

An Excerpt from:

“Kinghorn of Norwich”

A review article of *The Life and Works of Joseph Kinghorn*,
compiled and ed. Terry Wolever
(Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 1995, 2005, and 2010), 3 vols.

One of the most famous portraits of Baptist luminaries of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries depicts fifteen of them standing behind or seated in front of a table with Robert Hall, Jr. (1764–1831) looming large in the front of the early Victorian picture. Hall is standing in a posture that surely bespeaks the preacher with a Bible in his right hand. And if the Baptists of that era were about anything it was preaching. As a means of grace, it was second to none as a way of communicating God’s will and presence. All of the men but one (John Foster the essayist) in the picture were preachers—men such as Andrew Fuller and Samuel Pearce; why then highlight Hall in this regard? It seems to reveal the conviction that, for many Baptists, Hall represented the cream of preaching in their communities. Indeed, for many of that era, Hall was the greatest of a great generation of preachers. Now, it is fascinating to observe that one of Hall’s key theological opponents on certain areas of Baptist thinking is also in the picture: seated in front of the table is Joseph Kinghorn (1766–1832) of Norwich. Today, Kinghorn is all but forgotten, but his own day obviously regarded him as an important figure on the Baptist landscape—hence his place in this portrait.

Thankfully, we now have more than this oft-reproduced portrait to understand the role that Kinghorn of Norwich played in the Baptist world of his day. These three volumes, skillfully edited by the independent Baptist historian Terry Wolever, contain the only major biography of Kinghorn, that by Martin Hood Wilkin, the son of a close friend (*Joseph Kinghorn of Norwich: A Memoir* [1855], long out of print, forms the bulk of volume 1), the majority of Kinghorn’s published works (sermons, tracts, book reviews, and assorted letters in volumes 2 and 3), and two funeral sermons preached at the time of his death (volume 1). His major defences of closed communion—the key area where he found himself in opposition to the open communionist Robert Hall—do not appear in these volumes, but are to be published separately in two future volumes.

Kinghorn grew up in the home of a Calvinistic Baptist pastor, David Kinghorn (d.1822), but unlike his father, with whom he had a very close friendship, Joseph had the benefit of a formal theological education at Bristol Baptist Academy from 1784 to 1787. It was at Bristol that he first met Robert Hall, who was his tutor and later theological opponent. Nearly two years after graduation, he was called to be the pastor of St Mary's Baptist Church in Norwich: he was but twenty-three. The rest of his ministry would be intertwined with this church and this city.

When Caleb Evans, the principal of the Bristol Academy, wrote a letter of recommendation for Kinghorn to the leadership at Norwich, he underlined the fact that "he is a sound scholar, an able, though not what may be called a brilliant preacher." Evans also observed: "I know him to be a young man of sterling worth and piety; and I have no doubt but he will be found to increase, wherever he goes, in graces, and gifts, and real usefulness" (1:137). Evans could not have been more prescient. Kinghorn's forty-three years at St Mary's were of great blessing to this church. Alexander Gordon, who wrote a dictionary piece on Kinghorn, noted that he became "famed for the unction of his preaching, and his power of apt illustration."

The Particular Baptist denomination in England as a whole also appreciated his ministry. There would have been few Particular Baptists in his day that had as firm a grasp of Greek, Hebrew and rabbinic studies as Kinghorn did, though he confessed that "learning languages is dry work" (a remark he made with regard to learning Syriac—1:260). Not surprisingly, he was twice asked to head up a Baptist seminary: first, in 1804 with regard to Horton College in Yorkshire (1:301–311), and then, six years later, with regard to the Baptist Academy at Stepney, which later became Regent's Park College (1:328–330 and 3:339–374). Although Kinghorn was deeply convinced of the necessity of formal theological education (see his sermons to ministerial students in 2:349–391 and 3:13–40), he also had a very clear recognition of his call to the pastorate of St. Mary's and hence refused to leave Norwich.

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Each of the various pieces in these three volumes is carefully introduced by the editor, who has also provided extensive person, subject, and church indices to all three volumes (3:481–590). The third volume also contains two portraits of Kinghorn (3:8–12), one of

which is a fine reproduction of the color portrait used for the picture mentioned at the outset of this review.

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