

# A Distinguished Blessing of Grace

## *Abraham Booth's Doctrine of Sanctification in Confessional Context*

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“Oh, that Abraham Booth’s God may be my God.”<sup>1</sup> These words from Benjamin Beddome (1717–1795) offer insight into how one of the leading figures of the eighteenth-century Particular Baptist movement was regarded by his contemporaries as an exemplar of personal devotion and piety.<sup>2</sup> Those who have studied the life and thought of Abraham Booth (1734–1806) have noted this legacy of stalwart Christian character. For example, R. A. Coppenger once described Booth as “a man possessed of an unusually admirable and consistent Christian character.”<sup>3</sup> He furthermore noted how Booth “won the widest regard in his time for his pure Christianity.”<sup>4</sup> Booth’s life was, in short, a testimony to his belief in the necessity of holiness in the Christian life. However, scholars have given little attention to the question of how Booth formulated

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1 John Rippon, “A Short Memoir of the Rev. Abraham Booth,” in *A Sermon, Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. Abraham Booth, Preached in Little Prescott Street, Goodman’s Fields by James Dore: And A Short Memoir of the Deceased, Incorporated with the Address Delivered at His Internment, in Maze Pond by John Rippon* (London: C. Whittingham, 1806), 85.

2 For biographical details on Booth, see See William Jones, *An Essay on the Life and Writings of Mr. Abraham Booth, Late Pastor of the Baptist Church in Little Prescott-Street, Goodman’s Fields, London* (London: James Smith, 1808); “Memoir of the Author,” in *The Works of Abraham Booth, Late Pastor of the Baptist Church Assembling in Little Prescott Street, Goodman’s Field, London, with Some Account of His Life and Writings*, 3 vols. (London: J. Haddon, 1813), 1:xvii–lxxx; and Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, 4 vols. (London: Isaac Taylor Hinton, 1830), 4:364–79.

3 Raymond Arthur Coppenger, *A Messenger of Grace: A Study of the Life and Thought of Abraham Booth*, Evangelical Heritage (Peterborough, ON: Joshua Press, 2009), 125.

4 Coppenger, *Messenger of Grace*, 124.

his understanding of sanctification within the larger framework of his Particular Baptist theology.

This dissertation offers the first dedicated study of Booth's doctrine of sanctification and its undergirding confessional context. Booth, in short, consciously followed the English Reformed tradition in four critical areas related to sanctification: (1) his understanding of the necessity and ground of sanctification; (2) his understanding of the nature and process of sanctification; (3) his understanding of the moral law's instrumental role in sanctification; and (4) his emphasis on the necessity of good works as the external fruit or evidence of sanctification. Booth's arguments, as they related to each of these areas, were characterized by intentional unoriginality. Nevertheless, his writings on sanctification were characterized by careful biblical exegesis and intensive theological inquiry, and they made a material contribution to the Particular Baptist response to Antinomianism.

Booth's continuity with the English Reformed tradition on the topic of sanctification is evidenced by comparing his own writings with those of the key thinkers who formed that tradition. Such a comparison reveals a striking similarity between Booth's arguments on the subject and the arguments of previous writers. Indeed, there are times when Booth's statements on the subject are almost word-for-word reproductions of confessional formulations, despite the fact that he never cites a confession of faith in his arguments. Although the lines of influence between Booth and the tradition are not always clear or direct, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that he formed his arguments in a way that was intentionally consistent with those who had gone before him.

The first part of the dissertation situates Booth's arguments within their proper historical and theological context. Chapter 2 introduces Booth and offers a summary of the literature that has been devoted to his life and thought. Chapter 3 examines a key area of historical-theological background related to the English Reformed view of sanctification, namely, the rise and development of Antinomianism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Chapter 4 offers a broad survey of how the English Reformed tradition formulated its doctrine of sanctification in response to the challenges of Antinomianism. It covers three key sources from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: (1) the

confessional and catechetical documents produced by nonconformists at the Westminster Assembly (1643–1653); (2) the writings of John Owen (1616–1683), the leading figure of the English Congregational movement; and (3) the writings and confessional documents of the early English Particular Baptists. Each of these distinct theological traditions were in basic agreement on the four doctrinal areas under consideration.

The second part of the dissertation, composed of chapters 5–8, is arranged systematically, and it covers each area of Booth's doctrine of sanctification outlined in the thesis. Chapter 5 explores Booth's thoughts concerning the necessity of ground and sanctification in God's plan of salvation. Booth understood sanctification to be a spiritual blessing of the covenant of grace that was distinct yet inseparable from other spiritual blessings such as justification. He thus argued for the necessity of holiness in the Christian life. Chapter 6 explores Booth's thoughts on the nature and process of sanctification. Booth understood sanctification to be a progressive work of the Holy Spirit that involved the believer's efforts to mortify sin and put on holiness. He furthermore stressed that sanctification would never be complete during the believer's lifetime. Chapter 7 explores Booth's thoughts on the relationship between sanctification and the law. Booth understood the moral law to be a perpetual rule of Christian conduct. As such, it was an important instrument that the Spirit used to carry on the work of sanctification. Finally, chapter 8 explores Booth's thoughts on the relationship between good works and sanctification. Booth understood good works to be the necessary external fruit or evidence of the Spirit's work in the life of the believer, and he insightfully applied this understanding to one of the most polarizing social and political issues of his day, namely, the abolition of the British slave trade. Each of these chapters concludes with a comparative analysis that highlights areas of continuity and discontinuity between Booth and the English Reformed tradition.

The concluding chapter explores the ongoing legacy of Booth's theological contribution, as it touches on the question of how Booth's formulation of the doctrine of sanctification can be instructive for contemporary historical and theological discussions. It suggests that Booth's writings on sanctification are especially instructive for contemporary believers who wish to maintain a faith that is historically rooted and confessionally informed. Booth was particularly

helpful in this regard as he made arguments that were informed by the confessional tradition without being overly dependent on it. As others have argued, confessionally rooted faith is much needed in an age that is often characterized by a hyper-individualistic approach to Christian faith and spiritual life.<sup>5</sup>

On one hand, the aim of this dissertation is to contribute to a deeper understanding of Abraham Booth's life and thought in its historical context and shed light on his importance as one of the most prolific theologians of the Particular Baptist tradition. There are several areas of Booth's life and thought that warrant further research, such as his writings on Baptist ecclesiology and his opposition to the British slave trade. Furthermore, more research is needed to properly situate Booth within the complex landscape of eighteenth-century Particular Baptist life. On the other hand, this dissertation seeks to contribute to a growing scholarly interest in the doctrine of sanctification as it developed within the Reformed tradition and especially in Particular Baptist thought. Booth was one of many Reformed thinkers who labored to stress the importance of holiness in the Christian life. More research is needed to establish a well-rounded understanding of the way that Reformed theology grounds a distinctive understanding of the Christian life.

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this need, see Carl R. Trueman, *Crisis of Confidence: Reclaiming the Historic Faith in a Culture Consumed with Individualism and Identity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024).