

The Doctrine of the Extent of the Atonement among the Early English Particular Baptists

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■ Abstract

This essay challenges the view that the early English Baptists who are often labeled as “Particular Baptists” always held a doctrine of strict particularism or particular redemption. It does so on the basis of the two London Baptist Confessions of 1644 and 1646. The main argument asserted here is that the two earliest confessions of the English Particular Baptists supported a variety of positions on the doctrine of the atonement because they focus on the subjective application of Christ’s work rather than his objective accomplishment. The first two editions of the earliest London Baptist confession represent a unique voice that reflects an attempt to include a range of Calvinistic views on the atonement. Such careful ambiguity reflects the pattern of Reformed confessionalism in the seventeenth century. This paper then goes on to argue that some individuals did indeed hold to “strict particularism”—which is compatible with, but not required by, the first two confessions.

■ Keywords

atonement, limited, particular, Baptists, redemption

■ Introduction

The contemporary paradigm of Baptist history has two separate roots, the first root being the General Baptists associated with Arminianism and the second being the Particular Baptists associated with Calvinism. The General Baptists were associated with John Smyth (ca. 1560–1612), who organized a credo-baptist congregation

in England in 1609 and whose pastorate was later taken up by Thomas Helwys. The Calvinistic group of credo-baptists originated separately from this first group, and its first church was pastored in London around 1616 by Henry Jacob, then John Lathrop, and finally Henry Jessey. This paper probes the issues of identity and definition of this second group, who have been known since the mid-1700s as “Particular Baptists,” by asking: What did it mean to be a *Particular* Baptist for the earliest Baptists in London who produced confessions in 1644 and 1646?

These labels of “General” and “Particular” are typically understood as references to distinctive Christian doctrines that defined these movements and set them apart from other sects at the time. Thus, the most pertinent questions about identity and definition involve doctrine. Is this word “Particular” a reference to “particular redemption” (limited atonement)? Or is this a reference to God’s sovereign election of individuals unto salvation? Some have observed that “even Particular Baptists were not in lock-step on the issue of the extent of the atonement.”¹ This paper focuses primarily on the London Baptist Confessions of 1644 and 1646 to probe this matter and answer these questions.² This paper proposes the following thesis: the two earliest confessions of the English Particular Baptists supported a variety of positions on the doctrine of the atonement because they focus on the subjective application of Christ’s work rather than his objective accomplishment.

The fact that the word “particular” (in reference to the objective work of Christ’s atonement) does not appear at all in the Baptist confessions of 1644 and 1646 suggests that the term could be anachronistic and perhaps misleading.³ The nineteenth-century Baptist minister and historian George Gould found that the “very first use” of the term “Particular Baptists” is found in the “Rules and Constitution of the Particular Baptist Fund,” established in 1717.⁴ And so it seems that the use of the term “Particular Baptist” today draws from the terminology of the mid-1700s. The absence of the term “Particular” does not mean the absence of the concept, to be sure. For example, the Baptists did not use the term “Baptist” for themselves until the mid-1650s, but the concept of credo-baptism was certainly there.⁵ There

¹ David L. Allen, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Historical and Critical Review* (Nashville: B&H, 2016) 459.

² The confessions of 1644 and 1646 may be best understood as two editions of one confession, the latter being an update of the former: *The Confession of Faith, of those Churches which are Commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists* (London: n.p., 1644) and *A Confession of Faith of Seven Congregations or Churches of Christ in London, Which are Commonly (but unjustly) Called Anabaptists: The Second Impression Corrected and Enlarged* (London: Matthew Simmons, 1646).

³ The word “particular” occurs six times in identical locations in the 1644 and 1646 London confessions. Article 33 uses the word “particular” in a context referring to Christ’s church as his “particular inheritance.” This article refers to the church and its relation to Christ, but it says nothing about the intent or design of the atonement.

⁴ George Gould, *Open Communion and the Baptists of Norwich* (London: Josiah Fletcher, 1860) 226; for a recent discussion of this fund see Peter Naylor, *Calvinism, Communion, and the Baptists: A Study of English Calvinistic Baptists from the Late 1600s to the Early 1800s* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought 7; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2003) 46.

⁵ Barry H. Howson, *Erroneous and Schismatical Opinions: The Question of Orthodoxy Regarding*

are no references to the term “limited atonement” either, because the common word in the seventeenth century was *satisfactio* (satisfaction).⁶ Still the question remains: what did it mean for the earliest Baptists in London to be “Particular”?

The answer to this question often tends to focus on the theology of certain prominent theologians or pastors. For example, Peter Naylor describes the particular Baptist doctrine of the extent of the atonement by explaining the positions of individuals such as William Jeyes Styles (1842–1914), R. Hall Sr. (1728–1791), and John Gill (1697–1771).⁷ Thomas J. Nettles’ study of Calvinistic doctrines amongst Baptists refers initially to the following individuals: Hanserd Knollys (1599–1691), William Kiffin (1616–1701), Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), John Spilsbury (1593–1668), Henry Jessey (1601–1663), and John Bunyan (1628–1688). It focuses almost exclusively on the 1689 confession, largely bypassing the London Confessions of 1644 and 1646.⁸ Nettles’ description of the 1644 confession is revealing: “As an expression of Spilsbury’s theology and the other Particular Baptist pastors of London, the First London Confession was decidedly and clearly Calvinistic.”⁹ While Nettles’ description is historically accurate in one sense, it neglects another sense in that it reads the 1644 confession as the voice of John Spilsbury rather than as a communal voice of the churches. In another recent example, Samuel D. Renihan argues that the London Confessions of 1644 and 1646 reflect “Reformed covenant theology”—not because they actually address the topic—but because certain individuals associated with the confessions wrote about covenant theology in other documents.¹⁰ These studies tend to view the voice of certain church confessions as the echo of certain prominent individuals.

This paper offers a historiographical critique that seeks to re-establish the confessions as having a voice in their own right. Not only were these two confessions the products of multiple local churches in and around London, the later confession from 1646 is an attempt to expand and correct the first. This attempt to correct the first confession suggests that continuities between the two confessions reflect strongly-held doctrines. These two sources also provide the study with the rough timeframe from the 1640s to the 1660s with further developments occurring in

the Theology of Hanserd Knollys (c. 1599-1691) (Studies in the History of Christian Thought 99; Leiden: Brill, 2001) 36.

⁶ John V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014) 189.

⁷ Naylor, *Calvinism, Communion, and the Baptists*, 169–70.

⁸ Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (rev. and enl. ed.; Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2006) xxv.

⁹ Nettles, *By His Grace*, 5.

¹⁰ Samuel D. Renihan acknowledges that the London Confessions of 1644 and 1646 reflect a certain “silence on the finer points of the relation between the historical covenants” in *From Shadow to Substance: The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists (1642-1704)* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2018) 110 n. 9.

the later London Baptist confession of 1677/1689.¹¹ When the confessions are interpreted in light of prominent individuals, then the communal voice of these documents is lost. The doctrines of both individuals and the church confessions constitute different voices and each must be heard on its own terms without drowning out the other. When the voices of both the pastors and the confessions are heard, there are elements of tension that cannot be missed.

The Particular Baptists were first and foremost credo-baptists who sought to establish local congregations where only disciples would be baptized. Beyond credo-baptism, the question remains as to what other doctrines were at the core of Particular Baptist identity. Were Particular Baptists known for their views of “strict particularism” (a version of limited atonement)? The contrast with the “General Baptists” who held to a “general” or “unlimited” view of the atonement points to the conclusion that “Particular Baptists” held the opposite view of the extent of the atonement.¹² Or, perhaps the moniker of “particular” simply refers to God’s sovereign and unconditional election of sinners unto salvation? The essential question is: what exactly were they “particular” about? If doctrinal distinctives remain an important part of denominational and social identity, then this is a significant question to answer.

■ The Modern Definition of Particular Baptists

The modern definition of what exactly constitutes the doctrinal identity of Particular Baptists ranges from broad to relatively specific. At the broad end of the range, there are those who identify the sect as “Calvinistic in doctrine.”¹³ A middling definition concludes that Particular Baptists were a subset of “strict Calvinists” who taught “the predestination of particular persons.”¹⁴ Others refer to them as holding to “limited atonement”—but without further clarification.¹⁵ At the specific end of the spectrum is the following definition: “The Particular Baptists were Calvinists noted for the belief that Christ died to save a particular elect people.”¹⁶ A much older definition

¹¹ For comments on ambiguity with respect to limited atonement in the London Baptist Confession of 1677/1689 see Allen, *Extent of the Atonement*, 512.

¹² Allen characterizes “‘General’ and ‘Particular’ Baptists [as] nomenclature chosen to illustrate their theological differences primarily over the extent of the atonement” (*Extent of the Atonement*, xiii). Similarly, see Robert W. Oliver, *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists 1771–1892: From John Gill to C. H. Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006) 166.

¹³ Richard B. Cook, *The Story of the Baptists in all Ages and Countries* (rev. and enl. ed.; Greenfield, MA: Willey & Co, 1887) 89; more recently Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012) 18.

¹⁴ Dewey D. Wallace Jr., *Shapers of English Calvinism, 1660–1714: Variety, Persistence, and Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 24; similarly, H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987) 774.

¹⁵ Ian Birch, *To Follow the Lamb Wheresoever He Goeth: The Ecclesial Polity of the English Calvinistic Baptists, 1640–1660* (Monographs in Baptist History 5; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017) 194.

¹⁶ Anthony L. Chute and Nathan A. Finn, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global*

of “Particular Baptists” from 1823 is interesting because it omits the atonement doctrine altogether and identifies the Calvinistic doctrines of “personal election, and of the final perseverance of the saints” as key elements of theological identity.¹⁷ The spectrum ranges from a broad reference to Calvinism to a very specific form of limited atonement. There are several pertinent observations to make from this range of definitions. First of all, these definitions identify the Particular Baptists as “Calvinistic,” but some go further and equate their doctrinal identity with a variety of limited atonement called “strict particularism” or “particular redemption.” Particular Baptists believed “the atonement was, *in some sense*, limited.”¹⁸ What is not always recognized is what the limitations to the atonement were and how they related to Particular Baptist identity.

Some early Particular Baptists did indeed hold to a form of limited atonement that is best described as “strict particularism.” Some of the more prominent leaders and pastors of the early Particular Baptists included Paul Hobson, John Spilsbury,¹⁹ Thomas Kilcop, Hanserd Knollys,²⁰ and Benjamin Coxe.²¹ It is not possible to be exhaustive here or to account for every reference to the atonement. If we relied only on these individuals’ tracts, sermons, and treatises, we might conclude that all early English Calvinistic Baptists were adhering to a very narrow view of Christ’s atonement that was exclusive in its intention, design, and application. But as the following section will demonstrate, this is not the case. The salient point in this section is that certain individuals amongst the earliest English Particular Baptists did indeed hold to a doctrine of atonement that might be described as “strict particularism”—Christ’s death only being intended for the elect and none else. But these individuals should stand alongside the voice of the confessions. This conclusion about these individuals does not logically require that the same conclusion applies to confessional documents.

In order to hear the voices of the confessing churches alongside these individuals, one cannot and should not read other sources into these confessions (eisegesis).

Movement (Nashville: B&H, 2015) 22.

¹⁷ Joseph Invimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (4 vols.; London: B. J. Holdsworth, 1823) 3:153.

¹⁸ Peter J. Mordern, “Nonconformists and the Work of Christ: A Study in Particular Baptist Thought,” in *T&T Clark Companion to Nonconformity* (ed. Robert Pope; London: T&T Clark, 2013) 185–212, at 195 [emphasis added].

¹⁹ John Spilsbury argues in *God’s Ordinance, the Saint’s Privilege*, that “Christ hath not presented to his Father’s justice a satisfaction for the sins of all men; but only for the sins of them that do or shall believe in him; which are his elect only,” as cited by Chute and Finn, *The Baptist Story*, 22.

²⁰ Hanserd Knollys is cited as a supporter of strict particularism, based on his comments in the dedication of Robert Garner’s volume on strict particularism in Robert Garner, *Mysteries Unveiled Concerning Redemption by Jesus Christ* (London: n.p., 1646), as referenced in Dennis C. Bustin, *Paradox and Perseverance: Hanserd Knollys, Particular Baptist Pioneer in Seventeenth-Century England* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought 23; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006) 255 n. 117; Knollys is also listed as supporting strict particularism by Allen (*Extent of the Atonement*, 766).

²¹ Barrington R. White, “The London Calvinistic Baptist Leadership 1644–1660,” *Baptist Quarterly* 32 (1987) 34–45, at 36–40.

There are occasions for synthesis and summarization of historical thought, but the danger lies in allowing one's presuppositions to shape diverse data into a monolithic view. For example, James M. Renihan focuses exclusively on continuity between the Baptist confessions of 1644, 1646, and 1677/1689, stating, "there is no substantial theological difference" between them.²² This paper suggests a different tack, considering both continuity and discontinuity by letting the confessions of 1644 and 1646 have their own voice vis-à-vis prominent individuals. In this framework, the confessions stand as documents reflecting the collective voice of the local churches who wrote them and supported them. They are not documents to be interpreted or re-interpreted in the light of prominent men who published other tracts and doctrines that may even appear to be somewhat contrary. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the earliest Particular Baptist confessions supported a variety of positions on the doctrine of the atonement, suggesting that their particularism focused on the concept of monergistic salvation rather than "strict particularism" in regard to the atonement.

This paper proceeds through three major sections. The first section examines the doctrine of the atonement in the London Baptist Confessions of 1644 and 1646. This analysis demonstrates that "strict particularism" is compatible with, but not necessitated by, the first two confessions. The second section focuses on the historical context for the key distinction between the objective nature of Christ's work on the cross and the subjective application of Christ's work, especially as it relates to the Westminster Confession of 1647. The third section offers a scenario that supports the theory that certain details about the atonement were left ambiguous for the sake of unity. The conclusion of this paper offers suggestions for re-assessing the theological identity of the early Particular Baptists.

■ The Early Particular Baptist Confessions

William McGlothlin quips in his survey of Baptist documents that the Confession of 1644 "is moderately Calvinistic."²³ He never explains what this phrase means, although one might surmise that he thinks the Confession avoids a strong view on limited atonement. And Glen H. Stassen states that the LBC of 1644 "is a careful, consistent, profound, and often beautiful statement."²⁴ It is significant that Stassen sees this confession as internally consistent—perhaps he means logically consistent in its doctrinal formulations. This section argues that the earliest English Particular Baptist confessions of 1644 and 1646 are compatible with a range of theologies of the atonement because they focus on the subjective application of Christ's work

²² James M. Renihan, "Confessing the Faith in 1644 and 1689," *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 3 (2006): 27–47, at 39.

²³ William J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911) 169. For Allen, the term "moderate Calvinism" refers to the rejection of "a strictly limited atonement" (which this article identifies as "strict particularism") (*Extent of the Atonement*, 16).

²⁴ Glen H. Stassen, "Anabaptist Influence in the Origin of the Particular Baptists," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36 (1962) 323–48, at 327.

rather than his objective accomplishment.²⁵ This argument demonstrates that the articles may be read as having ambiguous wording in key areas on the doctrine of the atonement. It is only speculative as to whether this ambiguity was intentional or not, as we cannot know authorial intention unless it is provided in the primary sources. The following section considers some historical reasons why this ambiguity may have served the interest of these earliest Baptists. This section considers three key articles from the 1644 and 1646 confessions: article 21 on redemption, article 28 on union with Christ, and article 24 on preaching.

The key to describing the various positions on the atonement within historical reformed and Calvinistic doctrine is to distinguish between the intent, extent, and application of the atonement.²⁶ It is not sufficient to state that the earliest Calvinistic Baptists held to “limited atonement.” One must ask: what *form* of limited atonement? In order to consider some of the theological options regarding the atonement at the time, it is helpful to consider the variety of opinions at the Westminster Assembly—those who wrote the Westminster Confession of Faith, published in 1647.

A taxonomy of four positions present at the Westminster Assembly comes from Gisbert Voetius (published in 1654) and helps to establish working definitions and terms that are commensurate with the theological streams of the English reformation.²⁷ There are two reasons for using this taxonomy. First, this taxonomy is chronologically useful because it offers a theological grid of options that were contemporaneous with those found in England. Second, this grid is sociologically helpful because many of the Baptist dissenters were formerly associated with the Church of England or the Presbyterians through their own views or family backgrounds. The very growth of the nonconformist movements drew from itinerant preaching and debates as well as the distributions of tracts, pamphlets, and confessions of faith.²⁸ We are even aware that individuals such as Edward Calamy, who was at the Westminster Assembly, was invited to dispute baptism with Benjamin Coxe, Hanserd Knollys, and William Kiffin (the event was preemptively canceled by the mayor of London). The following three Reformed views of the atonement were represented at the Westminster Assembly:²⁹

²⁵ For a similar suggestion see David H. Wenkel, “Only and Alone the Naked Soul: The Anti-Preparation Doctrine of the London Baptist Confessions of 1644/1646,” *Baptist Quarterly* 50 (2019) 1–11, at 4.

²⁶ Allen, *Extent of the Atonement*, 15.

²⁷ Gisbert Voetius, “Problematum de merito Christi, Pars Secunda,” in *Selectarum Disputationum Theologicarum, Pars Secunda* (Utrecht: Johannem à Waesberge, 1654) 251–53. This taxonomy of four positions is supported by Lee Gatiss, “A Deceptive Clarity? Particular Redemption in the Westminster Standards,” *Reformed Theological Review* 69 (2010) 180–96, at 180.

²⁸ Bill Pitts and Rady Roldán-Figuera, “Hanserd Knolly’s Life and Work,” in *The Collected Works of Hanserd Knollys* (ed. W. L. Pitts Jr. and R. Roldán-Figuera; Early English Baptist Texts; Mercer, GA: Mercer University Press, 2017) 7–44, at 21.

²⁹ Here I draw my definitions from Fesko, *Theology of the Westminster Standards*, 191.

- 1) hypothetical universalism: those who affirm the universal sufficiency of Christ's satisfaction and argue that it is applied in some sense to all but only effectively for the elect.
- 2) sufficient-efficient: those who admit the universal sufficiency of Christ's satisfaction but deny its application to all.
- 3) strict particularism: those who hold that Christ died solely for the elect.

A fourth view, held by the Arminian Remonstrants, stated that the cross was a universal satisfaction for every person, believer and unbeliever alike. These are the definitions used to analyze the theology of the atonement in the London Baptist Confessions of 1644 and 1646.

■ Article 21: On Redemption

The article on redemption (21) is essential to the argument set forth in this paper, that the two earliest confessions of the English Particular Baptists supported a variety of positions on the doctrine of the atonement. The following line from the 1644 edition is sometimes cited as self-evident proof of "strict particularism": "That Christ Jesus by His death did bring forth salvation and reconciliation only for the elect."³⁰ But there are two important observations to make that should be sufficient to challenge the status quo in Baptist history books.

First, the statement from article 21 in the 1644 edition does not demand strict particularism. The reason for this is that the language combines the objective side (Christ's death) with the subjective side (the "bringing forth" of salvation). This raises the question: does the "only" language refer to Christ's death, the application of it, or both? It is patently obvious that this language in the 1644 edition can support "strict particularism," but it may also be construed to support other theories of atonement that only limit the subjective application of Christ's death to the elect.

Second, the language of article 21 in the 1646 edition reflects a move away from strict particularism. The language of particularism, specifically the word "only," shifts in the 1646 edition away from Christ's death and toward the application of its benefits. Article 21 in the 1646 reads: "Jesus Christ by his death did purchase salvation for the Elect that God gave unto him." The key point is that those espousing hypothetical universalism and a sufficient-efficient model could agree with this language. This is because the limitation is not placed on who Christ died for but on who receives the benefits of his death. The wording about the objective intention of Christ's death is nebulous so that it is compatible with all three Reformed views listed above. The "only" language is now clearly removed from the reference to Christ's death and aligned with the application of the atonement: "These *only* have interest in him, and fellowship with him."

³⁰ As cited by Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller: Model Pastor-Theologian* (Studies in Baptist Life & Thought; Nashville: B&H, 2010) 74.

■ Article 28: On Union with Christ

The keyword in the seventeenth century for the doctrine of atonement was “satisfaction.”³¹ This word “satisfaction” only occurs once in both confessions, in article 28 on union with Christ. The portion that is relevant for this study reads, “That those which have union with Christ, are justified from all their sins . . . through the *satisfaction* that Christ has made by His death; and this applied in the manifestation of it through faith” (1646 edition, identical in the 1644 edition). The language here distinguishes between Christ’s “satisfaction” and what is “applied” through faith. This point is important for the argument of this paper because this language reflects an awareness of the distinction between the objective or accomplished work of Christ on the cross and the subjective application of this work in the lives of those who believe. Article 28 clearly identifies faith as the instrument through which believers appropriate the benefits of the cross. This distinction between the accomplishment of Christ’s cross and the application of Christ’s cross lies close to the center of hypothetical universalism and a sufficient-efficient view of the atonement. The language and logic of article 28 in the 1644 and 1646 confessions demonstrates an awareness of this important distinction that I have argued is at work in article 21.

■ Article 24: On Preaching

What this paper suggests is that there may have been a range of views on the extent of the atonement in the London churches that signed and supported the confessions of 1644 and 1646. But there is no question that these confessions reflect the heart of Calvinism: monergism (the concept that God alone saves sinners).³² Monergism is the principle of Calvinism that differentiates it from Arminianism and its principle of syncretism between human action and divine agency in salvation. Monergism has to do with the lack of inherent human ability to respond to God’s grace through the gospel. The theology of monergism requires a change (often called “regeneration”) to take place before the human will is enabled to respond to God’s salvation.³³ This concept of monergism is clearly articulated in article 24 on preaching: “Faith is ordinarily begotten by the preaching of the gospel, or word of Christ; without respect to any power or agency in the creature; but it being wholly passive, and dead in trespasses and sins, doth believe, and is converted by no less power than that which raised Christ from the dead” (1646, identical in the 1644 edition). The important wording here is that sinners are “wholly passive” and “dead” before exercising

³¹ Fesko, *Theology of the Westminster Standards*, 189.

³² Oliver D. Crisp comments, “most Reformed theologians (though perhaps not all) assert a doctrine of monergism” (“Faith and Experience,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* [ed. Gerald R. McDermott; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010] 68–80, at 70).

³³ Samuel Richardson, who co-signed the London Baptist Confession of 1644, argues that justification precedes faith and cannot rest upon human agency in *Justification by Christ Alone* (London: n.p., 1647).

saving faith. This concept of God's sovereignty in salvation has a trajectory going back to Augustine.³⁴ Preaching and faith are instrumental causes in salvation but do not detract from the monergistic act of regeneration and rebirth that gives way to saving faith. Both the 1644 and 1646 confessions rigorously integrate the sovereignty of God in salvation throughout all of the articles.

■ Article 5: Appendix to the 1646 Confession

The 1646 edition of the confession contains an appendix written by Benjamin Coxe. On the one hand, this is written by an individual and presents a different "voice" than the confession itself. On the other hand, it is attached to the confession itself in some manner. Article 5 in this appendix addresses the topic of Christ in relation to "sheep" versus "vessels of wrath." The critical text for consideration is the opening line: "We affirm, that as Jesus Christ never intended to give remission of sins and eternal life unto any but His sheep; so these sheep only have their sins washed away in the blood of Christ." The language cites and evokes the imagery of John 10:15 ("I [Christ] lay down my life for the sheep"). Although it is interesting that the article does *not* say: "Jesus Christ never intended to die for any but His sheep." This certainly appears to be "strict particularism" because it ties Christ's (and the Father's) intention in redemption to the elect.

There is one key question: is the "remission of sins and eternal life" something that is part of Christ's objective work or the application of his work? The article could be interpreted to say this: "We affirm, that as Jesus Christ never intended to apply the benefits of his redemption to any but His sheep; so these sheep only have their sins forgiven." This reading would be compatible with the range of Reformed views noted above. The next line includes the following rationale: "The vessels of wrath, as they are none of Christ's sheep, nor ever believe in Him: so they have not the blood of Christ sprinkled upon them." It is also noteworthy that damnation is attributed to both reprobation and lack of faith, mixing divine and human elements. Even if this article presents a view of "strict particularism," it is not identical to the language found in the confession of 1646. This supports the notion that while there were voices such as Coxe's in the writing of the confession, there were also more moderate voices who ensured a more inclusive posture in the confession itself. While many would like to use this appendix as a hermeneutical key to the confession, this paper suggests that such an approach may overlook nuances that the writers intended to preserve. The appendix and the works of the prominent pastors remain important. However, it is equally important to listen to the confessions on their own terms as communal documents reflecting theological unity among the early Particular Baptists.

³⁴ Mark E. Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Mercer, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000) 122.

■ Christ's Death: Accomplished and Applied

The last section argued that the nuances of several articles in the London Baptist Confession, especially in 1646, reflect ambiguous language regarding the extent of the atonement. The doctrine of "strict particularism" is compatible with, but not necessitated by, the first two London Baptist confessions. This posture of flexibility is achieved through language that focuses on the subjective application of Christ's work, while avoiding theories about the scope of what Christ's work objectively achieved. This raises the historical question: would the writers of the first two London Baptist confessions have known about this approach? Was this a distinction that was circulating in England in the mid-seventeenth century? The answers to these questions are evident by considering the approach to the atonement issue in the Westminster Confession of Faith 1647 (hereafter WCF), one of the most significant documents of the seventeenth century.

During the seventeenth century, the controversy over the extent of the atonement was widespread and led to publications such as John Owen's doctrine of strict particularism in his *Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647) and the hypothetical universalism of John Davenant's *A Dissertation on the Death of Christ* (1650).³⁵ Delegates to the Westminster Assembly such as Edmund Calamy, James Ussher, William Twisse, and John Davenant argued for a form of hypothetical universalism that was understood to be compatible with the theology of atonement as articulated by the Canons of Dort as well as the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles.³⁶ This hypothetical universalism may or may not have been a form of Amyraldianism but it often involved a distinction between the objective work of Christ and the subjective application of it.³⁷ What the Westminster divines did was avoid directly answering the question: What did God intend to be the object of satisfaction, the sins of every human being or the sins of the elect alone?³⁸ This is evident by considering two articles from the Westminster Confession that focus on the doctrine of the atonement.

The first article under consideration focuses on the objective work of Christ. This article cited below from the Westminster Confession most clearly teaches the

³⁵ For a recent study of the debate over the extent of the atonement see Lee Gatiss, "Shades of Opinion within a Generic Calvinism": The Particular Redemption Debate at the Westminster Assembly," *Reformed Theological Review* 69 (2010) 101–18.

³⁶ Fesko, *Theology of the Westminster Standards*, 192–97. For comments on the inclusive posture of the Westminster Confession on the issue of atonement because of the Canons of Dort, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (4 vols.; 2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2003) 1:76–77.

³⁷ There are certainly points of *theological* similarity between Amyraldianism and English hypothetical universalism. See David H. Wenkel, "Amyraldianism: Theological Criteria for Identification and Comparative Analysis," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 11 (2005) 83–96. The classic treatise on the topic is Moïse Amyraut, *Brief Traite de la Predestination et de ses Principales Dependances* (Saumur: Jean Lesiner & Isaac Debordes, 1634; 2nd ed., rev. and corr.; Saumur: Isaac Debordes, 1658).

³⁸ Allen, *Extent of the Atonement*, xxv.

doctrine of particular or definite atonement, which is incorrectly supposed by many exclusively to support strict particularism.³⁹

The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, which he through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him. (WCF 8.5)

In actuality, this language in WCF 8.5 is compatible with, but does not require, strict particularism. What is significant is that this article does not identify the scope of “those whom the Father hath given unto him.” One could state that this is the “elect only” and thus agree with strict particularism or the “entire world” and thus agree with hypothetical universalism or the sufficient-efficient approach. The salient point is that this article does not exclusively identify the elect only as the object of God’s satisfaction but leaves the option open for hypothetical universalism.

The second article to consider focuses on the application of Christ’s work. This article contains some of the most particular language on the topic of the atonement.

As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ; are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only. (WCF 3.6)

This article, especially the last sentence, was one of the most debated at the Westminster Assembly.⁴⁰ This article is referring to the “means” of salvation, which is the work of the Holy Spirit working in the redeemed. Thus, it seems best to interpret the last sentence as referring to the work of the Holy Spirit applying the work of Christ’s atonement. Lee Gatiss comments that the hypothetical universalists would have viewed the words “redeemed by Christ” as “part of the application of redemption, not the [objective] achievement of the atonement.”⁴¹ The exclusive language “but the elect only” is descriptive and does not change the possibility that Christ’s death may be offered to anyone. The emphasis of WCF 3.6 is on the exclusive application of Christ’s work to the elect alone and it does not rule out a nuanced position of hypothetical universalism.

At the Westminster Assembly, one third of the speeches on this topic supported hypothetical universalism, although they failed to gain the approval of the Assembly. This third of the Assembly denied adhering to Arminianism but rejected a narrow

³⁹ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: For Study Classes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004) 103.

⁴⁰ Chad Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster Assembly 1643–1652, Volumes 1–7,” (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 2004) 6:202–11.

⁴¹ Gatiss, “A Deceptive Clarity?,” 184.

view of strict particularism. Yet there was still a posture of inclusiveness. The intention to support such an inclusive posture is recorded by Richard Baxter, who stated of chapter 8 of the Westminster Confession: “I have spoken with an eminent Divine, yet living, that was of the Assembly, who assured mee that they purposely avoided determining that Controversie, and som of them profest themselves for the middle way of Universal Redemption.”⁴² Robert Letham concludes, “The Assembly was not a partisan body within the boundaries of its generic Calvinism, but allowed differing views to coexist.”⁴³ Lee Gatiss also agrees, stating, “The minutes do, however, alert us to the possibility at least that the learned and eloquent hypothetical universalists may have been able to exert an influence on the finally adopted text [of the Westminster Confession] in such a way that they could interpret it in a manner not incompatible with their own position.”⁴⁴

The Westminster Confession was written to delineate between the objective work of Christ’s atonement and the subjective application of it. The articles were crafted with selective ambiguity on matters that would have caused great division. In doing so, the Westminster Confession offered a document that was agreeable to the contingent of the assembly that held to some form of hypothetical universalism, perhaps up to one third.⁴⁵ This data aligns with the commentary of Richard Baxter, who is also widely quoted as saying that half of the divines in England held to a form of hypothetical universalism.⁴⁶ The use of the distinction between Christ’s work accomplished and applied was the conceptual framework for creating unity through the massively influential Westminster Confession. The Baptists saw the Presbyterian confessions as an important social and ecclesiological tool for establishing unity and they wanted their unique perspective established as well. The next section continues the broader argument by suggesting that the earliest Reformed Baptists were imitating this approach of unity through selective ambiguity in their own quest for unity and survival.

■ Unity Through Selective Ambiguity

The previous section concluded that the articles of the London Baptist Confessions of 1644 and 1646 are ambiguous in their language regarding the doctrine of the atonement. As noted earlier, it is not possible to reconstruct authorial intention beyond what the text says. It is not possible to prove the psychological rationale of any author without evidence. However, the thesis about the ambiguity regarding the doctrine of the atonement in the first two London Baptist Confessions gains

⁴² Richard Baxter, *Certain Disputations of Right, Certain Disputations of Right to Sacraments, and the True Nature of Visible Christianity* (London: R.W., 1658) preface, n.p.; also see the discussion by Allen, *Extent of the Atonement*, 250.

⁴³ Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009) 182.

⁴⁴ Gatiss, “A Deceptive Clarity?,” 182.

⁴⁵ Allen, *Extent of the Atonement*, 248.

⁴⁶ Baxter, *Certain Disputations of Right*, preface, n.p.

plausibility if it can be placed within an overarching historical narrative. The hypothesis in this section is simple: the ambiguity regarding the doctrine of the atonement encouraged unity at a time when the very survival of this fledgling nonconformist movement was questionable. This theory is supported by the following six points.

First, the doctrinal ambiguity surrounding the atonement reflects selective emphasis. The doctrine of atonement in these two confessions, especially the 1646 edition, evidences a careful delineation between the *accomplished* work of Christ and the *application* of the work of Christ.⁴⁷ This focus on the application of the atonement toward the elect opens these confessions to the nuances of the doctrine of atonement as found within Reformed thought and doctrine.⁴⁸ There are no extant explanations that articulate why the first two confessions are written as they are on this topic. But there is explanatory power in the theory that they were written to allow for unity among various Calvinistic doctrines of the atonement. The label of “Particular Baptist” suggests a specific view of limited atonement, otherwise known as “definite atonement,” “strict particularism,” or “particular redemption” in Reformed theology.⁴⁹ But the first two early English Particular Baptist confessions do not require adherence to the doctrine of “strict particularism” or “particular redemption” as commonly articulated in Reformed theology. There is an attempt to identify Christ’s objective work on the cross as achieving some benefit only on behalf of God’s elect in article 21. But these articles do not specify God’s intention to have Christ die on the cross only for the sake of the elect. What is unclear in the 1644 edition is even more postured toward various views of atonement in the 1646 edition. The “only” language is used to describe the benefits of Christ’s atonement as it is applied to the elect by faith. Again, the stress and theological details of the articles focus on the application of the benefits secured by the atonement.

Second, the first two London Baptist Confessions arose out of a defensive posture because their very survival was at stake. The very first congregations were formed by the peaceable withdrawal from paedobaptist churches, making the baptism of believers alone an essential doctrine and praxis for their identity. The posture of the first two confessions of faith was defensive in that they sought to undermine any charges that this sect was fanatically and violently “Anabaptist.”⁵⁰ They also had to defend themselves against charges of being Arminian, Antinomian, and

⁴⁷ Allen offers helpful comments on the concept of redemption accomplished and applied, and asserts, “This is a distinction that Scripture itself makes” (*Extent of the Atonement*, 712).

⁴⁸ G. Michael Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus* (Paternoster Theological Monographs; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 1997).

⁴⁹ Fesko comments, “Few people are likely aware of the doctrinal diversity that marks the so-called doctrine of ‘limited atonement’” (*Theology of the Westminster Standards*, 204).

⁵⁰ The name “Anabaptist” was “a byword for fanaticism and violent anarchy well into the seventeenth century” (Chute and Finn, *The Baptist Story*, 13). See the anonymous pamphlet published in Germany in 1642 entitled: “A Warning for England, especially for London; in the famous History of the frantick Anabaptists, their wild Preachings and Practices in Germany.”

Socinian.⁵¹ It is important to recall that the titles of both confessions reflect an apologetic tone. The title of the first confession includes the phrase “which are Commonly (though falsly) called Anabaptists” (1644) and the second edition includes the slightly different phrase “Which are Commonly (but unjustly) Called Anabaptists” (1646). The enduring nature of these defensive titles demonstrates that they were continually fighting for recognition as a legitimate Christian sect. By offering a communal confession, the Particular Baptists were offering a socially legitimate and safe separatism.⁵² The very titles of these confessions are evidence that this fight for survival took place over several years. This historical context supports the idea that this sect was not able to sustain internal fighting and division. The confessions came out of a place of weakness, not strength—either in numbers or political influence.

Third, the debate over the extent of the atonement was widespread amongst English Protestants, including Baptists, Presbyterians, and Independents. For the Baptists, no theological issue was “more significant than the debate over divine and human roles in salvation.”⁵³ Even the Presbyterians had to carefully wordsmith the Westminster Confession in order to maintain unity. The key point here is that many of the Presbyterians saw themselves as standing within the broader Reformed tradition and still did not articulate a doctrine of atonement that equated to strict particularism. The very doctrine of “strict particularism” that many assume was held by the “Particular Baptists”—either from their name or from statements made by early Calvinistic Baptists—is simply not demanded by their first two confessions, although it is compatible with it. This is all the more important because the Westminster Assembly—with all of its debates about the atonement—provided a “micro-context” for the Baptists’ and their first confession in 1644.⁵⁴

Fourth, the move toward ambiguity in the 1644 and 1646 London Baptist confessions is possibly an imitation of the Presbyterians, a step that was more fully developed in 1677/1689. The first two Baptist confessions likely drew from documents such as the True Confession of 1596. This reference to an established confession provided the Baptists with a measure of historical continuity and the ability to defend themselves from the charge of being heretics who were inventing new doctrines. There may have even been private conferences between the Baptists and some of the divines at the Westminster Assembly.⁵⁵ Furthermore, in 1677 the

⁵¹ For a discussion on these charges see Howson, *Erroneous and Schismatical Opinions*, 38–9.

⁵² Stephen Wright argues that the confession of 1644 was the origin of the Particular Baptists functioning as a “denomination” or “proto-denomination” in *The Early English Baptists, 1603–1649* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2006) 110.

⁵³ Pitts and Roldán-Figuera, “Hanserd Knolly’s Life and Work,” 32.

⁵⁴ Matthew C. Bingham comments, “the timing and intent of the Baptists’ decision to publish their 1644 confession only becomes explicable when set in the micro-context furnished by debates taking place within the Westminster Assembly itself” (“English Baptists and the Struggle for Theological Authority, 1642–1646,” *JEH* 68 [2017] 546–69, at 562).

⁵⁵ Bingham suggests that the ministers from the Westminster Assembly who may have been in contact with the Baptists may have been Philip Nye, Thomas Goodwin, and Jeremiah Burroughes

Baptists eventually adopted yet a third confession that was almost identical to the Presbyterian's Westminster Confession of Faith, the largest exception having to do with baptism. This does not prove but only suggests that the 1644 and 1646 confessions were also written with a disposition toward imitating the Presbyterians because of their political status and recognition. Matthew Bingham even suggests that the impetus for writing the 1644 confession was the leaks from the Westminster Assembly about upcoming reports about dissenters.⁵⁶ When survival was dependent upon demonstrating theological continuity with established Christian orthodoxy, the act of imitation became an important method. The Presbyterians successfully navigated the perils of schism in the Westminster Assembly and it is plausible that the Baptists sought to do this as well.

Fifth, the earliest Particular Baptist confessions of 1644 and 1646 reveal careful language reflective of the wider varieties of Calvinistic doctrine in the seventeenth century. Contemporary historical theologians have to continually remind today's readers that Reformed theology was never about the theology of one person, even if it bears the name of the infamous Frenchman John Calvin.⁵⁷ The strands of Reformed thinking about the atonement having universal implications go back to Moïse Amyraut, John Cameron, and arguably John Calvin himself.⁵⁸ Even the Synod of Dort was influenced by John Davenant and, through him, James Ussher, both of whom understood hypothetical universalism to be a truly catholic doctrine of atonement.⁵⁹ The point is that the tensions of particular and universal language with respect to the atonement have a long-standing history in the varieties and trajectories of Reformed thought.

Sixth, the greatest weakness of this hypothesis of ambiguity for the sake of unity is that we do not possess the minutes of the assemblies that led to these first two London Baptist Confessions, as we do for the Westminster Confession of 1647.⁶⁰ There is no extant information about who exactly edited the first two London Baptist Confessions. It may have been a joint effort between John Spilsbury, William Kiffin, and Samuel Richardson.⁶¹ An additional complication is that Hanserd

(“English Baptists,” 565).

⁵⁶ Bingham, “English Baptists,” 567.

⁵⁷ For example, see the comments by Oliver D. Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism: Broadening Reformed Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014) 2.

⁵⁸ John Calvin's position is notoriously difficult, and one scholar has recently stated that in the debate over particular vs. universal language, “neither side has been able to claim an outright victory in this debate” (Richard Snoddy, *The Soteriology of James Ussher: The Act and Object of Saving Faith* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014] 41). An introduction to Calvin's view of atonement and its “unlimited” aspects may be found in Alan C. Clifford, *Calvinus: Authentic Calvinism, A Clarification* (Norwich: Charenton Reformed Publishing, 1996).

⁵⁹ Snoddy, *Soteriology of James Ussher*, 90.

⁶⁰ *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assemblies, 1643–1653* (ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn; 5 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶¹ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (rev. ed.; Valley Forge: Judson, 1969) 145–46; similarly, Renihan, “Confessing the Faith,” 32.

Knollys signed the 1646 revision but not the 1644 edition.⁶² There are two factors to consider further. First, there were multiple churches or pastors of churches in London that signed these early Baptist confessions. If those churches were largely congregational in polity, they most likely had some support of the laity. Second, when this confession was analyzed by the contemporary opponents of the Baptists, there was never a reference to an individual (or individuals) who was the rumored author behind it.⁶³ In other words, those who opposed the Baptists did not seem to attack any one individual in their critiques of the Baptists. The anonymity of these two early Baptist confessions and the stress laid upon their approval by the local churches in London that signed them both emphasize the democratization of theological authority in the upheavals of seventeenth-century England.⁶⁴

In summary, the inclusive posture of the first two confessions likely supported theological unity at a time when this Baptist sect could ill afford to divide over such details. It is especially important to observe that the flexible stance on the topic of the atonement in the confession of 1644 was expanded in the later edition of 1646. In addition, this reading of the first two Particular Baptist confessions finds parity in the flexible tenor of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Canons of Dort on the same matter of the atonement. By focusing on the subjective application of Christ's work, the two confessions from 1644 and 1646 are remarkably flexible with an especially clear emphasis on monergistic salvation. They can be confessed by those who adhere to any of the three Reformed views on the atonement represented at the Westminster Assembly: (1) hypothetical universalism, (2) sufficient-efficient, and (3) strict particularism.

■ Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the doctrine of atonement as set forth in the London Baptist Confessions of 1644 and 1646 does not demand "strict particularism," even if there were Baptist pastors who did hold to it. In other words, this paper sets the Particular Baptists against the Particular Baptists by demonstrating a subtle distinction between the earliest Baptist confessions and the views of certain Baptist leaders. But this is simply a cheeky way of observing that the confessions were likely designed to be inclusive of a range of views on the atonement that were like those represented at the Westminster Assembly.

If the argument set forth in this paper is correct, it has the potential to reframe some caricatures of early Reformed Baptists. The primary sources of the confessions and various individuals reflect theologies that are reconcilable yet different. If

⁶² Bingham, "English Baptists," 565.

⁶³ For two seventeenth-century critiques of the Baptists, see Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena: or A Catalogue and Discovery of many of the Errors, Heresies, Blasphemies and pernicious Practices of the Sectaries of this time, vented and acted in England in these last four years* (London: Ralph Smith, 1646) and Daniel Featley, *The Dippers Dip't: or, The Anabaptists Duck'd and Plung'd over Head and Eares, at a Disputation in Southwark* (6th ed.; London: Richard Cotes, 1651).

⁶⁴ Bingham, "English Baptists," 547.

historians neglect this tension they will portray the early English Calvinistic Baptists as either too narrow or too broad in their views on the atonement. What this paper has labored to establish is that the seven churches in London who wrote and supported the first two confessions in 1644 and 1646 took care not to let the views of various individuals shape the doctrine of atonement in an overly narrow or schismatic way. This was most likely a specific example of how the Baptists sought to imitate the Westminster Assembly. Both confessions of 1644 and 1646 establish a doctrine of the atonement that allows for a range of nuances regarding the efficiency of Christ's atoning work by focusing on its application, rather than narrowly defining what it objectively accomplished. The confessions established a common ground of unity even where individual pastors and leaders took a more dogmatic stance on how the atonement was worked out.

The problem with the terminology of "Particular Baptist" is that the word "Particular" is strongly associated with the Reformed doctrine of particular redemption or strict particularism. Perhaps a better term for identifying this sect of Baptists that draws from *both* confessions and the literature from individuals would be "monergistic." The confessions of 1644 and especially 1646 suggest that these Baptists saw themselves as "particular" about the application of Christ's atonement to the elect—an idea close to the monergistic concept that God alone saves, without any consideration of act, thought, or merit in the individual. They did not likely identify themselves in their confessions with the concept of strict particularism.

One of the most significant findings of this paper is that the first two Particular Baptist confessions were much more flexible on the matter of the doctrine of the atonement than is found in some of the writings from individuals, such as John Spilsbury. This is all the more evident when the flexibility on the atonement was maintained and even expanded from the 1644 edition to the 1646 edition of the London Baptist Confession. Historians must be careful to consider both individuals and confessions as distinct sources and take care to let each have their own voice. Those from certain ecclesiastical traditions may want to interpret one in light of the other so as to make them more monolithic than they really are. According to this paper, there are some areas of discontinuity between certain individuals and the first two confessions. Whereas certain pastors urged doctrinal specificity, the collective churches in London crafted their confessions to allow for a range of views on the atonement, perhaps to urge unity. Given the need to consider this nuance, it is better to identify these early English Baptists as monergistic Baptists, holding to a range of Calvinistic doctrines but unified in the doctrine that God sovereignly saves.