Childhood, Youth and Religious Minorities

'All things necessary for their saluation'? The Dedham Ministers and the 'Puritan' Baptism Debates

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On December 6th 1583, a group of ministers were called to Lambeth Palace to meet with the Archbishop of Canterbury and a number of bishops—including those of London, Salisbury and Rochester—alongside the Dean of Westminster. John Whitgift was in his first few months as Archbishop of Canterbury, and was determined to pull back from some of the more 'godly' ways endorsed and tolerated by his predecessor, Edmund Grindal. The group of ministers, all hailing from Sussex, were some of the first to be seen by Whitgift during the early stages of the 'subscription struggle', which saw ministers who acted as agitators for further religious reform required to endorse Whitgift's Three Articles, or lose their living.[1] In their meetings with the bishops, the ministers questioned and contested the beliefs and articles of faith they were now being asked to avow, seeking concessions in return. In particular, they had three key issues which they wanted to discuss with their new Archbishop. Each involved those 'Rubrikes' of the Book of Common Prayer that dealt with infant baptism.

This chapter will examine the views of the Dedham ministers, and others who followed a zealous Protestant position, to unpick their beliefs about baptism. It will argue that the more radical reformers' anxieties surrounding the spiritual status of infants, expressed through clerical debate and within puritan polemical literature alike, influenced and shaped wider Protestant culture. What was distinctive about these anxieties was an unfettered fear of sin, and of the power of human sin. The godly emphasised the role of original sin, the sin held by women and the sin of the

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[1] In The Dedham Conference notes, Matthew Parker records that the ministers involved in this encounter were from London, but this detail has been corrected in Patrick Collinson, John Craig and Brett Usher (eds.), *Conferences and Combination Lectures in the Elizabethan Church: Dedham and Bury St Edmunds, 1582-1590* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2003), p. 108. The ministers, who were in fact from Sussex, were caught up in Whitgift's attempts to gain control and influence during the vacancy of Chichester.

newly born child, in a way that powerfully shaped Protestant perceptions of the very young. By doing this, puritan agitators in turn found themselves in the position of emphasising the importance of the sacrament of baptism, a sacrament they simultaneously argued needed to be simplified and downplayed within the English Church. This chapter will therefore bring together the histories of Protestant and puritan belief, those about baptism and those about childhood, infancy and women, to consider how the rite of baptism was negotiated during the English Reformation.

The Sussex ministers were some of the many in Elizabethan England who believed in the importance of properly reformed religious discipline—something they felt was decidedly lacking in the Elizabethan Church—and who gathered in 'conferences' of like-minded ministers to discuss such matters. In their edited volume of Sussex's Dedham conference and lectures, Patrick Collinson *et al.* describe the ministers as possessing an unconsciously 'Presbyterian ecclesiology' which was in 'embryo' form, and as 'so-called Puritans'.[2] These are terms, of course, that the ministers would never have used or recognised themselves. Indeed, the term 'puritans' cannot be used without consideration. Before delving more deeply into the histories of infancy and baptism in post-Reformation England, it would be wise, then, to define the language being used here.

The histories of reformed belief, and most especially the histories of the interaction between the Protestant mainstream and those who may have believed themselves to be godly—or puritan, as they may have been called by the seventeenth century—have been the subject of much historiographical debate, recent and otherwise. Much of this questioning centres on considering what that relationship between 'puritans', who held a more radical viewpoint within the post-Reformation Church establishment, and those who held more moderate Protestant beliefs, actually *was*. This chapter proceeds from the assumption that the godly did subscribe to a more intense version of Calvinist theology, and that this 'hotter' form of Protestant faith could place them into opposition with the established Church, as the Sussex ministers' experience at

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[2] *Ibid,* p. xxii.

Lambeth palace can reveal. As the Dedham volume editors state:

> […] the so-called puritans whom we meet in the documents published in this volume are not to be defined in themselves as a distinct religious species but only in the context of the imperfectly reformed church in which, as highly committed and fully informed protestants, they stood out as so many sore thumbs, a minority group, often obnoxious to the majority, and identifiable to themselves as 'the godly'.[3]

Indeed, the puritan figure is a slippery one, and often evades tight definition: their difference, or otherness, was relative to the position in which they found themselves within the contexts of the post-Reformation English Church. Their more radical faith existed on the broader spectrum of Protestant belief and practice: we must not forget that the godly sat on pews next to, and lived alongside, Protestants of varying degrees of belief. Some puritans were moderate in their beliefs—and, simultaneously, as Alexandra Walsham has argued, 'zealous Protestantism' could be a popular religion.[4] It was also possible at this time to hold puritan opinions without being someone who was, or who defined themselves as, a puritan: as Alec Ryrie has suggested, the term 'puritan' is 'better used as an adjective than a noun'.[5]

The subject of infant baptism, which was the matter under discussion at Lambeth in late 1583, is a useful window through which to glimpse the competing religious relationships and tensions at work in post-Reformation England. One of the characteristics that defined adjectival puritanism was a more intense emphasis on, or anxiety surrounding, human sin—and baptism was in this regard a critical point of

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[3] *Ibid*, p. xxiv.

[4] Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 325; Peter Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[5] Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 6. On Puritans being seen as participants within a broader Protestant continuum, see, for example, Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Walsham, *Providence*.

contention between believers of many stripes. If we look more deeply into these relationships and their resultant theological discussions, it is possible to see that encounters between those with godly convictions, like our Sussex ministers, and the official Church—as represented by the bishops sat before them at Lambeth—were not simply ones of opposition. Indeed, whilst Whitgift attempted to weed out the more zealous or radical ministers working within the Elizabethan Church, he himself was a committed predestinarian.[6] Diarmaid MacCulloch has pointed out that 'conformists' like Whitgift were not so much anti-puritan as confident that there was 'nothing in the existing settlement of the Church that was an obstacle to godly reformation'.[7] This is a subtler relationship than simple antagonism, involving questions of means as much as disagreements on ends.

Of course, religious debate and divide *did* exist in post-Reformation England, especially during the pre-Civil War fervour of the 1630s; but it would be anachronistic to read back these later debates on to the experiences of the godly throughout the whole of the Reformation period, or to allow them to distract us from moments of cohesion and compromise. When we explore the lives of people, when we unpick the lived experience of their faith and their pastoral realities, the significance of these notional boundaries between 'puritan' and 'moderate' begin to blur. The godly, especially during the late sixteenth century, as can again be seen in the Lambeth meetings and in the Dedham conference more widely, sought discussion and clarity within the frameworks of the established Church. In this way, godly ministers operated within, alongside and as part of the mainstream Church. For instance, authors who held puritan convictions, such as William Perkins, who will form part of our discussion, wrote texts which set out to influence the religious mainstream. Within this situation, the godly did not necessarily hold a minority position, and certainly not an isolated one: they were in fact influencing and helping to shape the English Protestant Church. As a result, English Protestant faith operated on a spectrum, with levels of intensity varying, both in the experiences of particular

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[6] Peter Marshall, *Reformation England 1480-1642* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003) p. 139.
[7] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided* (London: Penguin, 2004), pp.384-5. MacCulloch goes on in the same passage to refer to a 'spectrum of nonconformism', which is an especially useful phrase.

Christians, and even waxing and waning throughout the life-cycles of the same individuals.

This chapter will, then, situate puritans within this wider context to which they belonged: that is, their position was relative as much as it was absolute—they situated themselves by reference to the mainstream Protestant position, and were a crucial part of the dialogue that formed it. The terms 'godly' and 'puritan' will here be used to refer to those who held, at one time or another and with varying intensity, particularly zealous sets of Protestant convictions. These people may or may not have identified as such, and their relationship to any notional 'mainstream' will have shifted over time; their views existed within a wider Protestant landscape, and helped to shape early modern Protestant experience from within.

Official Baptism, the Sussex Ministers and the Three 'Rubrikes':

This brings us back to Lambeth Palace in 1583, and to the issue of infant baptism. Some of the most obvious of the spiritual fault-lines evoked above, at which points the religious debates of the period surfaced more obtrusively than others, were moments when the soul of an individual, or group of individuals, appeared to be in the most danger. One of the most prominent of these moments, of course, was the period of infancy, most especially the time between birth and baptism. Indeed, baptism became a site of particular tension and anxiety during the period of the English reformations, and as a result became a point of negotiation between those with puritan convictions and the Church establishment.[8] Given their particular focus on sin and

[8] For further reading on the Reformation baptism ceremony, from social and religious perspectives, see Will Coster ''Tokens of Innocence': Infant Baptism, Death and Burial in Early Modern England', in Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (eds), *The Place of The Dead in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and his *Baptism and Spiritual Kinship in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) chapters 5-8; Anna French, 'Disputed Words and Disputed Meanings: The Reformation of Baptism, Infant Limbo and Child Salvation in Early Modern England', in Jonathan Willis (ed.), *Sin and Salvation in Reformation England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); Karen E. Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva: The Shaping of a Community, 1536-1564* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

salvation, puritan anxieties about the uncertainty of the infant soul helped in this arena to shape Protestant opinion more widely, and this process will be the subject of the rest of this chapter.

One of the main reasons for this anxiety and tension was the disputed nature and status of infants at this time. The image of the infant, both before and after birth, was one of a creature in a state of physical and spiritual liminality, a creature who had come from the body of a woman, and who did not yet 'know' God. According to the bible, women were created as secondary to men, as helpmeet to their male companions, a view various Protestant writers adopted. As William Perkins, a puritan turned mainstream author, argued, 'The male is a man of a superior sexe, fit for procreation. The female is a woman of inferior sexe, fit to conceive and beare children'.[9] Furthermore, Protestants, especially those with more radical convictions, focused intensely on the sinful nature of the female body, and these perceptions were interconnected with the processes of pregnancy and childbirth, as well as with infants.[10] Baptism, as the ceremony of infants, became a key part of this struggle over who—or perhaps what—an infant was or could become. This was a rite that was, in its official format, sometimes experienced by those with puritan leanings as an imposition by an 'ungodly' mainstream, and negotiations between different members of the Protestant faith can tell us much about perceptions of infants and infant salvation at this time.

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[9] On early modern perceptions of procreation see Patricia Crawford, 'The Construction and Experience of Maternity in Seventeenth-Century England' in her *Blood, Bodies and Families in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2004); Gail Kern Paster's 'Complying with the Dug: Narratives of Birth and the Reproduction of Shame' in her *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Anne Stensvold, *A History of Pregnancy in Christianity: From Original Sin to Contemporary Abortion Debates* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015). See also William Perkins, *Christian Oeconomie* (London, 1609), *STC* (2nd ed.) 19677, p. 24.

[10] Genesis 2:18–25. See William Perkins on the inferiority of women in his *Christian Oeconomie*, p. 24; on discussions of the sinful nature of the female body in historiography see, for example, Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003);
Susan Karant-Nunn, Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1997) esp. ch. 2.

In the English Church, it was the Book of Common Prayer that laid out the approved form of Protestant baptism. The second of Whitgift's Three Articles demanded ministers declare that the Book 'containeth in it nothing contrary to the word of God'. The Book of Common Prayer had a history of revisions, but in 1583 the most recent edition was still the 1559 version—and yet its stipulations remained so controversial that Whiftgift felt it necessary to demand of his Church's ministers explicit approval for it. The Sussex ministers, like many who sought further reform of the Church, believed that the Book gave rise to ambiguity and doubt, in their case especially concerning the rite of baptism. These concerns, therefore, 'moved them to require of the said most reverend father and the rest afore […the] interpretation of the said Rubrikes'.[11] The ministers argued that they should not be required to subscribe to any belief or action that was against the word of God, and that anything that they did preach or teach needed to be 'according to the Analogy of faith'.[12] What they meant by this was simply that they should not be asked to perform any rite or religious duty which might imply or introduce scriptural contradiction. As a hermeneutical principle, the 'analogy of faith' held that scripture does not contain internal contradictions, but is rather harmonious across its parts—as one would expect, given it was believed to be the word of God. For the ministers, any interpretation of any biblical passage had to be matched with other sections of the bible, to ensure that they—that is, the interpretation, not the passage, since the former was the element derived from human reasoning—did not contradict any other passage. Before they could subscribe to the Three Articles (and thus retain their living), then, they sought clarification that the interpretations Whitgift championed were consistent with godly understanding of scripture.

Critically, some of the issues that concerned them found their root in an effort on the part of the authorities to assuage the anxieties of believers at the other end of the spectrum—those who might miss such things as the signings of the cross or the use of salts during baptism. For their part, the ministers' concerns with the baptism ceremony as it was set out in the Book of Common Prayer, and as the Church was

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[11] Collinson, Craig and Usher (eds.), *Conferences and Combination Lectures*, p. 109.
[12] *Ibid*. p. 109.

requiring its ministers to perform it, were three-fold. First, they were worried about the relationship between baptism and confirmation, and its implications for the conferment of grace and infant salvation; secondly, they held uncertainties about the use of the 'crosse in baptism' and finally they expressed doubts about private or emergency baptism, and the implied role of women within such a rite.

These discussions took place against the backdrop of the second half of Elizabeth I's reign, in which Archbishops Whitgift and Bancroft pursued a strategy aimed at imposing conformity across the Church, and the ministers' encounter with Whitgift was not untypical during the 1580s. This was a period in which the established Church became more conservative and disciplinarian, as it sought to foster greater conformity across the Church. On the one hand, the Elizabethan Church attempted to row back on some of the more subversive forms of Protestantism which had been influenced by an earlier generation of Marian exiles; on the other, Elizabeth's reign had always struggled to accommodate lingering Catholic, or quasi-Catholic, beliefs. In both respects, what parishioners *felt* was often quite separate to what they were required publicly to profess, and their expectations were often quite different to what might be implied by or contained within official doctrine.[13] As Micheline White has argued, for example, from the 1560s onwards the Elizabethan Church became concerned with reforming 'all aspects of private prayer, including the assumptions readers brought into their devotional closets; the way they interpreted the meaning of the Biblical verses in front of them; and the way they translated those meanings into lived devotional performances.'[14]

The phrase 'lived devotional performances' is important when we consider all acts of worship, and what was implied or interpreted by or through them: the liturgy itself, as set out in the Book of Common Prayer, was to be acted and performed by ministers to

[13] For emotional responses to reformed faith, see esp. Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling: Shaping the Religious Emotions in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and also Ryrie, *Being Protestant*.
[14] Micheline White, 'Dismantling Catholic Primers and Reforming Private Prayer: Anne Lock, Hezekiah's Song and Psalm 50/51', in Jessica Martin and Alec Ryrie (eds.) *Private and Domestic Devotion in Early Modern Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) p. 113.

their congregations. That involved an exchange between minister and parishioner—between Church and church-goer—that was being negotiated within the pages of the Book of Common Prayer just as much as its doctrinal orthodoxy was being disputed at Lambeth Palace. All ministers, puritan or otherwise, were keen to provide assurances to their flocks. The concern of the Archbishop, and other defenders of the Book of Common Prayer, was that the congregation took away with them the correct messages from liturgical rites such as baptism. Confirmation and crossings were seen to be lingering popish rituals which had no place in Protestant worship as it was to be enacted by Church ministers, and therefore not just references to any suspicious beliefs or practices had to be removed, but also any room for continued confusion, misreading or anxiety amongst parishioners that may result from those excisions.

All this brings us back to our ministers, who were concerned over the tightening of regulations and the wording used within them. On their first concern, the relationship between baptism and confirmation, ministers raised doubts surrounding the words used in the preface of the Catechism in the Communion Book, which aimed to reassure parents that 'no detriment' would come to their children if they delayed confirmation. What the Book of Common Prayer intended to do was to reassure those in the pews that confirmation was not, as they might erroneously believe, necessary as sort of 'seal' on salvation—that the only rite a child needed to be welcomed into the Church was infant baptism. The Book thus emphasised: 'children being baptised haue all things necessary for their saluation and be undoubtedly saued'.[15] In so doing, it introduced an ambiguity: what the ministers wanted to know was whether these passages meant that the Church of England was effectively arguing that the baptism ceremony itself *actively* conferred grace ('*grace tanquam ex opera operato*'). This would not have been in line with scripture or Protestant theology (baptism being a sign of token or God's grace, not the conferment of it). The group of bishops and the Archbishop assured the ministers that the 'booke had noe such meaning', and that they were intended to dissuade believers 'from the opinion which the papistes had', which they argued implied that children were not 'perfectlie baptised until they be also bishopped'. In short, Whitgift sought to prevent any members of a given

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[15] Collinson, Craig and Usher (eds.), *Conferences and Combination Lectures*, p. 109.

congregation wrongly linking confirmation, or ‘bishoppinge’ with beliefs about salvation. The Archbishop also assured the ministers that the Church of England’s rite of baptism contained in it nothing contrary to the word of God, as it sought to ensure that ‘children may know what their godfathers promised for them in their baptisme and also lerne to performe the same’. For puritans, and for Protestants more widely, one of the most important aspects of the baptism ceremony was that it constituted a beginning (a word used in the 1552 and 1559 Books of Common Prayer): it was not as an end in itself, and did not assure salvation. It was, rather, the beginning of a child’s Christian life and journey. The ministers concluded, then, that ‘they were satisfied’ with Whitgift’s answer.[16]

On the second point, the ‘Rubrike’ on the ‘forme of baptisme’ asked the priest to ‘make a crosse on the childs forehead’.[17] The role of crossings in baptism held traditional connotations and associations with baptismal exorcism. As Eamon Duffy argues, the sign of the cross was seen by Catholics to be a sacred ‘formulae’ which could ‘banish the Devil’—and as such became, during the periods of the Reformation and post-Reformation, a highly contentious issue.[18] The traditional exorcism (as it had appeared in the Catholic ceremony) was removed in the second Book of Common Prayer in 1552, but beliefs about its efficacy still lingered within the popular imagination.[19] The ministers therefore desired to know whether the crossing was to be an addition to the ceremony, and framed as a crucial part of it—which could potentially imply that, without the signing, baptism would be perceived to be ‘imperfecte’. Whitgift’s party, however, answered that the book had ‘no such meaning’ and that ‘the crossing of the child was only a ceremony significant and a profitable circumstance according to the words expressed in the booke’.[20] The ministers recorded in their own minutes of this exchange that they were indeed content with this answer, but zealous Protestants remained, in practice, sceptical and

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[16] *Ibid*, p. 109.
[17] *Ibid*. p. 109.
[18] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992) p. 281. See also Cressy’s chapter ‘Baptism as a Sacrament and Drama’, in his *Birth, Marriage and Death*; French ‘Disputed Words and Disputed Meanings’.
[19] For the traditional Catholic ceremony, see J.D.C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation in the Medieval West. A Study in the Disintegration of the Primitive Rite of Initiation* (London: S.P.C.K., 1965).
[20] Collinson, Craig and Usher (eds.), *Conferences and Combination Lectures*, p. 109.

critical of continued crossings throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England as across Europe, and continued to agitate for an urgent need to remove any hint of exorcism in order to be a truly reformed faith.[21]

The ministers' third and final baptism-orientated concern was thornier, as it related to the possibility that women could baptise an infant—or, as the ministers put it, 'the last doubte was of baptising by women'. Baptism by women would take place privately, and was a form of the rite which was traditionally reserved for emergencies, when it seemed that an infant might die before a minister could reach them. Many Protestants, including those with puritan convictions, held strong feelings about private, or emergency, baptism—and yet the rite was retained in each edition of the Book of Common Prayer. These anxieties continued for two key reasons: firstly because the private baptism provision inevitably involved women (as the ministers were fully aware), as women in the birthing room were the most likely to meet an infant who was in grave danger. Thus, the rite was seen to be specifically giving women the authority to baptise, which was seen as problematic—in part due to their lay status, but mainly, as was the case with our ministers, due to the perceived lesser authority compared to men. In 1559, Archbishop Matthew Parker had declared that private baptism was to be reserved, out of necessity, for those babies who may die soon after birth. But even he emphasised that women baptising the young was the very last resort, arguing that, if no minister was present, it would be best to locate a 'grave and sober man' to undertake the task: in other words, it was merely preferable that the baptiser be ordained; it was their gender that, except in the most extreme cases, was non-negotiable.[22]

Just over a decade before our ministers arrived at Lambeth, the 'puritan' authors of the *Admonition* of 1572 argued that 'baptism by women', was a lingering popish hangover, needed to be stopped. They complained that women baptising infants

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[21] On the efforts of the Reformed to thoroughly cleanse the baptism ceremony from any 'popish' trappings, see, Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), esp. pp. 220-222.
[22] Edward Cardwell (ed.), *Documentary Annals of the Reformed Church of England*, Vol 1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1844), p. 238.

'meddle in ministers' affairs' across the whole country.[23] Whitgift had also attempted to tackle this puritan discontent more widely, when defending the Church's position against the writings of the more radical Thomas Cartwright. He maintained that the sacrament 'remaineth in full force and strength, of whomsoever it be ministered', and further that 'the sacrament is not in the man, be he minister or not minister, be he good or evil, but in God himself, in his Spirit, and his free and effectual operation'.[24] Cartwright, meanwhile, had protested that 'I take the baptism of women to be no more the holy sacrament of baptism, than I take any other daily or ordinary washing of the child'.[25] Whitgift responded to this by reminding Cartwright, and the readers of his works, that if it were true that only ministers could baptise, 'then there be many that go under the name of Christians which were never baptized', including the 'divers' people to have been 'baptised by women'. Whitgift used Calvin's *Institutes* to defend his position, and called the views of Cartwright 'strange' and 'absurd' when compared to the views of other reformers: thus again revealing the fact that so-called mainstream moderates were similarly influenced by Calvinism, and therefore blurring and complicating the notion of a hard-and-fast divide between them and those we may term puritans.[26] Yet, for our ministers, and those who shared their views, the continued provision for *any* woman to be able to deliver the sacrament of baptism, as well as the continued position of the mainstream Church on the matter, remained, to say the least, problematic.

Emergency baptism occasioned a secondary concern, too: any provision for it implied that baptism was necessary for salvation. Although the ministers do not refer to it here, many Protestants, most especially puritans, widely disputed the need for emergency baptism because they held that, through the doctrine of predestination, God had decreed who was to be elect before birth, and no watery washing at the hands of any minister (or layperson, female or male) would or could alter or influence the salvation, or destination, of the child's soul. In this sense, 'emergency baptism' was oxymoronic: for the godly in particular, there was never an urgency behind any

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[23] 'An Admonition to the Parliament', in W.H. Frere and C.E. Douglas (eds.) *Puritan Manifestoes: A Study in the Origin of Puritan Revolt* (London: S.P.C.K, 1954) pp. 11, 26.
[24] John Ayre (ed.), *The Works of John Whitgift*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1851-3), ii. 528-9.
[25] *Ibid*, p. 525.
[26] *Ibid*, p. 525-7.

baptism: as Cartwright had argued, such a belief was 'founded upon a false ground, and upon an imagined necessity (which is none indeed)'.[27] This being the case, there seemed, to the more radical, little need to allow specific provision for ensuring the ceremony could happen *in extremis*.[28] The zealous ministers were, in other words, keen to prevent baptism being seen as a transformative rite, or one that was necessary to save a soul. They followed those such as Zwingli, who argued that any ritual which may be confused for exorcism, or any private baptism, was superfluous and superstitious, as the rite was simply one which offered a newborn initiation into their new community. There was no need, then, for the rite to be performed in private, away from that community.[29]

In the most obvious example of constructive ambiguity to be found amongst the ministers' exchanges with Whitgift, the bishops responded to the doubts surrounding private baptism by arguing that the Book of Common Prayer did not 'name' women, which presumably implied that the ministers could therefore subscribe whilst also forbidding or discouraging private baptism by women in their parishes, without strictly being in contravention of their beliefs or the Book of Common Prayer (one assumes that the same, however, would be true for a minister holding that emergency baptism was permissible and women ideally suited to providing it).[30] On this point, the ministers did not comment on whether or not they were pleased with the response they were given, perhaps not being fully reassured that the absence of the word 'women' was enough to prevent the gender from being involved in emergency baptisms (which clearly, it was not). Furthermore, their anxiety over the involvement of women was a position arising from an intense puritan focus on female sin and inferiority.

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[27] *Ibid*, p. 525.
[28] For further reading on emergency baptism after the Reformation, see esp. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and* Death, esp. ch. 5; Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation* Geneva, esp. ch. 5; Hannah Cleugh, 'Teaching in Praying Words? Worship and Theology in the Early Modern English Parish', in Natalie Mears and Alec Ryrie (eds.) *Worship and the Parish Church in Early Modern Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) esp. pp. 22-23.
[29] Spierling, *Infant Baptism*, p. 32.
[30] Collinson, Craig and Usher (eds.), *Conferences and Combination Lectures*, p. 109.

The puritan emphasis on sin—and most especially their emphasis on female sin, and the infant sin which was acquired by babies' necessary closeness to women—paradoxically leant greater significance to the baptism ceremony, and to the resultant desire to preserve its integrity. Baptism, for Protestants of all shades of opinion, did not and could not save a child; but it *could* confer status, independence and identity; with all its traditional connotations, it continued to provide a necessary separation from the sinful woman who gave birth to a child. Indeed, as others have argued, the rite of baptism held all the symbolism and meaning of rituals associated with separation of rebirth. Baptism was, and is still, seen to be a fundamental rite of passage, where the baby leaves the body of the woman, and is brought to a new space to undergo, as Cressy argues, 'rites of separation'; as Spierling suggests, baptism had a long tradition of being a ritual which 'separated the child from the evil that still clung to him or her from the 'pre-life' stage'; and as Adriano Prosperi tells it, baptism was 'birth in spirit, the rebirth of the soul'.[31] Against this fraught theological, liturgical and pastoral backdrop, the puritans did indeed have a difficult task trying to challenge or unpick these tightly entwined beliefs, as the case of our ministers reveals. *But*, and even more significantly, they became part of these conversations, and they became part of the reason that baptism held such significant connotations and implications.

The Sussex ministers' doubts, and the responses they received, tell us a great deal about this process. These exchanges between members of the 'mainstream' Church hierarchy and those with godly, or 'puritan', leanings give us some insight into the theological and liturgical fault-lines and anxieties that existed in Protestant and 'reformed' circles in general, and into those surrounding the subject of baptism, and infancy, in particular. Many godly Protestants expressed worries about what the ceremony meant, what the Church was implying the ceremony of baptism meant, how much power the Church wished to invest in it, about whether baptism was seen to confer grace onto a child and about the role of women in relation to the ceremony. As David Cressy has argued, for the Elizabethan godly, writing in such texts as *The*

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[31] Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, p. 97; Spierling, *Infant Baptism*, p. 36; Adriano Prosperi's *Infanticide, Secular Justice, and Religious Debate in Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout, Brepols, 2016). p. 161. see also Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).

Admonition to the Parliament of 1572, the Church was seen to be 'but half-cleansed', and issues relating to the font, crossings and private baptism were 'abominations' left over from a popish past.[32] For those who wanted to see the Church fully reformed, all that was needed to baptise someone, as with the early Christians detailed in biblical literature, was the person who needed to receive the rite, a person to administer it and water. Mainly, for puritans, as we can see through the words of the Dedham ministers, there was a lingering concern about how *transformative* the Church and its representatives intended the ceremony to be, or how their perceived permissiveness allowed it to be in the eyes of their congregations. These concerns are important to the historian of early modern religion, and more specifically to the historian of early modern childhood, as they reveal the levels of Protestant discord and anxiety which surrounded bringing new life, new souls, into the world. Furthermore, this anxiety existed across the spectrum of English post Reformation faith.

Despite the fact that baptism was no longer, officially, believed to confer grace, or to alter or affect God's predestined purpose, in practical terms the ceremony still held a high level of significance—for Protestants of all stripes and persuasions. Whether those with puritan leanings liked it or not—and however much they protested that God had decreed the soteriological status of every soul before birth, which no earthly rite could alter—even after the Reformation, baptism continued to be seen as a transformative rite. Part of the reason for this was the basic human need to welcome new life, and to assure parents that the rocky road which was often experienced by their vulnerable new offspring was at least in part sheltered by God's oversight and loving protection. Indeed, baptism remained important to the English reformers, and to those in Europe, despite the lack of a strong scriptural insistence on a need for it. Zwingli attempted to justify the rite's survival by comparing baptism to circumcision: circumcision represented the Israelites' membership of the old covenant, whereas Protestant baptism represented membership of the new covenant. The English Church was, though, unusual in its insistence, set out in the Prayer Book, that all children, even those who were illegitimate, or of evidently sinful parentage, be baptised—much

[32] Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, p. 108.

to the displeasure of those with puritan leanings.[33] Yet, another part of the reason for the ceremony's continued endurance was in fact the beliefs of the godly themselves.

Indeed, despite the Protestant claim that baptism was not necessary for salvation—and despite their desire to simplify, or to downplay, the ceremony—the godly themselves actually contributed to the continuing emphasis on, and perceived significance of, the rite in England. This is a fact which has not previously been sufficiently acknowledged within the resultant historiography. Certainly, as good Calvinists, those with puritan convictions expressed anxiety over all the issues considered so far here, as well as whether to baptise the children of sinners, in much the same way as their European counterparts.[34] But their emphasis on these questions proceeded from and contributed to precisely the curiously English context in which the ceremony was seen to be so important. Indeed, as stated at the outset, puritans were and can be defined against their relative position to the wider English Church, as much as any absolute one. Puritan interaction with other English voices in the post-Reformation Church led to an intense emphasis on baptism, and its relationship not just to debates about predestination, but also to perceptions of sin (women's, bodily, and infant): in arguing strenuously that, for example, baptism must not be administered by women, or that baptism needed to be preserved for those who had a chance of being amongst the elect, or at least denied to those who were believed to be entirely unworthy of possible election, puritan convictions joined the chorus of those placing such critical emphasis on the rite.[35]

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[33] Cleugh, 'Teaching in Praying Words?', pp. 17-22.

[34] Those involved in the Denham Conference sometimes discussed their baptism-related dilemmas, which included raising questions about what to do with 'children base born'. By 'base born', they meant, for example, children of 'an offensive person', the offspring of those who 'did refuse the lordes supper' and those of 'straunger […] Irish women'. In cases of sinful parents known to the parish, the Dedham ministers tended to suggest the use of appropriately and carefully chosen godparents, who would be able to answer for the children (even though puritans disliked the general use of godparents, arguing that in most cases parents should answer for their own children). However, they often refused to baptise the children of strangers to the parish, fearing that they were illegitimate, meaning that, for the godly, they had no chance of being elect. Refusing baptism was, though, against the recommendations of the Church itself. See Collinson, Craig and Usher (eds.), *Conferences and Combination Lectures*, esp. pp. 8, 16, 28 and 46.

[35] For puritan debates on whether to baptise children of perceived sinners, see Collinson, Craig and Usher (eds.), *Conferences and Combination Lectures*, esp. pp. 16, 28, 46.

Puritans, then, had a more complex relationship with the mainstream against which they sometimes defined themselves—and this can be clearly seen in how they imagined and negotiated baptism in particular. In order to conclude the discussion in this chapter, it would be useful to briefly consider the impact of all these debates on the figure of the early modern infant, as puritans imagined him or her, in their writings. How did puritan polemic shape and mould ideas about what it meant to be a child in the early modern period?

Locating the Early Modern Infant in Puritan Writings:

Despite the importance Protestant commentators attached to the image of family—and the many advice manuals they penned about how to procreate, and then give birth to and raise children—as well as all the baptism debates we have considered, the image of the infant, the smallest child, is quite hard to locate. As a result, early modern infants are a category of people rarely considered in early modern historiography.[36] The spiritual status of the infant was, as we have seen, heavily disputed, and occasioned much anxiety, with puritan writers emphasising this capacity for sin more than most. Even after birth, the spiritual status of a newly born 'creature' was contested, and it was not until after baptism that they were named. Infants themselves were seen to occupy an extremely contested space within the early modern mind. The sin they were perceived to hold made them theologically vexed and soteriologically uncertain creatures. Little wonder that such complicated, and unknowable, beings were shied away from in texts.

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[36] The fact that infants, and children more widely, are largely missing from early modern historiography (and historiographies more widely) is an odd reality. Early moderns did in fact spend considerable time writing about the lives of the young in this period, albeit in ways different to how we might expect. See footnote 8 above for publications on infant baptism. On early modern childhood more widely see Anna French, *Children of Wrath: Possession, Prophecy and the Young in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); Hannah Newton, *The Sick Child in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Lucy Underwood, *Childhood, Youth and Religious Dissent in Post Reformation England* (London: Palgrave, 2014).

Indeed, for Protestants, and for puritans in particular, infants presented something of a theological conundrum. Various sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, most commonly midwifery and family advice manuals (often written by those who held puritan leanings), presented the image of the child, newly born, as a creature stained red, covered in blood, and wailing—in an acknowledgement of the sin they had committed, been born both of and into. One of the overriding themes of Protestant childhood, or one of the beliefs that underpinned what it actually meant to be a child in early modern culture, was that this period of life was one of great instability and uncertainty. Children came from a place of sin (sex and conception, as well as their mother's womb), and were born into a situation of precariousness in which, given their natural stage of naivety and incomprehension, they were unable to 'know' God, or to understand or recognise the path of true religion. This, combined with the natural vulnerability and frailty of their small bodies, led to much anxiety. Indeed, the anxiety seen in the discussions between the Dedham ministers and Whitgift resurfaces in polemical texts, especially those written by puritans: who were, by the seventeenth century, much more self-aware of their 'godly' identities. Yet, as emphasised above, these zealous Protestants still remained part of more mainstream culture, and set out to preach to, and publish for, not only a puritan audience, but a general one. William Perkins in particular, as a minister within the established church, was a puritan writer who endeavoured to find ways to communicate with those in the pews more widely.

Protestants of various shades, but most especially puritan-influenced families, were advised to seek god-fearing partners. Indeed, as Thomas Becon advised in his *Catechism*, 'whosoever indendeth to have good, godly, and virtuous children […] it is necessary that he be wary and circumspect in choosing his wife': women, he argued, in the worst circumstances, produce 'monstrous and wicked children'.[37] As part of establishing a good Christian family, English Protestants, however, were also reminded of the importance of baptism, and encouraged to understand what was meant by the ceremony—that is, mainly to conceive of it as a welcoming into the Church. Therefore, parents were expected to educate their children as quickly as

[37] Thomas Becon, *The Catechism of Thomas Becon*, ed., John Ayre (Cambridge, 1844) pp. 346-7.

possible, so that they could come to know God in their own right. As Perkins argued:

> The […] point of education of children, is to Provide that they may liue well, and to lead a godly life […] First they are to be carefull, that the child, so soone as may bee, after it is borne, bee admitted into the true Church of God by Baptisme, and have a fit name giuen vnto it. Secondly, they are to endeuour to sow the seeds of godlinesse and religion in the heart of the child, so soon as it comes to the vse of reason and vnderstanding; and it is to grow in knowledge and grace.[38]

Perkins's writing here shows that Protestants, as puritans would aver, did not see baptism as an easy door to salvation. But they *did* see it as part of a 'package'. Baptism, as argued above, symbolically separated the body of the child from that of the mother—and, when combined with education, could help children towards their potential salvation, as part of nurturing in them understanding.   Perkins also wrote '[…] obserue both the inclination, and the naturall gifts of bodie and mind that are in the child, and accordingly to bestow it in some honest calling & course of life.' He then quoted Proverbs 20:11: 'A child is knowne by his actions, whether his worke be pure and right'.[39] Perkins was in this way depicting baptism combined with Christian education as a way of nurturing the child's individual character, and ultimately their salvation—which would proceed not out of the rite itself, but out of a process of coming to know God, and revealing their godliness through their own individual actions and behaviour. Such writings are not entirely inline with teachings about predestination, but they did provide a framework for both understanding and raising young Protestant children.

It is possible to see in this quite subtle theology why the ministers we met above were anxious to define baptism so carefully: to prevent confusion around it, and to regulate its pastoral meaning. Baptism was a fundamental rite for the infant, but it did not on

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[38] Perkins, *Christian Oeconomie*, p. 137.
[39] *Ibid*. p. 137.

its own grant salvation. It did, rather, help a child embark upon the right, and godly, path in life. Indeed, according to texts penned at the time, only Christ was born without the spot of sin; the rest of humanity needed to earnestly engage as early in life as possible with the 'covenant of reconciliation'—although most would agree that attempting such reconciliation in childhood was, at the very least, something of a challenge. Nevertheless, for Protestants, especially the more zealous amongst them, this challenge needed to be met as early as possible; the battle for their infants' souls started right after birth—even, one might argue, before it.

The whirlwind of sin which was seen to surround both infants and children (and, to some extent, youths) was expressed in contemporary literature. The spiritual status of the mother was fundamental to the spiritual status of the child, as evidenced over puritan deliberations over whether to baptise the children of 'sinful' women or those who they 'could not tell whether it [the infant] were begott in lawfull marriage.'[40] Furthermore, beliefs about female and infant sin, and fears and anxieties surrounding their potential for salvation, provided a key lens through which early moderns perceived women, pregnancy and infants. Some writers emphasised the themes of sin and salvation, and the soteriological problems presented by the pregnant or birthing mother and infant, more than others. Such details are clear in a funeral sermon written by puritan minister Sampson Price which was both delivered and published in 1624. The sermon, entitled *The Two Twins of Birth and Death*, is interesting because it helps us to understand how late Elizabethan concerns amongst the godly carried through to puritan Jacobeans—and therefore map this mutable community's development and relative cohesion over time.[41] It presents us with the trope of the blood-stained and crying child, making their way from the womb into the world, with deliverance occurring thanks to God. This image was a powerful one precisely because it clearly portrayed the relationship, in the early modern, and particularly puritan, mind, between the image of the child and the potent idea of sin. For early

[40] Collinson, Craig and Usher (eds.), *Conferences and Combination Lectures*, p. 46.
[41] Even by this time, puritan identity was, according to Tom Webster, 'context-dependent, friable and necessarily mutable'; yet, simultaneously, the 'community was maintained' via mutual 'observation of the criteria for godliness' amongst its self-declared members. See Tom Webster, 'Early Stuart Puritanism', in John Coffey and Paul C.H. Lim (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), p. 62.

modern people, children and babies were hideously sinful, and descriptions of them cast into high relief the fears surrounding those interrelated concepts of sin and salvation, and therefore the problematic question of how infants and children might achieve the latter. As Price saw it:

> […] man is borne miserable. For other creatures which are but base borne in respect of man, have coverings to defend them […] yet man commeth from the prison of his mothers wombe as a poore worm, the most naked of all living creatures [… and] enters into the world bathed in bloud, an image of sinne, his first song is the lamentation of a sinner, weeping and sobbing.[42]

For Price, the image of the newly born infant was something fearful, representative of human sin, symbolic of the original sin humankind had been indebted with since the Fall. Indeed, human infants were more sin soaked, more damnable and more representative of sin than any other newborn creature, for they had fallen from God's love, they were the punished. As Prices emphasised:

> […] Fishes of the sea have shells, Trees of the Forrest have knotty barkes, Beasts of the field hard hides, bees stings, Hogs bristles, Hedgehogs prickles, Beares rough hayre, Birds feathers, fishes scales, sheepe fleeces, serpents stings, cockes spurres, Elephants and bores teeth and tuskes, yet man commeth from the prison of his mothers wombe as a poore worm, the most naked of all living creatures.[43]

What is significant here is the deep and unremitting sense of human sin—the sin held by the child, and the mother, and the emphasis on their lucky escape from its deadly grip. When commenting on the sin held by the newly born infant's mother, he writes:

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[42] Sampson Price, *The Two Twins of Birth and Death* (London, 1624) *STC* (2nd ed.) 20334, p. 8.
[43] *Ibid*, p. 8.

‘the mother lyeth by but halfe flaine by the birth, and when she looketh vpon the fruit of her labour pranked up, it is as the Thief pardoned.’[44] Price notes that, during the pains of labour, both mother and child could die, in fact perhaps *should* die and be damned, as punishment for their sin. But if they were saved, and offered the opportunity of human life, this was due to the graciousness of God. As Price goes on to say, from the stance of the mother, ‘this childe had been her death, had not God given her a safe deliverance in the great danger of childbirth’. The child, too, had also been in grave danger—they ‘might have dyed from the wombe, and giuen up the ghost when he came out of the belly’—but they had not because, at that moment, they had God on their side.[45] Writers like Price encouraged their readers to look to God for mercy, and to thank God for the safe delivery of infants. In this drama, baptism might be a marker—but it had no power of its own, and this was what the Sussex ministers insisted that Whitgift clarify.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the perilous nature of puritan perceptions of infancy was reflected in the anxieties shared by all Protestants that surrounded the ceremony of infants, baptism. For early modern writers of all stripes, the theme of the family, and more particularly the difficult phase of infancy, were theologically muddied and pastorally complicated issues, this spiritual uncertainty paved the way to many anxieties. The infant was a soteriologically complex entity: one which became much less fraught, in the minds and writings of early moderns, when they were presented at the font for the baptismal washing, for the symbolic second birth. For puritans, it was precisely this thorny theology that led them to insist upon baptism’s inefficacy in cleansing sin from the infant—but in so doing they paradoxically placed greater emphasis on the sacrament than one might expect.

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[44] *Ibid*, p. 8.
[45] *Ibid*, p. 9.

When the Sussex ministers challenged the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace in 1583, they did so because they feared a contradiction between the biblical irrelevance of baptism and the Book of Common Prayer's ambiguous insistence on such continuations as emergency baptism—that is, on permitting women, however morally slippery they were perceived to be, to deliver salvation to dying infants. That puritans felt this issue was so serious as to necessitate risking their living in a challenge to the Three Articles is evidence enough that infant salvation posed unique difficulties for reformed thought. That Whitgift responded in a manner which soothed the assembled 'godly' demonstrates in turn that puritan anxiety over these issues had informed and driven 'mainstream' Protestant thought towards a similar ambivalence—despite simultaneously retaining a pastoral commitment to a sacramental balm for the endemic and urgent uncertainties occasioned in part by the very focus on sin puritans encouraged. The result of all this was that, for the infants themselves, the moment of baptism came to be the one at which they were perceived to be clearly separated from the woman from whom they came—and the one at which they were no longer viewed as creatures, but as beings in their own right. But that is another story.