In Gratitude for a Lack of Neglect: A Second Response to Kegan Chandler

Stephen R. Holmes

Revd Dr Stephen Holmes is a Baptist minister who presently serves as senior lecturer in theology at the University of St Andrews, Scotland.
sh80@st-andrews.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4222-8209

Abstract
Stephen Holmes, responding to Kegan Chandler, first points out that continuing academic conversation is beneficial, even if authors do not agree in every aspect of interpretation and conclusion. Holmes agrees that European anti-trinitarianism before 1700 was not rationalist, but biblicist. Matthew Caffyn (1628–1714) fits into this pattern, even if it is debatable to what extent he can be described as 'anti-trinitarian'. However, the author enters into further discussion on a number of topics concerning what it means to be (General) Baptist — in other words, what is the nature of a tradition — and he clarifies some interpretative claims in the light of understandings of Christian orthodoxy. A section in this article is devoted to Caffyn's theological views, especially his Christology. Holmes hopes that his reflections at least clarify where he and Chandler disagree, and why. Holmes concludes, 'The fact that there are scholars who care enough about Caffyn and the General Baptists to dispute interpretations, and journals that consider such disputes worth publishing, is a joy.'

Keywords
Matthew Caffyn; General Baptists; tradition; orthodoxy; Christology; anti-trinitarianism

Sir … the learned world said nothing to my paradoxes; nothing at all, Sir. Every man of them was employed in praising his friends and himself, or condemning his enemies; and unfortunately, as I had neither, I suffered the cruellest mortification, neglect.
— Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (chapter xx)

Introduction

Every scholar will understand George Primrose's plaintive complaint to his father Charles in the epigraph above: we ask not primarily to be agreed with (although it is pleasing when it happens), but to be noticed. I am therefore very grateful to Dr Chandler for continuing this

conversation. I am particularly thankful to him for focusing it on the specific case of Caffyn. His first article, and hence my response to it, ranged rather more widely, but historical debate is most likely to make progress if it is specific.

There is much that Chandler and I agree on. I noted in my first article that his central claim, that Caffyn should not be understood as a precursor of eighteenth-century rationalism, was one I support wholeheartedly. When writing previously on the history of trinitarian doctrine, I have argued the point that most European anti-trinitarianism before (say) 1700 is biblicist, not rationalist, and, whilst in that context I did not mention Caffyn, I am happy to accept that his story fits this pattern, albeit with a footnote querying the extent to which he is properly described as 'anti-trinitarian'.

As far as I can discern, we disagree in two areas. The first concerns what it is to be (General) Baptist, or what I have called elsewhere the nature of a 'tradition'; the second is on certain key interpretative claims. I will treat these in turn, separating out the interpretation of Caffyn's doctrine into a section on its own, as it is so central to the point. Before dealing with these however, let me state clearly the point I am arguing, and what it does not entail.

My key claim against Chandler is this: *there is no seventeenth-century example of the General Baptist tradition/denomination knowingly tolerating the continued membership or leadership of someone whose Christology they regarded as unorthodox*. I am not arguing, that is, that there were not some within the tradition who came to views that were recognised as unorthodox, and argued for them — there clearly were, but in every case they were excommunicated (Elias Tookey would be an obvious early example; John Weller an obvious later one). Nor am I arguing that there were not Baptists who were never within the denomination/tradition (I define this in section 2 below) who held to unorthodox doctrines (Leonard Busher would be a potential example, although it is possible he was involved with Helwys's church in Amsterdam at the very start). Nor, further, am I arguing that there was never a General Baptist who held to an unorthodox Christology secretly. Finally, I am not even trying to argue that the various christological opinions known amongst the

General Baptists in the seventeenth century were all 'orthodox', just that their co-religionists believed them to be so.[1]

On this basis, it may be that our primary disagreement is already over: Dr Chandler's second article[2] paints Caffyn as a Nicodemite; if this is true, and if Caffyn had carried off this self-presentation successfully, then the various events of the 1690s do not involve any part of the General Baptist tradition *knowingly tolerating* his errors, and we have no quarrel. That said, let me respond in more detail in the areas I have indicated.

What It Was To Be a General Baptist: On the Nature of Traditions

The claim I have made above depends on identifying some unified General Baptist tradition. I have argued before that we can see a loose movement becoming a denomination between 1652 and 1660.[3] In the same essay, however, I invoked Alasdair MacIntyre's developed account of the nature of a 'tradition' to suggest that it is appropriate to speak of the General Baptist movement or tradition starting with Smyth and Helwys, because they began the movement that became a denomination half a century after their time.[4] On MacIntyre's telling, a 'tradition' is a diachronic community defined by a continuity in conversation. The conversation may, indeed almost certainly will, lead to revision and sometimes reversal of earlier positions, but the tradition remains unbroken because there is an unbroken chain of discursive reasoning through which such reversals happen. Breaches in a tradition occur when there is a sustained refusal of two (or more) groups to continue

---

1 I have addressed the question of the meaning of 'orthodox' in precisely this context in my 'Evaluating a Neglected Tradition of (Ana)baptist Christology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* (2023), pp. 16–33 (pp. 29–32).

2 Kegan A. Chandler, 'Christological Laxity, Nicodemism, and Baptist Identity: A Reply to Stephen R. Holmes', *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 24.2 (2024), pp. 163–188.

3 Stephen R. Holmes, 'The Church of Helwys, Murton, and Lambe: An Argument for Continuity', *Baptist Quarterly*, 54 (2023), pp. 134–154 (pp. 153–154).

4 Holmes, 'The Church', p. 152, and see the reference to Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) in note 78 there. I have treated similar themes in discussing the Particular Baptists more recently: Stephen R. Holmes, 'Who Were the Early Baptists? A Review Essay of Matthew C. Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals*', *American Baptist Quarterly*, 40 (2024), pp. 252–272 (pp. 268–270).

the conversation — when, roughly, they stop talking to each other. This might be a split in a previously unified tradition (amongst the seventeenth-century General Baptists, the divide in the 1650s over the proper subjects of manual imposition, the 'laying on of hands', would be an example); equally, it may be a refusal of an existing tradition to engage with a new group who want to join it (we might look to the Mennonite hesitations over welcoming in Smyth's group after he and Helwys had split: Smyth and his comrades wanted to become a part of the Mennonite tradition, but were not received in Smyth's lifetime). Such breaches may be rather temporary (I have argued before for an early reversal of Helwys's refusal to engage with the Mennonites, on the basis of extensive evidence of friendly relations between the nascent General Baptists and the Waterlanders in Amsterdam from the 1620s to about 1660).[5] Questions of comprehension intrude, of course — in the essay just referenced, I proposed that the growing apart of the Amsterdam Mennonites and the English General Baptists after about 1660 can be explained by the ending of the English-speaking congregation in Amsterdam about that date.

All this is of course theoretical, and the messiness of history rarely conforms well to theory. That said, the General Baptists in the seventeenth century are not hard to narrate in these terms. From the beginnings in Amsterdam and then Spitalfields, London, we find, in 1626, five churches clearly engaged in conversation about doctrinal limits and settling on a willingness to recognise the Waterlander Mennonites as fellow Christians, whilst excluding Tookey and his little group. By (probably) 1652, the churches in this tradition are holding annual assemblies, which continue into the 1690s; even after the schism in that decade, we have two rival annual assemblies that cannot stop talking about, and to, each other, and which reunite not very far into the new century. We have, then, a diachronically continuous communal conversation — one that can change its mind relatively quickly on some issues (fellowship with the Mennonites, for example) — but that was repeatedly clear over the boundaries of acceptable diversity. Whether in splitting with Smyth's group over successionism at the beginning, or in

[5] For the point about the Mennonites, see Holmes, 'The Church', p. 137, and the references to the 2011 essay by Sprunger and Sprunger in notes 16–17 there.

expelling Tookey's group in the 1620s, or in decisions over the laying on of hands in the 1650s, or in ongoing disputes with the Quakers, clear lines were repeatedly drawn and policed. They were not the same clear lines at every stage, but it is not hard to show how the original decision about baptism and the concern in the 1640s and 1650s over the laying on of hands are parts of the same ongoing conversation.

Two points are worth stressing here, for avoidance of confusion. First, this all concerns historical judgements about the appropriateness of classifications, not normative judgements about the correctness of positions. To assert that Thomas Lambe and his Bell's Alley Church were excluded from the General Baptist tradition after the mid-1650s because of the divide over the laying on of hands is not to say anything about whether they were right or wrong. It is an historical fact that the continuing tradition, represented by the General Assembly, judged them to be so wrong that they should be excluded; the rightness or wrongness of that decision does not change this historical reality. Second, good historical work requires very careful attention to the questions considered important by the subjects of our research, and a determined refusal to impose our own concerns on them. I have developed this point at some length in a recent essay addressing Matthew Bingham's desire to make the Calvinist/Arminian debate decisive for seventeenth-century Separatists, Independents, and Baptists.[6] It simply was not; several General Baptist leaders, including as it happens Caffyn, in fact taught particular redemption.[7] To gain historical understanding, we need to focus on what our subjects regarded as important, not on what we think they should have regarded as important.

All of this is to say that the claim I am making, stated above, concerns (what I understand to be) the tradition/denomination that can be identified as 'General Baptist' in the seventeenth century, and that this is deliberately modest.

---

[6] Holmes, 'Who Were the Early Baptists?', passim, but see particularly the summary on pp. 268–270.

[7] See Matthew Caffyn, *Faith in God's Promises* (London: S. Dover for F. Smith, 1660), pp. 5–6.

Questions of Interpretation

Chandler questions a number of my interpretative claims, and most of the differences between us not covered above turn on these disputes. Before turning to specifics, however, it is worth reviewing a common feature of theological dispute, which is very visible amongst the seventeenth-century General Baptists, as it is in any number of other historical debates. In simple terms, theology *matters*: those engaged in theological dispute are almost always of the view that the eternal destiny of human beings is at stake, and so prosecute their cases with energy. The *odium theologicum*, the passion generated by theological controversy like this, tends, amongst other things, to lead to a piling up of matters of disagreement, and to very strong expressions concerning all of them, which can obscure the matter that is truly at stake.

When we turn to the dispute between Smyth and Helwys, this seems relevant. Chandler quotes some very strong language that Helwys uses of the Mennonite Christology that he was concerned to reject and that Smyth was prepared to make room for;[8] but it is clear that this was not his central concern — he says as much, writing to the Waterlanders that 'the whole cause in question being Succession (for so it is in deed and in truth)[…]'.[9] It is clear, despite the rather intemperate language that Chandler is able to quote, that Helwys and his group do not, at this point, consider the Mennonite Christology a barrier to Christian fellowship, or such an error as to put them outside the true church. In writing to the Mennonites, they address them as 'Beloved in the Lord', and 'Charissimi fratres fidei vinculo'; they praise their 'care, diligence and faithfulness in the advancement of God's holy truth'.[10] Helwys's

[8] Chandler's quotations are all, I think, from Helwys's *Advertisment* of 1611, which is certainly Helwys's strongest blast against the Mennonite Christology. Even in that text, however, Helwys makes clear that his primary argument with the Waterlanders is over succession: in the introductory epistle to De Ries, Wybrants, 'and the congregations where of they are', the single issue named is 'your error of Succession and order', indicating that this was the heart of the dispute. Thomas Helwys, *An Advertisement or admonition, unto the Congregations*… (no place or publisher stated, but presumably Amsterdam, 1611), pp. 6–7, quotation from p. 6.

[9] Letter from Helwys, Pigott, Seamer, and Murton to the Waterlander church 12 March 1610, reproduced in Champlin Burrage, *Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research, 1550–1641*, vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 1912), pp. 185–187 (p. 185).

[10] Letter 12 March 1610; Letter 'Ecclesia Anglicana, Ecclesiae Belg[icae] Amsterdamiae', reproduced in Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, 2, p. 181.

church represent themselves as a true church of Christ, which has properly excommunicated Smyth and his group for their repudiation of their baptisms and their confession of successionism, and which is writing to another true church of Christ, the Waterlanders in Amsterdam, informing them of this excommunication and asking that it be respected and upheld.

For the matter at hand, the sequence here is important: in 1610 Helwys tells the Waterlanders, who at that point he seems to regard as a true church of Christ without reserve, that the 'English church' — Helwys and his congregation — had excommunicated Smyth and his group, and that this excommunication should be respected by the 'Dutch Church', the Waterlanders. The sole ground cited for the excommunication is successionism. From Helwys's point of view, Smyth is then under the Ban, and is not a member of any church. It would seem that Helwys then learned more about what the Waterlanders actually taught and became concerned, particularly that they were holding the doctrine of succession but also over other matters. On his account, some private representations followed, which, being ineffective, led to the public rebuke contained in the *Advertisement*.[11]

We see from this sequencing that there was no (public) dispute between Smyth and Helwys over Christology during the (fairly brief) time they recognised each other as fellow members of a baptised church. They split over the need for succession — which is, of course, essentially the question of the validity of their baptisms and so of great importance to them. Some time after that split, Helwys opposed both Smyth and the Waterlanders on a number of issues, succession still being chief among them, but he also included other errors he perceived, concerning the Sabbath, magistracy, and Christology.

---

[11] In passing, it is worth noting that this is fairly transparently an application of the Ban procedure outlined in Matthew 18 to the Waterlanders. Helwys makes it clear that he has sought to address the issue of succession privately with De Ries in particular but had no satisfaction, so he has written 'privately to the whole congregation' — taken the matter to the church. Now he is making his charges public. Given this, the fact that he does not pronounce the Ban seems significant, and this impression is strengthened by the appeal to Revelation 2 immediately following the dedicatory epistle. In citing the letters to the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira, he is constructing the Waterlanders as a true church of Christ that is, however, entertaining errors and false teachers, and so is in danger of invoking judgement on itself.

I have addressed Chandler's points concerning Busher and Tookey above (although I am not certain he gets Busher right): both were clearly formally excluded from the developing tradition, and so they cannot be used as evidence of a willingness to embrace, or even to tolerate, the sort of doctrinal divergence they represent. Chandler cites Bell as noting christological differences between the five churches that signed the 1526 letter; unfortunately, Bell offers no evidence for this claim at all, and (unless it is a reference to Tookey) I cannot think of any evidence we have that might even suggest it.[12]

Baptist support for John Biddle is an interesting question. William Lumpkin ascribed an anonymous 1655 tract, *A Petition of divers gathered churches*…, to some sort of group of London Baptists.[13] This text not only pleads for Biddle's release, but also locates its authors as anti-trinitarian, in that it asserts that if Biddle is guilty under the Articles cited, so would they be. After the petition proper, addressed to Cromwell, there is a letter, addressed to the Midlands (General Baptist) churches who had agreed the 1651 *Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations*, appealing for their support on the basis that they had chosen to use biblical language, not 'person' and 'substance', in their confession of the Trinity, which is presumably why Lumpkin wants to ascribe the document to Baptists. It seems clear, however, that Lumpkin is mistaken: by 1655 the General Assembly had met more than once, and the appeal made is not that of churches secure in their mutual recognition. Rather, it seems that the deliberately biblical language of the *Faith and Practice* had somehow come to the notice of the tract authors and encouraged them to hope that the Midlands Baptist congregations might be fellow-travellers.[14]

Chandler cites the seventeenth-century historian Anthony Wood to the effect at least some General Baptists were won over by Biddle in the 1655 debate between John Biddle and John Griffith at

---

12 Chandler, 'Christological Laxity', p. 169), referencing Mark R. Bell, *Apocalypse How? Baptist Movements during the English Revolution* (Mercer University Press, 2000), p. 40.

13 William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. edn (Judson Press, 1969) p. 173, n. 17.

14 It is possible, although perhaps unlikely, that the 1655 tract was written by some surviving descendants of Tookey's group. This would make it easier to understand how they came to notice the *Faith and Practice*; on the other hand, we have no evidence of Tookey's group surviving into the 1640s, let alone to 1655.

Stone Chapel, which ended prematurely when Biddle was arrested. However, more recent historians, both Baptist and Unitarian, have judged, rightly in my estimation, that Wood failed to understand the Baptist commitment to liberty of conscience for all, and so he erroneously interpreted Baptist support for Biddle's *release* as support for Biddle's *doctrine*.[15] Indeed, if we consult Wood's original account, he dismisses the Baptists' concern for liberty of conscience as 'pretence', which to any student of the tradition will be merely incredible; further, his evidence for Baptists holding Biddle's views extends to a parenthetical 'as tis said', which is hardly compelling.[16]

I am grateful to Chandler for drawing my attention to the anonymous 1657 tract *To the Officers and Souldiers of the Army*, which I had previously overlooked. It has a marginal list of claimed subscribers to the 1655 *Petition* mentioned above,[17] which includes reference to several known General Baptist churches. The list bears some examination: first, there is a clear division between three churches, where we are told a small number of people subscribed 'in the behalf of the whole Church', and the other eight, where we are left to assume that one or more members subscribed to the petition but the church as a whole did not. None of the three subscribing churches are known to us as General Baptist causes of the time; of the other eight, asserted only to be home to some supporters, one is Independent, the church pastored by John Goodwin; one is Particular Baptist, pastored by William Kiffin; three are identifiably General Baptist — pastored by the two Thomas Lamb(e)s, and Samuel Loveday; the other three are indeterminate — a congregation pastored by George Huntley, who seems to be unknown to us, a congregation 'meeting in the Stone Chappel [*sic*] in Pauls', and a congregation 'meeting in Nightingale Lane'.

Goodwin, the Independent, is interesting here, not least because he was a prolific author and we know much about his convictions, and indeed his changes of mind. When Thomas Firmin, a young artisan in

---

15 So, for example, H. John McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford University Press, 1951), pp. 222–223; Clint C. Bass, *Thomas Grantham (1633–1692) and General Baptist Theology* (Regent's Park College, 2013), pp. 180–181.

16 Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxionensis*, vol. 2 (London: Tho. Bennet, 1691), col. 201–202.

17 There is an extensive quotation of the petition on p. 3, which is identical to the 1655 text. Anon., *To the Officers and Souldiers of the Army*… (n. p., but presumably London: n. pub., 1657).

Goodwin's congregation, met Biddle and embraced his principles, Goodwin was appalled. He preached repeatedly against 'Socinianism', to the extent that he could claim in 1654, to have 'laboured, and this more publikly, more abundantly' against the error than any Presbyterian divine.[18] He had previously expressed his commitment to liberty of conscience and to rational approaches to religion, but he was completely unprepared to accept that such principles might lead to toleration for anti-trinitarians. We have the published version of his anti-Socinian sermons, in which he was prepared — perhaps forced? — to acknowledge that some in his church struggled with the question; to them he proposed an argument reminiscent of Pascal's wager: it was more likely that the trinitarians were right, and the cost of embracing the Socinian position, if it should turn out to be wrong, was far higher, so a rational waverer should confess the Trinity.[19]

This gives context for the four Baptist churches mentioned: if Goodwin, publicly and implacably opposed to Socinianism and repeatedly warning his congregation against it, could be named in such a document, it cannot be offered, on its own, as good evidence that the Baptist leaders and churches named were any more positive than he was. Rather, like Goodwin, they were committed to the principle of liberty of conscience: no-one, however wrong, should be punished by the magistrate for their religious convictions — and this included John Biddle, even though his opinions were as odious as they were erroneous in their eyes.

Chandler's accounts of the 1656 debate, the writing of the Standard Confession in 1660, assume that the Anabaptist Christology is unorthodox; I have argued, in an essay that Chandler references with apparent approval, that this assumption is unwarranted.[20] Even if I am

---

[18] Indeed, he asserts that he has laboured more 'not onley then [sic] you all, but then all your six Commissioners'. John Goodwin, *A Fresh Discovery of the High-Presbyterian Spirit* … (London: for the author, 1654) p. 45.

[19] Goodwin's anti-Socinian sermons were published in *Πληρωμα το πνευματικον, Or, A Being Filled with the Spirit*… (London: Henry Eversden, 1670); John Coffey's analysis remains standard: John Coffey, *Thomas Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution: Religion and Intellectual Change in Seventeenth-Century England* (Boydell, 2006), pp. 246–249.

[20] Holmes, 'Evaluating a Neglected Tradition of (Ana)baptist Christology', pp. 28–30; Chandler, 'Christological Laxity', n. 5.

wrong, I simply note that it remains an assumption: Chandler offers no discussion of the meaning of 'orthodox', but instead asserts, on the basis of piecemeal quotations from people who without doubt disagreed on the meaning of that word (Thomas Helwys and Leon McBeth, for example) that what he terms, unhappily as I have argued,[21] 'Hoffmanite Christology' is obviously unorthodox.

Now, in my discussion already referenced, I accept readily that if by 'orthodox' we mean 'subscribing to the ecumenical creeds and conciliar definitions', then the Anabaptist Christology was not orthodox. That is, however, a position that is simply foreign to Baptist life from 1611 until today. Many of us have great respect for the ecumenical formulations; indeed, I have argued that they can carry effective authority even when we insist that God's revelation is *sola scriptura*;[22] but even if (as I do) we assert that doctrinal agreement with the Chalcedonian definition is necessary for orthodoxy, we have to take the doctrinal matter seriously, not the verbal form. I have argued before that Menno and Caffyn (*inter alia*) rejected Chalcedonian language because they heard it as Nestorian;[23] if this is right we might suggest that they were rejecting the language of Chalcedon in order to assert the doctrine of Chalcedon. (This is, of course, essentially the agreement reached in the recent historic rapprochement between the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox.[24])

On this basis, I find myself able to accept many of Chandler's assertions about General Baptist willingness to make space for Anabaptist Christology in the middle of the seventeenth century; indeed, I have previously gone further than he proposes on at least one of them. He urges on me that the 1660 'Standard Confession' made room for Caffyn's 'Hoffmanite' Christology. I have in fact argued in the past that Caffyn was one of the authors of this confession, alongside Joseph Wright and John Parsons senior, and that these three were tasked with

---

21 Holmes, 'Evaluating a Neglected Tradition of (Ana)baptist Christology', p. 28.

22 See Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past* (Paternoster, 2002), especially chapter 10.

23 Holmes, 'Evaluating a Neglected Tradition of (Ana)baptist Christology', pp. 20–21, 27, 28.

24 See Ciprian Toroczkai, 'Eastern Orthodox Churches and Oriental Orthodox Churches in Dialogue: Reception, Disagreement and Convergence', *Review of Ecumenical Studies*, 8 (2016), pp. 253–256 for an overview and *The Dialogue between the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches*, ed. by Christine Chaillot (Volos Academy Publications, 2016) for helpful discussion.

writing a confession that was capacious of both Caffyn's 'Hoffmanite' (*sic*, Anabaptist) views and Wright's more Chalcedonian formulations.[25] We agree that the tradition made space for the Anabaptist Christology; Chandler asserts that this Christology is 'unorthodox'; I regard this assertion as unwarranted, at least without good evidence being presented. Further, I have, in a previous publication already referenced, offered distinctions concerning the meaning of 'orthodox' and (what I see as) compelling evidence that, on any meaning acceptable to Baptists, we cannot (yet?) label the Anabaptist Christology as definitively outside this category, although I accept completely that neither can we assert that it is definitively within the category.

On Caffyn's Doctrine

Chandler suggests I am inconsistent in my account of Caffyn. I can only apologise here if I have failed to be clear. I have been working on Caffyn, on and off, for well over a decade, and not all my conclusions are yet in print. I have tried to be clear, for example, that whilst I have considerable respect for Bass's recent monograph and do regard it as the best reconstruction currently in print, I am not in total agreement, particularly when it comes to Christ's deity and the doctrine of the Trinity.[26] If I have not communicated this adequately, that is entirely my fault, particularly given I have not yet published my (admittedly tentative) reconstruction of Caffyn's trinitarian doctrine.

As I have indicated above, I accept completely that Caffyn held to an Anabaptist, 'heavenly flesh' Christology. The textual evidence for this is not straightforward, but it all points in this direction. I note, however, that this doctrine is entirely about the human nature of Christ, and so no evidence at all for his orthodoxy or otherwise on the Trinity. I have explored this point at some length in print elsewhere,[27] but here I will simply point to Hans de Ries's 1578 Confession, which was of course written under duress, and demonstrates De Ries's best attempts

[25] Stephen R. Holmes, 'A Note Concerning the Text, Editions, and Authorship of the 1660 Standard Confession of the General Baptists', *Baptist Quarterly*, 47 (2016), pp. 2–7.
[26] For this in terms see Holmes, 'Evaluating a Neglected Tradition of (Ana)baptist Christology', n. 46 on p. 26, for example.
[27] Holmes, 'Evaluating a Neglected Tradition of (Ana)baptist Christology', passim.

to make the Anabaptist Christology acceptable to his persecutors, but demonstrates that he is prepared to assert, whilst holding tenaciously to the Anabaptist Christology, that 'Jesus Christ is truly God', and that he is 'of one will, one mind, one essence with the Father, of one substance with the Father and the Holy Spirit […] in His divine Being having neither beginning nor end […]'.[28]

I suppose that no-one familiar with the sources will disagree that it is hard to give an adequate account of Caffyn's doctrine of the Trinity. If De Ries is evidence that it was possible for a careful theologian to hold both the Anabaptist Christology and a traditional account of the Trinity, he cannot of course be evidence that any later writer, including Caffyn, followed him in this. We have, essentially, nothing from Caffyn's own hand, and the various contemporary sources that we do have are distorted by the ongoing controversy. There are, however, various historical facts that are not in dispute.

The first is that we have incontrovertible evidence that the General Assembly, in the 1690s, was sufficiently opposed to 'Socinianism' to expel Richard Newton in 1692 for holding the doctrine. Caffyn was present at that Assembly. It is further clear that throughout the dispute the General Assembly never suggested that the various doctrines imputed to Caffyn were acceptable; rather, they judged that he did not hold the doctrines of which he was accused. Whatever this says about Caffyn, it is strong evidence that the Assembly was committed to upholding a basic trinitarian orthodoxy, although they never defined the limits or extent of that. This evidence is surely unambiguous and compelling, and supports my statement of my core thesis at the beginning of this article: the Assembly would not 'knowingly tolerate' unorthodox doctrine regarding the Trinity. If Caffyn was obfuscating, they fell for it, but this does not make them accepting of unorthodoxy; rather it merely makes them somewhat gullible.

There are other lines of evidence that suggest support for this conclusion, although with less direct purchase. Daniel Allen is a case in

[28] Quotations from Cornelius J. Dyck, 'The Middleburg Confession of Hans de Ries, 1578', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 36 (1962), pp. 147–54 (p. 152); I discuss this in Holmes, 'Evaluating a Neglected Tradition of (Ana)baptist Christology', pp. 23–25.

point. Allen is, although he disavows the term, Arian. Chandler makes much of Caffyn's association with Allen, and suggests that Bass did too.[29] In reality, the only association we have any evidence of is that they defended different propositions in two debates that were held in the same place on the same day. Allen's book, *The Moderate Trinitarian*, does not mention Caffyn once, although it engages in passing with the debates of the 1690s and directly and at some length with some of Caffyn's opponents, notably Thomas Monck.[30] We do, however, know from the minutes of the General Assembly that Allen was a Messenger in good standing in 1696 and 1698, but he then disappears completely from the record. His book, denying the doctrine of the Trinity directly, was published in 1699. This may be coincidence, but, particularly given the exclusion of Newton in 1692, it may also be suggestive. Like Newton, Allen denied the doctrine of the Trinity; unlike Newton we have no record of deliberations, but he similarly plays no further discernible part in denominational life.[31] Caffyn, however, remains a Messenger in good standing.

Chandler suggests, following, amongst others, Curtis Freeman, that Caffyn remained in good standing because he dissembled — Chandler's accusation of 'Nicodemism'. As I have noted above, if this is true, it does not in any way damage the point I am trying to make against Chandler. That said, is it true? Once again, the evidence is insufficient for us to come to a firm conclusion, but there is no evidence whatsoever for the claim that Caffyn was 'a master of theological obfuscation'.[32] He was repeatedly imprisoned through his life, but we have not one suggestion that he dissembled to avoid prison. We look in vain in any of the four works that have come down to us for anything other than robust, sometimes dismissive, statements of what he believed. His anti-Quaker polemic was still being answered by members of the Society of Friends into the eighteenth century, but none of them

[29] Chandler, 'Christological Laxity', p. 176.
[30] Daniel Allen, *The Moderate Trinitarian* (London: Mary Fabian, 1699).
[31] Chandler's suggestion that Allen was somehow involved in setting the conditions for Caffyn's trial in 1700 is therefore implausible. Chandler, 'Christological Laxity', p. 176.
[32] Chandler, 'Christological Laxity', citing Freeman, p. 181.

ever raise a charge of equivocation or deceitfulness, suggesting that no such charge was known amongst them.

Against all this, Chandler offers one piece of evidence, and one generic assertion. The evidence is Wright's recollection of an Assembly meeting probably in the early 1670s in Aylesbury. Wright's account of Caffyn's statements does not look like equivocation, however: 'to say the eternal God could change into Flesh, Blood, and Bones […] is Blasphemy' seems instead to be straightforward and robust![33] Wright professes shock at hearing this from Caffyn, and suggests it represents a major change of mind on Caffyn's part, but if we understand the Anabaptist Christology, it need not. As I have argued elsewhere, Menno developed that tradition to a point where he felt it possible, indeed crucial, to assert that the 'becoming' spoken of in John 1:14 happened without change. If we assume that Caffyn held a similar conviction, then we can make perfect sense of everything Wright records, without positing any change of mind on Caffyn's part. Wright has regularly heard Caffyn speak of the Logos 'becoming' flesh, and has assumed that 'becoming' here means or at least implies 'change'; Caffyn thinks however, with Menno, that 'becoming' does not entail 'change'. Presented, then, with the claim that 'the eternal God could change into Flesh', Caffyn simply dismisses it as '[b]lasphemy', but Wright hears this dismissal as a major change of mind. Caffyn's response to Wright on this point, which we have only in Wright's transcription, suggests he thinks Wright has simply not understood him,[34] which is echoed in his dismissive response on a similar point to Haynes,[35] and in Thomas Crosby's report of his response to Monck's *Cure*.[36] If this reconstruction is correct, Caffyn is not dissembling in any way here; he is perhaps guilty of not understanding how his position is confusing to Wright, but he is simply expressing, forcibly indeed, the position he has always held.

Chandler then gives us a line from Bass to the effect that after this meeting in the 1670s, '[Caffyn] proved to be much more elusive,

---

33 Joseph Wright, *Speculum Haeriticis, or, A looking Glass for Heretics* (London, 1691), pp. 6, 11.
34 Wright, *Speculum*, pp. 7–8 for Wright's account; p. 25 for Caffyn's nuanced response.
35 Matthew Caffyn, *Envy's Bitterness Corrected with the Rod of Shame* (London, 1674), p. 32.
36 Thomas Crosby, The *History of the English Baptists*, vol. 4 (Baptist Standard Bearer, 2001; original published in London in 1740), p. 338. Thomas Monck, *A Cure for the Cankering Error of the New Eutychians* . . . (London: for the author, 1673).

stressing the obscurity of traditional formulations and rarely stating positively his own position.'[37] But on what evidence is this based? We have no writings from Caffyn from this period, and little other material. The Assembly *Minutes* do not give particulars of who said what, so cannot be offered in support. There is a repeated charge that Caffyn described John Weller's unitarianism as 'precious truths' in a letter, although the evidence does not in fact adequately support this charge;[38] that said, even if it is true, it does not look like evasiveness. Again, the 1699 debate used to link Caffyn with Allen has Caffyn stepping forward willingly to defend what is essentially the Anabaptist Christology in debate against all comers. Is this the act of someone who is striving to conceal his own views?

Bass's assertion that Caffyn emphasised 'the obscurity of traditional formulations' has a little more support. The clearest statement is again from Crosby, who asserts that at the 1699 debate Caffyn 'made the unsurmountable difficulties, which attend the *Athanasian* scheme, […] fully and manifestly appear' and more generally that Caffyn 'thought it a little strange and unaccountable, that in respect of the Deity, *one* substance should constitute *three* real persons, and yet, that in Christ, *two* intelligent natures and substances should make but *one* person'.[39]

I have argued before that expressing such doubts in seventeenth-century England was natural, as the key terms of the ancient trinitarian confessions, 'person' and 'substance', had changed in meaning, and so the traditional formulae made no sense. It is not unreasonable to read Crosby's account of Caffyn's hesitations in these terms. Indeed, there is evidence that we should do so. In Wright's report of Caffyn's responses to his charges, he notes that Caffyn included a passage from 'Dr. Sherlock's *Vindication of the Athanasian Creed*'.[40] Wright is dismissive of this, noting that Caffyn denied the *Quicumque vult* (which

[37] Clint C. Bass, *The Caffynite Controversy* (Centre for Baptist Studies in Oxford, 2020), p. 39.
[38] Even if the letter were from Caffyn to Weller, which given its appearance ten or twelve years after it was written cannot be certain, the 'precious truths' of which Caffyn approves are unspecified. It could as easily be about the Anabaptist Christology, or indeed some other eccentric opinion shared by both men of which we now have no trace.
[39] Crosby, *History*, 4, pp. 337, 341; all emphases original.
[40] Wright, *Speculum*, p. 28.

is unsurprising if the doubts Crosby ascribes to him are even close to true). The reference is striking, however. Wright's *Speculum* was published in 1691, with the implication (from the dating of the introductory epistle) that it was written and responded to in 1690, which was also the year of publication of Sherlock's *Vindication*.[41] Caffyn, therefore, had read this text almost as soon as it was published and was citing it (uniquely, according to Wright's evidence) approvingly.

Sherlock was a non-juror, who had argued against Toleration because he believed nonconformity should be actively persecuted in law. He was not, it is fair to say, an obvious authority for Caffyn to appeal to. The *Vindication*, however, although controversial, was perhaps the greatest attempt in the seventeenth century to restate a traditional trinitarian doctrine without using the problematic language of 'person' and 'substance'.[42] Caffyn's interest in, and invocation of, Sherlock suggests a similar interest, which accords well with Crosby's reports, and makes considerable sense both of the various debates of the 1690s' Assemblies, and of Wright's complaints and confusions.[43]

Salters' Hall, 1719, and Beyond

Chandler turns, albeit briefly, to the Salters' Hall Synod of 1719, repeating the old charge that the refusal of the General Baptists who were present to subscribe to Anglican or Presbyterian formulae was evidence that they were already unorthodox. Recent scholarship does

41 William Sherlock, *A Vindication of the Doctrine of the Holy and Ever Blessed Trinity and the Incarnation of the Son of God* (London: W. Rogers, 1690).

42 For some account of the controversy, see Martin Grieg, 'Reasonableness of Christianity? Gilbert Burnet and the Trinitarian Controversy of the 1690s', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 44 (1993), pp. 631–651; D. W. Dockrill, 'The Authority of the Fathers on the Great Trinitarian Debates of the Sixteen Nineties', *Studia Patristica*, 18 (1989), pp. 335–347; and Yudha Thianto, 'Three Persons as Three Individual Substances: Joseph Bingham and the Trinitarian Controversy at Oxford in the 1690s', *Fides et Historica*, 40 (2008), pp. 67–86.

43 There is not room to demonstrate every detail of this here, but consider, e.g., the standard framing of the charge against Caffyn in the 1690s, that Christ 'is not of the Uncreeted [*sic*] Substance of his father But God made him a Creature only' (from the 1692 minutes in *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptist Churches in England*, 2 vols, ed. by W. T. Whitley (Baptist Historical Society, 1909), 1, pp. 39–40). If my account is right, Caffyn may well have accepted the first clause, because he could make no sense of 'substance' language, whilst denying the second. He would therefore be continuing to affirm the true deity of Christ.

not, unfortunately, offer any support for this, and much strong evidence against it.[44] The, albeit probably apocryphal, tale of the twin shouts, 'You that are for the Doctrine of the Trinity…' and 'You that are against Persecution…' makes the salient point well:[45] the question at stake was not trinitarianism versus unitarianism, but willingness to subscribe to imposed human formulae in defence of the doctrine of the Trinity versus a commitment to trinitarian doctrine coupled with a refusal to accept demands of subscription. It is worth recalling that in 1719, we are only three decades from the Toleration Act; some of those present might well have been persecuted for their unwillingness to conform to Anglican norms, almost all would have known people who were so persecuted. Non-subscription was not a rejection of the Trinity, but a rejection of the imposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles or the Westminster Standards.[46] (Chandler appears to have missed the fact that the formula of subscription was drawn from these sources, instead suggesting it was 'drafted by the defeated minority at Salters'[Hall]'.[47] This is significant, given the history of persecution.)

Claims of a universal shift of the General Baptists to unitarianism in the eighteenth century are not uncommon, but are also misleading: certainly there was some movement in this direction, but the fact that the old General Baptist denomination was almost entirely unitarian by (say) 1800 is mostly a reflection that all the churches committed to trinitarian orthodoxy had left to join the New Connexion.[48] Through a somewhat stuttering process, the New

---

[44] See, e.g., Jesse Owens, 'Salters' Hall and the English General Baptists: A Reappraisal', in *Trinity, Creed and Confusion: The Salters' Hall Debates of 1719*, ed. by Stephen Copson (Regent's Park College, 2020), pp. 63–85, which demonstrates that every one of the General Baptist nonsubscribers of whom we have knowledge was, in 1719, not anti-trinitarian, but merely opposed to the imposition of subscription to non-biblical texts.

[45] Anon., *An Account of the late Proceedings of the Dissenting Ministers …* (London: J. Roberts, 1719), p. 10.

[46] Most recent accounts take this line. To give only one example, 'The case for the majority of the Nonsubscribers at Salters' Hall being theologically orthodox regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, but opposed to the requirement of subscription to extrabiblical words and phrases, is strong' (Jesse F. Owens, 'The Salters' Hall Controversy: Heresy, Subscription, or Both?', *Perichoresis*, 20 (2022), pp. 35–52 (p. 50)).

[47] Chandler, 'Christological Laxity', pp. 178-179.

[48] Frank W. Rinaldi, *The Tribe of Dan: The New Connexion of General Baptists 1770–1891* (Paternoster, 2008) remains the best history; he discusses the various old General Baptist churches that seceded to the New Connexion on pp. 42–43.

Connexion merged with the Particular Baptists to form what is now The Baptist Union of Great Britain, presently numbering some 2000 congregations, of whom none are confessionally unitarian.

The churches of the older General Baptist tradition dwindled through the nineteenth century. Chandler cites Beard to the effect that there were twenty-four (only!) 'Unitarian Baptist' churches the UK by 1846. He goes on to cite a sentence from the conclusion of an essay of mine to the effect that, lacking any competent magisterium, Baptists must accept the right of congregations to self-denominate, and asks if this applies to these 'Unitarian Baptist' churches.[49] I confess I find this slightly puzzling: just two sentences later in that essay, I addressed these nineteenth-century churches directly, as a limit case, noting that amongst them were probably congregations that maintained the denomination 'Baptist' even when they had given up on any practice of baptism, and distinguishing the right to self-denomination from the scholarly willingness to point to anomalies. This should, surely, have made my reply to Chandler's question clear: yes, they have the right to self-denominate as congregations; but the scholar trying to narrate the Baptist tradition has equally the right to regard them as anomalous and so to exclude them from their narration — in this case on the following bases. (1) That the denomination was historic, and so might be assumed to persist for some time after it ceased to apply; (2) that these anomalies are very few in number; and (3) that they are mostly very short-lived. Of course, such a proposed exclusion may — indeed should — be challenged, but only on the basis of evidence or of an alternative account of Baptist identity that specifies a credible definition which is capacious of congregations previously considered anomalous.[50]

[49] Chandler, 'Theological Laxity', p. 186, citing Holmes, 'Baptist Identity, Once More', *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context*, 3 (2021), pp. 5–27. The point about self-denomination is found on pp. 26–27 of that essay.

[50] It is perhaps worth noting that the account of Baptist identity I develop in that essay focuses on the active and direct lordship of Jesus over every person and over every local congregation. The account of 'Lordship' I offer seems to me to demand a robust assertion of the deity of Christ, and therefore also some sort of trinitarian doctrine.

Conclusion

I return to where I began: I am grateful to Dr Chandler for his engagement. All of us who work as scholars desire above all not to be merely neglected. To read, and engage with someone's work remains the greatest compliment we can pay them — this, even if I completely disagree, is worth my time and effort, a contribution important enough to care about and to put in the labour to respond to. I hope the above reflections at least clarify where we disagree, and why. For my part, the fact that there are scholars who care enough about Caffyn and the General Baptists to dispute interpretations, and journals that consider such disputes worth publishing, is a joy: when I began my academic career, in the 1990s, this would not have been the case, and I am grateful to all those — journal editors, conference organisers, but, supremely, individual researchers — who have laboured to make that change happen.