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G. Stephen Weaver, Jr.

Orthodox, Puritan, Baptist

Hercules Collins (1647 – 1702) and Particular Baptist
Identity in Early Modern England

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht



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Foreword by Crawford Gribben

Hercules Collins was, as Stephen Weaver suggests in this important addition to scholarship on early modern religious history, a foremost theorist of Baptist identity and pioneer in Reformed ecumenism. Born during the first civil war, he found his way into a new religious movement that was still struggling to find its feet in the polemical world of English Protestantism, and dedicated himself to providing his Baptist brethren with the theological resources by which they could make sense of their situation as their circumstances grew ever more desperate.

Collins' first major literary project was to prepare *An Orthodox Catechism* (1680), which combined the modesty of its title with content which drew heavily upon the European Reformed tradition, even as it argued implicitly for a commonality of conviction between the mainstream Reformed tradition and the new religious movement which sought to modify that tradition while appreciating many of its values. He later signed the new confessional text which was adopted by the English Baptist General Assembly (1689), a statement of faith that adapted the Westminster Confession and Savoy Declaration within the frame of believers' baptism and a "visible saints" ecclesiology, and which continued the task of identification and appropriation which he had begun in his first publication. But Collins was also a staunch defender of the particularity of his religious community. Many of his subsequent publications reflect his long experience as pastor of a fellowship of baptized Christians that was still negotiating the problematic balance of the privileges and responsibilities of the laity and their leaders.

Stephen Weaver's study of Collins represents a major break-through in the scholarship of early modern religious radicalism, as well as in the history of Baptists. A great deal of recent writing on English Baptist origins – and on contemporary American Baptist politics – has worried about the relationship between the new fellowships of baptized Christians and the theological traditions of the Reformed. Both the heirs and the antagonists of the English Particular Baptists have debated whether the movement can properly be understood

as being “Reformed.” Undoubtedly many early Baptists were strongly critical of the hegemonic claims of, for example, the Westminster Assembly. But many others, perhaps benefitting from the political environment of the Restoration, which brought Baptists and many of their critics together in the shared “experience of defeat,” came to appreciate and to identify with the legacy of the English reformation. Collins’ life and literary legacy reflects the growing tendency of English Baptists to attempt to recover a Reformed identity, in the context of ever more detailed debate within the new religious movement about what it might mean to be a member of a congregation of baptized believers.

Orthodox, Puritan, Baptist is the first sustained discussion of the contribution of one of the most important of early Baptist leaders. It will be warmly welcomed by the growing community of historians, church leaders and general readers who continue to draw their own spiritual resources – as well as much of their religious identity – from the first generations of Christians who combined their convictions about the baptism of believers with gratitude for all that had been accomplished in the Calvinist reformation.

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March 2015