

SECTION 3

THEOLOGIAN &
THEOLOGICAL METHOD

“ACCORDING TO THE GRACE OF
GOD WHICH WAS GIVEN TO ME,
LIKE A WISE MASTER BUILDER I
LAID A FOUNDATION, AND
ANOTHER IS BUILDING ON IT. BUT
EACH MAN MUST BE CAREFUL HOW
HE BUILDS ON IT.

1 CORINTHIANS 3:10

THE FIRST BAPTIST TREATISE ON PREDESTINATION: THOMAS HELWYS'S *SHORT AND PLAINE PROOF*

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Thomas Helwys is often overshadowed by his mentor, John Smyth. Smyth was the leader of the English Separatist congregation whose voyage to the Netherlands Helwys financed and who later adopted believer's baptism and an Arminian soteriological posture.² Yet Helwys was the father of the English Baptist movement, having left Smyth, who had capitulated to the views of the Dutch Waterlander Mennonites. Helwys's decision to leave Smyth and take part of their congregation back to England resulted in the establishment of the first Baptist church on English soil and the subsequent Baptist movement.³ The General Baptist movement arose from Helwys's activities, while the Particular Baptist (Calvinist) movement arose a generation later.⁴

In 1611 Helwys and his congregation issued a confession of faith, *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam*.⁵ In this work Helwys outlined the major reasons for his separation from Smyth. The confession delineated objections to Smyth's denial of the Reformed doctrine of original sin and the imputation of the righteousness of

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²On Smyth and Helwys, see B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

³See J. Matthew Pinson, "Sin and Redemption in the Theology of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys" (paper presented at the Theological Symposium of the Commission for Theological Integrity, National Association of Free Will Baptists, October 25, 2004).

⁴The "General" in General Baptists signifies general or universal atonement—that Christ died for all humanity, whereas the "Particular" in Particular Baptist stands for particular or limited atonement—that Christ died only for the elect. For more on both the General Baptists and Particular Baptists, see H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 21-123; B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1996). On the English General Baptists in the context of their relationship with their American descendents, the Free Will Baptists, see William F. Davidson, *The Free Will Baptists in History* (Nashville: Randall House, 2000); Michael R. Pelt, *A History of Original Free Will Baptists* (Mount Olive, NC: Mount Olive College Press, 1996); and J. Matthew Pinson, *A Free Will Baptist Handbook: Heritage, Beliefs, and Ministries* (Nashville: Randall House, 1998).

⁵For the entire English text, of Helwys's *Declaration*, see W. J. McGlothlin, ed., *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911), 85-93.

Christ alone in justification, as well as his acceptance of Hoffmanite Christology⁶ and Waterlander positions on succession and the role of the magistracy.⁷

While the layman Helwys was not Smyth's equal in theological acumen, his passionate theological commitments motivated him to put his views into print. His literary output gave voice to the fledgling English Baptist movement, resulting, for example, in the first treatise in the English language advocating liberty of conscience and freedom of religion, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*.⁸ Helwys's sentiments gave rise to the Baptist movement, his soteriological views laying the foundation for a vigorous Arminian Baptist movement in the seventeenth century, which would find expression in articulate General Baptist writers such as Thomas Grantham later in the century.

Later in 1611, after writing his *Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam*, Thomas Helwys wrote a brief work entitled *A Short and Plaine Prooffe by the Word and Workes of God that Gods decree is not the cause of anye Mans sinne or Condemnation. And That all Men are redeamed by Christ. As also, That no Infants are Condemned*.⁹ This treatise does more than any other General Baptist writing to link General Baptist soteriology with the thought of Jacobus Arminius. Though Helwys does not mention Arminius's name, in his preface he refers positively to the fact that the truth of general redemption was breaking forth in what even the Calvinist Separatists said were the "best Reformed churches"—that is, the Dutch Reformed churches (sig.A4v). Helwys obviously had in mind the Arminian surge in Dutch Reformed circles that was raging in the Netherlands at the very time he and John Smyth had been exiled there. That Helwys would tie his doctrine of general redemption to the Dutch Reformed churches, despite his lack of reference to Arminius personally, indicates that he was familiar with early Dutch Arminianism and viewed it favorably.¹⁰ When one adds to this the striking similarity of Helwys's and Arminius's soteriology, as Helwys moves away from Smyth's Waterlander-influenced soteriology in 1610, it seems indisputable that Arminius's thought directly influenced Helwys and General Baptist soteriology.

Helwys intended *A Short and Plain Proof* to be an exposition and defense of article five in his *Declaration of Faith*, which dealt with election and reprobation (sig. A3r). As reflected in his title, for Helwys the solution to the problem of election and reprobation lies

⁶Hoffmanite Christology taught that Christ's flesh was celestial or heavenly rather than derived from the Virgin Mary.

⁷See Champlin Burrage, *Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 2:185.

⁸Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, ed. Richard Groves. Classics of Religious Liberty I (Macon, Ga.: Mercer UP, 1998).

⁹Hereafter, quotations from Helwys are modernized, thus avoiding archaic spelling, punctuation, etc.

¹⁰Authors did not footnote back then as we do now; thus, it is sometimes hard to discern their sources.

in the biblical construct of general redemption—God’s gracious, universal design for the salvation of humanity. Redemption is not “particular” (wrought only for the elect) but rather general or universal. “. . . God hath not in his eternal decree appointed some particular men to be saved and some particular men to be condemned, and so hath redeemed but some. But . . . Christ is given a ransom for all men, yea even for the wicked, that bring swift damnation upon themselves. . .” (sig. A3r).

Helwys’s prayer was that the “clear light of truth” of general redemption would shine on more and more people—starting with his Calvinistic Separatist counterparts.¹¹ Helwys criticizes Protestants for not going far enough in their reform of the church. They have broken “out of the depths of darkness” of the church of Rome and their “resting on the faith of the church” rather than scripture alone, Helwys says. Yet such Protestants still fail to reform the church thoroughly according to scriptural principles and thus distort the scriptural teaching on the divine salvific plan. Helwys hopes that new light will break forth from the Word of God and free them from their error, thus magnifying the universal grace of God in Christ (sig. A4v).

Helwys saw the main solution to the problem of election and reprobation in the doctrine of the general provision of salvation for humanity. Yet he saw the central question at the bottom of the debate as the origin or cause of evil. What caused sin? Was it the unconditional decree of God or the free will of man before the fall? This is the main question that must be answered in any discussion of predestination and human freedom (sig. A4r). Helwys faulted the Calvinists of his day, who wrongly “enter into the secret counsels of God” (sig. A4r). Helwys saw this as vain philosophy that “measur[es] God’s thoughts by their thoughts and his ways by their ways” (sig. A4r).

DETERMINISM AND THE FREE WILL OF ADAM

In his preface, Helwys emphasizes Adam’s free will before the fall. Because Adam had free will to choose to disobey God or not, then the divine (supralapsarian) decree to foreordain the fall makes no sense.

God giving *Adam free will and power in himself not to eat of the forbidden fruit and live, or to eat and die*, could not in his eternal decree ordain or appoint him to life or death, for then had his *free will* been overthrown. And if Adam had not eaten and sinned (which was in his own power), then had not death entered. Therefore God did not decree that death should enter, and thus *God’s decree* is not the cause of any man’s condemnation (sig. A2r).

Helwys says that it is Adam’s unfettered choice to sin that causes condemnation (reprobation), not God’s decree.

¹¹This phrase is reminiscent of Separatist leader John Robinson’s phrase, “The Lord has yet more truth and light to break forth out of His Holy Word.” Cited in Timothy George, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer UP, 1982), vii.

Another root problem in Calvinism, according to Helwys, is its determinism. He criticizes the notion that “*the Almighty* hath decreed all things that come to pass, and that of him, and through him all things are”—that “God is the moving cause of all things” (sig. A4r). This concept logically results in the supralapsarian idea that God foreordained the fall. This view, Helwys argues, results in the belief, whether Calvinists own up to it or not, that God is the author of sin: “. . . they will and do conclude most blasphemously that God hath foredecreed that sin should come to pass” (sig. A4r). Helwys believed that this doctrine was a result of “the craft and subtlety of [Satan] who lieth in wait hereby to deceive. . .” (sig. A4r). Helwys dealt with the Calvinist objection that God did not decree sin itself, just the action that is sinful. Helwys rejects this as faulty logic. If God’s providence is “in every action,” Helwys argues, then it must also have been in “Adam’s eating of the forbidden fruit.” Thus, if God foreordained every action, it logically follows that he foreordained sin as well (sig. A4r–sig. A5v). Helwys blasts this approach with stinging rhetoric: “Thus do they walk by their owne imaginations and intents, deceiving and being deceived, pretending not to lay sin upon God, when (indeed and in truth) they directly make God the author of sin. Our best thoughts of them are that they do it ignorantly. The Lord give them hearts to repent, all whose conversions should be the joy of our souls” (sig. A5v).¹²

After these opening thoughts about the free will of Adam before the fall and the Calvinist view of the foreordination of all things, Helwys sets out his plan for the treatise. He begins by humbly telling the reader that there is no one more unfit than he to delve into these issues. “Yet to show ourselves faithful with that talent that God hath given us, we have, through the grace of God, taken in hand to do our best service unto the Lord herein, hoping for his assistance and acceptance” (sig. A5v). Helwys’s first aim is to “show wherein we differ from them [Calvinists] and they digress from the truth” (sig. A5v).

Helwys confesses that God decreed all good that comes to pass, “through him are all good things. . . the Lord is the author, actor, and moving cause in and to every good action” (sig. A5v). Yet God is not the author of evil. However, if Calvinism is true with its system of divine, unconditional election and reprobation, predestination to salvation and predestination to damnation, then God is the author of evil, for he creates people for destruction so that “they of necessity must be damned” (sig. A5r). The Calvinist system of reprobation, whether it states that God unconditionally reprobates people to damnation without choice in the matter, or God simply “hath particularly redeemed some and left others to perish,” makes God the author of sin and evil (sig. A5r).

THE CAUSE OF DIVINE REPROBATION

Having set forth what is *not* the cause of reprobation—God’s decretive will—Helwys proceeds to establish, in “the most plain, easy, and short way that, by the direction of his Spirit, our hearts can devise,” (sig. A5r) what *is* the cause of divine reprobation. Citing Romans 5:12, 18, Helwys says that sin is the cause of condemnation, not God’s decretive

¹²Sometimes in his writings, Helwys—beleaguered, persecuted, imprisoned, and in the context of theological polemics much more heated than those in our own day—makes extreme statements about the spiritual state of his opponents, whom he feels have rejected the truth.

will (sig. A5r). Everyone agrees with this, Helwys writes, but Calvinists wish to make human sin the result of God's decree.

Helwys argues that God's creation of Adam in the *imago dei* with free will to choose between good and evil courses of action frees God of the charge of being the author of sin.¹³ "It is proved here," Helwys says, "that God gave Adam free will and power to eat, or not to eat, and this all men do confess. How then can it be said, with any Spiritual understanding, that God decreed he should sin? For God's forecounsel and decree must of necessity come to pass" (sig. A6v). Whatever God decrees must necessarily come to pass. Thus, if God decreed that Adam would eat of the fruit, then that action becomes a matter of deterministic necessity and not a free action (sig. A6r). "Can men make freedom and bondage in one and the same action, all in one man, and all at one time? How shall men be able with any good conscience to make things so contrary hang together?" (sig. A6r).

Furthermore, God's command to Adam "that he should not sin," means that God is commanding Adam *not* to do something and at the same time decreeing that he *will* do it—making it impossible for him not to do it. Helwys argues that the biblical God does not make commands and then decree states of affairs in such a way that makes it impossible for his creatures to obey those commands (sig. A6r-sig. A7v). Such a decree would place God in opposition to his own revealed will: "In the fear of God, let men take heed how they go about (by subtle arguments) to prove God contrary to himself, which they plainly do, when they say it was the eternal will of God that man should sin, and yet God commands that he should not sin" (sig. A6r).

Just as it would be unjust for God to decree Adam's fall unconditionally, so, Helwys argues, it is unjust for God to decree the condemnation of human beings after the fall without extending divine grace to them. Helwys proceeds to refute the doctrine of divine reprobation:

This is the whole substance of what they say. That God hath decreed to forsake and leave those that he hath appointed to condemnation, to themselves, and withholdeth his grace from them, leaving them to sin, and so to perish for their sin. We will not put them to prove this because we know they cannot, but we will show, by the mercy of God, that it is an old, conceived imagination and hath no ground of truth (sig. A7v-r).

It is interesting that Helwys here aims, not at what has been called "double reprobation" but at "single reprobation." Double reprobation was much more popular among Calvinists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than it is now. Those who held this view believed that God unconditionally predestines people to both salvation and damnation. That is, both election and reprobation are unconditional, both arising from the secret counsel of God. Single reprobation argues that, while God's election of people to salvation is unconditional (that is, not conditioned on foreseen faith or foreseen union with Christ or anything "in the creature"), reprobation of people to damnation is conditioned on foreseen sin or unbelief.

¹³Helwys assumes the classic Reformed tying of Genesis 1:26-27 with Ephesians 4:24 in his understanding of the divine image in humanity.

Single reprobation is the doctrine that Helwys here refutes. Yet, to him, any doctrine of reprobation in which God condemns people when he commanded them to repent and believe and yet did not give them the grace to repent and believe is equally pernicious, whether single or double. It all amounts to the same thing: God says, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved,” yet he grants the gracious ability to believe only to the elect, leaving the reprobate in their sins. For Helwys, this is the height of injustice, unworthy of God who is the fountainhead of justice and truth.

FALL IN ADAM, REDEMPTION IN CHRIST

Helwys launches into a discussion of the effects of the fall on the human race. He reiterates the Reformed doctrines of original sin, depravity, and human inability in salvation. Like Arminius, he holds to a Traducian and Natural Headship understanding of the transmission of sin in the race, as seen in his statement that Adam’s posterity “were yet all in his loins” (sig. A7r).¹⁴ Helwys states that death and condemnation “went over him [Adam], and over all by his transgression” (sig. A8v). After Adam’s fall, Helwys explains, we see the first mention of the gospel, Genesis 3:15, which is intended for *all* Adam’s posterity. Helwys uses a Reformed approach to original sin to argue for general redemption. As all Adam’s posterity are caught up in his sin and guilt, so Christ dies for all Adam’s posterity (sig. A8v).

Christ, the second Adam, comes to provide redemption for all people. Yet this redemption becomes actualized in the human person through the condition of personal belief in Christ. Here Helwys’s Arminian view of conditional election comes to bear. Predestination to salvation is not unconditional. Rather, “the condition was, that Adam should believe, and under this same Condition was Christ promised and sent to all the world” (sig. A8r). Yet this condition is made available to all Adam’s posterity, and Helwys illustrates this by quoting from the Gospel of John: “*John 12.46. I am come a light into the world that whosoever believeth in me should not abide in darkness. And John 3.16. God so loved the world that he hath given his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life*” (sig. A8r).

If God had left people in a state of condemnation for Adam’s sin without giving them the opportunity to recover from such a state, he would be unmerciful, Helwys argues (sig. A9v). Yet, he does not leave humanity, or any part thereof, without a remedy for original sin. As all of Adam’s posterity are guilty in Adam, so Christ provides all of Adam’s posterity a remedy—not just the elect, but all of Adam’s posterity.

INFANT SALVATION

In this context, Helwys feels it necessary to discuss infant salvation. Tying the doctrine of infant salvation to the unity of the race in Adam, Helwys explains that infants are saved through the redemption Christ provides for all Adam’s posterity (sig. B1v). The difference between infants and adults is that infants have no way to resist the grace of God in Christ that has been proffered to all in general redemption. Adults must meet the

¹⁴See Pinson, “Sin and Redemption in the Theology of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys.”

condition of belief in order to appropriate the general redemption of all Adam's posterity. Yet, since infants¹⁵ cannot meet the condition of belief, and since they cannot resist Christ's general redemption through unbelief, they are saved through Christ's general redemption. Thus, Helwys posits infant salvation through general redemption (a different kind of "conditionality" for infants than for adults, since they cannot meet—or fail to meet—the conditions set for adults). This is opposed to the constructs in many Anabaptist and later Arminian theories of infant salvation, which are really more infant "safety" views, which reject original sin, than infant salvation views.

Helwys was interacting directly with Anabaptist theories of original sin (actually, the lack thereof) and infant safety that the Waterlanders had confessed and that John Smyth had appropriated from them. He distanced himself from Smyth and Waterlander leaders like Hans de Ries in his views on original sin and infant salvation.¹⁶ Again, here Helwys bore the influence of Arminius, the only theologian of that time who sought to combine the notions of general redemption and infant salvation with a thoroughgoing approach to original sin and the transmission of Adam's sin to the human race. The foregoing distinctions are not meant to imply that Helwys believed that infants were guilty of actual sins, as if they could do good or evil. His primary concern here is to provide a rationale for the salvation of infants, and he does so in the context of general redemption rather than mere infant safety or a denial of original sin. Helwys's statements on infant salvation here must be compared to his statements in his *Declaration of Faith* to get the full impact of these distinctions.

PROBLEMS WITH DIVINE REPROBATION

After this excursus on original sin, general redemption, and infant salvation, Helwys again takes up the subject of reprobation. He reiterates his earlier point, that reprobation makes God the author of sin. He then argues that the doctrine of reprobation, which rests on the Calvinistic system of particular redemption, mitigates the biblical witness to the love of God. It "restraineth the love of God to the world in giving his Son for a Savior" (sig. B2v). Helwys's argument from the universal love of God in Christ is penetrating and powerful, as seen in the following passage:

. . . whereas our Savior Christ saith, John 3.16, *God so loved the world, that he hath given his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life.* This opinion of particular redemption saith that God did not so love the world, but he loved some few particular persons, as he gave his son for them, and they only shall believe and shall be saved. And the greatest part of mankind, God loved them not, but hath decreed they shall be damned, and he hath not given his Son for them but hath left them to perish. Thus denying the greatest part of the world to have any means of salvation, and that there is no Savior for them (sig. B2v).

¹⁵And, as later General Baptists said, children and mentally incapable adults who have not reached an age of moral and spiritual responsibility.

¹⁶See Pinson, "John Smyth, Thomas Helwys, and Separatist Arminianism."

This excerpt brings Helwys's general-redemption approach into sharp relief with the particular-redemption theology of regnant seventeenth-century Calvinism. It also illustrates Helwys's method, which veers from the scholastic method and uses a more plain-style expositional approach to scripture to establish Arminian arguments.

Another reason Helwys rejects the Calvinistic scheme of particular redemption and reprobation is that, like the decree to cause the fall, the decree to reprobate certain people puts God at cross-purposes with himself. In Scripture God commands people to repent and even calls them to faith universally with the gospel. Yet in the Calvinistic view, God is commanding them and calling them to do what they cannot possibly do because he has not graciously given them the capacity to do it.

. . . this lamentable opinion of particular *redemption* and *reprobation* saith they [the reprobate] can have no part nor portion in Christ. So is their judgment enlarged for not receiving Christ, with whom they have nothing to do. And thus do they make Christ to offer himself to them that he would not have receive him, and which he hath decreed shall not receive him, nor believe him, and make the words of the Lord feigned words, and words of dissimulation (sig. B2v).

Helwys goes on to cite Luke 13:34, which he interprets as giving human beings the freedom to resist and reject divine drawing grace. Here again, Helwys presses, a particular-redemption scheme seems to make Christ conflicted with himself, using words he does not really mean, holding out promises on which he cannot, or does not intend to, deliver:

As also those words of our Savior Christ, Luke 13.34, where he speaketh with such unfeigned earnestness: *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem [. . .] how often would I have gathered thy children together as the hen gathereth her brood under her wings, and ye would not.* What impiety is this to account these words feigned, and if any shall say they do not account them feigned, then must they be forced to confess that God would have had all Israel and all their posterity in uprightness of heart, to have feared him, and kept his commandments, that it might have gone well with them forever, and so did not decree any of them, nor of their posterity, to be condemned. And if our Savior Christ's words were not feigned words, then would he have gathered the children of Jerusalem together which would not be gathered and so would have had them believe in him that would not. And yet they that hold this fearful opinion hold that God would not have some men, yea the most men, to believe, but hath decreed their condemnation (sig. B2r).

Helwys quotes Acts 17:30, "*That now God admonisheth all men everywhere to repent.*" He continues his engaging line of argument: "Yet they of this opinion . . . say, he would not have all, but some to repent. And if they would speak plainly, and not halt betwixt opinions, they must say that God would have some to be unbelievers and wicked and disobedient, and that is the highest blasphemy. . ." (sig. B2r).

Another difficulty Helwys has with particular redemption is that it diminishes Christ's gracious work of redemption and his suffering for sins. This view, which makes

Christ a “particular private redeemer for some private men” dishonors Christ “in that his great sufferings are not accounted sufficient to take away Adam’s sin, and so hath he not yet utterly broken, but only bruised, the serpent’s head, making Adam’s sin to abound above the grace of God by Christ, overthrowing that word of God, Rom. 5:20, which saith, *Where sinne abounded grace abounded much more*, speaking of Adam’s sin” (sig. B3v). Again Helwys invokes his theory that Christ’s redemption makes available a remedy for original sin for the entire human race, so that all who meet the condition of faith personally appropriate Christ’s redemptive work.

SPIRITUAL EFFECTS OF THE DOCTRINE OF UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

Helwys roots his discussion of the doctrine of unconditional election to practical, spiritual concerns, warning that Calvinism has numerous negative spiritual effects. First, he argues that the doctrine of unconditional election “works presumption in men” (sig. B3v). People who believe they are elect and have no possibility of being condemned will become presumptuous about their salvation. This relates to their security in salvation as well:

. . . if men can but once get a persuasion in themselves that God hath elected them, then they are secure. They need not work out their salvation with fear and trembling. For God having decreed them to be saved, they must be saved. They need not feare: If they increase and grow in knowledge and grace, it is well but if they do not, it is all one, for it is decreed they must be saved, and this causeth all slothful, careless, and negligent profession. . . . But for all their presumption, it shall be said unto them, *I know you not. Depart from me all you workers of iniquity. Luke 13.26, 27* (sig. B3v).

Second, particular redemption causes those who fear they might be among the reprobate to despair and not to attempt to respond to God at all. This, in turn, leads to their own condemnation.

And this opinion . . . makes some despair utterly, as thinking there is no grace for them, and that God hath decreed their destruction. And it makes others desperately careless, holding that if God hath decreed they shall be saved, then they shall be saved, and if God hath decreed they shall be damned, they shall be damned, and so in a desperate carelessness run headlong to destruction (sig. B3v).

Third, Helwys asks, why preach? If God has already decided that certain people are necessarily saved and others are necessarily damned, the biblical command to preach the gospel is incoherent. How can the gospel be preached to everyone, Helwys asked, if preachers do not know whether or not Christ died for the ones to whom they are preaching? “Here is all faith in preaching the Gospel to the World destroyed. For what faith can there be to preach the Gospel when we know not whether Christ belong to them or not?” (sig. B3r).

Fourth, Helwys argues, praying for the conversion of unregenerate people makes no sense if Christ did not die to provide them with salvation. If a Christian prays for an unbeliever to be converted, he might be praying against the decretive will of God. Helwys

asks, how can “a man of faith pray for any man, when he cannot know, whether God hath decreed him to condemnation, and so he pray against God’s decree” (sig. B3r).

Fifth, Helwys brings the discussion back to the question of assurance of salvation. Before, Helwys said that the doctrine of unconditional election might cause people to be presumptuous about their security in salvation. He now argues that the doctrine has the effect of causing some truly regenerate people to doubt whether they are among the elect. This gets to the heart of the problem of assurance (or lack thereof) in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English Calvinism (Puritanism): How can one prove (even to himself) that he is elect? Helwys says, “For thou must first believe that Christ is given a Savior for thee before thou canst know that he is a Savior for thee, which cannot be, that a man should believe what he knows not” (sig. B4v). Helwys goes on to say, “Let the mystery of iniquity the man of sin himself devise (whose device this particular redemption is) how any man shall know by the word of God that Christ is given a Savior for him, but by knowing that he is given a Savior for all men, except he can show his name especially set down in the Word” (sig. B4v).

General Redemption

Helwys follows his discussion of the practical, spiritual effects of the doctrine of particular redemption with a more direct discussion of general redemption or general atonement *per se*. He proposes to “prove by plain evidence of Scripture that Christ by his death and sufferings hath redeemed all men. . . .” He begins with a consideration of the *protoevangelion* in Genesis 3:15. Here again, Helwys marshals his Traducian and natural-headship view of Adam’s relationship to his posterity to argue for general redemption. Key to Helwys’s construct is his belief that all Adam’s posterity were “in him” or “in his loins” though they had not yet been born. Reformed theologians have often referred to this Augustinian concept as the doctrine of Adamic unity. In Genesis 3:15, Helwys argues, the promise to send Christ to redeem Adam and Eve was, by extension, made to the entire race, because the entire race were in Adam and Eve at the time the promise was made. The “promise of Christ is made of Adam and Hevah, in which were all mankind, and in whom were all mankind in whom all had sinned, and for the taking away of the condemnation due for that sin, Christ was there promised and given. . . .” (sig. B4v-r). This interpretive device sets certain Calvinistic categories on their head while at the same time appealing to Reformed categories (e.g., regarding Adamic unity).

Helwys’s other arguments for Christ’s universal atonement for humanity appeal to proof texts that were common to the Dutch Arminians and the Amsterdam Waterlander Mennonites. He cites, for example, 1 John 2:2, “*And he is a reconciliaton for our sins* (speaking of all the faithful to whom he wrote) *and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.*” Helwys argues that this passage clearly teaches that Christ’s atonement is not merely for believers, but also for unbelievers. “. . . how is it possible that the Holy Ghost should speak more plainly, to show that Jesus Christ is a reconciliation for the faithful which are not of the world, and for the unfaithful which are the world” (sig. B4r).

In this connection, Helwys cites 2 Corinthians 5:15, which states that Christ is dead for all; 2 Corinthians 5:19, which says that Christ reconciled the world to himself; and 1 Timothy 2:5, 9, which says that Christ Jesus gave himself a ransom for all (sig. B4r). He is

appealing to proof texts that were part of both Arminian and Mennonite doctrinal teaching, with which he was familiar (as well as Lutheran writings, with which he may or may not have been familiar). He continues this with his citation of 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4; and Colossians 2:20: “*The Lord of that promise is not slack as some men count slackness but is patient towards us and would have no man perish but would all come to repentance*” (B4). “*God will that all men shall be saved and come to the acknowledging of the truth*” (sig. B5v). “*And through peace made by that blood of that his cross to reconcile to himself through him [unreadable] all things both which are in earth and which are in heaven*” (sig. B5v).

Having cited these proof texts, the plain sense of which Hewlys believes should be clear to anyone who is “tractably minded,” Helwys moves back to a reiteration of his main theological framework for understanding both original sin and general redemption: Adamic unity.

. . . when man had of his own free will (being tempted) yielded unto the temptation of the serpent, neglecting the commandment of his God and Creator, and brought condemnation upon himself and all mankind, God, of his infinite mercy, would not leave Adam and in him all mankind to perish under that condemnation, but hath sent a Savior to redeem Adam and all mankind from that sin (sig. B5v).

Furthermore, Hewlys argues, both the mercy and justice of God demands that he send his son to die equally for all people. Yet he ties even this to the concept of Adamic unity. In the atonement, God was “equally merciful and equally just unto all, being no respecter of persons, not pardoning Adam and giving him a Savior and condemning the greatest part of his posterity for that his sin: but hath given his son a Savior for all, if through unbelief they deprive not themselves” (sig. B5v-r).

Finally, Helwys discusses the practical spiritual benefits of believing the doctrine of general redemption.

And what a comfortable doctrine is this unto all, when every poor soul may know, that there is grace and salvation for him by Christ, and that Christ hath shed his blood for him, that believing in him he may be saved, and that God would not the death of him, but that he should repent and live. Thus is all despair taken away, . . . and all careless presumption cut off. . . (sig. B5r).

In his concluding paragraph on proofs for general atonement, Helwys recaps some of the arguments he has already made. He discusses, for example, the agreement of the doctrine with “the whole Word of God,” the fact that the doctrine sets forth the mercy of God and advances the justice of God. Yet, then he adds to his understanding of the universality of Christ’s atonement being an example of God’s justice. Before, he had said that general atonement illustrates God’s justice in that God is not partial to one segment of humanity over another (e.g., Adam over his posterity or the elect over the reprobate). Here Helwys says that general atonement also illustrates the justice of God in that it leaves human beings “without excuse” in God’s condemnation of those who have rejected Christ and remain alienated from God in sin. General redemption “advances the justice of God, in

condemning unbelievers seeing he hath left them without excuse, in that he hath given them a Savior, in whom because they believe not, they are justly condemned” (sig. B5r).

It is clear that Helwys believed doctrine has not merely a cognitive function but also an affective one. This is seen in his constant appeal to the fact that the doctrine of general redemption brings with it emotional benefits: “. . . we doubt not that comfort will follow abundantly” (sig. B5r-sig. B6v).

In his conclusion, Helwys summarizes his treatment of the doctrine of particular vs. general redemption. Yet, he spends the most time on the unique keystone of his interpretation: that the unity of the race in Adam, which demands the Reformed doctrine of original sin, also demands the doctrine of general redemption, based on the *protoevangelion* in Genesis 3:15. Yet, while this general redemption is accomplished for all, it is not indiscriminately applied to all, but must be subjectively appropriated to be salvifically efficacious.

And we have shown that, as Christ the promised seed was given and sent to Adam to be his Savior, for the same end he was given and sent to all the world as also under the same condition, which was that he should believe in him. For if Adam had not believed, he must have been condemned, and if all the world had not believed, all the world must have been condemned, and as Adam, believing in the promised seed, was (through the grace and mercy of God in Christ) to be saved, even so all the world, believing in the promised seed, was (through the grace and mercy of God in Christ) to be saved (sig. B6v-r).

Free Will

In an epilogue, Helwys clarifies what his beliefs are concerning human free will after the fall. He argues that the belief in free will as Calvinists commonly define it is often attached to the doctrine of general redemption. Yet, he wishes to distance himself from that doctrine. If by free will is meant the Pelagian or semi-Pelagian belief (which, for example, John Smyth and the Waterlander Mennonites held) that man after the fall has the natural free will to choose the good without the interposition of divine grace, then Helwys does not believe in it. He says,

It is a custom amongst men to conclude that free will must needs follow this understanding of universal redemption: and if their meaning were free will in Christ, and that we have free power and ability through Christ to worke out our salvation, and that through Christ we are made able to every good work, such a free will we hold. But that man hath any free will or power in himself to work his own salvation or to choose life, we utterly deny. . . . Thus Christ offering himself, man hath power and doth reject Christ, put the Word of God from him, resist the Holy Ghost, and freely of his own will work his own condemnation. But he hath no power at all to work his own salvation, and so much only to clear ourselves from that gross and fearful error of free will, from the which the Lord in great mercy hath freed us. The End. (sig. B7v).

CONCLUSION

Many who are unfamiliar with Baptist origins will be surprised to learn that Helwys, the first Baptist, was Arminian. As seen in the last paragraph, his Arminianism, like that of Arminius, was of a different sort from the more semi-Pelagian tendencies of the Waterlander Mennonites, which he rejected, the English Arminianism gaining popularity in his day, or the later Wesleyan-Holiness Arminianism of those who would follow John Wesley.¹⁷ It was a more grace-oriented Arminianism that emphasized that salvation was by grace alone, through faith alone, by the imputed righteousness of Christ alone, though divine grace is resistible. Helwys's plain-style approach in this first Baptist treatise on predestination laid the groundwork for more extensive works by General Baptist thinkers such as Thomas Grantham (e.g., *Christianismus Primitivus*).¹⁸ Probably because the Free Will Baptists are the only modern denomination historically connected to the seventeenth-century General Baptists, the Arminianism of Helwys and his successors has not been studied in the wider Baptist movement. Yet it remains a vital resource for understanding Arminian Baptist approaches to soteriology.

¹⁷See Pinson, "Sin and Redemption in the Theology of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys," and "Atonement, Justification, and Apostasy in the Thought of John Wesley," *Integrity: A Journal of Christian Thought* 4 (2008): 73-92.

¹⁸See J. Matthew Pinson, "The Diversity of Arminian Soteriology: Thomas Grantham, John Goodwin, and Jacobus Arminius" (paper presented at the national meeting of the American Society of Church History, Florida State University, Spring 1998).