Christological Laxity, Nicodemism, and Baptist Identity: A Reply to Stephen R. Holmes

Kegan A. Chandler

Dr Kegan A. Chandler is an Honorary Research Associate in the Department for the Study of Religions at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.
kegan.chandler@uct.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6875-1180

Abstract
Stephen R. Holmes has argued that all early General Baptists were both unreflectively orthodox in their trinitarianism and insistent on orthodox Christology as a non-negotiable part of the Christian faith, promoting a relatively tranquil image of Baptist Christology prior to the 1690s debates surrounding Matthew Caffyn (1628–1714). Additionally, he has argued that General Baptist non-negotiables included orthodox Christology even in the 1690s, with latitude allowed merely in the language involved. He has also treated the case of Matthew Caffyn and any potential tolerance of his unorthodoxy as basically not representative of the Baptist tradition. In this article, I offer a response through an examination of Baptist treatment of unorthodox Christology from the movement's beginnings to 1730; subsequently, I offer a view of the unorthodox nature of Caffyn's Christology and an explanation of his behaviour (and that of his peers) during his theological interrogations. While Holmes paints Caffyn as a bold controversialist who would never hide his views, I offer an alternative account based on the then-current English trend of Nicodemism. The article concludes with a brief revisitation of Baptist identity in light of the preceding history.

Keywords
Matthew Caffyn; General Baptists; Christology; Nicodemism

Introduction

In 2019, this journal published an article of mine which earned the reply of Stephen R. Holmes.[1] I appreciate Holmes's thoughtful criticism and the historical dexterity displayed in his response, and I am likewise grateful for his interest in dialoguing on orthodoxy, tolerance, and the intersection of the two in an early Baptist context. My gratitude extends

[1] Kegan A. Chandler, 'Unorthodox Christology in General Baptist History: The Legacy of Matthew Caffyn', *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 19.2 (2019), pp. 140–151; Stephen R. Holmes in his 'General Baptist "Primitivism", the Radical Reformation, and Matthew Caffyn: A Response to Kegan A. Chandler', *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 21.1 (2021), pp. 123–139.

also to the editor of the journal for allowing us the space to engage. In summary, my 2019 article featured two arguments. The first was concerned with the emergence of unorthodox Christology in General Baptist history and whether or not it should be attributed to an infiltration of 'eighteenth-century rationalism' or rather to the execution of principles like *sola scriptura* which had long characterised the movement and the Reformation more generally. The second argument concerned Matthew Caffyn (1628–1714) and whether or not his unorthodox Christology, whatever its detail, and the historical tolerance of that Christology should be thought of as a legitimate part of the Baptist heritage. In 2021, Holmes levelled an array of claims in my direction about the misreading of facts and the painting of a misleading portrait of General Baptist history and its players. In a few cases, Holmes's criticisms were welcome and have encouraged sharper thinking on some issues, though some of his complaints amount to overstatements of my case. I cannot address all of Holmes's points in this limited space, and while I disagree with Holmes's response to my first argument about Reformation history, in this article I will focus on his response to my second argument about Caffyn and christological laxity in Baptist history, saving further discussion of 'primitivism', 'biblicism', and Radical Reformation history and creeds for another time. My sense is that Holmes has excluded too many vital details about General Baptist history, resulting in a degree of distortion. To resolve our tension, a more complete picture is needed of the progress of christological deviance and laxity among the General Baptists, the fascinating situation and behaviour of Matthew Caffyn in that context, and what it all might mean for current revisitations of the historical Baptist identity.

Christological Laxity and John Smyth

Responding to my historical portrait, Holmes asserts that 'most Anabaptists, and all early General Baptists, were unreflectively orthodox in their trinitarianism'.[2] Having space only to address the situation of the General Baptists, my response must begin with the Baptist founders

[2] Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', p. 123.

John Smyth (c. 1554–c. 1612) and Thomas Helwys (c. 1575–c. 1616). Holmes insists these men did not have a major dispute over Christology,[3] and thus denies my argument that a line can be drawn from Smyth to the unorthodox Matthew Caffyn. It is, of course, not a matter of debate that Smyth at least 'flirted with Anabaptist Melchiorite ["heavenly flesh"] Christology',[4] the content of which Holmes has lately done fine work in reviewing.[5] Regardless of Smyth's final views on the matter, my general argument about the contrast between Smyth and Helwys and the overlap between Smyth and Caffyn — and my understanding of Smyth as at the very least an example of christological laxity in the Baptists' early days — remains viable. Meanwhile, Holmes's minimisation of the situation between Smyth and Helwys seems insufficient. Indeed, Holmes describes Smyth as '*merely* making space' for unorthodox Christology and making a '*minor* christological accommodation'.[6] Yet one need only consult Helwys's writings to the Waterlanders to observe how important the christological problem was between him and the group with which Smyth aimed to commune. To Helwys, the Waterlander's heavenly flesh Christology flatly 'destroy[s] the faith of Christ'. This christological opinion is a 'damnable heresy' which denies the Lord and was condemned by the Apostle Peter.[7] It is for specifically christological reasons that the Waterlanders have a vain faith and no saviour and will receive destruction for their sins.[8] Smyth, says Holmes, at least conceded that Waterlander Christology 'was an acceptable position, even if wrong'.[9] But for Helwys, even those among the Waterlanders who remained ambivalent on where Christ's flesh came from and maintained that 'it is not needful to salvation to know where Christ received his flesh', were leading simple souls 'to walk in the ways of death and condemnation'.[10] For Helwys, Smyth's too-lax

[3] Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', pp. 129–130.
[4] James R. Coggins, 'The Theological Positions of John Smyth', *Baptist Quarterly*, 30.6 (1984), pp. 247–264 (p. 255).
[5] Stephen R. Holmes, 'Evaluating a Neglected Tradition of (Ana)baptist Christology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* (2023), pp. 1–18.
[6] Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', p. 130, emphasis mine.
[7] Joseph Early, Jr, *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* (Mercer University Press, 2009), p. 96.
[8] Early, *Thomas Helwys*, pp. 97–99.
[9] Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', p. 129.
[10] Early, *Thomas Helwys*, p. 102.

approach to Christology ultimately landed Smyth in the same wicked camp as the ambivalent Waterlanders.[11]

If, in the end, a line cannot be drawn between Smyth and Caffyn as unconventional Christologists themselves, a line may nevertheless be drawn between Smyth and Caffyn (and the General Baptists who accepted or protected Caffyn and others despite their disagreement) as christologically lax Baptists.[12] Holmes concedes that if I 'had both Smyth at the start and Caffyn at the end of the century as witnesses to an acceptance of heterodoxy […] something might be made of that. However […] even if [Chandler] is right about Caffyn, one data point cannot establish a trend.'[13] But Smyth is not the only early data point for either unorthodox Christology or christological laxity among the Baptists.

Other Early Baptist Views

The career of early Baptist leader Leonard Busher (fl. 1614), an associate of Smyth's and a figurehead among the Separatists alongside Smyth and Helwys who did not join the Waterlanders, is worth emphasising here.[14] Busher's Christology was evidently a blend of heavenly flesh and unitarian Christology, in which Jesus was not the one God but a pre-existent being with a heavenly body.[15] A letter to Busher from Baptist James Toppe (fl. 1647) describes his view as one in which 'Jesus Christe is not true god nor true man, butt that he is onely a mere creature' who

[11] Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', p. 129.

[12] Caffyn 'was also happy to associate with those (such as Daniel Allen) who were clearly Arian' (Holmes, 'General Baptist 'Primitivism"', p. 133).

[13] Holmes, 'General Baptist 'Primitivism"', p. 130.

[14] Busher's prominence in the early days was recognised as early as 1611, when Matthew Saunders and Cuthbert Hotten wrote a letter to a church in Amsterdam describing him, alongside Smyth and Helwys, as representative of types of English Baptists. See William Thomas Whitley, 'Leonard Busher, Dutchman', *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* 1.2 (1909), pp. 107–113.

[15] I use 'unitarian' to mean any theology in which the one God is one person, the Father, and not tri-personal. This applies to both 'Arian' (pre-existence) and 'Socinian' (non-pre-existence) views of Jesus.

had 'a heavenly humane body' while pre-existent in heaven.[16] This was a view also ascribed to Thomas Leamer in this same period, a merchant preacher who, like Busher, had Dutch Anabaptist connections.[17] It is also a view which resembled that of the later Matthew Caffyn — certainly a believer in the heavenly flesh doctrine and arguably a unitarian — a fact reinforcing my proposed through-line of unorthodox Christology in Baptist history.

Additionally, it seems significant that Busher also held that 'if one confesses Jesus as Messiah and bases order and ordinance upon knowledge of God's holy word, all other doctrinal points are adiaphorous, matters of indifference'.[18] In his well-known argument for religious liberty presented to King James, Busher insists that all of those who believe Jesus is the Messiah and that he came in the flesh are to be esteemed children of God — a minimum requirement for Christian legitimacy which Busher would continue to insist upon, even as he himself was neglected in his old age over doctrinal differences with certain Christians (who seem to have challenged his Christology but whom he nevertheless called 'brothers').[19]

Another early Baptist view on Christology worth introducing may be found in Elias Tookey (fl. 1624), a leader of a small group connected to Helwys's project in England,[20] who writes in May of 1624 to the Dutch churches that while they believe in the deity of Christ, ostensibly in something of a modalistic (heretical) sense, they will not be compelled 'to believe three different persons in the Deity, which manner

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16 William H. Brackney, *The Early English General Baptists and Their Theological Formation* (Centre for Baptist Studies in Oxford, 2019), p. 119; Walter Burgess, 'James Toppe and the Tiverton Anabaptists', *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, 3 (1913), pp. 193–211 (pp. 204–205).

17 Leamer's view has been described as an 'Arian chiliasm'. Keith L. Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism: A History of English and Scottish Churches of the Netherlands in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2022), p. 82.

18 Brackney, *Early English*, p. 120.

19 For his argument, see Leonard Busher, *Religions Peace: Or, A Plea for Liberty of Conscience* (London, 1614). I find Busher's later dispute with his friends at least partly christological on the basis of a few lines from Buscher's 1642 letter, in which he indicates that his fellows might 'allege that I do not believe' that Christ came in the flesh (with 1 John 5:1–2) though he nevertheless agreed with this and believed that 'all [God's] sons are brothers together, but our Brother Christ is the eldest' (Whitley, 'Leonard Busher, Dutchman', p. 111).

20 Tookey defected from the main group in London, led by John Murton at the time, partly over matters of Christology.

of speaking is not found in the Scriptures'.[21] A letter of January 1624 by Tookey and his London congregation[22] reveals their guiding principles while marketing themselves as orthodox in the hopes of finding fellowship:

> We do not think that the holy and peaceful doctrine of toleration is misused if some remain in our communion (if they are quiet), who know not yet what they should think of Christ's deity, namely if they only believe that their salvation is in Christ […] they are the people of God, though they have not yet appropriated to themselves this mystery by their reason. But if it were that some of them contradicted the general opinions of the congregation in this or other doctrines, or that they discovered an unquiet or ambitious spirit, we sure think that such should not be tolerated, but ought to be avoided for their unquietness, and because they wish to exercise authority over others.[23]

Tookey and company's policy is advertised in this statement as one of concord, in which tolerance is provided with the aim that conformity will emerge. Nevertheless, while these Baptists claimed that the members of their congregations believed in the divinity of Christ (in some sense), they do ultimately admit that there were some among them who simply 'have a somewhat different [christological] opinion than we maintain in general, though, we think that, after all, it comes to the same end'.[24] After explaining their technical differences, they write, 'and shall we condemn each other for these opinions? That be far from us.'[25] Furthermore, 'We do not compel one to believe of Christ what we do, but bear with each other.'[26] Bass understandably describes this as a group of Baptists 'tolerant of Christological aberration'.[27] As we will see, this prescription of Tookey and his congregation, wherein christological tolerance is provided so long as those less inclined to the pattern of the majority remain quiet and do not disturb the peace (or perhaps

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[21] Benjamin Evans, *The Early English Baptists*, 2 vols (London: J. Heaton & Son, 1862–1864), 2, p. 38. As has been observed, Tookey and his elders 'were not all sound on the matter of the Trinity' (Herbert John McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-century England* (Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 218; see also p. 39).

[22] The letter is signed, 'Elias Tookey, and the others'.

[23] Evans, *The Early English Baptists*, 2, p. 22.

[24] Evans, *Early English Baptists*, 2, p. 22. See Walter Herbert Burgess, *John Smith the Se-Baptist, Thomas Helwys and the First Baptist Church in England* (London: James Clarke, 1911), p. 33.

[25] Evans, *Early English Baptists*, 2, p. 22.

[26] Evans, *Early English Baptists*, 2, p. 36, statement quoted in the Dutch response.

[27] Clint C. Bass, *The Caffynite Controversy* (Centre for Baptist Studies in Oxford, 2020), p. 19.

additionally disturb the ability of the group to appear insistent on orthodoxy — an important image in this context), will be a recurring theme in General Baptist history.

The more orthodox John Murton (1585–c.1626), who took over from Helwys in London after Helwys died in prison (and who had his own christological falling out with Tookey around 1624, the details of which are lost), strongly championed the cause of liberty and joined Busher in advocating religious tolerance.[28] He insisted, as had Busher before him, that 'heretics' (however defined and on whoever's authority) should not be harshly persecuted but simply exiled from the community of faith according to the prescription of Titus 3:10.[29] The five General Baptist churches in England which Murton fostered and which entertained 'some differences among them, especially over christological questions […] laid a foundation for the General Baptist movement'.[30] Smyth, Helwys, Busher, Tookey, and Murton are regularly grouped in Baptist histories as the primary Baptist founders or the 'first Baptists'.[31] Surely the diversity of views on Christology and tolerance represented here is not insignificant. To argue in response that this or that figure or their group were but marginal or minority reports relative to the greater Baptist population would simply be to restate my basic thesis, that some degree of diversity had existed in Baptist history prior to Caffyn, including a current of laxity regarding orthodox Christology.

Clint C. Bass, whose 2020 analysis I take to be at least representative of current scholarship if not authoritative, and whose opinion I will frequently raise below as a barometer for my own, has likewise observed that 'Christological questions swirled from the very inception of the first General Baptist church'.[32] And specifically, *pace* Holmes, 'there were certainly strains of anti-trinitarianism among the

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[28] John Murton, *Objections… No Man Ought to be Persecuted for his Religion…* (London, 1615).
[29] Of course, Busher was himself unorthodox and had noted that in their time, 'good men' had wrongly been called 'disturbers of the World, Heretiques, Schismaticks, seditious Persons' (*Religions Peace*, unnumbered preface; see also p. 38).
[30] Mark Robert Bell, *Apocalypse How?: Baptist Movements During the English Revolution* (Mercer University Press, 2000), p. 40.
[31] Anthony R. Cross and Phillip E. Thompson, 'Sacramentalism Alive and Well', in *Baptist Sacramentalism* 3, ed. by Anthony R. Cross and Phillip E. Thompson (Pickwick, 2020), p. xxx.
[32] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 32.

early Baptists […] [meanwhile] Melchiorite [Hoffmannite or "heavenly flesh"] views, which took hold at the beginning of the Restoration, and subsequent Arian and Socinianism […] developed into a movement that found a large number of adherents among the General Baptists associated with the General Assembly in the eighteenth century'.[33] All of this is not to say that in its entirety or even in its lion's share the General Baptist movement was unorthodox in their views of God and Jesus — certainly this was not the case[34] — but with now other points of data (and more to be added below), a line can and must be drawn to represent what continues to resemble vibrant strands of christological deviation, controversy, and laxity, however influential or long-lived, coursing through Baptist history. As Bass concluded in his 2020 investigation, bolstering my 2019 linking of the Smythian controversy to that of Caffyn and later General Baptists, 'Christology was long an unresolved issue for the early General Baptists. It could be said that they were never without Christological controversy. It was a feature of church life even from the days of John Smyth, and Mennonite notions lingered in the background providing ample fuel for a Christological blow-up.'[35]

The Debate Over Christological Laxity from 1650–1730

Holmes, against my 2019 findings, concluded that 'General Baptist fundamentals in the 1690s demonstrably include "orthodox Christology" and "the doctrine of the Trinity", but offer, albeit controversially within the movement, some latitude in how this is expressed'.[36] In other words, Holmes argues that all General Baptists in both the early period and through the 1690s were completely orthodox in their Christology, though some tolerated merely different terms in the expression of orthodox beliefs. However, it is clear that before 1700, there were unorthodox Christologists existing among the General

[33] Clint C. Bass, *Thomas Grantham (1633–1692) and General Baptist Theology* (Centre for Baptist Studies in Oxford, 2019), p. 181.
[34] See Bass, *Thomas Grantham*, pp. 11–12, 181.
[35] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 135.
[36] Holmes, 'General Baptist 'Primitivism'', p. 136.

Baptists along with discussions about the possible Christian legitimacy of christological deviants.

Indeed, I suggest there were several discernible strands of General Baptists during this period, though the veiled nature of the situation will make it impossible to determine their shares of the population. Some were simply unorthodox in their Christology; others were hardliners who demanded christological compliance; still others were orthodox but laxer when it came to their neighbours' subscription. Among the orthodox, there were some who insisted on standard orthodox statements of trinitarian theology and Christology; on the other hand, some of the orthodox were suspicious of the non-biblical language which regularly travelled with such statements. Obviously the unorthodox would have balked at this language; some of the orthodox rejected it on purely biblicist grounds; others likely rejected it due to their laxity on the point of Christology — for fear of excluding their neighbours or generally causing what they felt was unnecessary division. To make matters more complicated, some felt the unorthodox were simply not Christians; others felt them Christians but concluded they should not be counted Baptists.

Lacking space to effectively demonstrate this diverse landscape in this period, I will raise only a few pertinent examples. Already in 1653, at the General Assembly in Stone Chapel, London, Joseph Wright was leading the charge against not only Matthew Caffyn but several others as members of a 'Hoffmannite party', and the assembly did not expel these men but did ask Caffyn to explain how he came to his views.[37] In 1655, the unitarian John Biddle, debating Christology before an audience of five hundred at Stone Chapel (namely the question of 'Whether Jesus Christ be the most High, or Almighty God?'), appears to have won over at least a few of the General Baptists before he was arrested by the authorities on the premise of blasphemy laws, which promised death for denying the trinity.[38] It is noteworthy that other General Baptists who did not agree with Biddle's theology supported

[37] Joseph Wright, *Speculum Haeriticis, or, A looking Glass for Heretics* (London: for the author, 1691), pp. 6–10.
[38] See Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses* (London: Bennet, 1692), pp. 200–201; cf. Bass, *Thomas Grantham*, pp. 180–181.

him for reasons of religious liberty.[39] These Baptists passionately and loudly petitioned the English government on his behalf, even affirming that Biddle was a true and merely mistaken Christian believer who would believe anything about Jesus that could be drawn out of the Scriptures. It is not that Biddle should be destroyed by Christ and not the government; rather, God would judge his error, they said, not as a damnable heresy but as a misguided expression of his sincere 'zeal and love' for God.[40] Certainly, we cannot gauge the prevalence of this view among General Baptists in the seventeenth century; nevertheless, I suggest that the issue of how best to deal with those with genuinely different Christologies (and not merely different ways of verbally expressing a universally agreed-upon orthodox view) was part of General Baptist discussions long before the eighteenth century. I suggest the confessional results of these discussions sometimes quietly reveal that at least some General Baptists were not only unwilling to usurp Christ's right to judge the heretic, but already less inclined to expel dissenters from their midst.

Indeed, soon after the Biddle incident, the topic of unorthodox Christology was openly contested again in the 1656 General Assembly. The result was a broad statement designed to satisfy both sides of the debate, and with a definition deliberately and 'entirely acceptable to the most committed Melchiorite'.[41] At this point, there was even suspicion that most of the leadership at Aylesbury sympathised with Caffyn to some degree, and finally, in 1660, the sympathetic General Assembly in London published a *Standard Confession* deliberately capacious of unorthodox, 'heavenly flesh' Christology, creating no boundaries against the Hoffmannites among them.[42] This confession also left out explicit or exclusively trinitarian doctrine, leaving glaringly unanswered the vital question of how the Father, Son, and Spirit are related, and allowing for

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[39] For a list of Baptist petitions (and others) on Biddle's behalf, see Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: In Transylvania, England, and America* (Beacon Press, 1945), p. 206. See also *To the Officers and Soldiers of the Army* (London, 1657), p. 3.

[40] *A True State of the Case of Liberty of Conscience in the Common-wealth of England* (London, 1655), p. 7; Paul C. H. Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England* (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 64–66.

[41] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 36; see *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptist Churches in England*, 2 vols, ed. by W. T. Whitley (Baptist Historical Society, 1909), 1, p. 6.

[42] See Bass, *Caffynite*, pp. 37–38.

baptism in either the name of all three or only in the name of Jesus. Is it possible that some General Baptists were consciously interpreting vague confessions like this in unorthodox ways? Is it also possible that this was a practice well-known to assembly members at this time? It is more than possible. In that same year, Joseph Wright published his *Animadversions upon Five Articles* (1660), explaining how the christological heretics in the midst of the General Baptists were creatively interpreting the confessions. In the following year, he published *Speculum Haereticis: Or, A Looking-Glass for Hereticks* (1661), confronting Caffyn directly and warning the congregations not to tolerate christological heresy. Here, he disowns the 1660 confession as an example of an 'Equivocal Confession' in which there is made 'room for an Arian, Socinian, Antitriniarian, Jew, Turk, or Infidel'.[43]

Certainly, there was more involved here than mere differences in preferred terms for expressing a unanimously agreed-upon set of orthodox doctrines. Yes, the controversies did include a debate over language, but that linguistic debate absolutely included the obfuscatory use of language by assembly leadership. This probably amounted to a well-known secret. In the late 1660s, other Baptists outside of the General Baptist fold accused the leadership of the General Assembly of 'harbouring Christological error' and being 'too generous' on the person of Christ.[44] John Griffith (c. 1622–1700) admitted in 1669 that there were indeed unitarians who had gained followers in General Baptist circles.[45] While outwardly denying the presence of non-trinitarians in the face of charges that the General Baptists were too lax in christological requirements, the orthodox theologian Thomas Grantham (1634–1692) likewise subtly acknowledged that there were in fact Baptists with unorthodox Christology among them.[46] Before 1673, it is clear that wider debates over Christology were already energetically brewing, and Thomas Monck (1570–1627) claimed to be engaging with unorthodox Christologists who boasted a wide array of supporters throughout

[43] Wright, *Speculum Haeriticis*, p. 31.
[44] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 38.
[45] John Griffith, *The Searchers for Schism Search'd* (London, 1669), p. 59; Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 38.
[46] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 39. This may be a reference to Caffyn; see Joseph Hooke, *Creed Making and Creed-Imposing Considered* (London: J. Darby and T. Browne, 1729), p. 33.

England who held the same views.[47] In 1677, a debate over Christology split a church at Staplehurst, Kent, and by the following year, 1698, a revision to the *Standard Confession* was proposed to manage the division of christological opinions — a revision with deliberately conciliatory language which still left things vague.[48]

The *Orthodox Creed* was eventually proposed by a faction led by Thomas Monck in order to unambiguously squash heretical Christology and to lead the General Baptists towards the orthodoxy of other Protestants in England (the first eight articles setting down definitively the orthodox Trinity and the deity of Christ). This strict statement, 'alone among Baptist confessions in including and setting forth the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds',[49] was widely rejected by the churches and refused by the General Assembly. To simply dismiss the repeated failures to instantiate such creeds among the General Baptists as mere rejections of non-biblical language would be to miss the significance of why this orthodox language was being pushed so hard and so often by the anti-heresy factions in the first place.

In the early 1680s, christological controversy continued to rage in congregations like those of Buckinghamshire, one of which excommunicated the unitarian John Weller, to whom Caffyn had written a letter sympathising with his 'precious truths'.[50] One assembly at Aylesbury ultimately declared that they would 'maintain amity and friendship with Mr. Caffin, though he might differ a little in some abstruse unrevealed speculations',[51] and in 1686, the Biddenden congregation swore to excommunicate anyone who pursued the uncharitable actions of the heresy hunter Joseph Wright. Though not necessarily explicit in their latitudarian approach during this period, I

47 Thomas Monck, *A Cure for the Cankering Error of the New Eutychians* (London: for the author, 1673), pp. 51–52.
48 See Bass, *Caffynite,* p. 42.
49 *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. by William Lumpkin and Bill Leonard (Judson Press, 2011), p. 296.
50 See Christopher Cooper, *The Vail Turn'd Aside: or, Heresy Unmask'd* (London: for the author, 1701), p. 55; Bass, *Thomas Grantham*, p. 201.
51 Adam Taylor, *The History of the English General Baptists* (London; for the author, 1818), p. 467.

concur that there were General Baptist leaders who behind the scenes 'had been restrained toward Caffyn, despite his doctrinal errors'.[52]

Moving into the 1690s, we will do well to focus on the split that occurred within the General Assembly at this time, wherein Caffyn's adversaries and their churches, apparently always in the minority, grew tired of giving the General Assembly repeated chances to prove their dedication to orthodox Christology. They requested a vote as to whether or not they would be allowed to debate christological differences going forward, and lost. The wider group was simply not interested. Thus, the minority cut ties with the majority, forming the so-called General Association, and swore not to return until the General Assembly removed christological heresy from its midst. The larger General Assembly, while not broadly unorthodox, was the 'more doctrinally lenient body' and refused to allow further public debate over Caffyn's acceptability, and required all discussions, public or private, about '[the] Trinity and the Christ of God' to use only biblical words and 'no other terms'.[53]

When Caffyn's opponents in the General Assembly produced the damning record of the words uttered by Caffyn in 1692, in which he confessed that Christ had neither the substance of his Father nor his human mother, all except one of those presiding at the assembly declared it a doctrinal error. We do not know who this leader was who refused to condemn explicitly unorthodox statements, but Bass points out that the fact that we have no evidence that they disciplined this assembly leader means the General Association was 'right to wonder about the Assembly's doctrinal scrupulousness'.[54] The smaller General Association were, on the other hand, 'those championing strict Christological orthodoxy', but as Bass also points out, 'the General Association was not without its own Christological problems' and they found themselves engulfed in their own controversies, like that of the Deptford and Ashford churches, wherein they were forced to choose between tolerating members and excommunication. Many of those expelled by the Association or dissatisfied with its attachment to the

[52] See Bass, *Caffynite,* pp. 44–45.
[53] Bass, *Caffynite*, pp. 51–52; see *Minutes of the General Assembly*, ed. by Whitley, 1, p. 51.
[54] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 53.

orthodox theology of their leadership migrated over to the more latitudinarian General Assembly.

What is evident is that the General Assembly in the 1690s actively debated whether or not 'General Baptist fundamentals' included orthodox Christology. This was not merely a debate over what Holmes calls 'latitude in how [orthodox doctrine] is expressed',[55] it included to some degree a debate over doctrine itself, and which christological doctrines were required for Baptist identity and fellowship.[56] A 1699 meeting asked two vital questions: 'Whether it be absolutely necessary to Christian communion, to believe that Christ is essentially God of the same Essence with the Father,' and 'Whether it be absolutely necessary to Christian communion to believe that Christ is of the Substance of Mary his Mother.'[57] In this debate, Caffyn and the well-known unitarian Daniel Allen (fl. 1699) joined forces, with Allen answering in the negative the question about God and Jesus, and Caffyn answering in the negative the question about Jesus and Mary. Allen describes the factions at odds among the brethren as 'the Orthodox' (also 'the Athanasian Perswasion') and 'the Heretick' (also 'the Unitarians').[58] This teaming up between Allen and Caffyn, says Bass, is a strong indicator that Caffyn himself held subordinationist (unitarian) views.[59]

Allen's appeal to toleration in 1699 ultimately saw fruit in the critical 1700 assembly at Whitsuntide whose leaders convened with Caffyn and drew up a declaration 'which evaded rather than determined the points in dispute'; thus, 'the assembly recorded its satisfaction with Caffyn's defence'.[60] An absolutely vital note from Bass must be read here about this deliberately vague declaration. While, on the face of it, a 'trinitarian' statement of faith,

> [a] more narrowly orthodox group raised questions about the meaning, but there was no reply. They then produced their own articles of faith which were not entertained. The Assembly's indefinite statements were read and approved by the body as a whole, but with a qualification. The Assembly

[55] Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', p. 136.
[56] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 136.
[57] See Cooper, *The Vail*, pp. 134–136.
[58] See Daniel Allen, *The Moderate Trinitarian* (London, 1699), p. 16.
[59] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 103.
[60] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 56.

> recognised that certain individuals might understand the words to mean something other than the doctrinal position of the majority. In such a case, differing conceptions were to be tolerated so long as individuals did not teach, print, or discuss their views in a way that led to the disturbance of the Assembly's churches. The Assembly did not make its Christological position obvious, but it did make its emphasis on toleration quite clear.[61]

Once again, we encounter the old prescription of tolerance for the quiet and an open sanctioning of creedal equivocation. Unsurprisingly, Caffyn's opponents, as well as the strict General Association, condemned the 1700 declaration as a mere paper full of ambiguous language which only 'looked' orthodox,[62] repeating the long-standing complaint about 'equivocal confessions' made by the likes of Wright since at least 1660. Ultimately, the 1700 meeting amounted to what the unitarian historian Alexander Gordon once famously described as 'the first deliberate and formal endorsement of latitudinarian opinions in the article of the Trinity by the collective authority of any tolerated section of English dissent'.[63] In this same year of 1700, General Baptist writers like Nathaniel Gale (fl. 1700) argued that orthodox propositions about the co-essential and con-substantial nature of Christ could not be legitimately imposed on General Baptists since such doctrines were not found in the Bible.[64] This stance became important for the General Baptist's future, as 'antitrinitarianism, of one type or another, took possession of their congregations in the south of England'.[65] Clearly, none of this would have happened in 1700 had there not already been a shift among important General Baptist figures and associations on the issue of christological orthodoxy and its overlap with General Baptist confession and identity in the preceding decade. Holmes has argued that, ultimately, the only thing of orthodoxy which the General Baptists may have discussed sacrificing prior to 1700 were the traditional, technical words of conciliar Christology, and that a true orthodox Christology remained always an insisted-upon General Baptist non-

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[61] Bass, *Caffynite*, pp. 56–57.
[62] Cooper, *The Vail*, p. 121.
[63] Alexander Gordon, 'Caffyn, Matthew', in *Dictionary of National Biography, 1885–1900,* vol. 8, ed. by Leslie Stephen (London: Elder Smith & Cok, 1886), pp. 208–210 (p. 209).
[64] Nathaniel Gale, *Brief Remarks upon Dr. Russell's Brief Account of Mr. Caffin's several Opinions of the Person of the Messiah* (London, 1700), p. 12.
[65] Gordon, 'Caffyn', p. 209.

negotiable. But in the 1690s at the very latest, we can observe that in some cases it was merely the outward presentation of General Baptist non-negotiables which 'demonstrably includes orthodox Christology'. Indeed, the General Assembly was, despite whatever was on the books, clearly torn in two during the 1690s, and not merely over the person of Matthew Caffyn — '[a]t the very heart of this divide was a debate over the person of Christ'.[66]

In the first decade of the eighteenth century, many church associations experienced not only a move towards a unitarianism of some form or another,[67] but an anti-confessional shift.[68] Many felt that Scripture was to be preferred over the creeds, and that statements of faith in general must be coherent to be believed; meanwhile, the traditional orthodox creeds 'were crammed with mysteries that stretched beyond comprehension. The confession of mysteries is a farce, they cried. It would be better to simply confess faith in the Scriptures and leave all else alone!'[69] These biblicist arguments were supported by practical analysis of the virtual uselessness of creeds as a test of fellowship. Indeed, it was evident that the definitions of the words used in the trinitarian creeds, like nature, substance, or Person, were not agreed upon by even the most deliberately trinitarian Baptists — a problem endemic to trinitarianism throughout English Christendom.[70] Once General Baptists realised that no one could possibly know how others were interpreting creedal language, the practical value of formal confessions diminished, and an insistence on subscription to the Bible alone easily took its place. Thus, at Salters' Hall in London in 1719, only *one* General Baptist representative signed an affirmation of the Trinity and the deity of Christ drafted by the defeated minority at Salters',

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[66] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 1; see also p. 109: 'The controversy that captivated the General Baptists was, at is inception, a division over how to understand the person of Christ.'

[67] Already by the year 1718, 'not only all the Kent-Sussex churches, but all the London General Baptist churches except one, held a somewhat low view of the personality of Christ' (W. T. Whitley, 'Salters' Hall 1719 and the Baptists', *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* 5.3 (1917), pp. 172–189 (p. 172)). The many churches which followed in this Christology, whatever its 'distinctive' flavour, continued to be called by their opponents 'Caffinites' (Whitley 1917, p. 173).

[68] See Bass, *Caffynite*, pp. 120–123.

[69] Bass, *Caffynite*, pp. 120–121.

[70] See my introduction, 'Emlyn's Humble Inquiry: English Unitarianism and the Rise of Tolerance in the West', in Thomas Emlyn, *An Humble Inquiry into the Scripture Account of Jesus Christ,* updated edn. (Theophilus Press, 2021), pp. 8–9.

compared to the fourteen General Baptists who refused to sign (for whatever reasons).[71] This marks what Leon McBeth rightly called a 'clear victory for the Arian and Socinian factions, who had defined the deity of Christ as a "human addition" to the gospel'.[72] During the 1720s, strict confessional expectations about the nature of God and Jesus all but evaporated in the public consciousness to the end that by the 1730s, as the two General Assemblies reunited, it was made clear by their exchange of even the mild *Standard Confession* for the Scriptures alone that 'members of the Assembly were at liberty to hold whatever they wished about the doctrine of the Trinity and person of Christ'.[73] While the Church of England had enabled anti-trinitarianism through the slipshod application and enforcement of its doctrines, unorthodox Christology and theology thrived among the General Baptists 'through the dismissal of official dogma altogether'.[74] And yet there persisted identifiably 'Baptist' marks among the General Baptists of the eighteenth century; they continued in their emphasis of the laying on of hands, believer's baptism, the use of hymns, intra-Baptist marriage, and the 'general' offer of salvation to humankind. A strict adherence to conciliar Christology as a non-negotiable condition of Christian legitimacy was, at least by this stage, not among these marks. Again, this was not an overnight development.

On Caffyn's Christology

There is regrettably not space for a full treatment of Caffyn's Christology or Holmes's engagement with it. Here I will only point out that in his 2023 article, Holmes concluded that Caffyn, like the Anabaptist leader Menno, held a 'heavenly flesh' Christology in which Jesus assumed flesh in heaven and then passed into the womb of Mary — validating, surely, my basic image of a current of unorthodox Christology patterned in the Anabaptists and then moving from the

[71] H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Broadman Press, 1987), p. 156.
[72] McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, p. 156.
[73] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 124.
[74] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 131.

early days of the Baptists toward Caffyn and beyond.[75] However, Holmes has also leaned toward Caffyn being a sincere but confused orthodox Christian who merely stumbled over terms and formulae or who was merely too creative in his expressions.[76] Whatever Caffyn was, Holmes insists it is '[not] fair to call Caffyn "unitarian"'[77] and proposes Caffyn was actually 'far from being "unitarian", [and] was actively involved in repudiating that doctrine'.[78] Holmes also says that he remains unconvinced by Clint Bass's recent reconstruction of Caffyn as a unitarian (Arian) subordinationist with a 'heavenly flesh' Christology; however, Holmes also curiously says in both of his articles (2021, 2023) that Bass's is the best reconstruction currently available and that he essentially agrees with it.[79] It is in truth difficult to nail down what Caffyn really believed, facts which, in my view, Caffyn appears to have deliberately masked. The matter is made more difficult as both his theological position and his method of expressing (or concealing) his theology appears to have changed over time. While we have few quotations from Caffyn on the issue of Christology, a basic sketch remains possible, drawn by considering not only the reports of his antagonists but also his friends.[80] While we might reasonably wonder if the charges of heresy from his enemies like Wright, Monck, and Cooper were in fact slanderous, why should we doubt the reports of his allies who presumably would want to avoid getting him in trouble, especially if it were not all true?

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75 Holmes, 'Evaluating', p. 12.

76 See Holmes, 'Evaluating', p. 12.

77 Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', p. 133.

78 Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', p. 134.

79 Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', p. 133, n. 15; Holmes, 'Evaluating', p. 11, n. 46; see Bass, *Caffynite*, pp. 89–108.

80 One friendly source relates that Caffyn personally rejected Athanasian and Chalcedonian Christology (see Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists*, vol. 4 (London 1740), p. 337, 341); another reveals that while Caffyn believed in pre-existence, he 'is not able to conceive how it is possible for Christ to be Essentially one with the Father and Holy Ghost, and yet be personally diversified without individuation' (see Nathaniel Gale, *An Examen of the Pretences and Character of Mr. William Russell* (London, 1700), pp. 4–5); 'Besides says Mr. Caffin', writes another friendly source, 'as [it] is nowhere written [in the Scriptures], so I cannot comprehend, nay, apprehend how Three distinct Persons can be Essentially One; nor how Christ the Son of God, which is a Relative term, and supposeth Subordination, can be coequal, coessential, and coeternal with the Father' (Gale, *Brief Remarks*, pp. 4–5).

Caffyn at the Interrogations

My position is that Caffyn likely managed to escape condemnation at the assemblies through a combination of evasion, equivocation, genuine agreement in some areas with his inquisitors, and the sympathy of his Baptist audience — some of whom likely knew very well of his unorthodox proclivities but allowed his complicated muddying of the facts due to some combination of their commitment to religious tolerance in general, their love of an undeniably Christian man (another form of tolerance), or their own potentially unorthodox views. I generally join Curtis Freeman here, who found in Caffyn 'a master of theological obfuscation' and 'a skilled rhetorician who cleverly eluded his accusers […] and […] escaped conviction by managing […] to avoid plain language about what he did not believe'.[81] I suggest additionally that Caffyn's defence will in the end amount to a dissemble that was plausibly recognised by both his adversaries and his tolerant (or even sympathetic) inquirers. Also important for my view is notice of a change in both Caffyn's theology and his political approach to expressing himself. It is clear to me that around 1653, Caffyn had taken up an unorthodox Christology and until the early 1670s was ostensibly more open to discussing his real views. To the shock of a General Meeting at Aylesbury, however, Caffyn backed down at Wright's inquisition and suddenly asked for lenience, saying that he was only confused about Christ's origin. Wright described this as 'most surprising' and 'the first time that we heard' something like this from Caffyn.[82] It is possible that this marks his turn to (Arian) unitarianism, since espousing such a thing was illegal and even more controversial than his heavenly flesh doctrine. From this point forward, as Bass observes, Caffyn 'proved to be much more elusive, stressing the obscurity of traditional formulations and rarely stating positively his own position'.[83] I believe Joseph Wright's assessment of Caffyn and his allies' behaviour is for the most part correct. Wright, who spent many years carefully collecting and studying

[81] Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Baylor University Press, 2014), p. 157.
[82] Wright, *Speculum Haereticis*, p. 12.
[83] Bass, *Caffynite,* p. 39.

every word of his opponents in preparation for their many high-stakes debates, was convinced that they were 'Nicodemites' — persons who 'consciously feigned approval of articles which they did not genuinely believe. Whereas the plain sense of the articles were evident, the Caffynites assuaged themselves with obscurant manipulation of language.'[84]

It is important to locate this behaviour in the wider context of English controversy over trinitarianism. The *locus classicus* for Nicodemism is of course Sir Isaac Newton, who concealed his unitarian views by essentially feigning subscription to orthodoxy, which allowed him to maintain his position at Cambridge.[85] Nicodemites employed biblical texts and examples to justify their deception, such as the case of Naaman who bowed in the temple of Rimmon, or David who pretended to be mad before the Philistines, or Jehu who pretended to worship Baal — God would permit this sort of survivalist activity and forgive the non-trinitarians who were forced to abide with persecuting trinitarians. Such practices seem rampant in Anglican controversies. Of course, 'Nicodemist' subscriptions to christological statements have been paid since ancient times.[86]

Other kinds of christological deviants, including kinds of unitarian subordinationists, could likewise agree with the condemnation of a view that entirely separates the *logos* from the Father (similar to a condemnation which Holmes suggests Caffyn was a party to).[87] And English subordinationists could promote 'the doctrine of the Trinity' and market themselves as 'true Scriptural Trinitarians', all the while

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[84] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 46. I would add that the 'plain sense' was not always evident in the confessions.

[85] Stephen D. Snobelen, 'Isaac Newton, Heretic: The Strategies of a Nicodemite', *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 32.4 (1999), pp. 381–419.

[86] See, for example, the reported behaviour of some Arian bishops at Nicaea. Nicetas Choniates, *Treasury of Orthodoxy*, 5, 7–9; Eusebius, *Letter of Eusebius to the People of his Diocese*, 1.4; see also Photios's epitome of Philostorgius's *Church History*, 2, 7–7b; Charles Butler, *The Moveable Feasts, Fasts, and other Annual Observances of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: J. Duffy, 1839; originally published 1774), p. 364.

[87] Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', p. 135, n. 24. See, for example, the subordinationist theologian Tertullian in Dale Tuggy, 'Tertullian the Unitarian', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 8.3 (2016), pp. 170–199.

meaning something entirely unorthodox by it.[88] One Norton Jarman, a General Baptist at Ashford, Kent, once signed a public affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity and it was only later revealed that he did not hold to it the way his congregation did.[89] Thomas Emlyn (1663–1741), who would famously be imprisoned and deprived of his wealth for his unitarian writings, originally began his defence against charges from an association of Dublin ministers by arguing that he and his accusers actually agreed in substance but merely differed in language.[90] Holmes argues that Caffyn would never have done this, that Caffyn's character was that of a public controversialist and for this reason he would have been bold and open when officially asked about his doctrines. But English unitarians, even brave controversialists, sometimes did take an evasive, ecumenical, or even deceptive posture when accused of christological heresy.

It is probably true that Caffyn was better at hiding his views than Thomas Emlyn, but I suggest Caffyn's success was at least partly owed to his more tolerant audience. My point here is that it would not be difficult for someone like Caffyn to have privately conformed his views to *prima facie* orthodox language, nor would it be surprising in his context. Holmes's present rejection of this scenario relies explicitly on an assumption about Caffyn's 'character', and a psychological analysis which concludes that Caffyn would never have dissembled while faced with the repeated pressure of ecclesiastical interrogations.[91] But it must always be kept in mind that these inquiries were complex and daunting processes, carrying immense consequences for those ending up on the wrong side, and we cannot forget that over these proceedings loomed also the threat of the English government, whose track record for dealing harshly and even violently with non-trinitarians was well known and continued until roughly the mid-eighteenth century, as the case of the unitarian Thomas Emlyn proves. Indeed, the Toleration Act of 1689

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[88] See, for example, Samuel Clarke, *The Scripture-doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1712), and Thomas Emlyn, who self-described as 'a true Scriptural Trinitarian' in his 'Remarks on Mr. Charles Leslie's…', in Thomas Emlyn, *The Works of Mr. Thomas Emlyn*, vol. 2 (London, 1746), p. 3.

[89] *Minutes of the General Assembly*, ed. by Whitley, 1, pp. 64–65.

[90] Thomas Emlyn, *The Case of Mr. E in relation to the Difference Between Him and Some Dissenting Ministers of the City of Dublin* (London, 1702; Dublin, 1703).

[91] '[D]issembling […] was simply not in his character' (Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', p. 137).

provided religious freedom to dissenters but not to non-trinitarians. The fact that Caffyn was himself imprisoned several times for unauthorised preaching made the possibility of imprisonment for unorthodox Christology all too real.

It is also worth mentioning that these social, financial, and legal pressures were likewise faced corporately by the movement at large and by the local congregations and ministers involved, and if not for other ethical or theological commitments, it would certainly have been much easier or safer to simply refuse to tolerate christological deviance of any sort. In this light, it is possible that we may detect a double-dissembling in the assembly meetings, in the sense that at least some among the General Baptist leadership may have known that Caffyn did not subscribe in substance to the required confessions but allowed for the appearance of a genuine acquittal;[92] and possibly also in the sense that a few of them insisted on orthodox-shaped confessions because they too needed to keep up appearances for the heresy hunters and the English government. Again, while dissenters did not need to subscribe to some established rules, denial of trinitarianism remained illegal. We should not forget that General Baptist leaders had witnessed firsthand the fate of the vocally unitarian John Biddle, who was hauled off in the middle of a debate on Christology at one of their churches under the premise of blasphemy laws (strictures which carried the death penalty for denying the Trinity). If anyone's conscience ever stung at their duplicity under pressure, they could easily remind themselves of both the Nicodemist methods and latitudinarian fashions increasingly in vogue in England.

The above stance may ultimately render null Holmes's emphasis on the fact that Caffyn was a member of the assembly which repudiated a Socinian in 1692. I do not disagree that Caffyn was opposed to Socinianism along with that assembly, being a believer in Christ's pre-existence. But we do not know specifically what Caffyn thought of the condemnation of Richard Newton. We can deduce that Newton was held to be in violation of the old prescription of quiet dissension, since his teaching was openly 'contrary to the Articles of ffaith [sic]' and

[92] I see that even those General Baptists who were orthodox and who disagreed with people like Caffyn ultimately resemble the latitudinarians among the Anglicans; see Bass, *Caffynite*, pp. 127–128.

'troubling of the peace and welfare of our Brethren'.[93] In the end, however, we do not have enough details about Newton's case to make very much of it or to allow the fact of Caffyn's presence at the assembly to obscure the reality of his own heterodoxy on other points besides Socinianism. There was, of course, Caffyn's own skin to worry about. Of interest here is a striking report about this assembly meeting which bears mentioning. Despite the pronouncements made against Newton's (Socinian) unitarian view, Joseph Taylor, a preacher from one of the London congregations, along with several other assembly attendees, claimed that they heard with their own ears Caffyn espousing the unitarian heresy at this very meeting where Newton was being judged. They wrote down his words for the record: '[T]he Son of God, or the Word of God, was not of the Uncreated Nature and Substance of the Father, neither of the Created Substance of his Mother.'[94] This claim would be brought up as a challenge to Caffyn's dissembling at subsequent meetings. Interestingly, this is precisely the same charge brought against the earlier Baptist leader Leonard Busher.

Holmes mentions Alex Carver's proposal that Caffyn had a loyal block of support and Bass's idea that Caffyn's trials 'were, by accident or (more probably) design, stacked to make it easy for him to acquit himself'.[95] I fully endorse these additional considerations, which are compatible with and complimentary to my own position. Indeed, that Caffyn's acceptance by the General Baptists has also something to do with the generosity of the assemblies toward a respectable man is not out of the question. As Holmes put it, 'This would point us towards accounts of Baptist identity in which a history of faithful service, of successful evangelism, and perhaps particularly of suffering for the faith, was relevant to determining someone's commitment or otherwise to that faith, even if some of what they had said was troubling — an account of Baptist identity where orthopraxy matters alongside

[93] *Minutes of the General Assembly*, ed. by Whitley, 1, p. 37.

[94] See *A Vindication of the Ancient General Assembly, from the False Imputations of the Russelites* (London, 1704), p. 12; Alex Carver, 'Matthew Caffyn Revisited: Cooperation, Christology, and Controversy in the Life of an Influential Seventeenth-Century Baptist', *Baptist Quarterly* 47.2 (2016), pp. 44–64 (p. 64).

[95] Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', p. 137.

orthodoxy.'[96] By 'troubling' Christological sayings I take it Holmes means 'unorthodox' sayings, and by an identity where 'orthopraxy matters alongside orthodoxy' I take it he means an identity where 'unorthodox Christology may be tolerated on account of one's obvious Christianity'. If that is right, then Holmes simply restates my basic thesis in different terms. As suggested above, it is also plausible that the repeated generosity of the assembly members had something to do with a level of sympathy with Caffyn's opinions among the people, and not merely tolerance for that with which they strongly disagreed. Indeed, we must not forget that Caffyn was not the only unorthodox Christologist involved in the controversy that had already stirred prior to the interrogations of the 1690s. As Bass concludes, it seems that while Caffyn 'refused to articulate clearly his own position, he provided cover for others who held views even more radical than those that he had adopted'.[97]

Conclusion: A Baptist Identity Revisited

By 1846, J. R. Beard could still locate twenty-four 'Unitarian Baptist' churches in England, Scotland, and Wales.[98] Did the name 'Baptist' deserve to be painted alongside 'Unitarian' above their doorways, or is this a contradiction in terms? Holmes concluded his 2021 article by insisting that an account of Baptist identity which includes an 'uneasiness with enforced formulae' must also recognise 'the continuing commitment to a broad doctrinal orthodoxy'.[99] I can at the very least agree that there were, as I have mentioned, both lenient and strict currents within the denomination during its history. That the laxer elements so widely recognised by historians deserve to be more often included in discussions of 'the Baptist tradition' constitutes the basic position of my 2019 article.

Holmes, in an essay on 'Baptist Identity' published in 2021, proposed that 'to be Baptist is to believe in the active, direct, Lordship

96 Holmes, 'General Baptist 'Primitivism'", p. 138.
97 Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 108.
98 *Unitarianism Exhibited in Its Actual Condition*, ed. by J. R. Beard (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1846), pp. 330–337.
99 Holmes, 'General Baptist "Primitivism"', p. 139.

of Jesus over every person and over every local congregation'. After a reasonable disambiguation of this proposition, in which nothing was said about subscription to the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity or the deity of Christ, he concluded that 'as Baptists, we must give priority to reality: our confession of freedom of conscience must imply the right to self-denominate, and so, fundamentally, anyone who claims the title "Baptist" is one, and anyone who refuses it is not'.[100] Does this latitude apply for even those who do not subscribe to orthodox Christology? A contention of mine has been that there was a time in General Baptist history in which my optimism about the possibility of a 'unitarian Baptist' was shared. Clearly, in the eighteenth century at the latest, we have the example of the Barbican church in London, which held special standing and influence in the movement due to the formal education of its leadership, and which 'did not steer clear of anti-Trinitarianism' and even invited the famed unitarian Thomas Emlyn to speak at their church.[101] Among the leadership were those who 'had no shortage of Arian friends and […] regard[ed] the Trinity as nonessential to Christianity'.[102] Indeed, there are more than a few examples of General Baptists, like those associated with Kent and Sussex, who were ultimately 'tolerant of unorthodox views of Christ' and were 'reluctant to take seriously any charge of Christological deviation among the General Baptists'.[103] Clearly preserved here is a record of what Raymond Brown recognised as a trend of 'theological freedom' among the General Baptists, a trend worth keeping more in mind, at the very least for history's sake.[104] Whether it is now agreed that within this history we will also find a model for contemporary and future Baptist churches will not change this history.

Concluding this limited reply, I will note once more my sincere appreciation of Holmes's historical criticism and the opportunity to dialogue on such fascinating issues. I believe my own view and the way

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[100] Stephen R. Holmes, 'Baptist Identity, Once More', *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context*, 3 (2021), pp. 5–27.
[101] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 76.
[102] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 76.
[103] Bass, *Caffynite*, p. 77.
[104] Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century* (Baptist Historical Society, 1986), p. 7.

I express it has been sharpened by brushing with his insight. Many thanks are owed again to the journal for allowing the space for this conversation.