁷Ibid., 21.

him.⁷⁸ In summary, assurance is provided by the fact that the conscience has changed “from benumbedness to tenderness.”⁷⁹ However, the motive for Christian obedience should not be assurance. Rather, “The command of Christ . . . is the bond of the conscience.”⁸⁰ In other words, the Lordship of Christ is the primary concern of the conscience.

Phenomenologically, the conscience is that faculty of the soul that is illumined by the Word and the Spirit of God. It is the receptacle of spiritual knowledge, because God speaks to the conscience through His Word and enlightens the conscience by His Spirit. The Christian conscience is so answerable to divine revelation that Blackwood lists it among the reasons that we believe the Scriptures are God’s Word.⁸¹ The connection thus established between God and man through the conscience allows him to place it frequently in a couplet with God: “the more warnings thou has against [sin], whether from God, Conscience or men, and yet dost commit it; the more heinous is thy sin.”⁸² He rejects the “sweet morsels” of sin, “so I can retain God and a good Conscience.”⁸³ A man should develop “an habit to leave any enjoyment, and undergo any suffering for Christ and a good conscience.”⁸⁴ “God and good Conscience call” for people to take up their crosses.⁸⁵ The reason why sin is greater when committed against conscience is because such sin is “deliberately committed against light.” Sin against conscience entails “a greater resistance of that light the Spirit kindles in us.”⁸⁶ A Christian man may commit such a sin, but “beating back the voice of Conscience” is “exceedingly seldom” in a “godly man.”⁸⁷

In other words, the Spirit by the Word brings light and truth to the human conscience. When the conscience receives such illumination, the human will may exercise faith in Christ, resulting in transformation.⁸⁸ This true faith forms a habit within the Christian toward confession of Christ, issuing forth in many brave acts of confession. The key to knowing whether one is a true Christian, or merely one of those persons who are “too good to go to hell, and yet not good enough to go to heaven,” is found in the habitual confession or habitual denial of Christ.⁸⁹ The key to understanding whether a person has properly responded to an illumined conscience occurs when he or she faces a cross in life. A “cross” is a traumatic event that presents the

⁷⁸Ibid., 23.

⁷⁹Ibid., 30.

⁸⁰Ibid., 24.

⁸¹Ibid., 79.

⁸²Ibid., 34.

⁸³Blackwood, *A Treatise Concerning Deniall of Christ*, 61.

⁸⁴Ibid., 17.

⁸⁵Ibid., 59.

⁸⁶Blackwood, *A Soul-searching Catechism*, 34-35.

⁸⁷Ibid., 36.

⁸⁸Cf. Blackwood, “The present Sweetnesse, and future Bitternesse of a delicious Sin,” in *Some Pious Treatises*, 35-46.

⁸⁹Blackwood, *A Treatise Concerning Deniall of Christ*, “To the Reader,” A2f.

opportunity either to suffer for confessing Christ or to avoid suffering by denying Christ. At the instance of a cross, the Christian will typically opt for confession, in spite of the potential suffering. Confession will lead to “the comforts of the Spirit, which taste as sweet to the conscience,” in spite of having “suffered for a good conscience.”⁹⁰

Denial of Christ will lead to the filling of “their consciences with horror.”⁹¹ Denial of Christ can occur by commission or omission, and by denying Christ or a fundamental truth about Him. Denial of Christ through denial of a fundamental Christian truth includes habitual participation in false worship, even when compelled to do so. The denial of Christ leads to “the tortures of a guilty conscience,” which are akin to “the tortures of hell hereafter.”⁹² Rather than deny Christ, one must be willing to endure grief “for the cause of God and Conscience.”⁹³ One should not worry about the loss of physical liberty, because God can give the persecuted confessor “liberty of Conscience” and “peace of Conscience.”⁹⁴ On the other hand, one may suffer “the wounding of their Conscience [through habitual] compliance to all abominations of false Doctrine and false Worship.”⁹⁵ Even after forming a habit of denying Christ, the fallen man still has conscience: “that worme of Conscience, which together with a fire that will never goe out, will gnaw upon the fearefull unto all eternity.”⁹⁶

The correlation between his high view of conscience and the confession of Christ explains why Blackwood was so opposed to any compulsion of conscience. Compulsion created a barrier between the natural conscience and further light: “It takes away possibility from coming to the light of any new truth.” Again, “for though your selfe were so full resolved, that you should never stand need nor see more light, yet how know you but your son, or daughter or father or mother, may see more light than yourself do.”⁹⁷ The persecutor cuts himself off from further illumination of God’s Word, and makes weak men “sin against their consciences.”⁹⁸ Alternatively, “clear light” brings confidence to a Christian man, but the one who allows his conscience to be compelled manifests his own condemnation. The coerced person who denies Christ does so because “his conscience steers by the compass of humane Laws which he is ready to follow what they set up, without ever looking whether it agree with the word.”⁹⁹ The battle for the conscience, which was key to the assurance of salvation, was only complicated by the state’s

⁹⁰Ibid., 45.

⁹¹Ibid., 46 [incorrectly numerated as 36].

⁹²Ibid., 53.

⁹³Ibid., 54.

⁹⁴Ibid., 57.

⁹⁵Ibid., 58.

⁹⁶Ibid., 62.

⁹⁷Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist*, “The First Part,” 16.

⁹⁸Ibid., 17.

⁹⁹Blackwood, *A Treatise Concerning the Deniall of Christ*, 19.

desire to compel worship in the “use of Ceremonies.”¹⁰⁰

The established church’s demand of conformity in worship was opposed by the Baptist cry for liberty of conscience. “Compulsion of conscience,” Blackwood passionately asserted, “overthrows Christian liberty.”¹⁰¹ The established church argued that indifferent matters should be left to the authority of the magistrate, but Blackwood said such arguments “keepe off conscience on the one side, and the crosse of Christ on the other.”¹⁰² Besides, Blackwood was convinced that differing interpretations of the Scripture could exist within the same nation. “Christian brethren, who differ in judgement in smaller matters, as the Presbyterian, Independent, and Anabaptist (though falsely so called) may each of them in point of conscience enjoy his own way, to worship God under one and the same State, in one and the same Kingdome, according to that which each of them thinketh to be truth.”¹⁰³

On the Church

Blackwood’s desires for the churches were “pure worship,” “the division of the assemblies,” “puritie in constitution of Religion,” and “Liberty of conscience.” The third desire was key to realizing the others and should be done “according to the Scripture.” Scripture mentions two sorts of churches: The first sort is “Catholick, comprehending all the elect or body of Christ, borne or unborne, which were purchased with Christs blood.” This church is universal “not in respect of ministeriall dispensation, but of mysticall union.” Thus, “the dream of a Catholick visible church” is ruled out of hand. The second sort of church in Scripture is the “Particular church or churches, which is no other then a company of Saints in profession, explicitly or implicitly consenting together, to worship God in the Word, Sacraments, and Prayer, and all other duties of Religion.” Churches are called by this name, because Christians “did meet to worship God.”¹⁰⁴

Blackwood discerned six “signes” of a church, “the three former necessary to the being; the three latter, to the well-being of a church.” The three signs comprising the *esse* of the church were: “The first is a right matter, *viz.* visible Saints.” In other words, the first mark of a church is regenerate church membership, which he credited the “Independants” for recovering. “The second Essentiall requisite to a constituted church is agreement, consent, or covenant, call it what you please.” This requisite is fulfilled by reference to Matthew 18: “We having it where two or three are gathered in Christs Name.” And the third essential mark of the particular church is “a

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 77-79.

¹⁰¹Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist*, “The First Part,” 19.

¹⁰²Blackwood, *A Treatise Concerning the Deniall of Christ*, 79.

¹⁰³Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist*, “The First Part,” 30. Blackwood himself evidenced a development in his views of religious toleration. He changed from denying liberty for those who doubt Scripture or even the existence of God to full liberty of conscience during his interchange with Thomas Blake. Cf. Thomas Edwards, *The third Part of Gangraena* (London, 1646), 98; Blackwood, *Apostolicall Baptism*, 82-83.

¹⁰⁴Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist*, “The Preface to the Reader,” 5-7, 11.

right dispensation of the word and Sacraments.”¹⁰⁵

He then outlined the remaining three marks of the church, “which though not essential primarily, yet so necessary that I cannot see how a Church can subsist without them.” Fourth, there is, “Profession.” “As faith makes us members of the Catholick, so the profession hereof concurs to make us members of the visible Church.” Fifth, there is, “Ministry.” This mark of the church was *bene esse*, because if the church’s ministry fails, the church is soon ruined. Yet, although a church needs a ministry, it is not dependent upon a particular minister for its existence. The final mark of a church is “discipline or government.” Discipline is necessary for the welfare of the church, because even godly men need to have their “unmortified reliques” curbed.¹⁰⁶ The problem with infant baptism and the correlative garrison of Antichrist, compulsion of conscience, is that they ultimately undermine these marks of the church, especially regenerate membership.

Starting from the six basic principles of Hebrews 6, Blackwood considered three ordinances fundamental for the Christian church: baptism, the Lord’s supper, and the laying on of hands. Beginning with the ordinance of baptism, Blackwood turned systematically to the problem with the Paedobaptist conflation of the covenants. The “new Covenant,” which is correlative with the New Testament of Christ’s blood, is “the better Covenant, as being established upon better Promises, of which Christ was surety.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the “old Covenant is abolished and come to an end.”¹⁰⁸ The two “signs of the new Covenant” are baptism and the Lord’s supper. The “right subjects of baptism” are “Disciples or Scholars of Christ, that make profession with their whole hearts, and of their repentance from dead works, and of their right knowledge of the object of worship, that is, the Trinity, into whose Name they are baptized.”¹⁰⁹

In his catechism, Blackwood rehearsed a few of the major arguments against Paedobaptism. The baptism of infants is based on mere human tradition, less than affectionately referred to as “gross will-worship, condemned.” The appeal to circumcision is illegitimate, because Colossians 2 refers to the “Circumcision made without hands, by the Spirit of God,” not old covenant fleshly circumcision. “We must not make additions in worship from our conceited proportions.” Among the many problems that have resulted from the misinterpretation of Scripture and the addition of the human tradition of infant baptism is that it “confounds the world and the Church together.” In other words, Paedobaptism undermines the pure church ideal.¹¹⁰

As for the power of dispensing baptism, he assigned it to “Apostles” and “Evangelists or Gospel-preachers.” He considered the office of apostles

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 8-11.

¹⁰⁷Blackwood, *A Soul-searching Catechism*, 37.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 40.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 42.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 42-44, 47.

to be a standing one for the churches, but distinguished between those called immediately of Christ, who were also the “pen-men of Scripture,” and those sent by the churches, who preached those writings.¹¹¹ Like Thomas Helwys and John Spilsbury, Blackwood denied that a succession of officers was necessary for the dispensing of baptism. “Baptizedness in the dispenser is not essential to Baptisme.” Again, like Helwys, “ordinary Disciples may make Disciples, therefore they may baptize.”¹¹²

When he came to the discussion of laying on of hands, Blackwood acknowledged “a dark revelation of this in comparison of other Fundamentals.” However, “I shall acknowledge laying on of hands on baptized persons after baptisme, to be an Apostolicall institution, or an Ordinance of Jesus Christ.” The apostolic basis for the practice rested on Hebrews 6:2, Acts 8:14-17 and 19:6, and 2 Tim. 1:6. The laying on of hands conveys an “increase of the Spirit,” but not in a mechanical fashion.¹¹³ Relatively uncontroversial, Blackwood’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper was Calvinistic. The Lord is “present spiritually to the Faith of the receiver, to increase by his Spirit the Union & Communion of the soul with Christ.”¹¹⁴

Blackwood spelled out his understanding of church discipline in *Tractatus de Clavibus Ecclesiae*, an exposition of Matthew 16:19. The keys are given to the church to indicate God’s confirmation of the church’s censure. His rendition of the binding of sinners and loosing the repentant gave a leading role to the clergy. However, final authority for the keys resides in the church itself, not in the eldership.¹¹⁵ As elsewhere, he did not assign an *ex opere operato* authority to the use of this power. The church could commit an error in judgment, and, if so, heaven would not agree. He identified a threefold process in church discipline: private admonition, public admonition, and excommunication.¹¹⁶ He said the proper ends of the practice were for the good of the excommunicated person, “to bridle men that are wicked,” to prevent the church itself from being punished, to preserve the church’s reputation in the world, to deter others from sinning, and to bring the sinner into communion with God.¹¹⁷

The censures of excommunication and absolution must rest on proper grounds. Excommunication must be reserved for sin, private or notorious, ethical or doctrinal. Absolution must be administered after the sinner has repented, the church being careful to act neither too quickly nor too slowly, but for the sinner’s benefit.¹¹⁸ In “difficult & intricate cases,” the churches should turn to a “consociation of Churches” for consultation. Finally, the churches

¹¹¹Ibid., 49-50.

¹¹²Ibid., 52-53.

¹¹³Ibid., 54-57.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 61.

¹¹⁵Christopher Blackwood, *Tractatus de Clavibus Ecclesiae*, in *Some Pious Treatises*, 85, 95.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 85-87.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 89-90.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 90-91, 101-03.

should not practice the rigor of excluding themselves from civil communion with the disciplined person.¹¹⁹

Because of his comments to Henry Cromwell and close association with Thomas Patient as a fellow elder, Blackwood was likely a proponent of closed communion in the vein of William Kiffin as opposed to the open communion position of Henry Jessey and John Bunyan. In early 1652, Patient's church sent a letter to John Rogers' congregation in Dublin repudiating their open membership, open communion principles. Rogers responded by denouncing the Particular Baptists as "uncharitable *Formalists*." However, Patient won many to the Baptist cause, including two Irish governors, Daniel Axtell and Richard Lawrence. Close communion certainly did not keep the early Particular Baptists from experiencing growth. Indeed, it may have spurred it.¹²⁰

On Calvinism

It is problematic to explain exactly what Blackwood thought of Calvinism. This problem results from the methodological difference between seventeenth-century and twenty-first century procedures in Baptist theology. Many today measure one's level of fidelity to Calvinism by appeal to the five heads of doctrine defined by the Synod of Dort. Such a method of evaluation cannot be found in the life and writings of Christopher Blackwood and, I daresay, is rare amongst other seventeenth-century Particular Baptists. Blackwood was concerned more about measuring his theology against Scripture illumined by the Spirit than about measuring his theology against a synod hostile to the baptizing free churches. Blackwood was a very competent historian for his period, but he did not ascribe theological authority to history. Rather, he utilized "Narrations and Confirmations out of Antiquity," partly to demonstrate the longstanding status of his argument, "partly to delight thee by mingling profit and pleasure together," and partly to prevent his own theology from being superficially constructed.¹²¹

With this methodological problem in mind, the first of two things to note about Blackwood in relation to Calvinism is that he is primarily a pastoral theologian. His sermons emphasize the calling of sinners to repentance and believers to faithfulness. There is an invitational quality to his writings. *A Treatise Concerning Repentance* demonstrates this superbly. The treatise was written in an effort "to open the way of salvation," not by his own efforts alone, but with "the Lord assisting."¹²² Presaging Andrew Fuller's response to the hyper-Calvinists of the eighteenth century, Blackwood refers to conversion as a "duty comprehended in the text" of Scripture.¹²³ Moreover, the

¹¹⁹Ibid., 96-97.

¹²⁰Richard L. Greaves, "Patient, Thomas," *ODNB*.

¹²¹Blackwood, *A Treatise Concerning the Deniall of Christ*, "To the Reader," A2^v.

¹²²Blackwood, *A Treatise Concerning Repentance*, "To the Right Honorable Edmond Ludlow," unpaginated.

¹²³Ibid., 1. He also warned against the idea of frantically searching for a warrant for

preachers of God's Word must encourage one another "in doing duty," zealously desiring the conversion of sinners and the edification of saints:

How would it pity us, to see many Corn-fields that are ripe, and in danger of shattering, for want of hands to imbarn the corn! So, many have good beginnings of knowledge, but wanting able Teachers to perfect the work, they are in danger to be lost. What endeavours are enough, might a Preacher be instrumental in saving one soul! what then, where there are many souls, not onely of those that pretend to Christ, but also Jews and Heathens!¹²⁴

In his discussion of the grounds of repentance, he makes some statements that indicate an attenuated *ordo salutis*, in comparison to the high Calvinism of a Herman Bavinck. "Without repentance," Blackwood says, "there is no forgiveness. Repentance and remission of sins was to be preached together."¹²⁵ Christ himself is the ground of repentance, and He meets us in the ordinances of Christ. "Come and meet God in the Ordinances of Prayer, Fasting, Baptism, Supper, and therein God will come with a full hand, and bestow that which his free grace hath engaged him to do."¹²⁶ Yet, repentance and faith are not *ex opere operato* causes. "If we place our Repentance and our deliverance from sin or wrath, as a meritorious cause together with Christ, we make an idol thereof."¹²⁷ In another place, he queried whether "faith went before forgiveness." He answered, "We are not first washed, and then believe; but in Scripture-language we first believe, and afterwards are washed: hence we are said to be justified by faith."¹²⁸ As can be seen, Blackwood was not so interested in establishing a specific *ordo salutis* as he was in preserving the priority of grace in communion with Christ.

The second thing to note about Blackwood is that, from a systematic viewpoint, he was a more consistent Calvinist than the typical Particular Baptist, if we can identify such by their associational confessions. With regard to the head of election, Blackwood affirmed not only positive election, which the Particular Baptists likewise affirmed in both the First and Second London Confessions, but also negative reprobation. Blackwood's 1653 catechism queried, "*What are the parts of Predestination?*" The response was twofold: "Election, which is Gods appointing some to Salvation through Christ. . . . Reprobation; which is Gods appointing some, both Men and Angels to destruction." He went on to deny that sin was the cause of reprobation, and that God decreed sin.¹²⁹ He elsewhere affirmed both election and

faith. *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, 2.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 8.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 10.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, 11.

¹²⁸Blackwood, *A Soul-searching Catechism*, 17.

¹²⁹Blackwood, *A Soul-searching Catechism*, 6-7.

reprobation with regard to infants.¹³⁰ The Particular Baptists edited out the statements affirming reprobation in both their 1644 and 1689 confessions, as first defined in the 1596 *A True Confession* and the 1645 *Westminster Confession*, the respective primary sources of the leading Particular Baptist confessions.¹³¹ But Blackwood was not necessarily always a consistent Calvinist, even with regard to reprobation. *The Humble Apology*, which includes the signatures of Kiffin, Spilsbury, and Blackwood, identifies Luther's doctrine of consubstantiation, and Calvin's doctrine of absolute predestination and reprobation, as among "the errors and impieties of others," which should not "be imputed to us."¹³²

His view of the other Dortian heads seems similarly nuanced. On the one hand, he speaks of a human "resistance of the light the Spirit sets up in our hearts," and he calls on people not to "put off the pulses or knockings of the Spirit," for fear they may harden their hearts.¹³³ On the other hand, "yet ours being wrought on by him, doth co-operate: and as paper can make no resistance, no more can man's will. Not as if man's will had no principle of resistance in it self naturally, but because grace takes off this resistance."¹³⁴ On the one hand, he can call the will to respond now or face judgment. "Well, put off time by delay, as long as you please: when you come in sight of death, you cannot put off conscience. Consider, your sun is setting, your glass is running, your tide is ebbing, your journey shortning, your lamp consuming: O then, haste, haste, post-haste, by day and by night: hadst thou taken but one turn in hell, thou wouldst see the worth of the present seasons now flightest."¹³⁵ Again, we must "put ourselves under his Government and subject our wills to his will."¹³⁶ On the other hand, he is clear that there is no "natural freedom of Will." Freedom of will comes only to regenerate men. "The creatures cannot make themselves alive; but when they are made alive, they can move themselves. . . . Christ is not onely the *Author*, but also the *Finisher of our Faith*."¹³⁷

Ultimately, Blackwood was concerned to motivate Christians to proclaim their faith rather than to examine Dortian precepts. "He that changes his course, would have others to change with him: If a man change a prin-

¹³⁰Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist*, "The Second Part," 5.

¹³¹Cf. *A True Confession of the Faith, and Humble Acknowledgment of the Alegeance, which we hir Maiesties Subjects, falsely called Brownists, doo hould towards God* (1596), art. 3; *The Confession of Faith* (1644), art. 3. The 1644 confession replaced reprobation with preterition. Cf. *The Westminster Confession* (London, 1646), art. 3.3; *Confession of Faith Put forth by the Elders and Brethren Of many Congregations of Christians (baptized upon Profession of their Faith) in London and the Country* (London, 1677), art. 3.3. The 1677 confession similarly replaced reprobation with preterition. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 83, 157, 254.

¹³²*The Humble Apology*, 12.

¹³³Blackwood, *A Treatise Concerning Repentance*, 25.

¹³⁴Blackwood, "A Christians Groans Under the Body of Sin," in *Some Pious Treatises*, 47.

¹³⁵Blackwood, *A Treatise Concerning Repentance*, 40.

¹³⁶Blackwood, *A Soul-searching Catechism*, 18.

¹³⁷Blackwood, *A Treatise Concerning Repentance*, 39.

ciple or practice, he would have all the world to change with him. . . . [S]o, if thou be changed from a life of sin, thou wilt endeavour what in thee lies, that there may be the same change in others."¹³⁸ To that end, Blackwood preached vividly on both heaven and hell, and pressed the hearer to repent as "the proffers of grace" are given.

The present proffers of grace should be a great motive to stir us up to repentance. To day if yee will hear his voice. Seek the Lord while he will be found. Remember Now thy Creator. Behold, now is the accepted time. Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man will open unto me, I will come in to him: q.d. the present proffers of grace are to be taken.¹³⁹

And to end this conference paper on a note Andrew Fuller would appreciate, Blackwood cried out that the will must be called into action when "receiving Christ": "we look upon this offer as worthy of all acceptance."¹⁴⁰

Conclusion

Christopher Blackwood has served as an exemplar of the seventeenth-century Particular Baptists. First, his life, among others, demonstrates that the paradigmatic division between the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists is challengeable from a historiographical perspective. This is not only the case with regard to the first generation, but should also be noted with regard to the leading figure of the second generation of Particular Baptists, Benjamin Keach. Second, Blackwood's life serves as an exemplar to suggest major themes in Particular Baptist history, including the movement's birth and substantial growth; the defense of believers-only baptism by immersion; the central place of London yet wide appeal to the provinces, the other British kingdoms, and the American colonies; the early associational efforts; and the responses to political crises. Finally, Blackwood's life and works serve as an exemplar to suggest the central theme of the cross of Christ, and of three major themes in Particular Baptist theology, specifically conscience, the church, and Calvinism.

¹³⁸Ibid., 19.

¹³⁹His italics. Ibid., 30.

¹⁴⁰Blackwood, *A Soul-searching Catechism*, 19.