

## Particular Baptist history

Hope Fellowship may be a relatively young church, but we stand in a tradition stretching back hundreds of years. This history still influences our church life today, from the hymnbook we use to the distinctives of the Articles of Faith we hold to, which were formed in response to historical debates. To understand where Hope Fellowship comes from, we must go back to the origins of the Particular Baptist movement in the tumultuous 17<sup>th</sup> century. The 17<sup>th</sup> century was a time of revolutionary political and religious change in the British Isles: debates over the role and power of the King and Parliament led to a civil war in the 1640s which culminated in the overthrow of the King and the establishment of a republic lasting for a decade. The Church of England was at the centre of these debates, divided over what the Prayer Book should consist of and how the Church should be governed. Some churches, known as Separatists, left the Church of England and embraced a congregational form of church government, in which each local church was independent. Within these churches, some became convinced that only those who had professed faith should be baptised, contrary to the usual practice of 'baptising' infants, and separated to form Baptist churches. John Smith, exiled in the Netherlands, formed the first English Baptist church in 1609, and Thomas Helwys formed the first congregation in England when he moved back to London in 1611.<sup>1</sup> These were 'General Baptists', so called due to their belief in general atonement, believing that Christ died to save all people. This was in contrast to the Calvinistic Particular Baptists who believed in particular redemption, holding that Christ died to redeem a distinct number of people, known in the Bible as his 'elect'. The first Particular Baptist church was formed in 1638 in London by a group under the leadership of John Spilsbury who seceded from the independent separatist church of Henry Jessey. This movement grew such that by 1660 there may have been up to 131 Particular Baptist churches in England.

In 1644 seven Particular Baptist churches in London drew up the first Particular Baptist Confession of Faith, which was revised in 1646, and today is known as the First London Baptist Confession, or the 1644 Confession. These churches aimed to distinguish themselves firstly from the political radicalism of the Anabaptists, who were continental groups that had embraced believer's baptism along with subversive attitudes towards political authority, and secondly from the doctrinal errors of the General Baptists. The Confession therefore emphasised the loyalty of the churches to the civil government's authority, as well as their distinctive beliefs on baptism, church order and particular redemption.

In 1677, Nehemiah Coxe and William Collins, pastors of the Petty France Church in London, drew up and published another Confession, which closely followed the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith. With the coming of limited religious toleration after the Glorious Revolution in 1688, this was adopted by a General Assembly of Particular Baptists in 1689, and became known as the Second London Baptist Confession, or the 1689 Confession. Those who adopted the Confession in 1689 wanted to emphasise their unity with the Presbyterians and Congregationalists as Calvinistic non-conformists, while holding to their baptistic distinctives. It was signed by thirty-three pastors and messengers representing 108 churches, including names such as Hanserd Knollys, William Kiffin, and Benjamin Keach.

These Confessions formed the foundation for the Particular Baptists in the 18<sup>th</sup> century across England. Most churches organised themselves into local associations, which would meet together annually to hear an address and reports on the state of the churches, although each church

---

<sup>1</sup> P. Hallihan, 'The Immediate Pre-History of the English Particular Baptists', *Strict Baptist Historical Society Bulletin* 15, p. 8

remained firmly independent. London was a centre of Particular Baptist activity, with many large churches. John Gill, the greatest Baptist theologian of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and author of a two-volume *Body of Divinity* and multi-volume commentary on the whole Bible, took up a pastorate in London in 1719, remaining there for the rest of his life. This church, which moved from the Goat Yard Chapel in Southwark to Carter Lane in 1757, was later pastored by John Rippon and Charles Spurgeon, and continues as the Metropolitan Tabernacle to this day. John Gill played a central role in ensuring the Particular Baptists remained orthodox, in the face of a decline into Unitarianism among General Baptists and other non-conformists. Other important figures of the time include Abraham Booth, respectfully known as 'the first counsellor of our denomination', and the Ryland father and son. The 18<sup>th</sup> century also saw the beginning of the Baptist missionary movement, with the Baptist Missionary Society formed in 1792 famously sending William Carey to India, as well as involvement in social issues such as the campaigns to abolish slave trade and for religious toleration.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of theological decline for Particular Baptists. It began promisingly enough with the formation of a nationwide Baptist Union in 1813, conceived of as a strictly Calvinistic body. However what was intended to bring denominational strength through unity ultimately proved to be an undermining factor. In 1832, the Union was reorganised and its objects were redefined to embrace all Baptists who could subscribe to the description of being 'evangelical'. This brought General and Particular Baptists together but marked the beginning of a long doctrinal downgrade, to such an extent that by the end of the century liberal theology was widespread. Charles Spurgeon, who was perhaps the most famous Baptist figure of the century, was compelled to take his church out of the Union in 1887 in protest at the refusal of colleagues to condemn attacks on the infallibility of the Bible and the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Christ. But in truth, damage had been done long before this with the acceptance of Andrew Fuller's innovative approach to the presentation of the gospel, based on a subtle distinction between natural and moral ability. In 1784, he had first published his watershed book, *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, which argued that all men have a duty to exercise saving faith, believing that Christ's atonement was sufficient to save all, limited only by the unbelief of man. Known as the 'Duty Faith' error, it formed a halfway house between Calvinism and Arminianism and took its followers on a trajectory away from the earlier understanding of faith grounded in the language of Covenant Theology. Although the 1689 Confession had referred to what God 'requires' of man, by this it understood that in the Covenant of Grace God's requirements are met by a faith imparted by the Holy Spirit operating in regeneration.

Andrew Fuller's teachings were the cause of division among the Particular Baptist denomination, which had been preserved from schism in earlier days despite there being very different views on communion. That issue revolved around the stance which churches took on the question of who should be admitted to the Lord's Supper. Those who believed that only those who had been baptised as a believer should be received to communion became known as 'Strict Communionists'. This had been an article of faith in the 1644 Confession, and interestingly Andrew Fuller himself remained a convinced Strict Communionist all his life. But those who refused to support any restriction in communion became known as 'Open Communionists', and over time there seems to be an increasing alignment between churches which took this position and the tendency to adopt 'Fullerite' views on the gospel. In contrast, a smaller number of churches remained in the position of John Gill, holding to a higher form of Calvinism as well as maintaining restricted communion. These became known as Strict and Particular Baptists, or 'Strict Baptists' for short. In time they would come to group around various different religious magazines formed for the purpose of standing for the 'old paths'.

The first of these magazines, the 'Gospel Standard', was begun in 1835 by William Gadsby, the powerful pastor of the Strict Baptist church at Rochdale Road in Manchester, who is better known

today as a hymn writer. He was labelled an 'Antinomian' because of his rejection of the moral law as having a place in Christian experience apart from its condemnation of sin. Salvation involved deliverance from the law, but this did not lead to the encouragement of immorality in Gadsby's teaching. Rather, he taught that the believer's rule of life was the gospel, meaning the New Testament principles and precepts laid down by Christ and his Apostles. Together with anti-Duty Faith views, he declared this to be among the leading distinctives of his new periodical, whilst placing a particular emphasis also on 'experimental religion', by this meaning that faith involves more than the intellect – 'something must be known and felt'.

Gadsby accepted onto the wrapper of his magazine the names of churches who stood for the same truths, and this list grew over the years as more churches separated from the local Particular Baptist Associations, which generally opposed him. New churches also formed through his tireless preaching throughout the north of England and the comparable labours of companions in the ministry like John Warburton and John Kershaw of Rochdale. A model set of articles of faith for sympathetic churches to adopt in their constitution was developed by William's son John, and were taken up by many across the country. Eventually they took permanent shape in the form of the 31 Gospel Standard Articles used for the charitable societies set up by John and others in 1872, which were expanded to 35 in 1878, joining together most of John Gill's 'Goat Yard' confession of 1729 with Gadsby's formulations. The Gospel Standard magazine is still in existence and numbers influential men like J C Philpot, J K Popham, John Gosden and B A Ramsbottom among its former editors, and Gospel Standard churches continue to today in the form of a distinct denomination.

The Gospel Standard magazine has outlasted other Strict Baptist magazines, such as the 'Earthen Vessel' and 'Gospel Herald', who later merged. Their support base was eroded by the decline that all Christian denominations experienced between World Wars, but they were undermined early on in their existence by doctrinal error over the person of Christ. This was a deadening admixture to what was their otherwise excellent high Calvinist witness, which increasingly deteriorated. Within their pages had been represented the important ministries of London pastors, such as John Foreman, John Stevens, James Wells, who regularly preached to a congregation of some 2,000 at the Surrey Tabernacle in the mid-1800s, and John Hazelton, who helped form the Strict Baptist Mission in 1861.

The 'Christian's Pathway' was another magazine, which continued until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but which again eventually suffered from doctrinal drift. This was in the direction of many Strict Baptists at the time, moving away from their distinctives towards a more general evangelical position. The 1960s saw a thirst for greater unity among these Strict Baptists, who formed an Assembly in 1964, issued a new affirmation of faith in 1966, and changed their name to the less forbidding 'Grace Baptist' Assembly in 1980. It was a period in which there was a welcome revival of interest in reformed theology, overlapping but not confined to the Grace Baptist denomination, leading to a rediscovery of the older Particular Baptist confessions, and thus the self-styled Reformed Baptists emerged. From the start it was a movement shaped by the Calvinism of influential evangelical figures like Martyn Lloyd-Jones and J I Packer, who did so much to rally their own denominations among the Anglican and Free Churches against the tide of liberalism and ecumenism. However, despite the definitions hammered out in the intervening years, and while adopting the 1689 Confession again as a defining document of belief, Reformed Baptists have by and large taken up the views of Andrew Fuller in their rediscovery of our Calvinistic Baptist heritage.

And so, we arrive at the present day. Hope Fellowship stands firmly in the theological position of John Gill, but without being formally aligned to any specific group of churches. We draw on the best tradition of the Strict Baptists but are independently governed and, although we are not ecumenical, we have fellowship with other likeminded churches.

**Bibliography and further reading:**

K. Dix, *Strict and Particular: English Strict and Particular Baptists in the Nineteenth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Strict Baptist Historical Society, 2018)

G. M. Ella, *John Gill and the Cause of God and Truth* (Go Publications, 1995)

M. A. G. Haykin and T. Wolever (eds.), *The British Particular Baptists* vols. 1-5 (Particular Baptist Press, 2000-2019)

E. Hulse, *An Introduction to the Baptists* (Carey Publications, 1973)

P. Naylor, *Picking up a Pin for the Lord: English Particular Baptists from 1688 to the early Nineteenth Century* (Grace Publications, 1992)

R. W. Oliver, *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists, 1771-1892: From John Gill to C.H. Spurgeon* (Banner of Truth Trust, 2006)

S. F. Paul, *Further History of the Gospel Standard Baptists* vols. 1-6 (Gospel Standard Trust, 1951-1969)

A. Walker, 'The 1677/1689 Confession of Faith: A Historical Overview' in R. Ventura (ed.), *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* (Christian Focus Publications, 2022), pp. 21-32

J. A. Watts and G. D. Buss, *A Goodly Heritage* (Gospel Standard Trust, 2006)