

**“GLORY TO THE THREE ETERNAL”:
BENJAMIN BEDDOME AND THE TEACHING OF
TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY¹**

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One of the hymnic treasures to come out of the eighteenth century is that by the East Anglian Calvinistic Baptist Robert Robinson (1730-1790), “Come, Thou Fount of every blessing.” Robinson had been converted under the powerful ministry of George Whitefield (1714-1770) and, after a short career as a Methodist preacher, he was used by God to build a thriving work at St. Andrew’s Street Baptist Church, Cambridge, where he became known as one of the finest colloquial preachers in England.² About two and a half years after his profession of faith in 1756, Robinson wrote the above-mentioned hymn to commemorate what God had done for him when he professed faith in Christ. “Thoroughly Scriptural in doctrine,”³ the final stanza of this hymn runs thus:

Oh! to grace how great a debtor
Daily I’m constrained to be!
Let Thy grace, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Take my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it from Thy courts above.⁴

Towards the end of his life, though, Robinson appears to have become increasingly critical of both this hymn’s Calvinism and its implicit confession of the deity of Christ. In a letter written in 1788 he stated that he considered “a trinity of persons” in the Godhead “the most absurd of all absurdities,” though in a letter written the following year he asserted that he was “neither a Socinian nor an Arian.”⁵ And the story is told of a certain

¹ For assistance with various aspects of this lecture, I would like to acknowledge the help of Mr. Derrick Holmes of Abbeymead, Gloucestershire, England; Mr. Stephen Pickles of Oxford, England; Pastor Gary W. Long of Springfield, Missouri; Mr. Jason Fowler, Archivist at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky; and Miss Ruth Labeth, Dean of Women at Toronto Baptist Seminary.

² On the life and thought of Robert Robinson, see especially Graham W. Hughes, *With Freedom Fired. The Story of Robert Robinson Cambridge Nonconformist* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1955); L.G. Champion, “Robert Robinson: A Pastor In Cambridge”, *The Baptist Quarterly*, 31 (1985-1986), 241-246; Len Addicott, “Introduction” to his, L.G. Champion, and K.A.C. Parsons, eds., *Church Book: St Andrew’s Street Baptist Church, Cambridge 1720-1832* ([London]: Baptist Historical Society, 1991), viii-xviii; Karen Smith, “The Liberty Not to Be a Christian: Robert Robinson (1735-1790) of Cambridge and Freedom of Conscience” in Marc A. Jolley with John D. Pierce, eds., *Distinctively Baptist: Essays on Baptist History. A Festschrift in Honor of Walter B. Shurden* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2005), 151-170.

³ See Erik Routley, *I’ll Praise My Maker: A study of the hymns of certain authors who stand in or near the tradition of English Calvinism 1700-1850* (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1951), 261.

⁴ This is the original version of this stanza, which more modern versions alter slightly. See Routley, *I’ll Praise My Maker*, 261.

⁵ *Two Original Letters by the Late Mr. Robert Robinson* (London: J. Marsom, 1802), 5; Letter to S. Lucas (September 16, 1789) [*Select Works of the Rev. Robert Robinson*, ed. William Robinson (London: J. Heaton & Son, 1861), 286].

occasion during these final years of Robinson's life when he was travelling in a stage-coach with one other passenger who happened to be a Christian woman. Robinson struck up a conversation with the lady that soon turned to the subject of hymns. The woman began to testify to the great spiritual blessing that the hymn "Come, Thou Fount of every blessing" had been to her. Suddenly Robinson burst out, "Madam, I am the unhappy man who composed that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then!"⁶

Further evidence of this shift in theological sentiments comes from Robinson's two final sermons. They were preached at the request of Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), the leading apostle of eighteenth-century Socinianism, in two Socinian meeting-houses in Birmingham on June 6, 1790. According to Priestley, one of these sermons assailed Trinitarianism in a manner that "savoured rather of the burlesque, than serious reasoning."⁷ Robinson was found dead the following Wednesday. It was thus widely believed that he had died a convinced Socinian. In his funeral sermon for Robinson Priestley gave added fuel to this belief when he triumphantly declared that Robinson had become "one of the most zealous unitarians" prior to his death.⁸

On the other hand, one of his oldest friends, Coxe Feary (1759-1822), pastor of the Calvinistic Baptist work in Bluntisham, Huntingdonshire, recorded a conversation that he had with Robinson but a month before the latter's decease in 1790. Robinson affirmed that when it came to the doctrine of the Trinity he was neither a Unitarian nor an Arian. "My soul rests its whole hope of salvation," he solemnly told Feary, "on the atonement of Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God."⁹

Calvinistic Baptist Trinitarianism

Whatever the truth regarding Robinson's final beliefs about the doctrine of Trinity, there can be no doubt about where the community with which he was long associated, the

According to the *Posthumous Works of Robert Robinson* (Harlow: B. Flower, 1812), Robinson "publicly declared his disbelief of the commonly received doctrine of the Trinity;—that he thought...the word Trinity was 'a barbarous, popish word,' which had produced much evil in the Christian church" (vii). Another posthumously published selection of his literary works maintained that Robinson was convinced "that the opinion of Athanasius, or Arius, or Sabellius, or Socinus, or Augustine, or Pelagius, or Whitby, or Gill, on the subjects in dispute between them, ought to be considered of such importance as to divide Christians, by being made the standards to judge of the truth of any man's Christianity." For this remark, see Robert Robinson, *Seventeen Discourses of Several Texts of Scripture; Addressed to Christian Assemblies in villages near Cambridge. To which are added, Six Morning Exercises* (New ed.; Harlow: Benjamin Flower, 1805), iv-v.

⁶ Hughes, *With Freedom Fired*, 106; Routley, *I'll Praise My Maker*, 262.

⁷ Cited Robert William Oliver, "The Emergence of a Strict and Particular Baptist Community among the English Calvinistic Baptists 1770-1850" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, London Bible College, 1986), 71, n.143.

⁸ *Reflections on Death* (Birmingham, 1790), 21. One of the most prominent of Robinson's Baptist contemporaries, Andrew Fuller (1754-1815), was certainly convinced that Robinson died a Socinian; see his *Calvinistic and Socinian Systems Examined and Compared [The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller]*, ed. Joseph Belcher (1845 ed.; rpt. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), II, 168, 222-224].

⁹ Joseph Belcher, "Note *" in his ed., *Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, II, 223-224.

British Calvinistic Baptists, stood on this issue. Throughout the eighteenth-century this community unhesitatingly affirmed that this doctrine is, in the words of the London Baptist preacher Benjamin Wallin (1711-1782), the “first and grand principle of revealed truth and the gospel.”¹⁰ Or as Joseph Stennett II (1692-1758) put it, “the doctrine of the ever blessed Trinity, is of the greatest importance to his glory.”¹¹ When, for example, in something of a cause célèbre in the London Baptist community in the 1730s, two pastors who were brothers, John and Sayer Rudd (d.1757), both came to the conviction that “Trinitarian doctrine” was “entirely consisting of words and phrases of men’s own inventing” and totally unscriptural, they were expelled from the London Baptist Association.¹²

Well typifying this Baptist grip on this doctrine was the voluminous John Gill (1697-1771), who wrote what was probably the major Baptist defence of the doctrine of the Trinity in the first half of the eighteenth century. His *The Doctrine of the Trinity Stated and Vindicated*—first published in 1731 and then reissued in a second edition in 1752—proved to be an extremely effective defence of the fact that there is “but one God; that there is a plurality in the Godhead; that there are three divine Persons in it; that the Father is God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God; that these are distinct in Personality, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.”¹³ The heart of this treatise was incorporated into Gill’s *Body of Doctrinal Divinity* (1769), which, for most Baptist pastors of that day, was their major theological reference work. As John Rippon (1751-1836), Gill’s successor at Carter Lane, noted in a biographical sketch of his predecessor:

The Doctor not only watched over his *people*, “with great affection, fidelity, and love;” but he also watched his *pulpit* also. He would not, if he knew it, admit any one to preach for him, who was either cold-hearted to the doctrine of the Trinity; or who *denied* the divine filiation of the Son of God; or who *objected* to conclude his prayers with the usual *doxology* to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as three equal Persons in the one Jehovah. Sabellians, Arians, and Socinians, he considered as real enemies of the cross of Christ. They *dared* not ask him to preach, nor *could* he in conscience, permit them to officiate for him. He conceived that, by this uniformity of conduct, he adorned the pastoral office.¹⁴

He did more than “adorn the pastoral office.” Through his written works he played a key role in shepherding the British Calvinistic Baptist community along the pathway of biblical orthodoxy.

¹⁰ *The eternal Existence of the Lord Jesus Christ considered and improved* (London, 1766), iv-v.

¹¹ *The Christian Strife for the Faith of the Gospel* (London, 1738), 78, cited Roger Hayden, “The Contribution of Bernard Foskett” in William H. Brackney and Paul S. Fiddes with John H. Y. Briggs, eds., *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B. R. White* (Macon Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1999), 197.

¹² R. Philip Roberts, *Continuity and Change: London Calvinistic Baptists and The Evangelical Revival 1760-1820* (Wheaton, Illinois: Richard Owen Roberts, 1989), 35-36.

¹³ *The Doctrine of the Trinity, stated and vindicated* (2nd ed.; London, 1752), 166-167.

¹⁴ John Rippon, *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Writings of the late Rev. John Gill, D.D.* (Repr. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Gano Books, 1992), 127-128.

This tenacious affirmation of Trinitarianism by these Baptists was in the face of some of the stiffest intellectual winds of their day. By and large the Trinitarianism of the Ancient Church had remained unchallenged until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even during that most tumultuous of theological eras, the Reformation, this vital area of Christian belief did not come into general dispute, though there were a few, like Michael Servetus (1511-1553) and the Italians, Lelio Francesco Sozzini (1525-1562) and his nephew Fausto Sozzini (1539-1604),¹⁵ who rejected Trinitarianism for a Unitarian perspective on the Godhead. As William C. Placher and Philip Dixon have clearly demonstrated, it was the growing rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that led to a “fading of the trinitarian imagination” and to the doctrine coming under heavy attack.¹⁶ Informed by the Enlightenment’s confidence in the “omnicompetence” of human reason, the intellectual *mentalité* of this era either dismissed the doctrine of the Trinity as a philosophical and unbiblical construct of the post-Apostolic Church, and turned to classical Arianism as an alternate perspective, or simply ridiculed it as utterly illogical, and argued for Deism or Socinianism.¹⁷

What is amazing is that this critical battle over Trinitarianism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—its outcome would help determine the shape of later thinking about Christianity’s God—is passed over in utter silence by the vast majority of modern studies of the history of this doctrine. Typically these studies leap over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, moving directly from the Trinitarian reflections of a Reformer like John Calvin (1509-1564) to various twentieth-century theologians.¹⁸ Robert Letham, for example, in an otherwise excellent study of this doctrine, can state in the “Preface” to his *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* that since John Calvin “little of significance has been contributed to the development of Trinitarian doctrine by conservative Reformed theologians” till the dawn of the twentieth century. He certainly knows of the writings of the English Puritan John Owen (1616-1683) and the New England theologian of revival Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) on the Trinity, but strangely maintains that these works “did not contribute anything significant to the *advancement* of the doctrine.”¹⁹ This claim is highly questionable. In fact, Richard Muller has argued that John Gill, a lesser theologian than either Owen or Edwards when it comes to Trinitarian thought, made a distinctive contribution to this branch of Christian doctrine by his inclusion of the Spirit in the eternal *pactum salutis*.²⁰ If this is true of Gill, should we not expect that we might find areas of original contribution in both Owen and Edwards?

¹⁵ His surname is sometimes rendered Socinus, hence Socinianism.

¹⁶ William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence. How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 164-178; Philip Dixon, ‘Nice and Hot Disputes’: *The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (London/New York: T & T Clark, 2003). The quote is from Dixon, ‘Nice and Hot Disputes’, 212.

¹⁷ G. L. Bray, “Trinity” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, Illinois/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 694.

¹⁸ Dixon, ‘Nice and Hot Disputes’, xi-xii, n.1.

¹⁹ *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2004), ix-x.

²⁰ “The Spirit and the Covenant. John Gill’s Critique of the *Pactum Salutis*”, *Foundations*, NS, 24 (1981), 4-14.

This lecture, though, does not focus on original contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, in an era when there was a “fading of the trinitarian imagination,” to use Dixon’s expression, it seeks to discern the way that one Baptist pastor sought to keep that imagination vital and robust through the use of the form of instruction known as a catechism. Or to put it another way: this paper’s goal is to see how this most important of Christian doctrines—one that has exercised the greatest intellects of the Christian faith—was conveyed to the Christian in the eighteenth-century pew. The pastor is Benjamin Beddome (1717-1795) and the catechism his *A Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism by Way of Question and Answer* (1752).

Benjamin Beddome—an eighteenth-century Baptist divine

Beddome, pastor of the Baptist work in Bourton-on-the-water, Gloucestershire, for fifty-five years, is remembered today primarily as a hymnwriter.²¹ Yet, in his day he was also widely admired as a preacher. The Evangelical Anglican John Newton (1725-1807) once observed of him in this regard that he was “an admirable preacher, simple, savoury, weighty.”²² And the Baptist Robert Hall, Jr. (1764-1831), himself one of the great preachers of the Regency period and the decade immediately following, noted that Beddome was “on many accounts an extraordinary person,” for even though “he spent the principal part of a long life in a village retirement, he was eminent for his colloquial powers” and “universally admired” as a preacher.²³ Beddome’s younger Baptist contemporary John Rippon, in the earliest biographical sketch of Beddome, similarly remarked that “sermonizing was...his forte.”²⁴ At his death, though, Beddome’s published literary remains consisted simply of a catechism that will be examined below

²¹ In his magisterial study of English hymnody, J.R. Watson notes that many of Beddome’s hymns have an identifiable “clarity of line and simplicity of image” and that they played a distinct part in the “transition of eighteenth-century hymnody from the grandeur of [Isaac] Watts to the sensitivity of [William] Cowper.” See *The English Hymn. A Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 202.

Incidentally, a clue to the pronunciation of Beddome’s name is provided by the Baptist historian Joseph Ivimey (1773-1834), who spells the name of his father John Beddome (1674-1757) as “Bedham” [*A History of the English Baptists* (London: Isaac Taylor Hinton/Holdsworth & Ball, 1830), IV, 283].

²² John Newton, *Diary* (1703-1805), entry for 7 August 1776 (Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey).

²³ “Recommendatory Preface” to B. Beddome, *Hymns adapted to Public Worship, or Family Devotion* (London, 1818), vi.

²⁴ “Rev. Benjamin Beddome, A.M. Bourton-on-the-Water, Gloucestershire”, *Baptist Annual Register*, 2 (1794-1797), 314-326. Vital for studying the life of Beddome is the lengthy account of his ministry in Thomas Brooks, *Pictures of the Past: The History of the Baptist Church, Bourton-on-the-Water* (London: Judd & Glass, 1861), 21-66. In this century there have been relatively few studies of Beddome. The most important is that of Derrick Holmes, “The Early Years (1655-1740) of Bourton-on-the-Water Dissenters who later constituted the Baptist Church, with special reference to the Ministry of the Reverend Benjamin Beddome A.M. 1740-1795” (Unpublished Certificate in Education Dissertation, St Paul’s College, Cheltenham, 1969). See also Kenneth Dix, ““Thy Will Be Done”: A Study in the Life of Benjamin Beddome”, *The Bulletin of the Strict Baptist Historical Society*, 9 (1972) [this article occupies the bulk of the *Bulletin* and is lacking pagination]; Roger Hayden, “Evangelical Calvinism among eighteenth-century British Baptists with particular reference to Bernard Foskett, Hugh and Caleb Evans and the Bristol Baptist Academy, 1690-1791” (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Keele, 1991), 140-160, 287-293; Michael A. G. Haykin, “Benjamin Beddome (1717-1795)” in Michael A. G. Haykin, ed., *The British Particular Baptists, 1638-1910* (Springfield, Missouri: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), I, 167-183.

and some hymns. A series of eight volumes of his sermons, which went through a good number of editions, appeared in the early nineteenth century, as well as a larger volume of some 67 sermons in 1835.²⁵ A collection of some 830 hymns was published in 1818.²⁶

Beddome came to Bourton-on-the-Water in the spring of 1740. Over the next three years he laboured with great success in the Baptist cause in Bourton. Significant for the shape of his future ministry was a local revival that took place under his ministry in the early months of 1741. Around forty individuals were converted, including John Collett Ryland (1723-1791), a leading Baptist minister in the latter half of the eighteenth century.²⁷ It may well have been this taste of revival that made Beddome a cordial friend to those who were involved in the evangelical revivals of the mid-eighteenth century, men like George Whitefield and the Mohegan Indian preacher Samson Occom (1723-1792),²⁸ and gave him an ongoing hunger to read of revival throughout the English-speaking world.²⁹ Within a year of the Bourton awakening, for instance, Beddome had purchased a copy of Jonathan Edwards' *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), which would have given him a marvellous foundation for thinking about and labouring for revival.³⁰

The early years of Beddome's ministry saw great numerical growth in the membership of the church. Between 1740 and 1750 the church membership more than doubled and by 1751 it stood at 180.³¹ Describing the state of the church in 1750, Beddome could declare: "my labours have been, and are still, in a measure, blest unto them, above a hundred having been added since my first coming amongst them."³² Derrick Holmes notes that the success of Beddome's ministry during his first ten years at Bourton is probably due to a number of factors. A central factor was that a number of good men were active as deacons and in the leadership of the church during this period, including Beddome's father-in-law, Richard Boswell. Then there was Beddome's gifted preaching as well as his practice of catechizing, the latter to be discussed below.³³

²⁵ *Twenty Short Discourses adapted to Village Worship* (London: Burton, Smith and Co., 1820), 8 vols.; *Sermons printed from the manuscripts of the late Rev. Benjamin Beddome* (London: William Ball, 1835).

²⁶ *Hymns adapted to Public Worship, or Family Devotion* (London, 1818).

²⁷ William Newman, *Rylandiana: Reminiscences Relating to the Rev. John Ryland, A.M.* (London: George Wightman, 1835), 3. On Ryland, see also James Culross, *The Three Rylands: A Hundred Years of various Christian Service* (London: Elliot Stock, 1897), 11-66.

²⁸ For Beddome's association with Whitefield, see Geoffrey F. Nuttall, "George Whitefield's 'Curate': Gloucestershire Dissent and the Revival", *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 27 (1976), 382-384. Samson Occom seems to have been converted under the preaching of James Davenport around 1740, prior to Davenport's period of fanaticism [W. DeLoss Love, *Samson Occom and the Christian Indians of New England* (Boston/Chicago: The Pilgrim Press, 1899), 34]. Occom preached at Bourton in April, 1767, during an extensive trip that the Native American evangelist made to Britain (Hayden, "Evangelical Calvinism", 152).

²⁹ Hayden, "Evangelical Calvinism", 152.

³⁰ Beddome's own copy of this book may be seen in the "Beddome Collection", Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford. It was published in Boston in 1741. On the title page Beddome has written two dates, "1742" and "1747," which would indicate probably the dates when he read it.

³¹ Brooks, *Pictures of the Past*, 50.

³² Letter to Prescott Street Baptist Church, November 22, 1750 [in Thomas Brooks, "Ministerial Changes a Hundred Years Ago", *The Baptist Magazine*, 51 (1859), 427].

³³ Holmes, "Early Years (1655-1740) of Bourton-on-the-Water Dissenters", 60-61.

During the 1750s and the first half of the 1760s the numerical growth of the church began to slow. As noted above, in 1751 the total number of members stood at 180. The next forty years of Beddome's ministry actually saw decline in the church membership. Between 1765 and 1795, 53 new members were added by conversion and baptism. But in this same period 105 of the members died, 12 were dismissed to other Baptist works and 2 were excluded. Thus, by 1795, the year that Beddome died, the church had 123 on the membership roll, sixty less than in 1764.³⁴ It is quite clear from letters that Beddome wrote on behalf of the church to the Midland Baptist Association, to which the church belonged, that he lamented this lack of growth in church membership. The size of the congregation maintained its own, probably around five or six hundred, to the end of his life, but that vital step of believer's baptism leading to church membership was taken by far fewer in the final three decades of his ministry than in the first two and a half.³⁵ Thus, the poignant prayer of Beddome in the church's 1786 letter to the Association: "Come from the 4 winds O Breath & breathe upon these slain that they may live. Awake O Northwind & come thou South, blow upon our Garden that the Spices may flow out."³⁶

*"That excellent little body of divinity": Beddome's Catechism*³⁷

True to the Reformed tradition of which the Calvinistic Baptists formed a part, Beddome was thoroughly convinced that vital Christianity was a matter of both heart and head. As he noted on one occasion with Puritan-like pithiness: "If the head be like the summer's sun, full of light, the heart will not be like the winter's earth, void of fruit."³⁸ And like others in this tradition, Beddome found the use of a catechism helpful in matching head knowledge to heart-felt faith.³⁹ When John Rippon came to write his obituary of Beddome, he observed that "one considerable instrument" of the latter's success in his ministry at Bourton had been his use of catechetical instruction.

³⁴ Brooks, *Pictures of the Past*, 50-55, *passim*.

³⁵ See these letters in the Bourton-on-the-Water Church Book 1719-1802 (Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford University), pages 232-317. For the fact that the size of the congregation listening to Beddome maintained its own during the final years of his life, see the letters for May 15, 1785, and June 4, 1786 (Bourton-on-the-Water Church Book 1719-1802).

³⁶ Bourton-on-the-Water Church Book 1719-1802. The punctuation has been added.

³⁷ The description of Beddome's *Catechism* is taken from *The Circular Letter of the Western Association* (1776), 7.

³⁸ *Importance of Scripture Knowledge in Sermons*, 6.

³⁹ Hayden, "Evangelical Calvinism", 259. In another context, Hayden notes that the use of Baptist catechisms like that of Beddome was "a very formative influence among eighteenth century Baptists and provided a Baptist identity which was set securely within Reformed and Evangelical orthodoxy" ["This failure of the past is having an effect today", *Baptist Times*, No.7237 (March 16, 1989), 4]. See also similar remarks in his "The Particular Baptist Confession 1689 and Baptist Today", *The Baptist Quarterly*, 32 (1987-1988), 410.

For an excellent collection of Baptist catechisms, see Tom J. Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts: The Study of Catechisms in Baptist Life* (Amityville, New York: Calvary Press, 1998). Beddome's catechism is not included in this collection.

Catechisms had been central to the Calvinistic Baptist movement from its origins in the 1630s.⁴⁰ For example, Hercules Collins (d.1702), the pastor of Wapping Baptist Church, London, which later moved to Prescott Street, put into print *An Orthodox Catechism* (1680), a Baptist version of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. The most widely used catechism among the Baptists, though, was the one commissioned by a General Assembly of the denomination that met in London in June, 1693. Although William Collins (d.1702), the pastor of the Petty France Church in the capital, was asked to draw it up,⁴¹ many would later know it as *Keach's Catechism*, so named after the leading Baptist author of the late seventeenth century, Benjamin Keach (1640-1704).⁴² This catechism, formally called *The Baptist Catechism*, was primarily a Baptist revision of the Presbyterian *Shorter Catechism* (1648) and was still being reprinted in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁴³

During the early years of his ministry Beddome regularly used this catechism, but clearly felt that the questions and answers of the catechism needed to be supplemented by further material. So he composed what was printed in 1752 as *A Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism by Way of Question and Answer*, which basically reproduced the wording and substance of *Keach's Catechism*, but added various sub-questions and answers to each of the main questions. In composing these additional questions and answers Beddome utilized, though not slavishly so, *A Scripture-catechism* (1703) by the quintessential Puritan Matthew Henry (1662-1714).⁴⁴

Beddome's *Scriptural Exposition* proved to be fairly popular. There were at least two editions during Beddome's lifetime, the second of which was widely used at the Bristol Baptist Academy, the sole British Baptist seminary for much of the eighteenth century.⁴⁵ Due its use at this seminary one can expect that it would have had a significant influence on many of the congregations that graduates of this seminary went on to pastor. In the nineteenth century it was reprinted once in the British Isles and twice in the United States, the last printing being in 1849.

Keach's Catechism had replaced the well-known first question of the *Shorter Catechism*—"What is the chief end of man?"—with "Who is the first and chiefest being?" and put the *Shorter Catechism's* first question in second place. In his *Scriptural Exposition* Beddome retained the first question of *Keach's Catechism*, but for some

⁴⁰ For further details of these catechisms, see Hayden, "Particular Baptist Confession 1689 and Baptist Today", 408-409.

⁴¹ Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: 1811), I, 533; *idem*, *A History of the English Baptists* (London, 1814), II, 397.

⁴² For differing opinions as to Keach's responsibility for this catechism, see J. Barry Vaughn, "Benjamin Keach" in Timothy George and David S. Dockery, eds., *Baptist Theologians* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 199), 66 and Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (Dundas, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2004), 219.

⁴³ For a modern printing of the catechism, see *The Baptist Catechism*, revised Paul King Jewett (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952).

⁴⁴ *A Scripture-catechism, in the method of the Assemblies* (London, 1703). I have used this catechism as found in *The Complete Works of the Rev. Matthew Henry* (Edinburgh/London/Dublin: A. Fullarton and Co., 1853), II, 174-258.

⁴⁵ The second edition, which came out in 1776, seems to have been largely paid for by Beddome. See *The Circular Letter of the Western Association* (1776), 7.

unknown reason omitted the *Shorter Catechism's* first question altogether. Instead he placed the question "Ought every one to believe that there is a God?" in second place.⁴⁶ This is one of the rare occasions in the *Scriptural Exposition* when Beddome introduces a main question for which there is no counterpart in *Keach's Catechism*. The intellectual climate of the eighteenth century, in which the Christian view of God was in dispute and some had gone so far as to even advocate atheism, may be the reason why Beddome introduced such a question.

Teaching the doctrine of the Trinity

The section of Beddome's *Scriptural Exposition* dealing with the Trinity opens with the question "How many persons are there in the godhead?" The answer in *Keach's Catechism*, which Beddome faithfully reproduces, is as follows: "There are three persons in the godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one, the same in essence, equal in power and glory."⁴⁷ Beddome then adds five paragraphs of questions and answers together with Scripture texts as a further delineation of this basic question and answer.⁴⁸

In the first paragraph he focuses on the triunity of the Godhead. As evidence he cites such passages as Genesis 1:26, where we have the statement "Let *us* make man" and the *Comma Johanneum*, 1 John 5:7, "there are three that bear record in heaven." Henry had also cited both of these texts to make the same point.⁴⁹ Beddome then turns to refute one of the main bugbears of the theologians of the Ancient Church, namely Sabellianism, which denied the proper distinction of persons within the Godhead.⁵⁰ Beddome cites Psalm 110:1, where the Son is mentioned as a distinct person alongside the Father, and John 14:26, where all three persons of the Godhead are distinguished, as clear indication that both the Son and the Spirit are distinct persons. Yet, as Beddome stresses, one can never forget that these two, along with Father, are one: "Are these the same in essence, affection, and operation? Yes."⁵¹ As biblical proof, Beddome again cites 1 John 5:7.

⁴⁶ *A Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism by Way of Question and Answer* (2nd. ed.; Bristol: W. Pine, 1776), 5-6.

⁴⁷ *Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism*, 23.

⁴⁸ *Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism*, 23-25. Henry's *Scripture-catechism* has only four paragraphs.

⁴⁹ *Scripture-catechism (Complete Works, II, 180)*.

⁵⁰ For possible evidence of the presence of Sabellianism among some Calvinistic Baptists in this period, see Anne Dutton, *A Letter against Sabellianism* (London: M. Lewis, 1764). See also Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century (A History of the English Baptists, vol.2; London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1986), 75-76.*

⁵¹ *Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism*, 23-24. In a sermon on Acts 8:29, where the Spirit tells Philip to draw near to the chariot in which the Ethiopian eunuch was traveling, Beddome notes from this verse that "the Holy Spirit is a divine and a distinct person in the godhead, issuing his commands, and exercising supreme authority... the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Father; and the Holy Spirit is considered as distinct from both. Yet though distinct, they are not separate; for they are one in nature, power, and glory." [*Twenty Short Discourses adapted to Village Worship* (London: Burton and Smith/Simpkin & Marshall 1823), V, 40].

None of this response to Sabellianism appears in Henry's catechism, though Henry does have a paragraph that focuses on each of the divine persons' distinguishing mark, which he terms "personal property." The Father's "personal property" is to "beget the Son," while that of the Son is "to be begotten of the Father" and that of the Spirit "to proceed from the Father and the Son."⁵² While Beddome is clear on the fact that there are indeed three persons within the Godhead, it is probably not surprising that he omits the use of the classical terms of distinguishing the persons. In contrast to the Presbyterians for whom Henry was writing, Beddome's Baptist audience was far less learned and more suspicious of theology. On occasion, though, Beddome can allude to this classical way of differentiating the persons. In a sermon on Galatians 1:16, for example, Beddome can remark that the term "Son" is "a title belonging to Christ as the second Person in the ever-blessed Trinity, and expressive both of equality of essence, and the peculiar relation in which he stands to the Divine Father."⁵³ Yet, it is clear that his preferred way of clarifying the difference between the Persons is to simply use the terms "Father," "Son" and "Spirit."

Beddome's second paragraph deals with explicit references to the deity of the Son and the Spirit. While Henry does have a paragraph that makes the same point, the material in this paragraph and its arrangement are unique to Beddome. The Baptist theologian cites texts where both the Son and the Spirit are referred to as God and Jehovah.

Is the Son called God? Yes. *Who is over all God blessed for evermore.* Rom ix.5. Is the Spirit called God? Yes. *Why hath Satan filled thine heart to lye to the Holy Ghost, thou hast not lyed unto man but unto God.* Acts v.3, 4. Is the Son called Jehovah? Yes. He is *the Lord* (Heb. Jehovah) *our righteousness,* Jer. xxiii.6. Is the Spirit called Jehovah? Yes. *They tempted the Lord* (Heb. Jehovah) Exod. xvii.7, compared with Isa. lxiii.10. *They vexed his Holy Spirit*—Is this name given to any but God. No. *The most high over all the earth, is he whose name alone is Jehovah,* Ps. lxxxiii.18.⁵⁴

In addition to Romans 9:5, there is a relative abundance of New Testament texts from which Beddome could have chosen that explicitly ascribe deity to the Lord Jesus.⁵⁵ On the other hand, there are no New Testament texts that are explicit in calling the Spirit "God." One of the closest to such an affirmation is Acts 5:3-4, where Peter tells Ananias that in lying to him and the Jerusalem Church he has lied to the Holy Spirit, whose indwelling of that community identified it as God's new covenant people. He has thus really lied to God.⁵⁶

Beddome also believes that various Old Testament verses, seen now through the lens of the New Testament, contain adumbrations of the deity of the Son and the Spirit. Unique to the God of the Old Testament, for instance, is the covenant name of Jehovah, an

⁵² *Scripture-catechism (Complete Works, II, 180).*

⁵³ *Christ Manifested to the Soul in Sermons, 119.*

⁵⁴ *Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism, 24.*

⁵⁵ For other unambiguous texts, see John 1:1; 20:28; Titus 2:13; 1 John 5:20.

⁵⁶ Similarly Gill, *Doctrine of the Trinity, 162.*

English transliteration of the Hebrew tetragrammaton YHWH.⁵⁷ Beddome is convinced that this Old Testament term of divine address can be also applied to the Son and the Spirit. When Jeremiah 23:6 speaks of “Jehovah our righteousness,” this can be understood, from the vantage-point of the New Testament, as a description of Jesus as Jehovah, for—and Beddome appears to assume the reader will know this—the New Testament describes Jesus Christ on one occasion as our “righteousness” (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Beddome sees a similar intertextuality between Exodus 17:7 and Isaiah 63:10. Here, though, the link is not a specific word as that between Jeremiah 23:6 and 1 Corinthians 1:30, but a similar description of the same event, Israel’s testing of the patience of God in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt. Beddome obviously regards the Isaiah verse as clarifying that it was the Holy Spirit whom Israel grieved during this period of her history. The name of Jehovah is thus applicable to the Spirit.⁵⁸

Here, Beddome’s questions and answers reveal a hermeneutical practice that stretches back to the patristic era. It is a biblicistic hermeneutic that assumes the unity of the entire Scriptures—they are the product of a single author—and that Scripture is its own best interpreter. By means of cross-referencing and intertextual links the meaning of texts can be clarified and a biblical theology developed.

The next paragraph, also unique to Beddome and not dependent on Henry, continues to focus on the deity of the Son and Spirit. Beddome refers to divine attributes and activities that the Spirit and the Son share with the Father and are the sole prerogative of a divine being.

Is the Son eternal as well as the Father? Yes. *Before Abraham was, I am*, John viii.58. Is the Spirit eternal? Yes. *He is called the eternal Spirit*, Heb. ix.14. Is the Son omnipresent? Yes. *Where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I*, Mat. xviii.20. Is the Spirit so too? Yes. *Whither shall I go from thy Spirit*, Ps. cxxxix.7. Is the Son omniscient? Yes. *Thou knowest all things*, John xxi.17. And is the Spirit so? Yes. *He seacheth all things*, 1 Cor. ii.10. Is the work of creation ascribed to the Son? Yes. *All things were made by him*, John i.3. Is it also ascribed to the Spirit? Yes. *The Spirit of God hath made me*, Job xxxiii.4. And is creation a work peculiar to God? Yes. *He that built all things is God*, Heb. iii.4.⁵⁹

If the Son and the Spirit are eternal—that is, have no beginning—and possess such incommunicable divine attributes as omnipresence and omniscience and if they do what only God can do—namely, creation—then they must be as divine as God the Father.

⁵⁷ The term “Jehovah” had first appeared in a 1516 Latin text. In 1530 William Tyndale (c.1494-1536) used it in his translation of Genesis, from whence it entered into the mainstream of English biblical thought and writing. See David Daniell, *William Tyndale. A Biography* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1994), 284.

⁵⁸ Beddome is following Gill here, who also deduced the same point from the two texts that Beddome uses here. See Gill, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 161.

⁵⁹ *Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism*, 24-25.

In the fourth paragraph the Baptist minister seeks to demonstrate the full deity of the Son and the Spirit from the fact that both of them are the object of prayer and worship in the Scriptures. He rightly notes that the Scriptures allow for only one who is fully divine to be the recipient of prayer and worship: “is religious worship a prerogative of deity? Yes.” To show this of the Son is relatively easy, and Beddome can refer to a passage like Acts 7:59, where Stephen, the first martyr, prays, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”⁶⁰ In a sermon on praying to Christ, Beddome describes this verse from Acts as “a strong and irrefragable proof of the supreme deity of Christ.”⁶¹

To find a text where the Spirit is actually the object of prayer is far more difficult. Beddome cites Revelation 1:4, where the “seven spirits,” which Beddome rightly notes to be a symbolic representation of the “one holy and eternal Spirit,” are included along with God the Father and Jesus Christ in a salutation to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia.⁶² It might be argued that while this passage clearly has significant Trinitarian import, it does not really serve Beddome’s purpose, for a salutation is simply not equivalent to a prayer. And yet, essentially the revelator John is praying, for he is asking for the seven churches to be given “grace ... and peace from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; and from Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:4-5, KJV).⁶³

The fourth paragraph ends with a reference to the baptismal formula of Matthew 28, where command is given to baptize believers into “the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (verse 19). Matthew 28:19, is, of course, a classical proof-text for the Trinity, and one that Henry had included also in the section of his catechism on the Trinity.⁶⁴ However, it is noteworthy that while Henry prefaces his citation of the Matthean text with the question “ought we to believe it [i.e., the doctrine of the Trinity]?”, thus employing the text as a simple proof-text, Beddome embeds his citation of Matthew 28:19 in a paragraph dealing with worship. By so doing, Beddome is declaring his conviction that baptism is an act of worship in which those being baptized dedicate themselves to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵ But only God can be worshipped.

In the fifth and final paragraph Beddome turns to the way in which our blessings as Christians reflect the Trinitarian nature of God.⁶⁶ “Divine blessings” come from all three persons of the Godhead as shown by the benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14. Then, a

⁶⁰ *Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism*, 25. For other passages where prayer is offered to the Son, see 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 12:8-9.

⁶¹ *Christ the Subject of Prayer in Sermons*, 237.

⁶² *Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism*, 25 and n.*. For a contemporary discussion of the identification of the “seven Spirits” as a symbolic allusion to the Holy Spirit, see Richard J. Bauckham, “The Role of the Spirit in the Apocalypse”, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 52 (1980), 75-77.

⁶³ Gill also cites Revelation 1:4 to argue this point: *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 70-71, 166.

⁶⁴ *Scripture-catechism (Complete Works, II)*, 180).

⁶⁵ Cp. Beddome, *Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism*, 160: “Is baptism an engagement to yield ourselves unto God? Yes.” See also Gill, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 145: “Baptism is a solemn act of divine worship.”

⁶⁶ *Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism*, 25.

passage like Ephesians 2:18 (“Thro’ him we both have access by one spirit unto the Father”) tells Beddome that each of the persons of the Godhead have “their distinct province in the affair of man’s salvation.” Here, the reasoning is that if the Son and the Spirit enable men and women to come to the Father, and so be saved, then they must be fully divine for ultimately only God can save sinners. One of Beddome’s hymns succinctly celebrates this truth in a single stanza:

Ye children of the Father’s choice,
And purchase of the purchase of the Saviour’s blood,
Sealed by the Spirit, now rejoice,
And bless and praise the triune God.⁶⁷

Then, reflecting a question from Henry’s *Scripture-catechism*, Beddome asks, “Is the unity in the godhead a motive to unity among the saints? Yes,” and he cites John 17:21 as proof. Beddome was clear in his Baptist convictions,⁶⁸ but, as his relationship to George Whitefield noted above indicates, Beddome seems to have possessed a catholic spirit. But it was a catholicity of orthodox Christianity that he affirmed, as the last question reveals: “Should we hold fast this doctrine [of the Trinity]? Yes. *Hold fast the form of sound words*, 2 Tim. i.13.”⁶⁹

Conclusion

Beddome’s last appearance at the association to which his church belonged, the Midland Association, was in 1789.⁷⁰ Over the years Beddome had frequently preached at and acted as moderator of the summer Association gatherings.⁷¹ From the mid-1770s on, though, Beddome had begun to suffer from gout and experience tremendous difficulty in walking,⁷² and eventually the joy of the Association gatherings had to become a memory of the past. His influence lived on, though.

In the year after his last appearance, his fellow pastors issued a letter—it was usual for the Association to issue an annual circular letter—in which they detailed the core doctrines that held them together as Calvinistic Baptists. At the head of the list, “of very great importance,” was the “doctrine of three equal persons in the ever-adorable Trinity.” After citing a number of Scripture texts that supported this doctrine, the letter continued:

⁶⁷ *Hymns adapted to Public Worship, or Family Devotion*, Hymn #257, stanza 3. See also Hymn #255, stanzas 1-3 for a similar expression of worship of the members of the Godhead centred around their differing spheres of activity in the divine work of salvation: the Father’s “rich displays of grace” and “special love,” the Son for his incarnation so as “to prepare our way to heaven,” and the Spirit, “who the stubborn will subdues” and who “humbles and renews” sinners.

⁶⁸ See, for instance, *Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism*, 158-166, where Beddome deals with the subject of baptism.

⁶⁹ *Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism*, 25.

⁷⁰ William Stokes, *The History of the Midland Association of Baptist Churches, From Its Rise in the Year 1655 to 1855* (London: R. Theobald/Birmingham: John W. Showell, 1855), 90.

⁷¹ For a list of the occasions when Beddome preached or acted as moderator, see Stokes, *History of the Midland Association*, 88-90.

⁷² Thomas Purdy, Letter to John Sutcliff, April 11, 1775 (Sutcliff Papers, Angus Library, Regent’s Park College, Oxford University).

Each person [of the Godhead] is truly and properly divine, according to the scriptures of truth; and yet we are informed that there is but one God. This, indeed, is a mystery, and it must remain so to us, at least in the present state.⁷³

Beddome would undoubtedly have approved, not only with regard to the theological sentiments, but also of the medium in which these sentiments were expressed. For the Association letter was sent out to the churches and distributed among their members and so became a crucial means of theological instruction. Though a “mystery,” as the above quote states, the doctrine of the Trinity was the heart and foundation of Christian living and thought and must be taught to God’s people if they were going to mature in Christ. And this Beddome had sought to do in his catechism.

In the section of Beddome’s catechism discussed above, Beddome did not explicitly mention this element of mystery with regard to the Trinity. Yet, it is something that does appear in one of the three hymns he wrote to celebrate the triunity of God.

Glory to the Three eternal,
Yet the great mysterious One,
Author of all bliss supernal,
Be unceasing honours due.⁷⁴

Here Beddome rightly recognizes that the doctrine of the Trinity, mystery though it be, is to find its ultimate expression in unceasing adoration and worship of the Triune God.

⁷³ *The Doctrines of Grace* in John Rippon, *The Baptist Annual Register* (London, 1793), I, 37-38.

⁷⁴ *Hymns adapted to Public Worship, or Family Devotion*, Hymn #255, stanza 4.