

## ***Transcriber's Preface to A Dialogue between the Baptist and the Presbyterian: An Early Baptist Responds to Calvinism***

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In his 1678 publication *Christianismus Primitivus*, Thomas Grantham writes: "It is enough for me, that I can faithfully approve my Heart to God in this Work, as aiming sincerely at his Glory in it, and the chief good of all Men by it."<sup>1</sup> This quote establishes a vivid and accurate tone for the life and ministry of Thomas Grantham. Grantham played a notable role in the development of the late seventeenth century General Baptists. In fact, Grantham is said to be the best representative of early Baptist theology of the Arminian persuasion.<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that making available Grantham's work, *A Dialogue Between the Baptist and the Presbyterian*, is of such importance. Baptists have a rich eventful history. It can only be an aid to the student of history to be acquainted with works such as the following.

This introduction will provide the reader with a brief biographical sketch of Thomas Grantham and a short analysis of Grantham's *A Dialogue Between the Baptist and the Presbyterian*. Perhaps we may instill a deeper sense of appreciation for the life, ministry, and writing of a relatively neglected Baptist pioneer.

### **Biographical Sketch of Thomas Grantham**

Thomas Grantham was born in 1634 in Lincolnshire, England. Grantham, in his younger years, made a living as his father had, as a tailor and a farmer. It was in his fourteenth or fifteenth year that Grantham

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus: or, the Ancient Religion, in its Nature, Certainty, Excellency, and Beauty* (London, 1678), iv.

<sup>2</sup>J. Matthew Pinson, "The Diversity of Arminian Soteriology: Thomas Grantham, John Goodwin, and Jacob Arminius" (Paper delivered to the Evangelical Theological Society, Southeastern Regional Meeting, Charlotte, NC, 10–11 March 1995), 1.

underwent his spiritual conversion. By the time he was nineteen he had joined a church, which was founded upon the biblical mandate of believers' baptism by immersion. Grantham opened his home to the small church for worship while the church spent several years securing pastors for their services. By 1656, Grantham had shown his preaching talents and was asked to become the pastor himself.<sup>3</sup>

Grantham began his life as a minister with some personal reservation as he stated that he would "rather have been sent to any drudgery in the world, than to preach."<sup>4</sup> However, Grantham was willing to answer the call of God, regardless of the personal cost. The cost for Grantham and his General Baptist brothers and sisters was very real. 1656 through 1660 was a time of persecution for the General Baptists. It was in 1660, though, that Grantham and Joseph Wright had the opportunity to be heard by King Charles II. They were able to plead their case and present the King with the General Baptist's *A Brief Confession of Faith*. They received a promise of protection, but that promise was short lived indeed. Eventually, Grantham would spend fifteen months in jail during 1662 and 1663.<sup>5</sup> Grantham believed that undergoing persecution is a sign of the true church. In contrast, however, to persecute others is not to exhibit the attributes of the true church of God.<sup>6</sup> This was certainly an indictment of the official church in Grantham's day.

Grantham, in 1666, would be elected to the controversial office of "messenger." The General Baptists, in this way, essentially established a position where the minister would engage in itinerate preaching. A messenger (like Grantham) would travel in order to preach the gospel where it was needed. The messenger would also ordain elders in obscure areas that lacked leadership.<sup>7</sup> It was after this milestone in Grantham's ministry that he began to seriously engage in writing and debating in order to educate and defend General Baptists and their views.

January 17, 1692 would mark the death of Thomas Grantham. It speaks highly of Grantham when one considers the way in which his memory was treated by John Connould. Connould was vicar at St. Stephen's Church in Norwich. Grantham and Connould carried on a cor-

<sup>3</sup>Samuel Edward Hester, "Advancing Christianity to Its Primitive Excellency: The Quest of Thomas Grantham, Early English General Baptist (1634-1692)" (PhD diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, LA, 1972), 9-13.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 14-17.

<sup>6</sup>R. Andrew Rankin, "The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit in Thomas Grantham" (Collected Papers from the Baptist Theologians Seminar, ed. James Leo Garrett, Jr., Roberts Library, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX, 1991).

<sup>7</sup>H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 78-79; Hester, "Advancing Christianity to Its Primitive Excellency," 19-20.

respondence in which, among other things, the topic of infant baptism was debated. Countering the trend of the day, these proponents of two different ecclesiologies developed a deep mutual respect. Consequently, in order to avoid threats that Grantham's body would be dug up, Connould had Grantham's body interred in the middle aisle of St. Stephen's church.<sup>8</sup> Such a gesture surely speaks volumes with respect to Grantham's life and ministry.

### ***Analysis of A Dialogue Between the Baptist and the Presbyterian***

Grantham's *Dialogue Between the Baptist and the Presbyterian* (hereinafter *Dialogue*) is essentially a rebuttal of what he views to be the negative aspects of Calvinistic theology. It is a subtle collection of various writings. First, it begins with a preface, which generally sets itself against the notion that God is the author of sin: "So that according to this Doctrine, all the Sins, both of Devils and Men, from the beginning to the end of the World, was by force of God's Decree." The second section is comprised of a compilation of correspondence. The correspondence begins with a letter Grantham wrote to a Dr. Collings. Grantham, in keeping with the book's theme, attacks Collings' Calvinistic moorings. Collings' response is included along with a poem of rebuttal sent by a colleague of Collings.

The main body of Grantham's book presents a fictional dialogue between a Baptist and a Presbyterian, providing the inspiration for the title. Grantham draws from numerous Reformed authorities in order to construct the Presbyterian portion of the dialogue. This section concerns itself with several aspects of Calvinistic soteriology, such as reprobation, sin, divine sovereignty, and the atonement. It seems, however, that Grantham is most concerned (as his preface foreshadows) with God being understood to be the author of sin, and the feared implications of the doctrine of limited atonement. Grantham concludes his book with a postscript, which includes a poem intended for John Calvin and his role in the execution of Michael Servetus.

Grantham, as one might assume from a General Baptist, approached the writing of *Dialogue* from what can be called an Arminian perspective. Grantham would have disagreed with his Calvinist contemporaries with regard to their views on unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. It should be noted, however, that in contrast with some of his Arminian counterparts, Grantham is said to have been much more in unity with Jacob Arminius's Reformed understanding of sin and the lack of human ability. This avoidance of a

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 29–32.

Semi-Pelagianism, perhaps, helps Grantham to avoid the charge of believing salvation to be aided by human merit.<sup>9</sup>

Grantham is interacting in his book with some of the more severe aspects of Calvinistic doctrine. In order to highlight some of these aspects, several main arguments that summarize the content of Grantham's dialogue section will be discussed. First, as previously mentioned, Grantham reveals his conviction that the Presbyterian's doctrine unavoidably implies that God is the author of sin. Second, Grantham is suspicious of his opponent's distinction between God's revealed will (what man ought to do) and God's acceptable will (what is decreed by God to come to pass). God appears, according to Grantham, to lack sincerity, if viewed in this manner. Third, Grantham moves on to argue against the doctrine of reprobation, and to ask why the gospel would need to be preached to anyone who is already damned. Fourth, Grantham condemns the notion that infants without faith are condemned to perish. He rejects the extra-biblical doctrine that posits some sort of "seminal faith" within the "elect infants."

Fifth, the Presbyterian's strong view of God's sovereignty is equated with the teachings of Mohammed. Grantham quotes a passage where Islamic teachings on God are shown to be fatalistic. The implication, of course, is that Calvinism falls under the same indictment. Sixth, Grantham attacks as arrogant the Calvinistic doctrine that one cannot fall away from grace. Seventh, there is a call for the Presbyterian to reject any contradiction found within his own system. For example, Grantham cites a particular article found within a Reformed confession, which seemingly uses universal language with regard to the atonement. He implores his opponent to embrace his own confession. Seventh, the idea that Esau was an example of reprobation in Scripture is rejected. Instead, Grantham argues that the condemnation of Esau represents a corporate condemnation as a result of willful sin. Finally, the charge of historic novelty is issued with regard to Calvinism. Grantham simply does not observe these doctrines in history until the fifth century.

In his postscript, Grantham positively affirms his position on many of these soteriological issues. For example, election is defined as God choosing those who die in infancy, and God choosing those who accept the gospel. Also, reprobation is understood as God condemning those who reject the gospel. Consequently, election and reprobation exist in time and space. None is elect or reprobate until they embrace or reject the gospel.

It is unfortunate that Grantham did not have the opportunity to interact with later more balanced voices, soteriologically speaking, in the Calvinistic community, such as Andrew Fuller and Jonathan Edwards.

<sup>9</sup>Pinson, "The Diversity of Arminian Soteriology," 3-4.

Edwards might have allayed some of Grantham's concerns with respect to Calvinists making God the author of sin. Observe Edwards in the following quote:

He hath mercy on some, and hardeneth others. When God is here spoken of as hardening some of the children of men, it is not to be understood that God by any positive efficiency hardens any man's heart. There is no positive act in God, as though he put forth any power to harden the heart. To suppose any such thing would be to make God the immediate author of sin.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, Edwards sought to protect God from any charge of creating fresh sin in the hearts of humanity, but within the confines of a Calvinistic soteriology. Grantham would no doubt have still found this to be distasteful. However, perhaps Edward's diligent attempt to affirm both God's sovereignty and humanity's moral responsibility would have been more appreciated by Grantham, in contrast to the more severe voices with whom Grantham contended in *Dialogue*.

One point that ought to be noted is Grantham's rehearsal of the execution of Michael Servetus with the approval of John Calvin. Grantham speaks of Servetus' death in the context of his own indignant reception from the Calvinists in Norwich. Grantham states:

Calvin burnt Servetus, (a learned and pious Baptist) for differing in opinion in Matters of Religion. Servetus is justified since his Death, and Calvin condemned for false Accuser and Fratricide, by Grotius and other Learned Men.

While modern Christianity should rightly be appalled at the execution of an individual for religious reasons, we must still recognize that Servetus was in fact a true heretic.<sup>11</sup> Servetus was condemned because he was both anti-Trinitarian and an anti-Paedobaptist.<sup>12</sup> A denial of the Trinity, for Calvin as well as for the rest of orthodox Christianity, is, of course, a theological catastrophe.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, theological truth is never defended

<sup>10</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *God's Sovereignty in the Salvation of Man*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (1835; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 849.

<sup>11</sup>For the purpose of this discussion, heresy is defined as the denial of a foundational or defining element with respect to the Christian religion.

<sup>12</sup>Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Servetus 1511–1553* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), 208.

<sup>13</sup>Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1988), 200–201; Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (Peabody, MS: Prince Press,

through persecution. The execution of Servetus for “re-baptism” only drives the point closer to home for Baptists that religious liberty is the right of heretics just as much as it is the right of the orthodox. Grantham’s outrage concerning the putting to death of an individual for “Matters of Religion” is certainly justified and generally shared by most Christians today.

Also, it should be noted that Grantham himself was pristinely orthodox regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. In his *St. Paul’s Catechism*, Grantham affirms the Trinitarian content of the *Nicene Creed*.<sup>14</sup> Also, *Christianismus Primitivus*, Grantham’s most significant theological collection, contains a discussion of the Trinity wherein Grantham defends the orthodox doctrine as a demonstrably biblical truth.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

Thomas Grantham was a tireless and brave advocate of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was deeply concerned for the souls of lost humanity. It was his sincere conviction that the breed of Calvinistic soteriology that was so prevalent in his day both hindered and violated the preaching of the gospel. Grantham’s *Dialogue* was written to address this very concern. Grantham’s dying words speak volumes as to his great passion for the message of Christ:

I came not amongst you for riches or for honour; but to preach the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; to spend and be spent for your good, both by preaching and writing: which words and works I recommend to you, to strengthen you in the faith which I have preached.<sup>16</sup>

Every evangelical and Baptist Christian today must share in Grantham’s deep desire to spread the message of Christ with the same bravery, sincerity, and carefulness that he did.

2001), 67–68.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas Grantham, *St. Paul’s Catechism: or, A Brief and Plain Explication of the Six Principles of the Christian Religion* (London, 1687), 24–26.

<sup>15</sup>Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus*, 40–41.

<sup>16</sup>Cited in Hester, “Advancing Christianity to Its Primitive Excellency,” 31.