**Review of Matthew C. Bingham: "Orthodox Radicals:
Baptist Identity in the English Revolution". Oxford
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Bingham, Matthew C.. *Orthodox Radicals – Baptist Identity in the English Revolution*. Oxford

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Matthew C. Bingham's *Orthodox Radicals* is a bold, necessary, and highly valuable study in the historiography of the denominational label "Baptist" when applied to parts of the English population in the seventeenth century. Bingham convincingly argues that the label, for all its familiarity, is anachronistic and misleading, and that its use raises numerous historiographical problems. To focus on paedobaptism as the main bone of contention among English Calvinist groups at the time, Bingham demonstrates, is to ignore the reality of alliances among different congregations and of theological and sacramentological debates held within these religious communities.

This, Bingham shows, can be understood at least partly as a result of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historiographical bias. Indeed, the history of "Baptism" in the 1700s and 1800s was frequently written by Baptists themselves – such as Thomas Crosby (d. in or after 1749) and Joseph Ivimey (published his work in 1811), who mapped their own experience of Baptist congregation onto the seventeenth century-, and the consequences of this bias, Bingham argues, can be felt even in contemporary works by scholars such as Stephen Wright (2006). What ought to be questioned, Bingham advances, is the applicability of the very label of "Baptist" to seventeenth-century English Congregationalists who would not have used it themselves, nor would they have regarded paedobaptism as the most pressing of issues.

Instead, he proposes to re-frame the discussion not as a conflict between "Baptists" and "paedobaptists", but in terms of the rapid development of Congregationalism in the 1630s and 1640s, most notably led by divines such as Henry Jessey (1601-1663) and William Kiffin (1616–1701), and of the resulting internal disagreements about, mainly, the nature of the "visible church". If the church is to be composed exclusively of "saints", that is, of professing believers, and if baptism is the rite whereby one becomes a member of the congregation, then abandoning paedobaptism becomes a doctrinal measure that is hard to escape, especially given the lack of support for it in Scripture. This

does not entail however that paedobaptism was suddenly deemed to be heresy, or that it is the rite in itself that was seen as problematic. The divide, then, occurred not between what others have called “General” and “Particular Baptists”, but rather between different types of Congregationalists, some of whom maintained the original sacrament – Bingham usefully coins the term “paedobaptistic Congregationalists” – and those who abandoned it, or “baptistic Congregationalists”, neither of whom would have understood themselves to be “Baptists”.

Bingham’s radical reframing of the discussion in this manner highlights a much wider array of facts about seventeenth century England and its historiography. As he points out several times, other labels, most notably the word “puritan”, suffer from similar misconceptions, and scholars of the period ought to be far more circumspect when employing them without thoroughly researched definitions and caveats. Bingham rightly suggests that the well-known interconnectedness of religion, politics, and social affairs in early modern England, and the fluidity and polysemy of these terms in seventeenth century print, warrant far greater caution *vis-à-vis* these categories than has hitherto been shown.

Furthermore, Bingham’s judicious and pleasant use of telling anecdotes highlights how useful his reframing is with respect to common problems in the pre-existing historiography of the English “Baptists”. His conclusion opens with the case of the famous Lucy Hutchinson, who, being pregnant, came across a pamphlet against paedobaptism, which evidently struck her, and which she and her husband found so convincing - while neither of them was part of any baptistic congregation at all - that they spent the next few months purchasing and perusing every piece of writing on the subject available to them, and even routinely invited ministers to solve the conundrum for them. The correct way to proceed with the unborn child was at stake of course, and, being dissatisfied with every single defence of paedobaptism they encountered, they decided not to baptise their child. Bingham remarks that this alone did not make the Hutchinsons’ “Baptists”, and that, in fact, they have been recognised as an oddity by Baptist historians, who usually did not consider them to be “Baptists” in the “true” sense of the term. Bingham also mentions several other such oddities, such as John Tombes (ca. 1603-

1676), whom, despite his being a foremost defender of believer's baptism, Baptist historians are traditionally reluctant to call a "Baptist", because he presumably did not hold other views that they consider to be central to the English "Baptist" doctrine. Bingham's re-framing of the question, however, solves both these issues, and many more.

Bingham's methodology is conscientious, displays a high standard of scientific integrity, and will – or, at the very least, should – usher in crucial changes in the way in which scholars of all relevant fields approach the question of religion in seventeenth-century England. Bingham encourages his peers to follow his example: to become, as it were, "unorthodox radicals", and to re-evaluate the fundamental assumptions underlying their research and their publications. He highlights the need to acknowledge the complex, protean, and unstable nature of inter-denominational relations in England at the time, not merely because this is clearly supported by a growing wealth of evidence, but also because doing so provides long-overdue solutions to historiographical issues and paves the way for a better understanding of a fascinating period.

Bingham could perhaps have been a bit clearer on the extent of the group he calls "congregationally minded puritans", but this only reinforces his overall thesis and his demonstration, and emphasises the need to be precise and thorough when labelling any religious group in seventeenth-century England. *Orthodox Radicals* is a highly engaging work that no student of the period should go without reading very closely indeed.

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