

History of the English Calvinistic Baptists 1771-1892 from John Gill to C. H. Spurgeon

by Robert W. Oliver

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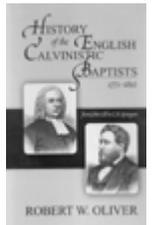
Emerging Deconstructionism

This book is based on Robert Oliver's 1985 doctoral dissertation. His title is misleading. It is not a history of the English Calvinistic Baptists but, as Michael Haykin's Foreword explains, an analysis of controversies regarding communion, the use of the law and the so-called free offer. These are discussed at an inter-denominational level with chapter-long references to Non-Baptist William Huntington, set up as the arch-contender against Dr Oliver's modernistic Emergence Theology. As Oliver hints in his Preface, the work is a justification of his own prodigality away from the rigid doctrines of his village youth and discovery of a new home in the lax doctrines of Fullerism. Rather than deal with the history of Baptist churches, Oliver speaks of the emergence of Baptist communities. The resulting deconstruction of the old churches, Oliver maintains, was the fault of those who preferred old paths to new ways.

Oliver commences with the death of Particular Baptist John Gill, as a Baptist water-shed, dividing the old from the new. He concentrates on branches rather than roots. Rejecting the 1644 Particular Baptist Confession as the basis for his emergent communities, Oliver pays lip-service to the Congregational-Presbyterian-Baptist-ecumenical 1689 Confession.

Chapter 1: Gill's legacy ignored

Oliver marvels at Gill's literary legacy but scorns his evangelistic fervour, believing that Gill modified Particular Baptist theology with 'serious implications for the future'. Presenting an imaginary Keach v. Gill scenario on justification as 'proof', Oliver follows Tom Ascol's un-Biblical view that eternity is past time and accuses Gill of "collapsing salvation history back into eternity". He pronounces Gill guilty of Hyper-Calvinism by association, claiming that Congregationalist Joseph Hussey, an alleged Hyper-Calvinist, knew John Skepp who knew John Gill so Hussey must have turned Gill into a Hyper-Calvinist. Most unlikely! Hussey (1659-1726) was an Arminian who adopted a more Calvinistic stand late in life.



However, Skepp quarrelled with Hussey and his church shortly after Hussey's change in theology and left Cambridge for London to become a Baptist minister around 1710. Skepp died in 1721 soon after Gill had settled in London. Strict Baptist rumours that Skepp was a Hyper-Calvinist arose a century later, possibly because Skepp had accused the Strict Baptists of harbouring Arminian tenets. After Skepp's death, Gill purchased his Hebrew lexica and grammars and wrote the foreword to a reprint of Skepp's Divine Energy. This work takes up the 1689 Confession's interest in effectual calling and speaks of the Spirit's influence on the soul in calling and conversion. Hardly Hyper-Calvinist material! Oliver's closing statement that Gill "must have caused many preachers to evade the biblical calls to the unconverted to repent and turn to Christ" in view of Gill's sound testimony to the contrary, is quite unfounded.

Chapter 2: Blessings in the Cotswolds

Oliver drops much of his acrimony to praise the enormous evangelistic work of Benjamin Beddome. However, Oliver does not comment on Beddome's misgivings concerning Carey's missionary society and his complaint that the new missionary zeal was leaving home churches neglected and sponsors forgetting that charity begins at home. Oliver does not strive to ask why many of his so-called Hyper-Calvinists were more for worldwide evangelism than those he counts on his side.

Chapter 3: Three Noteworthy Leaders

Oliver draws brief pen-sketches of John Ryland Sen., Robert Hall Sen. and Abraham Booth. Happily, he does not list the myths propagated to 'prove' that Ryland was a Hyper and takes Ryland's criticism of Fullerism in his stride. Oliver's mini-sketch of Robert Hall Sen. is sweet and beautiful with almost no hint of the controversies associated with his name. After all, Hall is often accused of being the father of Fullerism. Concerning Booth, Oliver makes a few mistakes in regard to the years to 1768 but otherwise his account up to Booth's controversy with Fuller is excellent. Surprisingly, Oliver drops the subject here to be continued in Chapter 8.

Chapter 4: The Communion Controversy

The subject is briefly opened and then dropped to be continued seven chapters later. The exclusive Baptists argued that believer's baptism by immersion was a guarantee of right faith and the Lord's Table was for those of right faith only. The open Baptists accused their closed brethren of sacramentalism. John Brown, a founder of the Northampton Association, argued that the exclusives put baptism above a Christian walk and sound doctrine yet they would not fellowship with open Baptists of sound doctrine and Christian testimony. Booth's side argued that if one dropped exclusive communion, one dropped the main Baptist principle. Oliver argues that the baptism issue did not divide High Calvinists from lesser Calvinists as Gill was a closed communion man and Ryland Sen., an open

communion man. This is not quite accurate. Gill allowed visitors to his church to partake of the Lord's Supper. After a number of weeks, he would ask the communicants to either join the church as members or bring letters of recommendation from their pastors. Gill's practice was followed by other Particular Baptist leaders.

Chapter 5: The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation

Following his publisher's policy, Oliver links Fuller's ideas with Bunyan's in order to make them more palatable. Bunyan's high view of gospel preaching could hardly be more different from Fuller's half-way gospel. Oliver describes Fuller's 'pilgrimage' through his membership and pastorate at extreme Hyper-Calvinistic Soham, omitting to say that Fuller stuck to the alleged Hyper-Calvinist idea that the doctrines of grace should be preached to believers only. True, Fuller afterwards spoke of a gospel warrant for all to believe but that warrant was merely the warrant of law telling the sinner to love Christ as if he had never apostatised. Fuller's doctrine of faith via duties is enough to convince any honest man that salvation is impossible for him. Fuller says there are no impossibilities in human capacities. Oliver sets up Fuller against Gill as one who exhorted all hearers to repent and believe in Christ. This is exactly what Gill did, with the additional merit that Gill had a more Biblical doctrine of repentance and faith than Fuller who had a too high view of man to make his repentance go deep enough and he confused faith with 'doing what is right'. Oliver does not mention that what Gill takes as Scripture's exact and concrete meaning, Fuller interprets as imagery and metaphor and rationalises the Biblical meaning away. Oliver condemns those who disagree with Fuller as 'ignorant', 'unthinking', 'Hyper-Calvinists' and 'Antinomians'.

Chapters 6-7: The Fullerite fear of William Huntington

Oliver calls Huntington an Antinomianism, defining Doctrinal Antinomianism as the belief that the law plays no part in the believer's life and Practical Antinomianism as the belief that Christians are freed from all codes of conduct. However, Huntington stresses using the law lawfully and argues that the book of the law will be opened at the Day of Judgment as the deciding test of those who are under the law to the Devil or under the law in Christ. Oliver quarrels with Huntington's historical respect for the Church of England, forgetting that many of his Particular and Strict Baptist fathers praised the Anglican homilies and Articles. However, Oliver's argument that Huntington was 'passionately loyal' to the Church of England limps somewhat as Huntington was a Dissenter. Oliver wrongly argues that Huntington taught the law was not a rule of life. Huntington's point was that the law was not the only rule of life. He demonstrated how his people followed the law closer than their Antinomian critics. Merely thrusting the Ten Commandments at a person without telling them that grace and truth come through the Lord Jesus Christ is misusing the Law. Oliver quarrels with Huntington on sanctification, though the Coalheaver stands four-square with our Reformers. Oliver appears to link sanctification

with some sort of Neonomian special obedience. This would be a Christ-less sanctification. Oliver criticises Huntington for not believing in a universal offer of salvation to all men everywhere at all times. Huntington pointed out that the Spirit was always discriminating in salvation. It is, however, wrong to say Huntington was not an 'offer man' as he spoke of those who in covenant faith received the offer and, in this, his view was identical to that of Boston and the Marrow Men whom Huntington loved and often followed.

Oliver demonstrates Practical Antinomianism in his scraping the bottom of a bawdy barrel to denigrate Huntington. Admitting that not a finger of suspicion of immorality could be pointed at Huntington after his conversion, he nevertheless produces the story of John Church, pastor of an 800 member strong congregation who was found guilty of homosexuality in 1817. Church, Oliver tells us triumphantly, was converted under Huntington.

Booth versus Fuller

Chapter Eight deals with Booth and Fuller on New Divinity teaching. Oliver concedes that Fuller accepted much of this new interpretation of the gospel but denies that Fuller took over their Governmental theory. He argues that though Fuller's words sound like Governmentalism, he does not mean what he says. Oliver does not record that Booth thought Fuller was lost but reproduces Fuller's complaining letter to Carey in which he claims Booth's opposition is because of his senility and jealousy of Fuller. Fuller accuses Booth of following Crisp. This gives Oliver his cue to denounce Crisp whose teaching he has obviously not understood. He then claims that "much of the criticism of Andrew Fuller was unthinking and hostile to such a degree that his positive contribution to theology and the life of the churches was not given the consideration it deserves." The same can be said of Oliver's criticisms of Huntington etc. ... Oliver refrains from mentioning that Fuller's own church complained that they had an absentee pastor, that his association churches shrank and rejected God's Word as the Christian's final authority.

Chapters 9-10: Gadsby and Stevens

Oliver says of Gadsby "he was able to secure a place for a modified Huntingtonian Antinomianism among the Particular Baptists", but admits that he "drew the crowds wherever he went" and founded church after church. Oliver is an expert at using theological swear-words meaninglessly. Against Fuller's legalistic *The Moral Law the Rule of Conduct to Believers*, a title which Plato, Socrates and Aristotle could have gladly used for their works, Gadsby produced his *The Gospel, the Believer's Rule of Conduct*, defending the New Testament. Oliver, following Fuller, maintains that those who love God via the Moral Law (whatever is meant by that) automatically accept the gospel.

Oliver presents John Stevens as a 'Hyper' but exonerates him as an

Antinomian because he writes against it. Is Oliver forgetting that Huntington wrote soundly against Antinomianism himself? Why does Oliver free Stevens of the charge but slander Huntington with it? The answer is plain. Oliver tells us that Stevens, in spite of his Hyper state, was critical of Huntington. That excuses Stevens of much! Oliver rightly points out Stevens' lack of clarity on the Trinity. However, the doctrine of the conflicting wills of the Trinity as taught by modern Fullerites goes widely beyond Stevens. Huntington preached that once the doctrine of the one will of the Godhead is dropped, we let in the devil and all his works. That is true Antinomianism. We read that Stevens increased his church more than any Particular Baptist Church in London at the time. Sensitive of the fact that his supposed Hyper-Calvinist Stevens was a great soul-winner and to keep his cake and eat it, Oliver calls Stevens an 'evangelistic Hyper-Calvinist'! Is this an improvement in Banner of Truth articles? Up to now they have always denied that those they charge with Hyper-Calvinism were evangelistic and interested in soul-winning.

Chapter 11: Open Communion again

Oliver relates how the greatest thrust in the Evangelical Awakening came from those who believed in baptising believers and their children. This made it difficult for Baptists to associate with them and pamphlets for and against open communion were written by those within the Fullerite fold. Fuller wrote against the practice and Hall supported it. The arguments on both sides grew more and more sacramental, tending to regard baptism and the Lord's Supper as means of grace. The debate became a denominational rather than a church issue with the exclusive Baptists not only shutting out baptised members of sound churches but also declaring that they were not even baptised. A number of Baptists left to join the Independents, others turned to the secular courts. At this most frustrating stage, Oliver leaves the subject again.

Chapter 12: Strict Baptist Magazines

Here Oliver deals with The Gospel Herald, The Gospel Standard, The Primitive Church Magazine and The Earthen Vessel. He also mentions The Gospel Magazine which Oliver claims was, like the Baptist magazines, Hyper Calvinist. The majority of Baptist magazines were opposed to Fullerism. Yet in 1996, eleven years after writing his dissertation, Oliver used the Strict Baptist Bulletin to argue that Fullerism is historical Christianity.

Chapter 13: Joseph Charles Philpot

Here we are given an overview of Philpot's life and work, touching on all the controversies which surrounded his theology and writings. Oliver claims Philpot shelved the responsibilities of the Great Commission. He helped establish a monastic community which rejected an ungodly world, but did very little to challenge or change it.

Chapter 14: Organisations

Oliver's title is misleading. Only a few local associations in southern England are mentioned, none in the north. Oliver explains that the Baptist Union was founded by men closely associated with Fuller and soon accepted General Baptists. Oliver describes the original local Particular Baptist associations as Hyper-Calvinistic but stresses that the weird Fullerite split-offs such as the London New Association, "went far beyond the teaching of Fuller", using their doctrine that the Holy Spirit gives no new powers in conversion but merely exercises existing powers as an example. Oliver ought to turn to Fuller's 'The Reality and Efficacy of Divine Grace', where Fuller fully agrees with the LNA, teaching, "man has the same power, strictly speaking, before they are wrought upon by the Holy Spirit, as after; and before conversion as after; that the work of the Spirit endows us with no rational powers, nor any powers that are necessary to moral agency."¹ Oliver objects to Gadsby's healthy suspicion of associations and turns again to Huntington and his influence on the Gospel Standard churches, dwelling on the Added Articles of the GS, which, of course (but Oliver does not tell us) ran absolutely contrary to Huntington's teaching. Oliver concludes this section by claiming that the traditional Baptist churches were fossilized in Hyper-Calvinism, had left the 1689 Confession and were crying out for the advent of Spurgeon.

Chapter 15: Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Oliver presents a minimised Spurgeon as the re-instigator of the Presbyterian-based 1689 Confession and the Baptist adaptation of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. He explains that when Spurgeon preached "Whosoever calleth upon the name of the Lord shall be saved", he was appealing to man's sense of duty. Oliver then castigates those who do not believe in duty faith and emphasises that the Hyper-Calvinists and the Baptist Union isolated Spurgeon from the English Baptists. Oliver ends the book with the emerging hope that a small group of English Strict Baptists (His own 'emergent community'?) who use Spurgeon's edition of the 1689 Confession are about to recover the lost Puritan heritage.

The Appendices

Oliver adds three brief notes as appendices to his book, one on the Communion controversy, one on Fuller and the Atonement and a brief letter from the pen of J. C. Philpot. He again strives to prove that when Fuller says he is using gospel terms figuratively, he means just the opposite.

Conclusion

Oliver's book is a jumbled collection of incomplete notes with the aim of boosting Fuller and condemning Huntington. There is no logical framework and no attempt is made to draw constructive conclusions. What Oliver says against Huntington, Gill and Booth etc. just cannot be verified from their works, nor does Oliver attempt to do so. So, too, what Oliver says of Fuller cannot be substantiated from Fuller's writings, nor does

Oliver try. Normally in a doctoral thesis, a hypothesis or aim is stated, usually regarding a subject which has not hitherto been researched, and then evidence is amassed to prove the validity of the hypothesis or aim. The emphasis, from the examiners' point of view is on original thinking and independent argument with a conclusion reached which is new to the world of learning. There is nothing of this in Oliver's book.

(Footnotes)

1 Works, vol. ii, pp. 546-547

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