

“Every Man’s Conscience is a needed addition to the growing library of Christian Endurance studies. King’s work provides a window into Baptist history that helps the contemporary Christian recognize the dangers of accommodating state churches and antagonistic cultures. It acknowledges the role government has played in both liberty and persecution, while parsing the distractions and theological errors the church has continually faced. *Every Man’s Conscience* is not just for Baptists, but for any Christian from a Kingdom-oriented tradition who wants to increase trust in Christ’s infinite capacity to fulfill his promises under any—and all—cultural circumstances.”

K.A. ELLIS

Director of The Edmiston Center,
Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta

“Since the early seventeenth century, the struggle for religious liberty has been a regular, if not always consistent, feature of Baptist testimony. As Ryan King’s new book demonstrates, in wonderful historical detail, this commitment to liberty has shaped in profound ways Baptist thinking about church and state—and offers a powerful alternative to the Scylla and Charybdis of unprincipled relativism and inflexible hegemony.”

CRAWFORD GRIBBEN

Professor of History,
Queen’s University Belfast

“As a Reformed Baptist, and a devoted student of the English Civil War, I have sometimes reflected that Parliament’s Blasphemy Ordinance of 1648 would have sent me either to prison or the gallows. Our Presbyterian forefathers (who dominated Parliament at that time) were not renowned for religious toleration. It fell to Baptists and their allies to make the robust case for toleration. In this significant work, Ryan King documents the noble and principled Baptist commitment to religious liberty in the story of Christian and Protestant history. I commend the work very warmly.”

NICK NEEDHAM

Church History Tutor, Highland Theological College;
Author of the series *2000 Years of Christ’s Power*

“Ryan King has produced an impressive piece of work, detailed in its research and addressing the vitally important subject of religious freedom and as such it is timely. We are facing new challenges to our testimony to the truth from postmodernism and particularly the LGBTQ lobby. It is good to be turned to those who have gone before and to be inspired by their faithful witness. Our theological forebears paid a high price for religious freedom. I am happy to commend this work.”

ROBERT W. OLIVER

*Author of *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists 1771-1892**

“Religious freedom is a vital topic—historically and currently. This excellent book guides the reader along the contours of the world in which early Baptists found themselves, and through which they forged a uniquely biblical and nuanced path. Meticulously researched, vividly written, and sensitively applied to the contemporary world, this is a wise guide to what our Baptist forbears wrestled with in their age, and what we must grapple with in our own.”

ANDREW ROYCROFT

Pastor, Portadown Baptist Church, County Armagh, Ireland;
Visiting lecturer in Biblical Theology & Apologetics, Irish Baptist College

“Given recent shifts in Western culture, it is understandable that Christians feel the pressing need to understand the church’s relationship to the government. What is needed in our day is not manmade knee-jerk reactions and short-sighted solutions, but rather sober trust in the sovereign God’s covenantal and eschatological promises. In this book, Ryan King offers such sobriety by showing how major Baptists in history have thought about religious liberty and how Baptist history can help Christians (even non-Baptists!) engage the government and culture wisely today. Highly recommended!”

BRANDON D. SMITH

Associate Professor Theology Early Christianity and Chair of the Herschel H. Hobbs School of Theology and Ministry, Oklahoma Baptist University;
Cofounder, the Center for Baptist Renewal

Every Man's Conscience



STUDIES IN BAPTIST HISTORY

EVERY MAN'S CONSCIENCE

*Early English Baptists
and the Fight for Religious Liberty*

RYAN BURTON KING



Every Man's Conscience: Early English Baptists and the Fight for Religious Liberty

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*For my parents,
Barry and Frances King*

Then Jesus said to him,
“Put your sword back into its place.
For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”
Matthew 26:52

Jesus answered,
“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my
servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the
Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”
John 18:36

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Foreword

For Your Freedom of Conscience

Malcolm B. Yarnell III

Every Man's Conscience will be one of the most valuable texts you ever read. The author addresses an extremely important subject to you: You and your most fundamental right, your personal freedom of conscience. Sadly, liberty of conscience has become a subject too often neglected by many who should know better even while it is being attacked by those who would bring harm to humanity.

This book addresses your personal freedom before other people and your personal right (and responsibility) to seek out and retain eternal truth as you deem best. Through thoughtful historical commentary, Ryan Burton King wants us to understand how liberty of conscience is the inalienable possession and responsibility of every human being. King has collected rare texts from an early modern intellectual tradition which helped to shape modernity's conceptions about human dignity, human freedom, and human rights. And he explains why those concepts remain important for the world in which we live today.

A few words about why this book is necessary, a short description of the lineaments of the genius which it affirms, and an expression of appreciation may help launch your reading.

Why This Book Is Necessary Now

It has been widely affirmed that if the fundamental modern idea of liberty of conscience is diminished, then our other rights will come under pressure, and our ability to pursue human flourishing will be inhibited. Standing on opposing sides of a worldwide religious tradition, both the Roman Catholic Pope John Paul II and free church Baptists together recognize that liberty in the matter of religion is the first freedom upon which all other human freedoms depend.¹

¹ John Paul II to the heads of state of the nations who signed the Helsinki Final Act (1975), September 1, 1980, on the eve of the Madrid Conference on European Security and Cooperation,

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Human beings across the world, whether they hold to Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, or Atheistic worldviews, increasingly agree that human rights must be respected. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights was written and has been widely accepted due to the burgeoning hope that all nations will embrace the fundamental importance of human dignity and will recognize basic human rights. Despite their widespread affirmation across cultures, various scholars have demonstrated how those rights nevertheless began to be recognized in a specific historical context.² This book addresses a critical movement in that context.

This book could not have appeared at a more propitious moment, for these very ideas are under attack from multiple directions. On the one hand, adherents to various religions in the contemporary West face an assault on their liberty of conscience from elements of the radical political Left. Some hope to limit religious believers' human rights by restricting religious expression to private worship or private opinion. They argue for the priority of their own sexual expression over religious liberty and religious action.³

On the other hand, the assault on religious liberty comes not merely from the Left. A potentially devastating and deceptive assault also comes from elements of the radical Right. Proponents of a new strain of "Christian Nationalism" may prove particularly deceptive in the churches because they audaciously use the name of God and propose to enthrone Christ over culture. These proponents draw upon harmful ideas once advocated by medieval thinkers, intolerant Puritans, slaveholding theologians, and modern reconstructionists.⁴

Ryan King is sensitive in this book, not only to discuss the lessons learned by others in the past but to the needs of our present day, needs that require the

no. 5; Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III, eds., *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016).

² Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019); Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (New York: Allen Lane, 2014); John Witte, Jr. and Frank S. Alexander eds., *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³ Mary Eberstadt, *It's Dangerous to Believe: Religious Freedom and Its Enemies* (San Francisco: Harper, 2016); Luke Goodrich, *Free to Believe: The Battle Over Religious Liberty in America* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2019).

⁴ Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2022). See the critiques by Kevin DeYoung, "The Rise of Right-Wing Wokeism," *The Gospel Coalition* (November 2022); Paul Matzko, "Beware the 'Christian Prince,'" *Reason: Free Minds and Free Markets* (June 2023); Andrew T. Walker, "Book Review: The Case for Christian Nationalism," *Nine Marks* (November 2022).

appearance of this book now. Indeed, it could be argued that part of the problem in the present is that many of the religious heirs of the intellectual tradition which King discloses are themselves unaware of their own founding genius. If we were more aware of our past, we might be even more willing to oppose expressions of intolerance or racism and ethnocentrism than we already are.

The Lineaments of Liberty of Conscience

If the reader will allow it, I want to reaffirm and restate in my own words the religious genius of the tradition King expositis so well in this book. Even if the reader is secular in outlook, it must be recognized that the radicals who helped foster the rise of the modern discourse on universal human rights acted from ideas arising from their religious faith. For many of these radical believers, the truths they discovered were so significant that they were willing not only to endure social disapproval but to suffer government persecution, even to the point of death. These Christians believed above all in Jesus Christ as their Lord, King, and Master. Several other doctrines accompanied or flowed from their primary belief in the sole Lordship of Jesus Christ.

First, these Non-conformists pursued with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength the basic and exclusive Christian confession that *Jesus Christ is the one Lord* (John 14:6; Rom. 10:9–10; 1 Cor. 12:3). Dissenting men and women advocated liberty of conscience precisely because they believed the second person of the divine Trinity had become human, died on a cross, and then arose from death. They had encountered Christ personally, been called to forsake their rebellion against God, and responded by taking up their crosses and following their master as his disciples (Mark 8:34–38). The free church doctrine of liberty of conscience is grounded in a series of faith claims, but the first and foremost dogma for them was that Jesus Christ, as the true Lord, is the only one who can demand loyalty from a human soul.

Second, they believed the Lordship of Jesus and all other necessary doctrines are clearly taught in the Christian canon, the Holy Bible. *Scripture alone*, working by the Holy Spirit, is sufficient to accomplish the spiritual purposes for which the church of Jesus Christ exists. Because they believed his Word was sufficient to meet Christ's purpose for the church in spreading the faith, they identified any attempt to spread Christianity by means of coercion through government as showing lack of faith in Jesus Christ. Christ commanded his church to use the great authority of the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Eph. 6:10–18). The Word of God itself, illumined by the

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Holy Spirit, has sufficient power to convert human souls (1 Peter 1:22–25; 2 Peter 1:16–21). The great authority of the sword of the flesh, which restrains wickedness through violence, rightfully belongs not to the church but to the state alone (Rom. 13:1–7).

Third, they believed in the necessity of salvation by grace alone through *personal faith alone* in Christ alone. In reading and hearing Scripture carefully, they discovered that Jesus was establishing his kingdom upon the earth now and will bring his kingdom in its fullness one day. In agreement with the Reformers, they believed that they needed to unite with Christ personally through being born again into a saving relation by faith alone (Rom. 1:16–17). They read that every human being is personally responsible for their acts and will be held accountable before God (Ezek. 18; Rev. 20:11–15), a foreboding truth to which every human conscience testifies even now (Rom. 2:15–16). This personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord means that no other person ought to impinge upon faith. Christ alone is the mediator between God and man, so he alone must be given personal faith and faithful loyalty (1 Tim. 2:5–6).

Fourth, arising from their loyal faith in Christ as Lord, they believed that *Christ alone rules the church*. Christ is present to each locally covenanted church, which must be governed by his discipline alone (Matt. 18:15–20). His ordinances, including baptism and the Lord's Supper, must be obeyed as revealed in Scripture without subtraction, addition, or other alteration. Before communion may be taken, baptism must be given to believers only, for each conscience must testify its personal faith to God (Matt. 28:18–20; 1 Peter 3:21). With Paul, they believed the demonic “mystery of iniquity” is already at work and should be ascribed to any attempt to put another person or institution in the place of God (2 Thess. 2:4, 7). This included, of course, any attempt to impose laws advocated by a pope, a king, a presbytery, or a pastor upon a church and upon a conscience. Their faith required a reevaluation of every human tradition, including those which had been built up around the sacraments and the governance of the church by those they deemed usurpers.

Fifth, these radical Christians' loyalty to Christ as the only lord of the human conscience and as the only head of the church led them to advocate the *separation of church and state*. They appealed to the words of Jesus that a distinction must be made between what is owed to Caesar and what is owed to God (Matt. 22:15–22). They also argued that the responsibility to judge human bodies for holding certain beliefs belongs not to human beings but to God alone. They departed from the persecutory reading of Matthew 13:24–30

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which had been advanced by Augustine, the medieval church, John Calvin, and the Puritans, among others. Instead, they showed how Jesus taught that the judgment of unbelievers in the world was to occur at the end of the world and was to be executed by his angels. These radical Christians rejected the longstanding Christian tradition of religious persecution by appealing to the true interpretation of the parable, which was taught by the Lord himself (Matt. 13:36–43).

Thanksgiving

For those radical Christians whom we know today as the Continental Anabaptists, the early English Baptists, the early American Baptists, the Quakers, and others, we should be thankful. We should be thankful that they corrected the major Christian traditions, who had brought untold misery upon human beings through persecuting bodies to maintain or advance their own ideas. Now, rather than oppressing consciences through forcing bodies, Christians widely recognize the churches' responsibility is not to *persecute* but to *persuade*. We must honor the sanctity of every human conscience as we attempt to change wicked hearts through speaking his powerful Word.

For these and other radical believers' wholesome addition to the freedom of individual human beings, to the peace of the world, and to the flourishing of human communities, I believe we should be thankful. However, I am most thankful that now Christians will rely on the only means God appointed from the church's beginning to propagate our beliefs: Faithful persuasion through loving proclamation. If we who are Christians will stay focused on proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit will do the rest through the prayers of God's people. May we never again forget the lessons these radical believers in Jesus once taught the other churches and the world.

Malcolm B. Yarnell III

Benbrook, Texas

October 14, 2023

(William Penn, advocate of liberty of conscience, was born this day in 1644)



The Five Points of a Baptist's Faith, Helmys Hall, Regents Park College, Oxford.

Introduction:

Religious Liberty—a Baptist Distinctive

On the wall of Helwys Hall at Regents Park College in Oxford, there is a five-pointed star, each point of which is inscribed with a Greek word. Translated into English, the words that label the star are “faith,” “baptism,” “fellowship,” “freedom,” and “evangelism.” These were, according to Henry Wheeler Robinson, “The Five Points of a Baptist’s Faith.”¹ In other words, they represent the irreducible minimums that define and distinguish what it means to be “Baptist;” those vital distinctives that under-gird Baptist faith and practice and are intertwined to such a degree, that the absence or removal of any one of them produces an ecclesiastical system that can no longer be rightly referred to as “Baptist.” To refer to these five words as “distinctives” is *not* to diminish the role any of these things may have had or do have in Christian traditions of different theological and ecclesiological persuasions; it *is* to note the vital and sometimes unique importance they are seen to play in an accurate portrayal of historic Baptist belief and behaviour. A study of historic Baptist documents—books, tracts, petitions, confessions of faith, and so forth—reveals the significance of these distinctives and the way they fit together.²

Baptists rejected the collapsing of the New Covenant into the Old functionally evident in paedobaptism, and so too the various state-church systems of various models of Christendom. Instead, holding personal responsibility and divine sovereignty in balance, they emphasised a salvation received by grace through *faith* in Christ: “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Furthermore, according to the Baptists, only upon a person’s profession of faith are they considered a suitable candidate for *baptism*—in other words, someone should not be baptised when they are born, but

¹ H. Wheeler Robinson, “The Five Points of a Baptist’s Faith,” *The Baptist Quarterly* 11, Nos. 1–2 (1942–1945): 4–14.

² For a collection of Baptist confessions with commentary, see William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, Second Revised Edition, ed. Bill J. Leonard (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2011).

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rather when they are “born again” with repentance and faith (John 3:1–15; Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38).

Such baptism of believers ought to be done in the context of the *fellowship* of a local church, signifying unity with Christ and creating unity among Christians as the church is built up (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:26–28). True fellowship with Christ and among Christians is not created by coercion though, and no one should be forced in any way into the profession of any faith, the practise of any ritual, sacrament, or ordinance, adherence to any theological system, or membership in any religious institution. More specific to a Christian context, unbelievers should not be coerced to follow Christ, be baptised, or join a church since these are voluntary responses to the inward-working of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Scriptures.

This theological as opposed to humanistic approach to religious liberty, or *freedom* of conscience, is intrinsically linked to the Baptist “free church” ecclesiology whereby faith in Christ, not national heritage or religious parentage leads to baptism and fellowship. Furthermore, it historically fuelled Baptists’ intentional evangelistic methodology. Because the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but of the Spirit (2 Cor. 10:4), and because we believe people become Christians not on the basis of governmental coercion, national citizenship, immediate family, or personal heritage, but as they hear the gospel and are called to repentance and faith in Jesus (Rom. 10:5–15), we devote ourselves to *evangelism*, proclaiming the good news of Jesus and making disciples to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:18–20).

All of these points are worthy of in-depth exploration and detailed explanation. They remain historically significant and currently relevant. However, the present volume is primarily concerned with that of “freedom,” in the sense of religious liberty.

When applied to specific aspects of modern-day life, the study of history is a powerful corrective to present confusion. The little volume you now hold is therefore born out of two primary motivations: I want people to know history and I want people to learn from history. More precisely in the case of this book, I want people to know and learn from *Baptist* history.

It is a travesty if members and even leaders of Baptist churches have a woefully deficient knowledge of the historical and theological formation of Baptist faith and practice, and yet this is all too often the case. Indeed, many baptistic believers seem to know more about—and hold greater respect for—people

who would have at one time beheaded, burned, drowned, imprisoned, or tortured them than they do the very men and women of whom they are theological heirs and spiritual kin. A great deal of material has been written extolling the virtues and expounding the theologies of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Knox, and the Puritans but what of the lives and beliefs of those all-too-unknown Baptists who suffered many afflictions for the sake of their conscience and the consciences of others, the proclamation of the gospel, and the establishment of healthy churches pursuing a Christ-exalting submission to the authority of Scripture? As a Baptist pastor, I would like to see this tendency balanced out.

But this book is not only for those who would identify as “Baptist.” Why should Baptists read and benefit from Anglican and Presbyterian history and literature, for example, but Anglicans, Presbyterians, and indeed anyone else not read and benefit from Baptist history and literature? Nonetheless, this book is not for the perpetuation of labels—helpful though they may be—but the promotion of liberty, a subject relevant to us all. Hopefully, its contents will be found useful to anyone committed to the continuation of biblical reformation and the growth of the church through the preaching of Christ.

Clearly identifying and expounding a historic, biblical theology of true religious freedom is a matter of particular importance for our present cultural moment. It should come as no surprise that there are many people in the world—whatever their beliefs—who do not have such freedom. Even Western readers unaccustomed to persecution of the variety those in the Global South experience would doubtless note a growing climate of anti-religious and especially anti-Christian antagonism. This hostility is fuelled by the influence of media and celebrity, and may in some cases even take legislative and judicial form, as public opinion shapes political orthodoxy and informs the actions of government and law enforcement officials, threatening liberty in a variety of ways, for people of different faiths. Non-conformity to the religious or irreligious *status quo* is at best frowned upon, and in many places suppressed—both legislatively and in far too many cases around the world, violently.

Even in the United States—a nation purportedly committed to the idea of “liberty and justice for all”—long enjoyed freedoms to believe and live accordingly are increasingly threatened by zealots across the political spectrum. Around the world, governmental overreach and the real or perceived suppression of freedoms by societal elites and influencers inevitably creates a reaction, but contemporary Populist push-back (of both left wing and right wing varieties) against “the establishment” often toes and eventually crosses the line of

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prejudice. Such prejudice is often not only religious but racialised: think at the most basic level of how some people view and speak about “Muslims” as though the word itself were obscene, or “Trojan Horse” hysteria that sees migration, asylum, and diaspora religio-cultural preservation as invasion, or the resurgence of Jew hatred in many forms, with far Right “Jews will not replace us” attitudes horseshoeing with the anti-Semitic theories and agendas of the radical Left, or the incorrect assumptions made about a person’s beliefs and values based on audible and visual factors such as family name, language, accent, facial features, skin colour, clothing, and head-wear.

As Western society seems to push historic Christian faith and practice more and more back to its starting place at the margins of society, some embrace politicised systems such as Theonomy, Christian Reconstructionism, Dominionism, and Christian Nationalism, while others are less invested philosophically but still content with preserving and advancing a nominal, cultural Christianity. From young men listening to apologetics podcasts to old women attending praise and worship prayer rallies, from a black Pentecostal individual in Reading, England to a white evangelical mega-church in Redding, California, from the Kirk in Moscow, Idaho to the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia, these ideas increasingly hold sway. All manner of abusive attitudes, actions, strictures, and structures are sure to follow error—indeed, they have already done so, to great harm.

Under such circumstances, it is all the more important to remember those who have gone before us and dealt with similar issues in previous ages so that we can learn from them. We need to be able to say with our chests that Christ’s Kingdom is not of this world, and that it is inappropriate to add his name or his people’s identity as an appendage to a worldly political movement. We must catechise ourselves not to confuse divinely given roles and boundaries of authority, distorting the mission of God in Christ and his appointed means for kingdom advance in the church. We must reject worldly philosophies that produce systems and structures that result in persecution, religion by coercion not faith by conviction and conversion—and thereby an unregenerate church. And we must recognise the consequences, not least as seen across Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America: an under-evangelised and reactionary, rebellious society that remembers the abusive conduct of Christians, not the beauty and glory of Christ.

The prominent Baptist preacher of Victorian London, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, once said of Baptist Christians:

The claim which we make to have been the first expositors and advocates in modern times of religious liberty, is based on the surest foundation, and is capable of the most satisfactory proof.³

The purpose of this volume is to examine that foundation, particularly within the historical and theological context of the years 1612–1689 and the cultural context of England. Hopefully readers will be both informed, and perhaps even transformed, by a better understanding of the early English Baptist development of a biblically distinctive theology of religious liberty in an era when it was not enjoyed by many and was endorsed by few, well before the radical cultural and intellectual shifts of the eighteenth century.

After introducing the historical setting and socio-religious context of the early English Baptists, representative contributions on the subject of religious liberty from early General and Particular Baptists will be explored—“General” and “Particular” referring to views of the extent of the atonement, and more broadly, distinguishing Calvinistic from non-Calvinist Baptists. It might be noted that not all are happy with the use of such categories, despite their prominent and consistent use in the relevant historiography.⁴ Admittedly, such labels were not used at the time, and those later identified as “Baptist,” were less concerned with labelling themselves and if they did, did so clumsily, choosing instead to express their identity in different ways, making themselves known more by their beliefs, practises, and associations than by names. The rejection of these categories is fairly recent and novel, and though intriguing—perhaps some may even find it compelling—not germane to the topic at hand: the doctrine of religious liberty as expressed by those in the soteriologically distinct but baptistic congregationalist traditions of, for example, the *Standard Confession* of 1660 (“General Baptists”) and the *Confession of Faith* of 1677/1689 (“Particular Baptists”).

While it is somewhat beyond the scope of the present volume to detail any implications history might have for a contemporary approach to religious liberty, I do hope these will be somewhat obvious and that this analysis of history and theology will provide an accessible framework for appropriate Christian engagement in response to apparent and emerging threats to religious liberty today, whether that liberty is our own or our neighbours’.

³ C.H. Spurgeon, cited by Ian Randall, “Baptists, The Gospel and Freedom of Conscience,” in *50th Anniversary Lecture of the SBHS* (Dunstable: Fauconberg Press, 2012), 15.

⁴ Cf. Matthew C. Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* (Oxford: University Press, 2019).

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At the centre of Helwys Hall's star of Baptist distinctives, is the Greek for "Lord Jesus." Ultimately, everything we believe and do must centre on Jesus Christ. The early English Baptist pursuit of universal religious liberty was not about liberty as an end in itself, but about the exaltation of Jesus as Lord. Because he is Lord, we must worship him regardless of restriction. Because he is Lord, we must proclaim him regardless of opposition. Because he is Lord, others must be allowed to live and worship in peace, with the Christian hope and mission being that they will hear and believe the gospel sincerely, without oppression. Because he is Lord, we believe that many will be persuaded by his message, amazed by his good news, and trust in and follow him.

Part One

The Crucible of Persecution¹:
Surveying the Historical Context

¹ From a phrase used by Leon McBeth, *English Baptist Literature on Religious Liberty to 1689* (New York: Arno, 1980), 1.



Etch by Jan Luycken: Burning of eight Anabaptists in Amsterdam, 1549

1

Persecution of Continental Baptistic Movements¹

Fairly early on in the days of the Protestant Reformation, some people began to leave Ulrich Zwingli's Zurich church after Zwingli gave the city council—instead of Scripture—authority in a matter of church practice. Through further Bible study, three men in particular—Felix Mantz, Conrad Grebel, and George Blaurock—came to believe in the institutional separation of church and state and a church membership comprised of believers at an age of understanding, baptised after personal profession of faith in Christ. These men and others in their group sought baptism as believers on January 25, 1525 and were soon called “Anabaptists”—a derogatory name meaning “rebaptisers” which came to be applied to several groups that practised believer's baptism and was generally rejected by those so-named.

“Anabaptist” teaching would spread quickly and on Easter Sunday 1525 we find a Roman Catholic priest named Balthasar Hubmaier baptising 300 believing parishioners.

These baptistic believers and their heirs made three particularly noteworthy contributions to reformation.

Ecclesiology—what the church is: The church is the assembly of people who truly believe their sins are removed by Christ, have been baptised as a confession of faith in him, and are committed to lives of reformation and repentance. The church is not an instrument of the state nor is the state an instrument of the church; they are separate. Church membership is then in no way connected to citizenship or parentage, but personal trust in Christ.

Ethics—what the church does: The Anabaptists were dismayed by how some were twisting the doctrine of justification by faith to excuse riotously sinful living, so emphasised “regeneration” instead of justification, and the changed life that true salvation brings. Their focus was less on the biblical teaching that

¹ For more on the subject of these movements, see Ian M. Randall, *Communities of Conviction: Baptist Beginnings in Europe* (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2009).

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we are justified by faith apart from works, and more on the complementary teaching that true faith will produce good works that imitate Christ and are characterised by love.

Evangelism—how the church grows: The Reformation as led by Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin certainly had its missionaries, but is sometimes called “the Magisterial Reformation” because of its reliance on civil magistrates to legislate change and grow. The Anabaptists relied on God’s Spirit changing people through the Scriptures, without the need for government support. They saw that true faith is not coerced and the church is not built through weapons of persecution but through patiently preaching the good news of God’s word, so actively shared their faith with others.

After just a few years those who pioneered this movement for further reformation were dead: Grebel died in 1526 after imprisonment. Mantz was drowned in 1527. Hubmaier was burned in 1528 in Vienna and his wife Elisabeth was drowned in the Danube days later. Blaurock was burned in 1529.

The history of medieval Europe is often pervaded by gory tales of torture, hangings, burnings, and beheadings—and those who suffered these cruelties, like those who administered them, often did so because of their beliefs. The plight of the Anabaptists, who historically with the English Separatists preceded the Baptists,² is best summed up as “Catholics killed Protestants, Protestants killed Catholics, and they both agreed to kill Anabaptists.”³

Consider the Continental Anabaptist Michael Sattler: in 1527 at the age of twenty-nine, he had his tongue torn out, before his tormentors lacerated his body with red-hot tongs and burned him alive. His wife was thrown into a river with a stone tied around her neck.⁴ Tens of thousands were horrifically massacred all across the continent. Take Friesland, in the Netherlands, for example: from 1535–1546 no less than 30,000 baptistic believers⁵ were put to death,

² James L. Garrett, *Baptist Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009), 8–21.

³ Tripp York, *The Purple Crown: the Politics of Martyrdom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007), cited by Brian Haymes, “‘Thomas Helwys’ The Mystery of Iniquity: Is it still relevant in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Exploring Baptist Origins*, eds. Anthony R. Cross and Nicholas J. Wood (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, Regents Park College, 2010), 61.

⁴ Erroll Hulse, *An Introduction to the Baptists* (Haywards Heath: Carey Publications, 1976), 18; cf. N. R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power, Part Three: Renaissance and Reformation* (London: Grace Publications Trust, 2004), 311–318.

⁵ Reformation era sectarian observers of believers’ baptism such as the evangelical Anabaptists, spiritual kinsmen of the modern Baptists who later sprang out of the English Separatists in the seventeenth century; cf. Hulse, *An Introduction*, 6.

by both Roman Catholics and Protestants. Like-minded believers in England were treated little differently.⁶

In short, “Christendom” was not Christ-like, nor was it friendly even to all who were professedly Christ-followers. It was not built around broad catholicity, or agreement on basic Christian beliefs and values, but specific scriptural interpretations, narrow personal preferences and quirks, and denominational distinctives. It was inherently inconsistent, made in the image of whoever was in control, and was often less about salvation and more about maintaining a spiritual and political *status quo*, power, the exaltation of nation-states or the advance of empires. Thus, Christians who contrasted the uniqueness of Christ’s Kingdom with the Christo-tyrannies around them particularly suffered.

⁶ Hulse, *An Introduction*, 19–20.



KEACH PILLORIED AT AYLESBURY.

Page 320.

*Benjamin Keach, pilloried for publishing a book of instruction for children
that did not conform to the teachings of the Church of England*

Persecution of the Early English Baptists

The English Separatist congregation in Gainsborough that would eventually move to London and become the first church to have the name “Baptist”¹ properly applied to it, was born out of persecution. Among the leading men within this congregation were John Smyth and Thomas Helwys. Smyth, a former Anglican priest, was prosecuted for “unlawfully preaching in public” in 1606.² Even the lawyer³ Helwys did not escape persecution—his wife Joan was arrested.⁴ These two men led a group to the Netherlands in 1608 to seek refuge from such harassment.⁵

After Helwys returned to England and planted a Baptist church in London in 1612, the Baptist movement began to expand. Since Baptist teaching constituted a threat both to the state and the church in the state-church system, they were persecuted—albeit not to the horrific extent of their English Protestant forbears and baptistic continental kinsmen. Due to a storm of public resentment, 1612 saw the last burnings for religious causes in England (of anti-Trinitarian heretics Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman).⁶ But while such gruesome measures ceased and a superficially more tolerant spirit toward religious diversity developed among the Anglican laity, such attitudes were not extended by the civil or religious authorities and laws of the nation.⁷

A significant wave of persecution hit the fledgling Baptists in 1630, leading some of them to migrate to safer lands, while the activity of those remaining declined. This was followed in 1640 by a period of relative freedom, for Baptists at least, that extended through the civil wars and Oliver Cromwell’s Protectorate, during which time Baptists were able to extensively and openly

¹ James L. Garrett, *Baptist Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009), 23.

² Anthony R. Cross, “The Adoption of Believer’s Baptism and Baptist Beginnings,” in *Exploring Baptist Origins*, eds. Anthony R. Cross and Nicholas J. Wood (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, Regents Park College, 2010), 2.

³ Cross, “The Adoption of Believer’s Baptism,” 2.

⁴ Ian M. Randall, *Communities of Conviction: Baptist Beginnings in Europe* (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2009), 15.

⁵ Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 23.

⁶ Leon McBeth, *English Baptist Literature on Religious Liberty to 1689* (New York: Arno, 1980), 11–12.

⁷ McBeth, *English Baptist Literature*, 13–14.

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He put another parable before them, saying,

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”’”

*... Then he left the crowds and went into the house.
And his disciples came to him, saying,*

*“Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.
He who has ears, let him hear.”*

Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

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