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On 1 January 1650 Richard Baxter and John Tombes met at the chapel-of-ease in Bewdley to debate the lawfulness of infant baptism and church membership. The subject of the debate was a matter of pressing concern following the recent abolishment of episcopacy (1646) and monarchy (1649) and had crucial implications for individual, communal, ecclesiological and national identities and politics. This public debate was a pivotal moment in the relationship between two clerics and their respective congregations whether parochial or gathered. A number of manuscript and print texts intersect with this event in complex ways that reveal the importance of local knowledge networks, the porous boundaries between manuscript and print, the emotional, ideological and political significance of baptism, and the contested authority of ministers when negotiating issues of identity and community in Commonwealth England.[1]

Examining the debate and the textual documents that surround the event enables a detailed exploration of the ways in which the meaning and practice of baptism as a sign and sacrament was contested in a local context across a range of media with implications for national church polity. Thinking about the texts as events that work rhetorically in the world illuminates how knowledge networks were created, nourished and transformed through practices of pastoral care, the forms of communication adopted by clerics, and the transformation of the debate itself as a mechanism for the testing and establishment of truth in a particular communal context. Event, as a concept, provides a coherent rationale for the selection of primary material that forms the basis of the case study considered here, which traces how the debate as an event was reciprocally created, enacted and interpreted by the manuscript texts and print publications revolving around it. The intention is not to reconstruct the debate as it was performed and might have been experienced by the original spectators. The focus, rather, is on how different texts – letters in manuscript and print, a verbal account of the debate in manuscript, published descriptions by participants and observers, printed polemic, and a dream and its interpretation – work "rhetorically in the world, as events rather than discourses."[2] The term 'event' is thus being

[1] I am grateful to the Early Modern Conversions project for funding a Visiting Fellowship at CRASSH, Cambridge, which allowed me to undertake the research for this article. I would also like to thank Drs Sara Barker, Tom Charlton, Ian O'Harae and Rachel Willie for their feedback on earlier drafts.

[2] The methodology used to interpret Baxter's debate with Tombes is indebted to approaches developed by scholars working on the history of the book. A text "is not neutral raw material comprehensible outside the event or the purpose that lay behind its publication and circulation." Texts are "wound with a thick skein of tensions and conflicts whose particularity needs to be ascertained," though this does not negate the possibility of drawing broader conclusions. Chartier, "General Introduction," 5. This relationship is summarised in Christian Jouhaud's essay title,

used in two ways: the debate as an event occurred at a specific point in space (Bewdley) and time (1 January 1650) reciprocally generated by and instigating a series of texts in manuscript and print; each of these materially embodied textual artefacts also work rhetorically in the world, as events. Ryan Szpiech defines the methodological problem created by the gap between these two meanings as "between text and event." He addresses this gap by noting the difference between the "thing felt" and the "thing made."[3] This distinction illuminates the critical space between the debate, as an event that occurred in space and time, which ultimately remains irrecoverable, and the material texts that embody the rhetorical acts that constituted it and which themselves operated in the world as events. The debate as an event, in the first sense, thus exists in a symbiotic relationship with a series of events, in the second sense, which is mutually constitutive.

Baxter's debate with Tombes centred upon one of the most complex and controversial issues to arise from the reformation: what was baptism? How should it be practised? Sue Wiseman has suggested, in the context of a broader study of metamorphosis, that such debates at a fundamental level "were exploring how and what could change the human" in early modern England.[4] Nicholas Terpstra notes that while Protestants reworked Catholic doctrines about the sacraments, clergy and faith, the rethinking of baptism by the Anabaptists reconfigured the church itself: "Baptism *replaced* circumcision. Anabaptists initiated each other into small and highly selective communities, not into a broader *Corpus Christianum*."[5] Therefore, it is necessary to attenuate our understanding of seventeenth-century English Protestantism, as the disputed "status of adult baptism as the entry point into Christian communion" reveals "unresolved tensions around the function of baptism within a reformed society". Indeed, the "return of

"Printing the Event," which analyses the published material circulating around the end of the siege of La Rochelle in 1628-29. Jouhaud, 290. Recent work by book historians has defined the relationship between print culture and the event more precisely as the "idea of language as *rhetoric, as historically situated* event." It sets out two ways in which "texts work rhetorically in the world, as events rather than discourses." The first attends to the book in history: "the circulation of meaning among specific authors, stationers, readers, book buyers, dedicatees, and others, by means of the specific rhetorical genres of early modern textual culture." The second examines the book as history: "a close attention to the book itself as a material embodiment of these rhetorical situations." Such studies "can illuminate the multifarious ways that people made meaning from the literary and nonliterary texts that confronted them in 'the world of lived history'." Brayman and Lander, "Introduction," 13-14.

[3] Attempting to recover the "thing felt" through the "thing made" privileges experience over its representation, establishing a false antithesis between the putative 'facts' of the irrecoverable event and the potential 'fiction' of the textual document(s) that record it. Szpiech's solution is to look at the "thing made" as a "stained-glass window" that "exists essentially not to be seen through but to be looked at." He thus reverses the relationship between event and text and this pushes us to consider textual accounts of past events in terms of their form, construction, symbolic function and ideological role within the local context. Szpiech, *Conversion and Narrative*, 1-19. Mary Morrissey notes that this difficulty is presented by anything incorporating performance: "The study of sermon manuscripts, as with the study of manuscripts from any performative genre, involves a consideration between the performance as an event and the textual witnesses it leaves. There is an undeniable element of uncertainty here, but no more than that encountered by students of drama or parliamentary speeches." Morrissey, "Sermon-Notes and Seventeenth-Century Manuscript Communities," 295.

[4] Wiseman, *Writing Metamorphosis in the English Renaissance*, 59.

[5] Terpstra, *Religious Refugees in the Early Modern World*, 195.

baptism to the realm of the sign" destabilised England's conception of itself as an elect nation,[6] creating a distinction between civic and religious identities and the ways in which the relationship between an individual and the nation-state was mediated. Though Baxter and Tombes deployed a complex theological discourse to debate the matter of baptism and infants' rights to church membership, the broader questions and issues that were being negotiated through this event had profound political and ecclesiological implications. Baptism was a rite of initiation into the spiritual community of the church and the way in which it was practised intimately affected the relationship between the individual and corporate groups of believers and citizens.[7]

John Tombes was the most important proponent of believer's baptism in seventeenth-century England. However, it is difficult to identify his ecclesiological position with precision, especially in the early 1650s. Tombes was one of the most intriguing "hybrids of conventional and heterodox churchmanship" galvanised by the upheavals of the 1640s; religious radicalisation was a national experience in the 1650s, not something unique to sectarians.[8] Tombes believed that the sacrament of baptism should be administered to those who could personally testify to their faith, but he did not actively embrace a separatist ecclesiology as proponents of believer's baptism usually did. It is best to consider Tombes's lifelong attempts to convince his contemporaries of the biblical basis for believer's baptism, and the consequent invalidity of infant baptism, as part of a goal he shared with other puritans to further reform the Church of England. Tombes thought it was necessary to restore baptism, as he believed it was practised in the New Testament, in order to reinvigorate the life and worship of the English church. Tombes's contemporaries had a deep respect for his learning, but were repelled by his sacramental theology. This led colleagues like Baxter to respond with a mixture of admiration and antagonism.[9] Thomas Traherne, for example, would have encountered Tombes when the latter was acting as an assistant to the Herefordshire commission in 1657, as Traherne was admitted on 30 December.[10] He was thus involved in the clerical networks that linked Tombes to

[6] Lynch, "Whatever happened to Dinah the Black?," 265.
[7] Terpstra, *Religious Refugees in the Early Modern World*, 195.
[8] Milton, "Unsettled Reformations," 81-2. While setting out the broad participation that characterised the Cromwellian Church as evidenced by the range of men selected as Triers, Ann Hughes identifies Tombes as a "moderate Baptist." Hughes, "The Cromwellian Church," 451.
[9] John Coffey has traced the gradual acceptance of Baptists by reformed Protestants in Britain and North America, noting the crucial role played by the puritan revolution in effecting this unique transition. Coffey, "From Marginal to Mainstream," 1-24. Mark Burden notes the importance of attending to the ways in which dissenting congregations described themselves in order to gain a clear sense of their self-fashioning. He highlights the danger of over-emphasising the "fluid" nature of church governance or the "'mixed' communion of gathered churches" as this can lead to the untenable conclusion that there were no real differences between them, or that such distinctions were a matter of indifference. Burden, "What Did Seventeenth-Century Dissenters Call Themselves?".
[10] Smith, "Tombes."

Baxter as well. Traherne records in his manuscript, *Commentaries of Heaven*, under the entry on "Baptism:"

> The Opinion of the Anabaptists seems the most innocent, &…yet by a strange…fate, it is the seed plot of Heresies, & the grand Nursery of Schismes & Disorders. No man is an Anabaptist long but he sucks in some other horrible Opinion soon after…I have myself conferred with Mr Tombs the great Ringleader of that Sect in this last Age, & have reason to believ he was condemned of his Conscience. For being a deep & judicious man, he could not but see, that his Opinion was utterly ruined, if the Jews were under the same Covenant with us, & therefore he held that the Jews were under a Covenant of Works, & we under a Covenant of Grace, & this he made it his Business to teach in his Sermons at this Amsterdam, his Heretical Church in Leominster in Herefordshire where having the advantage twice to meet him, I both times asked him….what use or place could be for Sacrifices in a Covenant of Works he was both times as Blank, & mute as a Fish.[11]

As Traherne's account here makes clear, the use of covenant theology as a hermeneutic for interpreting the Old and New Testaments was critical to Tombes's attempt to provide a biblical basis for the practice of believer's baptism. However, though his sacramental theology and ecclesiology created tensions with contemporaries who disagreed with the former, Tombes's intention was reform of the state church not disestablishment.

Baxter and Tombes met in London during the winter of 1644/45 and their relationship extended into the 1670s.[12] By the time of the debate in 1650, Baxter and Tombes were located in Kidderminster and Bewdley, about two miles apart from one another, and Baxter notes that he highly valued this proximity.[13] It soured somewhat when Tombes initiated a doctrinal controversy about baptism. He requested that Baxter debate the issue through a series of letters and messages delivered by friends or members of his congregation. This correspondence has affinities with Baxter's epistolary exchanges with other puritans: it oscillates between friendship, Christian fellowship, robust disputation in the pursuit of truth, and a fine-grained sense of the opportunities and challenges posed by their professional identities as clergymen.[14] Tombes, Baxter, and to some extent, Traherne, were entwined in local spiritual, professional and

[11] Thomas Traherne, *Commentaries of Heaven*, "Baptism," cited by Inge, ed. *Happiness and Holiness*, 163. See also British Library Add MS 63054 f. 194r. Cf. Stephen Marshall's description of Tombes's initial and detailed discussion of baptism in *Examen* as "a pompous dumb shew" in *A Defence of Infant Baptism*, 4.
[12] Baxter, *Plain Scripture Proof* , 210 cited by Powicke, "Richard Baxter's Relation to the Baptists and his Proposed Terms of Communion," 196.
[13] Cited by Keeble and Nuttall, *Calendar*, Vol. 1, 47.
[14] I have explored the concept of a puritan republic of letters and aspects of how Baxter and Tombes's earliest epistolary exchange might fit within this separately in Searle, "Though I am a Stranger to You by Face, yet in Neere Bonds by Faith" and "Performing Religious Nonconformity."

knowledge networks that were nourished by the exchange of manuscripts that sometimes morphed into print. Publication, in its various forms and modes, was a multimedia concept in early modern England. "Making something public" was not simply "making it accessible or putting it into circulation;" it was also "a key agent in the formation and reformation of collective and private identities." This has implications for the "social and affective landscape of the period."[15] The intersection between multimedia modes of publication and the negotiation of personal and corporate identities is central to Baxter's debate with Tombes. I will examine the texts that circulated around and constituted this event in turn focusing first on descriptions by contemporaries and a verbatim report of the debate, before looking at the letters exchanged in manuscript and repurposed in printed polemic, and concluding with an account of Baxter's dream and its interpretation.

Baxter provides a summary account of the debate in his famous memoir, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (published posthumously in 1696): it is inflected by a characteristic concern with his ill-health and a pejorative attempt to undercut Tombes's views on baptism as ineffectual and insignificant.

> So Mr. *Tombes* and I agreed to meet at his Church on *Jan.* 1. And in great Weakness thither I came, and from Nine of the Clock in the Morning till Five at Night, in a crowded Congregation, we continued our Dispute; which was all spent in manageing one Argument, from Infants right to Church-Membership to their Right to Baptism…In a Word, this Dispute satisfied all my own People and the Country that came in, and Mr. *Tombes*'s own Townsmen, except about Twenty whom he had perverted, who gathered into his Church, which never increased to above Twenty two, that I could learn.[16]

This extract provides evidence as to how Tombes balanced his radical sacramental theology with a more orthodox ecclesiology. Alongside the "Townsmen" for whom he was responsible as a parish minister, were a small "perverted" number "gathered into his Church."[17] It is also consistent with Ann Hughes's definition of the Cromwellian church as "an effective, flexible,

[15] Mullaney, *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare*, 146-7.
[16] Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, I, 96. The debate may well have been more disorderly than Baxter's autobiography indicates. Financial accounts for Bewdley record that a certain John Weaver was paid five shillings 'for mending the seats & other worke done in the Chappell at the dispute'. Burton, *A History of Bewdley*, Appendix, xxxiii. See also Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service, Ref. 498 BA 8681/236 (i), 624.
[17] Julia Smith suggests that Tombes founded a small Baptist congregation while retaining his parish role, training several members for the Baptist ministry, though he gradually retreated from a position justifying separation. Smith, "Tombes." Szpiech notes: "Conversion cannot be thought of apart from reversion; aversion from sin cannot be posited without rejecting perversion and subversion of the law….[It] is never simply the turning to one thing but also always implies a turning from another." Szpiech, *Conversion and Narrative*, 26.

and decentralized 'public profession', supported by the regime alongside its commitment to liberty of conscience for most Protestants."[18]

Baxter's textual reconstruction of the event in his memoir can be supplemented by two alternative versions: a manuscript account by John Aubrey, and a published version by Anthony Wood, who drew on material that Aubrey provided.[19] Aubrey notes that Tombes was "an admirable Disputant" and considered it requisite that one "be a good Grammarian, as well as Logician:"

> [Tombes] was soon taken notice of for his curious searching, piercing witt…and had a Sect \company/ followed him; and 'twas predicted he would doe a great deale of mischiefe to the Church of England….[H]e went into his owne countey, to Beaudley a market towne, at which time Mr Baxter, (his Antagonist) preacht at Kitterminster the next market towne; They preacht against one anothers Doctrines, and printed against each other. Mr Tombes was the Coryphaeus of the Anabaptists. both had \frequent/ great audience. they went severall miles on foot to each Doctor. once, (I thinke oftner) they disputed face to face….and the followers were like two armies: about 1500 of a party. and truly at last they fell by the eares, hurt was donne, and the civill magistrate had much adoe to quiet them.[20]

Aubrey's account suggests a far more rumbustious public exchange than Baxter's and attributes a significant degree of agency to the followers of each cleric indicating that their debate had something of the energy, violence and partisanship of a local football match. In the contextual material about Tombes's life, Aubrey associates him closely with the University of Oxford, and Wood's published account of the event highlights the presence of scholars amongst the spectators, claiming Tombes, with some ambivalence, for the university in implied contrast to Baxter. The latter was one of the most notable autodidacts in seventeenth-century England, but he always regretted that he had not attended Oxford or Cambridge:[21] "All Scholars there and

[18] Hughes, "The Cromwellian Church," 445.
[19] Parry, "Wood."
[20] Bennett, ed. *John Aubrey*, Vol. 1, 245-6. Bennett's edition has a unique and complex set of conventions for representing Aubrey's manuscript. I have simplified these in the transcription provided here. "Coryphaeus" denotes the leader of a party or sect and is drawn from the Greek term for the leader of a chorus.
[21] Baxter records in his memoir: "When I was ready for the University, my Master drew me into another way which kept me thence, where were my vehement desires. He had a Friend at *Ludlow,* Chaplain to the Council there, called Mr. *Richard Wickstead*; whose Place having allowance from the King (who maintaineth the House) for one to attend him, he told my Master that he was purposed to have a Scholar fit for the University; and having but one, would be better to him than any Tutor in the University could be: whereupon my Master perswaded me to accept the offer, and told me it would be better than the University to me: I believed him as knowing no better my self; and it suited well with my Parents minds, who were willing to have me as near to them as possible (having no Children but my self): And so I left my School-master for a supposed Tutor: But when I had tried him I found my self deceived; his business was to please the Great Ones, and seek Preferment in the World; and to that end found it necessary sometimes to give the Puritans a flirt, and call them unlearned, and speak much for Learning, being but a Superficial Scholar of himself: He never read to me, nor used any savoury Discourse of Godliness; only he loved me, and

then present, who knew the way of disputing and managing arguments, did conclude that *Tombes* got the better of *Baxter* by far".[22]

Wood's *Anthenae Oxonienes* (1692) and Baxter's *Reliquiae* (1696) have helped to establish this particular event as central to controversies about baptism in early modern England. It is rendered differently by a verbatim manuscript that purports to offer a detailed account of the content and context of what was said during the proceedings.[23] The strong dramatic dimension to the polemical encounter between Tombes and Baxter is captured by contemporary accounts of their followers acting like two armies and needing to be restrained by the civil magistrate. The manuscript account recreates it by setting out the debate in the form of a dialogue. It also suggests that the note-taker was present as an eyewitness by including occasional requests directed to the audience/congregation/spectators that they note a point one of the disputants has just made, or explicitly requiring them to exercise their own judgement in assessing the weight of arguments presented. The dialogic structure creates a sense of verisimilitude and foregrounds both the adversarial form of the debate and the important role played by the spectators. It is here that Szpiech's distinctions between the debate as an historical event that cannot be directly accessed and its representation in a "thing made," in this case a manuscript account by an eyewitness, is particularly useful. But it is important to recognise that the manuscript as a material embodiment of the rhetorical situation also acted in the world of mid-seventeenth-century England. As Joshua Rodda notes, disputation stages "a process of communication" and the arguments are of less importance than "the force they were seen to have, on an audience or an adversary."[24] Baxter and Tombes were both ordained clerics, despite the latter's unorthodox views on baptism, but the decision to stage a public debate about such a topic and the critical role which this manuscript account ascribes to the spectators evidences an important cultural shift – first initiated during the political and ecclesiastical revolution of the

allowed me *Books and Time* enough: So that as I had no considerable helps from him in my Studies, so had I no considerable hinderance." Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, Part I § 4. Similarly, Baxter responded to an epistolary query addressed by Anthony Wood in 1681 that his "faults are no disgrace to any University; for I was of none, & have little but what I had out of books, & inconsiderable helpes of Country tutors," Nuttall and Keeble, *Calendar*,Vol. 2, 225.

[22] Wood, *Athenae Oxonienes*, Vol. 2, 409-10.

[23] Dr Williams's Library, Baxter Treatises, ii.49. The precise provenance of this manuscript is unclear. The paper in which the account is wrapped has a watermark that demonstrates it is from a different source to the manuscript booklet enclosed. The wrapper is ruled with six-line staves and bears the name, Thomas Baldwin. Baldwin acted as an assistant and amanuensis for Baxter at various stages of his ministry in Kidderminster, but the signature on this page is in a different hand to Baldwin's signature on a letter written in Kidderminster in 1661, Dr Williams's Library, MS 59.v.142. The association remains suggestive, but it is impossible to draw any definitive conclusions regarding provenance from it. I am very grateful to Ms Jane Giscombe, Dr Alan Argent and Dr Tom Charlton for their expertise in identifying and comparing watermarks, paper types and signatures. The use of six-line staves for keyboard music appears to have been the norm in mid-seventeenth-century England. See Herrissone, *Musical Creativity in Restoration England*, xxv.

[24] Rodda, *Public Religious Disputation in England*, 5.

early 1640s – which demonstrated a change in attitudes towards lay people's participation in doctrinal debates and tacitly acknowledged that they were both able and required to assess and choose between different theologies of baptism..[25]

Some of those present at the debate had probably been involved in the personal conferences that preceded it, or were unsettled in their view about baptism as a consequence of the conflicting theologies provided by Baxter and Tombes, and thus had purportedly acted as instigators for the event itself. The manuscript account makes it very clear, as Traherne's own summary of his discussions with Tombes indicates, that building a case for or against infant baptism was a complex exercise in hermeneutics with profound social, cultural and emotional implications. It incorporated ecclesial governance – gathered, parochial or both, the spiritual security of children inside and outside the covenant, and the wellbeing of the local community or parish. It also involved exploring the relationship between the old and new covenants, a theory of how one should use and interpret metaphors in biblical exegesis – defining key terms such as "natural" or "engraft" for example – and the extent to which each disputant had been formally trained in the use of logic and rhetoric. This separated the autodidact Baxter from the university-educated Tombes, and seems to have created a disjunction between scholarly and popular assessments of how well each man performed in the debate.

The debate had an established history as an agreed format for settling controversy and verifying truth, or experimenting with ideas, amongst English Protestants following the Reformation.[26] However, the violence, social upheaval, and ecclesiological and educational changes precipitated by the Civil War put significant pressure on accepted mechanisms for the resolution of religious disputes and also radically extended both the range of doctrines that were considered contentious and the social status of potential disputants. Both Baxter and Tombes were acutely aware of how the education, status and eloquence of a disputant, the popularity or otherwise of a particular doctrine, and the unpredictable contingency of the debate as an event could shape the perceived outcome – the truth designed to be established – with implications for their own authority and influence as local ministers, writers and theologians.[27] These logistics were negotiated in detail in an exchange of manuscript letters before and after the debate.

[25] Bingham, "English Baptists and the Struggle for Theological Authority," 558. Bingham demonstrates how lay Baptist participation in mid-seventeenth century English religious culture helped to reduce the amount of authority centred in the ordained ministry and to create a more participatory lay culture.
[26] Capp, "The Religious Marketplace"; Hughes, "The Pulpit Guarded"; Rodda, *Public Religious Disputation in England*.
[27] References to the educational and social status of disputants in accounts of this debate could also be alluding to Baxter's role in the later Savoy conference (1661). See Cooper, "Richard Baxter and the Savoy Conference (1661)" for further detail.

Exceptionally for the Baxter correspondence archive, most of the letters that Baxter and Tombes sent survive in both manuscript and print. The extant correspondence can be categorised in a series of chronological clusters that consist primarily of several theological disputes. Between 2 September 1649 and circa November 1650 fourteen letters were exchanged (of which twelve survive in both manuscript and print) between Baxter, Tombes and their churches, concentrating on a debate – defined here as the event – about the legitimacy of infant baptism and church membership. The first chronological cluster incorporates a discussion about the most appropriate method of conducting and managing the dispute.[28] The second exchange focuses on a controversy about the nature of justification and faith, and was part of a much wider debate initiated by Baxter's idiosyncratic attempt to explicate the doctrine of justification.[29] This occurred between May and June 1651 and survives only in print. The tone here is quite different to that of the letters focusing on baptism and perhaps reflects the greater degree of importance that Baxter attributed to justification and more readiness on Tombes's part to tolerate disagreement on issues other than baptism.[30] The second epistolary exchange about baptism and church membership was sent between 3 April and 14 May 1655. The initial letters were exchanged in manuscript and then published twice in print – first by Tombes in *Anti-Paedobaptism* (1657) and again by Baxter in *More Proofs of Infants Church-membership and Baptism* (1675).[31] Tombes also wrote briefly to Baxter, in September and October 1659, to request that

[28] The letters are as follows: 2 September 1649: Tombes to Baxter **17** [iii.238; *Plain Scripture Proof* 3rd ed. 1653, 405); 3? September 1649: Baxter to Tombes **18** [iii.251; *Plain Scripture Proof* 3rd ed. 1653, 405-7]; 10 September 1649: Tombes to Baxter **20** [iii.243; *Plain Scripture Proof* 3rd ed. 1653, 407-8]; 11 September 1649: Baxter to Tombes **21** [iii.253; *Plain Scripture Proof* 3rd ed. 1653, 408-9]; 24 September 1649: Tombes to Baxter **23** [iii.247; *Plain Scripture Proof* 3rd ed. 1653, 410]; 25? September 1649: Baxter to Tombes **25** [iii.254; *Plain Scripture Proof* 3rd ed. 1653, 410-11]; 27 December 1649: Tombes to Baxter **27** [iii.245; *Plain Scripture Proof* 3rd ed. 1653, 412]; 3 January 1650: Tombes to Baxter **29** [iii.242; *Plain Scripture Proof* 3rd ed. 1653, 413]; 3 January 1650: Baxter to Tombes **30** [iii.250; *Plain Scripture Proof* 3rd ed. 1653, 413]; 3 January 1650: Tombes to Baxter **31** [iii.240; *Plain Scripture Proof* 3rd ed. 1653, 414]; 24 January 1650: Baxter to Tombes **36** [iii.249; *Plain Scripture Proof* 3rd ed. 1653, 415]; Late January 1650: Tombes to Baxter **37** [iii.246; *Plain Scripture Proof* 3rd ed. 1653, 415]; Nov? 1650: Baxter to the church at Kidderminster **51** [*Plain Scripture Proof* 1651, a1-b2]; Nov? 1650: Baxter to the church at Bewdley **52** [*Plain Scripture Proof* 1651, a1-b2]. References to volume and item number e.g. iii.238 refer to the MS reference in Baxter's Correspondence at Dr Williams's Library; numbers in bold e.g. **17** indicate the item in the *Calendar*. Nuttall and Keeble, Vol. 1, 47-54, 62.

[29] Tim Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 76-83.

[30] May? 1651: Tombes to Baxter **62** [*Of Justification* 1658, 325-30]; May/June 1651: Tombes to Baxter **63** [*Of Justification* 1658, 330]; 9 June 1651: Baxter to Tombes **66** [*Of Justification* 1658, 332-83]; 17 June 1651: Tombes to Baxter **69** [*Of Justification* 1658, 331-2]; 20 June 1651: Baxter to Tombes **70** [*Of Justification* 1658, 384-96]. Nuttall and Keeble, Vol. 1, 67, 69-70.

[31] 3 April 1655: Tombes to Baxter **231** [ii.159; Tombes, *Anti-Paedobaptism* 1657, 352; Baxter, *More Proofs of Infants Church-membership and Baptism* 1675, 5]; 3 April 1655: Baxter to Tombes **232** [ii.140; Tombes, *Anti-Paedobaptism* 1657, 353ff; Baxter, *More Proofs of Infants Church-membership and Baptism* 1675, 5-8]; 4 April 1655: Tombes to Baxter **233** [ii.141; Tombes, *Anti-Paedobaptism* 1657, 355; Baxter, *More Proofs of Infants Church-membership and Baptism* 1675, 8-9]; 14 April 1655: Baxter to Tombes **237** [ii.142; Tombes, *Anti-Paedobaptism* 1657, 355; Baxter, *More Proofs of Infants Church-membership and Baptism* 1675, 9]; 21 April 1655: Tombes to Baxter **241** [ii.147; Tombes, *Anti-Paedobaptism* 1657, 355ff; Baxter, *More Proofs of Infants Church-membership and Baptism* 1675, 10-13]; 14 May 1655: Baxter to Tombes **248** [ii.145; Tombes, *Anti-Paedobaptism* 1657, 357-448 (intercalated with Tombes's answer); Baxter, *More Proofs of Infants Church-*

he provide prefatory epistles for two of his published works in order to demonstrate their ecumenical union on matters other than baptism.[32] Finally, Tombes wrote two acerbic letters to Baxter in August 1670, which survive only in manuscript, referencing their earlier debates about baptism.[33]

These letters reveal patterns of sociability and neighbourliness between clerics and members of godly circles in Kidderminster and Bewdley. They also demonstrate how local knowledge networks formed and functioned facilitating the exchange of information, the management of disputes and attempts to resolve them. It is possible that the dialogic form of the personal manuscript letter as a genre, orientated towards closing the space between self and other, rather than the public debate, which encouraged an oppositional stance between adversaries, proved a less viable forum for continuing the dispute after the event. This may partially explain why the manuscript correspondence is incorporated into the subsequent printed polemic, which provides multiple retrospective reconstructions. As, for example, in the disingenuous framing narrative that Baxter provides in the third edition of *Plain Scripture Proof* (1653), which encourages a reading of the correspondence that supports the polemical purpose of his treatise: "*IT goes against my mind to trouble the Reader with these following Letters between Mr.* T. *and me. But his Relations have made it necessary, that it may appear, Whether all my endeavour was not to keep off, if possibly I could, from appearing against him in this Cause in writing.*"[34] N. H. Keeble has argued that Baxter did not consider published material to have a particular decorum that separated it from manuscript writings, and on multiple occasions his epistolary exchanges move in and out of print: "This intrusion of the private into the public domain was by many of Baxter's friends seen as an affront to good taste, an embarrassing and unbecoming piety."[35] Yet, Baxter was undoubtedly conscious of the ways in which manuscript material was implicated in how overlapping publics formed and functioned, and the repercussions of incorporating such material in published texts.[36] He considered it necessary to address the issue and justify his own

membership and Baptism 1675, 13-158 (with replies to Tombes's answers]. Nuttall and Keeble, Vol. 1, 170-1, 175, 177, 181.

[32] 23 September 1659: Tombes to Baxter **604** [v.48]; 18 October 1659: Tombes to Baxter **613** [v.136]; 29 October 1659: Tombes to Baxter **614** [iv.175]. Nuttall and Keeble, Vol. 1, 411, 416-7.

[33] 10 August 1670: Tombes to Baxter **813** [i.106]; 22 August 1670: Tombes to Baxter **816** [ii.242]. Nuttall and Keeble, Vol. 2, 97-99.

[34] Baxter, *Plain Scripture Proof of Infants Church Membership and Baptism* (3rd edition, 1653), 404. Baxter and Tombes's published commentary on the letters illuminates key aspects of how different registers of discourse and debate functioned within the local context.

[35] Keeble, "*Loving & Free Converse,"* 8-9.

[36] Blaine Greteman has noted a similar slippage between "public" and "private" and the "public" dimensions of scribal publication in relation to John Milton's correspondence, referencing both Bruno Latour and Harold Love. Latour is important, Greteman argues, because he emphasises the need to continually maintain social networks – in this context, through the exchange of letters – otherwise the networks cease to exist. "Latour argues that 'the connections among beings alone make time,' and I would suggest that the converse also holds true: the shared

practice, noting, for example, that Tombes was angered by how Baxter directed ten questions to him about baptism. He defends himself as follows:

> But it was in a private letter, extorted by his importunity, and published to the world by himself and not by me; who confess that this plainness was too great for me to have used to him publickly: But secret admonition disparageth him not to others.[37]

Despite the scruples he expresses, Baxter had no problem re-publishing the letter himself about nineteen years later. This demonstrates that the boundary between manuscript letters and their re-purposing in printed polemic was porous in both temporal and relational terms. Such repackaging was always done to support a specific polemical purpose and it could work both ways. The debate as an event continued to leach into and shape the manuscript correspondence decades later. In the last extant letter, sent from Salisbury on 22 August 1670, Tombes notes: "But fearing there is too much of your sceptical and unbrotherly spirit, which you shewed in the dispute at Bewdley Janu[ary] 1. 1649. in your epistle before your mocktitled booke of Baptism…I shall forbear to urge you any further to write to me, but shall pray God to give you an humbled heart…."[38] This letter demonstrates that the implications of the unsettled reformation continued to resonate powerfully after the Restoration.[39] It also reveals the tenacity of the local knowledge networks formed during the Commonwealth period, nourished by the exchange of letters, and how difficult it was to break these ties, as evidenced by Tombes's tetchy, convoluted syntax.[40]

Local networks such as those exemplified in Baxter's correspondence with Tombes were essential to the formation of larger geographical and ecumenical structures, which embodied and enacted the "public profession" characteristic of the Cromwellian church.[41] As Gary Schneider notes, letters are "sociotexts," which provide "material evidence of social connectedness," and they played a central role in constructing, regulating and interpreting the event under consideration.[42] Such exchanges rhetorically enact the "connections in a social network" that

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experience of time establishes connections among beings." Greteman, "Milton and the Early Modern Social Network," 83. Tombes's decision to cut off epistolary converse with Baxter in 1670 registers more poignantly in this context.

[37] Baxter, *More Proofs of Infants Church-Membership*, 159.

[38] Dr Williams's Library, MS 59.ii.242.

[39] Milton, "Unsettled Reformations," 63-83.

[40] Dr Williams's Library, MS 59.ii.242.

[41] Hughes, "The Cromwellian Church," 445.

[42] Network analysis is increasingly being deployed to interrogate large corpora of correspondence similar to the Baxter archive. "Network" is used here to "describe the ensemble of relations between actual historical people" not "the mathematico-geometrical entity produced by various operations from [a] dataset." Bourke, "Female Involvement, Membership, and Centrality."

"affect how people learn, form opinions, and gather news, as well as affecting other less obvious phenomena, such as the spread of disease."[43] Baxter notes, for example, "after one days Dispute with [Tombes] of *Bewdley*, my Hearers were more setled, and the course of his Infection stopt."[44] Baxter's metaphor of contagion here could be operating at several levels. As Terpstra observes, for Anabaptists:

> It was an individual's personal faith that mattered, and not any broader networks of spiritual kin. For those still shaped by earlier views of baptism, the Anabaptist refusal to baptize their infants meant that whole towns were now vulnerable to the contagion posed by these un-exorcised and unprotected children.[45]

Such networks were not limited to people. This event was constructed through an "ensemble of relations" that also included letters, books, manuscript transcriptions, printers, and physical spaces such as the chapel-of-ease at Bewdley and its damaged seats.[46]

Baxter and Tombes were acutely conscious of the interrelationships between their local clerical and pastoral networks and the development of ecclesiastical and political structures at a national level. The material embodiment of rhetorical situations like their debate about baptism acted in the world to shape community opinion and feeling. The potentially negative fallout from this was something they attempted to counteract in various ways. Tombes's request that Baxter write prefaces for his publications against papists and Quakers makes this very plain. Their correspondence demonstrates that this published epistolary exchange was an overt performance of their unity in Protestant fundamentals, designed to persuade a national audience of their ecumenical intent, despite their widely publicised debate over baptism.[47] Tombes further requests Baxter, "I pray you minde Mr [Henry] Osland at Bewdley that we do not in sermons and conferences vent such things as give occasion to keepe us at a further distance."[48] Such social networks were critical to the formation of the Worcestershire Association, a fellowship of

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[43] Newman, *Networks*, 2.
[44] Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, I, 88. Greteman poses the query: "What, in the terms that Malcolm Gladwell helped popularize, are the 'agents of infection' that lead to an epidemic so vast as to become commonplace?" Greteman, "Milton and the Early Modern Social Network," 89. Somewhat ironically, as Coffey notes, Baxter proved to be a poor prophet regarding the ultimate success of the Anabaptists as "agents of infection": "when hundreds of millions of churchgoing Protestants worship in congregations that practice believer's baptism instead of infant baptism, it is tempting to dismiss him out of hand." Coffey, "From Marginal to Mainstream," 4.
[45] Terpstra, *Religious Refugees in the Early Modern World*, 195.
[46] Network as it is used here is thus also informed by actor network theory, or a material semiotics, and "describes the enactment of materially and discursively heterogeneous relations that produce and reshuffle all kinds of actors including objects, subjects, human beings, machines, animals, 'nature', ideas, organizations, in equalities, scale and sizes, and other geographical arrangements". Law, "Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics," 141.
[47] Dr Williams's Library, MS 59.v.48
[48] Keeble and Nuttall, *Calendar*, Vol. 1, 417.

ministers that Baxter initiated and which acted as a model for the county association movement of the 1650s: "in effect creating from the ground up what national negotiations under the Protectorate could not achieve, a genuinely reformed national church".[49] Yet, as the reference to Henry Oasland suggests, the emerging proto-denominationalism that was also characteristic of the Commonwealth period, and which shaped elements of Tombes's own practice when training Baptist ministers, exerted a centrifugal force.[50] Tombes's successor, Oasland, continued to have conflicted relations with a group of Baptists who separated themselves from the parish assembly; indeed, he himself briefly flirted with the possibility of gathering a separate congregation within the broader parish. The tension between sacramental theology and ecclesiology was not resolved fully either by the Worcestershire Association, or by non-separating nonconformity following the Restoration.[51]

The final material embodiment of a rhetorical situation associated with the debate as an event considered here is Baxter's account of the dream he had the night after his eight-hour sparring match with Tombes. The manuscript recording his dream demonstrates how Baxter sought to integrate his role as an actor in the debate – a form of public theatricality[52] – with his own personal experience and doubts regarding the authenticity of infant baptism, and his desire to attribute his polemical intervention in print at least partially to divine inspiration through a dream. Despite his self-confessed hatred for the "overregarding of dreames," this one was "farre more impressive" and "affecting" than his "ordinary dreames" and provided an argument for his treatise against infant baptism.[53] However, while the dream is recorded in the manuscript of Baxter's memoir, it does not form part of the text posthumously published in 1696, an editorial decision that can be understood, alongside others, as a reflection of the radically different political context.[54]

Baxter writes:

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[49] Keeble, "The Reformed Pastor as Nonconformist." I am very grateful for the author's permission to cite this work in advance of publication.
[50] Halcomb, "Congregational Church Books and Denominational Formation in the English Revolution," passim.
[51] Gilbert, "Oasland." Transcripts of correspondence between Henry Oasland and a group of believers in Bewdley who had separated from parish church assemblies due to differences about baptism dated September and October 1652 demonstrate that this continued to be a matter of virulent dispute in Bewdley after the debate (British Library Harley MS 6866, item no. 2). The fact that Oasland himself wavered over the issue is revealed in a letter to Baxter sent in 1653 (Dr Williams's Library, MS 59.vi.118).
[52] McGavin and Walker use this term to interrogate the significant overlap between 'real' events with a strong dramatic dimension and theatrical performances: "while public theatricality more often produces explicit accounts of audience response than drama does, both forms of theatrical event may require inference and interpretation, if we are to move from the extant account to an understanding of the spectator's role," *Imagining Spectatorship*, 72.
[53] British Library, Egerton MS 2570 f. 30r.
[54] John Coffey has suggested that the "seventeenth-century editors were probably embarrassed by Baxter's nightmare; it would have made their subject look like a gullible enthusiast". Coffey, "From Marginal to Mainstream," 2.

> as I was in my chamber studying, a *Hen* & chickens would needs come in at the doore; & th*a*t I was much offended at the Chickens, as unmeet company for my chamber; & angrily stroue to driue th*e*m out; but the *Hen* fled at me & resisted me: At last having stroue long in vaine, I was so angry th*a*t I trod one or two of the chickns to death: And as soone as they were dead, they turned into the similitude of <a> most illuminated *eyes*, w*hi*ch gazed in my face: And im*m*ediately these words were spoken to me, [O *Hierusalem*, *Hierusalem*, how oft would I haue gathered thy children together, as the *Hen* gathereth her chickens under her wings, & yee would not: Behold henceforth &c: This Hen is not so tender of her Chickens, & resolved to bring th*e*m into this roome, as Christ was even of all H\i/errusalem, Infants as well as others, to gather to him into the Gospell Church; Nor will he any better be pleased with those th*a*t would driue \infants/ out: And when they are dead they are capable of being illuminated spirits, beholding the Glory of Allmighty God; as their Angells now behold the face of their heavenly father….[55]

Baxter's resistance to dreams as a mode of revelation is probably a reaction to the ways they had been used by radicals during the Civil War, which represented not only a "claim to godly authority," but also "a textual and theological claim."[56] However, dream reports also confront contemporary interpreters with a methodological challenge: the imperative to consider them as historical documents is counterbalanced by the difficulties that such material poses to historical understanding.[57] Even though the dream is "experienced by a specific person" it is "simultaneously individual and cultural" because practices of interpretation are a "social performance:" the interaction between narrator and reader thus becomes a "complex psychodynamic communicative event."[58] Baxter's dream exposes multiple permeable boundaries: between waking and sleeping, radical theology and the orthodox mainstream, genres and modes of consciousness, divine inspiration and theological polemic. Such accounts often "inspire literary criticism of a psychoanalytic nature," but "this rhetoric" needs to be "assigned its historical and political significance."[59] John Coffey has demonstrated how important the fluidity and fortuitous confluence of political power and religious radicalism was to the acceptance of Baptists as part of the reformed Protestant mainstream in England, a local aberration that

[55] British Library, Egerton MS 2570 f. 30r. I am indebted to Dr Tom Charlton for the reference and transcription.
[56] "[T]he influence of Civil War dreams can also be seen in the nonconformist-influenced thought on dream and melancholy" later during the Restoration. Wiseman, "Introduction," 10. The line between inspiration and fraud when dealing with dreams and preaching was a fine one. This is particularly evident in the case of Richard Haydock, the 'sleeping' preacher, whose claim to preach cogent sermons whilst sleeping was exposed by James I. See Levin, *Dreaming the Renaissance,* 13-19. Levin discusses Margaret Baxter's dreams as well, but not Baxter's.
[57] Plane and Tuttle, "Introduction," 7.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Clarke, "Beyond Microhistory," 221.

distinguished them from historical developments in Scotland and continental Europe.[60] Baxter's own experience as both a debater and dreamer here exemplifies Anthony Milton's claim that radicalisation affected all English men and women during the 1650s, not just sectarians or extremists;[61] this was something Baxter and his editors sought to expunge from his memoir.

Baxter's dream was generated directly by the event that forms the focus of this case study and it also created an interpretation of that event that was materially embodied both in the manuscript of his memoir and, to some extent, in his published polemical exchange with Tombes shortly after the debate. Indeed, the dream itself can be understood as a product of Baxter's emotional and exegetical engagement with a biblical text that was central to his debate with Tombes and to his resistance to recognising the innovation of believer's baptism as a restoration of New Testament church practice: 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!'[62] The vivid images of trampled chickens and illuminated eyes indicate both the horror characteristic of Baxter's dreamscape, and the urgency of ensuring that infants were not denied what Baxter understood as their biblical right to communion with God figured powerfully here as both mother hen and heavenly father. Underlying the biblical imagery deployed and experienced emotively in Baxter's rhetorical enactment of his dream as an event is the same covenant theology that Traherne identified as the basis of his disagreement with Tombes: the need to recognise continuities between God's covenant with the Jews, under the Old Testament, and his covenant with the church, established in the New Testament. If Traherne's account is to be trusted, the theological query he posed to Tombes on both occasions left the latter "as Blank, & mute as a Fish;"[63] the outcome of Tombes's debate with Baxter – despite Baxter's claim that most of the auditors were persuaded by his arguments – was very different, as the continued generation of polemical texts and correspondence into the 1670s makes plain.

Baxter's debate with Tombes about baptism and an infant's right to church membership has been defined here as an event, which can be located precisely in space and time. As Szpiech notes, the experiential and affective aspects of this historical event can only be accessed through its textual representation in things made. These texts are understood to work rhetorically in the world as events contributing to the circulation of meaning in a community context and as material embodiments of rhetorical situations associated with the debate as an historical event.

[60] Coffey, "From Marginal to Mainstream," passim.
[61] Milton, "Unsettled Reformations," 81-2.
[62] Matthew 23: 37, King James Version
[63] Thomas Traherne cited by Inge, ed. *Happiness and Holiness*, 163.

The texts are placed within the local knowledge networks that also to some extent created and underwrote the historical event and its textual representations. These local networks were themselves broad and complex and helped to form and shape Cromwellian church polity at a national level. Focusing on texts in a variety of genres – letters, a debate transcript, a dream account, auto/biographical narrations – as rhetorical enactments embodied in material texts that work in the world as events helps to foreground the intersections between performance, epistolarity and community that were integral to the complex history of baptism and theological debate in England during the 1650s. It requires the interrelationships between concepts and praxis to be articulated clearly allowing a historical and literary interpretation of the event that is more attentive to the multiple modes through which it was enacted and represented. Noah Millstone has suggested that vague language about the public sphere needs to be replaced with a more "robust account of how texts and information spread between social groups." He exemplifies this through a focus on practice, which incorporates "technique, material conditions, and strategy," and monitors transformations in the concept of political awareness as they unfold, by "tracking the efforts of early modern persons to perceive, interpret, and act in what they deem the political field."[64] This essay offers a complementary method. By considering a set of texts, in a reciprocally generative relationship with an historical event, as material embodiments that work rhetorically in the world, it exposes the interstices between concepts and praxis, the development of innovative doctrines – such as believer's baptism – and the media through which this process occurred. It demonstrates the ways in which arguments crossed media boundaries (oral, print and manuscript) and the integration of social and religious networks in processes of knowledge exchange thus providing a more robust account of how baptism, church polity, and their associated practices were redefined in Commonwealth England.

[64] Millstone, *Manuscript Circulation and the Invention of Politics in Early Stuart England*, 12-16.

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