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# 2016/5: A Garden Enclosed

A Review, by Jeffrey T Riddle

**Boon Sing Poh, *A Garden Enclosed: A historical study and evaluation of the form of church government practiced by the Particular Baptists in the 17th and 18th centuries* (Good News Enterprise, 2013): 330 pp. By Jeffrey T. Riddle.**

## Introduction

Poh Boon Sing is a pioneering Reformed Baptist Pastor in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia who has studied and written extensively in the area of ecclesiology. *A Garden Enclosed* (hereafter *AGE*) is a work of historical theology tracing the form of church government practiced by the early Particular Baptists, the doctrinal forerunners to today's Reformed Baptists. The title is taken from Song of Solomon 4:12, 16. This work served as Poh's 2012 PhD thesis in Church History from North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa.

## Background to the work

In many ways, this work is a continuation and expansion of Poh's previous studies in ecclesiology and his dialogue with other pastors and scholars on this topic. Poh's important 1995 book *The Keys of the Kingdom* presented his Reformed Baptist "Independency" view of church government, inspired by the ecclesiology of the influential Puritan John Owen. Among other things, Poh argued in that work for a distinction within the one office of elder between the teaching elder and the ruling elder, for a distinct and singular leading role for the minister or pastor (teaching elder) among the elders, and for elder rule with congregational consent (as opposed to democratic congregationalism) in the church. Poh's views in *Keys of the Kingdom* met with approval in some corners. The book is used, for example, in theological education courses by London's Metropolitan Tabernacle (Spurgeon's former church, where Peter Masters is now pastor) and distributed through their bookshop. It also met with critique and criticism from some corners. Sam Waldron and others argued against Poh's distinction in the office of elder in the booklet *In Defense of Parity* (1997). Poh, in turn, responded to Waldron, et al in his booklet *Against Parity* (2006). More recently James Renihan challenged Poh's assertion that this view of church government had been widespread among the early Particular Baptists in England in *Edification and Beauty* (2008) (see pp. 63-87). Thus, *AGE* might be considered a continuation and expansion of the issues first addressed in *The Keys of the Kingdom*, with particular attention to Particular Baptist history and a defense of Poh's views, especially against the historical objections raised by Renihan.

## Overview of content

*AGE* has a helpful abstract and preface which introduce the work. This is followed by seven chapters: (1) Introduction; (2) Autonomy; (3) The Headship of Christ; (4) Rule by Elders; (5)

The Byways; (6) The Communion of Churches; and (7) Conclusion (including a discussion of unsettled issues and recommendations for moving forward).

Poh's central thesis is that the likely majority practice of the earliest Particular Baptists (c. 1650-1750), under the influence of John Owen and others, was that of the "Independency" view of church government, including the existence and recognition of both teaching and ruling elders, a leading role for a singular pastor among the other elders, and elder rule with consent. Such a view is not contradicted by the Second London Baptist Confession (1689) but underlies it. Later Particular Baptists, however, beginning especially with Benjamin Keach in the late seventeenth century, through to John Gill in the eighteenth century, altered this form of church government, in favor of the single pastor/multiple deacons model of democratic congregationalism. Poh furthermore urges that the early Independent model of Particular Baptist ecclesiology be reclaimed in the modern context. He also appeals to contemporary Reformed Baptists to reclaim the practice of "communion" among like-minded churches.

### **A Closer Look at the Argument**

#### *Chapter One: Introduction (pp. 1-20):*

Poh begins by stressing the Puritan-Separatist descent of the English Particular Baptists. He points out that chapter 26 of the Second London Baptist Confession (1677/1689) was dependent upon the "Savoy Platform of Church Polity," whose chief author was Owen. The writings of John Owen, in general, apart from his views on Infant baptism, had strong sway among them. Thus, Poh asserts: "The Particular Baptists seemed content to allow John Owen to speak for them as far as church government was concerned" (p. 12). Poh's "central theoretical argument" in *AGE*, then, is that the English Particular Baptists "practiced a form of church government which is traditionally known as Independency" (p. 18).

#### *Chapter Two: Autonomy (pp. 21-64):*

Poh proceeds to note that the distinctive characteristic of seventeenth century Separatists was belief in "self-rule, or the autonomy of the local church" (p. 21). He traces six men who played a key role in shaping early Particular Baptist views on ecclesiology: John Spilsbury, Samuel Richardson, William Kiffin, Hanserd Knollys, Benjamin Keach, and Nehemiah Coxe. He also traces three controversies that influenced and sharpened Particular Baptist views on ecclesiology: (1) Baptism and Church Membership (1640-1660); (2) Baptism and the Lord's Supper (1660-1680); and (3) Baptism and the Covenant of Grace (1680-1700). Particular Baptists were distinguished as Independents who rejected paedobaptism.

#### *Chapter Three: The Headship of Christ (pp. 65-108):*

Next, Poh traces how "conservative Particular Baptists" upheld the principle of "the headship of Christ" as central to their understanding of church polity. They did so in contention with violent radicals (like the Levellers) and passive radicals (like those in the Fifth Monarchy movement and Seventh Day Baptists). This principle was also "forged in the fires of intense persecution that came to the Puritans from 1660 to 1668" (p. 87). When persecution subsided, it was articulated in the 1689 confession (seen especially in chapter 8 on Christ the Mediator and chapter 21 on Liberty of Conscience).

#### *Chapter Four: Rule by Elders (pp. 109-163):*

From the headship of Christ, Poh proceeds to discuss how Particular Baptists understood the

exercise of that headship through the rule of elders in the church. According to Poh, the Particular Baptists agreed with John Owen that the source of church power is Christ, and the seat of power is the church, while the authority of executing that power lies with the elders" (p. 113). Furthermore, Poh argues that the early Particular Baptists, like Owen, held that there were two types of elders (teaching elders or pastors and ruling elders) within the one office of elder. Thus, all pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors.

To clinch this point Poh marshals a number of early sources. One of the most important of these is Daniel King's book *A Way to Sion* (1650, 1656) which specifically describes the office of "Bishop or Elder" being "distributed into Pastor and Teacher, and Ruling Elder, or He that Rules" (as cited on p. 123). Clearly, "Daniel King believed in the validity of ruling elders" (p. 125).

While Poh acknowledges that Benjamin Keach in *The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline display'd* (1697) explicitly rejected the office of ruling elder as an extra-ordinary office "only temporary" in the early church (p. 126), he contends that the "predominant view" of the early Particular Baptists on elders was closer to that of King than Keach. Keach was a "second generation leader" who was only a ten years old boy when King wrote *A Way to Sion in 1650* (p. 126). Another key source for Poh is the writings of Hanserd Knollys. Though Knollys does not describe ruling elder in the explicit terms which King uses, Poh traces a similar Owenian outlook of the eldership in both men.

Beyond King's specific writings and his interpretation of Knollys' views, Poh, appeals to a number of other early Particular Baptist sources to prove his point. Some of these are indeed very specific and convincing. The 1654 minutes of the meeting of the Baptist "Association of South Wales," for example, do specifically mention within the overall discussion of "the pastor's office" both "the teacher's particular office" and "the ruling elder's or helping office" (p. 134). Likewise, the 1715 Church Book of the Baptist congregation in Reading listed among its officers, a pastor, two ruling elders, and four deacons (p. 141). The influential Broadmead church of Bristol was led by a pastor and ruling elders (p. 147). Other references are more vague, like that of the statement on eldership made by the Abingdon Baptist Association in 1654, of which even Poh can only conclude, "Since there is no explicit denial of the ruling elder, unlike the case of Keach, it is not possible to state with certainty which view this is" (p. 139).

According to Poh, not only did King and other early Particular Baptists advocate the Owenian distinction between teaching and ruling elders, but they also held to an Owenian view of the manner of elder rule. This meant that the elders had the authority "to make decisions" and the congregation had the responsibility "to consent to the elders' decisions" (p. 153). The ruling of elders among Particular Baptists did not have to do merely with teaching, administration of the ordinances, and the declaration of the admission or ejection of church members. The elders initiated and made decisions, while also seeking the congregation's consent. This elder rule with congregational consent is different in substance from democratic congregationalism.

#### *Chapter Five: The Byways (pp. 165-228):*

If the early Particular Baptists held to an Independent view of church, how and why did they later come to move away from this position? Poh pins most of the responsibility (or blame) on Keach for the shift among Particular Baptists away from their early commitment to an

Independent view of church polity. Keach was a "controversial figure" (p. 168). While some men engaged in some controversies, Keach "engaged in all controversies" (p. 176). He was "a prickly, rash, and independent-minded personality" (p. 176). He held to a "mixed theology" and often straddled the line between the General and Particular Baptists, on various issues (p. 206). Rather than cast Keach as the standard for Particular Baptist views, Poh suggests he was a "virtual loner" (p. 220).

For Poh the key figure among the early Particular Baptists was Hanserd Knollys, one of the few university educated men among the early Particular Baptist preachers. Poh maintains that Knollys held to a view on the eldership similar to Daniel King and John Owen. He suggests that Knollys was "most influential among the Particular Baptists," and he can even speak of his influence as "the Knollys' factor" (p. 180). He further suggests that Knollys' influence has been unjustly downplayed by more recent Baptist historians. In truth, Poh argues, "Kiffin was the Hermes and Knollys the Zeus of the Particular Baptist community" (p. 183). Of the three so-called "mighty men" (Knollys, Kiffin, and Keach), "Knollys was chief of the three" (p. 183). Keach, on the other hand, "was not as influential among the Particular Baptists as he is portrayed today" (p. 206). Poh charges that Keach's views on the eldership were more in line with the General Baptists and that they were not shared by the majority of Particular Baptists in his day. As astute a contemporary observer of the times as Isaac Watts noted that Particular Baptists were "generally Independents" (p. 222).

According to Poh the Independent view of ecclesiology persisted among Particular Baptists through the mid-eighteenth century. Even Benjamin Griffith's treatise annexed to the 1742 Philadelphia Baptist Confession in America explicitly described the role of ruling elders (p. 225). Eventually, however, Keach's view of the single pastor with deacons predominated as seen in the polity of John Gill and John Rippon, though Charles Spurgeon made a "valiant effort" to restore "the John Owen view of the eldership" (p. 226).

*Chapter Six: The Communion of Churches (pp. 229-254):*

Poh suggests that another way in which the Particular Baptists were similar to the ecclesiological views of the Congregationalist Independents, like Owen, can be seen in their concern for "inter-church fellowship" (p. 229). Though they preferred to use terms like "meeting," "assembly," and later, "associations," rather than "synods," they believed and practiced fellowship or communion among the churches. Poh traces the history of the Particular Baptist associations in the seventeenth century through to the four annual national London assemblies held in 1689-1692. Despite the failure of these national assemblies to achieve ongoing unity, Particular Baptists continued to seek church communion in smaller, regional associations, though, according to Poh, they increasingly "began to embrace the Congregationalism of the General Baptists, characterized by the single-pastor-and-multiple-deacons system of church officers, and ruling by congregational democracy" (p. 252).

*Chapter Seven: Conclusion (pp. 255-292):*

Poh begins by noting that ecclesiology remains an unsettled issue today among Reformed Baptists. He describes *AGE* as a "supplement" to his previous work, *The Keys of the Kingdom* (p. 259). Indeed, his thesis is that the early Particular Baptists practiced an Independent form of church government similar to that of John Owen. In support of this thesis, Poh necessarily takes exception to Jim Renihan's historical study of Particular Baptist ecclesiology (see *Edification and Beauty* [2008]). Poh charges that Renihan wrongly interprets the evidence both by concluding that most early Particular Baptists held to an "absolute equality" view of

the eldership and by concluding that they practiced a form of democratic congregationalism closer to that of the Brownists than to the Independency of John Owen.

Poh concludes by noting the need for clarity in ecclesiology. He further advises:

Today, any attempt to recover the plurality and equality of elders in the church should ensure that it is of the Baptist Independent type, in which is upheld the priority of the ministry of God's Word, the validity of ruling elders, the unity of the eldership, and rule by elders with congregational consent (p. 285).

The recovery of a Biblical form of church government is a matter of "greater urgency" than many other important matters (e.g., Bible versions, open or closed communion, how to observe the Lord's Day, etc.) (p. 291).

He also encourages Reformed Baptist churches to seek communion with like-minded churches in "flexible" associations. According to Poh these seem to work best if they are small (no more than twenty churches) and regional, as opposed to national. Nevertheless, he adds, that in the internet age such fellowships "need not be limited to a geographical region" (p. 288).

### **Analysis and Prospects**

As previously noted, *AGE* must be read as the continuation of a now twenty year-long discussion on the topic of Reformed Baptist polity. Poh's positive contributions to this discussion in *AGE* include the following:

1. He gives recognition to and places emphasis upon the influence of the Puritan John Owen upon the ecclesiology of early Particular Baptists. Poh demonstrates a ready familiarity with Owen's writings on ecclesiology, including especially *The True Nature of a Gospel Church and its Government*, whose influence upon early Particular Baptists has not perhaps been fully appreciated by contemporary Reformed Baptist pastors and scholars.
2. He demonstrates, in particular, that at least many of the early Particular Baptists clearly recognized a distinction between teaching elders (pastors) and ruling elders. Renihan acknowledged this as a minority position among Particular Baptists, conceding "at least a small number of churches made a distinction between teaching and ruling elders" (*Edification and Beauty*, p. 100). Poh challenges this assumption by suggesting it was much more widespread than previously understood. His argument is made more convincing by citations from Daniel King's *A Way to Sion*, a book which bore the endorsement of influential Particular Baptists like Kiffin, and by his interpretation of Hanserd Knollys' writings. King's *A Way to Sion* is not discussed or cited by Renihan in *Edification and Beauty*.
3. He offers a unique and compelling argument that Hanserd Knollys held to some form of Independent church polity and that he was the most influential leader among the "first generation" of Particular Baptists. The "second generation" then moved away from the Independent view of polity, particularly under the influence of Benjamin Keach, and later of John Gill.
4. He offers a heartfelt rationale for the doctrinal importance of ecclesiology among Reformed Baptists and for the importance of communion among Reformed Baptist churches.

There remain some points where greater clarity and further discussion will be helpful. Though Poh has clearly and convincingly demonstrated the influence of John Owen and Independency on the early Particular Baptists and the fact that many more of them than previously recognized distinguished between teaching and ruling elders, it appears much more difficult, based on the currently available historical evidence, to prove without doubt that this was definitely the majority position among the early Particular Baptists. The evidence just is not as plain, on either side, as we might wish it to be. This seems particularly obvious when it comes to reading and interpreting the minutes of church record books and other historical evidence in attempting to determine whether Particular Baptist elders sought congregational approval (Renihan) or congregational assent (Poh). The descriptions just are not as clear as we might like them to be.

Those who embrace a Baptist Independent polity must also admit that when the framers of the 1689 Confession adapted the Savoy Platform in chapter 26 they did not make explicit reference to ruling elders. Poh notes, I believe rightly, that the difference here between the Savoy Platform and the 1689 Confession is probably not so much one "in substance, but only in expression" (p. 273). Chapter 26 certainly does not exclude the teaching elder/ruling elder distinction, as proven by the fact that this distinction was made by many of the churches which adopted the confession. One must concede, however, that it does not explicitly refer to ruling elders, and this may be significant. It at least indicates that by this stage there was likely enough diversity of opinion among the Particular Baptists that the Savoy wording needed to be adjusted and modified to meet the needs of the Particular Baptists.

As helpful as historical theology might be, all Reformed Baptists will agree that the ultimate standard is Scripture. Poh has made a credible and convincing argument that at least many early Particular Baptists held to an Independent form of church government, along the lines of that held by John Owen. He rightly notes that AGE is a historical "supplement" to the *Keys of the Kingdom* where he has made the more important Scriptural case for his position. Poh is to be thanked by Reformed Baptists for his labors and encouragement to think Biblically and historically about the nature and function of the church, the Lord's "garden enclosed" (Song of Solomon 4:12).

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