THE BRISTOL ACADEMY AND THE EDUCATION OF MINISTERS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND (1758–1791)

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INTRODUCTION

The Bristol Academy was the first theological institution for the education of Particular Baptist ministers. Since its establishment in the late seventeenth century, the Bristol Academy played an important role in the growth of the Particular Baptists by producing a number of great ministers, and it was soon widely recognized as a preeminent place of theological study by the leaders of the denomination throughout England. In fact, the education of ministers at the Bristol Academy later became “a key factor in the tremendous growth the Baptists experienced in the nineteenth century.” Certainly, the foundation of the Bristol Academy is a highly significant event in the history of the Baptist churches.

In spite of this central role in the growth of the Particular Baptist churches, however, modern scholarship has not paid proper attention to the Baptist Academy at Bristol. That is, Baptists’ theological education in the Bristol Academy has gained less attention by modern scholars than other issues or events in Baptist history. Consequently, this lack of interest has created a gap in the understanding of how the education of Baptist ministers developed in the post-Reformation era. In particular, the neglect

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3 Some works on the history of the Dissenting Academies deal with Bristol Academy. For instance, H. McLachlan, English Education under the Test Acts (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1931), 91–101; Alan P.F. Sell, Philosophy, Dissent and Nonconformity (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2004), passim. However, they tend just to provide a brief sketch of the history of the institution without any substantial analysis of the idea of Particular Baptist’ theological education. In the present day, however, we encounter increasing discussions on the topic: Henry Foreman, “The Early Separatists, the Baptists, and Education, 1580–1780: with special reference of the clergy,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Leeds,
of the Baptist academy at Bristol led not only to the ignorance of the Baptists’ theological education in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but also to the common misunderstanding that “Eighteenth century Particular Baptist are obscurantist, ill-educated hyper-Calvinists.”

This study will deal with the theological education of Particular Baptists in the eighteenth century, with a particular focus on the Bristol Academy under the leadership of Hugh Evans (1712–1781) and Caleb Evans (1731–1791) in order to illustrate the way Particular Baptists approached theological education during that era. The Bristol Academy during the presidencies of Hugh and Caleb Evans (1758–1781 and 1781–1791, respectively) is one of the ideal places to study the development of Baptists’ ideas of theological education because significant writings concerning theological education were produced and the Bristol Academy experienced a huge growth while these two men served as both tutors and presidents for several decades in the eighteenth century.

The main purpose of this study is first to contribute to an understanding of Baptists’ view and practice of theological education and, second, to offer an evaluation regarding the validity of previous scholarship pertaining to the issue. In pursuing these goals, this study will particularly show

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4 Hayden, “Evangelical Calvinism,” iv. For example, Peter Toon states that “as the eighteenth century passed by, High Calvinism became in the main the faith of the poorly educated Independents and Baptists.” Toon, The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity (London: The Olive Tree, 1967), 146. This general assessment is shared by Henry W. Clark, History of English Nonconformity (London: Chapman and Hall, 1913), 2:250–251, and also by Duncan Coomer, English dissent under the early Hanoverians (London: Epworth, 1946), 23–25.


6 For example, each year, from 1773 onwards, a sermon was preached at the annual meeting of the Bristol Education Society by a minister elected by the Society. The sermons were later published, and they often discussed highly provocative and important issues of theological education.

7 Concerning this, see Moon, Education, 10–26; Foreman, “Early Separatists,” 265–288.

8 This study focuses only on theological education. Thus, secular education is beyond the scope of this study. Also, this study will not attempt to do any comparison between