

“I MUCH REVERENCE THIS ANCIENT CONFESSION OF FAITH”: GENERAL BAPTIST BIBLICISM AND THE TRADITIONED THEOLOGY OF THOMAS GRANTHAM

David A. Lytle

Gateway Seminary, Ontario, CA

Abstract

As Baptist scholars embrace catholicity and retrieve theologians from their movement’s past, General Baptist Thomas Grantham (1633-1692) has been the subject of increased attention. Grantham’s frequent quotations of the Church Fathers and Ecumenical Creeds have particularly been lauded. While some theologians offer Grantham as evidence that General Baptists were not biblicists in formulating their theology, most historical studies emphasize the movement’s biblicism. This essay seeks to refine both perspectives by employing Heiko Oberman’s taxonomy of “Tradition II, I, 0,” clarifying the biblicism in seventeenth-century General Baptist life, and developing Grantham’s own approach to tradition and its role in his theology. Grantham attempted to push his mostly biblicist movement towards orthodoxy and greater respect for tradition. Grantham’s primary motive for this approach, however, was apologetic—to defend General Baptist beliefs in a climate of external persecution and internal heterodoxy. Theologians pursuing the noble task of retrieval must also engage with a careful historical methodology that does not misrepresent the past they seek to retrieve.

INTRODUCTION

As evangelical scholarship continues to reevaluate the role of tradition in theological formation, scholars are asking new questions in their desire to revisit the past. Baptists have a unique challenge in this regard. They are inheritors of a tradition that tends to eschew any authoritative role of tradition. “No Creed but the Bible!” is often, ironically, the only acceptable creed. Thanks to the work of scholars like Timothy George, Cameron Jorgenson, Steven Harmon, Matthew Emerson, and Curtis Freeman, Baptist identity is being reimagined as less sectarian and more catholic.¹ Along with this movement toward catholicity, Baptists have rediscovered rich examples from their past that are often presented as a way forward in Baptist theology. The Particular Baptist *Second London Baptist Confession* (1677) and the General Baptist *Orthodox Creed* (1679) have garnered new consideration in this environment.

¹ See Timothy George, ed., *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith: Reclaiming the Apostolic Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011); Cameron H. Jorgenson, “Bapto-Catholicism: Recovering Tradition and Reconsidering the Baptist Identity,” Ph.D. diss, Baylor University, 2008; Steven R. Harmon, *Toward Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2006); Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014); Matthew Y. Emerson, Christian W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps eds., *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2020).

Early General Baptist pastor and theologian Thomas Grantham (1633-1692) has also received some much-deserved attention in these first decades of the twenty-first century. Although largely unaccounted for in earlier works like Dockery and George's *Baptist Theologians*, Grantham is now often considered to be the first Baptist systematic theologian.² While many Baptist scholars are still not sympathetic toward his soteriology, Philip Thompson and Curtis Freeman appraise Grantham as a prime early example of a Baptist who embraced catholicity in the forms of sacramentalism, creedal formulations, and ecumenical cooperation.³

While the topics of sacramentalism and ecumenicism deserve attention, Grantham's interaction with the Patristic and Nicene tradition is perhaps the most compelling. One does not have to read very far in Grantham's works before being met with quotations from the likes of Augustine, Tertullian, or the Nicene Creed.⁴ Indeed, it can be safely said that no seventeenth-century Baptist referenced the Church Fathers as much as Thomas Grantham. Grantham's method, however, has been interpreted in contradictory ways. J. Matthew Pinson has insisted that Grantham represents a General Baptist approach that highly regarded tradition in the same way as the mainstream Reformers.⁵ In contrast, Clint Bass has contended that Grantham was only a stone's throw away from the narrow biblicism that dominated Anabaptist and early Baptist theology.⁶

This essay explores the recent scholarship on Thomas Grantham along with his key works in an effort to clarify his approach to theology. It seeks to understand Grantham and his proposals primarily in their historical and ecclesiastical context before offering them as a pattern to be followed. While knowledge of Grantham can be valuable for modern Baptist life, it is more important to understand him first than to appropriate him for our current purposes. Carefully analyzing Grantham's theological method in its context will illuminate his use of Scripture and his view of tradition. To achieve this thoughtful analysis, it will be necessary to establish definitions and categories for the discussion of the role of tradition in theological formation. The taxonomy of "Tradition II, I, and 0" will be developed and employed in this effort.

² Timothy George and David Dockery, eds., *Baptist Theologians* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2000); Malcom Yarnell, "Baptists, Classic Trinitarianism, and the Christian Tradition" in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity*, edited by Matthew Y. Emerson, et al. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2020), 61; William H. Brackney, "Thomas Grantham, Systematic Theology, and the Baptist Tradition" in *From Biblical Criticism to Biblical Faith: Essays in Honor of Lee Martin McDonald* edited by William H. Brackney and Craig A. Evans (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 216.

³ Philip E. Thompson, "A New Question in Baptist History: Seeking a Catholic Spirit among Early Baptists," *Pro Ecclesia* 8 (1999): 65; Freeman uses Grantham as an example of Creedal Trinitarianism on 156 and "Evangelical Sacramentalism" on 316.

⁴ In *Christianismus Primitivus*, Grantham referenced Augustine on the third page of the Dedicatory Epistle. St. Lidanus appeared on the second page of the introduction; Augustine appeared again on the seventh. See Thomas Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus Or, The Ancient Christian Religion* (London, 1678), "Epistle Dedicatory," and Book I, 3, 7.

⁵ J. Matthew Pinson, "Confessional, Baptist, and Arminian: The General-Free Will Baptist Tradition and the Nicene Faith" in *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith: Reclaiming the Apostolic Witness*, edited by Timothy George (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 109.

⁶ Clint C. Bass, "The Catholic Spirit of Thomas Grantham," *American Baptist Quarterly* 32 (Fall 2013), 250.

Contrary to interpretations that showcase Grantham as an example of General Baptist catholicity, this study will assert that Grantham's thought grew out of the context of General Baptist biblicism ("Tradition 0").⁷ Despite his ecclesial context, Grantham embraced Patristic and ecumenical councils as a helpful guide in developing theology ("Tradition I"). Grantham's frequent interaction with theological tradition was rare among seventeenth-century General Baptists. In some ways, he was trying to push his biblicist movement towards greater orthodoxy and respect for tradition. Grantham's primary motive for this approach, however, was to defend General Baptist theology in a climate of external persecution and internal heterodoxy. His use of theological tradition reflects those apologetic concerns much more than it reflects what modern scholars label "catholicity." Modern Baptist theologians could certainly surpass Grantham by carefully discussing the role of church tradition in theology, but they may (and often do) fall far short of Grantham's traditionally informed approach.

THOMAS GRANTHAM IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

The last two decades have yielded new inquiries into the thought and life of Thomas Grantham. In February 1999, Philip Thompson published a compelling article for *Pro Ecclesia* entitled "A New Question in Baptist History: Seeking A Catholic Spirit among Early Baptists." In this study, he highlighted the theology of Thomas Grantham and that of the General Baptist *Orthodox Creed* as embodying a "catholic spirit" in their view of the creeds, the Church, and the sacraments.⁸ Thompson saw in Grantham the antidote to Landmarkism on one hand and anti-credal views of soul competency on the other. Thompson concluded, "The early Baptists here examined were catholic in mind and in spirit, and believed themselves to be speaking from within a tradition larger than any single communion."⁹

In the early 2000s, William H. Brackney argued that Grantham should have a more prominent seat at the table in the discussion of Baptists theologians. In his *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought*, Brackney placed Grantham as "second in prominence in the overall Baptist picture" right after John Bunyan.¹⁰ While Brackney admitted that Grantham could be a narrow biblicist at times, he praised his frequent interaction with Church Fathers and Reformers.¹¹

J. Matthew Pinson has promoted Thomas Grantham as an exemplar of commitment to Nicene orthodoxy, confessionalism, and Classical Arminianism. Pinson has argued that Grantham's soteriology was mostly consistent with the Classical Arminianism of Jacob Arminius rather than semi-Pelagian

⁷ This article makes no claims regarding biblicism in Particular Baptist life. My assumption is that something very similar could be said about this movement as well. Hercules Collins's need to defend his use of the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds is evidence of a certain amount of biblicism among Particular Baptists that needed correction. For a discussion of Collins, see Rhyne R. Putman, "Baptists, Sola Scriptura, and the Place of the Christian Tradition" *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity*, edited by Matthew Y. Emerson, et al. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2020), 44-45.

⁸ Thompson, "Seeking a Catholic Spirit," 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁰ William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004), 114.

¹¹ Brackney, "Thomas Grantham, Systematic Theology," 215.

manifestations of Arminianism found later. As a Free Will Baptist leader, Pinson has sought to exhibit Grantham as a fountainhead of Arminian Baptist theology to which the present generation can return.¹² In a 2011 essay included in Timothy George's *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith*, Pinson focused on Grantham's acceptance of the Nicene Creed and promotion of the General Baptist *Standard Confession* of 1660 as his chief examples. Pinson asserted: "Grantham and the early General Baptists' approach to the church and its orthodoxy, tradition, and confession of faith was very different from the individualistic, anticonfessional, and antitraditional views of many modern Baptists."¹³

Pinson went as far as to argue that "Grantham . . . was identical to Calvin in maintaining *sola scriptura* side by side with a high esteem for the Church Fathers and ecumenical councils."¹⁴ He further noted that Grantham and the General Baptist were "much like the Reformers, believing... in *sola scriptura*, not *nuda scriptura*."¹⁵ For Pinson, Grantham maintained the same healthy balance that the Reformers sought—they held to the authority of Scripture, but appreciated the weight of Patristic and ecumenical tradition.

As an advocate of Baptist catholicity, Rhyne R. Putman featured Grantham prominently in a 2020 essay. He advanced Grantham as an early Baptist who "was fluent in the resources of tradition, interacting with figures such as Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom, Jerome, and Tertullian."¹⁶ Building off Thompson and Pinson's research, Putman concluded that Grantham and General Baptists were "thoroughly entrenched in the Nicene and Reformed traditions, knowing nothing of the radical individualism later associated with Baptist life. When engaged in dialogue with their Anglican counterparts, they used tradition as an apologetic for the antiquity and orthodoxy of their faith."¹⁷ As will be shown, Putman is correct in his statement about tradition as an apologetic, but he goes too far in arguing that anti-traditionalism is simply a product of later generations of Baptists. On the contrary, many General Baptists of the early seventeenth century tended strongly toward biblicism.

Fortunately, recent scholarship has also provided us with excellent monographs on Grantham and his historical and theological context. These works offered a somewhat divergent interpretation from what was seen above. In 2013, John Inscore Essick and Clint Bass both published monographs on Thomas Grantham. Essick's *Thomas Grantham: God's Messenger from Lincolnshire* thoroughly explores through biography the historical and geographical situation of this leading General Baptist figure. Essick's greatest contribution was his discussion of Grantham and the development of the office of messenger. According to Essick, Grantham's writings as well as his activity did more than anyone to establish this semi-apostolic

¹² J. Matthew Pinson, "Thomas Grantham's Theology of the Atonement and Justification" in *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 8 (Spring 2011): 7-21; Also see J. Matthew Pinson, *40 Questions about Arminianism* (Kregel Academic, 2022), 101-103.

¹³ Pinson, "Confessional, Baptist, and Arminian," 105.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁶ Putman, "Baptists, Sola Scriptura," 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

office in Baptist ecclesiology and denominational organization.¹⁸ Essick's study outlined the office of messenger as having three major tasks: "(1) preach the gospel; (2) teach and strengthen churches; and (3) defend the gospel against attacks."¹⁹ Essick frequently reminded his readers that Grantham's books were written in performance of this third apologetic task of the messenger.²⁰ This insight from Essick greatly explains the apologetic tone in which Grantham wrote his theological works.

Bass's *Thomas Grantham (1633-1692) and General Baptist Theology* is the most complete study of General Baptist theology to date. Focusing on Grantham, Bass surveyed the history of General Baptist thought in the seventeenth century.²¹ Thanks to this study, Grantham can better be understood in his theological context. In contrast to these interpretations, Bass argued that Grantham's theology was largely biblicist. He maintains, "Grantham did not adopt the method of the Radical Reformers who often dismissed tradition altogether. But he was not so distant from them either."²² Bass also noted that "Grantham believed that the gulf between the writings of the Apostles and the rest of tradition was so large that none of the fathers of the church ought to be called as such in comparison to the Apostles. They alone were the true fathers of the Church."²³

Bass recognized Grantham's theology as orthodox, but he argued that Grantham's approach to Scripture and Tradition was too much akin to the General Baptist anti-trinitarian Matthew Caffyn. He stated, "The biblicism of many anti-trinitarians closely parallel the General Baptist approach to scripture."²⁴ He further noted that Grantham "viewed tradition with the same skeptical eyes as many of the Radical Reformers, relentlessly in search of unscriptural innovations."²⁵ According to Bass, Grantham's theology was much more biblicist than Pinson and the advocates for catholicity would like to admit.

THE REFORMATION, SCRIPTURE, AND TRADITION

How then does one make sense of these conflicting interpretations? Was Grantham a narrow biblicist even while frequently supporting his arguments with quotations from Augustine, Chrysostom, and the Nicene Creed? Is Grantham's approach representative of the General Baptist movement as a whole? To answer these questions well, it will be helpful to develop more careful definitions and categories of what is meant by biblicism and tradition. Simply labeling figures as biblicists or traditionalists may not be sufficient in accurately understanding Grantham and the General Baptists. The work of Alister McGrath, Richard

¹⁸ John Inscore Essick, *Thomas Grantham: God's Messenger from Lincolnshire* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2013), 111.

¹⁹ Essick, *Thomas Grantham*, 111.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 113, 152, 205.

²¹ Clint C. Bass, *Thomas Grantham (1633-1692) and General Baptist Theology* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2013).

²² Bass, "The Catholic Spirit of Thomas Grantham," 250.

²³ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁴ Bass, *Thomas Grantham*, 188.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Muller, and Timothy George will help establish a framework for discussing this topic.²⁶ All three scholars use Heiko Oberman's paradigm of "Tradition I and Tradition II" to discuss the role of tradition in theological formation.²⁷

Many, but not all, late-medieval thinkers could be classified under the category of "Tradition II." This concept holds to a "dual source" theory of divine revelation. Tradition and Scripture are mutually supportive, but separate sources of divine disclosure. God's revelation is indeed found in Scripture but can also be found concurrently in the tradition of the Church. Some Christian doctrine may not be contained in Scripture and may only be known through the teaching of the Church. McGrath, Muller, and George all concur that the Reformers rejected this thread of medieval theology, whereas Tridentine Catholicism codified it. Following the Reformers, Grantham also rejected the "Tradition II" view.

McGrath defines "Tradition I" as the "traditional way of interpreting Scripture within the community of faith."²⁸ This view sees Scripture as uniquely authoritative, but it also understands the ecumenical creeds and writings of the Church Fathers as being in essential harmony with Scripture. These traditional sources are authoritative but in a derivative sense. Their authority flows from the fact that they accurately relate the truth of Scripture. If certain Fathers depart from the truth of Scripture, those ideas may be rejected. Still, "Tradition I" displays deference for the theology of the Church Fathers and the ecumenical councils. Moreover, "Tradition I" provides the interpreter guardrails to safeguard against heresy.

While Luther made bombastic statements that were despairing of the role of tradition, his overall theology fits much more in the "Tradition I" category. Indeed, according to McGrath, Luther's reform movement was in many ways a revival of the Augustinian tradition.²⁹ Calvin followed Luther in this approach. Richard Muller's *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* emphasizes the continuity between the thought of the Reformers and late-medieval scholasticism. In this work, Muller also concludes that John Calvin embraced the "Tradition I" of the late medieval period. He summarizes Calvin's approach: "Calvin undoubtedly belongs to the 'Tradition I' approach of the late medieval theological debate – with the sole qualification, typical of the Reformers, that the crisis of the late medieval Church and the unreformability of the papacy had led to a sharper sense of the diversity, the levels of usefulness associated with different fathers, and the presence of error in the subordinate, traditionary norm."³⁰ Thus, Luther, Calvin, and the Magisterial Reformers can be classified "Tradition I."

²⁶ See Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca 1520 to ca. 1725, Vol. 2: The Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003); Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998); Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, revised edition (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013).

²⁷ Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought* 2nd ed. trans. Paul L. Nyhus (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2002), 51.

²⁸ McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 181.

²⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), 179.

³⁰ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 75.

George and McGrath contend that the Anabaptist approach should be called “Tradition 0.”³¹ Unlike McGrath, George is more sympathetic to Anabaptist thought and understands its diversity better than many scholars. According to George, it is irresponsible to assume that there is a singular Anabaptist approach to the subject. Because of this diversity of opinion, Menno Simons should not be seen as a representative figure, but he probably is the most influential. Simons unquestionably held to the sole authority of Scripture. At one point he stated, “long-standing practices, human philosophy, Origen, Augustine, Luther, Bucer...mean nothing; for it is the eternal, imperishable Word of God; I repeat, it is the eternal Word of God, and shall so remain forever.”³² Simons applauded the Reformers’ rejection of extrabiblical tradition but felt that they didn’t “follow their own advice.”³³

Despite some of his arguments against tradition, Simons had little desire to depart from the established teaching of the universal Church in many core areas. George argues that Simons “attempted to set forth the traditional, orthodox doctrine of the Trinity by appealing to only the Bible.”³⁴ This statement may be the most helpful assessment of Simons’ thought. Simons attempted to formulate his theology exclusively from the Bible, but still largely desired to reach traditional conclusions. At the same time, Simons’ departure from Chalcedonian Christology illustrates the low esteem in which he held tradition.³⁵ His approach, therefore, should be considered “Tradition 0.”

GENERAL BAPTIST BIBLICISM

Did Grantham and the General Baptists follow the path of Luther and Calvin or the inclinations of Menno Simons and the Anabaptists when approaching Scripture and tradition? The answer is far more complex than many have assumed. While Grantham was indeed the foremost leader of the General Baptists in the Restoration era, his thought is not necessarily representative of this movement throughout the seventeenth century. Grantham’s interaction with church tradition was uncommon among General Baptists. Like the Reformers, Grantham can be labeled as “Tradition I,” whereas many of the General Baptists should be labeled “Tradition 0.”

Until the time of the *Standard Confession* (1660), the General Baptist movement included diverse theological perspectives rather than an organized denomination. Because of this, historian Matthew Bingham has even challenged the use of the term “General Baptist” as a category that does not have “a coherent, stable, continuous point of reference during the period.”³⁶ While Bingham does well to highlight the lack of denominational identity in the first half of the century, I am still convinced that the term

³¹ McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 182; For Zwingli and tradition see George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 133-134.

³² George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 287.

³³ *Ibid.*, 289.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 297.

³⁶ See Matthew C. Bingham, “English Radical Religion and the Invention of the General Baptists, 1609-1660,” *The Seventeenth Century* 34, no. 4 (2019): 483.

“General Baptist” is the best descriptor available for those holding to the doctrines of believer’s baptism and general atonement, especially after the Restoration of 1660. Bingham’s thesis is helpful, however, in helping us recognize the need to avoid generalizations about a movement with such porous boundary lines. Thus, what is true of many General Baptists may not be true of Thomas Grantham.

Many General Baptists of the first half of the seventeenth century were biblicists. Two of the foremost contemporary Baptist historians, William Brackney and Stephen R. Holmes, concur with this assessment.³⁷ Here biblicism is defined as adherence to the most literal interpretation of Scripture possible and an aversion to traditional, non-biblical theological language. Biblicism in this definition is synonymous with a “Tradition 0” approach to theology. General Baptist lay theologians tended to employ a simple reading of Scripture. Thomas Lambe, the soap boiler, is a prime example. His biblicist method argued that the word “*baptizō*” meant to dip or immerse and that the New Testament gave no accounts of infants being baptized. This was enough for Lambe. His biblicist hermeneutic, rather than an appeal to tradition or an overarching schema like covenant theology, brought early Baptists to their conclusions.³⁸

Popular London pastor, Jeremiah Ives, serves as another prime example. He began his *Infants-Baptism Disproved: and Believers Baptism Proved* with a conspicuous statement about the unreliability of depending on the Church Fathers. He asserted, “Neither let a man think that his looking back to the ancient Fathers, and his searching of them, and reading them, will much help in the midst of these Religious disorders.”³⁹ Ives then noted the inconsistencies between Augustine, Chrysostom, and Justin Martyr. The rest of Ives’ work dealt almost entirely with scriptural arguments. When his interlocutor, Alexander Kellie, cites the expertise of scholars like Featly, Baxter, Calvin, and Beza, Ives dismissed their collected wisdom and insisted that “they have declined the footsteps of the Primitive Purity.”⁴⁰

One of the best examples of General Baptist biblicism is the 1651 confession of faith called *The Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations Gathered according to the Primitive Pattern*. Before Grantham had become a leader in the movement, the General Baptists of the Midlands (including Grantham’s Lincolnshire) drafted this confession. This document relied almost entirely on biblical language and therefore delineated little specific General Baptist theology. *The Faith and Practice* highlights the intense biblicism of the early General Baptists. It also revealed the necessity to draft a more precise doctrinal statement in 1660.⁴¹ While Grantham’s theology was forged in the biblicist climate of the Midlands’ confession, it found its clearest confessional expression in the *Standard Confession* of 1660. The *Standard Confession* undeniably

³⁷ William H. Brackney sees biblicism as a primary trait of the movement. See Brackney, *The Early English General Baptists and their Theological Formation* (London: Regent’s Park College, 2017), 13. Stephen Holmes argues that General Baptist’s biblicism left them susceptible to Christological Heresy. See Stephen R. Holmes, “The Dangers of Just Reading the Bible: Orthodoxy and Christology,” in A. Cross and N. Wood, eds., *Exploring Baptist Origins* (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2010), 122-137.

³⁸ Thomas Lambe, *A Confutation of Infants Baptisme* (London: 1643), 5 and 13.

³⁹ Jeremiah Ives, *Infants-Baptism Disproved: and Believers Baptism Proved* (London: 1655), “To the Reader.”

⁴⁰ Jeremiah Ives, *Infants-Baptism Disproved*, 64.

⁴¹ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd edition revised by Bill J. Leonard (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 161.

maintains much of the biblicism of the 1651 confession.⁴² Grantham presented the *Standard Confession* to Charles II and republished it in his own work.

Grantham consistently championed the theology found in the *Standard Confession* even though one of its primary authors was Matthew Caffyn.⁴³ Decades after the confession was written, Thomas Grantham and Thomas Monk opposed Caffyn's heterodox Christology. Scholars have universally recognized strong connections between Matthew Caffyn's heterodoxy and his biblicist hermeneutic.⁴⁴ Although Caffyn's theology and its sources are a matter of debate, he was a significant leader that represents a strong biblicist thread in General Baptist life.

General Baptists responded to Caffyn's heterodoxy in divergent ways. Some biblicists in the movement, unfortunately, believed they had no scriptural warrant to condemn Caffyn. In contrast to these biblicists, a group of Midlands General Baptists, led by Thomas Monk, published a new confession of faith called *An Orthodox Creed* (1678). This confession articulated a traditional and creedal Trinitarian theology. It even reprinted the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian Creed.⁴⁵ For his part, Grantham continued to hold to the *Standard Confession* and did not sign or support *An Orthodox Creed*. He did, however, maintain orthodox Christology and support it by appealing to Christian tradition.⁴⁶ While Grantham's method will be explored further, for now, it is sufficient to recognize that there was not only a single response to the threat of heterodoxy in General Baptist life.

Both of these orthodox approaches reveal a brand of General Baptist theology that eschewed naïve biblicism. While this evidence speaks to the fact that not all General Baptists were biblicists, they are also responses to the inherent problems of the biblicist approach that was common in their movement. Rather than being seen as representatives of all seventeenth-century General Baptist thought, Thomas Grantham and Thomas Monk, are better understood as attempting a course correction to put their movement more in line with historic orthodoxy. Countering their "Tradition 0" context, they advocated a "Tradition I" approach as a corrective.

Grantham's and Monk's approaches are not only a response to biblicism and heterodoxy in their ranks but reflective of larger historical patterns. The Restoration of Charles II (1660) brought about a time of Anglican hegemony and persecution of nonconformists. In a series of legislation, known as the Clarendon Code, nonconformists were denied local offices and forbidden to preach. According to historian Richard Greaves, Anglican ascendancy and persecution brought nonconformists together. With this, an irenic spirit tended to replace the polemic nature of the first half of the century. Greaves shows that

⁴² Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 213.

⁴³ Stephen R. Holmes, "A Note Concerning the Text, Editions, and Authorship of the 1660 Standard Confession of the General Baptists," *Baptist Quarterly* 17 (2016): 2-7.

⁴⁴ Putman, "Baptists, Sola Scriptura," 47; Clint C. Bass, *The Caffynite Controversy* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2020), 103-106; Also see Jesse Owens, "Matthew Caffyn, Thomas Monck and English General Baptist Creedalism," *Criswell Theological Review* 18 (Fall 2020): 39-55.

⁴⁵ Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 298-358.

⁴⁶ Bass, *Thomas Grantham*, 185.

nonconformists of this era were actively repudiating the religious divisions and sectarianism of the Civil War era.⁴⁷ Because of this, Restoration era nonconformists like John Bunyan and Richard Baxter defy denominational labels and frequently sought common ground with other nonconformists.⁴⁸

Baptists, both Particular and General, were anxious to prove their orthodoxy and continuity with the larger nonconformist cause. This accounts for *An Orthodox Creed* and the Particular Baptist *Second London Confession*. William Brackney asserted that the Particular Baptists community “was under no small amount of pressure to demonstrate their proximity to the Westminster Confession.”⁴⁹ Like the Congregationalists of the *Savoy Declaration*, Particular Baptists too wanted to join ranks with the mainstream of nonconformity by modeling their *Second London Confession* on the *Westminster Confession*. These changes in the religious landscape explain why Grantham’s approach to tradition departed from the biblicism of his movement.

THE APOSTLES AND THE CHURCH FATHERS

From his commitment to the authority of Scripture, Grantham stressed that his doctrine was the primitive historical teaching of the Apostles and Church Fathers. He believed that early church writings should be resourced to showcase the primitive and apostolic nature of General Baptist doctrine.⁵⁰ Rather than being a challenge to Baptist practice, the tradition of the early church essentially cohered with Baptist beliefs. While Grantham valued contributions from the Reformers, he held the Patristic era in especially high regard. He stressed the continuity between the apostolic era and the era of the Church Fathers.

The introduction to Grantham’s *Christianismus Primitivus* was an apology for the veracity of the Christian faith and defense of the authority of Scripture.⁵¹ Grantham then asserted that the Scriptures have been preserved trustworthy by the hand of providence.⁵² As Grantham’s argument progressed, he recruited Augustine, Eusebius, and Cyril of Jerusalem to reassert this point.⁵³ Grantham was unambiguously establishing Biblical revelation as the only ultimately reliable and authoritative source of theology, while still bolstering his argument with support from the early Church.

Written as a dialogue between a father and son, Grantham’s *St. Paul’s Catechism* continued this approach. When the child asks: “How can I best be satisfied...that the Holy Scriptures are the undoubted Oracles of God?” One answer among many is that “We have the Testimony of the first Churches that these Books are the undoubted Oracles of God and if their Testimony be not of credit, the Testimony of

⁴⁷ Richard Greaves, *John Bunyan and English Nonconformity* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1992), 7.

⁴⁸ Greaves, *John Bunyan*, 6.

⁴⁹ William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004), 32.

⁵⁰ For discussions on Grantham and the idea of Primitivism see T. L. Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb’s War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6, 11; also see Samuel E. Hester, “Advancing Christianity to Its Primitive Excellence: The Quest of Thomas Grantham, Early English General Baptists (1634-1692).” ThD diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1977.

⁵¹ Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus*, Book I, 3.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 6-8.

the present Church will signifie nothing.”⁵⁴ In this answer, Grantham recognized the problem faced by Anabaptist-style biblicism. One reason Scripture can be trusted is that the Church has recognized its trustworthiness. Because of Grantham’s high view of the purity of the early Church, he saw no drawback to this.

One of the more intriguing questions offered in *St. Paul’s Catechism* deals with sources of authority. The child asked: “I desire to be instructed, whether the *Holy Spirit*, or the *Holy Scripture*, or the *Holy Church*, must be our guide in these Soul-concernments?” The father replied, “There is no doubt but these three agree on Testimony.”⁵⁵ In this question Grantham is intentionally setting up a false trilemma. According to his interpretation, the Quakers saw the Spirit alone as authoritative, the Anabaptists held only to the Scripture with no regard for tradition, while the Papists saw Church tradition as authoritative and rejected the clear teachings of Scripture. In contrast, Grantham viewed the Scripture as the Spirit’s gift to the church. True Church tradition, the work of the Spirit in the believer, and the Spirit’s activity in the Church are in harmony with the authoritative words of Scripture.⁵⁶

Does Grantham’s view of authority differ from the Reformers that preceded him? The *Sola Scriptura* principle certainly loomed large in Grantham’s teaching. He also believed in the fallibility of the Church Fathers and the ecumenical councils. Like nearly all Protestants of his day, he saw the Middle Ages largely as a time of corruption. This, however, was also the position at which Luther and Calvin arrived. Like the Reformers, Grantham desired to be tethered to the tradition of the early Church while firmly maintaining that the Scriptures alone were dogmatically authoritative. Despite his biblicist context, Grantham comfortably falls in the “Tradition I” category.

TRADITIONED THEOLOGY

Grantham’s use of Church tradition further illuminates the central role tradition played as an apologetic for General Baptist doctrine. His use of tradition is an essential part of his larger program of distinguishing Baptists from Quakers and Roman Catholics, distancing himself from unorthodox General Baptists, and winning converts to his ideal of the primitive New Testament Church. Grantham explained why he frequently referenced the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, which are “of most venerable estimation.” He concluded that it was necessary to “declare to the world that we assent to the Contents thereof...that all men may know that we are no devisers or favourers of Novelties or new Doctrines.”⁵⁷ Referencing ancient creeds would, therefore, showcase the primitive purity of General Baptist doctrine.

Grantham also believed that Patristic opinions and conciliar decisions would bring clarity on difficult subjects. In *Christianismus Primitivus*, Grantham reprinted the Nicene Creed in Latin and English for the

⁵⁴ Thomas Grantham, *St. Paul’s Catechism: Or, A Brief Explication of the Six Principles of the Christian Religion* (London: 1687), 15.

⁵⁵ Grantham, *St. Paul’s Catechism*, 12.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁷ Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus*, Book II, Part 2, 60.

purpose of bringing “a greater degree of unity” to the divided parts of Christianity.⁵⁸ Grantham then follows the Nicene Creed with the *Standard Confession*. In this version of the *Confession*, each article was followed by a section entitled “the witness of the Ancients” or the “Testimony of Antiquity” in which he explained how General Baptist doctrine was congruent not only with the Bible but also with the early Church.⁵⁹ Augustine, Justin Martyr, Ambrose, Chrysostom, and Tertullian were among the Fathers used to show the antiquity of General Baptist doctrine. Reformers such as William Tyndale also made the list.⁶⁰

Grantham’s placement of the Nicene Creed as the introduction to the *Standard Confession* along with his choice of interspersing the *Confession* with great voices from the Early Church is significant. His integration of Nicaea and the Fathers with General Baptist theology is a far step away from the narrow biblicism of previous generations of General Baptists and certainly a stark contradiction to the biblicism of the heretical Caffyn.

Because of his context, Grantham had to walk a fine line between the biblicism of his General Baptist movement and his desire to present this movement as consistent with the tradition of the Church. Grantham’s discussion of the Trinity illustrates his understanding of the interplay between Scripture and tradition. Grantham famously stated that it was not necessary to impose the term “Trinity” on all believers because the term does not appear in Scripture. Grantham articulated that the eternal God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, “which some call the *Trinity*” and this term is “a Phrase [that is in] no way offensive to Christianity.” According to Grantham, the word Trinity even “hath very near affinity with the Language of the Holy Ghost.” He further argued that to deny the eternity of the Son and the Spirit was “contrary to the Word of God, and the best Antiquity next to that of the Holy Scripture.”⁶¹ For Grantham the “best antiquity” was not equal to Scripture but was certainly not to be ignored. This passage shows that Grantham was patient with the biblicists of his movement that shied away from extra-biblical terminology but ultimately insisted that tradition was an indispensable guide in theological formation. Because Grantham insisted that the Holy Spirit continues to work supernaturally in a properly ordered New Testament church, Grantham could come very close to arguing the Spirit inspired the early church to coin the term “Trinity.”⁶² The Nicene Creed also made a conspicuous appearance in *St. Paul’s Catechism*, which was written after Caffyn was accused of heresy. After explaining the Trinity, Grantham included the Nicene Creed so that his audience would know “how this Great Mystery was understood by the Ancient Church.”⁶³ He further explained that this “Confession of Faith” was produced by a “very great Council of Christians in those daies.”⁶⁴ After quoting the Creed, the student responded to the Creed saying, “I much reverence this ancient Confession of Faith for its excellent Brevity, and especially for the solidity of the Matter. But I desire you

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 62-74.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus*, Book I, 40.

⁶² Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus*, Book II, Part 2, 34-38

⁶³ Grantham, *St. Paul’s Catechism*, 24.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

to shew me what Scripture-Evidence we have for some things contained in the second article, where it says, *The Son of God was begotten before all Worlds.*”⁶⁵ While it is beyond the scope of this article to explore Grantham’s Christology, this quote encapsulated much of his approach toward tradition. Grantham praised the Nicene tradition but did not consider it above biblical scrutiny. In *St. Paul’s Catechism*, Grantham set forth orthodox Christology, specifically the doctrine of eternal generation, by first appealing to the Scripture. He then buttressed this claim with an appeal to tradition. He finally answered questions surrounding the wording of the Nicene Creed with further appeals to Scripture. This method reflected Grantham’s confidence that Scripture was uniquely authoritative, but that the early church had spoken biblical truth in its ecumenical judgments.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has shown that Grantham’s theological method fits much more comfortably in the “Tradition I” camp along with the Reformers than it does with the “Tradition 0” approach of the Anabaptists and many of the other General Baptists. For Grantham, Scripture was uniquely authoritative, but traditional statements like the Nicene Creed held a form of derivative authority because they contained a clear and concise summary of what God had revealed in Scripture.

Clint Bass’s work on Grantham is enormously perceptive, but his analysis of Grantham’s interaction with tradition is incomplete. Bass’s claim that Grantham was essentially the same as the Radical Reformers suffers from imprecise taxonomy.⁶⁶ Like all Protestants, Grantham rejected some aspects of Christian tradition as authoritative. He did, however, have a very similar approach to Luther and Calvin.

J. Matthew Pinson’s claims about Grantham and the General Baptists also need to be qualified. He asserted, “The General Baptists were much like the Reformers, believing, as [Timothy] George says, in *sola scriptura*, not *nuda scriptura*. Thus, they were like Luther and the other Reformers.”⁶⁷ This statement is certainly true of Grantham, but it is not accurately applied to seventeenth-century Baptists as a whole. While he had great influence among the General Baptists, Grantham’s approach to theology was more of a corrective to his movement’s biblicism than representative of its admiration for tradition.

While Grantham may reasonably be said to fall in the “Tradition I” category, the more rewarding question may be to ask why. Why did Grantham feel the need to interact with the Church Fathers and ecumenical councils more than any of his Baptist contemporaries? The answer to this question lies in the apologetic nature of Grantham’s theology and the threat of heresy within his movement. Grantham wrote to defend his emerging General Baptist movement from the Anglicans, Quakers, and Roman Catholics, and find solidarity with other nonconformists when possible. Additionally, he wrote to correct biblicist tendencies within his movement that threatened to lead to heterodoxy.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁶ Bass, “The Catholic Spirit of Thomas Grantham,” 250.

⁶⁷ Pinson, “Confessional, Baptist, and Arminian,” 110.

Modern interpreters who have found in Grantham a voice for catholicity need to nuance their interpretation of the General Baptists. It is misleading to point to Grantham as proof that early General Baptists were models of catholicity who universally valued the Patristic witness. This ignores the biblicism common among many General Baptists as well as some of Grantham's motives. Despite the limits of early General Baptist catholicity, Grantham's body of work is a clear example of an early Baptist who valued the role of tradition in theological formation. His willingness to interact with a broad range of Patristic and conciliar sources was a significant step in a healthy direction. Grantham was no stranger to the naïve biblicism that has always been a part of Baptist life, but he gently challenged this approach with efforts to inform General Baptist theology of the tradition of the Church. Unfortunately, many belonging to the next generation of General Baptists did not follow Grantham's lead.

Thomas Grantham represents the best of seventeenth-century General Baptist thought in his methodology and orthodox theological commitments. Efforts at renewing our current theological understanding through retrieving his theology can be rewarding. These, however, must pursue a robust interface with the man and his world. After all, the task of a religious historian is not simply to find figures to support a theological position but rather to illuminate "the past in all its variety" and grapple with the way people of a different era understood God, humankind, and the church.⁶⁸ This activity will, no doubt, expose shortcomings as well as virtues in both Grantham and his General Baptist movement. The process of retrieval does not require the wholesale endorsement of every aspect of our past. There are aspects of General Baptist life that are better left in the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, Grantham's eagerness to utilize the Patristic witness to refine deficiencies in the General Baptist movement is a model we can follow.

⁶⁸ John Webster, "Foreword" in William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004), xii.