

We've Been Dating It All Wrong: Richard Denton (1603–62) and the Arrival of American Presbyterianism

By Ryan Denton

American Presbyterianism prior to the eighteenth century is shrouded in mystique. Some would say it did not exist because there was no formal presbytery established until 1706. Books and lectures on the history of American Presbyterianism rarely detail what the landscape was like before the eighteenth century. However, some scholars have admitted there was a transatlantic movement and church planting taking place. Too often scholars present the arrival of Presbyterianism in the American colonies as corresponding solely to the ministry of Francis Makemie (1658–1708). Such reductionist accounts do a major disservice to the pre-Makemie colonial Presbyterians as well as to those wanting a more complete account of Presbyterianism in early America.

Though Makemie's significant and pioneering efforts are widely recognized in historical scholarship, students of American Presbyterian history would do well to consider the earliest and most active Presbyterian in the New World's infancy.¹ The Reverend Richard Denton (1603–1662) was a dwarfish, one-eyed Cambridge Puritan whom Cotton Mather boasted "could sway a congregation like he was nine feet tall."² Historian Alfred Nevin says, "In the history of early Presbyterianism in this country the name of Richard Denton should have a permanent and prominent place."³ Unfortunately, such has not been the case. Interested readers will be hard-pressed to find any mention of Denton in recent treatments of American Presbyterianism, despite the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) claiming that he was "the first Presbyterian on this continent,"⁴ which is the same conclusion drawn by Nevin.⁵ In Denton's day, he was well-known enough to be included in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, where he is described as follows:

Among these clouds was our Pious and Learned Mr. Richard Denton, a Yorkshire Man, who having watered

Halifax in England, with his fruitful Ministry, was a Tempest then hurried into New-England, where first at Weathersfield, and then at Stamford, his Doctrine dropt as the Rain, his Speech distilled as the Dew, as the small Rain upon the tender Herb, and as the Show'rs upon the Grass.⁶

Denton has been described as "a highly religious man with strong Presbyterian beliefs..."⁷ "His well-accomplished mind, in his lesser body, was an Iliad in a nutshell. I think he was blind of an eye, yet he was not the least of the seers of Israel; he saw a very considerable

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1. Walter C. Krumm, "Who Was the Reverend Richard Denton," *New York Genealogical and Biological Record*, Vol. 117 (New York, NY: New York and Genealogical and Biographical Society, 1986), pp. 163–166.

2. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: or, The ecclesiastical history of New-England, from its first planting in the year 1620. unto the year of Our Lord, 1698. In seven books....*, Vol. 1 (Hartford, 1853), p. 398.

3. Alfred Nevin, *Encyclopedia of the Presbyterian church in the United States of America: including the Northern and Southern Assemblies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian encyclopedia publishing co., 1884), p. 182.

4. Krumm, "Who Was the Reverend Richard Denton?," pp. 163–166. Krumm makes this claim about the PCA in his article.

5. Nevin, *Encyclopedia of the Presbyterian Church*, 182: "Richard Denton was one of the very first Presbyterian ministers in the country, and the Church of Jamaica, Queen's county, New York, is the oldest existent Presbyterian Church in the United States."

6. Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 1.398.

7. David T. Myers, A Highly Religious Man with Strong Presbyterian Beliefs. *This Day in Presbyterian History*, "August 5, [2019], Rev. Richard Denton (1603–1662)," accessed November 8, 2023. <https://thisday.pcahistory.org/2019/08/august-5-6/>

portion of those things which eye 'hath not seen.' He was far from cloudy in his conceptions and principles of divinity...."⁸

WHO WAS RICHARD DENTON?

Richard Denton was born in Yorkshire, England in 1603. Upon graduating from Cambridge in 1623 he ministered at Coley Chapel, near Coley Hall, in a small town north of Manchester.⁹ The *History and Vital Records of Christ's First Presbyterian Church of Hempstead, Long Island, New York* tells us "Denton had been educated in Cambridge University, where the principles of Presbyterianism had been instilled into his mind firmly and aggressively."¹⁰ "Here he remained seven years, when, finding the times hard, the bishops at their height, and the Book of Sports on the Sabbath-day insupportable, he immigrated with a numerous family to New England."¹¹ The *Memoirs of the Rev. Oliver Heywood* provide us with a fuller description of Denton's decision to leave England for the New World:

He was a good minister of Jesus Christ, affluent in his worldly circumstances, and had several children. He continued here about seven years; times were sharp,

the bishops being in their height. In his time came out the book for sports on the Sabbath days. He saw he could not do what was required, feared further persecution, and therefore took the opportunity of going into New England.¹²

Even though "the chapel at Coley was enlarged" under Denton, the vexations of impure worship finally drove him from his homeland.

Presbyterians were founding congregations in the New World as early as the 1630s.¹³ Denton himself had established "a Presbyterian church" in Hempstead, Long Island in 1641 even though he was preaching "to a Presbyterian congregation from the first arrival, in 1630."¹⁴ Records of his ministry indicate he would also preach "from time to time to a small group of Puritans" in New York City.¹⁵ However, not all of Denton's hearers received him with appreciation. His "strong Presbyterian beliefs" seem to have riled Independents and Anglicans alike on more than one occasion. After migrating to the New World with John Winthrop and Sir Richard Saltonstall, Denton had tried to settle down in Watertown, Massachusetts: "but the firmness of his convictions—his Presbyterian opposition to the oligarchic rule of the New England Divines—again led him to depart to Hempstead."¹⁶

Such strife between Congregationalists and Presbyterians was not unique in the New World. Collaboration among the two groups was often sought out but never without frustration. A type of "Presbyterianized Congregationalism" was produced by the Cambridge Platform of 1648, in which Congregational churches "shared 'Church-communion,' aiding, admonishing, and consulting on issues in congregations."¹⁷ The document also called for a type of representative consociations (not presbyteries) which would be "orderly assembled, and rightly proceeding according to the pattern, Acts. 15."¹⁸ Whether American Presbyterians influenced such an approach to church polity is debatable, but the obvious networking that took place between the two groups would suggest the plausibility of cross-influences on this score. What is certain is that Denton was caught in the middle.

Dutch ministers John Megapolensis and Samuel Drinns mentioned in a letter to the Classis of Amsterdam, dated August 5, 1657, that "when [Denton] began to baptize the children of parents who are not members of the church, they rushed out of the church."¹⁹ Ten years prior, while at Hempstead, a conflict over Presbyterian polity "caused some twenty-five families, led by Mr. Denton, to make another move."²⁰ They did not travel

8. Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 1.399.

9. In those days the chapel was commonly called "St. John of Jerusalem."

10. "History of Our Church," *Christ's First Presbyterian Church, Hempstead, NY*, accessed April 21, 2023. Cfpcny.com/history.

11. "Richard Denton," *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908), vol. 5, p. 830.

12. Richard Slate, "Memoirs of the Rev. Oliver Heywood, B.A.," in *The Whole Works of the Rev. O. Heywood*, 5 vols. (Idle: John Vint, 1827), 1.20.

13. David Koch, "Long Island Presbyterians: Our Puritan beginnings" (<https://www.pcusa.org/news/2014/11/20/long-island-presbyterians-our-puritan-beginnings/>).

14. Nevin, *Encyclopedia*, p. 182.

15. Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), p. 23.

16. John Dean Fish, "History and Vital Records of Christ's First Presbyterian Church of Hempstead, Long Island, New York," in *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, Volume 53 (New York: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 1922), p. 235.

17. Nathan P. Feldmeth, S. Donald Fortson III, Garth M. Rosell, and Kenneth J. Stewart, *Reformed and Evangelical across Four Centuries: The Presbyterian Story in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2022), p. 141.

18. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition*, p. 21.

19. J. Franklin Jameson, *Narratives of New Netherland, 1609–1664* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), p. 398.

20. Fish, *ibid.*, p. 236.

far, however, soon stopping within the Colony of New Haven at a place called Stamford. In Stamford, “He followed Presbyterian forms, but not without protests.”²¹ Among other points of controversy, “Mr. Denton’s uncompromising democracy, or Presbyterianism, came in conflict with the New Haven rules that none but church members should vote in town meetings.”²²

RICHARD DENTON THE PRESBYTERIAN

That Denton was Presbyterian is hardly debatable. In the same 1657 letter to the Classis of Amsterdam mentioned above, it is stated that “at Hempstead, about seven Dutch miles from here, there are some Independents; also many of our persuasion and Presbyterians. They have also a Presbyterian preacher, named Richard Denton, an honest, pious and learned man.”²³ We saw above that Mather painted him as “a highly religious man with strong Presbyterian beliefs.” In Long Island, Denton went to work building up both the colony and congregation of Hempstead. Nevin stated a whole colony of Presbyterians came with him from “the old country, and followed him till their final settlement on Long Island.”²⁴

Nevin reported there was an entire “Presbyterian tree planted by the hand of Richard Denton”²⁵ in Long Island, going so far as to call Long Island “a Presbyterian colony” under Denton’s leadership, a fact also preserved by colonial records.²⁶ Two of Denton’s sons, Nathanael and Daniel, “with a number of their Presbyterian brethren,” not only formed a colony in the village of Jamaica in 1656 but “as might be expected, they immediately established religious worship.”²⁷ A memorial of the inhabitants of Jamaica, signed by Nathanael Denton, states: “This town of Jamaica, in the year 1656, was purchased from the Indian natives by divers persons, Protestants, dissenters, in the manner of worship, from the forms used in the Church of England, who have called a minister of our own profession to officiate among them.”²⁸ Thus religious services were taking place since at least 1656, but more importantly for the history of American Presbyterianism, it can be demonstrated these religious services were Presbyterian.

On March 24, 1663, Rev. Zachariah Walker was assigned to the parsonage built the year before, and

from this date to the present day there is a clear record of every minister who has served the church, together with the time of their service. George McNish, the eighth pastor, was one of the original members of

the Mother Presbytery of Philadelphia. That this church has always been a Presbyterian church there seems no room for doubt. It is so denominated in all the records where it is named. It has had a bunch of ruling elders from time immemorial.

Historian Leonard J. Trinterud states that although the Presbyterian beginnings under Richard Denton “failed to develop into churches of Presbyterian order, the Hempstead church did contribute to the founding, at Jamaica, Long Island, of what was probably the first permanent Presbyterian church in the new world.”²⁹

A recent history of American Presbyterianism confirms that “an organized Presbyterian congregation was established on Long Island by 1662 (Jamaica Church), and there were other Presbyterians throughout New York.”³⁰ The governor of New York reported in 1678 that of all the religious groups on the Island, “Presbyterians and Independents [are] most numerous and substantial.”³¹ On November 25, 1700, John Hobbert was “ordained according to ye Rule & way of the Presbyterian way, & it is the unanimous mind of the towne that he be ordained accordingly.”³² In 1702 there were more than a hundred families at the church. It was “the mother church of other churches in the vicinity” and contributed families to the First Presbyterian Church in New York City and Hopewell, New Jersey. Thus, Nevin concluded that “Richard Denton was one of the very first Presbyterian ministers in the country, and the Church of Jamaica, Queen’s county, New York, is the oldest existent Presbyterian Church in the United States.”³³ Such historical records testify to the significance of Presbyterianism in seventeenth-century colonial America,

21. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition*, p. 23.

22. John Dean Fish, *ibid.*

23. Nevin, *Encyclopedia*, p. 183.

24. Nevin, *Encyclopedia*, p. 183.

25. Nevin, *Encyclopedia*, p. 183.

26. Nevin, *Encyclopedia*, p. 183.

27. Nevin, *Encyclopedia*, p. 183.

28. Nevin, *Encyclopedia*, p. 183.

29. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition*, p. 22.

30. Feldmeth, et al., *ibid.*, p. 145.

31. Feldmeth, et al., *ibid.*, p. 145.

32. Feldmeth, et al., *ibid.*, p. 145.

33. Not only did Nevin claim to have “verified by personal examination of the authentic sources here mentioned,” but he also lists the following sources: *Thompson’s History of Long Island*; *Woodbridge’s Historical Discourse*; *Onderdonk’s History of Queen’s County*; *McDonald’s Church History*; *New York State Documents History*; *Moore’s Early History of Hempstead*; *Jamaica Town Records*. Such accounts record the existence of a fertile Presbyterian “history” in America long before 1706.

and specifically as it flourished through the labors of Richard Denton.

DENTON HEADS SOUTH—AND BACK

Another letter from Megapolensis and Drisnis dated October 22, 1657 claims, “Mr. Richard Denton, who is sound in faith, of a friendly disposition, and beloved by all, cannot be induced by us to remain, although we have earnestly tried to do this in various ways.”³⁴ They mentioned Denton going to Virginia “to seek a situation, complaining of salary, and that he was getting in debt,” but he had since returned. That Denton would head to Virginia as a Presbyterian brings up additional questions.

The Jamestown, Virginia colonists of 1607 included some Presbyterian clergy. Others such as Alexander Whitaker came to Virginia four years later (1611). Whitaker “was from a Presbyterian Puritan family, his father, William, a divinity professor at Cambridge, a hotbed of Puritanism.”³⁵ This means that Whitaker’s father was a professor in Cambridge shortly before Denton had matriculated. Another Presbyterian, the Scotsman George Keith, instituted Presbyterian polity in several parishes in Virginia from 1617 forward. However, in 1629 the Virginia Assembly required all ministers to conform to the practices of the Church of England. The suppression of Presbyterianism in Virginia persisted throughout Richard Denton’s life, which raises questions about his attempt to relocate. Why would he visit such a place in order to find a new call and living situation?

A plausible answer may be found when examining the life of another “Apostle of Presbyterianism in

34. Jameson, “Narratives of New Netherland, 1609–1664,” p. 401.

35. Feldmeth, et al., *ibid.*, p. 144.

36. William Gray Dixon, *The Romance of the Catholic Presbyterian Church* (Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, 1918), p. 233.

37. Susan Hardman Moore, and Susan M. Moore, *Pilgrims: New World Settlers & the Call of Home* (Yale University Press, 2007), p. 197.

38. Thomas Lechford, “Plain Dealing, or Newes from New-England,” *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. 3, third series (Cambridge: Metcalf, 1833), p. 96.

39. “Rev. Francis Doughty,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (1898): 290.

40. William Gray Dixon, *The Romance of the Catholic Presbyterian Church*, p. 233.

41. John Frederick Dorman, *Adventurers of Purse and Person, Virginia, 1607–1624/5: Families G–P* (Genealogical Publishing, 1956; repr., 2007), p. 134.

42. John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. Marcus Robert Gilchrist (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), “Letter 549,” 4.73.

43. Calvin, *ibid.*, 4.74.

44. Calvin, *ibid.*, 4.74.

America.”³⁶ Francis Doughty (1616–1670) arrived in Massachusetts from England in 1637.³⁷ Like Denton, his beliefs regarding infant baptism got him into trouble with his congregations in Taunton and Cohasset. Doughty alleged that “according to the Covenant of Abraham, all men’s children that were of baptized parents, and so Abraham’s children, ought to be baptized.” This led to Doughty being dragged out of the assembly and forcibly removed from Massachusetts.³⁸

By 1642, Doughty had made his way to Long Island, where he was granted a tract of land by the “Director of New Netherland,” Willem Kieft. He was given “power to erect a church, and to exercise the Reformed Christian religion which they profess.”³⁹ However, Indians harried the group to New Amsterdam where Doughty pastored for five years. Further conflict with Kieft and Captain John Underhill caused Doughty to relocate to Virginia, where he became known for “troublesome but unsuccessful witch-hunting proclivities.”⁴⁰ Doughty reportedly pastored churches in Northampton County and Rappahannock County, Virginia, from 1654–1668.⁴¹ Thus, Richard Denton’s visit to Virginia took place three years after Doughty had begun pastoring there.

INTERGENERATIONAL BAPTISM

Doughty’s view of baptism is called “intergenerational baptism,” a not uncommon belief in his day, as evidenced by none other than John Calvin. On August 27, 1559 Knox wrote a letter to Calvin asking “whether it be lawful to admit to the sacrament of baptism the children of idolators and excommunicated persons before their parents have testified their repentance.”⁴² Calvin brought the question to his Genevan colleagues. Their answer was unanimous:

Now God’s promise comprehends not only the offspring of every believer in the first line of descent, but extends to thousands of generations. Whence it has happened that the interruption of piety which has prevailed in Popery has not taken away from baptism its force and efficacy. For we must look to its origin, and the very reason and nature of baptism is to be esteemed as arising from the promise of God.⁴³

Thus, reasoned Calvin and his colleagues, “it is by no means doubtful that an offspring descended from holy and pious ancestors, belong to the body of the church, though their fathers and grandfathers may have been apostates.”⁴⁴ Not stopping there, Calvin even claimed that to withhold the sacrament of baptism in such cases

would be to defraud such children of a God-ordained right:

Children are defrauded of their privileges if they are excluded from the common symbol; because it is unjust when God, three hundred years ago or more, has thought them worthy of his adoption, that the subsequent impiety of some of their progenitors should interrupt the course of heavenly grace. In fine, as each person is not admitted to baptism from respect or regard to one of his parents alone, but on account of the perpetual covenant of God; so in like manner, no just reason suffers children to be debarred from their initiation into the church in consequence of the bad conduct of only one parent.⁴⁵

Calvin's only stipulation for such cases was that the child have a sponsor. This would be a family member of the child who is in good standing in the church and willing to catechize the child in the faith. "Wherefore if none of its relations present himself to pledge his faith to the church that he will undertake the task of instructing the infant, the rite is a mockery and baptism is prostituted. But we see no reason for rejecting any child for whom a due pledge has been given."⁴⁶

Such a view can also be found in the Italian Reformer Girolamo Zanchi (1516–1590), who argued "the children of those that are indeed in the church, but, because of their unclean way of living, declare that they are not indeed of the church; if they be offered to baptism, they cannot be debarred therefrom, nor ought they."⁴⁷ Zanchi states that it is "the piety of the church in which they are born" which counts, as well as "their ancestors who have lived godly and holily," not the parents.⁴⁸

Richard Hooker (1554–1600) approved of Calvin's response to the Knox letter, although he disagreed with the way Calvin came to his conclusion. Hooker felt that if Calvin's reasoning was valid, it would mean that "all the world may be baptized, inasmuch as no man living is a thousand descents removed from Adam himself."⁴⁹ Hooker's response is especially important for better understanding the climate of Doughty and Denton, since Hooker was a fellow Englishman. According to Gavin Ortlund, "Calvin's affirmation of intergenerational baptism was broadly taken up by those who affirmed the national organization of the church, while Congregationalists frequently challenged this practice as insufficiently reformed."⁵⁰

Ortlund even claims that the issue regarding children of baptized but unprofessing parents "was one of the issues debated among Presbyterians and Independents in

Great Britain in the period leading up to and during the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s."⁵¹ He cites Samuel Rutherford in particular as a vocal proponent of intergenerational baptism. This dates the debate's progression to around the same time that Doughty and Denton were ejected from Massachusetts for their views on baptism. In Puritan New England such views would lead to the "halfway covenant," adopted at the 1662 Synod of Boston, but not before Doughty and Denton had already moved south.

Why are these historical details important? Because the wider context of this theological development provides insight into the conflict and sacrifice early Presbyterian ministers were forced to endure in America. Although intergenerational baptism is unheard of today, it seems to have been considered an orthodox view in the Reformed churches in the days of Doughty and Denton. Thus, although modern readers may see such practices as being outside the pale of Presbyterian practice, it would be wrong to call Doughty eccentric in his beliefs, at least for his historical setting. From all appearances, his view of baptism that got him dismissed from Massachusetts seems like nothing else than mainstream Reformed orthodoxy in the seventeenth century.

DENTON'S RETURN TO ENGLAND

Eventually, circumstances forced Denton's return to England. Denton's return was necessary, "because of his wife who is sickly will not go without him, and there is need of their going there on account of a legacy of four hundred pounds sterling lately left by a deceased friend." Denton arrived back in England in 1659, although he left behind a quiver of children who would in turn have big families and contribute meaningfully to the westward

45. Calvin, *ibid.*, 4.74.

46. Calvin, *ibid.*, 4.74.

47. As cited by Thomas Boston, in "Miscellaneous Questions," Question VI: Who have right to baptism, and are to be baptized? in *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston*, vol. 6: Sermons and Discourses on Several Important Subjects in Divinity (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1849), pp. 139–140. [Ed. Boston is citing from Girolamo Zanchi, *In Epistolas ad Ephesios*, in *Omnium Operum Theologicorum*, Vol. 2, Part 4–6 (Geneva: S. Crispini, 1619), pp. 226–227.]

48. Boston, "Miscellaneous Questions," *ibid.*, pp. 139–140.

49. Richard Hooker, *The Works of Richard Hooker*, ed. John Keble, 7th ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1888), 1.349.

50. Gavin Ortlund, "Why Not Grandchildren? An Argument Against Reformed Paedobaptism," *The Gospel Coalition*, accessed May 16, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/why-not-grandchildren-an-argument-against-reformed-paedobaptism/>. Much of the above information is credited to this article.

51. Ortlund, "Why Not Grandchildren?"

expansion of the colonies. “The men were active in the local militias fighting the Indians and they developed excellent military experience that prepared them for officer commissions when they moved to the Virginia frontier.”⁵² Upon his death in 1660, Denton’s tombstone in Yorkshire bore the following inscription: “Here lies the dust of Richard Denton. O’er his low peaceful grave bends the perennial cypress, fit emblem of his un fading flame. On earth his bright example, religious light, shown forth o’er multitudes. In heaven his pure robd sp̄irit shines like an effulgent flame.”

Denton’s unyielding commitment to Presbyterian polity and his unswerving zeal to see it implemented in the New World calls for a reiteration of our initial point: the history of the Presbyterian church in America begins in earnest in the wilderness of New York in the 1630s, not Philadelphia in 1706. For those who would dissent, the following must be weighed: without the pioneering efforts of early Presbyterian ministers like Denton, would there have been a presbytery in 1706? This is not to downplay the tremendous efforts of men in the eighteenth century, notably Francis Makemie. But it is to give due regard to the vast exertions of labor that went into the Presbyterian cause long before Makemie came onto the scene. Denton and Makemie were on the same team, so to speak, and each deserve a place in the history of American Presbyterianism. ■

In Brief: Calvin to Knox on Baptism (Nov. 7, 1559). Letters of John Calvin (Calvin Translation Society, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858) pp. 73–76.

... Respecting the questions of which you ask for a solution, after I had laid them before my colleagues, here is the answer which we unanimously resolved to send. It is not without reason that you inquire whether it be lawful to admit to the sacrament of baptism the children of idolaters and excommunicated persons before their parents have testified their repentance. For we ought always to be carefully on our guard that the sanctity of this mystery be not profaned, which it certainly should be if it were promiscuously administered to aliens, or if anyone received it without having such sponsors as may be counted among the legitimate members of the church. But as in the proper use of baptism the authority of God is to be considered, and his institution ought to derive its authority from certain conditions, one of the first things to be considered is who are the persons that God by his own voice invites to be baptized.

52. Josephine C Frost, ed., *Records of the Town of Jamaica, Long Island, New York: 1656–1751*, 3 vols. (Brooklyn, NY: The Long Island Historical Society, 1914), 1.20.

Now God’s promise comprehends not only the offspring of every believer in the first line of descent, but extends to thousands of generations. Whence it has happened that the interruption of piety which has prevailed in Popery has not taken away from baptism its force and efficacy. For we must look to its origin, and the very reason and nature of baptism is to be esteemed as arising from the promise of God. To us then it is by no means doubtful that an offspring descended from holy and pious ancestors, belong to the body of the church, though their fathers and grandfathers may have been apostates. For just as in Popery it was a pernicious and insane superstition, to steal or forcibly abduct their children from Jews or Turks, and forthwith to have them baptized; so likewise, wherever the profession of Christianity has not been altogether interrupted or destroyed, children are defrauded of their privileges if they are excluded from the common symbol; because it is unjust, when God, three hundred years ago or more, has thought them worthy of his adoption, that the subsequent impiety of some of their progenitors should interrupt the course of heavenly grace. In fine, as each person is not admitted to baptism from respect or regard to one of his parents alone, but on account of the perpetual covenant of God; so in like manner, no just reason suffers children to be debarred from their initiation into the church in consequence of the bad conduct of only one parent. In the meantime we confess that it is indispensable for them to have sponsors. For nothing is more preposterous than that persons should be incorporated with Christ, of whom we have no hopes of their ever becoming his disciples. Wherefore if none of its relations present himself to pledge his faith to the church that he will undertake the task of instructing the infant, the rite is a mockery and baptism is prostituted.

But we see no reason for rejecting any child for whom a due pledge has been given. Add to these considerations that the manner of proceeding adopted by a church now arising from its ruins, and that of one duly formed and established are two very different things. For whilst a church is being composed out of that horrible state of dispersion, since the form of baptism has prevailed through a long series of ages down to our times, it is to be retained, but with the progress of time the abuses which have crept in are to be corrected, and the parents forced to present their children themselves and become the first sponsors. For if in the first commencements an absolute perfection is severely exacted, it is greatly to be feared that many laying eagerly hold of this pretext will continue to wallow in their corruptions.

We confess indeed that we should not attach so much importance to anything as to swerve even a hair’s breadth from the line prescribed to us by God; but we imagine we have demonstrated in a few words that if we exclude from baptism those whom we have had proofs of having been domesticated, as it were, in the church, the exclusion would be too rigorous. ■