

HM 4.1 – Puritan Perspectives on Ministry

John Howe, Restoration anti-Calvinism and moderate presbyterianism

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“When John Howe the last of the giants died in 1705, Puritanism was over.” - J.I. Packer, *Among God's Giants*.

Key dates in Howe's Life

1630 - born in Loughborough
1634-42 in Ireland at his dad's ejection
1647 - to Cambridge
1648 - to Oxford
1650 - fellow at Magdalen
1652 - ordained
1654 - minister at Great Torrington, Devon
1655 - married (five children)
1656 - domestic chaplain to Cromwell
1658 - Savoy Conference
1658 - Oliver died; H served Richard briefly
1658-62 - back at Torrington
1660 - *Man's Creation in a Holy but Mutable State*
1662 - ejected from the Church of England
1662-71 - itinerant ministry
1668 - *Blessedness of the Righteous*
1671-75 Ireland - personal chaplain to Viscount Massareene of Antrim
1674 - *Delighting in God*
1675 - London
1675-1705 - minister of Haberdasher's Hall/ Silver St
1675 - *Living Temple, Part I*
1677 - Merchants Lecturer - to replace Thomas Manton
1677 - *The Reconcilableness of God's Prescience of the Sins of Men with the Wisdom and Sincerity of His Counsels, Exhortations and Whatsoever Means He Uses to Prevent Them*
1681-85 - persecution intensified - over to the Netherlands.
1681 - *Of Charity in Reference to Other Men's Sins*
1684 - *The Redeemer's Tears*
1685-87 - in Netherlands - lecturing; Got to know William of Orange
1687 - back to England
1689 - *Humble Requests*
1689-91 - working on 'Happy Union'
1690s - regular ministry
1693 - *The Carnality of Religious Contention*
1699-1702 - Occasional Conformity debate
1701 - *Consideration ... concerning Occasional Conformity*
1702 - *Living Temple, Part II*
1705 - died

The Prosperous State of the Christian Interest before the End of Time (1678 sermons), 1725
Principles of the Oracles of God (1690-95 lectures), 1810-22

In Print:

The Works of the Reverend John Howe (1630-1705) Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 3 volumes, 1990

The Greatness of God

1. The principal end of our Lord's undertaking and office was not the salvation of men but the glory of God (*Living Temple, Part II*)
2. A creature even in glory is still a creature, and must be treated as such. After the blessed God hath elevated it to the highest pitch, he must infinitely condescend; it cannot otherwise know or converse with him ... the distance even of a glorified creature from the glorious God is still infinitely greater than between it and the minutest atom of dust. (*The Blessedness of the Righteous*)
3. He who is the most competent and most rightful judge, determines when it will be more for the glory of God to dispossess the strong man arm ... and when it will most serve this his great end to leave the strong man armed still in his possession and finally to doom the possessor and the possessed to take their lot together. (*Living Temple, Part II*)
4. What innumerable varieties of paths lie open to the view and choice of an infinite mind which we can have no apprehension of (*Thoughtfulness for the Morrow*)

The Wonder of Grace

5. A prince may pardon to a malefactor a capital crime, spare his forfeited life and estate; and yet not take him for a favourite and a friend. But when the blessed God forgives his enemies he also takes them for his friends. (*Enmity and Reconciliation between God and Man*)

6. Men are pleased to behold love expressing itself towards them in a child, in a poor neighbour, in an impotent servant; yea, in their horse or their dog. The greatest prince observes with delight the affection of the meanest peasants among his subjects: much more would they please themselves if they have occasion to take notice of any remarkable expression of his favourable respect to them ! But how unspeakably more if he vouchsafe to express it by gracious intimacies, and by condescending familiarities ! How doth that person hug and bless himself ! How doth his spirit triumph, and his imagination luxuriate in delightful thoughts and expectations, who is in his own heart assured he hath the favour of his prince! ... And can it be thought the love of the great and blessed God should signify less? How great things are comprehended in this, the Lord of heaven and earth hath a kindness towards me and bears me goodwill ! (*Delighting in God*)

To unbelievers

7. The experience of almost six thousand years hath (one would think sufficiently) testified the incompetency of every worldly thing to make men happy. (*The Blessedness of the Righteous*)

8. Discontent proceeds from idolizing thoughts of ourselves; tis rooted in self-conceit, in self-dependence, self-love, self-seeking ... that one great idol self. (*The Blessedness of the Righteous*)

9. Men do not die at random ... but by an act of divine determination (*The Redeemer's Dominion over the Invisible World*)

10. An unconsidering soul is a perishing soul (*The Gospel Hidden*)

11. The supreme, primary law under which we all are, obliges us to be happy (*Of Charity in Reference to Other Men's Sins*)

Necessity of inward change

12. Think not forgiveness alone then will serve your turn; it will signify as much as a pardon will do to a malefactor just ready to die of a mortal disease (*Delighting in God*)

Christian experience

13. The best and most acceptable service any are capable of doing him is when they accept him, take and choose him to be their portion and blessedness. Trust, love and delight in him as such, live upon his fulness. (*Funeral Sermon for Richard Fairclough*)

14. Continual commerce with God ... how pleasant and delightful it is ... living free from care ... but how to please and honour him. (*Delighting in God*)

15. Get up then into the higher region ... that the secret of the Divine presence may become to you as your very element, wherein you can most freely breathe and live and be most at ease (*Delighting in God*)

16. Be constantly intent upon this business of spiritual growth. Mind it as a design, make a solemn purposed business of it, your great daily business. (*The Blessedness of the Righteous*)

17. Every sincere Christian is in affection and preparation of his a martyr. He that loves not Christ better than his own life, cannot be his disciple. (*The Blessedness of the Righteous*)

Glory

Three things in the Blessedness of the Righteous: vision of the face of God; participation of his likeness; and satisfaction therein

18. The Divine Glory satisfies a Deity, will it not a worm ? (*The Blessedness of the Righteous*)

19. We are not to be glorified merely by a glory that we are to behold but which we are to bear; not which we are to be the witnesses of only, but the subjects, whereby we are to be made glorious in conformity to him and in communion with him. (*Funeral Sermon for Richard Adams*)

Christian Unity

20. It is a very plain case that if you draw a circumferential line, and place one centre within that circumference you may draw as many straight direct lines as you will from any part of the circumference to that centre and it is impossible you should ever make them to intersect or interfere with one another. ... when there is but one end and every man's business is to serve and glorify their common Maker and Lord; when all thus agree in the love of God, there would be no interfering. (*The Prosperous State of the Christian Interest*)

21. Can any party be united within itself by so sacred ties as all true Christians are with the whole body of Christ ? (*Of Charity in Reference to Other Men's Sins*)

Hard Questions

Those who've never heard

22. Believing in Christ cannot be necessary to pagans that never heard of him, as a duty, howsoever necessary it may be as a means. Their not believing in him cannot be itself a sin, though by it they should want remedy for their other sins. (*The Redeemer's Tears Wept over Lost Souls*)

The unpardonable sin

23. Others are afflicted with very torturing fears lest they have committed it (the unforgiveable sin - against the Holy Spirit) ... their very fear itself is an argument to them that they have not. While they find in themselves any value of the Divine favour, any dread of his wrath, any disposition to consider the state of their souls ... they have reason to conclude God hath hitherto kept them out of that fearful gulf. (*The Redeemer's Tears Wept over Lost Souls*)

God's will to save all

24. God is truly unwilling of some things, which he doth not think fit to interpose his omnipotency to hinder, and is truly willing of some things which he doth not put forth his omnipotency to effect. (*The Redeemer's Tears Wept over Lost Souls*)

John Howe and Moderate Presbyterianism

1. Introduction

In a short time the right Protestant Cause was almost irrecoverably lost, under the more prevailing Power and Interest of Calvinism. That proud and busie Man had erected a new Chair of Infallibility, and enthroned himself in it ... and thus in most places did the design of Reformation degenerate into a furious Zeal for the Calvinian Rigours; the seeds of which Doctrine have produced nothing but thorns and briars of Contention, that have eaten out the life and power of true Religion.¹

So, in 1671, Samuel Parker expressed a hostility to Calvinism which was shared by very many in the third quarter of the seventeenth century. Indeed the repellent force of Calvinism was one of the most powerful theological forces at work in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. 'Dissent from some form of Calvinism' formed a common thread linking such diverse theological movements as the Remonstrants, the Laudians, the Cambridge Platonists, the latitudinarians and the early Deists and Unitarians.² It is not possible, of course, to think or speak of 'Calvinism' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as though there were some single, undifferentiated body of thought or ecclesiastical grouping readily identifiable and distinct from all others. Nevertheless, and in spite of a sustained scholarly effort to portray the Calvinist soteriology of the later English puritans as a betrayal of 'authentic Calvinism', there is a fundamental continuity of thought over more than a century between Calvin himself and the 'Calvinists' of Restoration England.³ To move from the *Institutes* to the *Canons of the Synod of Dort* to the *Westminster Confession* is to go but a short distance in comparison with other journeys of theological thought made in the early modern period. And within England the deliberate and modest readiness of the Congregationalists (*Savoy Confession*, 1658) and the Baptists (*London Confession*, 1677, 1689) to follow the predominantly Presbyterian *Westminster Confession* serves as evidence that in the realms of theology proper and of soteriology there was far more on which they agreed than on which they differed. The free sovereignty of God whose decree was the first cause of all things and who predestinated only those whom he chose to salvation; the guilt, corruption and helplessness of man in sin, with the need for a God-initiated, Spirit-given regeneration and a justification unconditional upon any good whatsoever in man; and the vital importance of doctrinal correctness, consistent discipline and pure worship in the church were characteristic tenets cherished in the streets of Geneva in the mid-sixteenth century, in the fora of the Synod of Dort in 1618-19, in the halls of Westminster in the 1640s and in tiny nonconformist meeting-places built during the respite from persecution given by Charles II in 1672-3. Complex though the history of theology in this period most certainly is, it would be to miss the wood for the trees not to recognize that in that history 'Calvinism' represents a definite cluster of ideas or band on the theological spectrum.

And hostility to Calvinism was as persistent as Calvinism itself. From the beginning the charges levelled against the system were that its emphasis on the sovereignty of God made God the author of sin, failed to take seriously his infinite goodness, led to a harsh doctrine of absolute unconditional predestination and tended to antinomianism; that it produced an intolerant and divisive authoritarianism and that its doctrine of the fall and its 'enthusiasm' led to an underestimation of the dignity of man as rational.⁴ These criticisms were increasingly widely accepted in England through the 1650s as the 'discrediting of orthodoxy' resulted from the combination of the political defeat of 'Anglicanism' and popular resentment at life under 'Calvinism'. Guilty through association with antinomianism, perceived to be bigoted and immoderate, and regarded as undermining the ethical element of religion by obsession with doctrinal precision, it became easy and popular to dismiss Calvinism as 'rigid'. Calvinism evoked strong responses and those who stood against it used strong language. Henry More declared that 'Antinomianism and Calvinism (I mean that dark Dogma about Predestination) are such horrid Errours, that they seem the badges of the Kingdome of Darknesse, rather than of the Kingdome of God'.⁵ Joseph Glanvill said that he 'would as soon worship a Lleek or an Onion as the God of the Calvinists'. Another anti-Calvinist argued after the Restoration that

it pleased God to let them set up what they so long looked for: that the World might see what they are and what is their way, and what is the dreadful consequence of that way when it doth prevaile; their pretences before they had the Government in their own hands, were such as rendred them Very amiable and made them the darling of the people; their practices when they had it, made them the most odious of Mankind.

¹ Samuel Parker, *A Defence and Continuation of the Ecclesiastical Politie* (1671), pp.663, 666.

² Carl Bangs, 'Arminius and the Reformation', *Church History*, 30 (1961), pp.155-70 (p.155).

³ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind* (Boston, MA, 1938); R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford, 1979); Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790 - An Evaluation* (Oxford, 1990).

⁴ Joseph Glanvill brings these three main charges (Calvinism against reason, against the goodness of both God and man and against charity and catholicity among Christians) in 'Anti-Fanatical Religion ...', Essay 7 in *Philosophia Pia* (1675-6), pp.17-31; John Spurr, 'Rational Religion in Restoration England', *JHI*, 49 (1988), pp.563-85 (pp.564-67).

⁵ Henry More, *Divine Dialogues* (1668), Dialogue IV, p.68.

And the imaginary Calvinist Triers in Lawrence Womock's *The Examination of Tilenus* had names such as Dr. Absolute, Mr Fatalitie, Mr Fri-Babe, Mr Narrow-Grace and Dr. Confidence.⁶

It has been long been argued that the Cambridge Platonists cannot be understood apart from their reaction to Calvinism, Coleridge writing in the nineteenth century that they were 'scared and disgusted into this [position] by the catachrestic language and skeleton half-truths of the systematic divines of the Synod of Dort on the one hand and by the sickly broodings of the Pietists and Solomon's-Song preachers on the other'. When Cassirer suggested that the Cambridge Platonists' great effort was to 'extricate Protestantism from the narrowness of Pauline and Augustinian dogma' the same thing was meant.⁷ John Spurr has recently argued that 'latitudinarianism', too, has far more to do with a widespread antagonism to Calvinism than with a positive and coherent liberalizing theology: 'As the Restoration church began to divorce herself from Calvinist soteriology, the cry predictably went up from the dissenters that she had become 'Arminian', yet for most of the 'moderate' and often allegedly 'latitudinarian' divines who were involved, the lure of another theological system was less than revulsion at the despair and pride bred by the doctrines of puritanism'.⁸

It is no less important to realize the influence that anti-Calvinism had on the theology of the early nonconformists. It was not, to be sure, that there was a widespread abandonment of Calvinism amongst the dissenters and neither, despite comments to the contrary from some, was there some conscious pulling away, or 'loosening of the rigours of Calvinism' or some deliberate effort to dismantle it from inside.⁹ There were, however, many Calvinist divines in the period 1650-1690 who, though the 'rigid' tag was in itself no argument, felt the force of the criticisms which lay behind it and endeavoured to present 'rigide Calvinisme in a softer dresse'.¹⁰ These men, led by Richard Baxter, were the Middle Way men, the Moderate Calvinists or the Moderate Presbyterians and once the rejection of Calvinism has been identified as the single most important feature on the theological landscape of England in the later seventeenth century the whole thrust and tendency of their theology can be understood. They were not the first to restate Calvinism in a 'moderated' way - Cameron, Amyraut, Davenant, Ussher, and many others had done so before. Moreover, it would be entirely unwarranted to suggest that theirs was some deliberate reformulation of Calvinism in the hope that it would be more widely accepted.¹¹ It was rather that these divines sincerely believed that the high Calvinist statement of Calvinist doctrine was unscriptural and unhelpful and the 'moderated Calvinism' which they believed and propagated was faithful to the essentials of Calvinism but sensitive to its vulnerability if imprecisely or unsympathetically presented. If the *Westminster Confession* is taken as the high water mark for the acceptance of 'Calvin Neat', then it can be said that the tide turned in the 1650s leaving the high Calvinists (most heavily represented amongst the Independents) theologically (and often culturally) isolated. The theology of the moderate presbyterians ('Calvin Mild') stayed afloat for only two generations more before the tide had receded still further, leaving moderate Calvinism as isolated as high Calvinism and bearing out to sea on the strong currents of rationalism and moralism some who had themselves begun as moderate Calvinists.¹²

But for those two generations from 1650-1720 'those who sought to retain the core of the Reformed theology of grace without offensive over-statement and with some moderating qualifications' understood themselves to be walking a middle way between what they saw as an exaggerated Calvinism on the one hand and angry rejection of Calvinism altogether on the other.¹³ The moderate presbyterians were by no means the only ones in the seventeenth century to use the language of the 'via media'. The idea and the phrase were widely used to commend the moderation of a given position. For example, while Baxter described the ecclesiastical parties of his day with 'the Faction of the Prelatists on one side ... and the Factions of the giddy and turbulent Sectaries on the other side', the Prelatists themselves made a claim to the middle ground with the reminder in the Preface to the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* that 'it has been the wisdom of the Church of England' on matters of liturgy, 'to keep the mean between the two extremes'.¹⁴ Baxter himself was in no doubt as to the slipperiness of the term: 'I never thought that when ever men differ, it is my duty to go in a middle between them both (for so that middle will be next taken for an extrem, and

⁶ Joseph Glanvill cited in C. Stanford, *Joseph Alleine: His Companions and Times* (1861), pp.138, 367; *The Mystery of Conventicles Unvail'd* (1664), p.46; Womock, *The Examination of Tilenus* (1658), p.208 (should read p.118).

⁷ S.T. Coleridge, *Notes on English Divines*, 2 vols (1853), vol.I, p.351; E. Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, translated by S. Pettegrove (1953), p.83.

⁸ Spurr, "'Latitudinarianism' and the Restoration Church", *The Historical Journal*, 31 (1988), pp.61-82 (p.81).

⁹ C. Gordon Bolam, Jeremy Goring, H.L. Short & Roger Thomas, *The English Presbyterians: From Elizabethan Puritanism to Modern Unitarianism* (1968), pp.21-4, 103-10, 125.

¹⁰ The phrase is used by Thomas Good writing to his friend Richard Baxter about the latter's Amyraldian and Neonomian theologizing. *CCRB*, 227; see also *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, ed. by Matthew Sylvester (1696), 2nd pagination, 148-51.

¹¹ O.M. Griffiths describes the Restoration Presbyterians' efforts to 'remodel their theology' in this way: *Religion and Learning: A Study in English Presbyterianism from 1662 to the foundation of the Unitarian movement* (Cambridge, 1935), pp.22-3, 45, 153-4.

¹² Bolam et al., *English Presbyterians*, p.103.

¹³ Wallace, *Puritans*, p.112.

¹⁴ *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, 1st pagination, p.97; Simon Patrick wrote of the 'vertuous mediocrity' of the Church of England, *A Brief Account of the new Sect of Latitude-Men* (1662), p.10.

men must seek out another middle to avoyd that!'). But still it was used not only to commend moderation but as some sort of claim to truth and Marvell's words are well-known: 'Truth for the most part lyes in the middle, but men ordinarily seek for it in the extremities'.¹⁵

However, when William Bates reminded the congregation at Baxter's funeral that 'In some points of modern Controversie he [Baxter] judiciously chose the middle way and advised young Divines to follow it', he was not making some general point about Baxter's moderation or the likelihood of his having been correct but was using the phrase with a more specific referent.¹⁶ From the time when Baxter first began to write on the doctrines of atonement and justification, at the latest, the term 'middle-way' was understood in the context of that debate to describe a particular position: 'This is to be a middle-way-man, to hold universal Redemption in such a sense as neither pleaseth the Arminian, nor the rigid Antiarminian'. To the author of that definition this middle way was truly a 'Golden Mean'.¹⁷ To others, who understood this usage the term aroused only hostility and contempt. It was probably in 1691 that Calamy went to preach to the pastorless Independent congregation in Andover. They shared a meeting house with the Presbyterians who had their own minister, John Sprint. One week the Independents would use the meeting house and the next week the Presbyterians. After Calamy had preached to the Independents he was 'applied to by a grave old woman in a high-crowned hat' who asked him to become the pastor of the Congregational element. Trying to apply fair-minded common sense, Calamy suggested that instead they let Mr. Sprint preach every week, to the Independents as well as to the Presbyterians. Calamy records how his suggestion was received, 'The old woman seemed perfectly astonished at my proposal, and cried out, "What, Mr. Sprint! old Mr. Sprint! Alas, he is a Baxterian! he is a middle way man! he is an occasional Conformist! he is neither fish nor flesh, nor good red herring !"'.¹⁸ The old woman objected to Mr Sprint not because he was a Presbyterian but because, in her eyes, he was a compromiser. Firm adherence to high Calvinism she understood and practised. Out and out rejection of it she understood and lamented. But to her the efforts of those who wished to restate Calvinism in a way which took into account the anti-Calvinist criticisms were wholly misguided and worthy only of contempt. What lies behind the pejorative appellations, 'Baxterian', 'middle way man' and 'occasional Conformist' was the old woman's fear that Sprint was guilty of diluting the pure Gospel by adding quantities of moralism, legalism and ecclesiastical indifferentism.

Sprint was not alone in uniting 'Baxterianism' and 'occasional Conformity' with the 'middle way'. John Humfrey, who wrote *The Middle Way in one Paper of Election and Redemption with Indifferency between the Arminian and Calvinist* which described the middle way position on universal redemption and its relation to the Amyraldian single decree, also wrote *Mediocria or the Middle Way between the Protestant and the Papist in a Paper of Justification* which outlined the 'Baxterian' Neonomianism often espoused by Amyraldians. And many of those who were middle way men and Baxterians were also occasional conformists who, while accused of cowardly compromise by those who saw themselves as more consistent and principled dissenters and of 'abominable hypocrisy' by many Anglicans, yet saw themselves, as Christopher Hill points out, as following a *via media*.¹⁹

The divines who adopted the middle way on election and redemption, who were Baxterian on justification, who were themselves dissenters and yet practised occasional conformity, who adhered to the fundamentals of Calvinism and yet stressed the reasonableness of Christian belief, the essential place of holy living in Christian life and the path of moderation in ecclesiastical disputes over against anti-Calvinist criticisms on all of these points have been given many labels of which perhaps the least misleading is 'moderate presbyterians'.²⁰ Baxter spoke of two sorts of presbyterians - 'dis-engaged faithful Men' and 'through Presbyterians'. He wrote of 'a great number of Ministers and People who had addicted themselves to no Sect or Party at all; though the Vulgar called them by the Name of Presbyterians'.²¹ In the 1650s Baxter believed most of the ministers and people throughout England belonged to this group; after the Restoration they are found most easily amongst the Presbyterian dissenters. They did not form a party but were for 'catholicism against parties'²² and indeed the number of other terms used in efforts to describe aspects of their theological and ecclesiastical position - 'moderate Calvinists', 'moderate nonconformists', 'occasional

¹⁵ Baxter, *Richard Baxter's Confession of his Faith* (1655), Preface, p.c4; Andrew Marvell, *Works*, ed. by Alexander Grosart, 4 vols (1872-75), vol.IV, p.115; see also John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England* (1991), pp.163, 316, 304-5.

¹⁶ William Bates, *Works* (1700), p.818.

¹⁷ *An Apology for the Ministers who subscribed only unto the stating of the Truths and Errors in Mr Williams' Book* (1694), pp.185, 190.

¹⁸ Edmund Calamy, *An Historical Account of My Own Life*, 2 vols [1731] (1830) vol.I, p.308. For Sprint, see *CR*. He is not listed in the Appendix 1 as a moderate presbyterian because his two published works, *The Bride-Woman's Counsellor* (1699) and *Christian Loyalty Revived* (1694) provide no substantial evidence.

¹⁹ Humfrey, *Middle Way* (1673), *Mediocria*, 2nd edn (1695); Hill, 'Occasional Conformity and the Grindalian Tradition' in *Religion and Politics in Seventeenth Century England*, Collected Essays of Christopher Hill, vol.2 (Brighton, 1986), pp.301-20 (p.301).

²⁰ W.K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, 3 vols (1938), vol.III, pp.316-46; N.H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in later Seventeenth Century England* (Leicester, 1987), pp.8-10, 33-7; J. Brentnall, *William Bagshawe, The Apostle of the Peak* (1970), p.35; E. Braund, 'Joseph Alleine', in *By Schisms Rent Asunder* (Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference Papers, 1969), pp.43-68 (pp.54-5); Wallace, *Puritans*, pp.112, 142; Douglas R. Lacey, *Dissent and Parliamentary Politics in England 1661-1689* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1969), p.414.

²¹ *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, 1st pagination, pp.148, 146.

²² *Ibid.*

conformists', 'presbyterians', 'Association Presbyterians', 'Baxterians', 'middle way men', 'Dons' - demonstrates the looseness and complexity of the phenomenon of 'moderate presbyterianism'. Nonetheless, the value of recognizing its reality has been widely understood although a careful enunciation of criteria by which 'moderate presbyterians' may be identified and a listing of more than three or four divines will be looked for in vain. The argument of this study is that the theology of these men is best understood as a reaction to a reaction, a restatement of Calvinism in response to the resurgent anti-Calvinism of the 1650s and after; that the criteria for identifying moderate presbyterians are best enunciated in terms of this understanding; and that a careful and contextualized study of the theological thought of John Howe provides substantial evidence and helpful illustration of this.²³ In the remainder of this introductory chapter a brief outline of the life of Howe will be followed by a more detailed description of the theological distinctives of the moderate presbyterians and an appendix to the chapter provides a listing of around twenty divines who may themselves be identified as such.²⁴

Calamy as a biographer is no paragon of impartiality.²⁵ His portrayal of Howe suggests that had he been living in 1724 he would stand just where Calamy himself stood with reference to efforts for union, subscription to creeds, tolerance of a wide spectrum of belief, definition of true terms of communion, and mild scepticism about too dogmatic claims for a single biblical mode of ecclesiastical polity. And Calamy wants to present Howe both as a man of national stature and significance and as the broad-minded and open-hearted friend and associate of the good and the great from all parties. Nevertheless, in the light of the scant attention which has been paid to Howe it is worth noting the range of friendships and associations which can be claimed for him. Even with a degree of caution over Calamy's enthusiasm for his subject such a list makes impressive reading. Howe was a life-long friend of Henry More's. He was sought out by Thomas Goodwin. He was ordained by Charles Herle, once prolocutor of the Westminster Assembly. He was personally selected by Oliver Cromwell to order the religion of his household and became intimate with Richard Cromwell. By the time that Howe was just 27 years old, Richard Baxter was speaking of his 'famed worth' and the two were in close contact from then until Baxter's death in 1691.²⁶ After the ejection in 1662, Howe found that he had almost as many friends in the Church of England as outside it.²⁷ He had the favour of Seth Ward, Bishop of Exeter, and James Margetson, Archbishop of Armagh. John Wilkins, Bishop of Chester was a personal friend, as was John Tillotson, later Archbishop of Canterbury. Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester, Edward Fowler, Bishop of Gloucester, Richard Lucas, Prebendary of Westminster, John Sharp, Archbishop of York, Benjamin Whichcote, patriarch of the Cambridge Platonists, and Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury, all thought highly of Howe. Amongst nonconformists, in addition to the respect of Baxter, Howe won the admiration and friendship of Thomas Jacombe, William Bates, Henry Hickman, Matthew Mead, Vincent Alsop and a host of others. Robert Boyle the scientist asked for his opinion on the knottiest of theological issues and Andrew Marvell the satirist wrote a long defence of him when he was attacked for his answer.²⁸ The second Viscount Massareene, Lord Philip Wharton, the seventh Baron William Paget, Lord Haversham, the first Duke of Bedford and his daughter-in-law Lady Rachel Russell, Sir Thomas Abney, Lord Mayor of London, Sir John Swynfen and indeed William III himself all recognized his worth and valued his friendship to one degree or another. If Howe had not, from his death-bed, ordered that all his personal papers be destroyed a more just and realistic estimate of the man could have been made but even without these, it cannot be doubted that John Howe was an outstanding figure of his day, a religious leader of great stature and a theologian of significance.²⁹ It is, however, when an attempt is made to locate Howe's position along the spectrum of the theological thought and ecclesiastical parties of his day that his real stature and significance become apparent. He was always a leader and the apparently contradictory answers which have been given as to his position suggest that the moderate presbyterians were a distinct and important group of Restoration divines whose theological endeavour must be understood if our knowledge of the history of theology and the church in that period is to be accurate.

On the one hand, Howe has been portrayed as a thorough-going nonconformist puritan: 'When John Howe, the last of the giants, died in 1705, Puritanism was over'.³⁰ Howe's father, uncle, tutor, and Master of college were all puritans. He was sought out by puritan Thomas Goodwin, ordained by puritan Charles Herle, and became the friend and married the daughter of puritan George Hughes. He was domestic chaplain to Cromwell, an observer at the Savoy Conference, and an opponent of the unscriptural impositions contained in the Act of Uniformity. He suffered less for his faith than many others but really nonetheless. He desired the further reform of the church, he looked for effective discipline, he stood for the unrivalled supremacy and indisputable authority of Scripture as the Word of God, adhered

²³ 'The context itself can be used as a sort of court of appeal for assessing the relative plausibility of incompatible ascriptions of intentionality'. Q. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' *History and Theory*, 8 (1969) pp.3-53 (p.49).

²⁴ For Appendix 1, 'The Extent of "Moderate Presbyterianism": Notes on some Restoration Divines' see p.167 below.

²⁵ A.G. Matthews, editor of *Calamy Revised* wrote, 'Calamy is unmistakably chary of registering denominational demarcations'; see also A. Gordon, 'Calamy as a Biographer', in *TCHS*, 6 (1914), pp.239ff.

²⁶ *Baxter Letters*, iii.200, *CCRB* 443; see also Baxter's 'To the Reader' in Howe, *BR*.

²⁷ Howe, *OC*, 180 (III.537).

²⁸ See below pp.137-8.

²⁹ Materials for a critical biographical study of Howe hardly exist. Fewer than two dozen letters are extant and almost no other Howe manuscripts. See above, p.ix, 'A Note on Bibliographical References', for further comment.

³⁰ J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL, 1990), p.60; see also *London Quarterly Review* 42 (1864), 355-86 (p.356).

firmly to the fundamental tenets of Calvinism, had an urgent evangelistic emphasis in his preaching, a stress upon the importance of the interior life and an earnest demand for godly living in his writing.

On the other hand, Howe has been characterized as a nonconforming latitudinarian, with Cambridge Platonist friendships and sympathies, an early 'liberal' with the tendency to moralism, doctrinal indifferentism and rationalism which is implied by that term.³¹ He has been pictured as more at home with Tillotson or Locke than with Owen or Bunyan. His life and written works are full of a revulsion against party spirit and an eager pursuit of visible Christian unity. Incidents illustrating his latitude and eirenicism begin in his time at Magdalen, Oxford and are to be found in accounts of his ministry at Torrington, his service to the Protector, his exile in Ireland, his activities after Toleration and his closing years in London. His friendships with many highly placed Anglicans, particularly those like Fowler, Tillotson, Sharp, and Stillingfleet are significant, as is his vigorous pursuit of comprehension and equally vigorous advocacy of occasional conformity. The outstanding characteristics of his preaching were his emphasis on the obvious rightness and the patent reasonableness of religion and his stress on the moral character of regeneration. 'Reasonableness', 'morality', 'eirenicism', 'latitude'; these are the words, it could be argued, which best describe the theological position of John Howe.

In fact, although Howe can be portrayed either as an old-style Puritan or as a nonconforming latitudinarian, he was neither. He was a typical and prominent member of that relatively distinct group of divines, described above, which emerged in the 1650s, grew in influence until the early 1700s and then began to disintegrate as the theology upon which it was founded and the reasons for which it existed came to be regarded as unconvincing and unnecessary. That group is, perhaps, most accurately labelled the moderate presbyterians and its characteristic features and tenets may now be described.

3. The Defining Characteristics of 'Moderate Presbyterianism'

3.1. Moderate Presbyterianism as a 'middle way', as 'rigide Calvinisme in a softer dresse'

It comes as no surprise to find that the mediating position occupied by Howe and others between high Calvinism and the self-conscious anti-Calvinism of various other groups was described by moderate presbyterians themselves as constituting a middle way between extremes. The language was taken up by others, particularly high Calvinist critics, but in the writings of the moderate presbyterians was used to signal what they regarded as a kinder, saner and more eirenic Calvinism.

Their objection to the 1662 Act of Uniformity was based upon the catholicity expressed twenty-five years earlier by Chillingworth: 'Why should men be more rigid than God? Why should any error exclude any man from the Churches communion, which will not deprive him of eternall salvation?' In the words of Howe's patron Viscount Massareene, divines like Howe 'thought of themselves as "trying to steer between these two extremes" of Sectarianism and Anglicanism'.³²

For their Amyraldianism some claimed the support of Calvin over against 'the most rigid Calvinists, who [are] contrary to the express mind of Calvin'. Amyraldianism as such was presented as a middle way between a strong doctrine of double predestination on the one side and a universal redemption which left man's salvation to be determined by his own free will on the other.³³

On the relationship between justification and works which was central to the antinomian controversy, Richard Baxter wrote in 1676:

There have been and still are two extreams in the world, some trust to their own External superficial Righteousness ... other [s] ... teach men to look at nothing in themselves at all, no not as an evidence or condition or means of Application.³⁴

Another pair of extremes which the moderate presbyterians saw themselves as avoiding were those of undue reliance upon unaided reason on the one hand and a dogmatism which some perceived to be irrationalist on the other. James

³¹ Charles Farah, 'The Theological Thought of John Howe, 1630-1705' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1958), p.147; William Ward Bass, 'Platonic Influences on Seventeenth-Century English Puritan Theology as expressed in the thinking of John Owen, Richard Baxter and John Howe' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of S. California, 1958), pp.286, 290; H.M. Gwatkin, *Church and State in England to the Death of Queen Anne* (1917), p.390.

³² William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants* (Oxford, 1638), p.210; Massareene quoted in Lacey, *Dissent*, pp.27, 274 n.56.

³³ *An Apology for the Ministers*, p.185.

³⁴ Abraham Clifford, *Methodus Evangelica: The Gospel Method of God saving sinners* (1676), 'To the Reader'.

Clegg, determined to adhere to the reasonableness of Christianity, drew a contrast in 1699 between the 'clear and strong reasoning' of Episcopius and the 'doctrines of rigid Calvinism'.³⁵

In the areas of churchmanship, soteriology and theological method alike, then, it was a middle way which the moderate presbyterians were determined to walk and 'rigidity' which they were determined to avoid. They understood the hatred of Calvinist certainty which provided the motivation for much of the anti-Calvinist criticism of the 1650s and 1660s and endeavoured to present their own position as more moderate and less rigid. Calvinist 'rigidity' on reprobation, particular redemption, the ruin of reason, and ecclesiastical polity was shunned. 'High Calvinists' saw this as nothing other than unprincipled betrayal - the moderate presbyterians, 'tempering the truths of God so that they may be suited to the self-indulgency of unsubdued carnal affections', as John Owen put it.³⁶ The moderate presbyterians, on the other hand, held 'moderation' itself to be a virtue and expressed surprise that so many 'should quite overlook the middle way where truth commonly lies'.³⁷

3.2 Amyraldianism

'Amyraldianism' may be summarized as a rejection of double predestination and an assertion of strong asymmetry between the decree to elect some to salvation and that to pass over others, combined with the belief that Christ died for all men (general redemption) and that distinctions between the elect and the non-elect emerge in the application of redemption by God the Holy Spirit rather than in the accomplishment of redemption by God the Son. It emerged as a 'mediating Calvinism' in the 1620s and 1630s.³⁸ In 1618, John Cameron was appointed professor of theology at the Protestant Academy of Saumur. His formulation of a 'middle way' was developed and propagated by Moise Amyraut. The 'New Method', as some called it, consisted in two important alterations in the doctrine of the decree of election. The first was a change in the order of the divine decrees. Instead of teaching that the decree electing certain particular individuals to eternal salvation preceded the decree by which the Son of God was appointed head of the elect and surety of the new covenant, Cameron taught 'hypothetic universalism' or 'post-redemptionism'. He taught that the death of Christ was decreed to be for the whole human race rather than for the elect alone and that it was succeeded by the decree of election by which God chose those in whom he would efficaciously work to salvation by his Spirit.

It was this view, that Christ's death was, in some sense at least, for all mankind, which was generally regarded as the distinguishing feature of Amyraldianism. Edmund Calamy, the grandfather of Howe's first biographer, defended it at the Westminster Assembly:

I am far from universal redemption in the Arminian sense; but that that I hold is in the sense of our divines in the Synod of Dort, that Christ did pay a price for all ... that Jesus Christ did not only die sufficiently for all, but God did intend, in giving Christ, and Christ in giving himself, did intend to put all men in a state of salvation in case they do believe.³⁹

Richard Baxter, who said that he completely agreed with Amyraut on the matter put it this way: 'Christ died for all men, so far as to purchase them pardon and salvation on condition they would repent and believe; and for the elect, so far further as to procure them faith and repentance itself.'⁴⁰ And forty years later the formulations of this were little different, one author of the 1690s writing of, 'a Golden Mean, a middle way ... that Christ died only for the Elect Sinners of mankind both sufficiently and Efficaciously, but that he died for the Non-elect only Sufficiently but not Efficaciously'.⁴¹

This position on universal redemption was quickly embraced by those who, while convinced about the fundamentals of Calvinist soteriology, were uneasy about what they conceived to be the consequences of the doctrine of particular redemption. Many felt that this doctrine hampered evangelism, hindered assurance and rested on an exegetically insecure foundation. Baxter went so far as to suggest that the doctrine of universal redemption was held by 'half the Divines of England'.⁴² And, of course, to buttress the argument historical considerations and weighty names were brought to bear - Amyraldianism was presented as authentic Calvinism, as the position of the English

35 *Extracts from the Diary and Autobiography of the Rev James Clegg*, ed. by H. Kirke (Buxton, 1899), p.23.

36 Owen, *Works*, ed. by William Goold, 24 vols (1850-55) vol.X, p.432, referring to the Amyraldianism of Baxter and others in the 1640s.

37 Edmund Calamy to Burnet in Calamy, *Historical Account*, vol.I, p.470.

38 J.I.Packer, 'The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford University, 1954), p.109; see also Toon, *Emergence*; Alan P.F. Sell, *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism and Salvation* (Worthing, 1982); B.G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-century France* (Madison, WI, 1969).

39 A.F.Mitchell and J.Struthers (eds), *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (1874), p.152.

40 Baxter, *Certain Disputations Of Right to the Sacraments* (1658), pp.B-C2.

41 *An Apology for the Ministers*, p.190.

42 Baxter, *Certain Disputations*, p.B2.

divines at Dort and even as the position of the Canons of Dort themselves, and as the view of great men such as John Preston, Ezekiel Culverwell, Bishop John Davenant and Archbishop James Ussher.⁴³

High Calvinists regarded the adoption of this position as the first step down a dangerous slippery slope. John Owen wrote of

those who of late days have themselves drunk large draughts of the very dregs of Pelagianism, do hold out at first only a desire to be pledged in a taste of the universality of the merit of Christ for the redemption (or rather something else, well I wot not what) of all and every man.

Stephen Lobb saw things the same way:

Of these, how many slide into Arminianism? and from thence pass over unto the Tents of Socinus: Though they set up for Men of a middle way, between the extreams of Calvin and the excesses of Van Harmine; yet, on the turn from the former they fall in so far with the latter in their Concessions ... [they] at last fall in entirely with them.⁴⁵

And yet it is undoubtedly the case that the position was still essentially Calvinist. 'Cameron still held the essential Calvinist position, that God's secret will includes the unconditional particular redemption of certain men to salvation and that these, and they alone, are brought, by irresistible sovereign grace, to faith and perseverance'.⁴⁶ Or, as Hickman put it in 1659,

To grant him [Pierce, against whom Hickman was arguing] universall redemption is to grant him just nothing at all; for what though Christ did so far die for all as to procure a salvation for all, upon the conditions of faith and repentance, what's this to the absoluteness of God's decrees, or to the insuperability of converting grace, or to the certain infallible perseverance of God's elect after conversion?⁴⁷

The Amyraldian position on universal redemption may have been a middle way between Arminianism and Calvinism, but given that the sense in which Christ was said to die for all secured definite salvation for not one single sinner and that that definite salvation was secured only for the elect by the work of the Spirit bringing them to that faith in Christ by which they would come to enjoy the benefits of his atoning death, it has to be concluded that Amyraldianism was a restated Calvinism and not an abandonment of Calvinism. Its proponents argued for no more than this, with the important rider that it was a restated Calvinism exegetically driven (Cameron objected to the 'sham explanation of the divines'), one which allowed the universality of Scripture language to stand without giving up what Calvinists understood to be the unequivocal teaching of Scripture on the necessity of a doctrine of election to safeguard the gratuitousness of salvation.

The second alteration to the doctrine of the decree of election which the New Method introduced was the disavowal of the double decree. In Calvin, Dort and Westminster, too, there was asymmetry between predestination to salvation and predestination to damnation. But Amyraldians took this further, emphasising that the effect of universal redemption was the possibility of salvation for all, that grace was available for all, that any who repented and believed would be saved and that all of this served only to heighten the inexcusability of the lost. This view of single predestination was expressed by Milton:

Some I have chosen of peculiar grace
Elect above the rest; so is my will.
The rest shall hear me call, and oft be warned
Their sinful state, and to appease betimes
The incensed Deity, while offered grace
Invites; for I will clear their senses dark,
What may suffice, and soften stony hearts
To pray, repent, and bring obedience due.
This ...
They who neglect and scorn shall never taste;
... And none but such from mercy I exclude.⁴⁸

43 *An Apology for the Ministers*, p.192; Henry Hickman, *A Justification of the Fathers and Schoolmen* (Oxford, 1659), Preface, p.52; Calamy, *Divine Mercy Exalted* (1703), p.iv.

44 Owen, *Works*, vol.X, p.432.

45 Lobb, *The Growth of Error* (1697), pp.2-3.

46 Packer, 'Redemption', p.221; see also Von Rohr, *Covenant*, p.128.

47 Hickman, *Justification*, Preface, pp.48-53.

48 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, III.184-8, 198-9, 202.

Once again, this did not constitute an abandonment of essential Calvinism. Although it may only have been in brackets, so to speak, the Amyraldians did add that the only sinners who would repent and believe were those in whom God elected to work sovereignly by the Spirit, and that without the irresistible regenerating work of the Spirit none of the 'non-elect' would ever repent and believe. Adherence to Calvinist teaching on depravity and inability meant that there was no question of any of the non-elect being saved. Again it could be argued that the position adopted arose from the desire to reflect the asymmetry found in Scripture between election and reprobation and a determination to go no further than Scripture even if it seemed plain logic to do so. If the omniscient and sovereign God chose not to elect all to salvation then logic demanded that in effect he had decreed the damnation of the rest. Ironically, Henry More accused the high Calvinists of being 'not yet sufficiently cleansed from the corruption they contracted under the Mother of Apostasy: which mainly consists in this, in adding the fallible deductions of humane Reason to the infallible Articles of the ancient and Apostolick Faith'.⁴⁹

3.3 Neonomianism

Separate from and yet closely connected with Amyraldianism was the widespread acceptance of 'Neonomianism' amongst the moderate presbyterians. Neonomianism, also known as Baxterianism, was a development from the Amyraldian position on universal redemption. A change of view on the *extent* of the atonement required a movement away from a substitutionary model for understanding the *nature* of the atonement. If Christ died in the place of all mankind, bearing the punishment due to them for their sin, then no punishment can come upon them at any time. Universal redemption coupled with a substitutionary model of the atonement implies universal salvation. Baxter was by no means the first to adopt Cameron's views on universal redemption but he was one of the first to follow through its implications for the nature of the atonement. Taking its lead from George Lawson's political method, the foundation of his system was the understanding of God primarily as Rector or Moral Governor of the world.⁵⁰ Both the high Calvinists and Amyraldians worked in an Anselmic framework for understanding the atonement - atonement was the provision of salvation for sinful men without detracting from, in fact by restoring, the honour of God as the holy Sovereign. But whereas the high Calvinists held that this was accomplished by the satisfaction of the penal demands of law by the substitutionary death of Christ in the place of the elect, the Baxterians emphasized the 'governmental' element of satisfaction: the effect of the work of Christ is that

God's Sovereign Authority over the creature might be owned, and the Equity and Goodness of his Law acknowledged; and the Threatnings therein denounced fulfilled, and his Holiness vindicated and his Hatred against sin and vindicatory Justice upon offenders declared, and Man for ever discouraged from sin by hopes of impunity.⁵¹

With this view of the atonement was combined the idea that the death of Christ somehow effected an objective, universal change in the constitution of God's dealings with the world:

All that properly results from the satisfaction of Christ is only this, that the grand obstacle which stood in the way of Mercy, and obstructed its communications to the guilty Offender, that this being removed, God might now be at liberty to pardon and reaccept [men] unto favour in what way, and upon what terms he pleased .⁵²

An explanation of the 'somehow' was conspicuous by its absence - Bates' lengthy treatment of the satisfaction and declaration of God's justice in the death of Christ, for example, never addresses this issue and indeed reads as though he were determined to avoid it.⁵³ The Baxterians did not describe what possible merit there was in the death of the perfect Son of God or how God could possibly be 'satisfied' by it, or indeed how his death could demonstrate God's hatred of sin if the penal element were denied. And the penal element had to be denied because it always raised the question as to whose punishment Christ was bearing which was the pressing question the particular redemptionists always returned to.⁵⁴

The Lord Jesus Christ, then, according to the Baxterians, 'procured the New Covenant, or such termes upon which Salvation may be had, as are possible to all the world ... the great immediate effect or benefit which accrewes to man from Christ's dying for him, is his having other terms procured upon which he may be justified and saved'.⁵⁵ It was not that the death of Christ procured the salvation of the elect, but that it made possible the offer of salvation to all men. A new covenant and a new law (terms) were introduced for all mankind and now all that is left is that 'the

⁴⁹ Henry More, *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (1660), p.xxvi.

⁵⁰ CCRB, 72.

⁵¹ Clifford, *Methodus*, pp.4-5.

⁵² Clifford, *Methodus*, p.17.

⁵³ William Bates, *The Harmony of the Divine Attributes*, in *Works* (1700), pp.172-96.

⁵⁴ E.g. John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, in *Works*, vol. X.

⁵⁵ Humfrey, *Middle Way*, p.26.

release of the Guilty is suspended upon those Conditions, which he that freely makes Satisfaction, and the Governour who by favour accepts it, are pleased to appoint'.⁵⁶

The teaching of Neonomianism was that the conditions of the new law, those things which constituted 'evangelical righteousness', were 'repentance, faith and sincere obedience'. Faith was no longer the means by which a salvation already complete was freely received but the condition upon which salvation was granted: 'we are justifiable by the covenant of mercy as performers of the condition'.⁵⁷ This teaching was a red rag to the high Calvinists bulls to whom the introduction of 'conditions' was equal to the introduction of merit. Debate on this began with the publication of Baxter's *Aphorismes* in 1649 and raged again in the 1690s. One high Calvinist defined a Neonomian as 'one that Asserts the Old Law is abolished, and therein is a superlative Antinomian, but pleads for a New Law, and Justification by the Works of it, and therein is a Neonomian'.⁵⁸ In fact, Baxterians went to extraordinary lengths and into great detail in order to show that though they spoke of conditions as necessary to salvation they did not mean that fulfillment of these conditions merited salvation:

Evangelical Repentance is a Condition Dispositive of the Subject (Man) necessary in order to his being justified ... a lively effectual Faith is the Condition receptive and applicative of the Object (Christ and his Righteousness) by and for which only, Man is justified ... sincere evangelical Obedience proceeding from a principle of true Faith, is a condition necessary on Man's part, unto his obtaining possession of Eternal Salvation in Heaven, for the alone Merits of Christ.⁵⁹

While it was true that in Baxterianism there was a danger of moralism (the complicated teaching on atonement and justification was open to a simplification along the lines of 'Christ has sorted things out with an offended God and introduced easier terms - do the right thing sincerely and you will be saved - all by grace of course'), it cannot be said that the moderate presbyterians of the seventeenth century fell into it. This was partly because their puritan background and Christ-centred piety stood completely opposed to any idea of anything meritorious in man but more directly because the retention of Calvinist teaching on the spiritual inability and deadness of the sinner meant that the conditions themselves could only be fulfilled under the irresistible regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. The repentance, faith and sincere obedience which were the conditions were also gifts of God. This, again, is why Neonomianism, like Amyraldianism cannot be regarded as other than essentially Calvinist - when all was said and done, the elect and only the elect would be saved and that by the sovereign, irresistible grace of God.

3.4 Opposition to antinomianism

A further characteristic of the moderate presbyterians was their deeply held opposition to antinomianism. Wallace is right to observe that 'the Antinomian crisis and controversy [of the 1640s] acted as a catalyst in the forming of the theological parties, on the one hand driving a wedge between moderate Calvinists who abhorred them and high Calvinists who found them incautious allies and, on the other hand, further alienating Arminian Anglicans from all Calvinists'.⁶⁰ While Baxter was by no means the first to voice alarm at antinomianism, the first round of the bout having been fought before Baxter went into print, his example and influence were of great importance in moulding and strengthening the hostility towards antinomianism which, along with other features, marked out the moderate presbyterians for the next fifty years. Indeed, this was arguably the most important element in what Packer calls 'the growth of the Baxterian synthesis'.⁶¹ It would have been possible for Baxter to hold Cameron's views on the decrees and even to develop a 'political' understanding of the nature of the atonement, without needing to include endeavours after sincere obedience in his definition of faith. But as Walter Marshall understood, 'some late divines have thought fit to bring the doctrine of former Protestants concerning justification to their anvil, and to hammer it into another form, that it might be more free from Antinomianism'.⁶²

There were specific doctrinal disputes over matters such as eternal justification, the primary means by which a believer comes to assurance of salvation, the place of the law in the believer's life, and the nature of saving faith.⁶³ But

⁵⁶ Bates, *Works*, p.192.

⁵⁷ Humfrey, *Middle Way*, pp.16-17. See Sell, *Debate*; Packer, 'Redemption'; Toon, *Emergence*; Clifford, *Atonement*, p.85. Also C.F. Allison, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (Wilton, CT, 1966). Allison's discussion of views of justification in the seventeenth century is indispensable. He calls the Neonomian view, 'the doctrine of the lowered market'. The single most important book in the 1690s debate was Daniel Williams, *Gospel Truth Stated and Vindicated* (1692). On the matter of merit, see Robert South, *12 Sermons upon Several Subjects* (1698), III, pp.3-52.

⁵⁸ Isaac Chauncy, *Neonomianism Unmask'd, or the Ancient Gospel pleaded against the other called a New law or Gospel* (1692), p.A2 + 2; see also CCRB, 68.

⁵⁹ *An Apology for the Ministers*, Preface, A2 + 4.

⁶⁰ Wallace, *Puritans*, p.120.

⁶¹ Packer, 'Redemption', pp.197, 227.

⁶² Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* [1692] (reprint, 1954), p.15.

⁶³ Von Rohr, *Covenant*, pp.97-8, 102-12, 163-6; Wallace, *Puritans*, pp.113-20; see also 'General Heads' in Williams

underneath these doctrinal disputes ran the undercurrent of suspicion. The antinomians so gloried in the freeness of justification that they detached it theoretically from good works altogether; all mention of conditions for justification smelt to them of moralism. This horrified a man of Baxter's temperament and constitution who could never fail to connect the libertinism which he saw in the army and amongst the sectaries with the theoretical tenets of antinomianism. Indeed, 'to Baxter's mind, an improper reliance upon the merit of deeds is far preferable to a confident trust in a justification which does not need to be demonstrated'.⁶⁴ However often he might see theoretical antinomians living good lives or however often those theoretical antinomians reasserted their belief common to all Protestants that the distinction made between justification and sanctification in order to preserve the unmerited freeness of the former could never mean that they could be separated in life, Baxter could only equate antinomianism with the licence, enthusiasm and disorder of the anabaptists in the army. His opposition to the antinomians may have been as much a hatred of disorder, a deep-rooted social conservatism as a matter of theology but his suspicions that theoretical antinomianism meant arrogant and extravagant enthusiasm and lawless wickedness were shared by many, not only in the 1640s but throughout the remainder of the seventeenth century. Von Rohr has noted that against the Calvinists of the seventeenth century was levelled 'the charge ... of being unconcerned about the Christian's inner moral condition, to say nothing of outward moral behaviour'.⁶⁵ Modern scholars, too, write of 'the irrationalism and antinomianism implicit in the puritan versions of the doctrines of justification by faith alone, imputed righteousness and absolute predestination', and even of the 'antinomian nonsense' found in Owen's writings.⁶⁶ Owen himself and other high Calvinists were ready to explain carefully (and successfully) that these charges were unwarranted, whatever abuses may be found in the writings or lives of those who really were antinomians. The moderate presbyterians reacted to the charges differently - so strongly did the tide of anti-Calvinism flow and so great was their own horror at the libertinism of the sectaries that their grip on Calvinist fundamentals was loosened and their opposition to antinomianism must itself be regarded as a major contributory factor not only to the development of Neonomianism but also to the suspicion that an incipient moralism is to be found in some of their writings.

3.5 'Liberal rationalism'

Moderate presbyterians were also, along with many others in Restoration England but in contrast to high Calvinist dissenters, marked by what might be called their 'liberal' rationalism.⁶⁷ This affected their apologetic method. Richard Baxter, for example, in his *Reasons of the Christian Religion* determined to begin 'with retired reason to read the book of nature only ... omitting all that might be controverted by any considerable, sober reason' and in that way managed nearly two hundred pages of theistic evidences before turning to revealed religion.⁶⁸ Horton Davies said of one piece of Bates' writing, that it was 'typical in its rationalism, its concentration on Creation rather than Grace, and on natural rather than revealed theology, as well as in its urbane approach to an intelligent congregation'. That is by no means all that there is to say about Bates' preaching and writing but it remains true that such words are used accurately to describe Baxter, Howe and Bates and could also be used of Wilkins, Tillotson or Burnet but that they would be far from true if written of John Owen, Thomas Watson or John Bunyan.⁶⁹

There was also amongst the moderate presbyterians strong sympathy for the views of the Great Tew circle, the Cambridge Platonists and the latitudinarians that creed-making had damaged the church, that the fundamentals of the faith were few and clear and that theological debate ought to be marked by calm tolerance and an undogmatic spirit. The principle of Scripture sufficiency gained increasing numbers of proponents amongst the moderate presbyterians as the seventeenth century drew to a close. Although it is true that 'while Baxter gives reason what he believes to be its due place, he never gives it primacy' and that 'to set the "rationall" Baxter against "revelational" rivals is ... to miss the genuine sense in which Baxter was part of a movement which he was also criticizing', it can nevertheless be said that within twenty years of Baxter's death the presbyterians were deeply dyed with 'Baxterian Latitudinarianism'.⁷⁰

3.6 Reluctant Dissent

Finally, the moderate presbyterians were quite different from other dissenters in the degree of reluctance with which they found themselves compelled to leave the ministry of the Church of England. They continued to enjoy good

Gospel Truth, pp.251-52.

⁶⁴ N.H. Keeble, *Richard Baxter, Puritan Man of Letters* (Oxford, 1982), p.69.

⁶⁵ Von Rohr, *Covenant*, pp.102-3.

⁶⁶ Spurr, 'Latitudinarianism', p.70; Clifford, *Atonement*, p.188.

⁶⁷ The term is open to the charge of anachronism but is used by, amongst others, C. Hill, *A Turbulent, Factious and Seditious People: John Bunyan and His Church* (Oxford, 1988), p.14; A. Gordon, *Heads of English Unitarian History* (1895), pp.31, 59; G.F.Nuttall, 'Northamptonshire and the "Modern Question"', *JTS*, XVI (1965), pp.101-23 (pp.107-8); and B.J. Shapiro, *John Wilkins: An Intellectual Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), p.152.

⁶⁸ Baxter, *Reasons* (1659), p.191.

⁶⁹ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England, 1603-90* (Princeton, 1975), p.176.

⁷⁰ G.F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter* (1965), p.124; Lamont, *Baxter*, p.67; D.D. Wallace, 'Socinianism, Justification by Faith and the Sources of John Locke's "The Reasonableness of Christianity"', *JHI*, 45 (1984), pp.49-66 (p.51).

personal relationships with conformists, were very often proponents of occasional conformity and stressed repeatedly the importance of charity and catholicity in attitudes to other Christians. Humfrey spoke for many: 'The Presbyterians are my Friends, and the Independents my Friends, and others my Friends, but Truth is greatest and must overcome'.⁷¹ While the moderate presbyterians were, in terms of ecclesiastical polity, 'presbyterians' they had been deeply influenced by Ussher's scheme for a moderated episcopacy and by Stillingfleet's arguments, put forward in 1660, that no one system of church government could claim the necessary, sufficient and exclusive support of Scripture. After 1662 they still looked for comprehension, driven in part by their attachment to the parochial system, their emphasis on an educated ministry and the relative openness of the sacraments in Presbyterianism.

4. Moderate Presbyterianism: Important but Impermanent

There was one outstanding English Protestant divine in the second half of the seventeenth century who consciously endeavoured to avoid rigidity and walk a middle way, who held to Amyraldian views of predestination and redemption and to Neonomian views of justification, who was characterized by a strong antipathy to antinomianism, a confidence in natural theology, an impatience with creed-making and a catholicity of mind and spirit which made his dissent sad and reluctant. His name was Richard Baxter and all students of seventeenth century church history and historical theology are aware of his importance. But he was not the only divine who could be described in this way. There were many others and they are most accurately labelled 'moderate presbyterians'. John Howe, William Bates, Joseph Alleine, John Humfrey, John Corbet, Henry Hickman, Daniel Williams, Matthew Henry, John Shower, Thomas Gouge and others can all be justifiably called moderate presbyterians.⁷² In the face of the intensely hostile and widespread anti-Calvinist reaction of the 1650s and 1660s these men remained faithful in their adherence to Calvinist fundamentals and yet responded to criticisms of Calvinism with an understanding and moderation which were absent from many high Calvinist responses. Several of them may be considered leaders of early nonconformity and all were men of influence and ability. Their writings and their network of ministerial contacts gave their moderate presbyterian views an extensive reach. And yet, for all that, 'moderate presbyterianism' lasted for but two generations.

Cragg called the period from the Restoration until the end of Anne's reign a watershed in English religious thought. 'In the long run, latitudinarianism was to replace Calvinism as the dominant strain in English Protestantism' and in retrospect the signs of this can be seen even at the time of the Restoration. However much their concerns arose from the desire to be faithful to the teaching of Scripture and to be pastorally effective in promoting both a proper understanding of grace and a fervent pursuit of holiness, the moderate presbyterians were in effect 'orienting Calvinism to the realities of the new situation'.⁷³ And this drew sharp criticism from those 'high' Calvinists who saw the 'moderation' of the moderate presbyterians as compromise. High Calvinist hostility to the trends towards rationalism and moralism was understandable and was exemplified in John Owen's debate with William Sherlock or John Bunyan's with Edward Fowler. To a character in *The Pilgrim's Progress* who showed a distaste for 'enthusiasm', a confidence about his spiritual state on the basis of his morality and who held to Neonomian view of justification, Bunyan gave the name 'Ignorance'.⁷⁴ And Owen's anxiety and indignation at what he saw as the growing rationalism and moralism of the anti-Calvinists were evident in the work which he saw go to the publishers on the day he died. In it Owen referred to 'a pretence of the sobriety of reason', 'mere unsanctified reason', 'a religion declared, as they suppose by reason and the light of nature', 'a refined heathenism', and to the 'public contempt of the principal mysteries of the Gospel among them that are called Christians'.⁷⁵

Men may talk what they please of a light within them, or of the power of reason to conduct them unto that knowledge of God whereby they may live unto him, [but without supernatural revelation] ... they would not excel them who, in the best management of their own reasonings, 'knew not God' but waxed vain in their imaginations.⁷⁶

It was not just high Calvinists who noticed the theological shifts taking place. In 1690, Francis Tallents observed in a letter to Baxter, 'A great fault hath been for above 20 years, to incline to neglect Christ under pretence of exalting Reason and Goodness'.⁷⁷ But what moderates like Tallents may have joined the high Calvinists in lamenting, the high

⁷¹ Humfrey, *Mediocrity*, p.37.

⁷² See Appendix 1, 'The Extent of Moderate Presbyterianism: Notes on some Restoration Divines', p.167 below.

⁷³ G.R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason 1648-1789* (Harmondsworth, 1960), p.65; Hill, *Turbulent*, p.134. Jordan, *Development*, vol.III, p.316.

⁷⁴ Edward Fowler, *The Design of Christianity* (1671), *Dirt Wipt Off* (1672); John Bunyan, *A Defence of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith in Jesus Christ* (1672); William Sherlock, *A Discourse concerning the Knowledge of Jesus Christ* (1674), *A Defence and Continuation of the Discourse* (1675); John Owen, *Of Communion with God* (1657), *A Vindication of some passages in a Discourse concerning Communion with God* (1674); see also Parker's hostility to Owen: he has 'neither so much Wit as he himself presumes, nor so much Sincerity as his Friends imagine'. Samuel Parker, *Defence*, A3; see also John Spurr, *Restoration Church*, ch.6, esp. pp.281, 296-311, 314.

⁷⁵ Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, in *Works*, vol.I, pp.287, 296-7, 306, 328, 332.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Baxter Letters*, v.124, CCRB, 1206. For Tallents see *DNB*, *CR*.

Calvinists discerned and denounced in the moderates' own theology. High Calvinist, Thomas Danson, reacting to Howe's work on God's prescience, declared that 'Protestantism grows weary of itself (if we may judge of its present humour by Mr. H. and Mr. B.)' and suggested that part of Howe's teaching 'borders as near upon Arminianism as Scotland does upon England'.⁷⁸ And Robert Traill, a Scottish minister living in London, expressed his concerns not about Anglicans but about some nonconformists:

We see the pure Gospel of Christ corrupted; and an Arminian gospel new vampt ... what was good church-of-England doctrine at and after the reformation, cannot now go down with some Arminianizing Nonconformists.⁷⁹

Traill describes the 'liberal' nonconformists as those with whom, 'no books or authors are in esteem and use, but such as are for the new rational method of divinity', reckons their supporters are to be found mostly amongst 'the zealous devout people in a natural religion' and laments,

How many sermons may a man hear, and read when printed, yea and books written; about the way to heaven, wherein is hardly the name of Jesus Christ? And if he be named, it is the name of Christ as Judge and Lawgiver, rather than that of Saviour.⁸⁰

The high Calvinists believed that the Amyraldian abandonment of particular redemption would lead to an abandonment of particular election; that Neonomian inclusion of sincere obedience as a condition of justification would lead to a dilution of the gospel of pure grace; that Baxterian views of Scripture-sufficiency would bring decline in doctrinal discipline; and that occasional conformity would undermine dissenting convictions. They argued that 'usually such men that are for middle ways in points of doctrine, have a greater kindness for the extreme they go halfway to than for that which they go halfway from'. And historically speaking they were correct. 'The uneasy compromises of moderate Calvinism among the Presbyterians [did not] as a theology, prove a very lasting holding point: Baxterians became Arminian and then Arian as their opponents had warned'.⁸¹ Later comment on their influence has come under such headings as 'The Twilight of Puritanism', 'The Death of Presbyterianism' and 'The Transformation of Dissent'. Two generations after the crystallizing of moderate presbyterianism in the life and thought of Richard Baxter, the anonymous author of *A View of the Dissenting Intrest in London* wrote of 'the so manifest growth of error, by which is meant the spreading of Arminianism which generally leads the van, arrianism, and Socinianism, and which is very often the consequence of them all, Deism and Infidelity'.⁸² Certainly the pace of theological change in Presbyterianism accelerated after 1690 and many explanations have been offered. The internal organisation of Presbyterian churches may have played a part. There was no control over the views of the minister and he had greater power than in the Independent churches where a form of 'democracy' acted as a brake on doctrinal movement. It has been suggested that the relative wealth enjoyed by Presbyterian merchants and the travel that they engaged in both gave them a breadth of mind and optimism about man that more suited Arminianism than Calvinism. Because Presbyterians tended to come from higher social groups there was a constant pressure to conform and many succumbed to it. In addition, while 'waiting' for comprehension, a number of influential Presbyterians spent time in the Netherlands and may have adopted the Voetian anti-voluntarism which they encountered there. On returning and being barred from the Anglican church they established Dissenting Academies which tended to be liberal - their independence of the universities led to the writing of their own syllabuses which were notably progressive in the areas of science and modern languages, both of which may have encouraged students in a liberal rationalism.⁸³ The antinomian controversy of the 1690s with the break-down of the Presbyterian-Independent 'Happy Union' entrenched the position of those who held to the middle way and indeed, as Thomas says, saw the 'triumph of Baxterianism' among the Presbyterians. Moreover, after the mid-1690s the influence of Locke was a decisive factor in taking what were early traces and trends through to a full-blown liberalism.⁸⁴ The argument of this study is that the single most important feature of moderate presbyterianism was its character as a response to the anti-Calvinist criticisms of the 1650s and 1660s. But that 'middle way' response, though a coherent and theoretically consistent whole was developed and expounded with considerable subtlety and complexity and so it is not at all surprising that many who adopted the moderate presbyterian position as a first step away from consistent high Calvinism did not rest there but went on to a more thorough-going acceptance of liberal Arminianism.

⁷⁸ Danson, *De Causa Dei* (1678), pp.44, 121.

⁷⁹ Traill, *A Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine concerning Justification* [1692], in *Works*, 4 vols (Edinburgh, 1810), vol.I, pp.262, 264.

⁸⁰ Traill, *Vindication*, p.281.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* p.253; Wallace, *Puritans*, p.185.

⁸² *A View* (MS in DWL, 1731), p.83.

⁸³ H. McLachlan, *English Education under the Test Acts* (Manchester, 1931).

⁸⁴ Bolam *et al.*, *English Presbyterians*; Griffiths, *Religion*; Hywel Jones, 'The Death of Presbyterianism' in *By Schisms Rent Asunder* (Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference Papers, 1969), pp.31-42; see also J.T. Spivey, 'Middle Way Men, Edmund Calamy and the Crises of Moderate Nonconformity (1688-1732)' (unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 1986).

5. 'Rigide Calvinisme in a Softer Dresse': The Moderate Presbyterianism of John Howe

John Howe was one of the four most important leaders of early nonconformity. In his defence of nonconformity, his understanding of true Christian charity and unity, and his apology for occasional conformists Howe responded to the anti-Calvinist criticism that Calvinism was dogmatic and divisive. An examination of Howe's own life and practice as well as a comparison of his teaching with that of Stillingfleet and Defoe, amongst others, is illuminating in this respect. In his anti-atheist apologetic, his use of natural theology and his exposition of the place and powers of reason, Howe responded to the anti-Calvinist criticism that Calvinist teaching underestimated the rational dignity of man, and a comparison of his apologetic and that of John Wilkins on these matters is illuminating. Finally, in his teaching on predestination and providence, on voluntarism and regeneration, he responded to the anti-Calvinist criticism that Calvinist teaching made God the author of sin and undermined the imperative towards holy living; understanding of Howe's thought is helped by comparing it with the teaching of the Cambridge Platonists on these matters. It is these areas which are covered in the chapters which follow. While it may be that Howe's own presentation of the moderate presbyterian position was unrepresentatively consistent it is certainly the case that an extended study shows him to have been not only a leader of an important but neglected movement in seventeenth-century theology but also, in his own right, a thinker of independence, clarity and depth.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Calamy reports Howe's own statement that while at university he 'drew up a Body of Divinity for himself and his own use, which he saw very little occasion afterwards to vary from, in compliance with the Schemes of others', *Memoir*, p.12. See Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding', pp.16-22.