RESPONSE TO J. MATTHEW PINSON'S "THOMAS GRANTHAM'S THEOLOGY OF THE ATONEMENT AND JUSTIFICATION"

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The silence on Thomas Grantham in Baptist theological and historical studies is deafening. Even more remarkable is the lacuna created on the bookshelves of pastors, theologians, and historians who have little or no access to one of the most important texts in Baptist history. Many seem to believe that Grantham lost his relevance with the turn of the seventeenth century. In his article, "Thomas Grantham's Theology of the Atonement and Justification," Matt Pinson encourages us to think otherwise. He argues that General Baptist thinkers like Grantham can help us rethink the often superficial and hastily generalized categories of "Calvinism" and "Arminianism."

Pinson's article is commendable both for its labor in these texts and for its application to ongoing soteriological debates. As an exercise in historical theology Pinson does not evaluate the propriety of Grantham's exegesis or understandings of Pauline thought. Rather, he successfully employs Grantham, Goodwin, and Arminius to illustrate that, despite some claims to the contrary, Arminianism presents us with no single, monolithic soteriological scheme—especially with regards to the nature of the atonement itself. Much like Roger Olson, Pinson is interested in distinguishing between "myths and realities" in Arminian theology.[1] Pinson also successfully demonstrates that Arminians like Grantham, and Arminius before him, do in fact belong to a Reformed tradition that embraces central Reformation tenets such as forensic justification *sola fide* and penal substitutionary atonement. The recognition of our shared Reformation tradition is an important step toward removing straw men in the Calvinist-Arminian conversation.

As the earliest known systematic theologian in the Baptist tradition, Grantham modeled a practice of pastoral theology that was apologetic, biblical, irenic, and culturally engaged. He concerned himself with external cultural challenges such as Islam, skepticism, and deficient

[1]See Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

views of Christ's humanity and divinity. Grantham handled the more internal, polemical issues, such as Calvinistic doctrines of unconditional election and limited atonement or Hugo Grotius's controversial views of the atonement with dignity and grace, yet with an unwavering commitment to biblical authority. Grantham also penned one of the most significant early treatises on religious liberty, seen in the third book of *Christianismus Primitivus*. Most important for Pinson's purposes here, however, is the way Grantham represents an often unnoticed stream of tradition that is very much in tune with the soteriological themes of the Reformation.

Let me be clear: there's nothing really all that unique about Grantham's view on the atonement and on justification. He does not stand that far removed from Arminius, whose own views on the atonement do not dramatically differ from the later Calvinistic tradition, save for his patently divergent opinion on the extent of the atonement. As Pinson notes, Grantham's position on general atonement virtually "goes without saying." (Unfortunately, Calvinists and Arminians tend to talk past each other on universal atonement because they are working in completely different language games here, as evidenced in their very different understandings of the referent action in the verb "atone"). Grantham's originality is not the issue here. What's important for Pinson is illustrating the ways in which General Baptists in the vein of Grantham tend to differentiate their own position from other Arminianistic schema. Pinson's apology for Grantham is thus a defense of his own Free Will Baptist tradition, which he is adamant about distinguishing from other Wesleyan-Arminian traditions.

Grantham stands alongside the Reformed tradition in several ways, including several key aspects. Central to his scheme is the doctrine of the union with Christ. The accusation of "legal fiction" often dealt to forensic models of justification like Grantham's comes from a fundamental misunderstanding of this Reformed doctrine. Often missed in these debates is the centrality and profundity of Paul's metaphor of being "in Christ." Reformers understood this term to mean a legal, life-giving, and mysterious union wherein Christ and the believer are made one in a way akin to but nevertheless greater than the bonds of marriage. When in union with Christ, what happens to the believer happens to Christ (e.g., the penalty of sin) and what happens to Christ happens to believers (e.g., victory over death and exaltation). For Grantham and the Reformation tradition, God is not arbitrarily passing off our blame to Jesus and designating his merits as our own. Rather, Christ's active and passive obedience is ours because we are linked to him through an otherwise inexplicable bond. "Imputed righteousness" cannot be understood apart from this framework.

Pinson also makes a helpful distinction between various Arminian understandings of apostasy, again using Goodwin and Grantham as dialogue partners.[2] For Grantham, who was committed to *sola fide* and an objective grounding for justification in Christ's penal-substitutionary act (which Pinson puzzlingly describes as Anselmian "penal satisfaction"), apostasy was the reversal of faith—an explicit rejection of faith in Christ. If grace is resistible prior to faith in Christ,

[2]See also J. Matthew Pinson, "The Diversity of Arminian Theology: Thomas Grantham, John Goodwin, and Jacobus Arminius," available at http://evangelicalarminians.org/files/ The%20Diversity%20of%20 Arminian%20Soteriology%20%28Pinson%29_1.pdf; accessed on April 14, 2011.

grace can be resistible after faith in Christ. Goodwin, on the other hand, makes apostasy or perseverance contingent not on continued faith but rather on continued good works. With the author of Hebrews, Grantham saw apostasy as irreversible and Goodwin did not necessarily see it a permanent condition. Once more, Pinson shows that there is not simply one "Arminian" way to understand apostasy and perseverance. I admit my own guilt in failing to make these distinctions when speaking of my General Baptist cousins and their place in the broader Arminian tradition.

The debate over Calvinism and Arminianism is not the only place where Grantham serves an illustrative purpose in contemporary soteriological discussions. The contrast between Grantham and John Goodwin on the grounds for justification in the atonement parallels much of the contemporary debates on the so-called "New Perspective(s) on Paul." Whereas Grantham contended that the imputation of Christ's active and passive obedience was made necessary by some kind of moral obligation within God, Goodwin's more Grotian approach to the atonement represents a kind of theological voluntarism popular since *Euthyphro*. Many of the recent evangelical discussions about the nature of δικαιοσύνην θεοῦ raise a similar question: Is God's righteousness an extension of a necessary or essential attribute that he possesses or is it simply something that he does (e.g., his faithfulness to the covenant)? The outcome of this debate is not yet clear, but my suspicion is that Arminians in the Wesleyan tradition (who represent views akin to Goodwin's) will tend to be more favorable to the positions of N. T. Wright and other "New Perspectives" than will other Arminians who, like Grantham and Arminius himself, more fittingly belong under Pinson's "Reformed Arminian" moniker.

In summary, Grantham's contributions to the Baptist family have been too long neglected. So, Baptists of every stripe are indebted to Pinson and Clint Bass for their help in bringing new exposure to Grantham. We should also be appreciative that the editors of Mercer University Press's *Early Baptist Texts* series who are striving to make new editions of Grantham's works widely available for the first time in centuries. Hopefully this revival of Grantham can foster new appreciation for the broader Arminian perspective.

One of the most important elements of dialogue is for each party to understand the other in their own terms. We should also practice what philosophers call the principle of charity, which means we can withhold criticism of a perspective different from our own until we attempt to evaluate that position in its strongest and most cogent form. With Grantham, Pinson has pointed us to a stronger, more persuasive version of Arminianism than the monolithic straw man Calvinists often employ.