

From Reformation to Revival

THE STORY OF BRITISH
EVANGELICALISM WITH
SPECIAL ATTENTION TO
THE PARTICULAR BAPTISTS,
1520s–1830s

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Kentucky
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The Reformation in the 16th century has to be counted among the two or three most important events in the past thousand years of church history. Figures like Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564) and their ideas about salvation and worship forever changed the religious, political, and cultural landscape of Europe. In England and Wales, the Reformation came during the reign of Henry VIII (1491–1547), but it was really not until the reign of his son Edward VI (1537–1553) and his daughter Elizabeth I (1533–1603) that it got a firm foothold. During the reign of Mary I (1516–1558), this eldest daughter of Henry VIII sought to bring England and Wales back into the fold of the Roman Catholic Church by killing the leading figures of the English Reformation, men such as Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) and Hugh Latimer (c.1485–1555), both of whom died as martyrs in Oxford. Cranmer has played a key role in reforming worship in England through his *Book of Common Prayer* (1549, 1552), while Hugh Latimer had excelled as a preacher. For both of these Reformers, preaching was central to the English Reformation. As Latimer affirmed:

Take away preaching, and take away salvation. . . . Christ is the preacher of all preachers, the pattern and the exemplar that all preachers ought to follow. For it was he by whom the Father of heaven said, *Hic est Filius meus dilectus, ipsum audite*, ‘This is my well-beloved Son, hear him.’¹

After Elizabeth I ascended the throne in 1558 there was little doubt that England was firmly in the Protestant orbit. The question that arose, though, was to what extent the Elizabethan state church would be reformed. It soon became clear that Elizabeth was content with a church that was “Calvinistic in theology, [but] Erastian in Church order and government [i.e. the state was ascendant over the church in these areas], and largely mediaeval in liturgy.”² It was in response to this “settledness” in the reformed Church of England that the Puritan movement arose.

“Without tarrying for anie”

The main theological concern of Puritanism was to effect a thoroughgoing reformation of the Elizabethan church after the model of the Reformed churches on the Continent, especially those in Geneva and Zürich. In these continental churches there was a definite attempt to include in the church’s worship only that which was explicitly commanded by Scripture. For instance, John Calvin, whose name is synonymous with the Reformation in Geneva, could declare with regard to the worship of the church that “nothing pleases God but what he himself has commanded us in his Word.”³ But Puritanism was about more than the reformation of the church’s worship and liturgy. In its essence, Puritanism was concerned with true spirituality that would lead to godliness in the home and in the nation as well as in the local parish church.

As the 16th century wore on, though, the goal of bringing about a full reformation of the English state church seemed no closer. When Elizabeth I died in 1603 and was succeeded by her relative, James VI of Scotland who now became James I (1566–1625) of England, Wales, and Scotland, the Puritans were thrilled since James had been raised in a Presbyterian environment in Scotland and most of the Puritans favored a Presbyterian-style government for the Church of England. What they did not know was that James hated Presbyterianism. At the Hampton Court Conference, held in January 1604, the Puritans had the opportunity to air their concerns directly to the king. But absolutely nothing came this meeting, except for the recommendation made by the Puritans that there be a new translation of the Bible. The

king loved this idea, and seven years later, the so-called King James Version/Authorized Version of the Bible was published, which, in time, became the Bible of the English-speaking peoples from the 17th century to the middle of the 20th century. It is noteworthy that 90% of the New Testament of the King James Version was actually taken from William Tyndale's (c.1494–1536) New Testament that he had translated in the 1520s and 1530s.⁴

Before the death of Elizabeth, a number of Puritans came to the conviction that the Church of England would never be fully reformed, and they decided to separate from the state church and organize their own congregations. These Puritans would be known as the Separatist movement, though their opponents more often called them “Brownists,” after their first leader Robert Browne (c.1550–1633), a graduate of Cambridge University. Browne's convictions were hammered out in Norwich, where he lived from 1580 to 1582. Browne's book, *A Treatise of Reformation without Tarrying for anie* (1582), became the “clarion-call” of the Separatist movement. In this influential tract, Browne set forth his views that, over the course of the next century, would become common property of all the theological children of the English Separatists, including the Baptists.

First of all, Browne willingly conceded the right of civil authorities to rule and to govern. However, he drew a distinct line between their powers in society at large and their power with regard to local churches. As citizens of the state the individual members of these churches were to be subject to civil authorities. However, he rightly emphasized, these authorities had no right “to compel religion, to plant Churches by power, and to force a submission to ecclesiastical government by laws and penalties.” Then, Browne conceived of the local church as a “gathered” church, that is, a company of Christians who had covenanted together to live under the rule of Christ, the Risen Lord, whose will was made known through his Word and his Spirit. The key principle that Browne had seen clearly was that the kingdom of God cannot be brought about by the decrees and dictates of state authorities. Ultimately, Browne perceived that Christianity is a matter of private conscience more than public order and that the church is a fellowship of believers rather than an army of conscripts.

“The compass of the Word”

It was among these Separatists, as they came to be known, that believer’s baptism was rediscovered, and Baptist congregations subsequently formed in the first half of the 17th century. The earliest Baptist group to develop was that of the General Baptists, so called because of their conviction that Christ died for all men and women. Along with this conviction went a firm commitment on the part of these Baptists to Arminian theology. Although historical research has tended to focus on this first group of Baptists, in the long run they are not tremendously significant, for the majority of General Baptist churches ended up in the arid wasteland of 18th century Arianism and Socinianism. The more influential Baptist group ultimately, the Calvinistic or Particular Baptists (so-called because of their commitment to particular redemption), appeared in the late 1630s. By the mid-1640s there were at least seven Particular Baptist congregations, all of them located in the metropolis of London. By 1660 the number of these Particular Baptist congregations had grown to roughly 130 and they were to be found throughout the British Isles.

This growth came during the period of the Civil Wars (1642–1651) that saw the Puritans and Parliament fighting against their monarch Charles I (1600–1649), the son of James I, for religious liberty. These wars ended in the establishment of a republic known as the Commonwealth and the execution of Charles I. “The world turned upside down” was the way that one historian, Christopher Hill, has described the social and political dislocation of this era. The leading political figure in the Commonwealth was Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), a man of remarkable Christian convictions and a firm advocate of religious toleration. This toleration afforded the Baptists a period of great growth. But these halcyon days were not to last. His death in 1658 spelt an end to this republican experiment and within two years the monarchy was restored in the person of Charles II (1630–1685).

Charles II was determined to destroy the military, political, and social power of the Puritans. Through a series of laws that came to be called the Clarendon Code and that were passed in the 1660s and 1670s, Charles succeeded in reducing the Puritans, including the

Particular Baptists, to the status of a persecuted minority of second-class citizens. Between 1660 and 1688 the Baptists, along with other groups outside of the Church of England like the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians (collectively known as the Dissenters or Non-conformists), were thus hurled into the fierce fires of state persecution. Baptists who refused to go along with these laws often ended up experiencing state harassment, paying substantial fines or undergoing life-threatening imprisonment. Probably the best-known Baptist figure of this early period of Baptist life is John Bunyan (1628–1688), whose ministry in Bedfordshire was greatly blessed by God and who spent twelve years in jail in Bedford for refusing to give up his calling as a gospel preacher. In the 17th century, though, his influence in Baptist circles was limited since he argued that believer's baptism was neither necessary for church membership nor reception of the Lord's Supper. Other key Baptist leaders, like the London Baptists William Kiffen (1616–1701) and Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), pastor of the congregation that would worship eventually in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, strongly opposed this position and argued for restricting membership in the local church to baptized believers. This perspective of closed membership and closed communion was the dominant Baptist position, which meant that Kiffen and Keach were the most influential Baptists of their day. Ironically, both Kiffen and Bunyan were laid to rest not far from each other in London's Bunhill Fields, the cemetery where thousands of English Baptists and other Dissenters like John Owen (1616–1683) and Isaac Watts (1674–1748) lie buried.

Shaped by their Reformation and Puritan roots, 18th-century Baptists were historically characterized by a spirituality of the Word. This spirituality was based on the affirmation of the infallibility of the Scriptures. As a 1651 Baptist tract against the Quakers has it, the Bible is “the infallible word of God...declaring his mind, making known his counsel, being able to make the people of God wise unto salvation.”⁵ Thus, because this was the nature of the Scriptures, they were central to the piety of the believer. A statement by the prominent William Kiffen well captures this fact when he stated in a funeral address for fellow Baptist, John Norcott (1621–1676) that Norcott “steered his

whole course by the compass of the Word, making Scripture precept or example his constant rule in matters of religion. Other men's opinions or interpretations were not the standard by which he went; but, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, he laboured to find out what the Lord himself had said in his word."⁶ This devotion to the Scriptures would be critical when these Baptist went through a period of stagnation and even decline in the 18th century.

"A very dunghill in society"

After thirty years of brutal persecution of all Dissenters, religious toleration came in 1689, and the Baptists, along with other Dissenters, were now free to plant and build congregations, though it was still illegal for them to evangelize outside of their church buildings. Yet, despite the advent of toleration, the denomination as a whole began to plateau in its growth and, in some parts of England, it actually went into decline. In 1715, for example, there were around 220 Calvinistic Baptist churches in England and Wales. By 1750 that number had been reduced to about 150.

Various reasons can be cited for this declension. For example, since it was illegal for Baptists to engage in mass evangelism outside of their meeting-houses, their money and effort began to be poured into the erection of church buildings instead of evangelistic outreach. Moreover, prior to the erection of a meeting-house, services might be held at a variety of geographical locations and thus a congregation could have an impact over a wide area. But once the building went up, members who lived at a distance were expected to make their way to the meeting-house, and thus the impact in the various locations was somewhat diminished. And despite the advent of religious freedom, there was still from time to time physical attacks on the Baptists and their meeting-houses.

Then there was the development of the theological position known as High Calvinism, sometimes called Hyper-Calvinism. Pastors and believers of this persuasion were rightly convinced that salvation is God's work from start to finish. On the basis of this conviction, however, they erroneously reasoned that since unbelievers are unable to turn to Christ, it was therefore unscriptural to urge them

to come to the Saviour. Genuinely desirous of exalting God's sovereignty in salvation, High Calvinist preachers shied away from calling all and sundry to repentance and faith, lest any of the credit for the salvation of sinners go to them. God, in his own time, would convert the elect and bring them into the churches of the Particular Baptist community.

Andrew Fuller (1754–1815), for instance, was raised in a Baptist work in the small village of Soham, not far from the university town of Cambridge. Its pastor was John Eve (d.1782), who had been set apart to preach the gospel by St. Andrew's Street Baptist Church, Cambridge, in 1749. Three years later Eve was ordained as the first pastor of the Baptist cause at Soham, where he ministered for nearly twenty years till his resignation in 1771. Eve appears to have been a typical High Calvinist. His preaching, as Fuller later recalled, "was not adapted to awaken [the] conscience," and he "had little or nothing to say to the unconverted."⁷ Thus, despite the fact that Fuller regularly attended the Baptist meeting-house with his family, he gave little heed or thought to the sermons that he heard. After his own conversion and call to the ministry in the 1770s and in spite of his own experience, Fuller found himself preaching much like Eve during the early years of his pastoral ministry. "Encumbered" with inhibitions, he could not bring himself to offer the gospel indiscriminately to sinners. As Andrew Fuller summed up the situation of his denomination: if the Baptists had continued in a state of decline much longer, they "should have been a very dunghill in society."⁸ And in the words of the Victorian historian John Stoughton (1807–1897), "spiritual torpor prevailed" in these congregations.⁹

"The outpouring of the Blessed Spirit"

It is vital to note that while many Baptists were in this state of declension, from the mid-1730s onwards there had been a tremendous movement of revival going on in Great Britain with such leaders as George Whitefield (1714–1770), the Wesley brothers—John (1703–1791) and Charles (1707–1788)—Howel Harris (1714–1773), William Grimshaw of Haworth (1708–1763), John Berridge of Everton (1716–1793), and John Newton (1725–1807). Known as the 18th-century

Evangelical Revival, the power of this movement is well depicted by Howel Harris in a letter that he wrote at the close of 1743 to George Whitefield, in which he said:

The outpouring of the Blessed Spirit is now so plentiful and common, that I think it was our deliberate observation that not one sent by Him opens his mouth without some remarkable showers. He comes either as a Spirit of wisdom to enlighten the soul, to teach and build up, and set out the works of light and darkness, or else a Spirit of tenderness and love, sweetly melting the souls like the dew, and watering the graces; or as the Spirit of hot burning zeal, setting their hearts in a flame, so that their eyes sparkle with fire, love, and joy; or also such a Spirit of uncommon power that the heavens seem to be rent, and hell to tremble.¹⁰

At the heart of the revival, superbly captured by this description, was the Christ-centred ministry of the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit of God moved powerfully throughout British society on both sides of the Atlantic, tens of thousands of men and women were shaken out of spiritual slumber and death, and drawn irresistibly to adore and to serve the Lord Christ. This revival also engendered a profound missionary expectation, as seen in the hymn of William Williams Pantycelyn (c.1717–1791), “O’er those gloomy hills of darkness”:

O’er those gloomy hills of darkness,
 Look, my soul; be still, and gaze;
 All the promises do travail
 With a glorious day of grace:
 Blessèd jubilee!
 Let thy glorious morning dawn. ...

Kingdoms wide that sit in darkness,
 Let them have the glorious light;
 And from eastern coast to western
 May the morning chase the night,

And redemption,
Freely purchased, win the day.

Fly abroad, thou mighty Gospel,
Win and conquer, never cease;
May thy lasting wide dominions
Multiply and still increase;
Sway thy scepter,
Savior! all the world around.

Many Particular Baptists, however, had deep reservations about the revival. The Wesleys, of course, were Arminians and thus beyond the pale for the *Calvinistic* Baptists. Furthermore, the Wesleys' view of the Baptists was hardly conducive to good relations. Here is Charles Wesley in 1756 speaking about the Baptists in his diary. In his words, Baptists were "a carnal..., contentious sect, always watching to steal away our children, and make them as dead as themselves."¹¹ However, George Whitefield was a Calvinist. Yet, the fervency of his evangelism and his urging of the lost to embrace Christ prompted a number of Baptist critics to complain of what they termed his "Arminian accent."

Most importantly, the Baptists were disturbed by the fact that the earliest leaders in the revival belonged to the Church of England. Their Baptist forebears, after all, had come out of the Church of England at great personal cost and suffering, and they had suffered for their determination to establish true gospel churches. The heritage that came down to the 18th-century Particular Baptists was thus intertwined with a great concern for proper New Testament church order.

"Devoting ourselves wholly to be the Lord's"

The Particular Baptists did not emerge from their spiritual "winter" until the last two or three decades of the century. There were a variety of reasons for what amounts to a profound revival among their ranks. First, there was theological reformation, in which the High Calvinism of the past was largely rejected in favour of a truly

evangelical Calvinism. *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, written by Andrew Fuller and published in 1785, was the book that crystallized this movement of theological renewal. Fuller was a farmer by occupation, a big, broad-shouldered man who resembled, in the words of the Evangelical abolitionist, William Wilberforce (1759–1833), “the very picture of a blacksmith.” Yet, in the words of the Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892) Fuller was “the greatest theologian” that the Baptists had throughout the late 18th and 19th centuries.¹² It has been rightly said that Fuller “stands first in the Evangelical school of his day; and perhaps no one had so much influence as he upon Nonconformist theological opinions during... the first quarter” of the 19th century.¹³ It was during his first pastorate in the village of Soham, Cambridgeshire, from 1775 to 1782 that Fuller wrote the substance of the above-mentioned book. In it he convincingly demonstrated on the basis of the Scriptures that it is the duty of all who hear the gospel to put their faith in Christ and the corresponding duty of pastors to preach the gospel clearly and plainly to all, using “free and solemn addresses, invitations, calls, and warnings... to bring them to Christ.”¹⁴

Then there were calls for repentance. For instance, Andrew Fuller, in his *Causes of Declension in Religion, and Means of Revival* (1785), outlined the spiritual apathy then reigning among many Baptists of his day:

It is to be feared the old puritanical way of devoting ourselves wholly to be the Lord’s, resigning up our bodies, souls, gifts, time, property, with all we have and are to serve him, and frequently renewing these covenants before him, is now awfully neglected. This was to make a business of religion, a life’s work, and not merely an accidental affair, occurring but now and then, and what must be attended to only when we can spare time from other arrangements. Few seem to aim, pray, and strive after eminent love to God and one other.¹⁵

Seeking to change this dire situation, Fuller suggested:

If it is required ‘What then is to be done? Wherein in particular can we glorify God more than we have done?’, we answer by asking: ...Have we been sufficiently earnest and constant in private prayer? Are there none of us that have opportunities to set apart particular times to pray for the effusion of the Holy Spirit? Can we do more than we have done in instructing our families? Are there none of our dependents, workmen, or neighbours that we might speak to, at least so far as to ask them to go and hear the gospel? Can we rectify nothing in our tempers and behaviour in the world so as better to recommend religion?... Cannot we save a little more of our substance to give to the poor? In a word, is there no room or possibility left for our being more meek, loving, and resembling the blessed Jesus than we have been?¹⁶

Above all, Fuller emphasizes, there must be prayer.

Finally, brethren, let us not forget to intermingle prayer with all we do. Our need of God’s Holy Spirit to enable us to do anything, and everything, truly good should excite us to this. Without his blessing all means are without efficacy and every effort for revival will be in vain. Constantly and earnestly, therefore, let us approach his throne. Take all occasions especially for closet prayer; here, if anywhere, we shall get fresh strength and maintain a life of communion with God. Our Lord Jesus used frequently to retire into a mountain alone for prayer, he, therefore, that is a follower of Christ, must follow him in this important duty.¹⁷

“That the Holy Spirit may be poured down”

The year before Fuller wrote these words there had actually begun regular, monthly meetings for prayer, which met for one specific object: to pray for biblical revival. The origin of these prayer meetings can be traced back to the year 1784, to a town called Nottingham in the heart of England, where in June of that year, the pastors of the Baptist churches belonging to the Northamptonshire Association were meeting. Earlier that year a treatise on corporate prayer for revival by Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), the New England divine, had come

into the hands of John Sutcliff (1752–1814), the Baptist pastor of Olney, Buckinghamshire, and a close friend of Fuller. Sutcliff was well described by one who knew him well as a man in whom “humility diffused itself over the whole of his character and deportment, and gave it a certain beauty which no artifice could successfully imitate.”¹⁸

Deeply impressed and moved by this treatise, Sutcliff proposed to his fellow pastors, including Fuller and their good friend John Ryland, Jr. (1753–1825), that a monthly prayer meeting be established to pray for the outpouring of God’s Spirit not only upon the Baptist churches of England, but also upon all those churches that loved the Lord Jesus. The key paragraph of this proposal ran as follows:

The grand object of [our] prayer is to be that the Holy Spirit may be poured down on our ministers and churches, that sinners may be converted, the saints edified, the interest of religion revived, and the name of God glorified. At the same time, remember, we trust you will not confine your requests to your own societies [i.e. churches]; or to your own immediate connection [i.e. denomination]; let the whole interest of the Redeemer be affectionately remembered, and the spread of the gospel to the most distant parts of the habitable globe be the object of your most fervent requests. We shall rejoice if any other Christian societies of our own or other denominations will unite with us, and do now invite them most cordially to join heart and hand in the attempt.¹⁹

There are three noteworthy items about this text. First, there is the conviction that without the Holy Spirit all of the church’s best efforts to bring men and women to Christ will fail and all of her noblest attempts to edify God’s people and bring glory to God’s name will fall short of success. The Spirit is the true agent of renewal and revival. Thus, there was a desperate need for prayer. Then, there is the “inclusive” nature of the praying. As the Particular Baptists of this Association came together for prayer, they were urged not to pray solely for their own churches or even for their own denomination, but to embrace in prayer other Baptist churches throughout the length and breadth of England, and

also churches of other denominational bodies, including, as it turns out, parish churches of the Established Church. Finally, there is a definite missionary focus: the readers of this call to prayer are encouraged to pray that there would be a spread of the gospel “to the most distant parts of the habitable globe.”

“The Lord is doing great things”

In 1794, ten years after the call to pray for revival, John Rippon (1750–1836)—pastor of the London Baptist congregation that Benjamin Keach had once pastored and that Charles Haddon Spurgeon would pastor from 1854 to 1892—published a list of Particular Baptist congregations and ministers. He estimated that there were at that time 326 churches in England and 56 in Wales, more than double the number which had existed in 1750. He printed another list of churches four years later, according to which the numbers had grown to 361 churches in England and 84 in Wales. Reflecting on these numbers, Rippon wrote, “It is said, that more of our meeting houses have been enlarged, within the last five years, and built within the last fifteen, than had been built and enlarged for thirty years before.”

Rippon was not exaggerating. There was indeed steady growth among the Particular Baptists during the last four decades of the eighteenth century, but it was not until the final decade of the century that there was a truly rapid influx of converts. It is surely no coincidence that preceding and accompanying this growth were the concerts of prayer that many churches had established in response to the Prayer Call of 1784.

One of the early fruits of this awakening among the Baptists was the formation of the Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Heathen in 1792, later known as the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS). Included among the items recommended for prayer in the Prayer Call of 1784 had been “the spread of the gospel to the most distant parts of the habitable globe.” God began to answer this prayer in the early 1790s: first, by providing a man with the desire to go and evangelize peoples to whom the name of Christ was completely unknown, namely, William Carey (1761–1834), the so-called father of the modern missionary movement.

Carey had been converted in the late 1770s, baptized in 1783 by John Ryland, and had become a member of the church that John Sutcliff pastored in Olney. Not long after his conversion Carey was gripped by the responsibility that the church had been given by the risen Christ in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20) to spread the good news to the ends of the earth. The formation of the Baptist Missionary Society was a direct result of prayer for revival and Carey's biblical passion for gospel expansion. Carey was sent to India in 1793 by the BMS; he laboured there until his death in 1834.

The impact of his missionary labours can be well seen in the following extract from a letter by an Anglican evangelical named Thomas Scott (1747–1821), who had known Carey in his early years. Writing on December 3, 1814, to John Ryland, Scott stated:

I do most heartily rejoice in what your missionaries are doing in India. Their's is the most regular and best conducted plan against the kingdom of darkness that modern times have shewn; and I augur the most extensive success. More genuine Christian wisdom, fortitude, and disinterested assiduity, perseverance, and patience appear, than I elsewhere read of. May God protect and prosper! May all India be peopled with true Christians!—even though they be all Baptists . . . The Lord is doing great things, and answering prayer everywhere.²⁰

The Particular Baptists were enjoying a profound season of spiritual awakening, a season that culminated in many ways with the remarkable ministry of the Victorian Baptist, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892).

Endnotes

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² Robert C. Walton, *The Gathered Community* (London: The Carey Press, 1946), 59.

³ John Calvin, *Daniel I (Chapters 1-6)*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co./Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1993), 130.

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¹³ Stoughton, *History of Religion in England*, VI, 374–375.

¹⁴ Andrew Fuller, *Confession of Faith XV* (1783) in Michael A.G. Haykin, ed., *The Armies of the Lamb: The spirituality of Andrew Fuller* (Dundas, ON: Joshua Press, 2001), 279.

¹⁵ Andrew Fuller, *Causes of Declension in Religion, and Means of Revival* in *Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 320.

¹⁶ Fuller, *Causes of Declension in Religion* in *Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 320.

¹⁷ Fuller, *Causes of Declension in Religion* in *Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 324.

¹⁸ The opinion of Robert Hall, Jr. (1764–1831) as cited in Stoughton, *History of Religion in England*, VI, 365.

¹⁹ John Sutcliff, “The Prayer Call of 1784” in John Ryland, Jr., *The Nature, Evidences, and Advantages, of Humility* (Circular Letter of the Northamptonshire Association, 1784), 12.

²⁰ John Scott, *Letters and Papers of the Rev. Thomas Scott* (London: L. B. Seeley and Son, 1824), 254.

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