

Principles of a Baptist Theology of Worship

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Baptists are known, perhaps are even notorious, for their distinctive beliefs, and worship is rarely considered to be one of them. However, worship was once the central concern that created divisions between believers and shaped the beliefs now considered to be distinctively Baptist.² Early Baptists benefited from a robust theology of worship, and modern Baptists might be surprised to learn just how relevant the principles of that theology are today. The purpose of this essay is not just to explore those principles but also to open a dialogue about them. Pastors and worship leaders in Baptist churches often have a difficult time with worship because they do not know how to approach it objectively. The earliest English-speaking Baptist leaders struggled with some of the same issues we face today, and they left a surprisingly detailed record of their biblically inspired positions. Their perspectives and conclusions offer a helpful starting point for a new dialogue on a Baptist theology of worship. This essay will introduce their theology of worship through two basic questions: what did a church rooted in pure worship look like from the early English Baptist perspective, and how should those churches be evaluated? The principles they established and the questions they asked are surprisingly germane to Baptist churches today. From time to time in this essay, questions will be offered for reflection on how these issues from the seventeenth century still resonate in the twenty-first century.

A Specific Field of Meaning

The authors cited in this essay regularly used the term “worship” to refer to a specific subset of the wider biblical concept, namely its instituted, external, corporate aspect. The Reformers distinguished between internal and external religion, but because they cared about the unity of a diverse country, Anglicans prioritized the purity of the external. Most English Separatists and dissenters (including Baptists) prioritized the purity of the internal, but they recognized the importance of the external. Leading dissenters of that day, including John Owen, Jeremiah Burroughs, and Henry Lawrence, limited the scope of their argu-

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² For more information on the historical arguments presented in this essay, see my *Pure Worship: The Early English Baptist Distinctive* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publishers, 2014).

ments to the outward worship observed in church assemblies, or “instituted worship only,”³ while explaining a pure heart as a necessary condition for proper external worship. This essay focuses on a specific group of Baptists, often called Particular Baptists, who united around a confession of faith issued in 1644, the First London Confession. The “fathers” of that Baptist tradition, William Kiffin and Hanserd Knollys, and the pastor of the church often credited with birthing that tradition, Henry Jessey, all followed that approach to worship. Kiffin restricted his arguments about worship to “the right and Orderly Administration of Ceremonies,” which Knollys further clarified were the “holy Ordinances of the Gospel.” Jessey likewise added, “Forms or Ordinances are ways and means of divine worship, or Christ’s appointment.”⁴

When Baptists and other Christian leaders argued about worship, they understood they were referring to the external worship of the assembly, or the instituted worship of the church (be that instituted by Christ or by Cranmer, the Bible or the *Book of Common Prayer*). Everything they did in public assembly was a type of rite or ceremony. For example, the Independent pastor Jeremiah Burroughs narrowed church worship to hearing the word preached, receiving the Lord’s Supper, and prayer. He discussed at length the internal preparations for worship, but his *form* of worship related to those three *actions* of worship.⁵ For Baptists, the acceptable actions in worship were the ordinances. Today, Baptists think of the ordinances as baptism and the Lord’s Supper, but to early English Baptists an ordinance was anything ordained by Christ for worship. For example, Hanserd Knollys listed prayer, reading Scripture, expounding Scripture, preaching the gospel, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and singing as “Gospel Ordinances in which his Churches of Saints must worship God in Spirit and in Truth.”⁶ In

What does my church consider appropriate actions or ceremonies in worship? How do we make that determination?

³ [Henry Lawrence], *Of Baptisme* (Rotterdam: n.p., 1646), 106. See also Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel-Worship, or, The Right Manner of Sanctifying the Name of God in General* (London: Peter Cole, 1658), 161; and John Owen, *Truth and Innocence Vindicated*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 13 (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1852; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 447. *Of Baptisme* was published anonymously, but William Kiffin attributed the work to Lawrence.

⁴ William Kiffin, *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church-Communion* (London: G[eorge] Larkin, 1681), 117; Hanserd Knollys, *An Exposition Of the whole Book of the Revelation* (London: n.p., 1688), 189; Henry Jessey, *A Storehouse of Provision to further Resolution in severall cases of Conscience* (London: Charles Sumptner, 1650), 9. Note that my *Pure Worship* gives the mistaken impression that Kiffin borrowed this idea from Jeremiah Burroughs; here he actually cited Henry Lawrence.

⁵ See Burroughs, *Gospel-Worship*. This book is highly recommended reading for all students of worship.

⁶ Hanserd Knollys, *The World that Now is; and the World that is to Come: Or the First and Second Coming of Jesus Christ* (London: Tho[mas] Snowden, 1681), 70–76; cf. *A 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: Benjamin Harris, 1677), Article XXII, and *The humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines, Now by Authority of Parliament sitting at Westminster* (London: n.p., 1646), Article XXI, Section V.

summary, when Baptists spoke about worship, they referred to the orderly administration of the ordinances in a gathering for worship.

Knollys's list of ordinances can clarify much about the framework for a Baptist theology of worship. Corporate worship can be seen as a series of ceremonies, organized and directed by a pastor or other worship leader. The way a service is introduced, the way the Lord's Supper is celebrated, the way the offering is taken, all are ceremonies within the larger corporate worship service. Their organization and administration represents the scope of this discussion about worship. Early English Baptists worked to relate every such ceremony to an ordinance of the gospel. That itself could mean several things, as this essay will explore, but Knollys expressed their basic sentiment that "the whole Worship of God and all the sacred Ordinances of the Lord be administered according to the Gospel Institutions, Commandments, and Examples of Christ and his holy Apostles."⁷

That is not to say that Baptists could agree about what should be considered a command or example of Christ and His Apostles; this essay will mention multiple, mutually exclusive lists of ordinances. But it is equally important to recognize an even more fundamental question: does the ordinance refer to the ceremony alone or the circumstances surrounding the ceremony (the translation of Scripture read, the order of the elements, the mode of baptism, and so on)? Henry Jessey, who specifically did not separate from the established church because he saw the fine line Baptists would have to walk, knew that Baptists could not agree on the circumstances of disputed ordinances, such as laying on of hands at baptism, footwashing, and anointing with oil, so they should be more gracious with those who disagreed with them about the circumstances of baptism.⁸ Early Baptists would have to learn to be cautious about what they decreed essential to an ordinance, but they would also learn to be faithful to everything determined to be essential.

The important matter for this introduction is that early English Baptists framed their questions about the church in terms of worship, namely instituted worship. When they wrote about worship, they meant the administration of external ceremonies (ordinances) that expressed the inward devotion of the participants. This distinction as much as anything has led to the

Can I separate an essential ordinance from inessential circumstances?

current confusion and misunderstanding about the importance of worship to early Baptists. When they disagreed about baptism, they were not debating a doctrine but a ceremony; when they expounded on ordinances, they were not explaining institutions but worship.⁹ They had in mind not only the words of Scripture but also the weekly experiences of an event. One mark of a true church was the right observance of the ordinances as an integral part of its worship.

⁷ Knollys, *Exposition*, 123–24.

⁸ Cited in John Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment about Water-Baptism, No Bar to Communion* (London: n.p., 1673), 116–17.

⁹ Compare the wording in Henry Jessey, *Miscellanea Sacra: or, Diverse Necessary Truths* (London: T. M., 1665), 130, with Jessey, *Storehouse*, 102, as an example of such semantics.

The Relationship between the Church and Her Lord: The Church as a Worshiping Community

The driving force behind early English Baptists was a desire for true worship, namely worship that God Himself approved. For a church to worship truly, it must be constituted and structured rightly. What does a church rooted in true worship look like? To the early Baptists, this question was answered in terms of that church's form, matter, and model. Theoretical answers were unacceptable because a New Testament church existed in a particular form for a visible function. Instead, Baptists focused on tangible definitions and examples.

A True Church versus False Worship

In the background of every ecclesiological discussion from this era was the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles. Article XIX, "Of the Church," defined a church as a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God was preached and the sacraments duly ministered according to the ordinance of Christ. Article XX, "Of the Authority of the Church," further gave a church the power to decree rites or ceremonies for it to use in worship.¹⁰ Early Separatists injected some modifications to this definition, including the idea of separation, voluntary covenant, and autonomy. All of these perspectives were rooted in worship. Separation was not only from false doctrine and profane men but also from false worship. The covenant of a church was "to worship and serve God according to his word, remembering to keep holy the Lord's Day." Autonomy was the right "to exercise Ecclesiastical government and God's spiritual ordinances in and for itself immediately from Christ."¹¹

Early Baptists followed that lead. They defined a church as "a company of visible Saints called and separated from the world by the word and 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 in the practical enjoyment of the Ordinances, commanded by Christ their head and King."¹² Experiencing the ordinances in the context of the church meant corporate worship. If worship according to the commands and patterns of Christ required that they separate from the world of false institutions, they were courageously prepared to do so.

¹⁰ *Articles agreed on by the Archbishops* (London: Richard Jugge and John Cawood, 1571) [on-line]; accessed 18 June 2012; available from http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/articles_39_1572.html; Internet.

¹¹ See the Brownist confession of faith recorded in Edward Bean Underhill, ed., *The Records of a Church of Christ, Meeting at Broadmead, Bristol. 1640–1687* (London: J. Haddon, 1847), xl; Henry Ainsworth and Francis Johnson, *The Confession of faith of certayn English people, living in exile, in the Low countreyes* ([Amsterdam: Giles Thorp], n.d.; reprint, 1607), 52; and Henry Jacob, *The Divine Beginning and Institution of Christs true Visible or Ministeriall Church* (Leyden: Henry Hastings, 1610), not paginated.

¹² *The Confession of Faith, Of those Churches which are commonly (though falsly) called Anabaptists* (London: n.p., 1644), Article XVII. The Second London Confession further clarified that a church had "all that power and authority which is any way needed for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline which [Christ] has instituted for them to observe" (*Confession of Faith* [1677], Article 26).

Murray Tolmie, an important historian of this era, concluded that Separatists formed their own churches in order to achieve “the fundamental right of conscience: to worship the way it saw best.”¹³ The right to worship, and by this the Separatists meant the external forms of corporate worship, was sacrosanct. Yes, they might leave a church because they did not like the instruments being used, but it was never for so shallow a reason as personal preference. Rather, their decisions to leave existing churches and form new ones were based on the principles they found in God’s Word.

Does my church prioritize worship as a benefit of membership?

Thomas Cranmer built Anglican identity on the principle that the Bible was not the only source of worship practices for a Christian church. He retained for the Crown the right to ordain such rites and ceremonies as necessary and beneficial for the spiritual guidance of England.¹⁴ The term often given to such rites is *adiaphora*, or things indifferent, such as the width of a pew or the number of times a church bell rings, allowable as long as not forbidden in Scripture. Baptists felt that Anglican leadership took that liberty to unacceptable lengths. Most importantly, they believed that the practices that resulted from such an approach were valid reasons for separation.

William Kiffin explained that he left the Anglican Church for three reasons: he did not have freedom to worship as he saw fit, he did not have an opportunity to participate actively in his church’s worship, and he did not agree with the concept of a church tax. He concluded that “if we cannot keep faith and a good Conscience in obeying all the Commands of Christ [for the church] so long as we assemble ourselves with you, then we are necessitated to separate ourselves from you” and further boldly accused the Anglicans of reducing the people into “formal hypocrites.”¹⁵ By formal, Kiffin referred to the forms of worship imposed by the Crown on the local assemblies.

Kiffin’s rejection of imposed worship was so important to the Baptists because they saw worship both as the purpose of their gathering and the mark of their identity. Did they belong to the Crown or to Christ?

Were they to be shaped by the culture or the Word of God? Hanserd Knollys believed that “the Chief Work of Jesus Christ in his *first* Coming into the World was to save

What are our sources for worship practices? Which ones most shape our worship?

sinners, to build up his own House, *the Church of the Living God*, and to institute all Gospel Ordinances *necessary* for his Disciples to worship God in Spirit and in Truth.”¹⁶ Christ not

¹³ Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London, 1616–1649* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1.

¹⁴ See, for example, Cranmer’s letter to Convocation recorded in C. H. Smyth, *Cranmer & the Reformation under Edward VI* (Cambridge: University Press, 1926; reprint, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), 264.

¹⁵ William Kiffin, *A Briefe Remonstrance of The Reasons and Grounds of those People commonly Called Anabaptists, for their Seperation* (London: n.p., 1645), 5, 8, 9.

¹⁶ Knollys, *The World that Now is*, 2.

only established the church but also gave it all necessary instructions. Any further instructions from a human source could only be seen as inferior to those of Christ, and if a church were not free to follow Christ's instructions, it must declare its independence.

This conclusion created disagreements between Baptists and their reforming brethren, particularly the Presbyterians. Baptists, for example, refused to acquiesce to the decrees of the Westminster Assembly. When pressed for a reason, the answer was simple: Baptists would not be satisfied with an incomplete reformation. William Kiffin wondered, "What great thing is it to change *Episcopacy* into *Presbytery*, and a *Book of Common Prayer* into a *Directory*? I pray you consider, is there not the same power, the same priests, the same People, the same Worship, and in the same manner still continued?"¹⁷ True reformation included the reformation of worship practices as well.

An interesting illustration of this reforming impulse, especially considering its lack of emphasis in modern American churches, was baptism. Early Baptists saw baptism as an instituted ceremony with a proper administration, one to which they should adhere closely. Importantly, unlike the Presbyterians or Independents, they considered the mode of baptism and the recipient of baptism to be integral to the or-

Does my church borrow worship practices from other churches or traditions that we otherwise disagree with? If so, why?

dinance, not an indifferent circumstance. That perspective raised eyebrows. Praisegod Barbone, a Baptist antagonist, argued that Baptists could never be sure that they had observed the ceremony perfectly. How could they know the heart of the administrator or the recipient or that they had not missed a spot? But if Baptists were unwilling to nullify their own baptisms in the face of a possible ceremonial error, they would have to admit that baptism's validity lay not in its form but its doctrine and thus respect the baptisms of other traditions. Barbone distinguished between the form and the essence of a church (the well-being from the being). The form, which included its external worship and thus baptism, was transient; the essence was inviolable in Christ.¹⁸ He concluded that Baptists had gone beyond proper respect for a ceremony into the very ceremonialism of which they accused the Anglicans.

John Spilsbury, one of the pastors who signed the First London Confession, took this charge of ceremonialism seriously. His solution was to separate the doctrine of baptism from its administration. The doctrine of baptism included the non-negotiable rules for mode and recipient. The administration of baptism, its use in worship, belonged to the local church as a part of its covenant. Indeed, the covenant of the church gave authority to the ceremony of baptism such that its members did not need to become ceremonialists or formalists. Within certain limits, the local church could affirm the validity of a baptism. Spilsbury recognized the need for a certain amount of freedom within limits; ceremonies were

¹⁷ Kiffin, *Briefe Remonstrance*, 6–7.

¹⁸ Praisegod Barbone, *A discourse tending to prove the baptisme in, or under the defection of Antichrist to be the ordinance of Jesus Christ* (London: R. Oulton & G. Dexter, 1643), 11–24.

not as “clean” as doctrines.¹⁹ Baptists would need to approach ceremonies of worship with a certain amount of grace and subtlety.

A generation later, John Bunyan picked up the threads of this argument again. He soundly echoed Barbone when he said of the ordinances, “I count them not the fundamentals of Christianity; not grounds or rule to communion with Saints; servants they are, and our mystical Ministers to teach and instruct us,” and of the Baptists, “‘Tis possible to commit Idolatry, even with God’s

How does my church determine the validity of a baptism?

own appointments.”²⁰ His argument took a new turn, however, when he responded to accusations of failure to worship by stating, “For albeit that Baptism be given by Christ our Lord to the Church, yet not for them to worship him by as a Church.”²¹ Whereas Barbone simply gave wide latitude to the interpretation of baptism, Bunyan removed baptism as an element of church worship. By turning baptism into an act of personal, not corporate, worship, Bunyan circumvented some of the issues for debate that had formed about instituted worship.

Bunyan’s tactic was important because he took properly instituted worship seriously. A rule that emerged from Westminsterian circles (from the pen of George Gillespie) that “a church is in so far true or hypocritical as it mixes or mixes not human inventions with God’s holy worship.”²² Presbyterians believed Baptists had invented their ceremony of believers’ baptism by immersion, making their churches hypocritical. Bunyan personally approved of believers’ baptism by immersion, but he did not want to counter-call Presbyterian churches hypocritical. His solution was to remove baptism from the church entirely.

William Kiffin responded with a declaration as to why baptism was so important to Baptists: “I have no other design but the preserving the Ordinances of Christ in their purity and Order as they are left unto us in the holy *Scriptures* of Truth and to warn the Churches *To keep close to the Rule*, lest they being found not to Worship the Lord according to his prescribed Order he make a *Breach* among them.”²³ If baptism was indeed given by Jesus to the church for use in His worship, churches could not for any reason fail to obey. Backing down from baptism, an act of true worship, for the sake of unity or charity (or individual choice) was unacceptable. The worship of God must be maintained no matter the cost; that is the church’s responsibility both to God and to the believer in discipleship. Kiffin’s view is a powerful and moving perspective of baptism.

¹⁹ John Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme* (London: n.p., 1643), 32, 41.

²⁰ John Bunyan, *A Confession of my Faith, And A Reason of my Practice* (London: n.p., 1672), 65.

²¹ Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment*, 13.

²² George Gillespie, *A dispute against the English-popish ceremonies, obruded upon the Church of Scotland* (Leyden: n.p., 1637; reprint, Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1993), xxxv.

²³ Kiffin, *Sober Discourse, To the Christian Reader*.

These early Baptists were so concerned about the proper use of baptism in worship because they understood the connection between a church's beliefs and its worship

Does my church treat baptism as an act of corporate worship?

(its identity and its actions). It was roundly recognized in dissenting circles that the rites and ceremonies a church used directly reflected its understanding of the commandments of God. A church found to worship falsely or to mix its worship with human inventions, as Gillespie had intimated, was hypocritical at its core. A hypocritical church in worship was the kind of church that Jesus would spit out of His mouth: a lukewarm church.²⁴ Certainly Baptists worried, as Kiffin did above, that their improper use of the ordinances in worship would create a breach between them and God.

But this concern about a church's ordinances also influenced early Baptist views of other churches. The important Puritan William Bradshaw had earlier acknowledged that those who had the power to create new forms of worship had the power to create a new religion.²⁵ This weighed heavily on Baptist minds as they surveyed the diverse liturgical landscape around them. If worship reflected the true identity of a church, then false worship reflected a false church. Their call to separate from false worship noted above really meant separation from a false church. Churches were assessed in terms of matter and form. The matter was a baptized person (of debated age); the form was either a profession of faith, a covenant, or baptism itself. There was great concern among Baptist circles that improper use of baptism in worship actually invalidated the very form of that church.

Does my church see our worship services as an extension and communication of our core beliefs?

Indeed, some felt that Baptists were *too* concerned with baptism in worship. Praisegod Barbone, for one, argued that Baptists did not have the credibility to be so strict; they knew they were not perfect in all they did in worship, so why should they expect other churches to be perfect specifically in baptism? Henry Jessey likewise counseled churches not to divide over disputed matters of worship, such as the laying on of hands at baptism, singing, or baptism itself.²⁶ Their reasoning reflected the distinction noted above between the being and the well-being of a church. They believed that worship belonged to the well-being of a church. Improper worship was unhealthy for a church but not enough to destroy it.

²⁴ See Knollys's warning in *World that Now is*, 77–80.

²⁵ William Bradshaw, *Several Treatises of Worship and Ceremonies* (London: n.p., 1660), 35. The treatises were originally presented in 1604–5.

²⁶ See Barbone, *Discourse*, 11; and Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists*. 4 vols. (London: John Robinson, 1739–40), 1:312.

John Spilsbury explained how Barbone and Jessey misunderstood the charge: “if they mean by defection the outward form of worship and Ecclesiastical government, and I think they do, then all the power and authority that ever has carried out any administration or constituted ordinance has taken its being thence and depends upon the same; and if so, then the power and ordainer and the ordinance so ordained must be both of one and the same stamp, as I have already proved: if the one be Antichrist’s, the other must be also Antichristian.”²⁷ False worship was not merely a symptom of an unhealthy church, it was the actual disease—corruption perpetuating corruption. Spilsbury did not believe that a church inhabited by the mind of Christ would abide false worship. A church *is* its worship; there can be no distinction.

Has my church considered our corporate worship to be an essential element of our relationship with God?

Ecclesiology

If a church and its worship are inseparable, what is the organizational structure of a church marked by true worship? Reformers from this era generally thought of the church in terms of worship, discipline (or ministry), and government, or actions, offices, and structure. The First London Confession approved of any church “rightly gathered, established, and still proceeding in Christian communion, and obedience of the Gospel of Christ.”²⁸ In what way was the structure of a church connected with its actions, namely its worship? Early English Baptists drew conclusions that were both simple and profound as well as extremely informative.

It has already been noted that William Kiffin separated from the established church in part because he had no freedom in their program of worship. The *Book of Common Prayer* declared itself binding, notwithstanding certain pockets of laxity on the part of the local authorities. The Crown understood the power of worship to unite (or divide) the people and as such demanded uniformity of worship throughout the nation. Baptists appreciated that secular concern, but they equally understood the power of worship to unite (or divide) them with Christ. They did not want to worship according to the will of the Crown but the will of Christ. If the Crown claimed authority over worship, they would not have the freedom to be obedient to Christ.

In one sense, religious liberty has always been a fundamental Baptist principle. The First London Confession devoted six articles to this concept, recognizing the magistrate’s authority to make laws necessary and appropriate but denying that authority to stretch into the realm of church action, most importantly worship. It declared, “And if any take this that we have said to be heresy, then do we with the Apostle freely confess to worship the God of our Fathers after the way which they call heresy, believing all things which are writ-

²⁷ Spilsbury, *Treatise*, 39.

²⁸ *Confession of Faith* [1644], Article XL.

ten in the Law and in the Prophets and Apostles.”²⁹ Some things were between a man and His Maker, and they expected and granted that direct accountability. While subsequent emphases on religious liberty have focused on doctrinal beliefs, these early Baptists focused heavily on freedom of worship. Therefore in a deeper sense, religious liberty was for these Baptists about their right of direct access to God as a church.

In calling for freedom of worship, Baptists were already drawing the threads of salvation and worship together. Salvation could not be coerced, and certainly not by the will of a person. Like-

How seriously does my church take and teach the right of access to God in worship?

wise, true worship could also not be coerced; a gift demanded is no gift at all. True worship could not be orchestrated or generated; true worship must be free worship. Just as salvation was a personal transaction, so also was worship. The difference was that worship also had a corporate element, one upon which the early Baptists focused in their writings. Salvation was personal; one stood alone before God in judgment. Worship was personal *and* communal; a church stood together before God in fear and love.

Emphasizing the corporate aspect of worship in the context of religious liberty led to two ecclesiological consequences: a church must be free (autonomous) to make decisions about worship, and a church must consist of individuals qualified to worship. John Spilsbury concluded that the great privilege of salvation was “communion with the Church of Christ in the outward worship of God and the use of Christ’s Ordinances.”³⁰ It was a privilege that Christians and churches should cherish, not neglect. Importantly, those who were not saved were not grafted into the true vine and thus drew no power from true worship. Hanserd Knollys likened them to the five foolish virgins of Matthew 25. They had the form of godliness in worship but not the power thereof. They looked identical to the five wise virgins, but when the time came to be with the bridegroom, the door was shut to them.³¹ Baptists placed the power of worship above the form, and they believed that God alone granted this power.

In the first place, the privilege and power of worship in salvation undercut the reason given by the authorities for the imposed national liturgies and directories: common people and common ministers needed help to worship God. Baptists believed that was not true. John Spilsbury recognized that God gave the church “his Spirit for their guide, his Word for their rule, and himself for their warrant.”³² They

Does my church use manmade resources to help in worship planning? If so, why? What do we gain from them?

²⁹ *Confession of Faith* [1644], Article LII[I].

³⁰ John Spilsbury, *Gods Ordinance, The Saints Priviledge* (London: M. Simmons, 1646), 72.

³¹ Hanserd Knollys, *The Parable of the Kingdom of Heaven Expounded* (London: n.p., 1674), 97–101.

³² Spilsbury, *Treatise*, 12.

did not need some magistrate's pity or charity; they had the direction of the living God and the power of His life-giving Spirit. They would not forego the honor of that counsel for a manmade system like the *Book of Common Prayer*. Christ, not their culture or their peers, would tell them how to worship Him.

In the second place, this privilege and power necessitated a turn to congregational church polity. William Kiffin declared, "Christ has given this Power to his Church, not to a Hierarchy, neither to a National Presbytery, but a company of Saints in a Congregational way."³³ If churches were directly accountable to Christ for their worship of Him, then they must be governed in such a way as to have that responsibility. Indeed, they could be governed no other way coherently. Historian Stephen Wright described an early Baptist church well: "It was founded mainly upon the direct collective inspiration to be found in the preaching, prophecy, and prayer of all the members, and from its source, the immediate presence amongst them of the risen Christ."³⁴ Christ Himself inhabited the local church; any intermediate human oversight would always be inferior compared to Christ's immediate rule, particularly with respect to His instituted worship.

Congregationalism accomplished the autonomy and accountability of a church in its worship of the living God; it also freed the church from the great challenges of a hierarchical church institution. As has already been stated, Baptists understood the importance of uniformity in worship for the identity of a "denomination" or "tradition." But they also realized that such concern for uniformity forced the governing authorities to emphasize the external. In other words, when Anglicans expressed concern for the purity of worship, they meant the purity of the rites and ceremonies.³⁵ But when Baptists expressed that same concern, they presumed (and prioritized) the purity of the *worshiper*. They understood that the pure external forms about which they wrote meant only so much to God. Rather, as Hanserd Knollys realized, "The power of Godliness does make the Believer fruitful under that form of Godliness which Christ has instituted for the Worship of God."³⁶

If a church must worship in Spirit and Truth, and only Christians can do so, then only Christians could be in that church. That basic belief led to two scandalous convictions that Baptists today take for granted. First, if all Christians could worship in Spirit and Truth, then there was no separate priestly class; officers were for the well-being and not the being of a church. True worship was a great privilege of salvation, and thus there was certainly no need for a man specially trained to be an administrator of a complex liturgy. Indeed, that liturgy existed because those in authority believed common Christians could *not* worship effectively on their own. Baptists believed that God equipped certain men with

³³ See Kiffin's Epistle to the Reader in Thomas Goodwin, *A Glimpse of Sions Glory: Or, The Churches Beautie specified* (London: n.p., 1641).

³⁴ Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603–1649* (Rochester: The Boydell Press, 2006), 32.

³⁵ See H. F. Woodhouse, *The Doctrine of the Church in Anglican Theology, 1547–1603* (London: SPCK, 1954), 154ff.

³⁶ Knollys, *Parable*, 46.

gifts of such leadership, but those men were drawn from the church and accountable to it, not to a hierarchy or written liturgy.³⁷

Does my church account for the regenerate/non-regenerate nature of our assembly in our worship planning?

Rejecting the trained priestly class certainly led to occasional spectacles in worship services,³⁸ but the second conviction led to even greater confrontations. If infants could not worship in Spirit and Truth, then infants could not be in the church. Thomas Grantham, a Baptist leader in different circles of that day, perceptively asked “whether the difference between the Baptists and Paedobaptists be not chiefly (if not only) about imposing Ceremonies on Infants?”³⁹ Because the purity of worship depended on the worshiper more than the rite, the passive role of an infant in any rite availed nothing. From the outside, Baptists were accused of putting their children out of the church. They knew that their children were never in the church (at least until they made public their own profession of faith through baptism). But that does not mean Baptists ignored their children—truly, they bore the highest responsibility for their care and upbringing: “The Lord knows we long and labor to have our houses as churches of Christ.”⁴⁰ In the corporate assembly, however, children were to be silent observers.

Baptists so highly pursued regenerate membership not simply to be separate from a wicked and corrupt generation but because Christ deserved a pure bride. In fact, God demanded the church to be holy for the glory and communion of His Son.⁴¹ Puritans obsessed about the external holiness of an individual in their attempts to observe the fruits of salvation. Baptists obsessed about that holiness for the purposes of worship. Their definition of a church mentioned earlier further said that Christ “makes his people a spiritual House, a holy Priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God through him; neither does the Father accept nor Christ offer to the Father any other worship or worshippers.”⁴² Christ, worthy of the

How does my church address the hearts of our gathered worshippers?

³⁷ *Confession of Faith* [1644], Article XVII, XXXIII, XXXV, and XXXVI.

³⁸ The era of the Westminster Assembly saw an eruption of heresiography, particularly against those who agreed with the Baptists that one did not need special training or license to minister God’s Word. The scandalous (and sometimes exaggerated) descriptions of irregular behavior in worship resulted in Parliament outlawing all unlicensed preaching on April 25, 1645. See *Pure Worship*, 71–78, for examples.

³⁹ Thomas Grantham, *The Quaeries Examined, Or, Fifty Anti-Quaeries Seriously Propounded to the People called Presbyterians* (London: n.p., 1676), 9.

⁴⁰ Robert Steed and Abraham Cheare, *A Plain Discovery of The Unrighteous Judge and False Accuser* ([London]: n.p., 1658), 6. Steed served as William Kiffin’s co-pastor for many years in the late 1600s.

⁴¹ Hanserd Knollys, *Christ Exalted: in a Sermon* (London: n.p., 1645), 15.

⁴² *Confession of Faith* [1644], Article XVII.

highest worship, warranted the very best of humanity in that worship. Only a redeemed person, sensitive to the Word and led by the Spirit of God, should consider such a high offering. To Baptists, the “strange fire” warned about in Leviticus 10 meant not only the actions but also the heart of the worshiper.

These ecclesiological conclusions drawn in the context of worship did not answer every question, nor did Baptists apply them consistently (or always coherently). But worship gave them the starting point from which they developed the positions now considered Baptist distinctives. The uniformity or lack thereof with which they implemented these conclusions led to the early Baptists’ greatest achievements and greatest failures.⁴³ Worship brought out the best and worst in them.

Cooperation

The Puritan William Bradshaw perceptively remarked, “The more one Church differs from another in Rites and Ceremonies, the more it differs in substance of Doctrine, and the more one Church draws nearer unto another in Ceremonies, the more it draws near unto it in substance of Doctrine.”⁴⁴ Baptists understood and appreciated this observation. They did what they could to set a general framework within which their churches could worship freely yet still cooperate. Many of the church schisms among early Baptists were the result of worship divergences, including the laying on of hands at baptism, the Sabbath, singing, women’s participation in worship, Quaker silent-ordinances, and the details of the Lord’s Supper. Baptist leaders counseled and implored churches not to divide over worship, but worship was too strong and principled a matter for the people to set aside.

In the earliest days of this Baptist movement, Baptists were able to overlook potential disagreements about worship because they were trying to build a tradition struggling under persecution. Furthermore, they were willing to admit being on a journey of discovery, coming out of Babylon’s false worship and seeking the worship God desired. If they did not entirely agree on matters such as worship in the present, perhaps they would in the future. They knew that divisions caused by worship would severely damage their strength and their reputation. Consequently, at the beginning of their movement, these Baptists emphasized areas of agreement. It was only after the Civil War dethroned the king and destroyed the Westminsterian hegemony, while Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell looked favorably on independent-minded Baptists and other dissenters, that the Baptists had the free time and energy to investigate and debate their differences.

The most important point of agreement for these Baptists was the pursuit of the apostolic model of church. Yes, that model included proper doctrine and structure, but it primarily included proper worship. Most importantly, appealing to the apostolic church allowed Baptists to bypass centuries of formal worship as well as the layers of arguments based on liturgical succession. They did not care what humans had invented in the post-

⁴³ *Pure Worship* argues that, among other things, disagreements about worship led directly to the end of any formal association among London Particular Baptists.

⁴⁴ Bradshaw, *Several Treatises*, 8.

apostolic era but only what they knew of the apostolic church. In their first general assembly (which did not meet until after religious toleration was declared in 1689), the Particular Baptists explained their pursuit of the apostolic church: “Forasmuch as they did nothing in those purest Primitive Times in the sacred Worship of God, either as to time or form, but by a Divine Warrant from the Holy Apostles, who were instructed by our Lord Jesus and were guided in all those Affairs by his faithful and infallible Holy Spirit.”⁴⁵

Modern visions such as Robert Webber’s “Ancient-Future” movement continue to seek a pre-Constantinian liturgy, but early Baptists sought only the truly primitive apostolic model. Benjamin Cox (in his appendix to the London Confession), Hanserd Knollys, and William Kiffin each referred to the Acts 2 model as a goal, Kiffin describing that model as “not only Commanded, but Practiced.”⁴⁶ Knollys also looked to the churches mentioned in Revelation for this model, observing that the church in Ephesus “congregated together to Worship God in Spirit and in Truth *visibly*, walking in all the Commandments and Ordinances of God *blamelessly*, according to the Order of the Gospel,” and observing in Sardis “the soundness of *Doctrine*, purity of *Gospel-Administrations* in the Worship of God, and the strictness of *Discipline* in this Church.”⁴⁷

Does my church know where our worship practices originated? How willing are we to evaluate them?

William Kiffin found urgency in the apostolic model in his debate with Bunyan over baptism. He saw Bunyan’s position as stepping away from the “Gospel Order settled by Apostolic Authority and Direction,” and called his readers to pay close attention to that order, “especially considering the day wherein we live, many endeavoring to bring in their own Inventions into the Worship of God, which should make all Christians be more careful and Zealous to Cleave to the Institutions of Jesus Christ as they were first Delivered by the holy Penmen and the Practice of the Primitive Christians.”⁴⁸ Although the goal of apostolic worship practices united and guided early Baptists, their conclusions about how to achieve that goal divided them.

From the beginning, Baptists were aware of a tension between their desire for freedom and their desire for uniformity. All early Baptists agreed with Hanserd Knollys that “there must be a Conformity unto the Revealed Will of God in his Word, especially in the External part of the Instituted worship of God in the Gospel.” In principle, they also agreed with Knollys’s conclusion that “there ought to be a Uniformity among all the Churches of God in every Nation, in every City and in every Village. All that worship God in one place are

⁴⁵ *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the General Assembly Of divers Pastors, Messengers and Ministring-Brethren of the Baptized Churches, met together in London* (London: n.p., 1689), 17.

⁴⁶ Benjamin Cox, *An Appendix to a Confession of Faith* (London: n.p., 1646), 10; Knollys, *World that Now is*, 49; Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, 29.

⁴⁷ Knollys, *Exposition*, 18, 42.

⁴⁸ Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, 58–59.

to Worship him in one way, with one accord, and with one shoulder.”⁴⁹ However, they could not agree on that model. This was acceptable in the sense that they had withdrawn from the established church to pursue their own freedom in worship. It was unacceptable because they now wanted to cooperate with churches that might disagree with them over the most important purpose of their assembly: their worship.

All these early Baptist churches had to draw at least some conclusions about the content of their weekly worship services. Some were more certain of their practices than others. In the background of their different practices was the concept of “light” or illumination. Benjamin Cox established the early, gracious position on their practices: “Although we know that in some things we are yet very dark, and in all things as yet we know in part and do therefore wait upon God for further light, yet we believe that we ought in our practice to obey, and serve, and glorify God in the use of that light which he has given us.”⁵⁰ This observation acknowledged that they would not agree on every matter of worship, and it freed them to practice what they believed to be right, but with grace and humility. Nevertheless, they sometimes came to mutually exclusive claims of certainty, and no matter how much grace they desired to extend to one another, they each had a limit concerning what they considered acceptable in God’s worship.

How does my church feel about cooperating with churches that have different practices of worship?

Consider Knollys’s list of ordinances mentioned above. Early Baptists only practiced ordinances in their worship, so such a list guided every worship service. Knollys mentions prayer, reading Scripture, expounding Scripture, preaching the gospel, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and singing.⁵¹ However, other Baptists included additional ordinances in their comparable lists. Thomas Patient, Kiffin’s first co-pastor, included hearing, thanksgiving, and almsgiving; Henry Jessey included fasting; John Griffith, a founder of the General Baptist tradition in London, included the laying on of hands at baptism.⁵² Other Baptists also considered washing feet and anointing with oil. About most of these, Baptists were in full agreement. However, the laying on of hands at baptism led some churches to form a separate “Six-Principle Baptist” tradition across England, and singing led to the complete dissolution of the London Association by 1695. And this is not even to mention the Seventh-Day Baptist tradition or the losses of Baptists to Quakers largely with respect to worship.⁵³

⁴⁹ Knollys, *Parable*, 42, 43.

⁵⁰ Cox, *Appendix*, 11.

⁵¹ Knollys, *World that Now is*, 70–76.

⁵² Thomas Patient, *The Doctrine of Baptism, And the Distinction of the Covenants* (London: Henry Hills, 1654), 171; Jessey, *Miscellanea Sacra*, 3; John Griffith, *Gods Oracle & Christs Doctrine* (London: Richard Moon, 1655), 37ff.

⁵³ See Ward, *Pure Worship*, 208–13, for further reading.

Why was worship such a disruptive or destabilizing element for early Baptists? It was fundamentally important and difficult to keep in perspective. Murray Tolmie describes this effect on early Separatist churches: that “the search for an exclusive and universally binding model of a true Christian church placed upon the tiny separatist congregations a burden impossible to bear” such that “the very smallest detail of church order and worship became a heavy responsibility.”⁵⁴ The early Particular Baptists attempted to overcome this burden with grace and cooperation, and for a long time that worked. Eventually, though, members of their churches became impatiently convinced of their own worship practices and unwilling to wait for their sister churches to receive that same light.

This impatience created a tension they could not manage. The benevolent Henry Jessey queried his paedobaptist peers, “Now must we tarry in this Babylonish way, till such a mighty glorious Angel come? Or must we reform as far as we see?”⁵⁵ Yet he also counseled churches not to divide over singing, asking those churches *not* to reform as far as *they* saw. The stricter William Kiffin defended his debate with Bunyan saying that “care must be had in the first place to observe the Rules given by our great Lord, and to walk according to them, and not for Communion sake to leap over the Order Jesus Christ has Prescribed in his Word.”⁵⁶ Perhaps Jessey and Kiffin simply expected other churches to adopt their own conclusions, perhaps Jessey was more comfortable with disagreements than his peers, and perhaps Kiffin was more comfortable with isolation than his peers.

Does my church worry more about personal preferences, ecclesial relationships, or God's Word in our actual worship practices?

Multiple positive and negative lessons can be learned from early English Baptist perspectives on ecclesiology. Positively, Baptist churches today would do well to reemphasize worship as the early Baptists did. Worship shaped the most important Baptist distinctives, and it gave Baptists great motivation to maintain regenerate membership and take their autonomy seriously. Negatively, worship clarified the need for Baptist churches to operate with grace and humility. Worship was seen as a just cause for separation. Churches today need to look at the diversity of worship practices and ask themselves an important question: “Do I disapprove of another church’s worship practice because I believe it is unbiblical, or because I just do not like it?” Early English Baptists left much guidance on how to make that determination, and that is the final topic for this essay.

⁵⁴ Tolmie, *Triumph of the Saints*, 2.

⁵⁵ Jessey, *Storehouse*, 16.

⁵⁶ See Kiffin’s Preface in Thomas Paul, *Some Serious Reflections On that Part of M. Bunions Confession of Faith Touching Church Communion with Unbaptized Persons* (London: n.p., 1673).

The Relationship between the Church and the Word: The Gospel as a Liturgical Hermeneutic

Early English Baptists built their movement on a basic premise: “The Rule of this Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience, concerning the worship and service of God, and all other Christian duties, is not man’s invention, opinions, devices, laws, constitutions, or traditions unwritten whatsoever, but only the word of God contained in the Canonical Scriptures.”⁵⁷ That rule united them and guided them in many ways, two of which will be introduced here. That “Rule,” according to articles VI and VII of the First London Confession, was the Gospel—not only the good news that man could enter into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but also the good news that God has given man prescription how to maintain that relationship in worship. In this way, the Gospel not only motivated them to continue the Reformation from doctrine into worship but also helped them understand how to interpret and apply Scripture to their decisions about worship.

This essay is not meant to be a primer in liturgical hermeneutics. Suffice it to say that a liturgical hermeneutic both helps a church interpret Scripture from the perspective of worship and helps a church apply Scripture to its worship. Calling the Gospel a liturgical hermeneutic means that early Baptists considered and intended their worship to communicate and embody the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Does my church know what principles we implicitly use to guide our worship services? Are we intentional about those principles?

Worship as an Ongoing Reformation

William Kiffin declared Baptists to be in lock-step with the greater Reformation in telling them that “you are for a Church of Christ’s own Election, for a Ministry of his own Calling, and for Ordinances of his own Appointing.”⁵⁸ Kiffin, however, believed the Reformation fell short; it had addressed necessary and critical doctrinal matters, but failed to address worship fully. He saw his role and that of Baptists as a “furtherance rather than a disturbance” of the Reformation, addressing matters of equal importance to that of doctrine.⁵⁹ If “reformed” worship looked like that of the Anglicans and Presbyterians, Kiffin found it still hopelessly superstitious and unacceptable.

In essence, Baptists treated their pursuit of pure worship in the same way Luther and Calvin treated their pursuit of pure doctrine. John Spilsbury stated, “The holy Scripture is the only place where any ordinance of God in the case aforesaid is to be found, it being

⁵⁷ *Confession of Faith* [1644], Article VII.

⁵⁸ John Norcot, William Kiffin, and Richard Claridge, *Baptism Discovered Plainly & Faithfully* (London: n.p., 1694), Preface (by Kiffin).

⁵⁹ Kiffin, *Briefe Remonstrance*, 7.

the fountainhead containing all the instituted Rules both of Church and ordinances, so that when or wheresoever any of these are wanting in their constitution and cannot be found in their outward orderly form, we are to go directly unto its institution and recover the same again from thence.”⁶⁰ Their emphasis on the Gospel, however, gave them a firm understanding of how to use that Scripture.

Spilsbury made it clear that the Gospel gave a priority to which Scriptures they should use with respect to their worship and constitution: “They are those Scriptures that are necessary to bring God and man together unto a oneness in Christ. And this is the Gospel, which . . . brings persons to be of the household of God, which household is that composed order, and instituted state of Christ’s Church of the new Testament.”⁶¹ The New Testament represented a new era in the history of salvation, an era in which God’s plan for humanity finally received its fullest and clearest revelation in Jesus Christ, the new covenant in His blood. The purpose of the New Testament was to demonstrate the administration of that new covenant.⁶² The rules for the church, God’s people under this new covenant of salvation, were given in the New Testament; therefore, that was their guiding source.

What part of the Bible does my church emphasize in worship planning?

Importantly, those rules included worship. Worship embodied the Gospel, therefore worship must be led by the New Testament. This included the choice of ordinances, for “the Ordinances of the Gospel give a more clear vision of Christ than those under the Law,”⁶³ and the administration thereof, for “tis most evident that the Worship of the Old Testament for the beauty and ornament of outward Ceremonies and the splendor of their observation far exceeds and excels that Worship which God commands now.”⁶⁴ The relationship between the Gospel and simplicity will be addressed below; the consequence here is the priority of the New Testament over the Old for the church’s worship.

Worship’s priority and worship’s New Testament source intersected in “will-worship,” a term taken from Colossians 2:23 that Jeremiah Burroughs defined as “we must not worship God according to our own wills.”⁶⁵ William Kiffin gave the clearest explanation of why will-worship must be taken seriously:

⁶⁰ Spilsbury, *Treatise*, 38.

⁶¹ Spilsbury, *Gods Ordinance*, 22.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶³ Knollys, *Exposition*, 190.

⁶⁴ Hercules Collins, *Some Reasons for Separation From the Communion of the Church of England* (London: John How, 1682), 22. Collins was a good friend of William Kiffin and an important Baptist in the 1680s.

⁶⁵ Burroughs, *Gospel-Worship*, 10.

Man's Nature is very prone to be meddling with things beyond his Commission, which has proved the very pest and bane of Christianity; for notwithstanding that dreadful prohibition, Rev. 22. 18, 19. of *adding to*, or *taking from* his word, is not Europe full of pernicious Additions and Subtractions in the Worship of God, which are imposed as Magisterially as if stamped with a Divine Character, though in themselves no other than (as Christ himself calls them) the *Traditions of men: Matth. 15. 3.*? It is a superlative and desperate piece of audacity for men to presume to mend any thing in the Worship of God, for it supposes the All-wise Law giver capable of error, and the attempter wiser than his Maker.⁶⁶

Any bit of purely human creativity in worship, no matter how clever, would always be a step backwards in the reformation of worship.

Sometimes the additions of men were rather obvious to Baptists, as the use of vestments or incense. Sometimes the additions of men were to instituted ordinances, as the larger ceremony of the Mass

Do our worship leaders feel pressure to be consistently creative for the "human audience"?

or infant baptism. Sometimes the additions of men were highly debatable, such as the circumstances concerning congregational singing. Nothing was entirely "safe," though, because Baptists were extremely aware that Satan would be able to twist the Scriptures to support a form of worship more to his liking.⁶⁷ They relied on the Spirit's guidance in their assemblies to know and understand the difference. God desired proper worship, and He gave proper guidelines for it. It was the responsibility of Christ's followers to ascertain and observe those guidelines.

The search by Baptists for what might be called a "New Testament liturgy" was bolstered by their pursuit of the apostolic model described above. The apostles' churches worshiped in a visible and tangible form, meaning that such a form existed, and they believed it existed in the New Testament. Knollys declared, "But there is a form of Godliness which is of God's own Institution under the Gospel wherein Men ought to worship God in Spirit and Truth, John 4. 23, 24, according to his own appointments."⁶⁸ Determining God's own appointments became troublesome to Baptists for the reasons explained above. They agreed on most of the ordinances. They agreed on most of the circumstances of those ordinances. Yet what they could not agree on became a major stumbling block to cooperation.

Without realizing it, Baptists could not clearly explain their approach to Scripture. Scholars use the terms "regulative principle" and "normative principle" to describe the two primary approaches to Scripture regarding worship and regularly apply them to movements in Christian history. Unfortunately, at least from the perspective of studying this era and also from that of the Baptists themselves, those terms mask the fact that neither were

⁶⁶ Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, Preface.

⁶⁷ Spilsbury, *Treatise*, 35.

⁶⁸ Knollys, *Parable*, 25.

observed consistently or even coherently. Kiffin would have quickly placed the Baptists in the camp of the regulative principle, as his definitions clearly demonstrated: “where a *Rule* and *express Law* is prescribed to men, that very *Prescription* is an express prohibition of the contrary,” and his most direct statement: “God hath Prescribed a particular way and method in which he will be Worshipped. He is so tender and nice therein that the least Variation from his own Stated Order will not be allowed by him, which appears by the punishment of such as Transgressed, and the praises given to such as kept his Ordinances and they were Delivered unto them, mentioned at large before.”⁶⁹ It was not until Benjamin Keach, decades later, that anyone associated with this group of Baptist leaders acknowledged the naivety of their position, and he was thoroughly lambasted for that admission.⁷⁰

In reality, Baptists used countless such variations in their worship. One example is the Lord’s Supper, a significant arena of much debate. Kiffin fondly recalled his nonconformist elders who would rather abstain from the Lord’s Sup-

How much attention does my church pay to the little details of worship? How do we argue for or against those details?

per than kneel during it, as was the custom of the Anglicans. But the debates in such circles during the 1630s and 1640s included the difference between sitting and reclining, the minister handing an element to every communicant or them passing the elements, being around a table or in pews, separating the elements or taking them together, and so on. It was even a matter of discussion to some that women did not expressly participate in the Last Supper in the upper room, or that it happened at night, or that they sang a hymn subsequently.⁷¹ The First London Confession did not address the Lord’s Supper at all, leaving it to the individual churches to resolve issues surrounding it. The truth was that the Bible did not address every circumstance of worship, leaving Baptists (and every other Christian) to supply certain details. But their inability to explain their own hermeneutical assumptions or methods became a huge barrier to their cooperation and communication.

Early English Baptists maintained the strongest unity when they acknowledged a certain range of liturgical freedom granted them in Scripture and each church’s right to explore that range. Their unity became threatened when they insisted on treating their unique positions or conclusions as biblical necessity. Because they did not all have a healthy awareness of that distinction, overcoming their differences was difficult, if not impossible. Baptist churches today are rarely accused of taking worship *too* seriously, but they are regularly faulted for taking certain manmade circumstances of their worship too earnestly. They would do well to learn from the early English Baptists who thought it good

⁶⁹ Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, 28–29, 57–58.

⁷⁰ Benjamin Keach was converted to the Particular Baptist position by Hanserd Knollys and was one of the driving forces behind hymn singing among Baptists. He pointed out that the argument from silence (the normative principle) that he used to defend his practice of hymn singing was the same argument that Baptists and others had used to defend their practice of prayer, particularly before the sermon.

⁷¹ See, for example, Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, 121; Gillespie, *Dispute*, 431ff.; Burroughs, *Gospel-Worship*, 264–65; Collins, *Some Reasons for Separation*, 13.

to pursue and stand firm on God's prescriptions in His worship. On the other hand, their inability to differentiate between those prescriptions and secondary circumstances can serve as a warning. The dissolution of the London Particular Baptists because they could not agree on the circumstances of singing in worship (too complex an issue to examine here) provides a cautionary tale for those lacking in grace.

Worship Embodies the Gospel

The most important contribution early English Baptists made to instituted worship was its connection with the Gospel. The good news of Jesus Christ so informed their identity that they knew their worship should enhance and not distract from that message. There are two obvious reflections of this influence based on the discussion above. First, the ordinances were the primary means of evangelism. Knollys stated, "Jesus Christ has instituted and ordained the Minister of the Gospel and all Gospel-Ordinances for the salvation of sinners to the Glory of God the Father."⁷² Remember that the ordinances included preaching and reading God's Word. Second, salvation was a prerequisite to and not a consequence of the right *use* of the ordinances. Whereas other Reformers considered the ordinances in their more sacramental sense, as a "use" or "means" to salvation, the Baptists understood "means" quite differently. Kiffin explained, "As the *Supper* is a spiritual participation of the *Body and Blood* of Christ by Faith, and so (not merely by the work done) is a means of Salvation, so *Baptism Signs* and *Seals* our Salvation to us, which lies in *Justification* and discharge of sin."⁷³

How does my church explain the importance of the ordinances?

The difference between Kiffin's view and a sacramental view was the line between presentation and participation. The ordinances presented the Gospel, either verbally as in preaching and prayer or visually as in baptism and the Lord's Supper; this was why the New Testament must be privileged in worship. A non-Christian could observe those ordinances in worship and be brought under conviction of the Gospel. Only a Christian, however, could participate in those ordinances. Only a Christian could take the Lord's Supper, be baptized, pray, or read Scripture aloud in congregational worship. Baptists would note that distinction to their hearers as a way of encouraging them to consider their own spiritual condition.⁷⁴ Those hearers who assented to the Gospel could be baptized, brought into membership of that church, and participate fully in the worship of God.

The Gospel shaped the early Baptists' understanding of worship just as their experience of worship gave them a greater appreciation of the Gospel. They wanted their preaching to be evangelistic. Knollys was clear about this: "It is my duty to preach the Gospel to

⁷² Knollys, *World that Now is*, 10.

⁷³ Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, 25–26.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Knollys, *Christ Exalted*, 1–15.

you and to exhort you to seek Christ, Act. 17. 22, 27., but it is the mere mercy and free grace of God to drive you to Christ, which nothing but his everlasting love can move him to do, Jer. 31. 3.”⁷⁵ As Particular Baptists, those who took a limited and predestinarian view of the Atonement, this put them at great odds with the other Reformed Englishmen who omitted evangelism from their uses for preaching, treating worship as a kind of Bible conference. Baptists wanted their worship to be edifying and evangelistic.

On the one hand, early Baptists wanted their worship services to be coherent to the people who visited them (an understandably small number considering the persecution they would likely face). That coherence would make their gospel presentation more understandable as well as their preaching for edification. On the other hand, they also wanted their worship services to be more than a sermon. Remember that the Gospel was both the good news of salvation and the good news of an ongoing relationship with God. Baptists wanted their churches to “enjoy” the ordinances. Knollys believed that God planted churches “that they may meet together in ONE to Worship God publicly in Spirit and in Truth in all his sacred Gospel Ordinances, to the Glory of God, and for the mutual edification of that mystical body of Christ, whose head he is.”⁷⁶

The Gospel was for non-believers and believers. The Gospel made worship accessible to non-believers, and it gave a greater depth of experience to believers. Worship glorified God, but it also edified the mind and soul of man. That was the beauty of the Gospel to early Baptists and the reason why worship was of such importance to them. They emphasized preaching, “both for the conversion of sinners and the edifying of those that are converted,” but not to the exclusion of the other ordinances.⁷⁷ God gave worship as a gift of immense benefit to believers in the church, but infused it with the message that could bring outsiders into that church.

Importantly, the emphasis on the Gospel and the great privileges of salvation led some early Baptists to acknowledge the role of women in worship. A rigid regulative principle had caused many Englishmen to conclude that women could not participate in worship because they must remain silent and there were no clear biblical examples of women taking the Lord’s Supper. Knollys believed that Christian women possessed the same right to worship. He even endorsed the highly unusual instance of a woman, Katherine Sutton, who composed and sang hymns in her church services.⁷⁸ The privileges of salvation eventually carried the day in Baptist practices, though not after a long and bitter fight.

Does my church give a clear presentation of the gospel in an environment and structure that is coherent to non-Christians?

⁷⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁶ *Confession of Faith* [1644], Article XXXIII; Knollys, *Exposition*, 18.

⁷⁷ Cox, *Appendix*, 10.

⁷⁸ Katherine Sutton, *A Christian Womans Experiences of the glorious workings of Gods free grace* (Rotterdam: Henry Goddaeus, 1663), Preface (by Knollys).

One final principle to note about Baptists' early approach to worship concerns the place of set forms in worship (such as a precomposed hymn). During their early days, they had to contend both with the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Directory for Public Worship*. The Anglicans focused on ceremony in their Book, and the Presbyterians prioritized efficient edification in their Directory. The Gospel informed the Baptist concern with both. Most importantly, decreeing or instituting any kind of order of worship implied to the people its necessity. If one had to use such an order to approach God, then it must be necessary in order to have a relationship with God, which means that it must be connected with salvation. For example, Baptists rejected any set form of prayer precisely because they knew the author of that prayer could not guarantee its efficacy. The same would be true of a homily. God could not be manipulated by the form of a ceremony.

How does my church use pre-written prayers, songs, or devotions?

Similarly, Baptists believed that elaborate ceremonies obscured the clear and plain message of the Gospel. On the one hand, it would be easy for the people to be caught up in the pomp and circumstance of an ornate set form of worship and forget the purpose or object of their worship. On the other hand, the more elaborate the liturgy the more focused the people would be on the accuracy of its execution, associating proper worship with keeping a script. But they knew that God had intentionally moved away from the grandeur of Temple worship to the simplicity of gospel worship in order to reorient the worshiper to what really mattered. Sophisticated manmade ceremonies could not bring a human soul to salvation and therefore must be shed. Christ's institutions revealed everything God wanted man to know about maintaining their relationship.

Obviously, this distrust of elaboration resulted in early Baptist worship being quite plain and centered around preaching, as explained above. It also meant that Baptists typically removed all visual symbols from their worship spaces and practices. Knollys, for example, rejected crosses, altars, and paintings because he saw in practice that those objects became idols to the people.⁷⁹ Baptists feared the slippery slope of set forms of ceremony. Any set form of prayer would inevitably lead to a Prayer Book, a Prayer Book would lead to uniformity in images and genuflections, and such uniformity would lead to the complete control over a church.⁸⁰ They believed they were far better off not going down that road in the first place. One area that proved especially difficult for them was the precomposed hymn, something that violated their opposition of set forms of worship but that was necessary for congregational singing (itself a disputed practice). The debate over singing revealed the uneven fault lines in Baptists' approach to Scripture.

How elaborate has my church made the production of our worship services? Have we considered the ramifications of that decision?

⁷⁹ Knollys, *Exposition*, 114–15.

⁸⁰ Benjamin Cox, Hanserd Knollys, and William Kiffin, *A Declaration Concerning The Publike Dispute Which Should have been in the Publike Meetinghouse of Alderman-Bury* (London: n.p., 1645), 11–12.

Early Baptists were willing to use Christ's ordinances in their worship because they revealed the Gospel, edified the whole man, and were approved by God. Everything else was an exercise in human futility. This does not mean that all Baptists endorsed equally each practice or that all Baptists placed the same emphasis on the Gospel. There are far too many details and examples to explain in a short essay. But Baptists' emphasis on the Gospel shaped and distinguished their approach to worship for many years.

The Gospel, then, was the measuring stick for early Baptist worship practices. Did their worship services embody that Gospel—both in evangelistic presentation and in celebration of a life lived in the presence of God? Did they worship according to God's own appointments? Did they emphasize the purity of Christ's bride? Did they employ means that obscured the simple message of the Gospel? Those were the questions that they asked themselves persistently to ensure they brought God proper glory. Their worship services were not productions for consumption but vital elements of their relationship with God. That basic perspective guided their planning and evaluation.

Ideally, these principles and examples will spark some ideas for reflection. Perhaps these questions will raise further issues for contemplation. It does seem that early English Baptists identified the framework of a truly Baptist theology of worship, one that fits closely and carefully with all our Baptist distinctives. Why is that so? Because our Baptist distinctives were actually shaped by that framework of worship. Rediscovering this origin of our distinctive beliefs and reopening the dialogue about worship has the potential to revitalize our churches' participation in worship and refresh our leaders' planning of worship. "Worship renewal" has been a fashionable term for quite some time. Baptists should realize that worship renewal has been a part of our English-speaking tradition from the very beginning.