

Book Review

James M. Renihan, *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-1705* (Paternoster, 2008): 207 pp.

Introduction

This work is volume 17 in the “Studies in Baptist History and Thought Series” issued by Paternoster Press. It is the welcomed publication of Reformed Baptist historian James M. Renihan’s dissertation completed in 1997 at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Renihan portrays it as “an attempt to describe in detail the implementation of confessional ecclesiological principles among a large group of churches which subscribed the Second London Baptist Confession in the final quarter of the seventeenth century” (p. xix). The title is taken from early Baptist pastor Nehemiah Coxe who stated, “The Edification and Beauty of the Church is much concerned in her Order....” (p. xxiii). Renihan’s method for his study of the “practical ecclesiology” of early Particular Baptists comes from his examination of three sets of sources taken in “concentric circles”: the innermost ring is the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* itself; the middle ring is the ecclesiological writings of various early Particular Baptists; and the outer ring are the manuscripts of Church Books (p. xxi).

Summary of Content

The book consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an historical overview of the emergence and development of Particular Baptists. Chapters 2-6 then provide ecclesiological analysis of various issues (the nature of the church; church government; church officers; church worship; church associations). Here is a brief glimpse into each of the chapters:

In chapter one, Renihan first traces the origins of Calvinistic Baptists to division in the separatist Jacob/Lathrop/Jessey Church in the 1630s. Based on his examination of the “Kiffin Manuscript” Renihan concludes that these early Baptists most likely restored the practice of baptism “within their own circle” rather than through contact with Dutch Anabaptists (p. 6). Renihan also makes a strong case for the close relationship of Independent church leaders (like the “dissenting brethren” at the Westminster Assembly: Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Jeremiah Burroughs, William Bridge, and Sidrach Simpson) with the early Particular Baptist leaders (see pp. 10-11). He further argues that the early Baptists self-consciously viewed themselves and their churches as “among the reformed churches” (p. 15). This discussion is particularly valuable given recent comments made by some Presbyterians (like R. Scott Clark) who argue that Baptists should not use the label “reformed.” To the contrary, Renihan argues that early Baptists like Knollys and Keach “believed that they had taken the principles of the reformation to their logical conclusion” (p. 17). Thus, by recovering the Biblical ordering of the church, “they were self-consciously more reformed than the paedobaptist reformed churches” (p. 17)!

Renihan next also offers a detailed look at the development and adoption of the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith*, drawn from the Westminster Confession (1647) and the Savoy Declaration and Platform of Polity (1658). The Baptists were concerned to show that they were “orthodox, and in most ways identical with the convictions of the Puritans around them” (p. 20). Thus, they were “in the broad stream of English Reformed Confessional Christianity” (p. 17). Renihan concludes that the confession originated in the Petty France church and was most likely composed by Nehemiah Coxe and Williams Collins. Though first written in 1677, it was endorsed in a General Assembly of Baptist ministers and messengers in 1689. Interestingly, Renihan notes that although the document is known as the 1689 Confession, he could find no evidence that it was printed in that year (see p. 28, n. 100; it was published in 1677, 1688, and 1699)!

Finally, Renihan offers an intriguing survey of the demographics of the Particular Baptists, indicating that c. 1715-18 they composed c. 0.74% of the English and 1.31% of the Welsh population (p. 30). Particular Baptist churches were found throughout the country, in both urban and rural areas. Some churches were large (London’s Petty France congregation recorded 538 members in 1676 and they likely had an even larger number in attendance) and others were small (the Norfolk church had 51 members in 1689). The churches were primarily composed of the poor from the lower classes of society. Women composed the majority. Churches had trouble supporting their ministers, and most of the early pastors were what we would call bivocational. So, “Kiffin was a merchant, Knollys a school teacher, and Keach a tailor and a book seller” (p. 35).

In chapter 2 on the nature of the church, Renihan argues that “ecclesiology was the driving force behind the Baptist movement” (p. 37). Noting the 1689 Confession’s definition of the universal church and the local church, Renihan contends that the early Baptists possessed a “catholicity” of spirit. They thus considered paedobaptist assemblies (Presbyterians and independents) to be “defective” and yet true churches (p. 45). This spirit extended to the inclusion in Particular Baptist Assemblies (like the one in 1689) of churches that held to both open and closed membership (p. 47). Renihan offers a valuable sketch of the serious process followed by Particular Baptists in the constituting of local churches, noting that some (like Keach) insisted on the use of membership covenants, while others (like Knollys) did not. He also traces their understanding of the duties of church membership and the exercise of discipline, concluding that “the ‘visible saints’ for the most part lived up to expectations” (p. 57). Finally, he stresses that for these early Baptists evangelism was always accompanied by church planting: “The Baptists could not conceive of evangelism apart from church planting” (p. 60).

In chapter 3 on church government, Renihan begins by asking whether the early Particular Baptists followed a more Congregational or Independent model of church government. Is the seat of authority in the congregation or in the elders? Here Renihan interacts with the recent work by Malaysian Reformed Baptist Pastor-Theologian Poh Boon Sing who has argued that the Particular Baptists were closer to the Independents in ecclesiology. After tracing evidence of

diversity among early Baptist leaders (e.g., Knolly's 'Modified Independency,' Coxe's "Congregational Consent/Rule by Elder," and Keach's "Congregationalism/Rule by Elder") along with examination of church minute books, Renihan argues that Poh has overstated his case. He concludes that Independency, among Particular Baptists, "was not a system emphasizing the rights of elders so much as it was an attempt to maintain the rights of the people while carrying out the appointed tasks of the eldership" (p. 87).

In chapter 4 on church officers, Renihan examines the two offices of elder and deacon outlined in the 1689 Confession. Though acknowledging that the Confession does not address a distinction between teaching and ruling elders, and that the majority of churches did not recognize a distinct office of ruling elder, Renihan concludes that "at least a small number of the churches made a distinction between teaching and ruling elders" (p. 100). Hanserd Knollys even held that the churches in each city should be guided by a preeminent minister of Christ (see p. 101)! Renihan also describes the Baptist practice of setting apart "Gifted Brethren" as lay preachers (pp. 107-114). Finally, he examines the role of deacons in Baptist churches as an office primarily given the task of benevolence. Noteworthy here is his debunking of the moderate Baptist myth that early Baptists regularly appointed women to serve as deacons. Contra moderate historians like Leon McBeth, Renihan notes that only in one congregation (Broadmead) was there a mention of deaconesses and even here these were "special servants to the sick" and not "an office equivalent to the deacons" (p. 116).

In chapter 5 on worship, the author traces the Particular Baptist embrace of the Regulative Principle. He cites Horton Davies who notes that "Baptism apart, it would be difficult to distinguish their worship from that of the Independents" (p. 118, n. 1). The Baptist view of the Lord's Day as the Christian Sabbath was little different from "the broader Puritan/Independent/Separatist religious culture on this issue" (p. 122). As "self-consciously part of the Puritan movement" Baptists were concerned for "simplicity" and rejected "any element for which scriptural warrant could not be found" (p. 125). Preaching was central. Women "were not allowed to exercise any kind of authoritative verbal communication in the churches" (p. 131; again, Renihan observes in n. 59 that McBeth "seriously misrepresents the facts" in this regard). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the "great controversy" over the singing of hymns between Benjamin Keach (who advocated for hymn singing) and Isaac Marlowe (who opposed it) (pp. 146-52).

Finally, in chapter 6 on associations of churches, Renihan points out the high value that the early Baptists placed on "communion" among sister churches. He concludes that the 1689 Confession advocates "formal associationalism" (p. 172). Under proper circumstances, the churches "gladly entered into strict and solemn arrangements" (p. 173).

Conclusion and Commendation

This book is highly recommended. It is an especially helpful corrective for any pastors who might have been influenced by H. Leon McBeth's moderate construal of Baptist history in *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Broadman, 1987; a point Renihan acknowledges, p. xx, n. 4). Renihan convincingly argues that the Particular Baptists were not driven by "soul liberty" but by a passion for precise confessional doctrine. This work is especially helpful in detailing the way in which the Particular Baptist saw themselves as part of the Reformation theological tradition (and even taking it to its logical Biblical conclusions on the issues of baptism and ecclesiology). They were more influenced by and akin to the Puritans and Independents than the Anabaptists. What is most exciting about this book is the way it will help Reformed Baptist churches in our day understand their own heritage as they live out the gospel in our times and set a course for the future.

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