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1987 Congregational Studies Conference Papers

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Bryan Jones,
and
Michael Plant

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The papers are printed in the order in which they were given at the Conference; as usual each contributor is entirely responsible for the views expressed in his paper.

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Foreword

The following papers were delivered at the Congregational Studies Conference held at Westminster Chapel, London, on 15 March 1997.

'No history,' wrote JC Ryle, 'ought to receive so much attention as the past and future history of the church of Christ. The rise and fall of worldly empires are events of comparatively small importance in the sight of God.'

The papers by Philip Swann and Noel Gibbard both underline the effectiveness of the Bible in advancing the work of God. At Argyll Street, Bath, William Jay, for 63 years, faithfully preached the Word of God which resulted in remarkable growth. His biblical ministry extended far beyond Bath and resulted in Gospel advancement worldwide. The same was true of the work in Madagascar. At great cost the Scriptures were translated into Malagasy, and those same Scriptures, in times of great persecution, enabled the believers to show great courage, patience and wisdom and remain faithful to their Saviour. The paper by Robert Pickles again shows that where the Scriptures are honoured and preached, the Gospel advances, and where they are neglected the work goes into decline.

Surely these are lessons we need to heed in our own day.

Derek Swann
Cardiff

John Cotton's Doctrine of the Church

Digby L. James

At this conference two years ago the Rev. Peter Golding of Hayes Town Chapel gave a paper on John Owen on the mortification of sin. He said that his was the first paper to be given by that great Congregationalist and recommended that future study conferences should have more papers on the theology of John Owen, especially his theology of the church. In discussing this with the Chairman some weeks later I pointed out that John Owen was a presbyterian until he read John Cotton's book *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*. His explanation of the change in his thinking can be read in his *A Vindication of the Treatise on Schism* in volume 13 of his works, page 223. When asked to give a paper at this conference it was therefore almost inevitable that I should choose to examine John Cotton's view of the church which was to influence John Owen and the other Independents among the Puritans and to give us the word Congregational. It is, perhaps, also inevitable that in giving this paper someone may detect some error due to lack of research on my part. Please correct me in the discussion afterwards and be prepared to give a paper on it yourself!

Since most people probably asked themselves 'John Who?' when they heard the title of this paper it will be well if I begin with a brief biography of John Cotton. A slightly expanded version can be found in the Autumn 1984 *Evangelical Library Bulletin*. Anyone wishing to learn more about John Cotton should refer to *The Career of John Cotton* by Larzer Ziff (which is available from Dr Williams' Library) and *John Cotton* by Emerson (which, if anyone finds it please let me know).

The Life of John Cotton

John Cotton was born in December 1584 in Derby, the son of a lawyer. After attending Derby Grammar School he went up to Cambridge in 1597, at the age of thirteen, to Trinity College to study for the degree of batchelor of divinity. On receiving his BA in 1603 he was forced out of Trinity College for lack of fellowship money and moved over to the Puritan Emmanuel College where he studied further for his MA in 1606, and his ordination in 1610.

Even though he had long been a man of Puritan principles, it was not until 1612 that he was converted. He had often heard William Perkins preach, but did not like what he heard. He was secretly glad when he heard the bell toll for Perkins funeral. However, God used the preaching of Richard Sibbes, first to

bring Cotton to see his own sinfulness and helplessness, and then to know joy and peace in believing.

Up to the time of his conversion, Cotton's reputation in the university had been advancing by leaps and bounds, particularly as a preacher. However, this was not true preaching. Cotton's preaching was an art form more designed to tickle the ears of the hearers and elevate the preacher than to glorify God and press home upon the consciences of the hearers God's demands upon them. For example, it was said of the sermon Cotton preached at the funeral of Robert Some, a rigid Calvinist who had been Master of Peterhouse, that 'it was so accurately performed in respect of Invention, Elegancy, Purity of Style, Ornaments of Rhetoric, Elocution, and Oratorious beauty of the whole, as that he was henceforth looked on as another Xenophon, or Musa Attica throughout the University'. After his conversion, this all changed. He began preaching in a plain style aiming at the saving of souls. Those who had before loved to listen to him hated it, and his popularity began to wane. Cotton would have been very cast down if it were not for the fact that John Preston was converted through the first sermon that Cotton preached after his conversion.

In 1612 Cotton received a call from the aldermen of Boston to become the vicar of St Botolph's Church (commonly known as Boston Stump) in the town. This church still remembers Cotton and has a side chapel dedicated to his name where an eternal flame burns and the reserved sacrament is kept. Cotton accepted the invitation and was to spend twenty years there. During this time, his views on the nature of the church matured and he began to hold separate meetings for believers for fellowship and communion apart from the public services. This was but one of many aspects of his nonconformity.

It appears at first amazing that he got away with it for so long, but being in an undermanned diocese full of nonconformists, the bishop dare not insist overmuch on conformity otherwise he would have virtually no clergy. Cotton also had powerful admirers who promised to support him if the authorities threatened. Thus he was able to survive even an outburst of iconoclasm in Boston, which may be considered to have sprung from an overenthusiastic application of his preaching. When, however, he was called to appear before the High Commission and William Laud, his powerful friends were powerless and he had to fly for safety. He was just recovering from malaria which had also killed his wife. On advice from John Dod, he fled the country in 1633, with his second wife, and sailed to New England in a ship called the Griffin. During the voyage his first son was born who was named, appropriately, Seaborn.

Shortly after arriving in New Boston, Cotton and his wife were received into the church, and a few weeks later Cotton was appointed an elder and the teacher of the congregation. His reputation had preceded him and people flocked to hear him. In his first few years in Boston, there appears to have been a revival under his ministry, large numbers being admitted to the church. In 1636, a major controversy arose, now known as the Antinomian Controversy, which threatened to divide the whole of Massachusetts colony. A group had taken aspects of Cotton's teaching on conversion and assurance and distorted it and were spreading it around. Cotton taught that at conversion a person received the direct witness of the Spirit in their souls. It was this that assured them that they were Christians in the first instance. To initially look to their sanctification would lead to despair. Once a person had received the witness of the Spirit then they could look to their sanctification as a secondary evidence of the work of grace in their hearts. Ann Hutchinson and her group were teaching that sanctification counted for nothing with regard to assurance and that people should only look for the direct witness of the Spirit. Anything else was held to be legalism. A synod of all the ministers was called to settle the matter with the result that Cotton was cleared of any responsibility and the 'antinomians' exiled from the colony.

When things had settled down again, Cotton began to write numerous works in defence of New England church polity, a number being responses to the attacks of presbyterians in England. He was invited to attend the Westminster Assembly, but declined on the grounds that, as most of those present would be presbyterians, it would be pointless making a round trip of 6,000 miles merely to agree with five men.

He died in Boston in 1652. His last words were reputed to be in response to his colleague John Wilson's prayer that God would lift up the light of his countenance upon the dying man and shed love in his soul. They were 'He hath done it already brother'.

The Doctrine of the Church

In seeking to present the teaching of most of the Puritans to a modern audience difficulties are encountered over language and style. The Puritans loved their points, sub-points, sub-sub-points etc., which can get very involved. I ask the indulgence of the Conference if I have failed in my attempt to translate Cotton for a modern audience.

John Cotton is best remembered for his writings on the nature of the church and in defence of the 'New England Way'. He was a loyal Anglican and abhorred separatism. In Boston he had served as vicar to all those who lived in the parish, although he also began separate meetings for those who had a clear

profession of faith. Cotton had already rejected most of the ceremonies insisted upon by the authorities on the basis that a form of reverence that is not appointed is not sanctioned (when defending his position before the bishop elect of Salisbury, he said 'a form of reverence that is not appointed is not sanctioned. Genuflection in receipt of the Eucharist is an unappointed form of reverence. Therefore it is not sanctioned.'). However, while holding such views, he had not at that time come to the clear views on the church for which he would later become famous.

Upon arrival in Boston, New England, Cotton found himself in a totally different ecclesiastical environment. There were no diocesan bishops over the clergy and the government of the young colony was Puritan minded and sympathetic towards reformation. He also found a degree of fellowship between the church at Salem, supposedly non-conformist Anglican, and the Separatist church at New Plymouth. Indeed, so strong was the latter link that Salem was almost becoming Separatist, especially when Roger Williams became an elder of the church. Williams believed in the purity of the church and that it should be composed only of the elect. He therefore argued in favour of breaking all ties with the corrupt Church of England.

Some of these things constituted problems for Cotton, especially as he was a loyal member of the Church of England, albeit a non-conformist, and he believed separatism to be schism. The extent to which Cotton was still an Anglican at this stage can be seen in the problem he had over the refusal of the New England churches to admit into membership new settlers until they had been admitted into a church covenant whereas in England all were admitted.

Though some of these things were problems for him on his arrival, further study and observation led him to change his mind, to such an extent that when, in 1636, while preaching before the church at Salem, he announced to them his change of opinion.

> At the first coming over of some of our honoured magistrates, it so fell out that they did arrive at this congregation, the sacrament being near to be administered, and a child being born to one of them; they themselves could neither be admitted to the Lord's Table, nor their children to baptism: When I myself heard of this, I wrote unto the pastor of this congregation doubting of the lawfulness of that practice; thinking then, that the faithful and godly men coming where the seals were to be dispensed, and having right unto the covenant, had right also to the seals thereof, and so that their children had right unto the former seal of baptism; something I wrote to that purpose, as I conceived, then requisite. It pleased God that he sent me a large and loving answer; but through the extremity of sickness then upon me, I could not read it; and afterwards being shuffled among other papers, I could never find it to

> this very day: but what might have been for instruction to me from his letters, the Lord hath since shewed unto me by a diligent search of the Scriptures.

He then proceeds to give three reasons for his change of mind, and then commences the sermon proper. The thrust of the sermon is that while he has come to their view of the church, he urges them to take no further steps down the road to separation from the Church of England.

It can thus be seen that Cotton was not the originator of the New England church polity. His role was that of defender and codifier. His reputation as a theologian was such that many people in New England believed that God would not allow Mr Cotton to err!

Cotton stated his position on the church most clearly in his book entitled *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* published in 1644. Anyone wanting to get to grips with Cotton's teaching on the church must get to grips with this book. It was reprinted in 1968 and is bound with Cotton's *Sermon at Salem* and *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*. It is available from the Evangelical Library. Do not be put off reading *The Keys* by the preface which was written by Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye. By modern standards their English is appalling. I would only recommend reading it to the most extreme insomniac. One of the more lucid passages in their preface to Cotton's book says;

> As to ourselves, we are yet, neither afraid, nor ashamed to make profession (in the midst of all the high waves on both sides dashing on us) that the substance of this brief extract from the author's larger discourse, is that very middle way (which in our Apology we did in the general intimate and intend) between that which is called Brownism, and the presbyterial government, as it is practised; whereof the one doth in effect put the chief (if not the whole) of the rule and government into the hands of the people, and drowns the elders' votes (who are but few) in the major part of theirs: and the other, taking the chief and principal parts of that rule (which we conceive is the due of each congregation, the elders and brethren) into this jurisdiction of a common presbytery of several congregations, doth thereby in like manner swallow up, not only the interests of the people, but even the vote of the elders of that congregation concerned in the major part thereof.
>
> [The Apology referred to is *An Apologetical Narration* written to Parliament by the so-called Five Dissenting Brethren (Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Jeremiah Burroughs, Sidrach Simpson and William Bridge) concerning the presbyterian bias in the Westminster Assembly.]

Cotton's book is a practical exposition of the words spoken by the Lord Jesus Christ to Peter in Matthew 16:19;

> To thee I will give the keys of the kingdom of Heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth, shall be bound in Heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, shall be loosed in Heaven.

In the seven chapters of the book he explains the meaning of the verse and its application to church polity. I will attempt to give a brief summary of each chapter with an explanation in modern English.

1 'What the keys of the kingdom of heaven be, and what is their power'

This chapter is concerned with basic definitions of terms. The keys are spiritual power and authority exercised in the ordinances appointed by Christ (which are the preaching of the word, the sacraments and censure). They do not relate to civil power. The power of binding and loosing has to do with admission and excommunication from the church. Cotton says that the keys were given to Peter and that other Scriptures make it clear that they were also given to the other apostles, to elders and to all church members in differing degrees.

2 'Of the distribution of the keys, and their power, or of the several sorts thereof'

The common view of the day (that there is a key of knowledge and a key of power, the latter being a key of either order or jurisdiction) is shown to be defective for four reasons:

1. none of the keys can be left without power;
2. an integral part of the keys is the key of church liberty;
3. the key of order should not be divided from the key of jurisdiction;
4. that order is appropriated by church officers only and not the whole church.

Cotton identifies several keys:

1. the key of faith or knowledge by which believers enter into the kingdom of heaven;
2. the key of order which is subdivided into the key of power or interest and the key of authority or rule. The key of power relates to the orderly manner of life of believers in the church and of the congregations right to choose its own minister and dismiss him if he proves to be a wolf in sheep's clothing. The key of authority relates to the authority of the elders in preaching the law (binding), preaching the Gospel (loosing), the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper and, together with the congregation, the excommunication and restoration of those who fall into sin.

3 'Of the subject of the power of the keys, to whom they are committed: and first of the key of knowledge, and order'

This is the briefest of all the chapters. In it Cotton says that the key of knowledge belongs to the faithful, the converted, whether they are members of

a church or not. The key of order belongs to all believers in a church, though elders are of a superior order to other believers.

4 'Of the subject to whom the key of church privilege, power, or liberty is given'

This key is given to the brethren of the church and to the elders. Power is shared between the congregation and elders in the same way as it is shared between a judge and jury. The liberties are many and great. For example,

1. the power to choose their own officers;
2. the privilege or liberty to send forth one or more of their elders, as the public service of Christ and of the church may require;
3. the power and liberty of raising objections to the admission of persons to membership;
4. the power and privilege to remonstrate with brethren in cases of private scandal;
5. the liberty to refer serious cases of dissension to a synod for resolution;
6. the power to withdraw communion from those excommunicated;
7. the liberty of communion with other churches on various aspects of communion, such as participation in the services of other churches, by the recommendation of those moving to a new area, by consultation over persons or situations, by formal consultations in synods, by mutual support in material things, by admonition when scandals arise and by working together for the propagation and multiplication of churches.

5 'Of the subject to whom the key of authority is committed'

The key of authority or rule, is committed to the elders of the church. In their rule of the church they are to act as the servants of the congregation, not lords. There are many special acts of this rule, such as:

1. the elders who labour in the word and doctrine are to chiefly attend to the preaching of the word and also to administer the sacraments or seals;
2. they have power, when necessary, to call the church together;
3. the examination of new members;
4. the ordination of elders and deacons who have been chosen by the church;
5. the authority to ask people to speak or be quiet in church assembly;
6. to prepare matters beforehand for presentation to the church for consideration;
7. the authority to pronounce judgement and give sentence in handling an offence in the church;
8. the power to dismiss the church with a blessing in the name of the Lord Jesus;

9. to charge people in private to work hard and not live scandalously in any way;
10. they have power in synods, discussed in the next chapter;
11. the power to withdraw with the believers from a professing church which blasphemes Christ and rejects the truth when there is no help, or hope of help, from a synod.

6 'Of the power and authority given to synods'

According to Cotton, there are three causes given in Scripture for convening a synod.

1. when a church wants greater light upon a subject or peace on a contentious matter it may seek the counsel and help of other churches;
2. when any church, through corruption in doctrine and practice which cannot be healed by its own members, lies under scandal, and others seek to help out of brotherly concern; and
3. if the state of all the churches in a country becomes corrupted, the meeting of those churches who recognise the problem can obtain advise and counsel from one another as to how a general reformation may be brought about.

Synods being justifiable, what power do they have?

1. they have power not merely to advise, but also to admonish, and to command and enjoin things to be believed and done. If the offenders or offending churches persists, they have the power to withdraw communion from them;
2. all brethren present at a synod have the right to participate in debate and discussion, but the authority of any decrees promulgated comes only from the elders present;
3. synods have no power to insist upon things which both in their nature and use are indifferent. They have no power to ordain ministers or excommunicate. Synods in and of themselves can only advise, the sovereignty of individual churches is not over-ridden.

7 'Touching the first subject of all the forementioned power of the keys. And an explanation of Independency'

Christ is the head of his church, the first proper subject of the sovereign power of the keys. Therefore,

1. all legislative power in the church is in him, and not from him derived to any other;
2. from this it follows that only he can erect and ordain the true constitution of a church;

3. it is from the same sovereign power that all of the offices or ministries in the church are ordained by him;
4. from this sovereign power all gifts that are necessary to discharge any office by the officers or any duty by the members are from him;
5. from this sovereign power all the spiritual power and efficacy and blessing in the administration of these gifts in these offices and places, for the gathering and edifying and perfecting of all the churches and of all the saints in them is from him.

Cotton says that all these points are undisputed among Protestants, and goes on to state four propositions concerning ministerial power:

1. Church officers and all their spiritual gifts and powers which Christ has given them are to be primarily concerned with the particular church or congregation of saints in which they serve.
2. The apostles of Christ were the first subject of apostolic power.
3. When the church walks together in truth and peace, the brethren of the church are free from the authority of any other church or of any synod in their election of elders. The elders are free from the authority of any other elders or of churches or of synods in their rule over their church. Together the brethren and the elders of a church have all the power necessary to be exercised within the church whether in the election of church officers or in the censure of offenders within the body.
4. In case a particular church be disturbed with error or scandal, and the error or scandal is maintained by a faction among them. Now a synod of churches, or of their messengers, is the first subject of that power and authority, whereby error is judicially convinced and condemned, the truth searched out and determined, and the way of truth and peace declared and imposed upon the churches. Put more simply, each individual church has within it all it needs to be a fully functioning church of Jesus Christ without reference to any other church. Should problems arise, the elders of such a church can call upon a synod for help and guidance which is composed of representatives of other churches in the area.

This leads, finally, to five corollaries. These are:

1. The church is not independent of Christ, but is dependent upon Him for all church power.
2. The first subject of the ministerial power of the keys, although it derives no spiritual authority from the state, it is subject to the state in matters which concern the civil peace. Cotton defines such matters as the things of this life: property, tributes, customs etc., the establishment of pure religion in doctrine worship and government (though not enforcing attendance, membership etc.), advancing the public good by proclaiming

a fast. The church is to suffer rather than take the sword. Should the magistrate be a Christian he is subject to the church concerning spiritual matters.

3. A church of a particular congregation, consisting of elders and brethren, and walking in the truth and peace of the Gospel, is independent of any other church or synod for the exercise of the power of any of the keys.
4. A church fallen into any offence (whether it be the whole church or a strong party in it) is not independent in the exercise of church power, but is subject both to the administration of any other church, and to the determination and judicial sentence of a synod for direction into a way of truth and peace.
5. Though a church of a particular congregation, consisting of elders and brethren, and walking in the truth and peace of the Gospel, is the first subject of all church power needed to be exercised within itself and consequently be independent of any other church or synod, it would be wise to consult with other independent churches concerning matters which are difficult and of common concern such as the election and ordination of elders, the excommunication of an elder or other prominent person and the transfer of an elder from one church to another.

To this brief summary of Cotton's book, the following brief comments need to be added. The first is that Cotton believed that all this could be accommodated within the framework of the national Church of England, of which he always maintained he was a loyal member. Thus Cotton expected to have reasonable uniformity and unity among all the churches within a state.

Secondly, he did not believe in the separation of church and state as it is understood and practised in America today. He believed in a theocracy where church and state moved along parallel lines but did not meddle in the others affairs. He approved of the banishment of Anne Hutchinson and her followers and of Roger Williams because of what Cotton believed to be the seditious nature of their beliefs. Cotton was very far from accepting Roger Williams' teaching concerning liberty of conscience and wrote forcefully against it, justifying the right of a godly commonwealth to persecute those who did not conform to the truth. Williams argued that a good society was not of this world and so men should therefore organise the best society possible. This best society was one in which men had equal political power in spite of their differing religious views, whatever they may be. Cotton responded by arguing that if someone is in error he should be instructed to correct his error. If he then persists in his error he is to be punished for sinning against his conscience, which is different from persecution.

Finally, Cotton's *Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* was widely read in England, and hated by most presbyterians as it was the most influential book concerning congregational church government. Robert Baylie wrote in his *Dissuasive from the Errors of the Time* (published in 1645) against it, and Daniel Cawdrey also sought to answer it anonymously in his *Vindiciae Clavium* (also published in 1645). These attacks elicited a lengthy rejoinder from Cotton entitled *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared* (published in 1648). In it he answers all of the objections levelled against his teaching by Baylie and Cawdrey. One of his most significant replies is to the charge that Independency is halfway (if not the whole way) to Separatism;

> Nor is Independency a fit name for the way of our churches… Wherefore, if there must needs be some note of difference to decipher our estate, and to distinguish our way from a national church way, I know none fitter than to denominate theirs [that is the presbyterians] Classical, and ours Congregational.

To my knowledge, this is the first time that the word congregational is applied to a system of church government.

We now move briefly to consider Cotton's influence down the years.

The Westminster Confession

The Westminster Confession of Faith ignored or rejected Cotton's teaching, presbyterian church polity being the view held forth. This is not surprising since it appears that all of the members of the Westminster Assembly were presbyterians with the exception of the five Dissenting Brethren. However, Cotton's books were read and had considerable influence. The presbyterian John Owen became the independent John Owen as a result of reading Cotton, as already mentioned. A not inconsiderable 'scalp'!

The Cambridge Platform

In 1646 the General Court of Massachusetts Colony called a synod at Cambridge to resolve several ecclesiastical issues. The synod did not actually meet until 1648 because of an infection prevalent in Cambridge. Three ministers were asked to draw up a model of church government. The one prepared by Richard Mather was accepted and the preface to it was written by John Cotton. In it he seeks to answer presbyterian objections, such as the charge that the Congregationalists gathered churches out of churches, and that they had no means of dealing with those outside the church. He speaks of holding to the same fundamental doctrines as the English presbyterians as expressed in the Westminster Confession though differing on points of church order and discipline. He explicitly mentions chapters 25 (Of the Church), 30 (Of Church Censures) and 31 (Of Synods and Councils). The Platform was

based closely on Cotton's teachings. It introduced a further teaching which had been standard practice for some time in all the New England churches, the practice of admitting into the churches only those who could relate their passage from death to life. Applicants for church membership were expected to be able to relate their experience of conviction of sin, of turning to Christ, of receiving the Spirit of adoption and of their resulting change of life (This begins to deal with Cotton's doctrine of conversion which is another subject which I hope to study soon and is too big to deal with here). This was equally applicable to baptised children when grown up and those transferring from other churches. It was because so few baptised children were later converted and became full church members (and consequently citizens) that the Halfway Covenant was introduced some years later which allowed partial membership to those who had been baptised and not converted. This was a disastrous move for the colonies, but is another subject.

The Cambridge Platform was adopted by the Massachusetts General Court in 1651 and remained the legally recognised doctrinal standard on church matters until 1780. It was very influential even after that.

The Savoy Declaration

Via Goodwin, Owen and others, Cotton's view was to find expression in England in the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order in 1658. This became the doctrinal standard of the Congregational/Independents in England and is still in use today. It was not as influential as the Cambridge Platform mainly because of the political changes within England which forced both presbyterians and congregationalists out of the Church of England in 1662. It was republished in 1971 with a foreword by the Chairman of this Conference, and has been reprinted again by an Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches in its small book entitled *Evangelical and Congregational*.

Cotton's Abiding Influence

The extent of Cotton's continued influence can be seen in the spread of Congregational churches all over the world. The sad thing is that most of these have been savaged by the blight of liberalism, so much so that many abandoned all the principles of congregationalism and joined the United Reformed Church. Few, if any, would hold to the totality of Cotton's church polity. Most now reject his belief in a theocracy and his denial of freedom of conscience within it. But the bulk of his teaching, while not accepted by the majority of Puritans, is now accepted by the majority of evangelical non-conformist churches in England and Wales, the basis of church government of most of them being John Cotton's congregationalism.

Application

By way of application, in closing, we may ask ourselves some basic questions. Assuming the bulk of Cotton's doctrine of the church to be Biblical (a matter to be decided on the basis of Scripture alone) to what extent do our churches follow his congregational pattern? Are our churches truly congregational and therefore have within them all that is necessary for the full functioning of a church of Jesus Christ? Or do we feel the need for denominational links or for modern-day apostles to lead us? How do we go about calling a minister when we are in need? When calling a minister from another church do we consult his church? How would we appoint elders? Do we have elders (plural) who rule the church as its servants and include at least one elder who labours in the Word and doctrine? How isolationist do we tend to be? Does the thought of synods fill us with fears of incipient presbyterianism? What of the requirement of members of churches relating their spiritual experience before admittance to a church, even if they have been brought up in that church?

It would be a tragedy if we were to leave this place today without giving some thought to the practical application of these things to the lives of our churches that Jesus Christ might be the better glorified in them and sinners brought in to hear his voice and repent and be added to our number.

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The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared, 1648)
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Cotton Mather, *Great Works of Christ in America* (Banner of Truth)
Edmund Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea*
The Westminster Confession of Faith (Free Presbyterian Publications)
Iain Murray, ed., *The Cambridge Platform* in *Reformation in the Church* (Banner of Truth)
Evangelical and Congregational (An Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches)

The author of this paper is working on reprinting the complete works of John Cotton. Enquiries should be addressed to Quinta Press, Meadow View, Weston

Rhyn, Oswestry, Shropshire, SY10 7RN. The following are downloadable from www.quintapress.com/PDF_Books.html:

A.W. M'Clure, *The Life of John Cotton*
John Norton, *Memoir of the Life of John Cotton*
John Cotton, *God's Promise to his Plantation*
John Cotton, *The Way of Life*
John Cotton, *A Practical Commentary, or an Exposition with Observations, Reasons, and Uses upon The First Epistle General of John by that pious and worthy Divine Mr. John Cotton, Pastor of Boston in New-England*
John Cotton, *Christ the Fountain of Life* [sermons on 1 John 5]
John Cotton, *Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*
John Cotton, *The Covenant of God's Free Grace* [sermon] *with a profession of faith by John Davenport* [1597–1670]
John Cotton, The Controversy Concerning Liberty of Conscience in Matters of Religion
John Cotton, Of the Holiness of Church Members
John Cotton, *The True Constitution of a Particular Visible Church*
John Cotton, *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and the Power Thereof and The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*
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Lionel Fletcher—Evangelist

Bryan Jones

Could I just at the outset tell you this, in dealing with Lionel Fletcher I thought of various ways to tackle the subject and I think the best way is to let Lionel Fletcher speak for himself as far as we are able. Lionel Fletcher was a unique man in this sense, the Lord's man at the Lord's time. He was born on 22 May, 1877. Bale, his second name, was his mother's maiden name and he traced through he his ancestry back to the Huguenots. On his father's side:– when he was in Inniskillen in Northern Ireland in 1939 he was reminded that it was from there in 1769 that his great-grandfather William Horner was personally appointed by no less a figure than John Wesley and he commenced his ministry there at 18 years of age. In the family there are treasured letters written personally by John Wesley to his great-grandfather Billy Horner commending him and his ministry. Lionel Fletcher, then, had a great ancestry and it was in Inniskillen that he reminded all the people that came to hear him preach, of this—He said, 'William Horner, all of them' he was to declare with pride, 'out and out Christians. There was not one black sheep in that large flock'. 'Is it any wonder,' he told them, 'that I, the youngest male in the line, should become an out and out evangelist.'

William Horner's daughter married Joseph Fletcher who had gone to India as a missionary with Billy Horner's son. John Fletcher married Mary and they went to the West Indies as missionaries. Their third son was the father of Lionel Fletcher. That's what he meant when he said about these men and these women down through his family—'Not one black sheep among them, all out and out Christians'. But in his early years he was so much of a rebel that he could have been a black sheep of the family. At one time he was forbidden to go to Sunday School for three months. On another occasion, he and another boy ran away from home and wanted to become cut-throats, pirates. But Lionel Fletcher tells us that, even though he intended to embark upon the life of a brigand and a villain, it had to be with Christian principles!

At school he came under the influence of a great teacher, Mr T.H. Newing B.A.—'Old Tom' as he was nicknamed. This man had a profound effect upon Lionel. One day, in class, Lionel tells of how Old Tom, when all the other scholars were writing, sat beside him and, Lionel said, 'I began to open my heart to this man and tell him all my troubles and struggles and turmoils'. Mr Newing helped not only Lionel Fletcher but many of the boys, and he was never too busy to have something to say to them. The testimonial that Lionel had from that school was a very, very good one.

After leaving school he pestered his family that they might allow him to join up in the mercantile service, that he might become a sailor. And the sea trip that he undertook from Sydney to England in 1894 when he was seventeen years of age was to make a very important mark upon his life. One of the great features of that journey was that he came into contact with the captain of the boat. The ship was the McQuarrie and it sailed from Sydney to London via Cape Horn. Captain W Goddard, the captain of the vessel, Lionel described as one of God's gentlemen. But, before he embarked upon that journey, he tells of his father's prayer the last day before he set sail. He remembers that his father gathered the family together and his father began to pray. A silence like death descended upon them, then the father's voice, thick with emotion, began—'Loving God'—then again silence. The chair moved, his father rose and approached the son who, next moment, felt an arm about his neck and a wet cheek against his. And there the prayer continued, 'Preserve this boy from the sins which he will face, keep him pure, grant that he may come back to us untarnished, for Christ's sake. Amen.' That prayer, wrote Lionel Fletcher twenty five years later, moulded my future life more than any he had ever uttered.

On board the vessel, it must have been when the ship was rounding Cape Horn, South America, there was a near mutiny and Lionel Fletcher was amazed at the control Captain Goddard had on the men. It seemed the captain ordered them into the rigging and, of course, they had been woken from sleep, and they didn't want to go into the rigging, and there was a great deal of criticism and murmuring. captain Goddard called them together, the whole crew, and he told them that, in his experience as a sailor, the barometer was dropping, there was to be a great storm at sea, and they could have one of two choices. Either they could go aloft and take in the rigging now or they could wait in their bunks until the storm broke and then they could go into the rigging. But, he said, let me tell you that I care about you all and I don't want to lose any men—so there's the choice. And they chose to go into the rigging and very soon the storm broke and Lionel Fletcher remembers that moment because of the command that this one man had over an entire crew of strong and sometimes rebellious sailors.

There is another story he tells about a young apprentice and we find that story in 'Life Quest and Conquest'. He tells this story because he wants to illustrate bravery. He tells of this young apprentice who, on the two occasions he went into the rigging, fainted, and he had to be brought down with great difficulty. Now this apprentice wanted to be a sailor and the doctor on board the ship said it was impossible for him to climb the rigging. He wasn't up to it physically or mentally. So the lad was defeated and Lionel Fletcher tells that on

one night this lad, in a terribly emotional state got out of his bunk and climbed the mast—one hundred and twenty feet above the deck. When he came down he asked that the few who were on watch should keep it silent. Fletcher's point was this: everyone knew this boy was brave because he did something that he had to do but that he didn't want to do. And Fletcher said that is bravery. That's the kind of spiritual bravery that we're called to in Christ's work. It's the kind of spiritual bravery that Lionel Fletcher exhibited in his life.

Unfortunately, Lionel Fletcher was not to be a sailor. He had to abandon the sea and it was not long before his father, back in Australia, knew that Lionel Fletcher, his dear son, had given up any idea of becoming a sailor. The captain's letter to his father and the testimonial are exceptional. Lionel could have made a sailor's life, he could have become a great sailor but that was not the Lord's will for him. In 1895, a year later, at the age of eighteen, he turned to the land. HE joined his brother Henry and his sister in law's people in the west of New South Wales on a big farm. They were near a place called Peak Hill, over two hundred miles from Sydney in the interior of the State. Lionel had a skill with horses. Not only was he a good sailor, or would have made so, but also he has a skill with horses and sheep, and dogs too. He was a valuable asset on the farm and it was at this time that Lionel came under conviction. Now this is remarkable and we must deal with it adequately. It appears in *Mighty Moments*, chapter three—

> There was no Methodist Church in Peak Hill in those days but the service was held in the Publicans Hall. The congregation was not large and I often grew indignant that the minister should come all those miles to preach to a few people. I always enjoyed the outing (he drove the minister to the service) especially when the minister was the Rev. William Pearson, who still lives in Sydney, and for whom I developed a deep affection. He never asked me if I was converted and he never preached to me during those drives through the bush but he entered my life and, after talking with him, I was ready to listen to him preach. He was not a burning evangelist but there was a quiet directness of speech which sometimes hit me hard and made me think. He was reaching me in a way that he did not know. If he had attacked me personally I would never have driven him to his services and perhaps this would never have been written.
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> On this particular night Lionel and another young man decided they would personally see to it that William Pearson had a good congregation, so they borrowed a large plough from the publican and took it down the end of the street—now a lot of miners in Peak Hill were living in tents there with their wives and families—and what they decided to do was shout 'Fire' and ring a bell. 'Fire', they shouted, 'fire. How to escape from the fire. Fire, fire, come to the hall and hear how to escape from the fire. Fire, fire.' We had so planned the

> whole thing that our voices rang out together and the commotion which followed cannot possibly be described. We could hear pots and pans being hastily flung aside, oaths and curses coming from startled lips, and the yells of a woman to someone else to get her baby. And other orders flung out in fear that fire was really sweeping the town. Well, to their relief, one man said, in the midst of the commotion, 'O' he said, 'it's only two kids announcing the Church service in the hall'. This raised a laugh and then he said, 'Shut up and listen to what they're saying, can't you'. And it encouraged them to give the announcement, the advertisement, again. Now Mr Pearson the preacher knew nothing of this but when he came to the hall the sight of a packed hall amazed him. And his text was 1 Samuel 26:21—'Then Saul said I have played the fool'. [Now listen to what Fletcher says—] Every word seemed meant for me. It searched me out and revealed me to myself in a startling way. There was a hush on the congregation and I have since thought that only God knew how many lives were influenced that night. I did not yield myself to Christ then but I was never the same again. I was disturbed and shown a vision of myself which made me feel that I had played the fool. I was ripe for such a message. Most of my chums in Sydney had been converted during the series of meetings held by the Rev. Thomas Cook of Cliff College who had been visiting Australia just recently. And I was on the balance, not knowing what to do or where to find satisfaction. I listened to see how it was likely to affect those whom I'd helped to bring and I ended up forgetting that the preacher was speaking to me.

So we have a man then under deep conviction of sin, we have a man ripe for the message, we have a man that the Lord is drawing to himself. And the conversion of Lionel Fletcher shortly after that is another remarkable chapter in this man's life. In *Mighty Moments* again, chapter 1 this time, we hear something of his conversion. It appears that shortly after William Pearson had made this impression upon him that Lionel had been boxing and his brother Henry walked in and saw Lionel with blood all over his face. Well, the brother was determined to do something and what he did was to face Lionel with his life. On page 9 and reading in paragraph 2 of *Mighty Moments* Fletcher says—

> During these days I was passing through the great crisis of life. Though I was sublimely unconscious of it I was restless and awkward and I know that I gave my brother many anxious moments. I can remember his look of horror one night when he stepped into a large room where a crowd of men had gathered to box and to watch boxing. It was rough going. Blood had flowed freely and there were many cut faces and black eyes. My brother did not know what was going on and just as he stepped into the room I had succeeded in sending my opponent, a great heavy man, who had come at me with fists flailing like a threshing machine, crashing to the floor. There was a yell of excited applause from the onlookers and I was naturally proud of my achievement, especially as I had a dreadful black eye gained from one of those whirling fists. Henry

looked at me in disgust and walked out. But he never forgot it.

Lionel tells us that at that time he was friendly with an Irishman who was after Lionel because he was skilled with horses and sheep and the Irishman wanted him to accompany him into the interior where he would be cut off from his friends, his family and the church. His brother knew that and he decided on the second Sunday evening of July 1895 to tackle him about his life. This is how Lionel put it

> If my brother never preached another sermon, he preached one that night which brought a soul to Christ. All his congregation were converted. He told me that God had given me a personality which would either lead men to hell or to heaven. There would never be any half measures, but he warned me that if I led other men to hell, I would go there myself and, as far as he could see, I was at a crisis in life which would either result in my salvation or my ruin. He faced me with my ugly temper, my tendency to go into excitement and mix with men who loved boxing and racing and though he knew that I neither drank nor gambled, still he also knew that if I went off on this proving expedition it might lead to my utter ruin. He knew that I cursed and swore and that many times I went out and spent Sunday in sport instead of at worship. He pointed out the horror with which my parents would view my life if I continued in this course. All my brothers preached and I was the only unconverted member of the family. Was I going to disgrace a name that was held high in honour and had been during many generations.
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> If he had not been my brother I would have done him physical violence that night. As it was I went to bed in a violent rage.

Fletcher says,

> I went to bed in a towering passion and I registered an oath that the next morning I would pack my bag, take my horse and dog and join the drover. I would change my name and then go out and be lost to my family and live as I chose without them being any the wiser. But I had gone far enough. The mighty hand of God gripped my life that night, I cannot explain exactly what happened. Only this, that at midnight I distinctly heard singing, it seemed to me that it was the choir in the Church in which as a boy I had sung, and this is what it sang—'Just as I am without one plea but that thy blood was shed for me and that thou bidst me come to Thee, O Lamb of God I come.' The effect was instantaneous and tremendous. All my rage forgotten, all my plans for the future vanished. It seemed that in that very instant a pathway of light opened in front of me leading to Christ on the Cross. I'd often wanted to be a Christian and I'd tried to be one but I had always begun by making great resolutions. I had fought bad habits, such as swearing, without success, and so I concluded that I could not be Christian. I had prayed that I might be converted but nothing happened. Now here was a startling revelation. Did it mean that I

> could come to Christ just as I was, my sins, my bad habits, my ugly temper and all? The singing continued—'Just as I am and waiting not to rid my soul of one dark blot, to thee whose blood can cleanse each spot, O Lamb of God I come.' I got out of bed and knelt down and waited and listened and again the music surged through my soul—'Just as I am thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve. Because thy promise I believe.' I finished the verse looking up into heaven and I said 'O Lamb of God, I come'.

And so he did, he did come. No overwhelming emotion, no sweeping joy. 'Next morning I rode through the bush and there came to my memory, almost as if someone had spoken the words to me, a piece of old doctrine which I suppose I had learned as a child "the Spirit himself beareth witness with my spirit that I am a child of God". That Jesus loved me and gave himself for me, that all my sins were blotted out and that I, even I, am reconciled to God. I was converted. I knew it and I have known it ever since.'

Now that is absolutely tremendous, no doubt. One of the great glories of Lionel Fletcher's preaching is that every time he preached, and especially when he preached for souls, he was re-living his conversion. And I wonder somehow if we mustn't get back there and when we preach re-live that moment when Christ took us to be his. After Conversion, What? Well, he joined the Church and he was appalled that this Church was so ordinary. He'd had an extraordinary conversion and the Church seemed to be so lacking lustre. He joined the Christian Endeavour connected with the Methodist Church in Sydney and he and another lad, Ross Thomas; became very influential in that Church in the Christian Endeavour movement. Ross Thomas asked him if he would go to the Petersham conference in Sydney and Lionel Fletcher was only able to go to the last service of the conference. He tells us in *After Conversion What?* that, at this conference, Archdeacon Tress began to tell them about his own life and how it had been revolutionised when he had laid hold of the truth that he would be filled with the Holy Ghost as soon as he yielded his whole life to God. 'God can only fill us to the extent that we yield ourselves to him', he said. And then he added 'If you yield yourself without reserve to God you have the right to know that God gives himself without reserve to you, and by faith you may claim the filling of the Holy Spirit'. Fletcher writes:

> my chum and I stood up in the after meeting as a token that we wanted to give ourselves without reserve to God. My life has never been the same again and every blessing I have received since, every soul won, every Church revived in my ministry, is the result of that night.

Lionel Fletcher was bent upon a preaching life and he took some examinations within the Methodist Communion. You must understand at this time that the whole family were Methodist. One of his brothers, the Rev. Scott Fletcher MA,

DD, Bachelor of Literature, a man of great qualifications, was the minister of the open Methodist Church in the suburbs of Sydney. So not only did Fletcher have good advice and good counsel but also he had good theological training. He also had good practical opportunities. While assisting on the Methodist Church circuit, he went to a place called Spring Hill Methodist Church near Orange, New South Wales, and there he met Maud Harris Basham. She was the daughter of Arthur and Matilda Basham, her father being a merchant in the city of Sydney. They fell in love at first sight and married, his brother performing the ceremony on 24 January 1900.

Now that marriage was most important because, when you read the story of Lionel Fletcher you will find that his accomplishments, though very great, could not have been accomplished without this very accomplished lady. She was not only his confidant but she was also his helper. She preached at ladies' meetings, she helped him write his letters, she helped him write his books, she helped him with the visitation that he engaged upon. She was more than a right hand to him and, together, and we must emphasise that, together, they became a force for God for good. Of course with marriage and with family he was unable to carry on his ambition of being a preacher, a minister within the Methodist Communion so he took up a job as a journalist for a mining paper. A Brisbane newspaper wanted his services on the condition that he became a miner first and he engaged upon the actual physical practicalities of the mining community. He was sent from Sydney 1,100 miles to a place called Charters Towers to become a miner and to learn the life of the mining fraternity. Then he could write, you see, as a mining editor. But these men looked at Lionel Fletcher and they thought here is an educated and intelligent man: he must be a plant that the mine owners have brought in to spy on us, and he was viewed with a great deal of suspicion. But, amazingly, Fletcher won them over and it is said of him that he understood their fears and suspicions.

Another of his great characteristics when he preached in later life was that he knew men. He knew what made them tick, he knew their fears, their ambitions, he knew their suspicions, he knew their doubts. He was able to identify with them as a man to a man. Some of his greatest preaching was to men only. In one of his churches the gallery, the whole gallery, was reserved for men only (wouldn't that be nice!). So he won acceptance with the men and he was very sympathetic to their problems. He became a great correspondent. Not only a sailor, not only skilled with horses and animals, but now a skilled journalist.

And he would probably have been a journalist for the rest of his life except, you see, early in 1905 the Congregational Church opened their doors to Lionel Fletcher. At the same time he had a very tempting offer as a journalist, a

correspondent, on the *Newcastle Morning Herald*. But he wanted the ministry, so he entered the Congregational Church. You see, what the Congregational Church offered Lionel Fletcher was this: they offered him a position in one of their churches and they said to him, you carry on your extra-mural studies, your studies in training for the ministry, and if you accept one of these positions in the Church it will pay your way for your family. So Lionel Fletcher joined the Congregational Church. He had a number of offers (he'd been to a number of Congregational Churches) to invite him to be their pastor. But he and Maud were determined upon this one course of action, and it happened to be the Church at Campbell Town, which isn't too far from the city of Sydney. The congregation offered him £100 per annum. When he began his ministry at Campbell Town he had fourteen people in the congregation. In two months the morning congregation had increased to almost forty people and in the evening the congregations were between sixty and seventy. That's not bad is it for two months! Surely not?

Now there were certain things that Lionel Fletcher insisted upon that moulded his pastoral life and in this book *Twelve Hours in the Day* by CW Markham we understand what they were. A mid-week meeting for prayer and Bible study was commenced at Campbell Town and here, at the very outset of his brilliant ministry, appears one of the secrets of his success. A full emphasis was placed upon this vital aspect of Christian work within the Church. He was, in later years, to stress again and again to his colleagues in the ministry the essential nature of this indispensable feature in the life of the Church. The establishment of such a practice is no easy task, he was always well aware. It is a problem, he said, but it can be solved and there exists no magic formula. He had seen, as a boy, great preachers with Sunday congregations of a thousand confronted at the week night meeting by thirty or so of their Church members. The mid-week service, as a lesser edition of the Sunday service, had been tried and he had watched it die. He had seen also the Methodist class meeting languishing and dying, yet the church could not live without this centre and core of spiritual culture. Though fellowship and communion should be the keynote we do not exist to provide social entertainment. It was to be the gathering place for the heart of the church (I like that, you know). Fletcher insisted that his ministry should be built upon this great fundamental fact that, in the week, when Christians come together for fellowship and prayer and Bible study, it should be the gathering place for the heart of the church. That is one of the great features, not only in Campbell Town, but also in his other pastorates, like Wood Street, Cardiff—this gathering place, the heart of the church. Perhaps, these days, we are poor because our mid week prayer and Bible study is so poorly attended.

Not only did Fletcher work hard at Campbell Town Congregational Church, but also he went to a place called Arcadia and he held there a fortnightly service with a congregation that jumped from twelve to forty in two months. In Ingleburn, a number of Congregational families were to be found and there he held a monthly service. That was sixty miles away for six families! There were a thousand men working on a nearby project called the Cataract Dam. The Salvation Army had been stoned out of the place but Fletcher went there and preached to these men. One hundred and fifty to two hundred listened to him in rapt silence. The manse at Campbell Town was big. Two of the rooms were converted into a gymnasium for young people and, in eighteen months, not only had the work increased out of all recognition, but the Church raised his salary from £100 per annum to £110 per annum That's not bad is it. Eighteen months, and working out relative figures!

The Congregational Church took notice of Lionel Fletcher's abilities and, after his studies, his ordination was in sight. He was ordained on 24 March 1908. There is a memory he has of his father leaning over the balcony listening to the ordination prayer. Quoting a newspaper cutting, 'Mr Fletcher made touching reference to his early home life and the influence and example of his parents and of his brothers'. To that home training he attributed his conversion. He felt bound to refer also to the obligation he was under to Methodism and particularly to certain Methodist ministers. He had been attracted by the freedom of Congregationalism, especially its freedom from ecclesiasticism, but he had come to see that the freedom that had first attracted him entailed responsibility.

With his ordination, the Congregational authorities moved him to a place called Kurri Kurri and he was there for about 10½ months. In that time work was undertaken to enlarge the church building which proves his work there was most effective. He also worked with the miners. It was a great coal mining area. He was working so hard that the church insisted that he had one month off per year. But when Lionel Fletcher took a holiday he took a holiday like this—the first week he went back to Campbell Town and preached there. He also preached at Pitt Street Congregational Church in Sydney because their pastor was on holiday. The other three Sundays he spent at Port Adelaide, preaching there on the condition that they did not call him to the pastorate. He knew that they were looking for a pastor.

The Saturday before the second Sunday at Port Adelaide he had a telegram, which proved to be a shattering blow. His infant son Ronald, barely one year old, was seized with inward convulsions and within five minutes had passed away in Maud's arms. He couldn't get a train out of Adelaide until Monday and his wife said, 'Lionel, whatever you do, do the Lord's work there'.

He couldn't preach on the Sunday morning but in the evening the congregation was moved to the depths of their being at the sight of a man triumphing over sorrow. He brought them a message that night that could only be preached by a man whom God was sustaining. That Church at Port Adelaide then felt that Lionel possibly was in a position, maybe, to accept the pastorate of the Church and they extended to him the offer. And after prayer with Maud he felt that it was right that he should go from Kurri Kurri, though he'd only been there 10½ months, to became the minister at this great Congregational Church in Port Adelaide. There are many stories about Port Adelaide . I will say this in my own words. When Lionel Fletcher arrived to take up the position at Port Adelaide the retired minister used to sit in the pulpit with Lionel Fletcher. He used to wear a pair of black mittens on his hands and he would be thrilled as he heard this younger man preach the Gospel of Christ. I think that's a beautiful picture, don't you. And Lionel Fletcher tells us about those occasions. He said that this man had been such a faithful pastor. Over the years he had pastored his congregation and all the young people had been pastored in evangelism and they'd all came to know the Lord Jesus Christ. And Lionel Fletcher didn't have to evangelise that church. His task, therefore, was to go and to get people to come in and evangelise them. And when he left that church, after six and a half years ministry, you can imagine the parting was not easy. Many, many people cried and there's a great story in *Mighty Moments* about that Church but we haven't got time for it, I'm sorry. It is a lovely story. But nevertheless, after that six and a half years then Lionel Fletcher resigned the pastorate, do you know why? He resigned because he and his wife thought that, at that time in South Australia, there was such a movement for God that he was impelled to go out, without money, and to go around South Australia preaching the Gospel of grace as an evangelist. And Maud and Lionel trusted God for one thousand converts as they went out. The Lord gave them 1,300.

There are tremendous stories told concerning that time. Many trophies of grace in *Mighty Moments* there is an illustration of that and really it's an illustration of something that went on at that particular time that we can only ascribe to Revival. Chapter 10 of *Mighty Moments* tells the story of a meeting that Lionel Fletcher went to address. He said that after the soloist had sung, a man rose to my right and said '"Mr Fletcher may I say a word?" And he said "I make it a rule that no stranger is to take part in any meeting of mine as I have known disaster follow when the leader has permitted someone to speak without first discovering who he is or what he represents". But on that occasion in the flash of a second I was consciously led to give this man the permission and I've always been very thankful that I did. To understand the position more fully, it

was 1915, the war in Europe was at it's height, Australian young boys of eighteen were being called up and going to England to fight in France and naturally there was a movement afoot, there was an anticipation. This man stood up, now he knew everyone in the congregation and he said something like this—"Neighbours, you will forgive me for saying a word tonight but my son is here and your sons are here and they are all going away to the war and perhaps some of them will never come back. I want to say something to my boy before you all and perhaps as I speak to him I will be speaking to your boys too. Harry my son, you are going away tomorrow to the city and then to the war. Your mother and I have been praying for you that you should not go away from home without first giving your life to Christ. I want to ask you now before these neighbours whom I have known, and have known you from childhood. Will you accept your father's God and will you serve him wherever you may go?"' Lionel Fletcher says he's never lived through such a tense moment as that. Then the young fellow stood up. 'Yes Dad, he shall be my God.' Now Lionel Fletcher hadn't preached yet! You see, there was a movement afoot.

Within six months of that ministry in Australia, Lionel Fletcher had a cable from Cardiff in Wales to take over the Pulpit and the ministry at Wood Street, Cardiff. The Rev. JD Jones, MA, DD, had visited Australia in 1914 and he had been very influential in putting Lionel's name to the deacons and the members in Cardiff. Now Wood Street, at that particular time, had fallen on bad times.

Here is just a potted history of the place. It had been built as a Temperance Hall by a man called JS Matthews and he was very disappointed because it was not a success, so he hired it out as a music hall and a circus. In 1868, the Rev. William Watkiss from Shropshire (not a Welshman) came to Cardiff. He'd severed his connection with the Guildford Street United Methodist Free Church and he began services in the year 1868. Now his ministry was so successful and effective that many, many people were converted. Over the twenty three years of his ministry, three thousand people had been added to the Church and some had gone on to became members of other Churches. After his death they had the Rev. W Spurgeon, a clever preacher whose ministry lasted seven years. Then they had the Rev. John T Peace from 1900-1905, through the Welsh Revival, then the Rev. WJ Zeal for the period 1906–1911 and then the Rev. A Guinness-Rogers, MA, DD. Dr Rogers was completely out of sympathy with the class whose outlook he didn't share and whose world he found it almost impossible to enter. His very walk dawn the aisle with his top hat resting on the crook of his arm was an offence to his congregation and few of them were able to follow him in his utterances. There was a serious falling away in the attendance with all the financial consequences

such a falling away has. The Church was in debt to the tune of £3,000 and it was almost at the point of closing. Now JD Jones had impressed upon the Church the work and the ability of Lionel Fletcher and he said to them: you must get this man from Australia, you must. So they asked Lionel Fletcher, and he and his wife, after a great deal of prayer and consideration, set sail and arrived in England in 1916.

Now what was Lionel Fletcher able to do in Cardiff? Well, he covenanted with the Lord that the Lord would give him five hundred conversions in 1916. And he took up his post at the beginning of March! When the watchnight service came he was twelve short of that number and he told them so. And before midnight struck that night he had fourteen more. Five hundred and two genuine conversions in the first year of ministry! But it isn't just the preaching ministry. The man had a vision! What we heard of Campbell Town, where he revitalised the midweek service, he did at Cardiff. He writes to his father and he says, 'You know, in my midweek services there are three hundred people attending for prayer and Bible study'. Three hundred. Now of course that isn't two thousand but it is a large number of people. He and his wife, his wife especially, engaged in work in that area. Mrs Fletcher walked the streets of Cardiff knocking on the doors of houses she could barely stand the smell of, visiting women whose husbands were at the war front. Lionel Fletcher wrote two hundred letters to men away in France. His wife organised a rota of sixty young women and they regularly visited four hundred babies who were on the cradle roll. The Sunday School rose from very few numbers to over a thousand. And if you read the book *Congregationalism in Cardiff & District* written in 1920, you'll find that way beyond anywhere else; Wood Street, Cardiff, is the biggest Church. In 1918 their membership is 1,369. Lionel Fletcher was still there then. Now this Church has been completely turned upside down with this man's tremendous ministry.

We have to say that, not only is the man, certainly in the preaching aspect, a great evangelist and revitaliser of the Church, but we find that this man has a vision, a vision of wanting to create a place in Cardiff where men and women can come as they come to the public houses and find there a place where they can sit down and talk and discuss and share their problems. He was a visionary, not just a mighty preacher, but a visionary. The debt was cleared by the Jubilee year, 1918, and there was more than enough to pay for vital urgent repair work. They bought the hotel next door so that they could use that as a Sunday School, and as a place where people could come and find help in time of need.

There is a lovely story of Lionel Fletcher at this time. He used to go to Wales to a preaching conference. Campbell Morgan could get all the best preachers in the world to preach at this conference, and on one occasion

Campbell Morgan asked Fletcher to preach. Let me just read to you what Campbell Morgan said, I find this quite excellent. He says 'Fletcher, I want you' and Lionel Fletcher follows him into the room and Campbell Morgan said 'You'd better be quick and make up your mind for I have an engagement and I shan't go until you say "I will"—I want you to preach at my conference.' Lionel Fletcher said, 'What could I do?' There he was, 'I shan't go until you say yes'. So he said, 'I said yes. I was worried,' he said, 'I had to stand there and preach to men from all over the country, men more distinguished than me.' But you notice his name was being known now. I also like the story about this time when he was to preach in Birmingham. Lionel Fletcher was a great temperance speaker and in Birmingham a very distinguished preacher, a very well known man, was to follow Fletcher who was so unimportant that he didn't have his name even on the handbill. Fletcher said when he was announced it wasn't much of an introduction. And Fletcher stood up and he says 'I felt, though I'm tired and weary it fired me and I'll preach'. And you know he preached so well that the congregation said 'Go on, go on' at the end, and the great preacher found that Fletcher was very difficult to follow.

Fletcher's ministry at Cardiff was coming to an end because the Congregational Church in England and Wales could see that his abilities were so great that he couldn't be confined within one Church and they really asked him if he would be the missioner so that he would go round the Congregational Churches in England and Wales and stimulate interest round the Churches—be a travelling evangelist. So in July 1922 he did resign from Wood Street but he didn't go with the Congregational Union. He went with a completely different evangelical Congregational committee who asked him if he would engage upon evangelistic work in the British Isles. The campaign (he was 45 years of age at this time) opened in Glasgow in Scotland, in Govan Town Hall. In ten days over six hundred people were converted. When he left Govan, the crowded streets walked him to the station singing 'Will ye no come back again'. He then preached at Birmingham and Bolton and Salford. In Salford on one Sunday they had 285 conversions. In the afternoon, Lionel preached to the men, there here 71 conversions; Maud preached to the women, there were 79 conversions; and, in the evening meeting, 135. And in this particular campaign in Salford, 300 decisions were made in one day. He then went to Dulwich, (292), to New Barnet (800 conversions in a ten day mission), and at Ipswich, where there had been a very successful mission the year prior.

On this particular occasion when Lionel Fletcher spoke at Tackett Street Congregational Church, Ipswich, there was almost a Revival situation. He had conducted the meeting and preached. Lionel Fletcher's method was that at the

close he would ask men and women to stand up and come out to the front. He would go down and shake their hands as a public testimony that they had received the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, on this particular occasion, no one moved at all and so Lionel Fletcher announced the last hymn and said the benediction and still no one moved. They just sat there as though they'd been pole-axed and he asked them if they wanted to sing again. He gave out another hymn and once more he invited confessions for Christ. The hymn was sung, then he said, 'I stood alone in the front of the congregation then I asked God's blessing and closed but the audience still refused to go home. Finally, after another hymn and prayer I left the building, and it was some considerable time before the congregation followed me out into the night. I was mystified and I said to the other ministers, have you ever seen anything like that? And they said "No" but they were all aware that God had moved in a mighty way. None of us slept much that night and, early in the morning, I was aroused by the news that one of the village ministers some miles from the town in which the meetings were being held had been aroused at midnight by a group of young men who desired me to pray with them [would you like to get out of bed at midnight tonight if a group of young men wanted you to pray with them?]. Then came news from various places that ministers were being called upon by their people who were asking for prayer and for help. One minister told me that in the weeks that followed more than one hundred people came to his manse seeking advice and prayer.' I believe we're touching the area of Revival now, aren't we. Something unusual God moving in a mighty and spectacular way.

At Stowmarket, there were 617 conversions, at Leigh, Lancashire, 776 conversions. It is a remarkable story what happened at Stowmarket and Leigh, Lancashire. It appears so many people wanted to hear Lionel Fletcher that he had to preach twice, they had to clear the building and then another lot came in so that he could preach to them. And the people at Leigh, Lancashire being converted, going back to the mills, didn't sing the then popular songs of the day, they were singing the Campaign hymns. Lionel Fletcher transformed, under God, the town of Leigh, Lancashire. He can do it again!

Sheffield, Ossett, West Croydon, Cricklewood, Eastcliff, Bournemouth, Malmesbury—all these places were evangelised with great success. The year 1923 saw him in the United States for the International CE Convention as the president of the CE Union of Great Britain. He resumed his mission in September 1923 in this country at Bridlington, Hull and Hartlepool (over 700 decisions for Christ in Hartlepool). When he left, the people walked him to the station singing 'God be with you till we meet again'. In London a great, great Campaign—then on to St Helens, nearly 300 conversions:

Wellingborough (400), Durham, Belfast, Ryton on Tyne, Wolverhampton, Maidstone.

Then, in the midst of all this great activity in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, he had a letter to say that Beresford Street Congregational Church in Auckland, New Zealand, was about to close. And he was asked if he would go there and become the pastor. He was 47 years of age at the time and he took up his post. on the 12th May 1924 at Beresford Street. The evening services were soon transferred to the largest theatre in the city, the New Majestic. Every seat was occupied one hour before the commencement. The Sunday School rose from under one hundred to over six hundred. The Sunshine Guild, fifty women, made three thousand visits in the neighbourhood. The membership went from a handful in 1924 to just over eight hundred in 1932. They engaged upon an extensive building project to house the Sunday School and the junior Christian Endeavour and incurred a debt of £10,000. The giving, even in the slump years of the thirties, in one year amounted to £5,000. Of this £2,373 were given to home missions, the LMS and the New Zealand Alliance. Lionel engaged upon suburban missions and pioneered radio work (being Uncle Leo to the children). That was in November 1927.

Though so greatly loved at Beresford Street they released him to go to London for the London Youth Evangelistic Campaign in the winter of 1930 and 1931. He travelled from New Zealand to England by way of the USA and, while in the USA, was offered the post of world evangelist. With it went a luxurious home of his own, but he declined and came to England. In London, in twenty weeks, he conducted 246 meetings, in 59 Church buildings, 64 public halls and 16 theatres. There were 11,000 conversions. There were shorter missions at Leigh-on-Sea, Luton, Birmingham and Bath and two memorable thanksgiving services at the Royal Albert Hall when 10,000 were present each night by ticket only.

When I prepared this paper this man fired my soul. You see here—Beresford Street can't contain him because the world is calling him, especially the world here in this country. And he didn't want to leave Beresford Street; the support of the deacons and the people, the loyalty. He didn't want to leave them but he had to give up the pastorate at Beresford Street and come again to England and to engage upon various works up and down this country. In Newcastle (1,245 conversions) and in Scotland. There's a tremendous story about him being interviewed in the presence of 140 ministers by the professor of theology at Edinburgh University as to the content of his gospel and this professor quite satisfied at Lionel Fletcher's answers. King George V sent an equerry to Lionel Fletcher and the equerry said to him 'The King wants you now'. 'I can't come like this', he said. 'The King wants you. He's told me that

you must come as you are.' And Lionel Fletcher had a personal, private audience with the king in his ordinary clothes and the king said to him 'How are you getting on, how's the mission going'. Isn't that wonderful. Lionel Fletcher went to South Africa in 1934, 1936, 1938—18,000 conversions and tremendous seeds. In October 1936 he was appointed the evangelist for the National Free Church Council (Bristol 1,000 conversions and so on). But with the advent of war there were fewer opportunities. He became the pastor of St Leonards' Congregational Church, Hastings, for almost a year—that's about 1939/1940 and then back to Australia and New Zealand. At Beresford Street, Auckland he ministered for 5 months due to the mortal illness of the pastor, the Rev. Arthur C Nelson. Lionel had recommended this man to the church and was able to minister to him before his death then to conduct his funeral.

When the family arrived in Sydney just before Easter 1941, Lionel was shocked at the deteriorating attitude towards religion and the wide acceptance of blatant nationalism and materialism. He became involved in campaigns in Sydney, Newcastle and Melbourne. Invitations from every state in Australia came to him. During the summer months he regularly occupied the pulpit at the Pitt Street Congregational Church and the Scots Church, Margaret and York Streets Presbyterian, Sydney. The year 1942 found him campaigning in Queensland, especially Brisbane, despite the Japanese advance, and the remainder of the year in New South Wales.

After an operation in 1943 he was soon occupied again taking, as well as other engagements, the Scots Church from August to October. In December the Manly Congregational Church was filled each Sunday at both morning and evening services as he ministered there until early 1944. At this time he also preached in churches of most main line denominations and at many Christian Endeavour gatherings. In 1945 onwards he took to the air to fulfil engagements in New Zealand and Australia. He compared the slow boat trips of early days to the quickness of air travel.

The year 1951 saw him not only as World Vice-President of the Christian Endeavour Union, but also President of the NSW Union. He owed much to Christian Endeavour, he more than repaid the debt. Also in that year a Doctorate of Divinity was conferred on him by the Bible Institute and Theological Seminary of Los Angeles, USA. The Institute, founded by Dr RA Torrey, had as its president at that time Dr LT Talbot, a former Sunday School scholar of the Redfern Congregational Church. He attributed his conversion and entry into full time Christian service as partly the result of Lionel Fletcher's preaching. The Pitt Street Congregational Church was full to its 1750 seat capacity when the doctorate was conferred.

This great man who, at a conservative estimate, led over a quarter of a million people to the Lord, who when he preached, preached as though he were living his conversion. He knew the power and filling of the Holy Spirit, he knew and loved men, he had a belief in seeding and watering and then reaping and then growing a church. He was a man of prayer. Every letter was personally answered—between 50 and 60 thousand—that took a lot of love, concern and patience on the part of him and his wife.

There's a marvellous story in *After Conversion What?* He was counselling a man and this man is not able to make a witness at his factory and so Lionel Fletcher says to him, 'Now you go in tomorrow and you tell them that you're a Christian. So the man did, and the foreman in particular was very cruel. But one day the foreman said to the man, "Look," he said, "my little girl's ill and you're the only man I know who can pray, would you pray for her?" "I'll do better than that," says the man, "I'll get my pastor to come and he'll pray too".' Now when Lionel Fletcher and this man went to the house they found the little girl had died. She was in the coffin and Lionel Fletcher led that man and his wife to the Lord Jesus Christ around the coffin. When later Lionel Fletcher left that Church that woman said to him, 'The Lord took my little girl,' but now she says, 'he's given me so many more'. Because, you see, she'd become a teacher in the Sunday School. Isn't that wonderful?

His final preaching service was at Manly Congregational Church to a congregation of no more than one hundred. Soon afterwards he was admitted to private hospital at Mossman. In a crowded notebook, Lionel records his final visitors, his pastor and his wife, Keith Matta and Maud. On Friday, 19 February 1954 he had listened to the nine o'clock news on his radio. He reached across to turn the radio off, and in that instant he left to be with the Lord. His Grace, Archbishop Mowll, DD, Primate of Australia was among the distinguished mourners at his funeral service at Pitt Street Congregational Church.

His biographer, CW Malcolm, in the book *Twelve Hours in the Day*, paid this tribute to Lionel B Fletcher—'His books, his writings, his exhortations, importuned men everywhere to follow the same path that led him to greatness. He kept no secret hidden that would enable another to achieve what he had accomplished … Lionel Fletcher resolved that the Holy Spirit should have full possession of his being that God should have all there was of Lionel Fletcher. He believed that the promises of God are sure …'

The last family letter Lionel completed, recalled that it was the 60th anniversary of his setting out on the sailing ship McQuarrie, in 1894, for England. He wrote, 'Little did I dream then of what a varied and colourful life lay ahead of me … How much I have to thank God for!'

To conclude, the success of Lionel B Fletcher as a Christian minister and evangelist can be spoken of under five headings.

1 He was a superb communicator of the gospel, yet, when speaking on the evangelistic gift in his book *Effective Evangelism*, pages 43, 44, he says this 'The evangelistic gift is not the exclusive possession of a few men specially endowed by Heaven, it is a gift possessed by most people who have cane into a living union with Christ. Doubtless, as in other things, some are more gifted than others, but that does not preclude the possibility of all who so desire doing their best in their degree. The greatest danger is the failure to attempt such work at all.

2 There is no doubt, in my view, that the success of Fletcher's ministry was primarily a result of the Holy Spirit moving in him and through him. In *After Conversion What?* page 30, he says 'This is not a book of theology and I quite well know that many religious teachers differ in their method and way of presenting the truth. I have no desire for controversy but I am sure of this great fact, as I am sure of the truth of conversion, that the great majority of converted people have not yet tapped the spiritual resources which are at their disposal.'

3 One is also impressed by the fact that Fletcher knew and loved men. His heart beat for people but especially for men. He was able to bring the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ home to their hearts as a man speaking to men.

4 In his ministry he believed in sowing and watering. At Campbell Town, in the early days of his ministry, he was deeply hurt when, at a Church meeting, he was criticised. A spokesman saying, that instead of an evangelist he was just an ordinary pastor and that no one had been converted since his arrival and, what's more, he didn't give anyone the opportunity to be converted. In reply to this, on page 38 of *Mighty Moments,* 'I held the view very strongly that when the Word of God was faithfully preached, men and women were always brought to Christ. For anyone to think that conversions could take place only in special meetings or at special times was, to me, a dangerous view to hold and I said so very plainly. Moreover I said that I did not believe in trying to revive a dead church by special or sensational means. I was preaching faithfully as I knew how and I would continue to do so; when I thought the time was ripe to hold evangelistic services I would do so, but not a day before, otherwise I was certain that more harm than good would result. I further advised the critics to get to their knees and pray for a blessing on themselves as well as others, for I felt that we needed a deeper and sweeter spiritual life within the church before we could expect others to come and join the church.' Nevertheless, this criticism prompted him to ask one Sunday evening if

after two years he had been used of God to lead anyone to Christ, to come to his vestry and tell him so; 27 people crowded into his vestry and told him of their conversion under his ministry.

5 Lionel Fletcher was a great prayer warrior and his ministry was sustained by prayer. Listen to him—

> What is the reason of the failure of so many Christians to achieve victory, and so many preachers to realise their early, glowing ideals and dreams? I would say without hesitation, that in the majority of cases it is the result of their failure to cultivate the daily habit of heart searching, heaven-reaching, prevailing prayer.
>
> After years in the Christian ministry, both as a minister of Churches and as an evangelist travelling the world, I am more convinced today than ever that prayer is the greatest weapon we possess (*Kneeling to Conquer*, page 11–12).

Let us encourage ourselves by hearing something of this man, and resolve to be like him in his commitment to the Lord.

(Editor's note: This paper has been prepared from the recording of Mr Jones' lecture in order to preserve the personal feeling he expressed.)

Richard Davis and God's Day of Grace

Michael Plant

My subject today is the remarkable ministry of Rev. Richard Davis of Rothwell, Northamptonshire. This ministry lasted from 1689 until 1714 and was marked, especially prior to 1700 and the collapse of Davis's health, by zealous itinerant evangelism and the grace of God at work in reviving power.

If you read the general histories which cover this period Davis has an unfortunate press. His main claim to fame seems to be the fact that he is regarded as a hyper-Calvinist and antinomian whose views and activities shipwrecked the Happy Union of Presbyterians and Congregationalists within two years of its launching in 1691. My contention in this paper is that in Richard Davis's ministry we have a happy blend of sound Calvinistic theology and passionate evangelism. In addition we have ample evidence of God's grace in reviving his cause among saints and sinners.

My method is firstly to sketch in the background to Richard Davis's ministry, secondly to narrate the events of his ministry and thirdly to make some assessment of his qualities as preacher, pastor and as an individual Christian.

1 The background to Richard Davis's Ministry

1.1 General Historical Background

In 1689 William and Mary acceded to the throne. This marked the end of almost thirty years persecution of the Dissenters. In April 1682 the Rothwell meetings had been broken up and their minister imprisoned. On 3 April 1684 the Church book reads 'From the last date [14 months previously] a sore persecution and scattering lay upon us, that we hardly got together, much less obtained church meetings' and again (13 May 1686) 'The church had but little communion for some months till God put it upon our hearts to humble ourselves, reform his house and set upon our works almost lost by 5 or 6 years persecution and the death of our pastor'. Their pastor, a Mr Browning, died on 4 May 1685. There is evidence of God already at work in the Rothwell congregation prior to Richard Davis's settlement among them but generally the dissenting cause was weak. A report in 1690 by the managers of the Common Fund stated that dissenting congregations in Northamptonshire were disintegrating for want of ministers. This urgent need explains the form Richard Davis's ministry was to take. We ought also to note a sharp antagonism between the Congregationalists at Rothwell, who had suffered

cruelly during the years of persecution, and some of the neighbouring Presbyterian congregations, who had conformed during this period.

The local tensions were worsened by the situation that existed nationally between Presbyterians and Congregationalists. On the surface all was well and the establishing of a common fund preceded the Happy Union of 1691. This union was intended to produce a unity of doctrine and practice but strict Congregationalists, Davis included, felt there had been unacceptable concessions and no doubt high Presbyterians felt the same. More crucially a deep doctrinal divergence was taking place.

Baxterianism, Amyraldianism or Neonomianism (new law-ism) was spreading amongst the Presbyterians. In 1677 Daniel Williams published a book entitled *Some of the paradoxes contained in the scheme* and these ideas were very influential. High Calvinists such as Isaac Chauncy and Thomas Cole, pastor of Silver Street Congregational Church where Davis was a member, wrote against the scheme. It is over simplistic to make this strictly a Congregational/ Presbyterian divide as Robert Traill a Presbyterian wrote against Neonomianism in *A Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine of Justification from the Unjust Charge of Antinomianism* and John King, one of Davis's most vicious opponents, was a Baxterian and the Congregational minister at Wellingborough.

Now to summarise the two positions in the doctrinal controversy. Firstly the High Calvinists taught that God's law is unchanged and unchanging and that Christ has lived and died for his elect. He suffered in their place for their sins and provided for them a perfect righteousness imputed to them for acceptance with God. This to be received by faith alone.

The Baxterian position is different all along the line. Firstly Christ did not bear the punishment of his people on the cross but endured an equivalent punishment. The gospel is then brought in as a new 'law' and to receive the saving benefits is conditional on repentance and faith.

Such diverse views meant that high-Calvinists made accusations of legalism and Arminianism and suffered counter-charges of antinomianism and hyper-Calvinism. Certainly it needs to be admitted that doctrinal antinomianism and hyper-Calvinism did exercise increasing influence at the start of the 18th century. I will be contending that Davis avoided such errors in his teaching.

1.2 Personal Background

Richard Davis was born in 1658 and was a native of Cardiganshire in South Wales. He was well educated and was a schoolmaster in London from 1680–89. Shortly after his arrival in London he came to faith in Christ. Whilst seeking he had a memorable conversation with the great Dr John Owen. John

Owen said to him 'Young man, pray after what manner do you think to go to God?' Mr Davis answered 'Sir, through the mediator'. To which the doctor replied 'Young man, that is easily said but I do assure you that it is another thing to go to God through the mediator indeed, than perhaps many men who make use of the expression are aware of. I myself preached Christ for some years, when I had but little if any experimental acquaintance with access to God through Christ; until the Lord was pleased to visit me with sore affliction, whereby I was brought to the mouth of the grave, and under which my soul was oppressed with horror and darkness, but God graciously relieved my spirit in a powerful application of Psalm 130:4 "But there is forgiveness with thee that thou mayest be feared". From whence I received special instruction, peace and comfort, in drawing near to God, through the mediator; and preached thereupon immediately after my recovery.' This conversation was among the means used in Richard Davis's conversion and he became a member of the Silver Street Congregational Church. At this time he married a widow, Mrs Rosamund Williams

Within the Silver Street Church he was encouraged to exercise a preaching gift and in due course was called to pastor the Congregational Church at Rothwell, Northamptonshire. He left London with the blessing of the Silver Street congregation who close their letter of dismission:

> So recommending him to your holy fellowship as a brother in Christ, whose orderly walking and exemplary conversation among us hath been as becometh the gospel. Thus wishing to him and to you much of the Spirit and presence of God in your holy administrations. We take leave and rest. Your loving brethren in the fellowship of the Gospel, *Thomas Cole (Pastor) etc.*

On 20 February 1689 the Rothwell Church records:

> Mr Richard Davis, after a full and large account given of God's work upon his heart, was with the full and rejoicing consent of the whole church joined to their communion in order to his being pastor.

2 The Events of Richard Davis's Ministry

Ill feeling from neighbouring ministers was evident at Richard Davis's ordination. As a strict Congregationalist he was ordained by the elders of the Rothwell Church and when they were not invited to participate, some of the local ministers left saying there was nothing for them to do.

From the beginning the ministry was richly blessed and during the 23 year ministry 795 members were added to the church (33 a year). The majority early on in the ministry. Davis writes: 'It pleased God in a short time not only to make my service acceptable to the saints, and useful to their edification; but also to own the labours of the meanest of his servants with success in the work

of conversion.' Not only was God honouring his gospel in Rothwell but small groups of Christian people near and far called for his services. Davis ministered in thirteen counties, travelling on horseback over 80 miles from Rothwell and visiting perhaps fifty congregations on a regular basis. To regard him as a forerunner to Whitefield and Wesley is accurate in view of the zeal and diversity of his labours but not in the form they took. Each congregation was organised as part of the Rothwell Church and would celebrate the Lord's supper and exercise church discipline and might in time became a separate church.

For obvious reasons this labour could not be borne by Davis alone and the Rothwell Church took steps to meet the need. On 4 May 1691

1. The Church unanimously agreed that human learning was good in its place, yet was not absolutely necessary in the qualifications of any sent forth to preach the Gospel.

2. The Church unanimously agreed that the church of Christ had power within itself to choose, approve of, ordain or send forth any to preach the gospel … without calling in the assistance of the officers and elders of other churches to approve them, unless at any time they thought it necessary to desire their assistance by way of advice.

My understanding of this is that this allowed gifted brothers who might exercise a preaching gift at Rothwell to do so elsewhere. Those who professed such a gift would be allowed to preach at a day long church meeting and then either encouraged or discouraged as most appropriate.

If one of the meetings grew sufficiently then the church at Rothwell had a strict policy 'that when any of their dear brethren and sisters that live remotely from Rothwell increase to a complete number so as to be able to answer the ends of their dividing and enchurching and to bear the weight of those duties incumbent on a particular church of Christ that this church of Christ will not only consent to their dividing for to enchurch apart but have declared it to be their duty to do so'. In August 1691 the group meeting at Wellingborough formed a separate church. The membership consisted of 45 women and 27 men including their pastor Thomas Betson, formerly an elder at Rothwell. In all seven churches, including one as far away as Cambridgeshire, were formed and divided from the parent church during Davis's ministry.

It is important we realise that the blessing attendant on Davis's ministry was a sign of the riches of life from above granted to the Rothwell Church as a body. A work of conversion was already in progress before his ministry began and the Church book shows a church in a state of spiritual ferment. They debated in the church meeting the existence and use of such officers as

evangelists and administrators. On 28 October 1700, 'the Church ordered some time to be spent every church meeting in relating their profession of faith and experiences and prophesying if God lays any word upon the heart of any brother'. Richard Davis wrote 'so glorious a work of Christ upon the wheel, must needs be expected to awaken all the rage of Satan against it'. We now turn to the opposition to work at Rothwell.

The first attack of Satan was through people physically affected when the word of God was preached. This appears to have been happening before Richard Davis came on the scene but drastically increased under his ministry. He describes them as 'strange and unusual distempers on the bodies of several' and an opponent simply calls them 'fits'. These were not encouraged and lessened in a short time. Davis writes of these affected 'they meet with so many consolations from the God of all Grace; that they are comforted under their tribulations with those comforts, wherewith they are enabled to comfort others'. Convictions, in other words, led to conversions.

The second attack was the publication of a book by P Rehakosht in 1692. The real author is probably John King, the Congregational minister at Wellingborough, and the book is entitled *A plain and just account of a most horrid and dismal plague begun at Rowell alias Rothwell*. It is vicious, defamatory, sarcastic and pungent. Read in isolation it is quite funny but to read Davis's reply, *The Truth and Innocency Vindicated* (also 1692) brings one sharply to see the reality of the situation. The reply is gracious, and firm. He is deeply grieved by the abuse of his people and the exploitation of their simplicity. Several were interviewed to provide damaging quotes. He is concerned to vindicate the work of God and the Gospel of God's free grace. Robert Betson, pastor of the recently established church at Wellingborough, adds a defence of his own involvement. The attack on Davis is personal, doctrinal and ecclesiastical, the three areas I will consider at the close of this paper.

The war of words was carried on by Giles Firmin and later by Davis himself but the next problem came from the United Ministers in London. Twice Davis visited London to meet with the London Ministers. He also answered correspondence from them. On Davis's second visit to London, Daniel Williams made strong allegations against him on matters of faith but left them unsubstantiated. In the summer of 1692 a delegation of London Ministers came to Kettering and summoned Davis to appear before them.

After prayer the Rothwell church refused to allow Davis to appear as being contrary to 'the Principles of Congregational Churches'. Davis himself wrote 'Its design was to hook away judgement from a particular church and fix it in a Presbyterian Classis', and he dubbed the Kettering meeting the 'Ketter-

inquisition'. He and the Rothwell church did not hold to the belief that their practises were unquestionable but that the primitive practise was 'If matters of debate and scandal arose, many churches were to send messengers to that church to compose that matter, if it could be, by way of advice'.

This debate and the continuing doctrinal controversy wrecked the Happy Union but Davis took no large part in the discussions. His answer to debate on the nature of the gospel was to preach the free grace of God.

However, he wrote two books and the second of these helps us trace the progress of God's work at Rothwell. In 1693 he wrote *The True Spring of Gospel sight Jesus Christ and Him Crucified* replying to Daniel Williams' *Gospel Truth Stated and Vindicated*.

But from 1700 onwards he was in poor health, never able to travel and rarely able to preach and in 1706 he published *Faith the Grand Evidence of our Interest in Christ*. In the foreword he states his reason was because 'The Lord's sick family did in a most peculiar manner want visits of love and the souls of disciples stood in the greatest need of confirmation in so gloomy a dispensation'. He also writes 'The souls of believers they are generally under great desertion, darkness and deadness'. These comments on the changing scene show, I believe, that not only was Davis less active than formerly but also that the Holy Spirit was no longer poured out in such fullness.

In the early 1690s the experiences of the believers at Rothwell were characterised by strong and joyful assurance. At that time Davis contended strongly for the Reformers understanding of faith as including assurance as against that of the Puritan writers. He wrote 'I judge it is a safe way to form a definition of faith from the Holy Scriptures of Truth rather than the dark low experiences of weak believer'. In 1706 he is urging his readers that 'The weakest act of saving faith in Christ takes possession of him, and eternal life in him'. Davis's health continued poor and handicapped his ministry considerably until his death in 1714.

Finally, I want to examine Richard Davis's life and ministry in three areas. The areas where criticism of him was most bitter. As a preacher, his manner and matter. As a pastor, in relation to the Rothwell Church and other churches and finally as a person, as a Man of God.

3 Richard Davis Preacher, Pastor, Personality

3.1 Preacher

Firstly his manner, how he said it. Joseph Perry, converted Roman Catholic, writes of listening as an unbeliever to Richard Davis's preaching. 'He had a good voice and a thundering way of preaching. I felt such power and authority

in his preaching the gospel that it made me feel like a conquered captive at the sound of it.'

One area of his preaching which is highlighted by the critics of his ministry is the way he accommodated his preaching to his listeners. Here he is illustrating to his hearers that you come to Christ as a guilty sinner not a reformed sinner. 'A poor girl comes to beg bread at a great man's door. Saith the great man "I'll give you bread enough if you will marry my son". Says the poor wench "Let me put off my filthy rags and then I'll come". "No" says he "you must marry him as you are".' Again speaking to children 'Christ's lambs shall sit in golden chairs in heaven'. John Gill refers to his preaching as lively, warm and zealous.

He also preached without notes. Matthias Maurice, his co-pastor and successor at Rothwell, writes 'The law of the Lord was his delight, and under the teachings of the Holy Spirit, the subject of his constant meditation, thereby he was rendered apt to teach and had in it a readiness without consulting poor, dry papers in the pocket, to speak to poor sinners the mind of his Lord and Master. He thought the primitive way of preaching preferable, reading of notes being what the Church of Christ for many hundreds of years knew nothing of.' I suggest that the use of notes impedes proper communication and robs a preacher of freedom.

We now turn to the matter of Richard Davis's preaching. What he preached. Here we enter the area of debate which was already driving apart Presbyterians and Congregationalists in London. Davis was accused of hyper-Calvinism, in detail denying the free offer of the gospel and teaching eternal justification, and also of antinomianism. We will deal with these three in turn.

3.2 The Free Offer of the Gospel

Here the accusation was made during his life in Rehakosht's *A Dismal Plague* and also after his death by a would-be friend the Baptist John Gill. In his foreword to the 7th edition of Davis's *Hymns* Gill writes 'I can affirm upon good and sufficient testimony that Mr Davis, before his death, changed his mind in this matter, disused the phrase "I offer Christ" as being improper and being too bold and free for a minister of Christ to make use of.' There are several reasons to discount Gill's testimony. Firstly it is admitted to be hearsay, secondly because Gill and Matthias Maurice, who was Davis's co-pastor and successor at Rothwell, hotly debated the free offer controversy for many years until Maurice's death in 1738. Maurice was ardent for the free offer and this was known to Davis when he accepted him as his co-pastor in 1713. Thirdly everything directly recorded of Davis's preaching and all he ever wrote upholds the free offer of the gospel.

In *Truth and Innocency Vindicated*, 1692 he writes 'the ministers of the gospel must offer the grace of Christ to all that hear them universally, without exceptions'. In his final book *Faith the Grand Evidence of Our Interest in Christ,* published in 1706, eight years before his death, he writes 'The grace we offer in the Gospel is definitely for sinners, as sinners and infinitely free for the chiefest of them'.

Here are same quotations from Joseph Perry's recording of his preaching. 'I remember when Mr Davis used to speak to sinners he used to exhort, with great earnestness, poor sinners to come to Christ and believe on him at the word of command. This is the command of God that you believe on his Son' (1 John 3:23) and not to stand to dispute thou art worthy or not worthy, elected or not elected.' Again dealing with his hearer's reluctance to come to Christ, 'It may be that you are afraid that the work of God is not right with your soul. Well, what then? Soul, tell Satan, for it is his business to make you question if the work be not right. If you have not yet believed upon the Lord Jesus for salvation, it is time now to come, it is time now to believe, it is time not to venture upon Christ. Therefore, come now, come as a poor sinner and throw yourself into the arms of his mercy for salvation.' If Davis did not preach the free offer of the gospel I would like to know who does.

3.3 Eternal Justification

Davis was accused of teaching that God justifying us when we believe is simply a manifestation to our conscience of our justification from eternity. Davis did not teach it and *Monuments of Mercy* published by Matthias Maurice in 1729 includes an elaborate refutation of this belief in a letter to Mr Beart, pastor at Bury St Edmunds. It cannot be denied that sometimes his language was confused and he uses biblical terms unbiblically. He also seems to have made a habit of quoting Thomas Goodwin (undigested) in his sermons.

3.4 Antinomianism (literally to be opposed to the law)

Davis in *Truth and Innocency Vindicated,* 1692, states he has always contended that 'no works must come into our justification. But holiness stemming from faith I have always preached and pressed constantly affirming that they that have believed must maintain good works.'

The test of doctrinal antinomianism is the attitude shown to the law. Can holiness be defined in terms of the law or is the moral law of God an inferior, superseded standard? In other words is the moral law of God, summed up in the Ten Commandments, the believers rule of life? On this basis Davis is clearly not antinomian. He writes in *True Spring of Gospel-sight*, 1693, that our sense of sin and the value of Christ's blood is lessened 'when we judge that the perfect law of God is not a rule for believers'. The book he recommends on

sanctification is Walter Marshall's *Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* which states its aim 'That we may acceptably perform the duties of holiness and righteousness required in the law'. Davis's opposition simply shows what is common experience. Carnal men will always fear the Gospel of God's free grace gives a license to live as you like.

So Richard Davis preached the orthodox Calvinism of the *Savoy Declaration of Faith*. What was so special about him? Simply this: that he preached Christ. In 1693 he wrote and published *The True Spring of Gospel sight and sense of sin, Jesus Christ and Him crucified*. His contention here is that thorough knowledge and conviction of sin is not the product of a preparation through the law but that we only see our sins clearly through 'the glass of a crucified Jesus'. In *Faith the grand evidence of our interest in Christ,* 1706, his two aims are to establish firstly 'the best act of saving faith on Christ takes possession of him, and of the eternal life in him' and secondly, 'This weak act of faith is, and may, and ought to be improved as a sure evidence of our interest in Christ and in eternal life by him'. In both books he exalts Christ's all sufficiency.

Here is his closing exhortation in *Faith the Grand Evidence*.

> Believe what the gospel says, that how wretched so ever thou art, yet there is an all sufficient and infinitely suitable remedy for thee in Christ Jesus; who with all his grace is offered infinitely free to the chiefest of sinners as such. Here is an overflowing fullness of grace where sin hath flowed to the uttermost, there is in him a plaster for every sore, a rich supply for every want. Sinner dost thou want to have thy prodigious guilt removed and blotted out? Here is blood that can and will do it. Dost thou want a garment of righteousness to cover the shame of thy nakedness? Christ has a robe of salvation to cover thy foulest shame. Dost thou want access to God to deal with him about his favour? The flesh of our Lord in glory, that Holy veil, is a consecrated, new and living way to recommend unclean worshippers as clean; coming to God through him. Art thou blind and ignorant and wantest spiritual eyes, and light too, to see by? In his light we shall see light. Dost thou want spiritual life and strength? There is in this blessed, ever living intercessor the power of an endless life to supply thee. In this Lord there is righteousness and strength for the most dead and impotent of sinners and sinners, while they apprehend themselves the worst of sinners, may come and take. O, therefore, be a convinced sinner, and see the fullness that is in Christ Jesus, how unspeakably suitable it is to their excessive wants.

This is a heart full of Christ speaking.

3.5 Pastor

Criticism was levelled at Davis in two areas firstly, the harshness of the discipline at Rothwell and secondly, sheep stealing. That is, taking away other minister's hearers and setting up churches very close to other nonconformist churches they were formerly in fellowship with.

Regarding the harsh discipline, we should note that in the whole period of Davis's ministry when 795 members were added, 200 were excommunicated. However, Davis did not bring in new standards of discipline but applied what was already in practise. Matthias Maurice writes of the bringing together of pastor and people. 'It was a great advantage to him in the work of the Lord when he came to Rothwell to find a people who had great acquaintance with the doctrines of the gospel, special love and delight in the law of their God, as established thereby for a holy rule of conversation and strictly Congregational as to their discipline.' The practise followed was for offenders to be twice admonished and then, failing repentance, being cut off from the church. The offences included going to the Public (the Church of England—remember the persecution), courting or marrying unbelievers, Sunday travelling, failing in Christian or marital affection and loss of temper in a Church meeting.

Such firm discipline would be very unlovely if exercised without love. Matthias Maurice writes of Davis's qualities as a pastor. 'In tenderness, compassion and the dearest love, he visited all the flock, inquired into their spiritual state, administered seasonable encouragements unto the weak, and agreeable in instruction unto them all; constantly seeking the face of God with them and for them.' When sick and unable to pastor his flock Davis writes 'My love and pity to the Lord's distressed little flocks of Christ are not lessened'.

Apart from his books, Davis also wrote many hymns. None survive in modern hymn books and that is a fair reflection of their worth as literature. However, they went through several editions and trained his congregation in gospel truth.

An example

Our Father from eternity
did see us in our sin,
his boundless grace did move him so
he called his Son to him

Come my delight, my Glory bright
my wrath thou must remove,
there is a company of men
whom I do dearly love.

Now for exchange thou needs must change
and take their sin on thee;
thy righteousness, thy merits shall
to them imputed be.

Another indication of Davis's gentleness comes in his letter to John Beart about an applicant for church membership who holds to eternal justification. Davis carefully refutes his error and then writes 'I do hope our brother daily knows experimentally that he comes as a perishing sinner to Christ and his righteousness in every prayer to God for present pardon and justification. And when he is helped to receive this present declaration, he can then reflect with comfort upon the eternal thoughts of God his Father toward him. And if he witnesses this experience to the church, they may be certain he holds faith to be somewhat else than the manifestation of his being eternally justified, however he may express himself.'

The second accusation 'sheep stealing' is harder to assess. What do you do concerning churches with whom you are formally in fellowship, who hold similar doctrinal standards but apparently totally lack zeal? Davis's reply to the accusation was 'Neither can they prove we solicit away anybody's hearers, for it is false, but if any come of their own accord we have no rule to send them away'. I think we cannot really contest that Richard Davis did overstep the boundaries of fellowship and mutual respect between gospel churches. His impatience at other churches who were lacking in zeal, and other ministers who hedged the gospel offer with restrictions, meant he had little time for protocol. This should not be understood as isolationism because with like minded churches there was frequent communication by letter and messenger.

4 Richard Davis as a Man

We have already heard the Silver Street Church's dismission of Davis as one whose 'orderly walking and exemplary conversation among us hath been as becometh the gospel'. His Christian character is further revealed when he was asked why he was leaving the advantages of life in London for such poor prospects with a small, impoverished Dissenting congregation. Davis simply replied that according to Christ's word he was to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Davis also shows the Christian grace of forbearance and his controversial writings are very mild by 17th century standards. Matthias Maurice shows this was not natural temperament but a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Maurice writes 'He was loving and kind to all his adversaries, patiently bearing injuries without revenge. And when at any time he was surprised into passion against any that offended him, it was always very manifest that the Spirit of Christ which dwelt

in him would presently make faith and love to flourish, and melt him into meekness so that he could with greater ease forgive the offence than his own resentment.' Hence we see a naturally fiery man tamed by grace.

Concerning Davis's life of prayer Maurice writes 'The Spirit of Prayer he did in an eminent manner enjoy. His prayers were fervent and frequent … with what faith, humility and holy familiarity did he address the Almighty! With what self-abhorrence, yet with what holy boldness did he approach the throne of grace. With the greatest awe upon his spirit would he speak unto God, and yet with evangelical fondness, if I may so express it, would he in the spirit of adoption, throw himself into the bosom of his heavenly Father and there melt and mourn, pray and plead.' A man's measure is what he is with God.

Finally he died well, showing strong faith to the end. Just before Davis died Matthias Maurice asked him '"how it was with his spirit in views of death and eternity?" His answer was "I am sedate". His mind was stayed upon his Lord and so kept in perfect peace. He rejoiced greatly that he was going to the God of all grace and desired others might join with him on that account.'

In summary we see in Richard Davis's ministry a day of Grace. Persecution was removed and the Spirit poured out. Whilst Richard Davis did not stand alone doctrinally he does stand alone, until the Methodist Awakening, in his zeal and concern to reach the lost. Was this period Nonconformity's missed Day of Grace?

Typeset and printed by Quinta Business Services, Meadow View, Weston Rhyn, Oswestry,
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E-mail: cscinfo@quintapress.com; Web-site: http://www.quintapress.com