

# The Triumph of Truth: John Fawcett's Defense Against Joseph Priestley's Christological Heterodoxy During the Long Eighteenth Century<sup>1</sup>

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The arrival of William of Orange (1650–1702) at Brixham in 1688 ushered in a dawn of hope for English Dissent as Baptists, Presbyterians, and Independents longed for the day that the tide of persecution would give way to a new age of religious freedom. Their battles were far from over, however, for the long eighteenth century in England was a complex battleground for “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). The “Age of Reason” gave rise to Rational Dissent resulting in a “doctrinal minefield” concerning the Trinity, the humanity and deity of Jesus Christ, and the doctrine of the atonement, especially during the final decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Stephen Wellum rightly identifies the critical importance of the Enlightenment era (c.1560–1780) as “the hinge that swung the medieval-Reformation era into the modern era” which displaced the Reformation worldview and gave way to the gradual secularization of

thought and institutions in Western Europe.<sup>3</sup> The stakes could not be higher as the church's consistent historic confession which affirmed that "Jesus is God the Son, the second person of the eternal Trinity, who at a specific point in history took to himself a human nature and was born as Jesus of Nazareth in order to accomplish our redemption" was under attack.<sup>4</sup>

Unitarianism, which grew out of the English Enlightenment, denied Trinitarian doctrine and the atoning work of Jesus on the cross.<sup>5</sup> This article will focus on the lives and writings of two prominent pastors from the north country of Yorkshire, the Unitarian Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) and the Particular Baptist John Fawcett (1740–1817). The analysis of their writings will demonstrate Fawcett provided an orthodox defense against Priestley's heterodox claims against the deity of Jesus and the doctrine of the atonement, that both are found in Scripture, and that these doctrines are foundational to true holiness in the lives of Christians.

### **JOSEPH PRIESTLEY'S UNITARIANISM**

Joseph Priestley was born March 13, 1733, at Fieldhead, Birstall, about six miles southwest of Leeds in Yorkshire.<sup>6</sup> The son of Jonas (1700–1799) and Mary (née Swift, d. 1740) Priestley, he was the oldest of six children (four sons and two daughters) and raised in a Presbyterian home. He was committed to the care of his maternal grandfather, Joseph Swift, a farmer at Shafton, a village about twenty miles southeast of Birstall, for most of his early life until his mother died in 1740. Priestley recalled that his parents were pious people who sought to raise him with religious instruction. His mother was a woman of "exemplary piety" and his father also "had a strong sense of religion, praying with his family morning and evening, and carefully teaching his children and servants the Assembly's catechism, which was all the system of which he had any knowledge."<sup>7</sup> He noted that he was "brought up with sentiments of piety, but without bigotry ... [and] as much confirmed as [he] well could be in the principles of Calvinism" yet never felt that he had experienced "a new birth produced by the immediate agency of the Spirit of God."<sup>8</sup> Though his memories of his mother were sparse, her godly conduct impressed the importance of virtuous living on young Priestley that would remain with him the rest of his life.

Upon her death he returned home where he was sent to a neighborhood school. The care of such a large family proved difficult for his father, so Joseph went to live with his uncle and aunt, John (d. 1745) and Sarah (d. 1764) Keighley in 1742. John, who died shortly after Priestley arrived, was a man of considerable property and distinguished for his zeal for religion. Priestley warmly remembered Sarah as a “truly pious and excellent woman, who knew no other use of wealth, or of talents of any kind, than to do good, and who never spared herself for this purpose.”<sup>9</sup>

As a young man, Priestley had a weak constitution and did not think he would live a long life, which he attributed to his mind being given to serious matters. His early days were often filled with horror as he saw himself as one forsaken by God, much like the case of Francis Spira who imagined himself hopelessly lost as “repentance and salvation were denied.”<sup>10</sup> These “conflicts of mind” led Priestley to think “habitually of God and a future state” and to have a deep reverence for divine things.<sup>11</sup>

Priestley’s sharp intellectual abilities were evident at an early age. He was sent to several schools and picked up Latin, elements of Greek, and a working knowledge of Hebrew by the time he was sixteen. In 1752, Priestley attended the Daventry Academy and studied under Caleb Ashworth (1722–1775).<sup>12</sup> He spent the interval between leaving his grammar school and entering the academy, which he reckoned as some time over two years, learning geometry, algebra, and various branches of mathematics from the Rev. George Haggerstone (d. 1792), a dissenting minister in the neighborhood. He became so proficient that he was excused from all first-year studies and most of the second year when he attended Daventry, and he also obtained a scholarship from Coward’s foundation, a trust set up by the London merchant William Coward (d.1738).<sup>13</sup>

Priestley sought membership in his Presbyterian congregation, but the elders of the church refused him because of his unorthodox opinion on original sin. Priestley did not think that the entire human race was liable to the wrath of God due to Adam’s sin. He became acquainted with the Baxterian “middle way” from his time with Haggerstone and by the time he went to academy, Priestley was a committed Arminian but had not quite rejected the doctrine of the Trinity or atonement.

Priestley maintained that the chief concern of his studies, even after leaving the academy, was theological matters and his duties as a

Christian minister. He was directed to apply as a candidate for a Presbyterian congregation in Needham Market in Suffolk to succeed the retiring minister John Meadows (1676–1757). The congregation eventually learned of his unorthodox convictions, and he fell out of favor with many in the church. He was able to remain there and continued to develop his views on theological matters, namely the atonement. Priestley indicated that his views were much in line with the Arian perspective laid out in Martin Tomkin's (d. 1755) book *Jesus Christ the Mediator Between God and Men* (1732), however, true to Priestley's inquisitive nature he was "desirous of getting some more definite ideas on the subject."<sup>14</sup>

He set out to find all the biblical data on the atonement that he could and collected every text that appeared to have any relation to it from the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT). Once done, he organized them "under a great variety of heads" and came to the conclusion that the doctrine of atonement had "no countenance either from Scripture or reason."<sup>15</sup> He presented his treatise to Caleb Fleming (1698–1779) and Nathaniel Lardner (1684–1764) and was urged to publish it, which he did under the title of *The Scripture Doctrine of Remission. Which Showeth That the Death of Christ is No Proper Sacrifice nor Satisfaction for Sin: But That Pardon is Dispensed Solely on Account of Repentance, or a Personal Reformation of the Sinner* (1761). Priestley soon became fully persuaded not only of the falsity of the doctrine of atonement but "of the inspiration of the authors of the books of Scripture as writers, and of all idea of supernatural influence, except for the purpose of miracles."<sup>16</sup> Priestley considered himself an Arian by this time and thoroughly convinced of the absurdity of Trinitarian doctrine.

Upon his move to Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds in 1767, Priestley became convinced of Socinian doctrine after reading Lardner's *A Letter, Written in the Year 1730, Concerning the Question, Whether the Logos Supplied the Place of an Human Soul in the Person of Jesus Christ* (1730). Priestley soon published a harmony of the Gospels, several tracts for use in his congregation on the Lord's Supper and family prayer, and an improved essay on the atonement. Priestley also wrote several works in response to the growing Methodist presence in Leeds and republished the trial of Edward Elwall (1676–1744) which included additional writings concerning the unity of God, the deity of Christ, and the doctrine of the atonement under the name *The Triumph of Truth* in 1771. Henry Venn (1724–1797),

the Anglican vicar of the Huddersfield Parish Church in Yorkshire, took exception to Priestley's work on the Lord's Supper and Fawcett issued his first, and quite rare, polemic in response to Priestley's *Triumph of Truth*.

### ***The Trial of Edward Elwall***

Michael Watts identified Arianism and Socinianism as the two foremost anti-trinitarian doctrines during most of the long eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup> The former was the dominant heresy of the fourth century, named after Arius (d.325), an elder in the church at Alexandria in Egypt. Arius taught that Jesus was a created being and not co-equal with the Father. His teaching was ultimately condemned at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Socinians were named after the sixteenth century Italian theologian, Fausto Sozzini (1539–1604) or Socinus, who was affiliated with a group of anti-trinitarian Anabaptists at Rakow in Poland in 1580.<sup>18</sup> Much like the Arians, Socinians also denied that Jesus was co-equal with the Father but went further by denying his pre-existence altogether. Arian views did not have a wide adherence until the first half of the eighteenth century, but Socinianism had a small following as early as the 1640s.<sup>19</sup> The Unitarians were a steady presence and seemed to gain more traction near the end of the century. Some Nonconformists would often transition from their Calvinistic or Arminian systems to Arianism, Socinianism, and Unitarianism, most notably the Presbyterians transitioning to the latter.<sup>20</sup> It is noteworthy that the Toleration Act of 1688 afforded tolerance to Dissenters in England, but Unitarians (and other anti-trinitarian sects) were excluded from protection and under the Blasphemy Act of 1698 could face up to three years imprisonment for propagating their beliefs.

One such case is the trial of Edward Elwall (1676–1744), born in Ettingshall, a hamlet roughly fifteen miles northwest of Birmingham, who was a Unitarian affiliated with the Quakers. Elwall was Presbyterian for a time but showed the fluidity of his commitments when he and his wife were baptized by immersion by a Baptist pastor when he spent time in Bristol. He eventually began to question the doctrine of the Trinity and became a Unitarian. He was a merchant and grocer with a solid reputation and respected for his honest business dealings.

In 1724, Elwall was living in Wolverhampton, Staffordshire, a town roughly two miles from his birthplace. He wrote *A True Testimony for God and for his*

*Sacred Law: Being a Plain, Honest, Defence of the First Commandment of God Against All the Trinitarians Under Heaven* which caused a great disturbance among the Anglican clergy who would not rest until they brought a large indictment against him. In 1726, Elwall was brought before Judge Denton in the Stafford Assizes on charges of blasphemy and heresy.

When asked by the judge whether he was guilty, Elwall denied the charge as he believed no evil had been done in writing a book. He simply asked if he could be permitted to defend his view which he perceived was the plain truth of God as given in Scripture. Denton was disturbed when he learned Elwall had not been given a copy of his indictment and was prepared to defer the trial upon proper bail so Elwall could review the charges. Elwall, however, declined Denton's kind gesture and maintained he had "an innocent breast ... and injured no man."<sup>21</sup> He reiterated his request for liberty to plead his case and the judge consented.

Elwall began his defense by calling attention to the first commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods but Me," keying in on the word "me" as a simple and straightforward declaration of the singleness of God.<sup>22</sup> He clarified that this spoke of God as a single person, not as three distinct persons. He developed his argument further by appealing to Moses, the patriarchs, and the prophets, keying in on the passage from Deuteronomy 4:35, "Unto thee it was shewed, that thou mightiest know, that the Lord he is God; there is none else besides him. Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee."<sup>23</sup> In this text, Elwall pointed to the singular pronouns, "he, him, and his" as a demonstration of the single person identification of God. Additionally, Elwall argued that not one of the patriarchs or prophets ever considered God as anything but one single person, drawing on passages from Genesis 14:22 where Abraham said to the king of Sodom, "I have lift up mine hand unto the Lord, the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth."<sup>24</sup> From the prophets, Elwall chose Malachi 2:10, "Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us?" to defend the "pure, uncorrupted Unitarian doctrine of one God."<sup>25</sup> He presented God's own words to Abraham as another proof, "I am almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect" (Gen 17:1). He drew upon two additional texts from the prophet Isaiah, "to whom will ye liken me, or shall I be equal, saith the holy One" (parenthetically quipping "and not the holy three"), and, "There is no God, I know not any: I am the Lord, there is none else. There is no God

besides me" (Isa 45:5).<sup>26</sup> The references to "me" and "One," Elwall continued, "did utterly exclude any other person's being God, but that One single 'me.'"<sup>27</sup>

Elwall insisted that the "monstrous doctrine" of the Trinity "was not then born, nor of two thousand years after, till the Apostacy and Popery began to put up its filthy head."<sup>28</sup> In other words, Trinitarian theology, besides being an odorous and vile doctrine, was not ancient and established, but rather a relatively new invention of apostates and false teachers like the popes who set out to deceive the true flock of God with man-made inventions and doctrine. Elwall rehearsed how he continued to plead many other OT texts, but recognizing the need to give the full testimony of Scripture, he moved to the NT.

He first quoted from Mark 12:29–30, when a certain ruler asked Jesus about the greatest commandment. Elwall explained, "our Lord Jesus Christ ... told him the same words that Moses had said. 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord,' not three, 'and though shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, etc.'" thereby demonstrating Jesus only recognized the Father as God in the first commandment.<sup>29</sup> To this the scribe agreed, Elwall declared, as he answered, "Thou hast answered right, for there is but one God, and there is no other but he" (Mark 12:32). He proceeded next with the words of Christ from John 17:3, "This is life eternal, to know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent," which he understood to say that God and Jesus are not one and the same.

At this juncture in the trial, Elwall turned his face directly to the priests, his prosecutors, who were standing on the right side of the judge, and proclaimed that "since the lips of the blessed Jesus, which always spoke the truth, says, his father is the only true God; who is he, and who are they that dare set up another, in contradiction to my blessed Lord, who says, his father is the only true God?"<sup>30</sup> At this, he stopped to see if anyone would answer, and no objections came. Elwall attributed this silence to the power of God which came over them and shut their mouths so that not one of them spoke a word. Elwall then directed his attention to the people situated on his left, and warned them "in the fear of God, not to take their religious sentiments from men, but from God; not from the Pope, but from Christ; not from Prelates nor Priests, but from the Prophets and the Apostles."<sup>31</sup>

Elwall completed his account of the trial with a final appeal to Christ and Scripture. He reminded his audience of Jesus' words, "Call no man Father here upon earth; for one is your Father, even God. And call no man Master, for one is your Master, even Christ" (Matt 23:9). And lastly, he cited Paul, "there is no other God but one; for though there be that are called gods (as there be gods many, and lords many) both in heaven and earth; but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things" (1 Cor 8:4–6). All told, Elwall recounted that he had been given the space of nearly an hour and a half in which he expounded fully from the both the OT and the NT that his doctrine was not in error and supported by God's own Word.

After pleading his cause, Elwall perceived there was a consensus in the courtroom of his innocence and that the priests had brought the charges against him purely out of envy. Elwall recorded that he "began to set before them the odious nature of that hell-born principle of persecution, and that it was hatch'd in Hell; that it never came from Jesus Christ."<sup>32</sup> He proceeded to lament the cruel and barbaric nature of the priests' conduct, stating that persecution was never the action of true Christians. Nevertheless, he maintained that he put his house in order, and was confident that if he were fined or imprisoned, he would be certain that God's living presence would be with him.<sup>33</sup> At this, he reported that Rupert Humpatch, one of the justices of the peace and neighbor of Elwall's for three years, spoke up for Elwall's character as an honest man.

Judge Denton, impressed with Elwall's conduct and character, pressed him for a few additional details. He concluded Elwall had studied this doctrine deeply but wondered if he sought the advice from one of the clergy or bishops of the Church of England. Elwall confirmed he had exchanged ten letters with the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Wake (1657–1737) but received no satisfaction into his inquiries. The archbishop only referred to acts of Parliament and declarations of state in his responses whereas Elwall appealed to Scripture throughout their correspondence. Ultimately, Elwall declared that he would not regard popes, councils, or priests concerning things of a spiritual nature but rather he would only obey God, his prophets, Christ, and his apostles. The judge responded, "Well, if his Grace of Canterbury was not able to give you satisfaction, Mr. Elwall, I believe I shall not."<sup>34</sup> Elwall was released and returned to his home. Priestley later

read the record of Elwall's trial and published abroad that truth indeed had triumphed that day.

### ***The Corruption of Christianity***

In 1782, Priestley sought to lay out the clear doctrines of Scripture he believed had been obscured over the previous seventeen centuries. The work was dedicated to his friend Theophilus Lindsey (1723–1808), pastor of the first Unitarian church in Britain. Priestley understood the relationship of divine unity to the natural placability of the divine being.<sup>35</sup> Since Priestley rejected Christ's divinity, he naturally objected to the doctrine of the atonement, saying "I conceive this doctrine to be a gross misrepresentation of the character and moral government of God, and to affect many other articles in the scheme of Christianity, greatly disfiguring and depraving it."<sup>36</sup> He assessed the doctrine as a modern invention which had "no countenance whatever in reason, or the Scriptures; and therefore that the whole doctrine of atonement, with every modification of it, has been a departure from the primitive and genuine doctrine of Christianity."<sup>37</sup>

Priestley's main objection to the atonement was Scripture's silence on what was perceived to be such a major doctrine. He acknowledged that Scripture is clear on the malignant nature of sin, but it did not go further to say God cannot pardon sin without satisfaction being made to his justice, laws, and government. Priestley argued atonement is not necessary because all Scripture ever prescribes is "repentance and a good life" which are, "of themselves, sufficient to recommend us to the divine favour."<sup>38</sup> Priestley continued, "all the declarations of divine mercy are made without reserve or limitation to the truly penitent, through all the books of Scripture, without the most distant hint of any regard being had to the sufferings or merit of any being whatever."<sup>39</sup> Priestley contended that Scripture only calls for individual repentance and if the doctrine of the atonement were expected in God's Word, the whole of the OT would be a "most unaccountable book, and the religion it exhibits is defective in the most essential article" for David, Job, and the prophets only ever referenced their own piety and repentance in their penitent addresses to God.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, if the atonement was such a central tenet to Christianity, Priestley maintained that the Jews would have expected a suffering Messiah, not a conquering one as they did, and Jesus would have certainly pointed out their failure. Instead, Priestley asserted,

Jesus spoke only of repentance, good works, and the mercy of God. He never instructed the people to look to the sufferings or merit of someone else as the basis of their hope. Even when Jesus spoke of his death, he never explicitly told his hearers he must die to secure the pardon for their sins.<sup>41</sup>

If the OT said nothing about the atonement and Jesus was silent on the matter, then the preaching of the apostles was the last hope for any warrant in Scripture. Priestley asserted no such instance was recorded and referenced Peter's sermons in Acts 2 and 10 as examples. Peter called for the Jews to repent in Acts 2 but said nothing of Jesus' atoning work on the cross. In Acts 10, Peter preached the death and resurrection of Jesus to Cornelius but was again silent on the concept of man being accepted on the merits of Christ or any other. Quite the contrary, Priestley complained, as Peter told Cornelius that God shows no partiality "but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34). Likewise, Paul spoke many times of Jesus' death in Acts 13, 17, 26, and 28, but not one word concerning atonement. At best, Priestley claimed the apostles only spoke of atonement in hints and inferences, and for a doctrine of such importance, that was too flimsy a foundation to stand on.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, Priestley considered the claims of the atonement as the satisfaction of God's justice. His response was that justice "can be nothing more than a modification of goodness, or benevolence, which is his sole governing principle, the object and end of which is the supreme happiness of his creatures and subjects."<sup>43</sup> The atonement may raise the understanding of God's justice, if it be allowed, but in proportion lowers the veracity of God's mercy. Priestley argued that the doctrine lost its effectiveness because the severity of God ought to work upon men, but since God's wrath has been applied to another, the offenders would never feel the weight of it. This would also hold true for all future transgressors since they too would not feel the weight of this burden, leaving Priestley to wonder how this would serve as any real restraint or admonition to virtuous living.<sup>44</sup>

Priestley concluded the early fathers did not teach the atonement and deemed other things, like martyrdom, baptism or the eucharist, as more important.<sup>45</sup> Some, like Origen (c.185–c.254) and Tertullian (c.155–c.220), even claimed there were salvific properties in them. He quoted Origen's call for believers to lay down their lives since Christ laid down his for them. This was not for the benefit of Christ, but for themselves

and others who may be edified by their martyrdom. Origen continued, “and perhaps as we are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ ... so some may be redeemed by the blood of the martyrs.”<sup>46</sup> Priestley’s point was that Origen’s atonement language could mean Christ’s death and the death of others could be sufficient for salvation. This was a clear departure from the doctrine of atonement of his day, so this language could be dismissed as figurative only and not an authoritative source from history. Likewise, atonement must not have been necessary as Tertullian believed baptism washed away the guilt of sin and the church of Rome eventually considered the eucharist to be “as proper a sacrifice as the death of Christ itself, and as having the same original independent value.”<sup>47</sup>

As he traced the development of the doctrine, Priestley’s criticism of its lack of rational integrity only increased. He complained that when atonement language was discussed, there was never any clear consensus to whom the price (using ransom language) of Christ’s sacrifice was paid and how such payment was rendered to the guilty parties. The earliest ransom view of the atonement made the devil the recipient of payment, a thought altogether repugnant to Priestley. Later articulations made the Father the recipient which was equally unsatisfactory.

The next significant work on the atonement Priestley recognized was Anselm’s (1033–1109) satisfaction view posited in *Cur Deus Homo* in the eleventh century. Theophilus, Anselm’s contemporary in the Greek tradition, made no significant developments on the atonement nor did Peter Lombard (d. 1160). After Anselm, perhaps Bernard (1090–1153) was the most innovative who spoke more of imputed sin and imputed righteousness than any who had gone before him.<sup>48</sup> Priestley reckoned the doctrine of the atonement really took shape during the Reformation. The Lutherans made explicit reference to it in the Augsburg Confession (1530), and the Waldenses of Piedmont included their position (satisfaction) in their confession of faith presented to the king of France in 1544. The Synod of Dort in 1618 clarified Christ’s death was an infinite satisfaction for offenses of an infinite magnitude. Man could not escape judgment unless God’s infinite justice was satisfied, and that satisfaction is impossible for men and only by God’s only begotten Son.

Even with these rudimentary explanations, Priestley remained frustrated with how the idea of atonement could appropriate the benefit of Christ’s

sufferings to individuals. Priestley objected that there must be some method, otherwise, all mankind would have an equal claim to it. He continued, “and since it would favour the doctrine of human merit too much, to suppose that the merit of Christ’s suffering was always applied to persons of a certain character and conduct, advantage was taken of an expression of the apostle Paul, that we are saved by faith alone.”<sup>49</sup> Priestley’s disdain for *sola fide* was evident as he claimed that the Reformers merely defined faith’s effects in vague and figurative language, “which conveys no determinate ideas, and leaves the mind in great uncertainty, whether it be possessed of it or not.”<sup>50</sup> The Synod of Dort’s definition of faith, much to Priestley’s chagrin, was “an instrument by which we lay hold of the righteousness of Christ” and rested on the belief that this was imparted by God and outside man’s ability to acquire on his own. For Priestley, this cut against the grain of Scripture’s plain language of man’s need for repentance and good works to find acceptance with God.

Even with this development of the doctrine, Priestley pointed out there was still diversity among the Reformers concerning some very essential points. Calvin, he pointed out, believed Christ really descended to hell, not for the purpose of preaching to those in prison as the “primitive Fathers understood it ... but that he might there suffer the proper torments of the damned and bear the wrath of God that had been merited by the sins of men.”<sup>51</sup> Calvin, however, did not believe God was really angry with Christ but rather made him suffer the effects of his anger so the “stain (that is the guilt) as well as the punishment of sin, was laid upon him, so that it ceased to be imputed to men.”<sup>52</sup>

It becomes quite clear that Priestley’s problem with the doctrine of the atonement was directly tied to his Christology. He could not reckon how the sufferings of Christ could be deemed infinite for Christ was not divine. Priestley objected:

A more difficult question, and to which it is impossible that any satisfactory answer should be given, is, how the sufferings of Christ can be deemed infinite, so as to make atonement for sins of infinite magnitude, when the divine nature of Christ, to which alone infinity belongs, is impassible, and his human nature could bear no more than that of any other man? It must be exceedingly difficult to conceive how any supposed union of the two natures can be of any avail in

this case, unless, in consequence of that union, the divine nature had borne some share of the sufferings, which the scheme requires to be infinite, and this idea is justly disclaimed as impious.<sup>53</sup>

Clarity and correction to such aberrant doctrine was achieved by men such as Faustus Socinus, who Priestley believed recovered the original doctrine of the proper humanity of Christ. He saw clearly “the absurdity of what was advanced by the reformers concerning satisfaction being made to the justice of God by the death of Christ” and argued that Christ, being only a man, could not in any proper sense atone for the sins of other men.<sup>54</sup> Socinus allowed that Jesus was able in some sense to save men from the punishment of God because of his great power in heaven and earth. He concluded that this method of rescuing men from the punishment for sin is very different from that which implies the satisfaction for sin, noting “nothing can be more repugnant to each other than the freedom of pardon and satisfaction ... since it plainly does very much derogate from the power and authority, or the goodness and mercy of God.”<sup>55</sup>

Priestley observed that in England the doctrine of the atonement “seems to have got as firm possession of the minds of men, as that of the divinity of Christ.”<sup>56</sup> In his mind, entrenched doctrines like these were like a great building, which does not fall all at once but will often leave some apartments which some think still livable. Errors like these did not happen overnight nor would they be destroyed quickly. He was convinced, however, that his estimation of the size of the error was correct for it had no evidence in Scripture, no historical basis, nor did it appeal to reason. It would therefore be dependent on God’s providence to open men’s minds by degrees and lead them to the light of truth. Since there could be no clear basis found in Scripture, Priestley believed that it was “time to lay less stress on the interpretation of particular texts, and to allow more weight to general considerations, derived from the whole tenor of Scripture, and the dictates of reason.”<sup>57</sup> He continued, “time may clear up obscurities in particular texts, by discovering various readings, by the clearer knowledge of ancient customs and opinions, etc. But arguments drawn from such considerations as those of the moral government of God, the nature of things, and the general plan of revelation, will not be put off to a future time” for they were within their present reach.<sup>58</sup> Priestley’s reasons lie in the simple,

plain reading of Scripture which states that “God is merciful to the penitent, and that nothing is requisite to make men, in all situations, the objects of his favour, but such moral conduct as he has made them capable of.”<sup>59</sup>

### JOHN FAWCETT’S DEFENSE OF TRUTH

There were several prominent Nonconformist theologians who engaged Socinian heresy on British soil, the Congregationalist John Owen (1616–1683) and Particular Baptist pastors John Gill (1697–1771) and Andrew Fuller (1754–1815).<sup>60</sup> Another Particular Baptist pastor, John Fawcett, is worthy to be included in this list of able defenders of the faith. It is noteworthy that Fuller enjoyed a warm friendship with Fawcett and even consulted him, along with Abraham Booth (1734–1806), in his preparations for his significant treatise against Socinianism.<sup>61</sup>

Fawcett, like Priestley, was raised in a devout Christian home. He was born at Lidget Green near Bradford in Yorkshire on January 6, 1740. His father, Stephen Fawcett (c.1701–1751), died when he was twelve years old and Fawcett was apprenticed to a man in Bradford for six years. He would work twelve to fourteen hours a day but made a habit to forego sleep so that he might spend the night in prayer and reading Scripture. During this time Fawcett read through the Bible multiple times by the age of fourteen. His greatest treasure was a small pocket Bible that he would sneak readings from during what little downtime he might have during the day. A considerable part of his pocket money would be used to purchase candles, and he would wait until the family was asleep so he could engage in his “delightful employment” of reading God’s Word late into the night.<sup>62</sup>

He was reared in the Anglican tradition but would travel to congregations of different stripes just so he could hear the gospel truth he loved so much, often visiting Methodist and Baptist meetings. In his journal, Fawcett traced his conversion and new spiritual life to a sermon preached by the itinerant evangelist George Whitefield (1714–1770) in 1755. Fawcett continued to study the Bible rigorously and became convinced of believer’s baptism. In 1758, he presented himself to the Baptist church in Bradford for membership. Within two years Fawcett sensed a call to ministry and was installed as pastor of the Baptist cause in Wainsgate in 1764. Fawcett’s reputation quickly grew, and he was called to succeed Gill

at Carter's Lane, which he respectfully declined so he could remain with his people he loved so dearly. Opportunity came once again for Fawcett to be the principal at Bristol Academy, the first Baptist college, in 1792 but he once again politely declined so he could remain with his flock.

Fawcett's demeanor was very kind, and he was not known as a confrontational figure. He avoided controversy as much as he was able, however, Priestley's publication of *Triumph of Truth* (1782) troubled Fawcett tremendously. He recognized the danger such heresy could cause not only for his congregation but for the church at large. This resulted in one of his earliest publications, *The Christian's Humble Plea* (1772). Fawcett's irenic nature was so well known that his son and biographer, John Fawcett Jr. (1768–1837) noted this was most likely written under the pseudonym Christophilus so Fawcett could avoid any further conflict. His peaceful personality was not to be confused with a lack of boldness as Fawcett staunchly defended the full deity of Jesus in response to Priestley's publication.

### ***The Christian's Humble Plea***

Fawcett and Priestley could certainly agree that there is only one living and true God. The error, Fawcett pointed out, is when men fail to honor Jesus as equal with God the Father. The fact that he should be "declared Omniscient, the Searcher of Hearts, the Almighty, the Immutable, and Eternal, and yet be but a mere creature, is most amazing."<sup>63</sup> Fawcett chose to write his rebuttal of Priestley in verse, in the spirit of Alexander Pope's (1688–1744) *An Essay on Man*, for the singular purpose that such style "strikes the reader more strongly at first, and is more easily retained by him afterwards."<sup>64</sup> Fawcett's great concern was ultimately for the glory of Christ and for the church to be strengthened against such heresy. For Fawcett, this was no small issue as he put the matter plainly, "'What think ye of Christ?' is a question of the last importance, since we are assured, that those who do not rightly 'believe in him, are condemned, and the wrath of God abideth on them,' John 3:18, 36."<sup>65</sup>

His treatise began with declaring the majesty of Jesus' divinity and the mystery of his love to man. The angels who sing his praises and "wrap up and hide their faces in their wing" possess a stature higher than mankind, yet it is man who is so arrogant and ungrateful that he is "too wise to pay due honor"

to the sovereign Lord Jesus.<sup>66</sup> Man's reason, prized so highly by Priestley, is given to him by his maker, but man in his depraved nature has employed it in "impious war with heaven" and attempts "to dethrone the Father's equal and eternal Son."<sup>67</sup> Priestley believed the account of Elwall's trial and defense of Unitarian doctrine was a "triumph of truth" but Fawcett declared this "triumph," a clear allusion to Priestley's work, was a "most vile and pernicious pamphlet."<sup>68</sup> When man elevates his reason above God's revelation and truth, it is rebellion against his maker. Even though the deity of Christ was Fawcett's primary focus, his defense was clearly trinitarian as he appealed to the "sacred Spirit" to enlighten his mind, direct his quill, "raise his low thoughts, with sacred ardour fill his languid pow'rs" as he rehearsed Christ's glorious attributes and deeds.<sup>69</sup>

Fawcett's broadside next employed Colossians 2:9, "In him the fulness of the Godhead dwells" to demonstrate the Unitarian fallacy of refusing to acknowledge Christ's deity. Elwall claimed to provide an overabundance of Scripture to show Jesus Christ is not divine, yet no mention of this crucial text was offered. Even in an abbreviated summary of events from Elwall's trial one would think this passage (and many others that affirm Christ's deity such as John 1:1, Heb 1:3, etc.) would be given some treatment. Elwall repeatedly insisted there is only one God, a point Fawcett heartily agreed with, but Fawcett continued, "He [Christ] and the Father are in essence one, Christ is th' eternal partner of his throne," a direct reference to John 10:30, "I and my Father are one." Fawcett provided additional commentary on the Trinitarian bent of this passage in the footnotes, "not one person, for that would be a contradiction; but ἓν ἔσμεν, one thing, one nature, or essence."<sup>70</sup> Clearly, two persons are in view here (the Father and the Son), yet Jesus affirms they are "one." Scripture, Fawcett argued, knows no division of their sacred essence. Priestley made the fatal error of elevating Elwall's (and his own) reason as the final arbiter of meaning when they should have "let reason's dim and feeble beam, own revelation as the judge supreme; nor dare t' oppose, because her scanty line could never reach to sound the deep Divine."<sup>71</sup>

Next, Fawcett explained Jesus' divinity is observable in his attributes. He considered Jesus' omniscience, "Hell's deep designs before him naked lie, and nothing's hid from his all-seeing eye" and remarked on Peter's confession in John 21:17, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I

love you.” Since Father, Son, and Spirit have one nature, what is said of God the Father in the OT is equally true for the Son and Spirit. Hence, when Fawcett wrote, “The blackest darkness and the blazing light are equal to his all-pervading sight” referencing Psalm 139:11 – 12, he attributed this to the omniscience of Jesus.<sup>72</sup>

Before leaving the omniscience of Jesus, Fawcett reinforced the full humanity of Jesus as well:

No being but the great Jehovah can  
Spy ev’ry thought and search the heart of man ...  
Yet when we hear the great Redeemer say,  
“He knows not when shall be the judgement-day;”  
And tell us, “that his heavenly Father is  
Greater than he,” the sense is plainly this;  
That he’s as truly man, as God supreme,  
For manhood’s every pow’r was found in him.  
God in our nature deign’d on earth to dwell;  
And hence his name is call’d Emmanuel.  
Yet th’ human nature can’t omniscient be,  
Nor claim with God a just equality;  
But since of both these nature he partakes,  
The claims of each at diff’rent times he speaks.<sup>73</sup>

It is interesting to note how Fawcett recognized the significance of two passages that have historically caused Christological controversies, namely Matthew 24:36, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” and John 14:28, “You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.” These passages have been used by opponents of orthodoxy to prove that Jesus does not know all things, therefore, he cannot be God and since the Father is greater than the Son, he must be a lower being and not divine. Here Fawcett argued the force of these passages is that Jesus’ divinity does not need to be set aside or dismissed but can clearly be addressing his humanity. He compared Hebrews 9:27, “just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement” with

John 11:26, “and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” Fawcett argued that Socinus, and those who deny Christ’s deity, try to make one passage mean the body and the other the soul, yet deny such proofs of Christ’s full humanity which died and full deity which is eternal.<sup>74</sup>

Fawcett continued with “yet brighter proofs of Jesus’ pow’r” as he contemplated his omnipresence as seen in John 3:13, “no one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” Fawcett wrote of Jesus’ immutability, “The tide of creatures ever ebbs and flows; but, dearest Lord, no change thy being knows,” drawing on Hebrews 13:8 which declares “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”<sup>75</sup> Note also Fawcett’s rebuttal of Arian, Unitarian, and Socinian doctrine as he speaks of Christ’s eternal being and reign, “When states and kingdoms shall be known no more: thy throne eternal ages shall remain, and thou for ever and for ever reign,” a reference to Hebrews 1:8 which says, “But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.’”<sup>76</sup>

Fawcett refuted the perplexing notion that Jesus is never referred to as divine in Scripture in a lengthy footnote as he considered the names given to Christ. He pointed to “the great God” from Titus 2:13 with this explanation:

Titus ii.13 “Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ.” That Jesus Christ is called the Great God in this place, as well as our Saviour, I should think, must be plain to everyone who carefully reads the passage with an unbiased mind, in connexion with the three preceeding verses. The article is prefixed before the words, Great God, without any repetition of it before the next clause; from whence it should seem the construction must be this: The appearance of Jesus Christ, who is the Great God and our Saviour. To this we may add, that no instance can be given where the word *ἐπιφάνεια* is ever applied to any but our Lord Jesus Christ. The Father is never said to Appear; nay, is expressly affirmed to be Invincible.<sup>77</sup>

Again, Fawcett pointed out that Jesus is worthy to be worshipped since he is God, citing the worship of the Lamb in Revelation 5:8–9. Elwall and Priestley affirmed Jesus spoke only truth but failed to reckon the passage in Matthew 4:10 where Jesus rebuked Satan for attempting to solicit worship from the sovereign Lord himself, saying, “You shall worship the Lord your

God and him only shall you serve.” The host of heaven falls at the feet of Jesus, and they are not rebuked for worshipping him, and Hebrews 1:6 declares “Let all God’s angels worship him,” a quote from Deuteronomy 32:43 applied to Jesus. Fawcett argued that the worship of Jesus is upheld in Scripture as a characteristic of a Christian in 1 Corinthians 1:2, Acts 9:14 and 9:21, and if Jesus is not divine and equal with the Father, then all “saints and seraphs, heav’n and earth must be promoters each of vile idolatry.”<sup>78</sup>

### ***The Cross of Christ***

Although Fawcett did not directly respond in print to Priestley’s *History of Corruptions*, he was clearly aware of Priestley’s writings and recognized the importance of the cross to orthodox Christianity. Originally penned for the Yorkshire and Lancashire Association in 1793, of which Fawcett was a founding member in 1787, *The Cross of Christ* was the association letter for that year.<sup>79</sup> When the ministers from the participating churches of the association met, they would discuss various matters of debate and controversy in their respective churches. They would then pray and discuss which matters of utmost importance (most always doctrinal) would be worthy of attention for the edification and strengthening of their people. Fawcett determined that this was the doctrine of the atonement as life’s greatest question is that of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16, “what must I do to be saved?” The only answer, Fawcett declared, is found in the cross of Christ, “The death of the divine Savior in our room and stead is what distinguishes the religion of Jesus from all others.”<sup>80</sup>

Priestley argued Scripture was silent on the atonement, but Fawcett held quite the opposite opinion as his letter is thoroughly saturated with Scripture references and language.<sup>81</sup> The simple and plain message of the cross is “the fulfillment of divine purposes and predictions — the salvation of sinners — the conquest of all enemies — the foundation of hope — the ground of triumph — the display of the divine perfections — and the grand incentive to holiness.”<sup>82</sup> Scripture clearly presents the lost condition of man and his subsequent separation from God, and the message of the cross is the greatest demonstration of God’s love to lost sinners and the hope of reconciliation found only in his Son Jesus Christ.

Fawcett began with the fulfillment of divine purposes and predictions that draw on the OT sacrificial system. “The thoughts and counsels of the God

of all grace were,” Fawcett explained, “from everlasting, employed on the grand design, which was accomplished by the Redeemer’s death.”<sup>83</sup> He drew upon Revelation 5:6 which presents Jesus as a “Lamb standing, as though it had been slain.” Scripture plainly depicts mankind as fallen in sin, inheriting the guilt of Adam their federal head. The sacrificial system points to the holiness of God which demands that atonement must be made for sin. The earliest mention of this is Genesis 3:21 when an animal was slain to cover the sins of Adam after the fall and his subsequent casting out of the garden of Eden signifying the death of sin and separation from God man would face from that time forward. Fawcett noted how John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29, 36). Peter spoke of Jesus’ atoning death in plain language, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Pet 1:18–19).

Fawcett insisted that Christ fulfilled all the types and prophecies from Moses to Malachi and that if this were not true, they would be at best “pompous and unmeaning institutions.”<sup>84</sup> All the blood of innocent animals, all the flesh consumed, all the peculiarities of the sacrificial system were repeated for centuries for nothing if they did not find their meaning in Christ and his cross. Here Fawcett is clearly drawing upon Hebrews 9:22, “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” The writer of Hebrews continues that Christ, the true high priest, has entered heaven “with blood not his own” to “put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb 9:25–26). This sacrifice of the Son of God was offered one time “to bear the sins of many” (Heb 9:28).

Fawcett continued with a robust survey of passages to demonstrate his absolute confidence in Scripture’s attestation of Christ’s fulfillment of OT predictions and prophecies. The priesthood of Melchizedek and of Aaron and his sons prefigured the everlasting priesthood of Jesus (Ps 110:4; Heb 6:20, 7:17). The account of Isaac the son of Abraham being bound and laid on the altar can only be fully understood and explained by the cross of Christ. Isaiah prophesied of the suffering servant who was led like a lamb to the slaughter, cut off from the land of the living for the transgression

of his people, and all this done by the will of the Father to crush him (Isa 53:7–10). Jesus himself instructed Nicodemus, the great teacher of the Law in his day, that just as the brazen serpent was lifted up in the wilderness (Num 21:8–9) so too would he be lifted up and that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:14). Just as the rock was smitten and gave life-giving water to the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod 17:1–7), Jesus offers living water to all who come to him (John 4). Finally, Fawcett rehearsed the example of Joshua (meaning “YHWH saves”) who led his people to the promised land as prefiguring Jesus who leads his people to eternal life with him.

Fawcett supplied more evidence from Scripture to prove that all of God’s Word, from Moses to the prophets, concerned Jesus Christ (Luke 24:27). Jesus was the promised seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15) and by whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3). Christ, the Lion of the tribe of Judah and Root of David (Rev 5:5), is the scepter that would not depart and lawgiver until Shiloh comes (Gen 49:10 KJV). The crucifixion is observed and prophesied in Psalm 22, whose opening lines Jesus quoted from the cross. Jesus was the anointed one prophesied by Daniel who would be cut off (Dan 9:26). Paul also affirmed that the OT pointed to Christ when he wrote to the Colossian church that the dietary requirements and feasts were a “shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col 2:17).

Fawcett was convinced that the death of Christ “is the life of the gospel” and that “all the lines of evangelical truth meet in this one point.”<sup>85</sup> Fawcett argued that all doctrines (election, regeneration, effectual calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, and perseverance in faith and holiness) are connected and related to the atonement of Christ.<sup>86</sup> The atonement, in fact, is the foundation without which the whole structure would fall to the ground. Priestley refused to acknowledge the deity of Christ so he could not conceive how a mere man could pay an infinite price for the redemption of mankind. True to Fawcett’s estimation, Priestley’s house was built on sand for it did not have the fully human and fully divine Christ, and him crucified, as its foundation.

Fawcett’s letter addressed Priestley’s other contentions with the atonement concerning Christ’s deity, the application of his atoning sacrifice, and the effect on a man’s morals and life thereafter. Fawcett returned to passages that

plainly declare Jesus' humanity (Phil 2:5–8) and divinity (Col 2:9). Priestley complained there was no reasonable explanation how the sacrifice of one would justify another man's guilt, but more illogical is Priestley's insistence that man can essentially clean himself up by good works and repentance when Scripture declares he is in a "lost and ruined condition."<sup>87</sup> Scripture nowhere declares that man can save himself (Isa 64:6; Ecc 7:20; Rom 3:23) and insists he must appeal to the grace and mercy of God for salvation. Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), by bearing their sins in his own body on the tree (1 Pet 2:24), was wounded for their transgressions, and bruised for their iniquities. In his suffering, the just for the unjust, man might have healing by his stripes and life by his death.<sup>88</sup> Fawcett could not make sense of the atonement without a divine savior, for salvation could not be accomplished "barely by the heavenly doctrine which he taught, and the bright example which he set before us; but by the death which he died for our sins."<sup>89</sup> He continued:

If the Redeemer's death were not a proper atonement for sin, why was it necessary that God should be manifest in the flesh? Why was it necessary that he who redeems us, should be Immanuel, God with us, God in our nature? An angel from heaven might have taught us the will of our Maker, and given us a good example. Nay, a man like ourselves might have done both. The deity of Christ, and his atonement for sin, must stand or fall together. Hence those who deny the one, do also consistently enough, deny the other. It is the dignity of the Redeemer's person that gives efficacy and validity to his sacrifice.<sup>90</sup>

Even if Christ's deity were allowed and he was presented as a sacrifice, Priestley questioned how this could be applied to another man. Fawcett pointed to Scripture once more to show that Christ's atoning sacrifice was applied by faith. The apostle Paul explained that all mankind has fallen short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift, which is "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Rom 3:23–25). In this manner, God displays the "utmost reverence to his divine law," declares his "infinite abhorrence of sin," strikes the "deepest terror on every persevering sinner," and "lays a solid foundation for the highest hope in every penitent transgressor."<sup>91</sup> In other words, it is the triune God's redemptive

work in salvation that is received by faith through grace (Eph 2:8–9) and cannot be attained by man's good works and reason.

Fawcett demonstrated that the cross is the “grand incentive to holiness” in contrast to Priestley's insistence that such a doctrine cannot be felt by guilty sinners nor have any meaningful effect on their conduct. It is the love of Christ that constrains sinners and produces such gratitude which will be “more operative than the most cogent philosophical reasonings,” a clear jab at Priestley's enlightenment principles.<sup>92</sup> Fawcett pointed to 1 John 4:19, “we love because he first loved us” that shows how God is the first mover in the salvation of men. It is the love of God the Father that sent God the Son to the cross to offer himself as the only true and perfect sacrifice which appeased his infinite and righteous wrath on sin.

Fawcett concluded Priestley's Unitarian views were outside the historic confession of the church and that he, and all who held them, were preaching another gospel contrary to Scripture. Ultimately, Priestley's system promoted love for self and reliance upon one's own repentance and good works for salvation. Scripture, Fawcett argued, reveals a much different picture as an enlightened sinner who reasons his way to Priestley's conclusions will one day realize he has denied the Son of God and be eternally cast away from his presence.

## CONCLUSION

This essay began with the false security that can ensnare Christians when promises of religious tolerance and freedom from persecution give way to complacency in the church. Jesus offered no guarantee from opposition when he told his disciples, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). For the Nonconformists, it was proper to look for the dawn of brighter days with the Act of Toleration yet still recognize the need to be alert when deadly heresy, such as Priestley's Unitarianism, threatened. It is also noteworthy that Priestley represented a shift in “Rational Dissenting ideals,” from a more passive approach to an open avowal, the “frank, open, even outspoken statement and defense of one's opinions.”<sup>93</sup> Such energetic opposition to orthodoxy needed to be met head on and faithful men like Fawcett answered the call.

Fawcett rightly argued that the church must get the doctrine of the person and work of Jesus right. Wellum's conclusion agrees, "Jesus Christ our Lord is the main subject of Scripture, as God's entire redemptive purposes center in him" and "all theological doctrines either prepare for Christology or are inferred from it."<sup>94</sup> Haykin showed the costly effects of unchecked heresy in the conclusion of his article on Fuller and Priestley as he noted the apparent defection of the extremely gifted Particular Baptist pastor Robert Robinson (1735–1790). Robinson became increasingly critical of Calvinism and Trinitarian doctrine near the end of his life and preached his final two sermons at Priestley's request in Socinian meeting-houses in Birmingham.<sup>95</sup> Priestley preached Robinson's funeral and was all too happy to declare Robinson had become "one of the most zealous unitarians" before his death.<sup>96</sup>

Priestley was right to assess the intrinsic connection between Christology and the atonement although he sadly came to the wrong conclusions. His accusations that Scripture was silent on the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the atonement were unsoundly argued and his misreading of church history wrongly asserted the early fathers knew nothing of the atonement. It is true the early church did not have the developed doctrine of the atonement of Priestley's time, but this does not mean they had no position on it. One has but to glance at the Nicene Creed's statement about Jesus "who, for us and our salvation, came down from heaven" and "for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate" for atonement language in the early church.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, Priestley's insistence on only one view of the atonement in order for it to be valid fails to appreciate the nuance that each position (ransom, satisfaction, Christus Victor, penal substitution, etc.) offers and in no way demonstrates this doctrine was unsubstantiated in Scripture or church history.

Fawcett ably demonstrated Scripture's revelation of Jesus Christ as God the Son incarnate and provided a biblical defense of the necessity of the atonement along with its application to sinful humanity by God's grace through faith. The battle for truth by these two Yorkshiremen demonstrates the importance of orthodoxy during the long eighteenth century and for the church moving forward. May Fawcett's exhortation continue to serve the church as she awaits the coming of the Lord Jesus:

Would we be excited to ingenuous sorrow for sin? While we look to him whom we have pierced we mourn after a godly sort. Nothing is so likely to break the stony heart, and to melt the ice within us to evangelical repentance, as a view of a suffering Saviour, wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities ... [M]ay his love be ever warmly impressed on our hearts! May we live by that faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us, which is an ever active principle of cheerful and grateful obedience!<sup>98</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Stephen J. Wellum and Michael A. G. Haykin for their guidance on this project and whose insights were invaluable for the direction of this paper.
  - <sup>2</sup> Alan P. F. Sell, *Christ and Controversy: The Person of Christ in Nonconformist Thought and Ecclesial Experience, 1600–2000* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 22–23. Sell helpfully points out the frequent occurrence of ministers and/or congregations changing their doctrine and denominational affiliations, adding to the complexity of labeling them and the controversies they engaged in. See also David L. Wykes, “Rational Dissent, Unitarianism, and the Closure of the Northampton Academy in 1798,” *Journal of Religious History* 41, no. 1 (December 31, 2017), 4–6.
  - <sup>3</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 46–47.
  - <sup>4</sup> Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 39.
  - <sup>5</sup> Russell E. Richey, “From Puritanism to Unitarianism in England: A Study in Candour,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41, no. 3 (December 31, 1973), 371.
  - <sup>6</sup> Joseph Priestley, *The Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley, to the Year 1795* (Northumberland: John Binns, 1806), 2.
  - <sup>7</sup> Priestley, *Memoirs*, 5–6.
  - <sup>8</sup> Priestley, *Memoirs*, 6–7.
  - <sup>9</sup> Priestley, *Memoirs*, 3–4.
  - <sup>10</sup> Priestley, *Memoirs*, 7–8.
  - <sup>11</sup> Priestley, *Memoirs*, 8.
  - <sup>12</sup> Priestley, *Memoirs*, 4–5.
  - <sup>13</sup> Priestley, *Memoirs*, 9–10.
  - <sup>14</sup> Priestley, *Memoirs*, 30–31.
  - <sup>15</sup> Priestley, *Memoirs*, 31.
  - <sup>16</sup> Priestley, *Memoirs*, 35.
  - <sup>17</sup> Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 1:370.
  - <sup>18</sup> Watts, *The Dissenters*, 1:371.
  - <sup>19</sup> Watts, *The Dissenters*, 1:371–72.
  - <sup>20</sup> Sell, *Christ and Controversy*, 3–6.
  - <sup>21</sup> Edward Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth; Being an Account of the Trial of Mr. E. Elwall, for Heresy and Blasphemy, at Stafford Assizes, Before Judge Denton* (Leeds: 1771), 5.
  - <sup>22</sup> Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 5. Scripture citations will retain the use of the King James Version and spelling conventions as recorded by Elwall.
  - <sup>23</sup> Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 5–6.
  - <sup>24</sup> Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 6.
  - <sup>25</sup> Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 6.
  - <sup>26</sup> Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 6.
  - <sup>27</sup> Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 6.
  - <sup>28</sup> Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 6.
  - <sup>29</sup> Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 6–7.
  - <sup>30</sup> Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 7.
  - <sup>31</sup> Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 7.
  - <sup>32</sup> Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 8.
  - <sup>33</sup> Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 8.

- 34 Elwall, *The Triumph of Truth*, 9.
- 35 Joseph Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (2 vols.) (Birmingham: Piercy & Jones, 1782), 151.
- 36 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 152–153.
- 37 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 153–154.
- 38 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 155.
- 39 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 156.
- 40 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 157–58.
- 41 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 160.
- 42 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 164–165.
- 43 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 168.
- 44 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 170–171.
- 45 Priestley reviewed the early fathers from Clement up to the Reformation and concluded the atonement was not found in any of their writings. Even Augustine, who made major contributions on the doctrines of original sin, grace, and predestination was “certainly ignorant of the principle of the doctrine of the atonement.” He spoke only of Christ taking the punishment due to man but not his guilt, and by denying the removal of guilt, did not bear the sins of others “so as to make himself answerable for them” (234). See 213–258 for his extended treatment of church history up to the Reformation.
- 46 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 230.
- 47 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 231.
- 48 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 254–55.
- 49 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 264.
- 50 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 264–65.
- 51 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 270.
- 52 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 270. A special note of appreciation to Stephen Wellum for pointing out the weaknesses of Priestley’s argument, most notably here where Priestley misrepresents Calvin’s view. For Calvin’s own words, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. I. The Library of Christian Classics, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (1960; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 512–20. It is clear Calvin understood this as part of Christ’s redemptive work in the atonement, “the Creed sets forth what Christ suffered in the sight of men, and then appositely speaks of that invisible and incomprehensible judgement which he underwent in the sight of God in order that we might know not only that Christ’s body was given as the price of our redemption” (516); see also Matthew Y. Emerson’s helpful discussion on Calvin’s interpretation of the *descensus* creedal affirmation, “‘He Descended to the Dead’: The Burial of Christ and the Eschatological Character of the Atonement,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 19:1 (2015), 115–31.
- 53 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 270–71.
- 54 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 272–73.
- 55 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 273–74.
- 56 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 274–75.
- 57 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 279.
- 58 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 278–79.
- 59 Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 279. For a modern discussion on Unitarian challenges to Trinitarian doctrine, see Dale Tuggy, “When and How in the History of Theology Did the Triune God Replace the Father as the Only True God?” *Theologica* 4, no. 2 (December 31, 2020), 1–25, and William Hasker, “The Trinity and the New Testament: A Counter-Challenge to Dale Tuggy,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13, no. 1 (December 31, 2021), 179–99. Tuggy, like Priestley before him, challenges the notion that Trinitarian doctrine has been the historic position of the catholic church, even claiming Tertullian, long regarded as the first apologist to employ “trinitas,” was in fact “unitarian in his theology, not trinitarian” (4).

- 60 There were certainly many others who engaged Socinian and Unitarian doctrine such as the General Baptist Dan Taylor (1738–1816) who was a fellow Yorkshireman and friend of John Fawcett. Owen's first publication against Socinianism was *Θεολογία Ἀντεξουσιαστική* or *A Display of Arminianism* (1643). See Lee Gatiss' article "Socinianism and John Owen" in the *Southern Baptist Theological Journal of Theology* SBJT 20/4 (Winter 2016) which also discusses Owen's additional works such as *Vindiciae Evangelicae*; or *The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism Examined Specifically to Refuting These Errors*. For Gill, *The Doctrine of the Trinity Stated and Vindicated* (1731); For Fuller, see *The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems Examined and Compared, as to Their Moral Tendency* (Market Harborough, Leicestershire: W. Harrod, 1793). See also *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller, Volume 7: Apologetic Works 3, Socinianism* edited by Tom Nettles, Michael Haykin, and Baiyu Andrew Song (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).
- 61 Michael A. G. Haykin, "A Socinian and Calvinist Compared: Joseph Priestley and Andrew Fuller on the Propriety of Prayer to Christ," *Nederlands Archief Voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 73, no. 2 (December 31, 1993), 187.
- 62 John Fawcett Jr., *An Account of the Life, Ministry, and Writings of the Late John Fawcett, D.D.* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy/Halifax: P.K. Holden, 1818), 10.
- 63 John Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea* (London: M. Lewis, 1772), v–vi.
- 64 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, vii.
- 65 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, viii.
- 66 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 2.
- 67 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 2.
- 68 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 2.
- 69 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 3.
- 70 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 3.
- 71 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 4.
- 72 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 4.
- 73 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 5.
- 74 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 6.
- 75 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 7.
- 76 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 7.
- 77 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 8.
- 78 Fawcett, *The Christian's Humble Plea*, 9.
- 79 Ian Sellers, *Our Heritage: The Baptists of Yorkshire, Lancashire, and Cheshire 1647–1987* (Leeds: The Yorkshire Baptist Association, 1987), 18–19.
- 80 John Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ, Considered in a Letter, Addressed to Christians of All Denominations* (Brearley Hall: Fawcett, 1793), 3.
- 81 The letter has surprisingly few direct Scripture references for modern readers. This was an associational letter, and Fawcett would have expected his fellow ministers and their respective members to recognize the passages referenced throughout the work. The Scripture references have been added for clarity, and when cited, use the English Standard Version (Crossway, 2001).
- 82 Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ*, 4.
- 83 Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ*, 4.
- 84 Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ*, 4–5.
- 85 Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ*, 6–7.
- 86 Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ*, 7.
- 87 Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ*, 7.
- 88 Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ*, 7.
- 89 Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ*, 7.
- 90 Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ*, 7–8.
- 91 Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ*, 11.
- 92 Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ*, 13.
- 93 Richey, "From Puritanism to Unitarianism in England," 382.
- 94 Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 466.
- 95 Haykin, "A Socinian and Calvinist Compared," 196–197.
- 96 Haykin, "A Socinian and Calvinist Compared," 197.
- 97 William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, *Mapping Atonement: The Doctrine of Reconciliation in Christian History and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 15.
- 98 Fawcett, *The Cross of Christ*, 13–14.