Elizabethan Separatists, Puritan Conformists and the Bible

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Sixteenth-century English separatists and Puritan conformists held a great deal in common but one simple distinction set them apart. Separatists recognised no other authority but Scripture: not logic, philosophy or reason; not tradition; not any human writing. Puritan conformists allowed a place for those authorities, though subordinate to Scripture. That distinction shaped printed debate over church government and worship. Separatists worked within an 'all-or-nothing mentality'; in response, conformists were forced to adopt a 'bare-minimum mentality', which was quite different from how they argued in the opposite direction against the bishops of the Church of England.

T he conceptual infrastructure of English separatism stood on the bedrock foundation of one adamant conviction: the Scriptures presented a single, timeless, changeless, perfect and binding pattern of church worship and governance. Henry Barrow, the noted Elizabethan English separatist, opened his *Brief discoverie of the false Church* (1590) with exactly this conviction. God had

committed these holy oracles to the careful custody of the Church, there to be inviolably preserved … purely taught, expounded & delivered, without corrupting, mixing, hiding, obscuring, perverting, wresting, there to be precisely observed with all reverence and feare, without any willing or knowen transgression, or swarving either to the right hand or to the left, of the whole Church or any member therof.[1]

In all transcriptions from published sources I have silently corrected all instances of u instead of v, and vv instead of w. Abbreviations are extended with the added letters in italics; original text in italic font is silently corrected to Roman font.

[1] Henry Barrow, *Brief discoverie of the false Church*, [Dordrecht?] 1590 [1591?] (*ESTC* 111924), 1.

There was simply no room for deviation. The Bible supplied the 'true patterne, form, mould for everie thing, everie part, everie member'.[2] Like the Old Testament tabernacle or temple that was an exact replica of the heavenly ideal, not even the smallest detail of the scriptural blueprint could be altered, not 'anie pinne or hooke (even the least thing)'.[3] This regulative principle was not unique to separatists, of course. It formed part of the mental furniture of Reformed ecclesiology that shaped so much of England's religious life within a general worldview that still looked back to the distant past for what was best and most authoritative, which meant, above all, looking back to the Bible.[4] What made the separatists distinctive was the thoroughgoing conviction, the uncompromising precision and the sheer urgency with which they held to it.

The story of English separatism begins with separatist congregations that appeared in London from the late 1560s. The result of these short-lived experiments was variously imprisonment and exile. The 1580s saw another flurry of separatist activity and here some famous names come to the surface, not least that of Robert Browne.[5] Born around 1550 into a gentry family in Tolethorpe Hall, Rutland, he was educated at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, graduating BA in 1572. The Cambridge connection is not unimportant. R. Tudor Jones compiled a solid list of separatist figures who were educated at Cambridge: Robert Harrison, Henry Barrow, John Greenwood, Francis Johnson and his brother George, John Smyth, John Robinson and William Brewster.[6] It would be a mistake, therefore, to dismiss these men as mere rustics or, to borrow a later phrase, 'mechanick preachers':[7] they embodied the learned godly ministry. Even so, once again the authorities responded severely. In 1583 two men who had circulated the books of Browne and Harrison were hanged. Ten years later Barrow, Greenwood and a Welshman, John Penry, were executed for sedition.[8] Barrow and Greenwood had taken up the mantle of leadership, forming a separatist congregation in London sometime during the mid-1580s though leading it usually from the confines of

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[2] Ibid. 204. See also p. 260.

[3] Ibid. 206–7, 215. For a general discussion see Fred. J. Powicke, *Henry Barrow, separatist (1550?–1593)*, London 1900, 91ff, and B. R. White, *The English separatist tradition: from the Marian martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers*, Oxford 1971, 73ff.

[4] John Gwynfor Jones, 'Nonconformists and the Bible, *ca* 1559–1804', in Robert Pope (ed.), *T&T Clark companion to Nonconformity*, London 2013, 113.

[5] All the authors listed in this paragraph are introduced in White, *English separatist tradition*; for Robert Browne see ch. iii.

[6] R. Tudor Jones, *Congregationalism in England, 1662–1962*, London 1962, 15, 17, 19, 21.

[7] See Nicholas McDowell, *The English radical imagination: culture, religion, and revolution, 1630–1660*, Oxford 2003, 4–8.

[8] For these dates and the general outline of this story of early separatism see Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters: from the Reformation to the French Revolution*, Oxford 1978.

prison from 1587 until their execution.[9] Their writings convinced Francis Johnson to jump from Presbyterianism to separatism, the very same writings that he was supposed to have suppressed while pastor of the Merchant Adventurer Church in Middelburg in the early 1590s. Following their deaths he led their separatist congregation, the 'Ancient Church', first in London and then in Amsterdam.[10] A final figure, Henry Ainsworth, joined the Amsterdam congregation as its teacher (or pastor) in 1597.[11] None of these men was among the Marian exiles and, for reasons that will soon become obvious, none of them looked to Geneva or anywhere else for models of church government. For them, there was nowhere else to look but in Scripture.

Scholars have long recognised the disruptive force of the Bible in sixteenth-century Europe. G. R. Elton observes that '[i]f there is a single thread running through the whole story of the Reformation, it is the explosive and renovating and often disintegrating effect of the bible, put into the hands of the commonality and interpreted no longer [only] by the well-conditioned learned'.[12] During the sixteenth century the barriers of language and literacy rapidly dissolved and translations in the vernacular proliferated with the invention of moveable type and the production of Bibles in ever-increasing numbers, not least in England.[13] Far more than ever

[9] See Scott Culpepper, *Francis Johnson and the English separatist influence*, Macon, GA 2011, ch. ii; for Henry Barrow, see Powicke, *Henry Barrow, separatist*.
[10] See Culpepper, *Francis Johnson*, ch. ii.
[11] Ibid. 116–20; Michael E. Moody, 'Ainsworth, Henry (1569–1622), separatist minister and religious controversialist', *ODNB*.
[12] G. R. Elton, *Reformation Europe, 1517–1559*, 2nd edn, Oxford 1999, 28. For other discussions of the Bible in the context of the Reformation see Timothy George, *Theology of the reformers*, Nashville, TN 2013; Brian Cummings, *The literary culture of the Reformation: grammar and grace*, Oxford 2002; and Peter Matheson, 'The Reformation', in John F. A. Sawyer (ed.), *The Blackwell companion to the Bible and culture*, Malden, MA 2006, 69–83. Brad Gregory's provocative assessment has caused recent debate: *The unintended reformation: how a religious revolution secularized society*, Cambridge, MA 2012. For responses see Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: the promise of retrieval for theology and biblical interpretation*, Grand Rapids, MI 2015; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical authority after Babel: retrieving the* solas *in the spirit of mere Protestant Christianity*, Grand Rapids, MI 2016; and Ian Provan, *The Reformation and the right reading of Scripture*, Waco, Tx 2017. Finally, for an assessment of the place of the Bible within the English Dissenting tradition, one that begins with the staunchly biblicist stance of sixteenth-century English separatists see John Coffey, 'The Bible and theology', in John Coffey (ed.), *The Oxford history of Protestant dissenting traditions*, I: *Beginnings to the Toleration Act*, Oxford 2020. I am grateful to Professor Coffey for allowing me to see his essay before publication.
[13] Robert Armstrong posits 'three waves' in the Bible's expansion in sixteenth-century England, 'washing in at different speeds, and with differing intensities': 'Introduction: Protestant England and the English Bible', in Robert Armstrong and Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin (eds), *The English Bible in the early modern world*, Leiden 2018, 2. See also Ian Green's essay in the same volume. Green argues that the impact of the

before, lay people came into direct contact with the content of the Scriptures that had, until then, largely been kept in the preserve of the Church and parcelled out only in carefully orchestrated and selected instalments.[14] Not only was Scripture a more readily available authority, it was the prime authority. Thus the great Protestant rallying cry of *sola scriptura*. But this apparently simple notion meant different things to different groups. What was the range of Scripture's authority? Did it pertain only to matters necessary to salvation or did it encompass secondary issues? Was it even appropriate to categorise some issues as secondary, indifferent or *adiaphora*? Or, when it came to the authority of Scripture, was everything primary? Was there a place for other potential sources of authority alongside that of Scripture, even if only in reinforcement of Scripture? In late sixteenth-century England only the separatists expanded the range of the authority of Scripture to the uttermost and denied any place for other potential authorities.

Peter Lake captures the awkwardness of their rigorous biblicism in the context of debate between the leading Elizabethan Presbyterian, Thomas Cartwright, and the separatists. He explains that for Cartwright to address the separatists at all was fraught with risk, which is why he chose to do so only in manuscript, never in print. The reason is simple enough: their 'motives and principles were almost identical' to his. Thus to defend his position against the separatists required him to concede that the corruptions of the Church of England were only of secondary importance, a concession he could hardly make when advocating a thoroughgoing reform of the Church of England. Such an admission 'would have crippled the radical coherence of the Presbyterian platform'.[15] Stephen Brachlow's study, focusing in the main on the proto-Congregationalist Henry Jacob and the separatist John Robinson, also emphasises continuity and commonality between Puritan conformists and separatists. He explicitly departs from earlier historians who tended to demarcate the two in stark terms. Any dividing lines were 'often entirely blurred'; in fact, the 'ideological lines of continuity … remained remarkably visible and intact'. He even discerns 'an often unrecognized ideological consensus' between them on a number of related dimensions of doctrine, including ecclesiology, soteriology and eschatology. Any differences were mostly a matter of strategy

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newly available Bible 'was probably limited for decades': 'The laity and the Bible in early modern England', 54.

[14] Julie Maxwell offers an original perspective on this in 'Early modern religious prose', in Rebecca Lemon, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts and Christopher Rowland (eds), *The Blackwell companion to the Bible in English literature*, Malden, MA 2009, 184.

[15] Peter Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church*, Cambridge 1982, 78–9.

and timing.[16] That was always the challenge of separatism. The similarities that they shared exposed Puritan conformists to the accusation that separatism was the inevitable consequence of those Presbyterian 'motives and principles' that they held in common.

So what did set them apart? A surprisingly clear dividing line distinguished separatists from Puritan conformists, one that scholars have not observed before: the separatists accepted only one ground of authority, that of Scripture; their opponents accepted other grounds of authority alongside (if subordinate to) Scripture. In this article I would like to map in some detail the contours of that demarcation. This will elucidate the difficulty that Cartwright and other moderate Puritans faced when they tried to refute the separatists without at the same time conceding vital ground to their opponents in the other direction: the bishops, prelates and defenders of the Church of England in its current form.

I do not intend to examine the separatists' view of Scripture as a whole, but only the effects of this one, absolute conviction of the separatists on intra-Protestant published polemic over church government and worship.

Thomas Cartwright, the separatists and some basic outlines

For the English separatists, Scripture really was alone. All other potential sources of authority, all other modes of reasoning and argument came to nothing in the face of Scripture's relentless, implacable and sole authority. The range of that authority extended to the whole of the Christian's life, since, as Francis Johnson recognised (citing 2 Timothy iii.15–17), 'the man of God can … by the Scriptures be made absolute and fully furnished to every good worke'.[17] But this article focuses mainly on 'the ministry, worship, and government' of the Church for which, Johnson argued, Christ established a law and a pattern just as rigorous and precise as that of Moses.[18] Churches were to follow that pattern exactly, replicating

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[16] See Stephen Brachlow, *The communion of saints: radical Puritan and separatist ecclesiology, 1570–1625*, Oxford 1988, especially the introduction and conclusion; the quotations are drawn from pp. 11, 13 and 272. For important examples of that earlier scholarship see Champlin Burrage, *The early English dissenters in the light of recent research (1550–1641)*, New York 1912, and White, *English separatist tradition*. For scholarship on later separatists see Murray Tolmie, *The triumph of the saints: the separate churches of London, 1616–1649*, Cambridge 1977. Theodore Dwight Bozeman also sees within a broad Puritan primitivism the ideal of a 'closed, all-sufficient, timeless' pattern of Church polity revealed in Scripture: *To live ancient lives: the primitivist dimension in Puritanism*, Chapel Hill, NC 1988, 17.

[17] Francis Johnson, *An answer to Maister H. Jacob his defence of the Churches and ministry of England*, [Amsterdam?] 1600 (*ESTC* 121679), 34.

[18] Idem, *A treatise of the ministry of the Church of England*, [Low Countries?] 1595 (*ESTC* 117234), 20. Dan G. Danner notes that this was a particularly English tendency:

every element it contained and rejecting any element it did not. Thus the separatists rejected such features of English worship as clerical vestments, liturgical music and the varied church offices that went beyond what was explicitly sanctioned in Scripture, even if they were vouchsafed by the very best of human authorities. There was one authority in these matters, and only one: Scripture. '[T]he word of God alone is that which can and must end these and all controversies in religion … One sound proof out of the divine Scriptures … is of more force and wilbe more regarded, then all the multitude of such flourishes … out of any humane writings whatsoever.'[19]

To begin with, this meant that university training was worthless. Barrow's short work on the subject, *The pollution of universitie-learning*, utterly condemned the false knowledge peddled in the universities, which offered the education of the monasteries, not that of the schools of the prophets that he read about in the Old Testament.[20] He had taken a BA at Cambridge in the late 1560s,[21] so his book demonstrated an intimate knowledge of university curricula and methods at the same time as it offered a biting denunciation that extended beyond the study of Divinity or the training of ministers. At one point Barrow responded to criticism that the separatists sought to throw out all learning and 'bring in barbarisme'. No one, he replied, should 'suppose that wee condemne any lawful Arts or necessary Sciences'. But those subjects should be taught 'in all places where an established Church is', which would keep all teachers 'under the holy government' of Christ.[22] Therefore, universities were not to be trusted.[23] They furnished AntiChrist with everything that he needed to bolster his authority by subjecting the Scriptures to outside, pagan influences, thus 'perverting the text it selfe with their glosses, paraphrases, notes, figures &c, fighting with their Schoole-learning, vaine arts, philosophie, rhetoricke, and logicke against the truth and servants of God'.[24]

in distinction to Luther and Calvin, the English Marian exiles saw the Bible as 'a book of propositions, precepts and laws to be followed. It contained models or patterns to be emulated': *Pilgrimage to Puritanism: history and theology of the Marian exiles at Geneva, 1555–1560*, New York 1999, 105. See also pp. 143, 144.

[19] [Henry Ainsworth and Francis Johnson], *An apologie or defence of such true Christians as are commonly (but unjustly) called Brownists*, [Amsterdam?] 1604 (*ESTC* 118591), 103.

[20] Henry Barrow, *The pollution of universitie-learning: or, Sciences (falsly so called)*, London 1642 (*ESTC* R18358), 6. For biblical allusions to the schools of the prophets see 1 Samuel xix.18–24, 2 Kings ii, and 2 Kings iv.38–41.

[21] Patrick Collinson, 'Barrow, Henry (*c.* 1550–1593), religious separatist', *ODNB*.

[22] Barrow, *Pollution of universitie-learning*, 7–8.

[23] For another attack on the universities see Henry Barrow and John Greenwood, *A plaine refutation of M. G. Giffardes reprochful booke*, [Dordrecht?] 1591 (*ESTC* 104500), 116–23. [24] Barrow, *Pollution of universitie-learning*, 1.

So the separatist stance on Scripture necessarily entailed a rejection of ancient pagan authorities – Aristotle above all – who had shaped these weapons of logic and philosophy. But separatists went further in dismissing even the Church Fathers. As Irena Backus has shown, the Church Fathers emerged from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with a new centrality and authority, becoming part of the way in which all Catholic and Protestant groups fashioned their identity.[25] But not the separatists. Robert Browne would never use such terms as 'essence', 'substance' and 'being' if not forced to by his opponent, Thomas Cartwright.[26] Even that Trinitarian language – ancient, weighty and credible, deeply entrenched in centuries of theological reflection – was out of bounds. More recently, the great names of Reformed Orthodoxy were rendered null. Barrow was not alone among the separatists in rejecting John Calvin, the 'frivolous Doctor', and his 'crooked disciples'.[27]

It is not that such authorities were absent in the writings of the separatists, but when they made an appearance they had no authority in themselves. Henry Ainsworth and Francis Johnson included a list of great names from the past but 'we build not upon them: neither would now have mentioned so many of them' except that their opponents seemed to revere them.[28] When Johnson justified separation in *A treatise of the ministery of the Church of England* he regularly quoted an impressive range of figures and sources within Reformed orthodoxy but in doing so he was merely taking advantage of his knowledge as a former insider. He quoted these sources not because he considered them authorities but only to embarrass his opponents by showing to the world that their own heroes spoke against them or that those same opponents were now contradicting their earlier writings.[29] When he crafted a 'table of some preincipall things', effectively an index of ideas in his book, he relegated five clusters of testimonies to the end of the list and even then only to demonstrate how his opponents had already testified 'against themselves'.[30] Unsurprisingly, his list began with the 'principall thing' that mattered most: 'The written word of God onely is to be the rule of our life and religion.'

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[25] Irena Backus, 'The Fathers and the Reformation', in Kenneth Parry (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to patristics*, Malden, MA 2015, 428–41. See also Irena Backus (ed.), *Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: from the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ii, Leiden 1997.

[26] [Robert Browne], *An answere to Master Cartwright his letter for joyning with the English Churches*, London [1585?] (*ESTC* 109433), 57.

[27] Barrow, *Brief discoverie*, 56, 23.

[28] [Ainsworth and Johnson], *Apologie*, 103. For the general Puritan view of university education see John Morgan, *Godly learning: Puritan attitudes towards reason, learning and education, 1560–1640*, Cambridge 1988.

[29] Johnson, *Treatise of the ministery*, 116.   [30] Ibid. [142–3].

All of this made the separatists difficult for Puritan conformists to argue with, in two main ways. First, when conformists argued from the ground of any other sources of authority, modes of reasoning, or ways of knowing they were wasting their breath (or ink). To the separatists, these extra-biblical sources were only so much shifting sand, and they treated everything built on them with disdain and indifference. Johnson complained to Henry Jacob that 'in steed of Gods word (which is very rare with you in all this dispute) you presse us with the authoritie of Man'.[31] Browne scorned Cartwright in colourful terms: 'His proofes are like wynde blowen out of a bladder.'[32] Second, the conformists could not easily argue on the basis of Scripture alone because the separatists had the market cornered. If the conformists made Scripture alone their ground, it was not nearly alone enough for the separatists, the only ones for whom it really was, literally, alone. Therefore, the separatists' deployment of *sola scriptura* would always trump any efforts of the conformists to do the same. Recall Johnson's delight at being able to exploit the other writings of his opponents: they had indeed contradicted themselves, because the arguments that they could freely employ against their Church of England opponents were rendered inoperative when they reversed direction to argue against the separatists. They could not credibly use *sola scriptura*-type arguments that the separatists were already using with pristine fidelity. Thus it is fascinating to observe the way in which the conformists did try to make their case, and unsurprising that their arguments had so little effect on the separatists.

We can see the dilemma in Cartwright's reply to Robert Harrison in 1584,[33] in which he made no effort to stand his argument on *sola scriptura*. Instead, he employed Calvin's two marks of a true Church: the preaching of the word and the administration of sacraments. But Calvin was no authority to the separatists, and even if he was, his model omitted a third mark: discipline. Cartwright's defence was to offer not Scripture but metaphor: a 'plaine similitude from the body of man'. If a man were to have both his arms cut off and his eyes put out he would remain a true man while he still breathed: a maimed man is still a man. Similarly, if a man should have six fingers on one hand and three on the other, and if they should grow out of where his mouth should be, he would remain a true man: a deformed man is still a man. So too, as long as the head of a Church is Christ, no amputation or deformation would render that

[31] Idem, *Answer to Maister H. Jacob*, 9.
[32] [Browne], *An answere to Master Cartwright*, 45.
[33] For context see A. F. Scott Pearson, *Thomas Cartwright and Elizabethan Puritanism, 1535–1603*, Gloucester, MA 1966, 211–23.

Church anything other than a true Church. Browne's comment in the margin made it perfectly clear what he thought of all this: 'a foppery'.[34]

Cartwright's letter to the separatist Anne Stubbe six years later demonstrated the same kind of constraints. He claimed 'that we doe herein according to that we are p*er*swaded out of the Word' but he asserted no perfect heavenly pattern to which the earthly Church had to conform.[35] In this way, Cartwright gave ample room for deviation and imperfection, once more resorting to metaphor: a disobedient wife is still a wife; a magistrate with a rusty sword is still a magistrate; and, of course, a maimed man is still a man. So the Church of England, for all its faults, was still a true Church, just as God never dismissed the wayward Corinthian church as a false one, or the Church in the time of Jesus, or even the Jewish Church in Babylonian exile.[36] Scripture was still in play here, but he argued that variation was tolerable in the eyes of God.

That is not what he said to Archbishop John Whitgift:[37] 'nothing is to be done in the church of God, but by hys commaundement and worde directing the same'.[38] This was especially true of church government, which 'is by the word of God, and heavenly, and not left to the will of men to devise at their pleasure'.[39] Noah's Ark, the Tabernacle and the Temple all came with very precise instructions and proportions, and if that was true of what were mere earthly shadows how much more was it true of the heavenly reality?[40] Offices such as archbishop and archdeacon, therefore, were not in Scripture, were 'of the earth', and 'so can do no good, but much harme in the church'.[41] As Brachlow noted, Puritan conformists would employ what he calls 'an *adiaphora* defence' against the separatists but when addressing the episcopate 'they tended to appeal to Scripture as a book of immutable rules which contained a detailed and perspicacious polity for the church that had been established by Christ for all succeeding generations'.[42] So in this context Cartwright was doing only what the separatists would do in attempting to strip the hierarchy of the Church of England back to an appropriate scriptural minimum. The only difference is that for him the Church Fathers carried genuine weight. Their authority did not exceed that of the Bible (for one thing, they disagreed among themselves and could be used to prove almost any position) but, even so, Cartwright argued that there was nothing in Augustine, for example, to

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[34] [Browne], *An answere to Master Cartwright*, 91–2. For another text of Cartwright's letter see *Cartwrightiana: Elizabethan Nonconformist texts*, i, ed. Albert Peel and Leland H. Carlson, London 1951, 48–58. [35] *Cartwrightiana*, 64.

[36] Ibid. 64, 65, 66, 68.

[37] For context see Pearson, *Thomas Cartwright and Elizabethan Puritanism*, 86–101.

[38] T[homas] C[artwright], *Replye to an answere made of M. Doctor Whitgifte against the admonition to the Parliament*, [Hemel Hempstead? 1573] (*ESTC* 120563), 36.

[39] Ibid. 83. See also pp. 32–3. [40] Ibid. 84. [41] Ibid. 83.

[42] Brachlow, *Communion of saints*, 26.

contradict his position. Indeed, 'against you [he] maketh much & overturneth all your building in [your] boke'.[43] He criticised Whitgift for being too selective in his use of the Church Fathers, not for using them at all;[44] and he appealed to figures as far apart as Aristotle and Calvin to help make his case.[45]

The separatists were distinctive, therefore, in their total reliance on Scripture alone to assert their position. They were also distinctive in the way they put Scripture to use, in two main ways. First, one can observe the concentration of proof texts positioned in the margins to buttress their own writing. This is nicely illustrated in Browne's *Answere to Master Cartwright*. A total of eighty-five pages in length, it contains 487 Bible references in the margins, an average of nearly six references per page. The coverage is balanced and impressively comprehensive: 229 references come from the Old Testament, 255 from the New Testament with 98 from the Gospels and 157 from Acts, the Epistles and Revelation. They range across the whole of the Canon: Barrow cited twenty-nine out of the thirty-nine Old Testament books and twenty-six out of twenty-seven New Testament books (his only omission was 3 John, which comprises a mere fourteen verses); there were no references to the Apocrypha. Thomas Cartwright also used proof-texts. Some pages in his reply to Whitgift matched Browne's average and, like him, Cartwright included no references to the Apocrypha. But over all 224 pages of the work his average was under two per page (in his reply to Harrison it was less than one per page) and he included in addition plenty of marginal references to the Church Fathers, something Browne never did. Of course, the abundance of proof texts settled nothing because Scripture could be read in multiple ways; each side disputed the appropriateness and relevance of the other's proof-texts.[46]

Second, notwithstanding the blanket coverage of their marginal references, the separatists' deployment of Scripture privileged the Bible's apocalyptic writings: Daniel, parts of Ezekiel and Revelation. Francis Johnson said that England's parishes were not like a maimed man at all but a swarm of locusts, 'whose forme is like unto horses … with faces of men, heare of women, teeth of Lyons, habergions of yron, wings like charets, tayles of scorpions, with stings in them to hurt withall'.[47] This privileging of the apocalyptic encouraged a semiotic reading of Scripture. In discussing one verse, Johnson advised that the words 'are not literallie to

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[43] C[artwright], *Replye to an answere*, 29–30. [44] Ibid. 29.

[45] Ibid. 32–3, 82, 116.

[46] For example, see the exchange between Francis Johnson and Arthur Hildersham in Johnson, *Treatise of the ministery*, 5–6, 9.

[47] Johnson, *Answer to Maister H. Jacob*, 59. The scriptural allusion is to Revelation ix.7–10.

be taken, but sacramentallie, attributing that in phrase of speach to the signe, which indeed is peculiar to the thing signified. This maner of speaking is usuall throughout the Scripture, both towching the true and false worship of God'.[48] The effect of this apocalyptic and semiotic reading of Scripture was to render their world in stark tones of either black or white, and to cultivate a dualistic, high-stakes sense of present reality and looming judgement on their opponents.[49]

This sense of present reality informed the separatists' reading of Old Testament history. For example, in Numbers xvi Korah led a rebellion against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. God instructed Moses, Aaron and the Israelites to 'separate your selves from among this Congregacion, that I may consume them at once'.[50] For the separatists, this demonstrated the weight of God's injunction to separate from impure worship and governance. First, 'Moses commaunded the congregation (& the Lord so bade him) to depart from the tents of those wicked men'. Second, the ground opened up to consume them, and 'was this not also a putting apart or a casting out?' Centuries later, Browne heard the same command to separate from the tents of the wicked: 'these judgements were both an ensampell and a figure of the spirituall judging at this day'.[51] But signs can be interpreted in different ways. As we shall see, their conformist opponents could easily cast the separatists in the form of Korah and his rebels, rebelliously removing themselves from God's established order of leadership.

In his *Brief discoverie of the false Church* Barrow worked with a different story, that of King Josiah, in whose day the Book of the Law was rediscovered.[52] '[W]hen he heard the booke of Gods law read, & compared the acts of his forefathers, and the present estate of his kingdome thereunto, [he] rent his clothes in horror of the wrathfull judgements of God, in that booke denounced.' To Barrow, the application was obvious: England's worship had also degenerated from the model set forth in God's word. Yet the nation's prophets and watchmen did not sound the alarm; instead they merely 'pretend a kind of reformation' and do not bring the people back to the 'true patterne' of worship in the Scriptures.[53] Both of these stories, and others similarly used by the

[48] Johnson, *Answer to Maister H. Jacob*, 118.

[49] Henry Barrow and John Greenwood believed that the 'generall defection & apostasie' that they saw around them showed that they were living in the Last Days 'most liuely described in the booke of the *Reuelation*': *A plaine refutation*, 'Welcome to the reader', sig. A.

[50] Numbers xvi.21. All scriptural quotations are from *The Geneva Bible: a fascimile of the 1560 edition*, Madison–Milwaukee–London 1969. The Geneva Bible was the translation preferred by separatists: Culpepper, *Francis Johnson*, 94.

[51] [Browne], *An answere to Master Cartwright*, 22.   [52] 2 Kings xxii.11.

[53] Barrow, *Brief discoverie*, 'epistle to the reader', sig. A ii.

separatists, carried with them the sense of impending judgement. This raised the stakes and required a stark choice to separate.

It is impossible to know entirely where this mindset originated. Did this stark biblical vision inform their separatism, or did the demands of separatism necessitate that high-stakes biblicism, or did both develop in mutually-reinforcing ways? To form a separate congregation was illegal, only the tiniest minority of believers was convinced enough to do so, and those who did ran the very real risk of imprisonment or execution. Justifying such a stand required an all-or-nothing mentality. The Church of England could not be just partly bad, but all bad. So Johnson declared a moral equivalence between the Church of Rome and the Church of England: 'they are not to be receyved or joyned unto in the one any more than in the other'. Any Church not founded on the pattern in the New Testament belonged to AntiChrist, even if the members of that Church 'walk with some show of piety and religion' and even if they profess 'many notable truths and foundamentall articles of religion'. There were only 'true churches' and 'false churches' with nothing in between.[54] Entirely absent is the desire so prevalent in early modern discourse to find the middle way.[55] The separatists had no interest in that discourse, not least because it derived from Aristotle. Whatever else the Bible delivered, it was not a golden mean. Conceptually it presented to the separatists two stark choices with nothing in the middle, and for the Church it set forth one true pattern, and only one. As Barrow warned, 'No middle course (as you affirme) may here be taken; we must either make the tree good or evill.'[56]

George Gifford, the separatists and a particular case study

So far the discussion has oriented us in the distinctive ways in which the separatists read and deployed Scripture. We can now investigate these dynamics in a particular dispute between the Presbyterian George Gifford and the separatists Henry Barrow and John Greenwood. In 1584 Archbishop Whitgift had deprived Gifford of his curacy at All Saints-with-St Peter, Maldon, for refusing subscription. Gifford was restored by early 1589, going on to become a respected and prolific godly author.[57] In 1590 he published *A short treatise against the Donatists of England, whome we*

[54] Johnson, *Treatise of the ministery*, 9, 19, 20.
[55] See Ethan H. Shagan, *The rule of moderation: violence, religion and the politics of restraint in early modern England*, Cambridge 2011.
[56] Barrow, *Brief discoverie*, 112.
[57] Brett Usher, 'Gifford, George (1547/8–1600), Church of England clergyman and author', *ODNB*.

call Brownists. In that work he addressed the separatists directly; in another work of the same year, *A plaine declaration that our Brownists be full Donatists,* he made his case to a more general audience. Barrow and Greenwood replied in the following year, publishing *A plaine refutation of M. G. Giffardes reprochful booke.* Gifford quickly responded in *A short reply to the late printed books of Henry Barrow and John Greenwood.* Throughout the course of the extended controversy each side used Scripture to make its arguments and yet, strikingly, each side accused the other of not bringing in Scripture to prove its case. Seeing things only in their own way, they were blind to the other.

Gifford regularly used Scripture to attack the separatists. The first page alone of the 'Preface to the Reader' of his first book contained three references to the book of Revelation.[58] One gets the impression that he was prepared to meet the separatists on their own ground. Throughout the text he sprinkled regular references to a range of biblical texts and stories, sometimes the same stories that the separatists had used, though in the rebellion of Korah it was the separatists who played the part of Korah – they were the ones inviting God's judgement on themselves for their perverse rebellion against God's rightly instituted authority; and the story of Josiah proved only that the magistrate did have a legitimate place in overseeing the nation's religion.[59] This demonstrates, of course, that the same Scriptures were open to rival and quite contrasting interpretations, and who was there to adjudicate?

Needless to say, when Barrow and Greenwood replied to Gifford they also used Scripture. The way they did so demonstrated the same all-or-nothing instinct shared by all separatists. There is an 'exact & absolute patterne' of church government and worship in Scripture.[60] 'We seeke to establish and obey the ordinances & lawes of our Saviour Christ … without altering, changing, innovating, wresting, or leaving out anie of them that the Lord shall gyve us sight of.'[61] There was to be no compromise or deviation, no muddying of the waters, much less any sort of middle ground. A little bit of yeast soured the whole lump; even rank heretics believed part of the truth.[62] 'No error or transgression can be joyned unto or built upon this foundation, no more then light & darkenes can be mingled. The least departure from Godes worde is an error; the least transgression of God's lawe is a sinne.'[63] So a Church is either true or false according to its entire conformity to the pattern laid down; it stands either under Christ or AntiChrist, with no mixing of the two. Barrow and

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[58] George Gifford, *A short treatise against the Donatists of England, whome we call Brownists,* London 1590 (*ESTC* 114289), 'Preface to the gentle reader', sig. A[1].
[59] Ibid. sig. A3v, pp. 103, 105.
[60] Barrow and Greenwood, *Plaine refutation,* 'Welcome to the reader', sig. Av.
[61] Ibid. 1.   [62] Ibid. 28, 30, 68.   [63] Ibid. 26–7. See also p. 101.

Greenwood found in Scripture only five officers in the Church: pastors, teachers, elders, deacons and 'relievers'.[64] But when they turned from there to the Church of England they saw the elaborate hierarchy of prelacy. Over the space of thirty pages they dismantled the various offices in the Church of England to demonstrate that there was nothing like them in all of Scripture.[65]

So when they asked Gifford to justify his 'church estate' – that is, this extensive hierarchy – they wanted verses from Scripture to justify each office. Yet those verses never came. He could assemble as many Scriptures as he pleased but as long as he failed to provide precise scriptural warrant for every office in the Church of England they counted for nothing. Thus they dismissed the Church of England as a false Church. There was nothing good about it, nothing at all. It had 'not one pinne, naile, or hooke according to the true patterne'.[66] Even the smallest addition of human novelty corrupted the whole, rendering the Church of England a false Church.

Barrow and Greenwood were correct: Gifford did not provide scriptural warrant for the many offices structuring the Church of England. Such verses would have been very hard to find but, more importantly, Gifford did not see the need to look for them because he was working not from an all-or-nothing mentality but a bare-minimum mentality. It was held in common with other conformist Puritans and was reflected in the simile so beloved by them all, that of the maimed man. To offer it again in Gifford's words, if a body is 'whole and sound' but is not breathing then the 'soule and life [have] departed, he is no longer a man, to speake properly, but the dead carcasse of a man'. It was the inner breath of life, not the outer working of his limbs or external appearance, that made a man both alive and true, so that 'if he be sicke and diseased, so that all partes are feeble, or if he be deformed with sores and maimes, wanting hand, foote, eye, nose, or such like, yet he is still a man, so long as the soule and life remaine in him'.[67] This metaphor set a remarkably low bar for the Church of England. As long as it still breathed it was a true Church, whatever deformities and diseases it might carry, whatever limbs or organs may have been lost. It is hardly likely he would have made a similar claim when he was arguing to reform such imperfections.

Gifford drew a further distinction between what was fundamental in Scripture and merely circumstantial, accidental and indifferent. At one point in his *Short treatise* he broached the separatist conviction that the magistrate can make no laws for the Church beyond those of the New

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[64] Ibid. 103–4. For a description of these offices see Culpepper, *Francis Johnson*, 51–6.
[65] Barrow and Greenwood, *Plaine refutation*, 105–35.
[66] Ibid. 'Epistle to the reader', sig. Av.
[67] Gifford, *Short treatise*, 'Epistle to the reader', sig. Av.

Testament. To 'simple men' it seemed a sound proposition. 'The deceypt lyeth hid in this: that men do not consider there be general lawes or rules given by Christ for matters of circumstance, that bee indifferent and variable in the particulars, and so to be altered and abolished, as the peace and edification of the Churche shall require.'[68] Those 'matters of circumstance' included every aspect of 'externall government' of the Church and its form of worship. Only doctrine was fundamental, and even then only some doctrines: 'a Church may erre in sundrie points of Doctrine, and not be Antichristian'.[69] This hermeneutical principle sat rather well with Gifford's bare-minimum mentality because it gave large room for error. For all the many faults in the Church of England, they 'be not fundamentall, nor destroy the substance'.[70] Gifford accused the separatists of bundling up certain faults in matters circumstantial and making them out to be 'odious enormities'.[71]

Such a distinction between fundamental and circumstantial made no sense within the separatists' all-or-nothing mentality and they were never going to let the Church of England off the hook that easily. Barrow and Greenwood scathingly dismissed Gifford's 'scholastical or (as he useth it) we might more rightlie saye, *papistical* distinctions of *fundamental errors and transgressions*'.[72] Sitting behind their critique was the separatists' rejection of university learning. They found Gifford's specious use of a syllogism 'so ful of *legier du main* [sleight of hand], that we had neede look narrowlie to his fingers, lest by his sophistries & diepe schole learning he beguile us, as the Serpent by his craftiness deceaved *Evah*' (that is, Eve).[73] Instead, for them, every part of Scripture was equally true and equally applicable.[74] Otherwise, who was to say which parts of Scripture were fundamental and which were not? Surely Christ was of only one mind.[75]

Gifford accused the separatists themselves of not obeying the very ordinances of Christ that they claimed to follow. He had in mind Matthew xviii.15–17, where Jesus lays down a process whereby sin in the Church is to be confronted. The separatists had not followed that process: they had not brought their accusation to the Church, they had simply left.[76] In reply, the separatists claimed that this process applied only in the context of a true Church, and the Church of England was not a true Church. Its processes for weighing disputes between believers were the product of canon law much more than Matthew xviii. And anyway, what was the point of 'telling the church' when all that Church did was 'hate, persecute, imprison al that speake for' Christ's true pattern of church government?[77] But their response would have been insufficient for Gifford: 'let us see

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[68] Ibid. 106–7.   [69] Ibid. 90.   [70] Ibid.   [71] Ibid. 77.
[72] Barrow and Greenwood, *Plaine refutation*, 26.   [73] Ibid. 25.   [74] Ibid. 26.
[75] Ibid. 137.   [76] Gifford, *Short treatise*, 4–6.
[77] Barrow and Greenwood, *Plaine refutation*, 24–5.

where that commaundement ye speake of is given unto private men' to form their own congregation; this 'ye do boldly and presumptuously affirme, and can shew no one place of Scripture for it'.[78] The central action of the separatists – that of separating – had no warrant in Scripture, at least in Gifford's eyes. It allowed him to claim that the separatists themselves could bring in no Scripture to support their stand.

Gifford had offered legitimate arguments from Scripture to make his case, but they were not legitimate in terms that Barrow and Greenwood could recognise and they simply did not hear him. Immersed as they were in the world of Revelation they dismissed his words as the 'opprobrie, blasphemie, and rage which he breatheth forth out of the mouth of that Dragon'.[79] They decried Gifford's handling of the Bible: he 'perverteth and wresteth the Scriptures from their holie sense according to his owne lust'. They cast him in the shape of the 'other': their readers should not marvel that God had given him up 'into a reprobate sense, and suffer[ed] him to draw these hereticall doctrines and damnable conclusions from the same, to the destruction of himself, and of as manie as receive his doctrines'.[80] This was some acknowledgment that Gifford was reading the Scriptures, but only in a reprobate sense, as God in his sovereign purpose hardened his heart and readied him for judgement. In their usual all-or-nothing manner they declared that they had won the argument.[81] For all of Gifford's efforts there could be no winning over the separatists against such concentrated imaginative power. 'Our innocence shalbe our defence, and his refutation.'[82] In this sense the Bible was for the separatists a closed book.

Henry Jacob, the separatists and some further possibilities

We have been tracing a simple yet suggestive demarcation in the way in which sixteenth-century English separatists and Puritan conformists conducted their printed debates over church government and worship. The separatists were entirely free to argue on the basis of Scripture alone because for them it really was alone. The conformists were not so free. It was a great deal harder for them to argue on the basis of Scripture alone because it was not alone: they accepted other grounds of authority alongside (even if lesser than) Scripture. Thus it was hardly credible for the

[78] Gifford, *Short treatise*, 102.
[79] Barrow and Greenwood, *Plaine refutation*, 100. See also p. 119. Ainsworth and Johnson made a similar point: 'it is strange that in all this tyme, though they write book after book, yet none of them hath an heart or ability hereunto [to make their case from Scripture], if it be a thing that could be done': *Apologie*, 107.
[80] Barrow and Greenwood, *Plaine refutation*, 65.   [81] Ibid. 146–7.
[82] Ibid. 100.

conformists to claim that they were the ones arguing from Scripture alone. They would lose that argument every time. Faced with this obstacle, they had to retreat to weaker and less comfortable ground exemplified in the metaphor of the maimed man, even though metaphor (or reason, or the Church Fathers, or any other source of authority) was never likely to satisfy a separatist.

But, as we saw in the case of Cartwright against Whitgift, if the conformists turned to argue in the opposite direction they could stand on firmer ground. Facing the bishops of the Church of England, they could make the case on the basis of Scripture alone because, of the two parties, they held to that conviction with the greater degree of purity. In this sense we can position the conformists between the bishops and the separatists: not as pristine as the separatists but more rigorous than the bishops when it came to *sola scriptura* and thus more free to argue on that basis. That is why the separatists could use the conformists' own arguments against them. The conformists could offer only what Brachlow calls *adiaphora* lines of argument against the separatists but they could launch *sola scriptura* lines of argument against the bishops.[83] Facing those like the separatists who held to Scripture alone with adamant purity, *sola scriptura* arguments were neutralised and compromised, thus conformists had to resort to a bare-minimum mentality. But when conformists turned to look in the opposite direction they were much freer to adopt something closer to an all-or-nothing mentality, though never with the same conviction and credibility as the separatists. *Sola scriptura* arguments, therefore, worked in one direction but not the other.

All this can be illustrated by the progress of Henry Jacob as he moved towards a position that came to be known as Congregationalist. He 'led the puritan campaign to influence the new King James in the direction of a fundamental reform of religion by such means as the famous millenary petition which he helped to draw up'.[84] This will take us just beyond the Elizabethan period by locating Jacob in the immediate aftermath of the Hampton Court Conference in 1604. His early ministerial career is uncertain, but from 1596 to 1599 he engaged in dispute with Francis Johnson, defending the validity of the Church of England against the separatists. By 1604 he had made the move from Puritan conformity to what Michael Winship calls 'something new, an irenic congregationalist third way between the separatists and the Church of England'.[85] Jacob now lay

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[83] Brachlow, *Communion of saints*, 57.
[84] S. Wright, 'Jacob, Henry (1562/3–1624), semi-separatist minister', *ODNB*.
[85] Michael P. Winship, *Godly republicanism: Puritans, pilgrims, and a city on a hill*, Cambridge, MA 2012, 100. In 1604 'he argued for the first time that salvation would ordinarily be confined to members of visible churches more in keeping with God's law': Wright, 'Jacob, Henry'.

between the Presbyterians and the separatists, but would he join with the separatists in according authority to Scripture alone or would he remain with the Presbyterians in allowing other grounds of authority?

When writing against Johnson in 1599 Jacob could not have demonstrated clearer conformity with the arguments of Cartwright and Gifford: 'My expresse words, and our Churches meaning is, That any reasonable kinde of Church-governement, and rites, and orders, are arbitrary and changeable, no matters of faith, nor written in the Scriptures.'[86] He distinguished between what he termed written and unwritten. The first comprised everything 'touching doctrine, that is, touching faith and the inward opinion onely'. The second comprised everything 'touching outward orders in the Church, and all outward gouernement, and ceremonies'. The first were 'necessarie' but the second were 'arbitrary' and changeable.[87] As for the Church of England, he could not offer a better answer than 'this similitude: This man hath a wooden legge, and eye of glasse, his nose deformed, adde if you will, both his armes not natural, but framed of him of wood or what you will: Ergo this is no true man. Yes Sir, for all this he is a true man'.[88] Thus the ever-reliable maimed man made his appearance, and all this is very familiar. Stephen Brachlow makes a shrewd point: 'Jacob's *adiaphora* line of reasoning in 1599 … sounded very much like the Calvinist Whitgift against a radical Cartwright – or, for that matter, the moderate Cartwright against a fanatical Richard Harrison!'[89] Exactly. Arguments such as these worked only in one direction.

In 1604, however, Jacob asserted the opposite. He declared that 'all Ecclesiasticall *Rites, Actions, Ministeries, & Formes of Visible Churches*' were ordained by Scripture and that all human traditions or inventions were 'directly contrarie to Gods woord', which was 'a most perfect and absolute demonstration of all things whatsoever being properlie and simplie Ecclesiasticall or religious'.[90] The form of church government was fundamental, not circumstantial; things indifferent and open to human ingenuity were only matters of 'Places, Times, Persons, Things', which included church buildings and furniture; whether to sit, kneel or lie prostrate to receive communion, and at what time of day; and even whether to baptise in rivers.[91] Furthermore, the only valid and scriptural form of a Church was a 'Particular ordinary constant Congregation of Christians' with power of government in itself.[92] The diocesan government of the

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[86] Henry Jacob, *Defence of the churches and ministrery of Englande*, Middelburgh 1599 (*ESTC* 107526), 19.   [87] Ibid. 14.   [88] Ibid. 24.
[89] Brachlow, *Communion of saints*, 57.
[90] [Henry Jacob], *Reasons taken out of Gods word and the best humane testimonies proving a necessitie of reforming our churches in England*, [Middelburgh] 1604 (*ESTC* 120955), 1–3.
[91] Ibid. 12.   [92] Ibid. 5.

Church of England was 'cleane *beside* the Scripture' and, for that reason, 'simplie evill and unlawfull'.[93]

In coming to that conclusion he sounded just like Johnson and any other separatist, but he stopped short of separatism in two ways, both of them indicated in the title of his book. First, it spoke of reforming 'our Churches in England'. To dismiss the English Church wholesale as a false Church, as the separatists did, was to buy into the conceptual framework of their opponents by conceiving it as just one national Church. For Jacob, the Church in England comprised thousands of individual congregations in varying states of adequacy, some of which were fit to commune with. So he did not dismiss the English Church out of hand as a false Church. Second, and more important for the purposes of this article, Jacob's 'Reasons' were 'Taken Out of Gods Word and the Best Humane Testimonies'. He sounded much like the separatists when he argued 'that all *Humane inventions*, or *Unwritten Traditions Ecclesiasticall* are directly contrarie to Gods woord' and when he asserted that custom 'is no warrant nor ground for any thing in Religion. The word of God alone must suffice us herein'.[94] Yet when he offered his definition of a visible Church he said that 'against this there is no text of Scripture in all the New Testament, nor anie force of reason appearing'.[95] Both Scripture and reason, it seems, were permissible grounds of argument. And when he defended the privileges of the pastor in his congregation (and only in his congregation, thus denying the authority of diocesan bishops) he justified his position by appealing to the writings of Cyprian, Jerome and Gregory of Nazianzus.[96] For Jacob, it was entirely consistent to argue that human innovations in church government and worship were 'directly contrarie to Gods woord' and also to accept a place for merely human authorities in sustaining that argument; for the separatists, this was not consistent. Thus the clear line of demarcation remained: Congregationalists recognised non-scriptural authorities; separatists did not. This clear, consistent division remained. It is one way of distinguishing a separatist from a Congregationalist.

Of all the Protestant groupings in late sixteenth-century England, only the separatists rejected all forms of authority but the Bible, and that remained true of the separatists well into the seventeenth century. In 1642 Barrow's *Pollution of universitie-learning* finally made its way out of manuscript into print. Clearly his arguments had lost none of their relevance and currency. Likewise, in 1644 the Presbyterian William Rathband published a manuscript that had been circulating since the later sixteenth century, written by a collection of unnamed authors to

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[93] Ibid. 13.   [94] Ibid. 2.   [95] Ibid. 18.   [96] Ibid. 39–40.

counter 'the old errors and dotages of *Barrow* and *Greenwood*'.[97] It offers further evidence for the same Puritan-conformist bare-minimum mentality that we have already observed: a Church may still be a true Church even though it does not hold to every truth of Scripture or contains error; not every verse in Scripture is of fundamental importance.[98] Separatists, they complained, loaded the margins with biblical proof texts to overwhelm 'simple, or credulous Readers' and they acted 'as if the Word of God had come out from them, or had come unto them onely'.[99] It is difficult to see how these arguments would have had any greater effect than they had earlier. The point was probably not to persuade the unpersuadable,[100] but to prevent further defections to the separatist cause, to retain those who could be persuaded. The fact that Rathband felt prompted to publish the unrevised manuscript suggests that all the same issues remained in the 1640s. And in his 'Epistle to the reader', Rathband himself offered one of the most telling observations: the separatists acted 'as if there were no middle'.[101] How true that was. What separates the separatists, therefore, was not so much a particular ecclesiology but the singular place of the Bible: pristine, adamant, absolutist and all-or-nothing. Scripture stood alone, and so, on this point, did they.

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[97] William Rathband (ed.), *A most grave, and modest confutation of the errors of the sect, commonly called Brownists*, London 1644 (*ESTC* R209828), 'The publisher to the reader', sig. *3v.   [98] Ibid. 4–6.

[99] Ibid. 'The preface of the authors … to the reader', sig. [A4r], p. 62.

[100] Although, as we have seen, Thomas Cartwright tried to do just that in what he thought would remain unpublished private letters.

[101] Rathband, *A most grave, and modest confutation*, 'The publisher to the reader', sig. [*4v].