

## **Unorthodox Christology in General Baptist History: The Legacy of Matthew Caffyn**

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In Baptist histories, English preacher Matthew Caffyn (1628-1714), thanks to his unorthodox Christology, is regularly identified as a theological deviant, and one working under the influence of ‘eighteenth-century rationalism’ or other external forces. By reconsidering the progress of unorthodox Christology among the early Baptists and other Reformers, I argue that Caffyn’s Christology represents not a sudden aberration, but an unsurprising expression of the elemental Baptist instinct. This instinct includes a commitment to being scriptural, to primitivism, and to theological tolerance within the community. In this light, I argue that Caffyn’s place in the Baptist tradition must be revisited in future histories.

### **Keywords**

General Baptist history; Matthew Caffyn; unorthodox Christology; unitarianism; freedom of interpretation; religious freedom

### **Introduction**

In many surveys of General Baptist history, the name of Matthew Caffyn (1628-1714) is spoken with a mixture of reticence and lamentation. His legacy has regularly been portrayed as a catalyst for the deterioration of the General Baptist tradition, a ‘decline’ that was ‘theological, spiritual, and moral [...]’<sup>1</sup> As Leon McBeth put it in his grand review of Baptist heritage, it was thanks to ‘Joseph Priestly and Matthew Caffyn, [that] the General Baptists absorbed Unitarian Christology and their churches plunged into steep decline’.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Caffyn’s doubts about orthodox Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity are often treated as a sudden aberration, a surprising and unfortunate episode, and as something not in keeping with Baptist heritage. But where do the boundaries of the Baptist tradition actually lie? Considering the theological topography of the modern Baptist world, it hardly seems possible that Baptist tradition could ever have been inclusive of Caffyn’s unitarian Christology. Baptist historians typically presume that Caffyn read the New Testament in the way that he did, not because he was a

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony R. Cross, *Useful Learning: Neglected Means of Grace in the Reception of the Evangelical Revival among English Particular Baptists* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2017), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), p. 152.

Baptist, but because he had succumbed to some external influence. Likewise, any deviant, non-trinitarian theology thriving among other General Baptists must be the byproduct of a similar infiltration. As McBeth concluded: ‘Doubts about the deity of Christ formed a part of the rationalism which affected all Christian groups in England during the eighteenth century.’<sup>3</sup> This seems to suggest that these two phenomena – the doubting of orthodox Christology and eighteenth-century rationalism – are necessarily related, and that any historical Baptist propensity towards unorthodox views of the Trinity was only the result of peripheral, inherently non-Baptist energies which must have entered through Caffyn (or the unitarian scholar Joseph Priestly). But this is, I argue, rather short-sighted analysis. Framing Caffyn’s legacy in the wider context of Reformation and Baptist history will provide a better vantage point for judging where his Christological conclusions actually fall on the spectrum of Baptist tradition.

This article represents only the next step in a series of recent historical advancements. Attempts have already been made to bring Caffyn’s wider career and contribution to the General Baptist faith into view,<sup>4</sup> and some have challenged the conclusion widely shared by Baptist historians that acceptance of Caffyn’s views directly led to a ‘decline’ of the General Baptists.<sup>5</sup> Caffyn’s theological proclivities certainly deserve to be part of this historical reconsideration, but so do the boundaries of Baptist heritage. I will argue in this paper that in light of: early Protestant and Anabaptist history; the Christological instinct of early Baptists; the traditional Baptist impulse towards primitivism; the Baptists’ deeply-rooted commitment to being scriptural; and the Baptists’ dedication to freedom of interpretation—that Caffyn’s unorthodox Christology should not be seen as the infiltration of ‘rationalism’ or some alien and non-Baptist principle, but as a rather predictable expression of the elemental Baptist instinct. I will furthermore argue that, despite contemporary assumptions, the General Baptist tradition was once understood to be inclusive of such theological convictions.

### **Matthew Caffyn: Committed Baptist?**

Matthew Caffyn was born in Sussex to Thomas and Elizabeth Caffyn in 1628. His mother was descended from Protestant martyrs, namely the ‘Marian Martyrs’ murdered by Queen Mary I in the 1550s. Her family’s spirit of dissent evidently lived on in her son: at seventeen Matthew was already questioning infant baptism and the doctrine of the Trinity, and openly

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>4</sup> See Alexa Carver, ‘Matthew Caffyn Revisited: Cooperation, Christology, and Controversy in the Life of an Influential Seventeenth-Century Baptist’, *Baptist Quarterly*, 47 (2016), pp. 44-64.

<sup>5</sup> Merrill Hawkins, Jr, ‘Assumptions or Conclusions: The Treatment of Early General Baptist Doctrinal Conflict by Selected Surveys of Baptist History’, *Baptist History and Heritage*, 49 (2014), pp. 64-77.

pushing Baptist theology at his college at Oxford, for which he was promptly expelled in 1645. Three years later he was made the head minister of a General Baptist church in Southwater.

During his vibrant preaching career, Caffyn was ultimately thrown in prison no less than five times for his vigorous, skillful, but ‘unauthorized’ teaching in English towns. He came into public conflict with other Baptist preachers, like the hot-headed Joseph Wright, who was himself imprisoned by the government on religious grounds. Caffyn’s involvement in intra-Baptist controversy continued in 1677, when there occurred a genial split in a congregation in Staplehurst over the Trinity – one side ultimately agreeing with Caffyn’s unitarian views. In a famous episode, a frustrated Joseph Wright made a call for Caffyn’s dismissal to the General Baptist assembly of 1691, but the assembly refused to denounce Caffyn. Wright tried once more in 1693, but was again unsuccessful. Further petitions for Caffyn’s rejection were made in 1699 and 1700 by two churches in Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire, and again the assembly refused to oust him.

We unfortunately have no record of Caffyn’s ministry following the year 1701. We know that he died and was buried in a village churchyard in West Sussex in 1714, and that his ministry was passed on to his son Matthew. But what are we now to make of Caffyn’s legacy and his place in General Baptist history? Our search for answers begins at the dawn of the Reformation.

### **Unorthodox Christological Instinct: A Protestant and Anabaptist Heritage**

We recall that McBeth, in describing the emergence of unitarian opinion in General Baptist circles, connected this phenomenon to the later infiltration of foreign principles. However, a closer look at the early decades of the Reformation begins to paint a different picture, and one that leads us to believe that doubts about the doctrine of the Trinity in Protestant circles, even in Baptist circles, cannot be relegated to an infatuation with ‘rationalism’ contracted in the eighteenth century, nor should they be reduced to the effects of some particular and undue influence from Caffyn (or Priestly). Indeed, Caffyn’s precise sentiments were already present in the Protestant bloodstream when the Reformation drew its first few breaths in the sixteenth century.

Martin Cellarius (1499-1564), a friend of Martin Luther, and the polymath Michael Servetus (1511-1553), provide examples of major theologians who had arrived at non-trinitarian conclusions about the

Scriptures at a very early stage in the Reformation.<sup>6</sup> These figures represent, in fact, a larger trend among early reformers, a trend certainly motivated not by eighteenth-century rationalism, but by the combined power of Reformation principles like *sola scriptura*, restorationism, *ad fontes*, and free Bible translation. Indeed, Luther had translated and published his New Testament in German in 1522, and the first Dutch Bible was printed in 1526 by Liesvlet, followed by a host of vernacular translations quickly spreading throughout Europe. Hot on the heels of these translation efforts we detect a shift in attitude towards Catholic (orthodox) theology and Christology among the radicals. Already by 1527 the great council of Anabaptists in Switzerland had drafted a comprehensive, unanimously endorsed statement featuring no mention of the Trinity. The *Schleitheim Confession*, ‘the most representative statement of Anabaptist principles’,<sup>7</sup> appears to identify the one God as the Father, not as the Trinity, and habitually distinguishes between ‘God’ and ‘Christ’, and even refers to ‘God *and* Christ’. Regardless of how consciously unorthodox this statement was, we know that already in the late 1530s we have reports of Protestant Christians being burned to death for ‘anti-trinitarian’ opinion.<sup>8</sup> In this light, we might be permitted to say that only several years after the wider distribution of the biblical documents had begun, the clarion call for primitivism and the license for free interpretation of the Scriptures won by Luther had already fostered non-trinitarian theology among some Protestants. Budding non-trinitarian interpretations of the Scriptures across Europe received a boost in the 1540s through the work of Italian Anabaptist and unitarian theologian Lelio Sozzini (1525-1562), who was a colleague and at one point a guest and correspondent of Calvin and Melancthon.<sup>9</sup> After Luther’s death in 1546, non-trinitarian theology continued to swell in Anabaptist circles, climaxing in the Council of Venice (1550), which formally agreed on explicitly unitarian principles. Reports from all over Europe of Protestants being executed for doubting the Trinity soon increased, featuring such victims as the Dutch surgeon George van Parris (d. 1551), the Spaniard Michael Servetus (d. 1553), and the Englishmen Patrick Pakingham (d. 1555) and Matthew Hamont (d. 1579). It is clear that at least by 1540-1550, non-trinitarian Christology had become a vibrant strain in the genetic makeup of wider Protestantism.

Looking back at the first several decades of the Reformation, we can recognise two general approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity, and thus to

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<sup>6</sup> Other noteworthy figures often thought to have espoused non-trinitarian theologies include the Anabaptist theologian Hans Denck (1495-1527). The Anglican priest John Assheton (fl. 1548) had, at least at one point, embraced ‘Socinian’ (unitarian) views before the year 1548.

<sup>7</sup> Howard Clark Kee, *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998), p. 281.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Catherine Vogel, wife of Melchior Vogel, was burned to death in 1539 at Krakow.

<sup>9</sup> Lelio’s better-known nephew, Fausto Sozzini, 1539-1604, would become the primary theologian of the Socinian movement and the Minor Reformed Church in Poland.

orthodox Christology. On the one hand, the likes of Luther and Calvin, belonging to the so-called ‘Magisterial Reformation’, were uninterested in challenging these points of doctrine. While these Magisterial reformers were prepared to challenge other congenital dogmas, primarily on the basis of a lack of explicit scriptural explanation, they did not touch the Trinity doctrine – an item long-understood to be essential to the Christian faith and life. Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, and others indeed appear, in the words of the great Protestant scholar Emil Brunner, to have wholly ‘by-passed it [rather] than made it the subject of their own theological reflection’.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, criticism of this doctrine (or family of doctrines) proved a serious interest of many of those Reformers belonging to the so-called ‘Radical Reformation’, and, as we have seen, such criticisms were already being entertained within the first few decades of the Reformation. What might identify these latter Protestants as ‘radical’ may be the degree to which they endeavoured to roll back the theological clock, compared to their Magisterial cousins. In the ‘radical’ view, Luther, an Augustinian monk, had only repealed Christian tradition back to Augustine (indeed, the Magisterial Reformation ultimately proved the revival and great triumph of Augustinianism). The ‘radicals’, on the other hand, unsatisfied with this allegedly limited repeal, were prepared to go much further, and at all hazard. And it must be recognised that it was by this extreme dedication to primitivism that the impulse to challenge orthodox Christology was begotten within only a few decades (at the very latest) of Luther’s *95 Theses*. It is thus not surprising that we locate unorthodox Christological tendencies also at the birth of the Baptist tradition a generation later, and neither is it surprising that we detect the same dichotomous approach to orthodox Christology within the earliest ranks of Baptists.

## **Unorthodox Christology in Baptist Beginnings**

Scholars today are somewhat divided over the historical connection between the Anabaptists and the later Baptists. While some may argue, and with good reason, that there is no organic (ecclesial) link between them, it is nevertheless possible to discern a spiritual (theological) connection. Indeed, in the late nineteenth century, Baptist J.R. Graves still pointed to ‘those ancient Anabaptists, whom we alone represent in this age’.<sup>11</sup> Regardless, modern Baptist historians like Joseph Early Jr reveal that the first Baptist church was actually brought into existence in 1609, and it was this event

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<sup>10</sup> Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), p. 205.

<sup>11</sup> J.R. Graves, ‘Old Landmarkism: What Is It?’, in Joseph Early Jr (ed.), *Readings in Baptist History: Four Centuries of Selected Documents* (Nashville: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 118.

which marked the formal beginning of the so-called ‘General Baptist’ movement.<sup>12</sup>

The General Baptists’ original founder, John Smyth (c. 1565-1612), clearly entertained serious doubts about orthodox Christology, as evidenced by his espousal of Hoffmanite (Anabaptist) Christology, which denied the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation in favour of a ‘heavenly flesh’ doctrine akin to the old Christology of Valentinus (second century CE). Smyth’s one-time partner Thomas Helwys (d. c. 1616) had worked to refute Smyth in this regard, standing strong for the orthodox interpretation, and finally breaking from him around 1610. But there can be no doubt that from its earliest years, vital constituents within the General Baptist movement were already mounting serious challenges to orthodox Christology and exploring doctrines of God quite outside the shelter of conciliar tradition. This is not to say that an ‘orthodox’ spirit was not dwelling vibrantly alongside this impulse in early General Baptist history, as it surely was. But we might say that John Smyth and Thomas Helwys formed two sides of a General Baptist coin: the former representing a radical commitment to the Reformation ideals of primitivism and *sola scriptura*, and the latter also embracing those ideals but in a way that circumvented certain theological fundamentals understood to be both essential and moot points. These twin impulses, while perhaps silently travelling together in Smyth and Helwys’ earliest days, came to visibly clash by 1610, and it was in that year that the Smyth-Helwys alliance ruptured. These two Baptist impulses would clash once again in the time of Matthew Caffyn.

In a way, we see that early General Baptist history forms a microcosm of general Protestantism in the preceding century. Again, in the 1530s-1550s we can observe both of the aforementioned theological impulses among the Protestants – the radical commitment to primitivism being represented by the likes of Cellarius, Servetus, and Sozzini, and the Christologically conservative spirit being represented by Luther, Calvin, and Melancthon. Many of these individuals, we recall, were at one point friends, or at least friendly, until the two spirits clearly recognised each other and could no longer share the same space. And we find a similar divide in the days of Caffyn, as the General Baptists separated into those who followed Caffyn’s restless spirit (and at an elemental level the dissenting, radical spirit of Smyth, their founder) and those who opted to leave the essentials undisturbed. After Smyth’s death in 1612, it is clear that his unorthodox Christological spirit did not die with him, but only took on new life, and soon developed (matured? deteriorated?) into the outwardly non-trinitarian

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Early Jr, *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), p. 25.

(unitarian) theology which took centre stage in the intra-Baptist disputes of the 1670s-1700s.

Today, most Baptists self-identify in terms of trinitarian theology and Christology. But we must take care that we do not allow modern Baptist standards and expectations to cloud the reality of Baptist beginnings. Indeed, Christian denominations often pace beyond the original confessions of their founders. Many members of the Church of Christ, for example, will be surprised to learn that their founders, Stone and Campbell, were not orthodox trinitarians, though such a doctrine is now confessed by their denomination.<sup>13</sup> In a similar way, Herbert W. Armstrong, founder of the Worldwide Church of God, taught an unorthodox, binitarian view of God, while today his denomination is openly trinitarian.<sup>14</sup> Clearly the Baptist tradition founded by Smyth has likewise moved beyond his unorthodox impulse and into (small 'c') catholic waters, but that does not change the fact that the 'Baptist tradition' was Christologically diverse from its inception. Indeed, the first Baptist church was officially founded by Smyth in 1609, and it was by 1610 that Smyth's Christological rupture with his partner Helwys was already complete.<sup>15</sup>

If what motivated early General Baptists in unorthodox directions regarding the Trinity and the deity of Christ was not the urgings of the Enlightenment, then what was it? I argue that such developments were not the result of cavalier Baptist attempts to 'rationalise' the biblical data, nor were they the products of overtly 'speculative' methodologies, rather, they were expressions of the Radical Reformation principles which first drew the Baptist movement up from the water, namely, *primitivism* and a fervent worry over the Scriptures. It is well-known that all Reformers, and Baptists in particular, have insisted that every attempt should be made to derive doctrine exclusively from explicit scriptural teaching. And herein lies the unique challenge for the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity inherited by Protestants from the historical-conciliar system, a doctrine which Protestant historians remind us that anti-Baptists like Luther and Calvin had 'bypassed' in their own reflections. Modern Baptist theologian Millard J. Erickson, famed author of the evangelical systematic standard *Christian Theology* (1990, 2013), makes the following observations about this doctrine in light of the biblical data:

It is claimed that the doctrine of the Trinity is a very important, crucial, and even basic doctrine. If that is indeed the case, should it not be

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas A. Foster, Anthony L. Dunnavant, Paul M. Blowers, and D. Newell Williams (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 356.

<sup>14</sup> 'The Worldwide Church of God, founded by Herbert Armstrong, held this 'binitarian' view. Doctrinal changes in favor of Trinitarianism took place in 1995,' (Anthony F. Buzzard, Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Oxford: International Scholars Publications, 1998), p. 15).

<sup>15</sup> Early, p. 35.

somewhere more clearly, directly, and explicitly stated in the Bible? If this is the doctrine that especially constitutes Christianity's uniqueness, as over against unitarian monotheism on the one hand, and polytheism on the other hand, how can it be only implied in the biblical revelation? In response to the complaint that a number of portions of the Bible are ambiguous or unclear, we often hear a statement something like, "It is the peripheral matters that are hazy or which there seem to be conflicting biblical materials. The core beliefs are clearly and unequivocally revealed." This argument would appear to fail us with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity, however. For here is a seemingly crucial matter where the Scriptures do not speak loudly and clearly. Little direct response can be made to this charge. It is unlikely that any text of Scripture can be shown to teach the doctrine of the Trinity in a clear, direct, and unmistakable fashion.<sup>16</sup>

Are these kinds of biblical questions, which are still being drawn by modern Baptist authorities like Erickson, asked under the heavy rod of rationalism or under the guiding hand of deeply Baptist principles? In the first one hundred years of the General Baptist faith, these concerns over Scripture, wherever they first came from, manifested in diverse ways: at first in the form of Smyth's heretical Christology, and then in the unitarianism of Baptists like Matthew Caffyn. As McBeth acknowledges, 'Whatever the reasons, the fact is clear that General Baptists tended to weaken or even deny the deity of Christ, and many of their churches eventually became Unitarian.'<sup>17</sup> But there seems to be little reason to continue to connect this General Baptist tendency, as McBeth ultimately does, to external influences. I suggest this is merely one expression of the Baptists' own internal commitment to Radical Reformation principles. Indeed, it seems clear that the abundance of unorthodox Christology thriving in the General Baptist world by the late seventeenth century does not represent an intrusion of foreign and non-Baptist instincts, but that such impulses had, in a fundamental way, formed a part of its matrix since its earliest period, precisely as it had in wider Protestantism in Europe. We can easily observe this instinct towards unorthodox Christology, and towards radical theological reflection, exploration, and inclusivity, in the first ninety years of General Baptist creeds.

## **Radical Christology and the General Baptist Creeds**

The earliest faith statements authored by the Baptist's first two leaders are very similar. Smyth may have entertained unorthodox Christology, but his *Short Confession* of 1610 certainly seems trinitarian in its general outlook, and describes the Father, Son, and Spirit as 'being three, and nevertheless

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<sup>16</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1995), pp. 108-109.

<sup>17</sup> McBeth, p. 155.



but one God'. Smyth does refrain from using the word 'Trinity', however, and leaves the precise relationship between the Persons somewhat ambiguous. On the other hand, his counterpart Helwys' subsequent confession, the *Declaration of Faith* (1611), penned following his Christological rupture with Smyth, emphatically states that 'these three are one God, in all equality' and explicitly refers to 'the Trinity'.

It is clear that the overt and decidedly orthodox trinitarianism of Helwys' declaration progressively waned in General Baptist circles in the subsequent decades. This waning is discernible in *The Faith and Practise of Thirty Congregations Gathered According to the Primitive Pattern* (1651). Here the humanity of Jesus is prominent, while little to nothing is said about his 'deity': Jesus is 'the second Adam', the man whose 'Lordly or Kingly preeminence over all mankind, is vindicated or maintained in the Scripture account, by virtue of his dying or suffering for them; Rom. 14:9'. The confession habitually distinguishes 'God' from 'Jesus Christ', and speaks freely and regularly of his humanity and death without qualification. There are some triadic passages: one says that 'God's Word, Son, or Spirit, are one [...] The Word quickneth [...] The Son quickneth [...] And the spirit quickneth [...] So they are one.' These triadic sections are, upon close inspection, rather vague and could still be assented to by unorthodox Baptists, even unitarian Baptists.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, the relationship between the Persons in the above triadic passage, if intended to be read ontologically (which is by no means clear) may even suggest that the Son is the Holy Spirit – a decidedly unorthodox sentiment.

By the production of *The True Gospel Faith* several years later (1654), explicit trinitarianism appears to have all but disappeared from formal Baptist confession. Here we read only that '[Jesus] is now a priest, a prophet, and a king.' There is no mention of the Trinity, and there are no triadic references at all. There are two verses cited together, that when juxtaposed as they are, might be taken to imply a belief that 'Jesus is God' (in some sense), nevertheless such belief is not clearly stated, much less explained, and is not necessarily implied.

The 1660 *Standard Confession* made to King Charles II illustrates how powerful the unitarian instinct became among the General Baptists. The confession clearly says that 'there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, from everlasting to everlasting, glorious, and unwordable in all his attributes' (*Confession*, I). Again, here the one God is not the Trinity, but the Father, and Jesus is not mentioned until the confession's third section. The Holy Spirit is not brought up until the seventh section. Quotations of the

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<sup>18</sup> Unitarian theologians of various shades throughout Church history have been able to maintain a 'unity' between three members of a trinity, or divine triad, while nevertheless maintaining that the one God is the Father, and ultimately not subscribing to a co-equal and co-eternal triune God.

spurious I John 5.7 appear, but with no further comment or clarification, and also included are traditional subordinationist favourites like I Corinthians 3.22-23, likewise without comment. Jesus is, ultimately, ‘the second Adam’ (*Confession*, X). Of course, all of this is not to say that the General Baptists were unanimously unitarian by 1660, rather, as McBeth put it, they ‘tended’ in this direction. But more than that, they continued to demonstrate their commitment to Radical Reformation values, and therefore operated with an aim towards inclusion and freedom of conscience.

Matthew Caffyn added his signature to the 1660 standard, and it is easy to see why. But other General Baptists joined him in assenting to that statement who did not necessarily share his views – surely an ongoing manifestation of the same spirit of diversity which characterised the Baptists’ earliest days. Certainly, trinitarian elements within the wider Baptist family laboured earnestly to swing the pendulum in the other direction: the 1689 *London Baptist Confession*, written by the Particular Baptists, is explicitly trinitarian, for example, though it openly condemns the idea that the ancient Catholic councils (which set down the Trinity doctrine) were infallible, and affirms that ‘all decrees of councils’ are to be judged by Scripture, ‘the supreme judge’. Nevertheless, it is evident that the general desire among General Baptists was regularly towards inclusion. In 1699, a General Baptist named Daniel Allen, a supporter of Caffyn, wrote a powerful tract titled *A Moderate Trinitarian, containing a Description of the Holy Trinity*, contending for unity among General Baptists of dissenting Christological opinion. Allen was able to write of both his own disagreement with those General Baptists who held to ‘Socinian’ (unitarian) Christology, as well as his sincere ‘charity for them’; his ultimate goal being to demonstrate ‘how far the contending parties are agreed in the fundamental point of faith in God and Christ’.<sup>19</sup> It is this same spirit which ostensibly motivated the subsequent General Baptist Assemblies of 1699-1701 to not merely tolerate Caffyn, but to adopt what has been called ‘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’.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, until the formation of the New Connection in the 1770s (which the older churches did not join, and so eventually died out) Caffyn’s unitarianism remained to some degree an element of the General Baptist identity and heritage.<sup>21</sup> But as we have seen by a brief survey of the evolution of other Christian denominations, time and circumstance have an uncanny ability to obscure the histories of even the most durable people-groups (Christian denominations notwithstanding), and

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel Allen, *A Moderate Trinitarian*, cited in H. McLachlan, *The Story of a Nonconformist Library* (London: University Press, 1923), pp. 68-69.

<sup>20</sup> Alex Gordon, quoted *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, in 1803, the National Assembly of the New Connection allowed unitarians to join.

to assign to them new histories and heritages surprisingly beyond the orbit of their primitive designs.

## Freedom of Interpretation

The final element of Baptist heritage to consider, which we have already touched on in the previous section, is the Baptist emphasis on religious freedom and the freedom of biblical interpretation. This good quality of the Baptist tradition has long been appreciated by both Baptists and non-Baptists alike as one of its most noble and admirable features. As the unitarian Christian philosopher John Locke once pointed out, ‘The Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty.’<sup>22</sup> One Baptist voice observed thus of Locke’s praise:

Ringing testimonies like these might be multiplied indefinitely [...] Our fundamental and essential principles have made our Baptist people, of all ages and countries, to be the unyielded protagonist of religious liberty, not only for themselves, but as well for everybody else.<sup>23</sup>

In this way, Baptists have perhaps more fully embodied that Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, and its necessary component: *the right to interpretation*, than many of their Protestant cousins. Early Baptists seem to have recognised what Stefan Zweig pointed out in his book on the concept of heresy in the Reformation, that ‘In and by itself, the very notion of a ‘heretic’ is absurd as far as a Protestant Church is concerned, since Protestants demand that everyone shall have the right of interpretation.’<sup>24</sup>

One assumes, of course, that there are nevertheless certain fundamental or essential doctrines set down by any group that constitute its core identity, and that when an individual betrays or disposes of those convictions, such a person can no longer claim that group identity which is necessarily defined by adherence to those principles. The voting record of the General Baptist Assemblies of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries demonstrate what the essential doctrines were for the General Baptists in that era, or rather, what they were not. Since Caffyn, a unitarian Baptist, was repeatedly admitted not only to fellowship but to an official preaching position, despite several dogged appeals to have him excommunicated, it seems clear that General Baptist fundamentals did not include a belief in orthodox Christology or the doctrine of the Trinity. The General Baptists at large remained true, despite internal pressures from

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<sup>22</sup> John Locke, cited in George Washington Truett, ‘Baptists and Religious Liberty’, in *Early Readings in Baptist History*, p. 146.

<sup>23</sup> George Washington Truett, *ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>24</sup> Stefan Zweig, *The Right to Heresy: Castellio Against Calvin* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1951), in Gospel Truth <[http://www.gospeltruth.net/heresy/heresy\\_chap6.htm](http://www.gospeltruth.net/heresy/heresy_chap6.htm)> [accessed 9 May 2018]

certain parties to force agreement, to their deeply rooted principles of religious freedom and the right to interpretation in those other areas not thought to be essential. The question is, of course, as to whether the doctrine of the Trinity's absence among the list of Baptist essentials in Caffyn's day was a development essentially tied to Caffyn. Or perhaps it should be tied to 'rationalism' or to the unitarian scholar Priestly? I believe, in light of the preceding analysis and a fair consideration of General Baptist principles, that diversity in the realm of Christology had been flowing in the Baptist bloodstream apart from and before any particular influence from Caffyn. It was, in fact, this sense of freedom and inclusivity which had enabled Caffyn to ever conceive of himself as a unitarian Baptist.

### **Caffyn the Baptist**

It ultimately seems right to agree with Baptist historian Anthony Cross that '[the early Baptists'] unorthodoxy owed a great deal to the Baptists' primitivism, or restorationism, understood as their 'emphasis on the first, earliest form of Christianity,' and their resulting desire to be scriptural'.<sup>25</sup> And in the end it becomes possible to see Matthew Caffyn as not the agent of some non-Baptist philosophy, but as a Reformer committed to that side of the General Baptist coin which had always reflected the Radical, not the Magisterial, approach to Christology and to religious freedom. Doubtless many modern Baptists will not feel compelled to recognise Caffyn as a true Baptist or as anything other than an unfortunate heretic. But whatever Baptists may think of Caffyn today matters not at all for Baptist history. Modern interpretations of the boundaries of Baptist heritage must be reconciled with the fact that for at least the first century and a half of the Baptist faith, a good many Baptists travelled in Caffyn's general (unorthodox) direction, both before and after his rise to prominence, and that in the final analysis, the majority of Baptists in Caffyn's day, whether they agreed with him or not, invariably and publicly considered him not 'a heretic' but 'a Baptist'. Whether modern Baptists will do the same for those in their own midst who are likewise driven by similar commitments to the Radical Reformation is theirs to decide.

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<sup>25</sup> Cross, p. 3, quoting T.L. Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb's War*, p. vii.