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***Grace:
'tis a
Charming
Sound***

Congregational Studies
Conference 2001



**Grace:
'tis a
Charming
Sound**

**Gordon Cooke, John
Hancock, Neil Stewart**

**Congregational Studies Conference
Papers 2001**

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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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Photographs by Dr Digby L. James

Foreword

The quotation from Philip Doddridge's well-known hymn seems an appropriate title for the three papers given at the Congregational Studies Conference on 17 March at Westminster Chapel. They comprised a paper on Doddridge himself, together with others on the grace of God manifested in our Lord's atonement for the sins of his people, and on the ordinance of baptism as a means of grace in the context of covenant theology.

The Conference was again well-supported, and a time of good fellowship enjoyed over the excellent meal provided by the team of helpers from our London churches and further afield. We are most grateful to them for their contribution to the day's proceedings. We also made use of an overhead projector and hand-outs to assist in grasping the content of the papers—we hoped this helped. The balance of the Conference was again maintained, with papers on doctrinal, biographical and pastoral subjects.

Once more, we are indebted to the three speakers for all the work done researching and preparing the papers, for their willingness to give time out of busy schedules and hectic lives as ministers, to provide for our instruction and encouragement.

Next year's Conference will be held, God willing, at Westminster Chapel on Saturday, 18 March 2002. Why not join us again, or for the first time?



John Semper

Wigtown



John Owen



RW Dale



PT Forsyth



*Dr and Mrs Martyn Lloyd-Jones
(photograph courtesy of John Legg)*

At One? A History of Congregational Thinking on the Atonement

Gordon Cooke

Introduction

Recently, preaching through the book of Acts with the folk in my home church, I came across that astonishing accusation that was levelled against Paul and Silas, after they had been reaching out in Thessalonica. In Acts 17:6 we read that envious, unbelieving Jews dragged Jason, and some of the other believers there, to the rulers of the city, crying out:

These who have turned the world upside down have come here too!

Now the church that I pastor, in the village where I live, is accused of many things by the people that I meet on the doors. We are ‘out of touch’, ‘old-fashioned’, ‘a lot of hypocrites’, ‘people with closed minds’, and so the list goes on. I guess it’s the same with you. I confess that I have never heard anyone say to me; ‘Oh, yes, you are from the church that is turning this village upside down.’

If that concerns you, as it does me, we need to ask ourselves why that is the case. Yes, we are living in a day of small things, and not in the days of revival which seem to characterise much of the Book of Acts. But is it enough to excuse ourselves in this manner? Ought we to be paying more attention to what immediately precedes that glorious accusation?

In verses 2 and 3 we see that it flowed from the reaction to Paul’s ministry in the city. That was a three-Sabbath long, synagogue-based, reasoning, explanation and demonstration from the Scriptures (which were in those days just the Old Testament!) ‘that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.”’

In Thessalonica and elsewhere, Paul’s preaching was based around the person and work of Jesus Christ, particularly his death and resurrection. Indeed, when he wrote to the church at Corinth, he could even claim:

For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Paul and the other early apostles centred their preaching around the Atonement. It is the contention of this paper that without the fearless

preaching of the Atonement, this most pivotal of doctrines of the Christian faith, our churches will never turn even our own people upside down (or should that be the right way up?), let alone the world outside. Great preachers down through the centuries, whether they be Congregationalists or Independents, Baptists, Presbyterians or whatever, have believed this. Listen to two typical quotes from CH Spurgeon:

I do not think a man ought to hear a minister preach three sermons without learning the doctrine of atonement.

Across my pulpit and my Tabernacle shall be the mark of the blood; it will disgust the enemy but it will delight the faithful. Substitution seems to me to be the soul, the life of the gospel, the essence of the gospel; therefore must it be ever in the front.¹

But this is a Congregational Studies Conference, not a Baptist one! This is Westminster Chapel not the Metropolitan Tabernacle! Don't we have enough heroes of our own without borrowing those of our theological step-brothers? Yes, we do! Within Congregationalism and Independency, we have several such historical role-models in this sphere, men for whom the doctrine of the Atonement has been central in their preaching and writing ministries. This paper examines the approach of four such men; men who, to a greater or lesser extent, share our Congregational ecclesiology, and from whose examples, and perhaps mistakes, we would do well to learn. I want us to begin with the writings of John Owen, perhaps the greatest of the Puritans, and end with those of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, both of whom came from Welsh stock. Our journey between these two giants of evangelical orthodoxy will also take us through some of the works of RW Dale and PT Forsyth, an Englishman and a Scot, Congregationalists of the intervening years.

John Owen

John Owen, born in 1616, has been described as 'the Calvin of England', and 'the theologian of the Puritan movement'. Of all the extended summations of his influence that have been penned, we will content ourselves with this from JI Packer:

... he is by common consent not the most versatile, but the greatest among Puritan theologians. For solidity, profundity, massiveness and majesty in exhibiting from Scripture God's ways with sinful mankind there is no one to touch him ...

1 Both quoted in John Blanchard, *Sifted Silver* (Evangelical Press, Darlington, 1995), p. 234, 235.

Owen was a theologian of enormous intellectual energy. His knowledge and memory were vast, and he had an unusual power of organising his material.²

John Owen left behind him seventeen volumes of theological writings, along with seven equally large tomes on the Epistle to the Hebrews. With the recent publication by Soli Deo Gloria of a translation of his Latin works, all his writings are now in print, the other twenty three volumes being produced by the Banner of Truth Trust. As well as being a great preacher and writer, we, as Congregationalists, also look back to him as the driving force behind our 1658 Savoy Declaration of Faith, which he penned, along with Philip Nye, Thomas Goodwin, William Bridge and Sidrach Simpson, the surviving Dissenting brethren from the Westminster Assembly.

HE McDonald, in his book *The Atonement of the Death of Christ in Faith, Revelation and History*,³ suggests that, out of all those who have written upon this doctrine, Owen's contribution has had the greatest and most permanent influence. *The Death of Christ in the Death of Christ* was first published in 1647, and is part of volume 10 of the Banner of Truth edition of Owen's Works, or can be bought separately in a paperback edition. It was the product of:

seven years' serious inquiry ... into the mind of God about these things, with a serious perusal of all which I could attain that the wit of man, in former or latter days, hath published in opposition to the truth.⁴

The result is arguably his greatest work. Its detailed exposition and closely reasoned argument demand serious study. For those unfamiliar with his style, he has been described as travelling through his subject 'with the elephant's grace and solid step, if sometimes also with his ungainly motion!'⁵

Grace Publications have an easy-to-read, abridged version entitled *Life by His Death* by John Appleby. It will prove helpful to many to read the full work, with this abridgement alongside. Or vice-versa!

His 'perusal' of existing works upon the doctrine greatly influenced the essay which he produced. His theme is that the death of Christ is an exact surety of satisfaction for those whom God intended for salvation. It is dominated by the belief in the absolute predestination of the elect, for whom,

2 JI Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, Crossway, 1990), pp. 81, 193.

3 HE McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ in Faith, Revelation and History* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1985).

4 John Owen, *Works*, 16 volumes (London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 10:149.

5 Andrew Thompson, quoted in JI Packer, *Among God's Giants* (Eastbourne, Kingsway, 1991), p. 192.

and for whom only, Christ has made atonement. In writing it, he attempts, and succeeds, in slaying three particular dragons that were roaring increasingly powerfully in his day.

All of them are variants on the theme of universal redemption. The first was classical Arminianism, which was gaining a foothold in the Anglican Church of his day. The second was what was being taught by the Scot, John Cameron, Professor at Saumur in France, a position later known as Amyraldianism (after Moisé Amyraut, 1596–1664). The third was the argument of Thomas More, a lay theologian from East Anglia, which Owen regarded as the most comprehensive statement of the case for universal redemption, and for which he reserves his most devastating criticism.

In his introduction to the reader, Owen gets straight to the point by asking the key question: Did Christ's death free all men, or only some men, from their sin? He assumes in his teaching four things that are essential elements in any propitiation: that there is an offence to be taken away, a person offended who needs to be pacified, an offending person, and a sacrifice or other means of making atonement for the offence. But for whom did Christ die? If he died for all men, all men must have the power to accept or reject that ransom for themselves, or everyone must actually be ransomed by the death of Christ, whether or not they know it. The first of those suggestions denies the Scriptural teaching that men are dead in their trespasses and sins; the second, the truth that some people are lost for ever. He then summarises the reasons why his opponents prefer the view that Christ's death was for everyone:

- 1 That it makes God more attractive;
- 2 that it makes God's love greater;
- 3 that it makes Christ's sacrifice more valuable;
- 4 the Bible often uses the words 'all' and 'the world' when talking of Christ's death;
- 5 if Christ's death was for all, then they can be included, whatever their lifestyle.

Owen then sets out to demolish their arguments from the Scriptures, and in doing so, produced a work advancing 'limited atonement' that, in the 350 years since, has never been either bettered by his followers, or refuted by his opponents. It has four sections.

In part one, he outlines what he considers to be the Scripture's teaching about God's purpose in sending Jesus to die, showing, as he does so, the

trinitarian nature of our salvation. He ends this section by proving that it is Christ's work which is the means used to obtain our salvation, and that Christ's offering of himself and his intercession are the only means to accomplish our redemption.

Part two outlines the true purpose of Christ's death, showing that it makes the salvation of the elect a certainty, and listing the reasons why all those for whom Christ died, must then be saved.

Part three amasses sixteen arguments against a universal atonement, including arguments based on the nature of the new covenant, the biblical descriptions of salvation, the nature of Christ's work, terms used in Scripture, such as redemption, reconciliation and satisfaction, and arguments from particular verses of Scripture.

His final section answers some of the arguments put forward for universal redemption. Particularly helpful to the preacher might be his discussions of key verses in this connection, such as John 3:16 and 1 John 2:2.

Because of Owen's somewhat lugubrious style, we have refrained thus far from too many quotes. I remember hearing someone saying after reading some of Owen's works that he understood every word of it, but that he couldn't make head nor tail of the sentences that the Puritan made with those words! But we must let Owen speak for himself, even if only once, as we seek to establish the key conclusions of his thesis, especially as we bear in mind the historical impact of his writing. Only then may we go on to examine the work of those who built, to a greater or lesser extent, on his foundation.

Christ's death is related to the law, to the punishment of sin, which the law demands. For those 'chosen before the foundation of the world', the satisfaction of Christ's death,

was a full, valuable compensation, made to the justice of God, for all the sins of all those for whom he made satisfaction, by undergoing that same punishment which, by reason of the obligation that was upon them, they themselves were bound to undergo. When I say the same, I mean essentially the same in weight and pressure, though not in all accidents of duration and the like; for it was impossible that he should be detained by death.⁶

If God had relaxed the law to lessen the claim on Christ, he would have been unjust. The fact that he sacrificed his Son rather than his justice, means that the Christian can be sure that the penalty for our sin has been met. As the later hymnwriter, Augustus Toplady, would put it:

6 Owen, *Works*, 10:269.

Payment God cannot twice demand
 First at my bleeding Surety's hand,
 And then again at mine.⁷

Notice the Godward emphasis in what Owen says the Atonement is all about. As we journey down through the generations we will see that it is an emphasis which others at least partially lost. The Puritans in general were Godward, rather than manward, in all their thinking, and so they were less likely to go astray.

Surely this is the first lesson we can learn from Owen and the Puritans in general. Furthermore, if the doctrine of limited atonement paralyses us in our preaching we have not understood it. It certainly did not hinder our forebears. Indeed it gave them a glorious assurance of the certainty of their salvation, of the completeness of Christ's victory and the accomplishment of his mission. It spurred them on to reach out to those appointed to eternal life (Acts 13:48). If we have lost the same blessings, is it because we have lost the doctrine?

Moving on ...

If there was one man more responsible under God than any other for the recovery in the last fifty years of interest in the writings of John Owen, and in the Puritans more widely, it was Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones. As pastor of Westminster Chapel, founder of the Puritan (later Westminster) Conference and great encourager of the work of the Banner of Truth Trust, which, as we stated earlier, has reprinted much of Owen's writings, we have much for which to thank him and God.

As we will see at the close of the paper, the Atonement was a crucial doctrine in the preaching of Lloyd-Jones. However, as Iain Murray reveals in his biography of the Doctor,⁸ that was not always the case and that it ever became so was due partly to the influence of two books on the subject written by Congregationalists, RW Dale and PT Forsyth.

Murray reports how, early in the preaching career of Lloyd-Jones, he was preaching in Bridgend on a Monday night. After the service, the preacher was approached by the minister of the church whose building was being used for the service, and the ensuing conversation was to prove of considerable importance in Lloyd-Jones' developing ministry. He challenged the Doctor

7 From verse three of the hymn 'From whence this fear and unbelief?', *Christian Hymns* (Bridgend, Evangelical Press of Wales, 1977), no 540.

8 Iain Murray, *D Martyn Lloyd-Jones, The First Forty Years* (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), pp. 190ff.

about the little place he gave to the Cross and the work of Christ in his preaching

Lloyd-Jones pondered long and hard on the words he had heard. He realised that he had not been preaching the Atonement or justification by faith in a distinct enough manner. He began to read more fully into the subject, and was pleased to receive a suggestion from Congregational minister, and later college principal, Rev. Vernon Lewis. Three books were highlighted, one, *The Death of Christ* by Scottish Presbyterian James Denney, and the other two, RW Dale's *The Atonement* and PT Forsyth's *The Cruciality of The Cross*. (All three, incidentally, are planned for republication by Quinta Press in the near future.) It was the latter two which proved especially helpful to Lloyd-Jones at that time, and even though there were weaknesses in the theology of both of these Congregationalist writers, he drew benefit from them. It behoves us therefore to study their views of the Atonement too.

RW Dale

Chronologically first of these was Robert William Dale (1829–1895), one of the most famous names in the history of Congregationalism, and pastor of the Carrs Lane chapel in Birmingham from 1854 until his death. As two papers at this conference in recent years have been devoted to Dale, there seems little need to give him a full biographical introduction. Dale wrote several books, the most well-known of which is probably *The Atonement*,⁹ which grew from the Congregational Lectures of 1875, and after publication, rapidly went through many editions. The aim of the lectures, and hence of the book, was, as the preface states,

simply to show that the Death of Christ is conceived and described as being the objective ground on which we receive the remission of sins.¹⁰

He then follows this sentence with an interesting statement, which sums up his approach:

The premature attempt to construct a theory of the Atonement on the basis of those descriptions of the Death of Christ which represent it as a Ransom for us, or as a Propitiation for the sins of the world, or on phrases in which Christ is described as dying for us, or dying for our sins, has been the mischievous cause of most of the erroneous theories by which the glory of the FACT has been obscured.¹¹

9 All quotes are from RW Dale, *The Atonement*, 10th ed. (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1887).

10 *Ibid.*, p. ix.

Dale, therefore, sets out to consider first the relationships between Christ and the eternal law of righteousness and secondly the human race. It is his premise that, until this has been done:

we are in no position to determine with any confidence to what extent the Death of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is described as a 'ransom,' is analogous to other ransoms, or to what extent the death of Christ, which is described as a 'propitiation' is analogous to the propitiatory acts by which men are accustomed to allay the anger of those whom they may have offended ...¹²

However, as we will see emphasised when we look at the teaching of Lloyd-Jones, terminology is important. Scripture uses words, and particularly illustrative words, to teach us facts about the fact. To downplay these terms must lead us eventually into difficulties.

That Dale's book, *The Atonement*, is one of the most influential volumes ever to have been written on the subject cannot be denied, whether or not one agrees with all of his conclusions. Dale was writing against those who refused to accept the idea of an objective atonement, writers who denied that salvation and forgiveness is intimately bound up with the death of Christ. In the ten lectures that make up the book there is much that is of great value, and which gives evidence of a fine mind.

The first part of *The Atonement* is a thorough examination of the New Testament material relating to the doctrine. Although Dale does examine the Gospels and the Apostolic writings, he does not regard the multiplying of proof texts to be a safe ground for establishing the significance of a doctrine, arguing rather that the key truths of Christianity were less likely to be abandoned, and were therefore less likely to be written about by Paul and his colleagues. This is a different approach from that of Lloyd-Jones, for example, who always established the points of his sermons, on the Atonement and more generally, by reference to the rest of Scripture.

After an introductory lecture, lectures two and three focus on the centrality of the Atonement in the life and teaching of our Lord. They are excellent in many ways, showing how every aspect of the life of Christ, and not just the words that he spoke, point to his coming to die for the remission of the sins of men and women. Dale's discussion of how Christ saw himself fulfilling the Old Testament Law and Prophets is particularly worthy of consideration and study. For him, Christ's own definition of the reason for his incarnation is sufficient:

11 *Ibid.*, pp. ix f.

12 *Ibid.*, p. x.

His death, not his birth, was to be the great crisis in the history of mankind. His death, not his living ministry, was to reverse the evil fortunes of the human race. His apparent and temporary defeat was the condition of his real and enduring victory; he must die on the Cross in order to become the Prince and Saviour of the world.¹³

He must die, if all men are to be drawn to him. Other explanations of his death may be given. I prefer his own. He gave his life a ransom for many; his blood was shed for the remission of sins.¹⁴

Lecture four takes us into the remainder of the New Testament where he starts with the testimony of Peter to the fact and centrality of the Atonement. Starting with the position of the critics who doubted the inspiration of the Apostles of Christ, he shows how even on their arguing, the Atonement's centrality runs through Peter's post-Pentecost preaching and his epistles. He also deals with the erroneous view that Paul and not Peter was the teacher of the Atonement through the death of Christ. Again there is much of lasting and apologetic value in this lecture.

Lecture five takes us to the teaching of the Epistles of John and James, where in the first he rescues John from those who would deny that the Atonement forms the backdrop to the epistle. Though in his teaching on 1 John 2:2 where Dale is forced to talk of propitiation (up until now he has preferred 'expiation') we might detect seeds of problems to come, there is again much of great help. In his usual scholarly and forceful way, Dale then goes on to show how impossible it would be for the Epistle of James to have been penned by one who did not believe in an objective atonement, despite its lack of references to Calvary.

Lecture six, not surprisingly, is the longest chapter, dealing as it does with the teaching of Paul. Dale shows from Paul's unity with the other Apostles, his public preaching, and from a sample of his letters (1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Romans, Ephesians and 2 Corinthians in particular) that, to quote his conclusion,

the death of Christ, as the objective ground of the Divine forgiveness of human sin, was the substance of Paul's preaching; it was the central idea of his theology; it was the spring of the mightiest motives by which he was animated in his apostolic work.¹⁵

Writing on Romans 3:25,26 he says,

13 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*, p. 264.

it would be difficult to find words in which the objective character of the death of Christ could be more explicitly asserted. It is from 'wrath' that we need to be saved, and Christ has been openly set forth as a propitiation.¹⁶

The second section of Dale's volume begins with lecture seven. There he traces the doctrine of the Atonement through church history, and proves that it did not originate from church councils or theologians, but from God. After a discussion of what is meant by the remission of sins in lecture eight, in the final two lectures, which he conceded were perhaps the weakest part of the book, Dale tries to tie everything together to produce a 'Theory of the Atonement'.

For Dale, the three New Testament pictures of propitiation, ransom and substitution are too diverse to be able to be amalgamated. What is needed, therefore, is a theory that does justice to all three together. In lecture nine, therefore he discusses the relationship of Christ to what he calls 'the eternal law of righteousness', and in lecture ten the relationship between Christ and the universe in general and the believer in particular. He begins by looking at differing theories of punishment. He believes that sin must be punished simply because it is the breaking of the law, and, arguably, dismisses the personal offence of sin to a holy God a little too easily. If we had more time, we might also take issue with some of his statements about the unity of Christ with mankind.

His thinking leads Dale to a theory of the Atonement which surely falls short of that advanced by Owen before him, and more importantly, of scriptural truth:

The death of Christ is the objective ground on which the sins of men are remitted, because it was an act of submission to the righteous authority of the Law by which the human race was condemned—a submission by One from whom on various grounds the act of submission derived transcendent moral significance, and because in consequence of the relation between him and us—his life being our own—his submission is the expression of ours, and carries ours with it... The moral act of Christ in submitting to those sufferings, while it remains for ever alone in its unique and awful grandeur, involves a similar moral act on the part of all who have access to God through him.¹⁷

Or again:

In the death of the Lord Jesus Christ as a sacrifice and propitiation for the sins of the world, the moral perfections of God find their highest expression, and

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.43of.

the deepest necessities of man's moral and spiritual life their only complete satisfaction.¹⁸

Dale refuses to accept that the sinner's sin is imputed to Christ:

Christ was made sin for us, to use the bold language of Paul. He could not actually share the guilt of the human race, for guilt attaches to those and to those only who have actually sinned. Nor was there any imputation of sin—the imputation of sin is a legal fiction. But in a very real and deep sense, he made the consequences of our sin his own. What in us is a consciousness of personal guilt, appears in him in that vivid and human sense of the sin of mankind which became possible to him through the incarnation.¹⁹

This puts Dale in opposition to Owen who argues for the imputation of the believer's sin to Christ, eloquently and, I suggest, biblically, in the middle of his treatise on justification by faith.²⁰ Similarly the emphasis on Christ dying for the sins of the elect only, so strong in Owen, and I suggest, in Scripture, is not found in Dale. This may already have been detected in earlier quotes, but here are some more:

...the death of Christ, which expiated before God the sins of the human race...²¹

That Christ died for the sins of men, establishes a personal relationship between every man and Christ of the most intimate character.²²

He so died for all, that the race died in him. His death was the true crisis in the history of every man.²³

What can we learn from Dale that is positive? First, the belief that the Atonement undergirds every part of the New Testament is one that we need to have if we are going to preach the Atonement from every part of the Scriptures. Although Dale goes astray in his thinking, perhaps because he does too much thinking, his ability to take on those that he saw as 'liberal' on the question of an objective atonement, is a noteworthy phenomenon. Do we stand for the Atonement so forcibly?

Second is the importance of having Biblical vocabulary as our starting point when we study the Atonement, or for that matter, any part of God's

18 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

19 *Ibid.*, p. lxiii.

20 Owen *Works*, 5:175ff.

21 Dale, *The Atonement*, p. 124.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 207.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 261.

Word. We need to be exegetes as well as expositors. Without such an anchor, there is always the danger of drifting onto the rocks.

PT Forsyth

The third great Congregational writer on the Atonement, to whom we now turn, is PT Forsyth.

Peter Taylor Forsyth was born in Aberdeen, the son of a postman, in 1848. He studied at the University of Aberdeen, then under the celebrated Albrecht Ritschl at Göttingen, and finally at New College, London. In 1876, he was ordained at Shipley, Yorkshire, but his extreme theological liberalism put him and the church there outside the pale of the Yorkshire Congregational Union. He moved to St Thomas's Square, Hackney, where the same thing initially happened. During his six years there (1879–1885), he underwent a remarkable religious experience, which he later described as being 'turned from a Christian to a believer, from a lover of love to an object of grace.'²⁴ The remainder of his life and ministry bore testimony to the radical change of direction. He served churches at Manchester (1885–88), Leicester (1888–1894), and Cambridge (1894–1901), before becoming Principal of Hackney College until his death in 1921.

A trilogy of books, which he produced at the close of his life, showed the conclusion to which he had firmly come. *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*,²⁵ *The Cruciality of the Cross*,²⁶ and *The Work of Christ*²⁷ bear testimony to his belief that man's supreme need is for the grace that alone can reconcile him to a holy God. These were accompanied by a flow of magazine articles, published sermons and lectures. Again and again he stated that the Gospel of redeeming and reconciling grace is the Christian's ultimate authority. Since Jesus Christ is at that Gospel's centre, so must the Cross be. The Atonement must be taken seriously and preached centrally if Christianity is to be worthy of its name. He expanded on this theme in another volume, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*.²⁸

If RW Dale was difficult to systematise, Forsyth is even more so. By his own admission, he has no neat doctrine of the Atonement. Sometimes it is

24 PT Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), pp. 282f.

25 PT Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1909).

26 PT Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1909). Quotes hereafter are from 2nd edition, Independent Press, 1948.

27 PT Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1910).

28 See footnote 24 above.

easier to see how he doesn't see the Atonement than how he does see it. Furthermore, he writes in a style that is highly polished and rather epigrammatic, which occasionally obscures his brilliance.

Focussing our attention on *The Cruciality of the Cross*, we can see much that we would think would place him in a direct line from Owen. His first two chapter headings are *The Atonement Central to the New Testament Gospel* and *The Atonement Central to Christian Experience*, and in *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* he has much to say about the need and place of strong doctrine in the proclamation and life of the church.

The need for the church to preach more about the Cross, and consequently about grace, the enormity of sin and justification by faith alone, is one of the themes of the first chapter of *The Cruciality of the Cross*. Even writing almost a century ago, he declares that the falling numbers of people uniting themselves to a church could be explained by the lack of these themes being preached in churches. What would he say were he alive today? How accurately he sums up the modern church when he comments that when the Atonement is not central:

Our very Christmas becomes the festival of babyhood, Good Friday the worship of grief, and Easter of spring and renewal instead of regeneration.²⁹

As Dale had done before him, Forsyth shows the foolishness of trying to set Christ against Paul in an examination of the New Testament's teaching on the Atonement. It has to be said, however, that Forsyth's work takes its starting point less from Scripture than Dale, or more definitely, Owen.

Chapter two, on *The Centrality of the Atonement to Christian Experience* is also helpful. How true he is when he states:

Nothing is so resented by the natural self as the hearty admission of man's native lostness and helplessness ... He does not realise what a poor thing his self-justification must be, compared with his justification by God, his self-repair beside God's new creation.³⁰

Running through his writings on the Atonement are many principles that are at the heart of evangelical orthodoxy. He defines the Atonement as,

the covering of sin by something which God himself has provided, and therefore the covering of sin by God himself.³¹

29 Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, pp. 30f.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

31 Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 55.

And elsewhere:

By the atonement, therefore, is meant that action of Christ's death which has a prime regard to God's holiness, has it for its first charge, and finds man's reconciliation impossible except as that holiness is divinely satisfied once for all on the Cross.³²

Listen to a further quote:

... the God we have sinned against was in Christ, really forgiving the sinner at first hand, that Godhead was actually living in Christ and reconciling—not sending, visiting, moving or inspiring Christ, but living in him and constituting him.³³

The writings of Forsyth are, indeed, a treasure trove for quotes:

Christ is to us just what his Cross is. All that Christ was in heaven or on earth was put into what he did there ... Christ, I repeat, is to us just what his Cross is. You do not understand Christ till you understand his Cross.³⁴

Talking, in *The Work of Christ*, of Paul's teaching about reconciliation, he writes:

On this interpretation of the work of Christ, the whole church rests. If you move faith from that centre, you have driven *the* nail into the church's coffin. The church is then doomed to death, and it is only a matter of time when she shall expire.³⁵

And:

'God was in Christ reconciling', actually reconciling, finishing the work. It was not a tentative, preliminary affair ... Reconciliation was finished in Christ's death. Paul did not preach a gradual reconciliation. He preached what the old divines used to call the finished work ... He preached something done once for all—a reconciliation which is the base of every soul's reconciliation, not an invitation only.³⁶

Or:

The atonement did not procure grace, it flowed from grace.³⁷

Forsyth has a very strong conviction of the need to understand every aspect of the Christian message in relation to the holiness of God. Holiness for him, is

32 Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, p. viii.

33 Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 246.

34 Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, pp. 25,26.

35 Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 53.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

37 Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, p. 41.

not just an attribute of God, but his very essence. Listen to two quotes from his works:

Everything begins and ends in our Christian theology with the holiness of God.³⁸

The holiness of God is not an attribute of God; it is the whole of God himself as holy.³⁹

The Atonement must therefore be understood against this all-controlling constant. But Forsyth, too, was against understanding it in a legalistic, governmental or transactional way, as writers, Congregational and others, had done in the past.

He believed, indeed, that the presentation of the doctrine of the Atonement had, historically, been forced into structures and pictures which did great harm in obscuring its true purpose. To couch the Atonement in legalistic or transactional terms hid the essential nature of the event, which Forsyth saw as divine moral action.

Listen to him in *The Cruciality of the Cross*:

... the Cross, which is the central act of God's holiness, and the centre of the central moral personality, Christ ... There, the moral nature of God lives in the unity of an external redeeming act ... There is but one spot in the world where that is entirely true; and the spot is Christ's atoning Cross, the power centre of the moral world.⁴⁰

Consequently, he argued against those who did not see the Cross as essential for the satisfaction of God's holiness:

God so loved the world, we read, that he gave his Son as a propitiation to his own holiness. He gave his holy Self in his Son. But ... we are now taught that he was not going to let his holiness interfere with its salvation. He had means to hush that holiness, or salve it, but we should not speak of satisfying it. Satisfaction is obsolete theology. At any rate, he took it less seriously than his pity. But surely that is a non-moral creed, one which is but sympathetic, one therefore which must issue in an immoral society ... Room must be made for judgment.⁴¹

38 Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 78.

39 Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 368.

40 Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, p. 66.

41 PT Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (London, Duckworth, 1939), p. 110.

For Forsyth, the love of God and the Atonement needed to be held, too, against this all governing attribute. ‘The holy love of God’ is an expression with which Forsyth has become associated. Listen to him again:

Christianity is concerned with God’s holiness before all else, which issues to man as love ... This starting-point of the supreme holiness of God’s love, rather than its pity, sympathy or affection, is the watershed between the Gospel and ... theological liberalism.⁴²

and:

Without a holy God there would be no problem of atonement. It is the holiness of God’s love that necessitates the atoning Cross.⁴³

We may not, however, fully agree with the next quote, which emphasises the battle in his mind:

If we spoke less about God’s love and more about his holiness, more about his judgement, we should say much more when we did speak of his love.⁴⁴

That Forsyth is rich pickings for those looking for a good quote to spice up a sermon, cannot be doubted. But at times the reader is left with the feeling that that is all Forsyth is! He shows us wonderful panoramic views of the Cross continually, but it is not always clear where we have been taken by the end of the journey.

It is probably possible to pick out strands in Forsyth’s teaching which would be outside of evangelical orthodoxy. Standing alongside other writers such as Bishop Westcott, Vincent Taylor and CH Dodd, there are elements in his writings of a belief in the idea that when the New Testament writers speak of Christ’s blood it stands not for his death, but his life, which is released through death and so is made available to us. This teaching relies too heavily on a misunderstanding of Leviticus 17:11–14. Is it true to say, as he does in the final, and I suggest, weakest part of *The Cruciality of the Cross*:

It would not have mattered a whit, if no drop of blood had been spilt, if Jesus had come to his end by the hemlock or by the gallows. The imagery under which we speak of the situation would have changed—that is all.⁴⁵

This leads him to protest against hymns such as Cowper’s *There is a fountain filled with blood*. As we will see, Lloyd-Jones would most definitely take issue with such a statement.

42 Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, p. viii.

43 Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, pp. 79–80.

44 Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, p. 39.

45 Forsyth, *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Forsyth does not argue for limited atonement in the way that Owen did. The subject is not dealt with at all in *Cruciality*. The impression one is left with is that he would follow Dale here.

What can we learn that is positive from Forsyth? Surely we too must have his confidence in preaching the Atonement, especially as we probably have more confidence than he in the infallibility of the Book that we are preaching it from! Too many modern preachers are frightened of preaching the Cross and the Atonement, lest it empty their chapels. Surely Forsyth was correct in blaming empty chapels on such thinking.

The wonderful, illustrative quotes from Forsyth that we have sampled, should also be a challenge to us. No, his florid style should not be copied, even if we had his natural gifts enabling us to do so! But we need to express ourselves concisely, imaginatively and memorably. In the age of the sound-bite, we may be sound, but do we have bite in our preaching?

DM Lloyd-Jones

For our final preacher within Congregationalist history, we turn to Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, whose admiration for John Owen, and whose debt to the works of Dale and Forsyth, we have already acknowledged. Despite his almost thirty years of ministry here at Westminster Chapel, some would query his place in a Congregational Studies Conference. His background, upbringing and first church at Sandfields, Aberavon, would be more readily defined as Calvinistic Methodist, Welsh Presbyterian or 'Forward Movement'. And, as Iain Murray describes in an appendix to the second volume of his biography of the Doctor,⁴⁶ Lloyd-Jones retained respect for some aspects of Presbyterian Church government.

Murray goes on to say, however:

ML-J became a Congregationalist minister and a Congregationalist or independent in his judgement on church polity.⁴⁷

and, although his views on infant baptism and the role of the church meeting might have placed him outside the historic Congregational position, if Lloyd-Jones could ever have had a denominational home (he sometimes described himself as being in a denomination of one!) it would have been here.

Though there might, indeed, have been an initial absence of emphasis upon the Cross and the Atonement in the early preaching of the Doctor, that

⁴⁶ Iain Murray, *D Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith* (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), p. 789ff.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 790.

was soon rectified. In fact, such was his emphasis on the need to preach the Cross that, like our aforementioned 19th century Baptist friend from south of the Thames (!), there were times when he was accused of preaching it from texts where it cannot be found. Some of his evangelistic sermons on the Old Testament, which are now in print, take us from the most unlikely of Old Testament stories to the most glorious of New Testament doctrines, along a rarely travelled route. But Lloyd-Jones, far from being guilty of ‘importing’, was convinced that forgiveness of sin was the basic need of men and women, and convinced too, that the Scriptures pointed throughout to Christ and his finished work on Calvary. Like the Apostles in the Book of Acts, he saw how the Law and the Prophets looked forward to the Atonement, which could alone bring vindication of God, and peace and justification to man.

Throughout the preaching of Lloyd-Jones, therefore, you will find him returning again and again to the theme of the Atonement. When you read his sermons on those passages most particularly related to this doctrine, you see a man who burns with a desire for the Glory of God, and with an awareness of the centrality of the message that he was preaching.

This was also displayed in his priorities when it came to the publication of his sermons. When the Banner of Truth came to publish his series of sermons on Romans,⁴⁸ it was the volume which began with the expositions of Romans 3:20 that he suggested be published first. Listen to his preface:

This series of volumes begins in the third chapter at verse 20, and some may ask, Why start here and not at chapter 1? The answer is that I am anxious to proceed at once to what may be called the ‘heart’ of the epistle ... There is a sense in which the crucial matters—and also the difficulties—arise at the point where this volume begins. I have therefore summarised the argument of the first two and a half chapters at the beginning of this volume in order that we might move directly to a consideration of the great doctrines of justification by faith and the atonement.⁴⁹

Let me briefly illustrate, therefore, from the sermons that followed that preface, how the Doctor followed so clearly in his preaching, the emphasis of John Owen, with whom we started.

Three of the initial sermons in that volume have very telling titles. They are *Propitiation*, *The Blood of Christ*, and *The Vindication of God*. They are significant because they sum up the emphases in the preaching of ‘The

48 Now available in twelve volumes covering chapters 1–12, published by The Banner of Truth Trust.

49 D Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Atonement and Justification* (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. xii.

Doctor'. They also take us away from Dale and Forsyth and back to John Owen, even though the scenario in which they were preached, if not the battles which were being fought, was very different from that of three centuries before.

In the sermon entitled *Propitiation*, Lloyd-Jones is eager to argue for this word over against the American Revised Standard Version's 'expiation'—simply removing the guilt of sin and purifying the sinner from it—which had become popular because, the Doctor argued, the doctrine of the wrath of God was no longer acceptable to the modern mind. Lloyd-Jones goes on in his sermon to show how fundamental a doctrine the wrath of God is to the whole of the Scripture. Because of the wrath of God, his 'settled opposition to all that is evil, arising out of his very nature',⁵⁰ propitiation is necessary. To strengthen his case, he takes us back to Owen, whose four necessary ingredients for propitiation were outlined earlier, but need to be repeated again:

- 1 An offence to be taken away;
- 2 a person offended who needs to be pacified;
- 3 an offending person; a person guilty of the offence;
- 4 a sacrifice or some other means of making atonement for the offence.⁵¹

And Lloyd-Jones then states,

this great and glorious doctrine teaches us that the very God whom we have offended has himself provided the way whereby the offence has been dealt with. His anger, his wrath against sin and the sinner, has been satisfied, appeased, and he therefore can now thus reconcile man unto himself.⁵²

The second of these three sermons, *The Blood of Christ*, continues the theme of the preceding address. At once, Lloyd-Jones asks:

In what sense is the Lord Jesus Christ this propitiatory sacrifice? The answer is given in the important term now before us. It is 'in his blood'. This is a thoroughly New Testament statement. 'The blood of Jesus Christ' in connection with our redemption and salvation is something that is frequently emphasized.⁵³

50 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Lloyd-Jones goes on to prove his point from the Scriptures, and then to ask why Paul and the other New Testament writers use the term ‘blood’ rather than death when talking of the event of Calvary. He concludes:

The term blood is used rather than death in order to bring this teaching concerning our Lord, and the way in which he redeems us, into line with the whole teaching of the Old Testament concerning sacrifices.⁵⁴

Again, Lloyd-Jones proves this point from other New Testament texts, and states that a failure to hold the unity of the two testaments will always lead us into trouble. Many modern writers on the Atonement, who move away from terms like blood and propitiation, do so because they put asunder what God has joined together. He then deals with two specific attitudes to preaching about the blood of Christ, which he felt were prevalent, and which were false.

Firstly he warns his readers of those who remove all traces of the word from their preaching, praying and hymnology because,

they maintain it has nothing to do with Christianity, and with the Lord Jesus Christ and his exposition of the love of God.⁵⁵

Summing them up, he states:

I have nothing to say about these people, except that I cannot see that they are Christian at all.⁵⁶

The second group are those which we have referred to more directly in our earlier discussion of Forsyth. Those who regard ‘blood’ as referring to Christ’s life which comes to us through Christ’s death, are also dealt with in a thorough manner. Those who teach this, according to the Doctor,

do so in order to avoid the doctrine of the wrath of God ... They do not like that, indeed they abominate it. This is their way of getting rid of the idea of the wrath of God, of getting rid of the idea that God punishes sin, of getting rid of propitiation ... they have to twist these terms right round, and so ‘the offence of the Cross’ becomes something positive and beautiful and wonderful.⁵⁷

Whether or not we agree with the sweeping nature of that statement, it is hard to argue with the way Lloyd-Jones demolishes this false teaching both linguistically and from the whole of the rest of Scripture. Linking Romans 3:25 with the Old Testament again, he asks:

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

What was the purpose of the sacrificial death of the animals in the Old Testament? What is the Old Testament sacrificial teaching? It teaches four things which are of the greatest importance. Firstly, their design was to propitiate God. ... The second principle is that propitiation was procured by the cancelling of the guilt of the sinner ... The third ... is that propitiation was effected by the vicarious punishment of the victim substituted by the offender, and for him. ... Fourthly, the effect of sacrificial offerings was the pardon of the offender and his restoration into the favour and fellowship of God.⁵⁸

Lloyd-Jones teaches that because the wages of sin is death, sin can never be dealt with apart from death, apart from the shedding of blood. Christ therefore is our substitute, God himself having made him so.

The third sermon, on Romans 3:25,26, is again significantly entitled. In *The Vindication of God*, which has also been published in its own right in booklet form,⁵⁹ Lloyd Jones starts by saying:

I would remind you again that in many senses there are no more important verses in the whole range and realm of Scripture than these two verses.⁶⁰

Although seasoned readers of the Doctor will recognise that sentence as one he seemed to use at regular intervals, he is surely not guilty of exaggeration here!

He continues, emphasising that:

The death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross on Calvary was not an accident; it was God's work. It was God who 'set him forth' there. ... It was a great public act of God.⁶¹

It is foolish to sentimentalise the Cross, to treat it as a great tragedy as some do. It is *God* who has set him forth. Lloyd-Jones then goes on to ask:

Why did God do that? What was it that led God ever to do that, that made him ever purpose to do it?⁶²

We are then taken word by word, phrase by phrase through the verses, as this great pulpit preacher brings all his forensic skills to bear. Lloyd-Jones really believed every word of these verses was important; every word was a vital rock in this 'acropolis of Scripture'. If you have never read this sermon, get it, read

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 88f.

⁵⁹ D Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Cross, the Vindication of God* (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, n.d.).

⁶⁰ Lloyd Jones, *Atonement and Justification*, p. 95.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

it. If you have, then read it again! Let me just whet your appetite with a few extracts:

On Calvary, he (*God*) has shown that he still hates sin, that he is going to punish it, that he will pour out his wrath upon it. How did he show that on Calvary? By doing that very thing. What God did on Calvary was pour out on his only begotten and beloved Son, his wrath upon sin. The wrath of God that should have come upon you and me, because of our sins, fell upon him. ... That was the tremendous problem—how can God remain holy and just, and deal with sin as he says he is going to, and yet forgive the sinner? The answer is to be found alone on Calvary.⁶³

The Cross is not merely meant to influence us. But that is what the popular teaching tells us ... They say that it is God telling us that he has forgiven us; and so when we see Christ dying, it should break our hearts and bring us to see that. The Cross according to them, is directed to us solely; but it has a grander object than that ... The Cross is the vindication of God. The Cross is the vindication of the character of God. The Cross not only shows the love of God more gloriously than anything else, it shows his righteousness, his justice, his holiness and all the glory of his eternal attributes. They are all to be seen shining together there. If you do not see them all, you have not seen the Cross.⁶⁴

The sermon closes with a heart-searching challenge:

Make sure that your view, your understanding of the Cross, includes the whole of it. Test your view of the Cross. Where does this statement about declaring his righteousness come into your thinking? Is it just something that you skip over ... you should know the meaning of this. This is an essential part of the glorious gospel.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Our brief overview of Congregational History in relation to the Atonement has only enabled us to look at four of our most famous forbears. More time would have enabled us to look at others, such as the 19th Century American Congregationalist Horace Bushnell,⁶⁶ whose views on the doctrine would certainly not have been 'at One' with Dale and Forsyth, let alone Owen and Lloyd-Jones. Even within the four on whom we have focussed, all of whom are in the broadly evangelical tradition, we have noticed subtle but significant

63 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

66 Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice, Grounded in Principles of Human Obligation* (New York, Scribner's, 1874).

differences in opinion on the nature and extent of the Atonement. With his emphasis on the vindication of God, and propitiation, however, Lloyd-Jones, it may be argued, has taken us back, full circle, to John Owen, where we began.

The important question for us, however, especially if we have been called to preach the Gospel, is what people will understand of the Atonement from listening to us. Would we pass the Spurgeon test that we mentioned at the start? Could somebody hear three of our sermons without understanding the doctrine? Our bookshelves may groan under the weight of the volumes of Owen and Lloyd-Jones, rather than Dale and Forsyth, but do we preach and emphasise the Atonement in the same way?

Surely, as 'Ministers of the New Covenant', it is our duty to preach the Cross from the whole of the Scriptures. Wherever we take our people in God's Word, the road from the text to Calvary should be clearly signposted. The Apostles of Acts had only what we now call the Old Testament to preach from, but they managed rather better, I suggest, than we do, as ministers of the New Covenant with its 27 books as well! Yes, it is easier to preach the Cross from Ephesians, or even Exodus, than Esther, but part of the job of the preacher must be to develop in his flock such a Biblical overview, that no part God's Word is seen as cut off from the Cross. As preachers of God's Word, do we do that? Far better for us to be charged by men of 'preaching the Cross where it isn't', than being charged by God for not sounding the trumpet clearly enough.

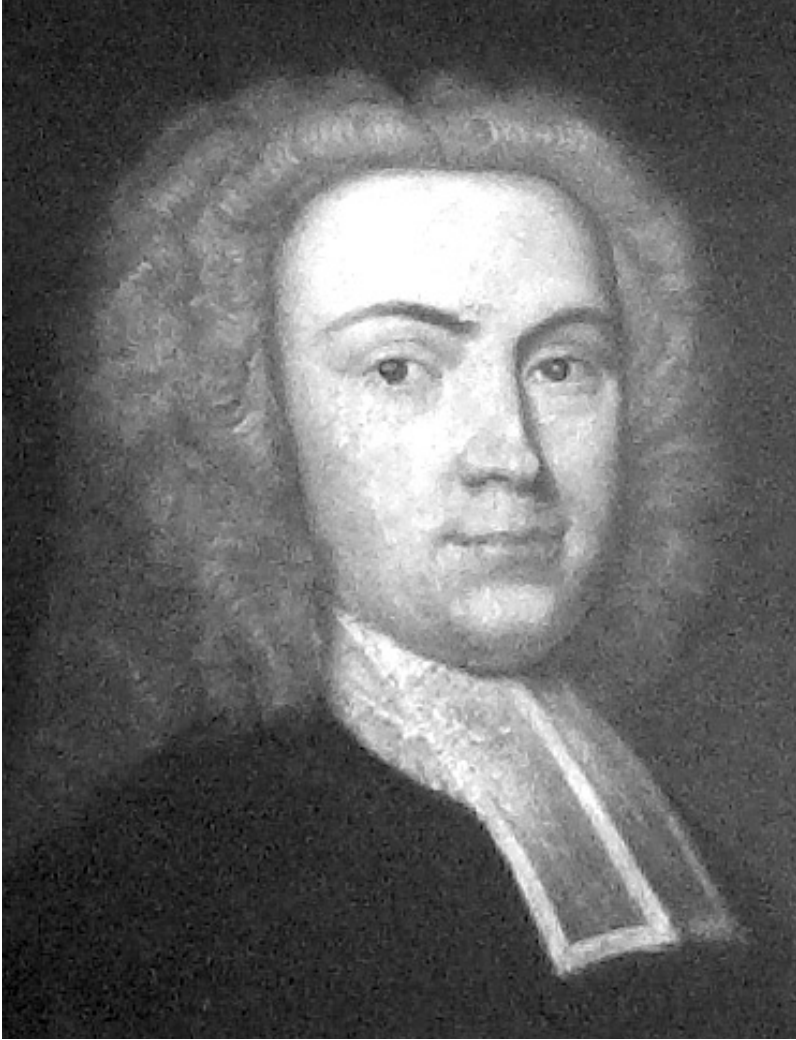
May I offer three other suggestions which may help us in this respect! Perhaps we are frightened of preaching doctrine. I do not mean afraid of talking about propitiation, the blood of Christ etc., as some outside of the evangelical camp may be, but wary of spending sermons concentrating on a doctrine rather than a particular verse or passage. *Because* our shelves grown with such well-read tomes as those of Lloyd-Jones, we may only ever preach systematically through a book. Yes, we touch on doctrines such as the Atonement, when they crop up, but do we take Sundays out from preaching in this way, so that we can preach on a particular doctrine from a number of texts? I heard of one preacher who did this for twenty six Sundays, with a series entitled 'The A-Z of The Christian Faith'. Might this not better equip our flocks?

Secondly, and this is of course linked with the previous suggestion, do we preach on the character and attributes of God enough? We live in a man-centred age. If ever there was a day when 'Behold Your God' needed to be the rallying cry of the preacher it is now. If we encourage our folk to think of

everything 'from God's point of view', surely they would not only be seeing things more biblically, but would also see the wonder of the Atonement more clearly.

Thirdly, have we lost confidence in the Communion Address? Turn to many of the great preachers of the past, and alongside the printed sermons that they have left behind are wonderful micro-sermons, preached at the Lord's Table, which, as well as directing their original hearers' thoughts to the significance of the elements then before them, take us, generations later, to Calvary. Too often, nowadays, our celebrations of the Lord's Supper are but rushed appendices to a prior service, and so another opportunity to set before the people the wonders of the Cross and of the Atonement is squandered.

Finally, let us never be guilty, in all our attempts to bring the gospel to the pagan society around us, of stripping the Cross of its offence to men. They still need to hear of the sinfulness of sin and of the wrath of a righteous God. They still need to be pointed to a perfect Saviour who has satisfied God's holy demands and gained for us eternal life. Only in preaching these truths can we hope to turn our world 'upside down'.



*Philip Doddridge, from a portrait in Dr Williams's Library
(reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of Dr Williams's Library)*

Philip Doddridge 1702–1751: Missionary Visionary

John Hancock

Introduction

On 17th September 1751 Philip and Mercy Doddridge left Bristol for Falmouth. Because of the condition of the roads, and the condition of Doddridge, it took ten days. They were heading for Lisbon, for Philip's health's sake. Once on board the small boat, and on their way, he felt somewhat better.

He had been trying various methods to get rid of a very hoarse voice, incessant coughing, extreme weakness and feverishness. He had recently attended the funeral of his friend Samuel Clark, the man who had encouraged him as a young boy to go into the ministry. He had tried various cures—hot baths, asses' milk, and tarwater—all proving unsuccessful. Doctors advised a winter in Lisbon, and he now sat on deck with his wife, leaving behind the cold damp of Britain, heading hopefully for sunnier climes. He had had a new lease of life already, as the ship becalmed in the Bay of Biscay. On 13 October they landed in Portugal. The day before, he had told Mrs Doddridge of the delightful and transporting views of the heavenly world that his heavenly Father had indulged him with. They were inexpressible. On landing he wrote a letter to his assistant minister in Northampton.

After mentioning his great weakness:

Nevertheless, I bless God, the most undisturbed serenity continues in my mind, and my strength holds in proportion to my day. I still hope and trust in God, and joyfully acquiesce in all he may do with me. When you see my dear friends of the congregation, inform them of my circumstances, and assure them that I cheerfully submit myself to God. If I desire life may be restored, it is chiefly that I may be employed in serving Christ among them; and that I am enabled by faith to look on death as an enemy that shall be destroyed, and can cheerfully leave my dear Mrs Doddridge a widow in a strange land, if such be the appointment of our heavenly Father. I hope I have done my duty, and so the Lord do as seemeth good in his sight.¹

He was not to live many more days—like many other ministerial role models of the eighteenth century, he was not to retire in comfort, but almost fell to

¹ Job Orton, *Memoir of the Rev. Philip Doddridge, DD (1766) in The Works of Philip Doddridge*, eds by E Williams and E Parsons, 10 volumes (London, 1802–05), 1:198.

pieces in harness. His whole life had been marked by great trials of personal weakness—he must have thought of some of them as they got to Lisbon.

His Early Life and Teens

When Philip was born in London, he was a tiny bundle that none seemed to think was alive. They thought he was dead till a passer by noticed a movement, and he was looked after as alive. He was the youngest of 19 brothers and sisters, though only one other survived into adult life apart from him, Elizabeth his sister. His family links were in the West Country and in Bohemia through his grandparents. As he grew up his mother often taught him Bible stories as they were depicted on the blue and white tiles around the fireplace of their London home.

He was only eight when his mother died suddenly. Four years later, an esteemed uncle died who had specially cared for him. He was moved to St Albans in the same year, and ten days after that move his father died. Many years later he said:

I am under some peculiar obligations to desire and attempt the relief of orphans, as I know the heart of an orphan; having been deprived of both of my parents at an age in which it might reasonably be supposed a child should be most sensible of such a loss.²

In St Albans a dissenting minister, Samuel Clark, took him under his wing. Of Clark he wrote:

He was a father to me when left an orphan, quite defrauded and stripped of all by those who should have been my guardians. I boarded house with him.³

His schoolmaster was a disciplinarian called Mr Nathaniel Wood, also a non-conformist minister. He was a thorough and careful scholar, and it was here that little Philip began to acquire the life long habit of working methodically, exactly, and instantly at whatever he aimed to do. It was during these years in St Albans that he came to faith, deeply influenced by Samuel Clark's holy life and warm heart. He confessed his faith and joined the church in January 1718. It was described by him as indeed 'the happy day that fixed his choice on his Saviour and his God'.

At 16 he felt a leaning toward the Christian ministry, and wanted to learn with that in mind. Reduced financially through bankruptcy in the family, he

2 Malcolm Deacon, *Philip Doddridge of Northampton, 1702–51* (Northampton, Northamptonshire Libraries, 1980), p. 31.

3 GF Nuttall, *Calendar of the Correspondence of Philip Doddridge, DD, (1702–1751)* (London, HMSO, 1979), Letter 1016, p. 206.

left Dr Wood's school to find comfort at his sister Elizabeth's new home, near the windmill on Hampstead Heath. Her husband was a dissenting minister, John Nettleton. The Duchess of Bedford became aware of his leaning and offered him financial support if he would give preference to the established church. He was not at ease. It was a tempting prospect, but he turned it down. Bewildered as to what to do, he had an interview with Dr Edmund Calamy, to beg his advice and assistance. Seeing the spindly looking youth in front of him, he gave Philip no encouragement at all, and advised him to turn his thoughts elsewhere. Torn apart by indecision, he decided to give a whole day to prayer. Imagine his delight when half way through that day, a letter came from Samuel Clark offering to provide him with a home and support for his studies till he could find a suitable academy. He eventually commenced his studies in October 1719, at Kibworth Harcourt, Leicestershire. He studied under John Jennings, a dissenting minister with a desire to train young men to a high standard of education.

His Training for the Ministry

Geoffrey Nuttall, editor of Doddridge's correspondence, points out:

A belief in the necessity of a trained and understanding ministry was something the Dissenters inherited from the Reformers and Puritans, whose spiritual children they were. When, after the restoration, they found the Universities closed to them, and an educated ministry put at risk, they set about training future ministers themselves.⁴

At first not many came forward, apart from ejected ministers' own sons. But the Toleration Act of 1689 gave some security, and various teaching establishments arose. Jennings' became well known through Doddridge's observation, and later use of it as a model for his own Academy in Northampton.

The study was intense, theological and secular. They covered the whole New Testament, and the parts of the Old Testament Jennings chose. Jennings would expound ten lessons per week, sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the evening. Extempore lectures Doddridge valued. Every evening an account was taken of their private studies:

We repeated to him immediately after prayer, something we had met with which we judged remarkable. By this means all enjoyed some benefits of the studies of each. It engaged us to read with attention, and reflections our tutor

4 Nuttall, *op. cit.*, p. x.

made and the advices he gave were well worth our remembrance. We were obliged to talk Latin within some certain bounds of time and place.

Every Sunday Mr Jennings used to send for some of us into the lecture room and discoursed with each separately about inward religion. The discourse was generally introduced by asking us what we observed as most remarkable in the sermon we heard that day. He took the opportunity of admonishing us of anything he observed amiss in our conduct. This he always did in an engaging manner. 7pm we met for family prayer, reading of a practical writer of our choice, or sermon review for three quarters of an hour. Some studied The [Westminster] Assembly's *Larger Catechism* after further singing and prayer.⁵

On 24 January 1723 he received a certificate of approbation and recommendation from all the ministers of the county, after three had examined him. Jennings moved to Market Harborough the same year, but died of smallpox soon after. The chapel at Kibworth invited Doddridge to be their pastor, which he was for some years. Thus began a period of difficult years of personal trial for Philip.

From his correspondence he describes Kibworth as,

... one of the most unpolite congregations I ever knew, consisting almost entirely of farmers, and graziers, with their subaltern officers. I have not so much as a tea table in my whole diocese, although above eight miles in extent, and but one hoopetticoat within the whole circuit. I live here just like a hermit.⁶

One senses that these were difficult years for Doddridge. He met with people his own age in the villages, where fashions, latest books, current affairs etc were much in vogue. In December 1722 he wrote to his Aunt Roberts, confiding to her that he was most violently in love with a 17 year old, Kitty Freeman, his host's daughter. He had nicknamed her 'Clarinda'. He wrote:

I have a heart exactly prepared to receive the finest and tenderest impressions. I forget everything but Clarinda. I dream of her in the night, and rave of her in the day. If my tutor asks me a question about predestination, I answer him that Clarinda is the prettiest creature in the world. Or if I sit down to make a sermon against trans-substantiation, I cannot forbear cautioning my hearers against the excesses of love.⁷

5 Philip Doddridge, *The Correspondence and Diary of Philip Doddridge, D.D.*, 5 volumes (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1829–1831), 1:473.

6 Nuttall, *op. cit.*, Letter No 67.

7 Deacon, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

This lasted some years, till she found fault with him, and the relationship broke up. He then formed another link with his previous tutor's daughter, Jenny Jennings. He was around 20, she was 15. He had known her since moving to Kibworth for instruction in her father's home. He felt ill at ease over this, as in his correspondence there are letters trying to substantiate a large age range between husband and wife. He moved to what he called a bachelor's house in Northampton, a thing in nature to which he had had the greatest aversion, yet now he had become settled and free from care from 'that foolish passion'.

At Christmas 1729, the pastorate of Castle Hill Dissenting Chapel in Northampton was vacant, and the church wanted him to consider moving there. People objected. It would be too much to have an Academy running as well as being a pastor. He moved, became very ill, but was ordained as the new dissenting minister in March 1730. He lived here till the journey to Portugal twenty one years later.

His family life until 1751

One name soon appears after the move to Northampton: Mercy Maris from Coventry. In a love letter to Mercy he wrote in October 1730, after a visit with her, he says:

In a few hours you have made yourself more to me than my most intimate friends ... this is a form of magick at which I am amazed.

Five love letters later, on 1 November, he says he is determined to see her again next week, and hopes then to fix the date of their wedding. They were married in December 1730.

In 1731 their first child was born, a daughter, Betsey. Polly was born two years later, and a third daughter born in 1734 called Mercy. When Betsey was not yet five, she became seriously ill. Philip wrote in his diary:

On 31st July last we lost my dear and reverend Christian brother and friend Mr Saunders. On 1st September Lady Russell, that invaluable friend, died in Reading on the road from Bath, and on Friday 1st of October, God was pleased by a most awful stroke, to take away my eldest, dearest child, my lovely Betsey. She was formed to strike my affection in the most powerful manner, such a person, such a genius and temper as I admired even beyond their real importance, so that indeed I doted upon her, and was for many months before her death in a great degree of bondage on her account. She was taken ill at Newport about the middle of June, and from thence to the day of her death, she was my continual thought, and almost uninterrupted care. God only knows with what earnestness and importunity I prostrated myself before

him to beg for her life; which I would have been willing almost to have purchased with my own. When reduced to the lowest degree of languishment by a consumption, I could not forbear looking in upon her almost every hour ... O my soul, God has blasted thy gourd; thy greatest earthly delight is gone; seek it in heaven, where I hope this dear babe is; where I am sure my Saviour is, and where I trust through grace, notwithstanding all this irregularity of temper, and of heart, I shall shortly be.⁸

A son arrived in 1735, and in 1737 another daughter was born. A second son was born in 1739, but did not survive infancy. Several miscarriages followed. Twin daughters were then born, Sarah and Jane. They arrived prematurely in 1746 and lived only two days. In 1749, a son, William, was born, but only lived six days. Two years later we find ourselves with Doddridge and his wife disembarking from the boat at Lisbon. His life was marked frequently by loss, family disruption, ill health, financial difficulties, temptations, and many trials, all packed into the first half of the 18th century. But in the midst of all this, God showed His strength through varying ministries.

From the boat, they were welcomed into the house of David King, a wealthy merchant living in Lisbon. The wife's relatives lived nearby too. They soon moved into a country house, but none had taken into account the rainy season which set in in October. Rain fell in torrents. Doddridge's bed was so damp that they had to light several fires to dry it out. His health soon deteriorated. Severe diarrhoea brought extreme exhaustion. 'His mind continued in the same vigour, calmness and joy, which it had felt and expressed during his whole illness', wrote Orton.⁹ 'So sure I am that God will be with you, and comfort you, that I think my death will be a greater blessing to you, than even my life has been', he said to his wife.¹⁰ He died during the night of 26 October 1751. That was the framework of great weakness in his life. Let's now catch a glimpse of what God enabled him to do.

God gave Philip Doddridge a Pastoral Ministry

The population of Northampton around Doddridge's time was around four to five thousand people. Towards the end of the previous century, a huge fire had destroyed the town, but it was now rebuilt. Like many such towns it was a focal point for the social and political life of the gentry, and for the operation of the local economy: the town manufactured footwear and textiles. Agricultural seed distribution in the Midlands, and marketing horses were

8 Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, 1736, 70th sacramental entry.

9 Orton, *op. cit.*, 1:199.

10 *Ibid.*

added to these. Sixty two inns, many alehouses, stabling for as many horses as there were people, cock fighting, florists feasts, gardeners' society meetings, wrestling, swordsmanship, concerts, plays, musical and literary activities were all part of Northampton life. Philip became a familiar figure on the streets of the town. Bishop Jebb spoke of him as,

a burning and a shining light, which in days of more than ordinary coldness, Divine Providence was pleased to kindle, in order to impart both warmth and illumination to the professing Christian world.¹¹

Shopkeepers, tradesmen from the town, farmers, farm workers and villagers, soldiers temporarily stationed in town, local gentry, and intelligentsia were all among the congregation.

His life of prayer and personal spiritual life spilled over into this daily work continually. He often spent several hours in prayer and fasting in a small room tacked on to the edge of the chapel, his vestry, where there was freedom from the noise and bustle of the town and Academy. His care over his responsibilities was evident to all.

He was specially concerned about families, emphasising the importance of family religion:

Oh my dear friend, whoever you are (for I know no one under my care to whom I may not address that appellation), give me leave to tell you plainly, that while I write this I have that awakening scripture in my view, 'Pour out thy fury upon the heathen that know thee not, and upon the families that call not on thy Name', Jeremiah 10:25. I appeal to you as a man of ordinary sense and understanding (as it needs no more) to judge whether this does not strongly imply that it may be taken for granted, every family, which is not a heathen family, which is not quite ignorant of the living and true God, will call upon his Name. What I desire and entreat of you is, that you would honour and acknowledge God in your families, by calling them together every day, to hear some part of his word read to them, and to offer for a few minutes your united confessions, praises and prayers to him.¹²

He was specially eager about how small children were handled in families. Four words he uses about teaching our children:

Plainly. Teach them the basic things first. Those things which are the most necessary for our faith are the plainest. This surely springs from the abundant goodness and condescension of the great God. Just as in the world of nature, those kinds of food which are the most wholesome and nourishing are the

¹¹ Deacon, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

¹² Doddridge, *Works*, 1:594.

most common. Make scripture phraseology our rule and pattern as Dr Owen says.

Seriously. There is an unhappy proneness in our degenerate natures to trifle with the things of God. Great care should therefore be taken that we do not encourage such a spirit by our own levity, or indolence in the way we teach.

Tenderly. Take care that we do not leave the impression that we desire to terrify them or amaze them, to lead them into unnecessary severities, or deprive them of innocent pleasures. It must proceed from a hearty love to them, and an earnest desire for their happiness. Address them in the most endearing language. If tears arise while you speak, don't suppress them.

Patiently. Farmers committing the seed to the ground need patience. So do ministers, so do parents. The growth of nature by slow insensible degrees we see. Your children will forget what you tell them, tell them again lovingly. They will forget a second and third time, tell them again. Thus God deals with you, and you have daily reason to rejoice that he does. He knows our frailty. Do so to them.¹³

He wrote letters far and wide, including to the troops after the Battle of Culloden, and loved to meet up with those who had benefitted by his ministry, as with Colonel Gardiner. His pastoral care overflowed to foster links with real Christians from other church groupings, including the nearby College Street Baptist Church, and Fuller's Baptist Church in Kettering. He wrote lovingly to James Hervey in the Church of England at Weston Favell, dedicating a printed sermon to him on Jesus' invitation to thirsty souls:

We both address the same God in the Name of the same Mediator; and the great blessings we ask are in the main the same. We both commemorate the death of Christ as our propitiatory sacrifice, resting our own souls, and directing our people to rest theirs, on the atonement he hath made, and the complete righteousness which he hath wrought. Thus joining in love to him as our common Saviour, and living the life which we live in the flesh by the faith of the Son of God, we are both waiting for his salvation, expecting that ere long our spirits will be joined in the general assembly and church of those who die in the Lord ... Surely the part we are playing under these different denominations is far more pleasing to God, more comfortable to ourselves, and more edifying to the world, than if you, dear Sir, were to set at naught your brother for his nonconformity, or I to judge mine for his conformity; and we were to infect, not to say, poison the streams of God's sanctuary, where we respectively reside, with bitterness, contention, censure and reproach.¹⁴

13 Doddridge, *Works*, 2:41–45.

14 Doddridge, *Works*, 2:588.

He was said to be most happy when the congregation met around the Lord's table. His diary was based on the days when this happened, they were highlights in his spiritual life:

My God, and is thy table spread? And does thy cup with love o'erflow?
Thither be all thy children led, And let them all its sweetness know.
O let thy table honoured be, And furnished well with joyful guests;
And may each soul salvation see, That here its sacred pledges tastes.
Revive thy dying churches Lord, And bid our drooping graces live;
And more, that energy afford. A Saviour's grace alone can give.¹⁵

He was a Preacher of No Mean Reputation

Gentlemen, ... preaching requires genius, application, and the Divine blessing. Of the former, few are entirely destitute who are capable of academic study, nor is great height of genius necessary. The latter, with good intent and pious conduct, may be expected. Diligence is therefore the main thing wanting.

Among the sixteen words of advice, be aware of good authors to read, follow their example. Don't read just one to pick up his weaknesses. First of all, become acquainted with the Puritans, often now despised. Our grandmothers looked beautiful though the way they dressed seems out of fashion nowadays.

Considering the lethargic state of so many souls, I have long thought it the prudence of Christian ministers to improve public alarms, which remarkable providences may excite in the minds of considerable numbers of the population.¹⁶

He was invited to preach in London 1749 when a second earthquake shook the city. Wellingborough was severely damaged by fire. He was called to preach at a fast day, where his subject was Amos 4:11 'I have overthrown some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and ye were as a firebrand plucked out of the burning, yet you have not returned to me, saith the Lord.'

On the opening of a County Infirmary, he preached on the duty of compassion to the sick, poor and lame.

To endorse the teaching of his sermons, he wrote hymns which were sung for the first time after the sermon, accompanied by Doddridge himself on the violin. His hymns were not published until after his death, but 374 appear in his works, all tied to passages of Scripture, and full of praise to God.

15 Elsie Houghton, *Christian Hymn Writers* (Bridgend: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1982), p. 62.

16 Doddridge, *Works*, 5:425.

Nearly a hundred years after Doddridge's death, Charles Bridges drew much instruction from Doddridge's comments on preaching and ministry. 'The better we pray, the better we study, the better we preach.'

Doddridge was a Writer

He surely had a great vision to bring the message of the Gospel of Christ to all kinds of people. At the end of a busy day he would set aside some time to write with this in mind. The year 1744 saw the publication of *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. That was the same year as the official opening of the Northampton Infirmary, and that year Doddridge read two scientific papers to the Northampton Philosophical Society. His book was read and passed on to William Wilberforce, and its reading led to his serious study of the Bible and conversion to Christ. His close friend Isaac Watts devised the plan for the book, but was too old and weary to write it himself. As Doddridge wrote it, copies of the text went to Watts, who made comments. Watts wrote back on one occasion, that the last two chapters had better sentences in them. He had however tried it out on his footman, who when interrogated said he came across many words that he just did not understand. The book was slightly amended when another friend suggested that where the book describes becoming a Christian, it may present a scheme of things that did not allow some variety in God's ways. Did not his directions for the Christian life also have in them possibility for discouragement for people who just could not meet his requirements?¹⁷ Alan Gibson's summary of the work is so extremely helpful for today's readers.¹⁸

His main work he regarded as five volumes of *The Family Expositor*:

I have long been convinced that if anything can stop that progress of infidelity and vice, which every wise man beholds with sorrow and fear, that if anything can allay those animosities which have so long inflamed us and pained the heart of every generous Christian; in a word, if anything can establish purity and order, peace and the glory of the church; or spread the triumphs of personal and domestic religion among us, it must be an attentive study of the Word of God, and especially of the New Testament, that best of books.¹⁹

It was a massive undertaking, including a Harmony of the Gospels in its early part, and what he describes as a new translation. It was intended for daily

17 Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, Letter from N Neal 1745.

18 Alan Gibson, 'Philip Doddridge's *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*' in *Increasing in the Knowledge of God*, 1960 Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference (np: Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, 1962), p. 3.

19 Doddridge, *Works*, 6:4.

reading of the Scriptures. The work has not been reprinted, while Matthew Henry's work has still maintained its usefulness. The long sentences of this work (eg the one sentence above) make it rather difficult to untangle, and maybe this is what Watt's footman found hard going.

Doddridge's Academy for Young People

His vision extended to training young people along the lines of the training that he had received as a young man under John Jenkins. It was a close knit community. It was an established law that every student should rise at six o'clock in the summer, and seven in the winter. A monitor was weekly appointed to call them, and they were to appear in the public room soon after the fixed hour. Their tutor set them an example of diligence, being generally present with them at these early hours. When thus assembled, prayer was made, then they retired to their closets until the time of family worship. At this Doddridge expounded the Old and New Testaments in Hebrew and Greek. Some were overcome by illness, a number actually died while on the course. The course was wide ranging, with lectures on Watt's logic, rhetoric based on Jennings's lectures, geography, metaphysics, algebra and geometry included.

Two hundred and thirty lectures on theology were the backbone of the course. Ten sections on such subjects as: the powers and faculties of the human mind (twenty two); on the Being of a God and his natural perfections (twenty eight); on the nature of moral virtue in general and moral attributes of the deity (thirty eight); on the immortality of the human soul (nine); on the reason to desire a revelation (nine); asserting and vindicating the genuineness and credibility of the Old and New Testaments (forty two); on the doctrine of the existence and nature of God and the divinity of the Son and the Spirit (nine); on the fall and recovery by the mediatorial undertaking of our Lord Jesus Christ, with the nature of faith in him and the Covenant of Grace established through him (twenty three); on a survey of duties the gospel requires (twenty one); on the doctrine of angels and the last things (twenty).²⁰ Doddridge received an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Aberdeen University in recognition of his work on the course.

George Whitefield visited the Academy, and soon after wrote to Doddridge and the students there:

I heartily pray God that you may be burning and shining lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Though you are not of the Church of

²⁰ Doddridge, *Works*, vol. 4, Index of lectures.

England, yet if you are persuaded in your own minds of the truth of the way wherein you now walk, I leave it. However, whether Conformists or Nonconformists, our main concern should be to be assured that we are called and taught of God ... Indeed, my dear brethren, it rejoiced me much to see such dawnings of grace in your souls; only I thought that most of you were bowed down too much with a servile fear of man... Unless your hearts are free from wordly hopes and wordly fears you will never speak boldly as you ought to speak ... Study, therefore brethren, your hearts as well as your books. Ask yourselves again and again, whether you would preach for Christ if you were sure to lay down your lives for so doing.²¹

Did the vast amount of extra-biblical material that these young people were encouraged to assimilate cloud some of their hearts, splendid work though it was to teach them? Was this an adequate way to meet the challenge of the hour?

Finally

Philip Doddridge lived in an age of no steam, no railways, no gas, no electricity, no telephone, no proper roads, no proper police force, where corruption and mismanagement in high and low places were the order of the day. Thirty years previous to his birth, Goodwin, Baxter, Owen, Flavel, Bunyan, and Howe, Puritan giants, all went to glory. Dissenters had more freedom now, but the distinctive doctrines of the Bible were hardly mentioned, let alone preached. Cold morality, deism, and philosophy poured in alongside life styles of abandonment. What held this man during those dark far off days?

1 He believed in the clear ability of the Lord Jesus to supply more grace to him personally as it was needed. In 1737 he wrote in his diary:

Let us own we needed a sacrifice. Let us own the sufficiency of this which God has provided, and let us by faith apply to it, and apply it to our souls, and so draw near to God by it, to God as seated on a mercy seat, therefore to God, our joy, our great joy, our exceeding great joy! to God whose mercy is our hope and confidence, whose attributes are now ours, what can we wish for more?

Hence at the end of his life too 'As to the conduct of every day, to breathe out my heart to God before I rise, to pray while dressing, to make prayer the first work if possible before I read one word, to make the scriptures the first book.' 'Such blessings from thy gracious hand our humble prayers

21 AA Dallimore, *The Life and Times of George Whitefield*, 2 volumes (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970, 1980) 1:399.

implore' and 'Thou shalt be our chosen God, and portion evermore'. 'The God of Bethel feeds his own people constantly'.²²

- 2 He relished the thought of the revival of true religion. At the end he was disappointed that the congregation in Northampton was slightly decreasing, but he delighted to preach the gospel on Harvest Autumn trips in the surrounding villages. He tried to organise linking as many pious people as he could to contribute to the spread of the Gospel overseas, and in the darkest parts of our own land. The friends of true revival were his friends. The Countess of Huntingdon, George Whitefield, James Hervey and Isaac Watts were hearts he warmed his own heart by.
- 3 His family motto was 'Live while you live'. In spite of hardships and sorrows, this he sought to do, though not as the ordinary person would see it.

Live while you live, the epicure would say,
And seize the pleasures of the present day.
Live while you live, the sacred preacher cries,
And give to God each moment, as it flies.
Lord, in my life, let both united be,
I live in pleasure, when I live to thee.²³

²² Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, 5:528.

²³ Quoted in Alan Clifford, 'Not in Word Only: The Forgotten Doddridge' in *Becoming a Christian*, 1972 Westminster Conference (Warboys: The Westminster Conference, 1973), p. 92.

A
DECLARATION
OF THE
FAITH and ORDER
Owned and practised in the
Congregational Churches
IN
ENGLAND;
Agreed upon and consented unto
By their
ELDERS and MESSENGERS
IN
Their Meeting at the *SAVOY*, *October 12*, 1658.



LONDON:

Printed by *John Field*, and are to be sold by
John Allen at the Sun Rising in *Pauls*
Church-yard, 1658

Baptism in the Congregational Tradition

Neil Stewart

Survey of the Congregational Position

These, then, are the Congregationalists. They are Christians who believe that each church is ‘independent’ of external control. They disallow the authority of the state to dictate how they should worship or serve God. They do not acknowledge the right of any other church (or group of churches or church representatives) to intervene in their affairs. They are ‘congregational’ because every believing and covenanted member of the local church has a part in the government of his own church. They differ from Baptists because they baptise infants as well as believers. Their essential witness is to the direct Lordship of Jesus Christ in the life of each local congregation.¹

So wrote Derek Swann in the EFCC publication of the Savoy Declaration of Faith, *Evangelical & Congregational*. This statement is in line with most of the Trust Deeds of Congregational Churches. With hardly a dissident voice, Trust Deeds specify that the properties they protect are reserved ‘for the use of Protestant Dissenters of the Independent or Congregational denomination, practising paedobaptism’, that is, the baptism of infants. The Congregational position is made clear by quoting the relevant paragraph of the Savoy Declaration. ‘Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptised, and those only.’

The subject of this paper is ‘Baptism in the Congregational Tradition’ and it will major on the Congregational understanding of the practice of baptising infant children of believing parents. Apart from differing opinions, perhaps on the mode of baptism (whether by immersion, sprinkling or pouring), Congregationalists have always baptised adult converts to Christianity on a profession of faith. The area of controversy has surrounded the practice of including infant children of those adult believers as well.

Congregationalists have historically followed the position of the majority of the Reformers in holding to a covenant theology understanding of God’s dealings with man (which we’ll come back to later). This has been the belief

¹ *Evangelical & Congregational* (Braughing: An Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches, 1981), pp. 10–11.

and the practice of men such as John Robinson, John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, John Cotton, Thomas Shepard, Jonathan Edwards, Isaac Watts, Philip Doddridge, the founders of the London Missionary Society, John Angell James and many more. It is a position which is reflected, as mentioned, in the Savoy Declaration of Faith² and the 1833 Declaration.³

However, for many today, even many within EFCC churches, infant baptism is at best a strange practice and at worst something which is anathema. There are a number of our churches whose practice on the matter of baptism runs contrary to their own Trust Deeds. Sadly, many object to the practice out of ignorance. One lady who attended our church told me of her father, who used to give a little booklet entitled 'What the Bible has to say about baptising infants' to people who enquired. The pages of the little booklet were blank! Now this woman did not come from a Congregational background, but there are many within our churches who would hold the same view.

Now it is not the purpose of this paper to provide a definitive statement on the practice of infant baptism which will end the centuries of controversy. It is not the purpose of this paper to defend the practice of infant baptism. It is not the purpose of this paper to convert any Baptist brethren to a Paedobaptist position. It is the purpose of this paper to show that Congregationalists have held to a Paedobaptist position not out of mere tradition, but out of biblically grounded convictions as to the way in which God in his grace reveals his salvation to a lost world.

And just as there are differences between Baptists over the meaning and mode of Baptism, so there are differences between those who hold to a Paedobaptist position. There have been differences within Congregationalism over the practice as well. And so I would like, first of all, to highlight some of those differences, which will then lead into an outlining of the theological basis for the practice, before looking at some objections to the practice, before raising some questions as to why there seems to be a lack of understanding concerning the practice, before looking at the significance of the practice for the children, their parents and the local church.

2 'Baptism is a Sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ to be unto the party baptised a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God through Jesus Christ to walk in newness of life.' (*Savoy Declaration of Faith*, Chapter 29).

3 'They believe in the perpetual obligation of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; the former to be administered to all converts to Christianity and their children, by the application of water to the subject, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost"; and the latter to be celebrated by Christian Churches as a token of faith in the Saviour, and of brotherly love.' Para. XVIII, Principles of Religion: Declaration of Faith and Order of the Congregational or Independent Dissenters 1833.

Differing positions on the practice within Congregationalism

John Owen

John Owen was perhaps the greatest Congregational theologian and was one of the authors of the Savoy Declaration of Faith in 1658. For John Owen, baptism, like the Lord's supper, was an external act 'whereby all the grace, mercy, and privileges of the gospel are sealed' and it is by these [grace and mercy] that the privileges are 'confirmed unto them who are in due manner made partakers of them.'⁴ For Owen, then, baptism was a sacrament, a sign and seal of the promises of the Covenant of Grace.

Sinclair Ferguson summarises Owen's general view of the relationship of the Christian to the sacraments:

Sacraments are of value only when the recipient sees through, or beyond them, as signs, to the reality which is communicated through them. This exercise of faith involves three things: the submission of the soul to the authority of Christ; trust in the veracity of Christ actually to accomplish that which is sacramentally exhibited; and an understanding of the mystical relation between the symbols and Christ himself.⁵

For Owen, baptism pictured the washing of regeneration.⁶ He defined it as:

An holy action, appointed by Christ, whereby being sprinkled with water in the name of the whole Trinity, by a lawful minister of the church, we are admitted into the family of God, and have the benefits of the blood of Christ confirmed unto us.⁷

Owen argued that the recipients of baptism were entitled to the external privileges which belonged to the regenerate, until such time as they failed to personally perform the duties which are required of the regenerate, such as faith, love and holy living. Personal failure here would mean that such persons 'lose all privilege and benefit by their baptism.'⁸

Owen believed that the infant children of believers were part of the gathered church and entitled to receive the sign of baptism. The failure of those baptised children who later in life proved unfaithful to Christ, was more

4 John Owen, *Works*, 16 volumes (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968) 15:168.

5 Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 214.

6 Owen, *Works*, 16:12.

7 Owen, *Works*, 1:491.

8 Owen, *Works*, 16:12–13.

a question of church discipline than a question over the validity of infant baptism as a sign and seal of the Covenant.

Owen saw baptism as a twofold pledge. It was a token of both God's promise to forgive and of the Christian's union with Christ.⁹ As such the reality of what is signified in baptism is not tied to the time of its administration. Owen argued the biblical ground for God's inclusion of the children of believers with their parents into the same Covenant, even though he emphasised the concept of the 'gathered church'.

Owen's argument for infant baptism is along the following lines. He finds that there is no explicit scriptural warrant for the refusal of baptism to infants from believing homes and, further, that there is no instance in the annals of the primitive church of such a person being baptised in later life:

The principle which lay at the heart of the old covenant administration that God's grace was extended 'to you and to your seed after you' cannot possibly be regarded as abrogated ... Without specific divine command, and this is absent from the Scriptures.¹⁰

To refuse to give the sign of promise to the infant children of believers, for Owen, would be to insinuate that they could not be recipients of the reality promised. Owen was convinced that infant children of believers are to be regarded as possible objects of God's grace and that some (especially those who die in infancy) are regenerate.

Central to Owen's thought was not so much his doctrine of the church but the concept of God's restorative and re-creational purposes within the Covenant of Grace. God's intention is to restore man to his original purposes, indeed take him further by securing his status as a son. Now Owen held that God created man in the context of family, which was ruined by sin. The Covenant of Grace restores God's creation. In the Old Testament the principle of inheritance and promise through 'seed' or generations, for Owen, was more than a matter of flesh. It was a matter of grace working through the created order bringing that restoration. Owen, and Congregationalists after, argued that if the children of parents in covenant with God were reckoned to

9 'Hereon we are said to be "buried with him" and to "rise with him", whereof our baptism is a pledge (Romans 6:3-4) not in outward representation, as some imagine, of being dipped into the water and being taken up again (which were to make one sign the sign of another), but in a powerful participation of the virtue of the death and life of Christ, in a death unto sin and newness of life in holy obedience, which baptism is a pledge of, as it is a token of our initiation and implanting into him.' Owen, *Works*, 3:560-561.

10 Ferguson, *op. cit.*, pp. 217-218.

be part of that covenant in the old administration, they cannot be any less so under the new administration of the covenant. The Congregational Paedobaptist position of Owen, and many others, trusts therefore in the Covenant promises of God and relies on his grace for the fulfilment of those promises.

As to the question of whether one who is baptised as an infant is to be considered a member of the church, Owen held that baptism is but a part of the argument. Baptism brought the child into certain privileges within the church and also certain responsibilities 'appropriate' to their 'capacities' and 'standing in the church'.¹¹ The baptism of the infant child of believing parents must also be seen in the context of the responsibilities parents, church members and church officers must play in the instruction, encouragement and discipline of the child as it grows. Such responsibilities would include prayer, instruction in the word, support and advice for the parents in bringing the child up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, looking for the Lord in his grace to fulfil his Covenant promise to reveal his righteousness to children, and to children's children.

R Halley and RW Dale

By the mid nineteenth century many in Congregational circles had moved from the historic position of infant baptism based on Covenant Theology, to embrace a broader understanding of baptism which was popularly espoused by Robert Halley. RW Dale adopted Halley's view and argued for it in his *Manual of Congregational Principles*.

Basically, Halley rejected the position of baptising believers and their children only, arguing for the administration of baptism to all infants presented to the church, irrespective of whether their parents were believers or not. Basing his argument on the Lord's commission in Matthew 28, Halley held that our Lord's words 'baptising them' refers not merely to disciples but to 'all nations':

When Christ says, 'Teach all the nations', what right have I to exclude any who can be taught? And when he says, 'Baptise all the nations', what right have I to exclude any who can be baptised? We have, according to the letter of this commission, no more right to limit the command to baptise to those who are taught than we have to limit the command to teach to those who are baptised.¹²

11 Owen, *Works*, 16:23–24.

12 Robert Halley, *The Sacraments*, vol ii:304, as quoted in RW Dale, *Manual of Congregational Principles* (Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 1996 reprint) p. 128.

Dale comments on this quote:

There is nothing to limit either the teaching or the baptism to believers; and there is just as little to limit either the teaching or the baptism to believers and their children.¹³

Tudor Jones notes that,

Halley's views were firmly opposed by Ralph Wardlaw and by Pye Smith, both of whom maintained that at least one parent should be a member. But it was significant that Pye Smith admitted that most Congregationalists adopted Halley's standpoint.¹⁴

Although this seems to have been the case, Derek Swann would later write, 'Dale's view has little to commend it scripturally and is quite a novelty to earlier Congregational thinking.'¹⁵

Evangelical & Congregational

The Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches upholds the earlier understanding of baptism. In its publication *Evangelical & Congregational* its position is clearly stated.

Congregational churches baptise converts to Christianity and also the children of a believing parent. Their theological starting point is the emphasis laid by Reformed theology on the grace of God.¹⁶

Congregationalists hold that the true Church comprises the covenant-people of God. The church is the heir of the covenant promises, just as Israel in the Old Testament was God's covenant people. The Israelite child was circumcised and so recognised as belonging to the covenant-people and to enjoy its privileges and responsibilities. As circumcision was the sign of the old covenant, so baptism is the sign of the new. So the child of the Christian home is regarded as an heir to promises and is baptised as a declaration of God's grace and of the Church's trust in God's faithfulness.¹⁷

The basis for this practice is the conviction that the Scriptures show the clear difference and supreme privilege of being brought up within the community of Israel as against belonging to a pagan nation. The Israelite had the Word of God, the ministry of the prophets, priests and kings. Similarly, the condition of a child nurtured in a Christian home is very different from that of a child

13 *Ibid.*

14 R Tudor Jones, *Congregationalism in England 1662–1962* (London: Independent Press, 1962), p. 227.

15 *Evangelical & Congregational*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

brought up in spiritual darkness. The believing parent surrounds his children with prayer and gospel truth. All the promises of the covenant-relationship into which the parents themselves have entered by grace are applicable to their offspring. The reality of these promises can be seen in the Christian homes of the churches. The moment of new birth may be delayed, but any covenant that God himself has made he will keep. This position is essentially the position held by the Congregational Federation as outlined in their *Patterns for Worship*.¹⁸

As stated earlier, Congregationalists have traditionally baptised converts to Christianity on a credible profession of faith and also the children of believers.¹⁹ In baptism, God declares his grace by a 'visual aid'. The convert, a believer, is acknowledging that God in his mercy has saved him, has cleansed him from his sin and has entered into covenant with him to be his God. The believing parents of the infant acknowledge God's graciousness to them and look forward to the fulfilling of his covenant promise in saving their children. Congregational Paedobaptists hold that the church is the covenant people of God, heirs of the promises God made formally to Abraham. The new administration of the covenant is an enhancement, a progression, an intensification and a realisation of those promises.

Under the old administration the Israelite child was circumcised and so recognised as belonging to the covenant people, enjoying its privileges and also bearing its responsibilities. As circumcision was the sign and seal of the old administration of the Covenant of Grace, so baptism is the sign and seal of the new administration of the one Covenant of Grace. Therefore the child of believing parents is regarded as an heir to the promises of the Covenant of Grace and is baptised as a declaration of God's grace, and of the parent's trust in the faithfulness of God.

In the Congregational tradition, children baptised as infants are not considered regenerate, but they are covenant children whom their parents and the church must instruct so that they understand the blessings and responsibilities of their baptism. The promise of the covenant is for them as well as their parents,²⁰ but they too, in the same manner as adults, are required to exercise faith. They have to say 'Amen' to their baptism by believing and being converted. In the instructing of them as to their privileges these children are to be taught their responsibilities. In failing to respond to the demands of

18 *Patterns for Worship* (Nottingham: The Congregational Federation, 1992), 2:1.

19 Savoy Declaration of Faith, Chapter 29 para. 4.

20 Acts 2:38.

God, their baptism becomes a rebuke to the children, as circumcision was to the Israelites. This applies equally to those baptised as adults.

Congregational Paedobaptists baptise their children in response to the command of God that believers are to give their children the sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace. Baptism in no way saves the child, just as it in no way saves an adult. Giving an infant the sign of God's promise highlights the glorious fact that our salvation is entirely dependent upon God's grace and not on any feeble act of man. To refuse to give the sign of baptism on the grounds that a person cannot understand and profess faith is not only to say that infants cannot be saved, but neither can thousands of those who are mentally incapable of an intelligent response to the gospel.

The Paedo-Baptist position hinges on the question, 'Do Circumcision and Baptism point to the same spiritual truths?'

To answer this question we need to ask another. 'What was the primary significance of circumcision and of baptism?' Circumcision signified entrance into the Covenant of Grace. Some argue that the primary significance of circumcision is 'earthly'. That is, that it has to do with temporal promises, the promise of God to Abraham to make his descendants into a great nation, to give them land as their inheritance, to be a sign which distinguished them from other nations. But is the essence of God's promises to Abraham temporal?

God does promise to make Abraham's descendants a great multitude, but then he goes on to say, 'And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you' (Genesis 17:7). Circumcision was the sign of covenant relation to God.

With reference to circumcision it must be fully appreciated that it was not essentially or primarily the sign of family, racial or national identity. Any significance which circumcision possessed along the line of national identity or privilege was secondary and derived. Its primary and essential significance was that it was the sign and seal of the highest and richest spiritual blessing which God bestows upon men. ... In a word it is union and communion with Jehovah, the God of Israel. It was this blessing circumcision signified and sealed.²¹

21 John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, (Philadelphia, Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974), pp. 45-47.

Circumcision was also an external sign of the removal of defilement. Circumcision was a symbol of the necessity of the cleansing and renewal of the heart needed for communion with God. ('And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.' Deuteronomy 30:6). The apostle Paul tells us that circumcision was the seal of the righteousness of the faith which Abraham had while he was uncircumcised.²² These three aspects, that circumcision was a sign of covenant relation to God, that it pictured spiritual cleansing and that it was the seal of the righteousness of faith, show us the spiritual essence of circumcision; they relate not to the nationality of a person but to the spiritual condition of that person before God.

The question is: Does baptism signify the same things as circumcision?

Under the new administration of the Covenant of Grace, a person is baptised 'into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'²³ Therefore, baptism expresses that a person is brought into a relationship with that into which he is baptised. The thrust of the New Testament teaching is that a person is baptised into union with Jesus Christ: union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection.²⁴ Baptism, therefore, is an external sign that a person has been brought into covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Baptism is also a sign of purification from the defilement of sin and the guilt of sin. Although this may not be explicitly stated in the New Testament, it can be implied since baptism is a washing with water, since it involves a religious use of water and since regeneration is expressed elsewhere in Scripture in terms of washing. It is difficult to escape the conclusion, as Murray puts it:

This washing with water involved in baptism represents that indispensable purification which is presupposed in union with Christ and without which no one can enter into the kingdom of God.²⁵

Christian baptism is also a sign of the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21).

22 Romans 4:11; Colossians 2:11–12; Philippians 3:3; Romans 2:25–9.

23 Matthew 28:19.

24 Romans 6:3–6; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27–28; Colossians 2:11–12.

25 Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

Baptism represents the remission of sins, or in other words, purification from the guilt of sin by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ.²⁶

So we can say that baptism is an outward, external, sign of an inward grace. It is the sign of the Covenant of Grace, the sign and seal of the promises of God, namely union and communion with God, the removal of the defilement of sin and the removal of the guilt of sin, of the righteousness that comes by faith.

Baptism is a sign, in that it is visible, but it points away from itself to something far more significant. It focuses our attention on God's salvation in the Covenant of Grace. The water points us to the spiritual realities that are ours in Christ Jesus:

Baptism points to what God has done for us, and not what we have done for God. It is an outward sign of the salvation God promises to the person who believes in Jesus as Saviour and Lord and not an outward sign that the person baptised has believed in Jesus as Saviour and Lord.²⁷

Baptism is a sign of God's grace, not a person's faith. Because it is a sign of God's grace the reality of what is signified is not tied to the time of administration.

Baptism is also a seal. It is given 'to reassure us of the reality of God's grace and visually to confirm and guarantee a spoken promise',²⁸ in much the same way as an engagement ring visually confirms the promise of marriage. Baptism helps us in our weakness by reminding us of the genuineness of God's promise to be our God.

We can see then that circumcision and baptism signified the same aspects of the Covenant of Grace. Both were external signs of spiritual promises. In both cases the realisation of the grace signified is not tied to the imposing of the sign. Circumcision did not cleanse the heart of the Israelite, baptism does not regenerate the individual, whether adult or infant. Under the new administration of the one Covenant of Grace, baptism replaces the sign of circumcision.

Should infants be baptised?

Under the old administration of the Covenant of Grace, the sign of circumcision, the sign of promise, was given, as a divinely instigated ordinance, to the children of adults who were in covenant relationship to God.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁷ Rodger M Crooks, *Salvation's Sign & Seal: the Case for Infant Baptism* (Fearn, Christian Focus, 1997), p. 35.

²⁸ Crooks, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

Under the new administration of that same Covenant of Grace, adults who are outside of God's covenant are brought into relation to God through faith in Jesus Christ and receive the sign of the covenant, namely baptism. As they are now in covenant relationship to God, their children also have a right to receive the sign of the covenant. They themselves are not regenerate, but are brought under the promises of God. For as Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a sign of the righteousness of faith he had whilst uncircumcised, and was commanded to give that same sign to his descendants at an age when they could not exercise like faith, so Paedobaptists hold that we are under the same Covenant of Grace as Abraham. As we are saved in the same way as Abraham, our children are also to receive the sign of the Covenant of Grace, now baptism.

Throughout the unfolding of the progressive revelation of the Covenant of Grace there has been an enlargement of the enjoyment of these covenant blessings. If children born to the faithful were given the sign and seal of the covenant, if they enjoyed a position of blessing under the old administration, and if the New Testament blessings are an enrichment and an elaboration of those enjoyed under the old, are we to believe that infants in this age are excluded from that which was provided by the Abrahamic Covenant? Is the New Covenant less generous, less gracious than the old?

Objections

There are arguments against infant baptism on the grounds that the New Testament does not expressly mention it. We are told that the exclusion of infants was so obvious that explicit abrogation of the concept that children are included in the covenant promises of God was not necessary. But is this so?

In seeking to answer this objection we need to remember that the early church grew out of Judaism. Most of the apostles and leaders grew up with the covenant promises of God. The argument of silence is rather in favour of the inclusion of infants in the covenant. For a practice which was divinely ordained, so closely linked to the enjoyment of the spiritual promises, for the blessings and privileges of the covenant to suddenly cease to be, we would look for an explicit reference. But we find none. Instead we find the apostle Peter telling the Jewish crowds on the day of Pentecost, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit; for the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call.' How would the Jewish hearers interpret the promise to the children?

The next objection that is raised is over the question, 'Who are the descendants of Abraham?' In Galatians 3 we read, 'Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham (verse 7). ... So then, those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham (verse 9). And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.' Here, those who object to infant baptism understand that only those who exercise faith in Jesus Christ are the children of Abraham, and therefore only they can receive the sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace, for only they are heirs according to the promise. For it is only through faith in Christ that one can partake in the blessings of the covenant. As infants cannot exercise such faith they cannot partake of covenant blessings.

Paul's argument in Galatians chapters 3 and 4 is against Judaizers who were advocating that those who had received salvation through faith must add to their simple faith both circumcision and observance of the Mosaic law. Paul's argument is not against either circumcision or observance of the law *per se*, but against justification by works as opposed to justification by faith. For a person, whether a child or an adult, to suppose that because he has received the outward sign of baptism he does not have to exercise faith to inherit salvation, is just as wrong today as it was for a Jew to look upon his circumcision as proof of his salvation. Without faith a person cannot receive the promise inherent in baptism, just as person could not receive the promise inherent in circumcision. Yet the sign of circumcision, a sign of the covenant promise of God, was given to the infants, who themselves could not exercise such faith.

The question is 'Who are Abraham's offspring?' It is sometimes argued that there is a difference between Abraham's descendants in the Old and the New Testaments. In the Old, the references to Abraham's descendants are to his physical descendants, whilst in the New, it refers to spiritual descendants, believers in Christ. But this does not hold up. In the Old Testament Abraham's spiritual descendants were in Christ, just as the New Testament believers are. The true descendants of Abraham are, and have ever been, those who have embraced the covenant promises of God through faith. There has only ever been one Covenant of Grace, there has only ever been one mediator of that covenant. The Old Testament saints had the same object of their faith as those under the new. The Old Testament church 'in Christ' were Abraham's descendants, and as Abraham's descendants they inherited the blessings of God's covenant; God was their God and they were his people. And as the covenant people of God, they gave their offspring the sign and seal of that covenant.

Congregationalists acknowledge that the true offspring of Abraham have always been those who are justified by faith in Jesus Christ. The descendants of Abraham always received the sign of the Covenant of Grace, whether or not they have, in reality, gone on to exercise faith for themselves. There is no clear abrogation of this in the New Testament. Congregational Paedobaptists, such as John Owen, point to the accumulative amount of evidence, such as Peter's reference to the crowds at Pentecost, to our Lord's blessing of children and his rebuke of his disciples who tried to keep them back, Paul's reference to the children of believing parents being 'holy' and his addressing the children of families in Ephesus as among the saints, to maintain that children of Christians are entitled to receive the sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace.

So, Congregationalists baptise children of believing parents, not because they are thought regenerate, not because they are presumed to be elect, but simply on the grounds that God ordained that the sign of the Covenant of Grace should be given not only to those who exercise personal faith in Jesus Christ, but also to their offspring, who must themselves embrace the promises of the covenant through faith if they are to be saved. Is it of no avail to be born and nurtured in a Christian household simply because the infant has no conscious understanding of the great blessing that belongs to him in the care, protection and devotion of Christian parents? It does not follow that infants who cannot make a profession of faith should be excluded from baptism, any more that it does to say that infants who cannot make a profession of faith are excluded from salvation. To appeal to the abuse of infant baptism is no argument against its validity. Many, baptised on their own profession of faith, have proven unfaithful and have lived godless lives.

There is the objection based on the difference between the Old and the New. Passages like Jeremiah 31:31–34 and Hebrews 8 are quoted to underline the 'new thing' the Lord has done through Christ. Inclusion of children within the covenant belongs to the Old and those who hold to the Paedobaptist position fail to recognise the newness of God's work. However what such objections fail to realise is that the contrast in those passages is between the Mosaic administration of the Covenant of Grace and the fulfilment of that covenant through Christ. God says, 'I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt.'²⁹ Now the ground for the inclusion of the children of believing parents within the covenant is not based on the Law, but

29 Jeremiah 31:31–32.

on the promise of God given to Abraham, which came 430 years before the Law and which was not nullified by the Law.³⁰

In his 1982 Studies Conference Paper entitled *Children of the Covenant*, John Legg referred to the failure of some to acknowledge the spiritual heart of the Old Covenant promises:

The New Testament also bears evidence of the spirituality of the Old. Baptists frequently argue or assume that the Old Covenant was a purely national affair, that circumcision was only a carnal sign and that all that was, therefore, done away with in the New Covenant. This, of course, ignores the fact that the covenant with Abraham preceded the law by 430 years and was not set aside by it. It ignores the spiritual significance of circumcision as a sign of regeneration, Deuteronomy 30:6, and of justification, Romans 4:11. This sign and seal of the new birth and of justification was given to infants. Thus the argument that baptism, because it signifies salvation, cleansing from sin, dying and rising with Christ, must only be given to actual believers, would apply equally to God's clear command that infants should be circumcised. (In fact most of the arguments against infant baptism would also condemn infant circumcision!).³¹

It is objected that circumcision cannot be linked with baptism because circumcision was applied only to males, whereas baptism is applied to all. That the bestowal of that sign is given to females as well as males surely highlights one of the glories of the New Covenant in that in Christ Jesus there is now no longer male and female, just as there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, barbarian nor Scythian.

Congregationalists who baptise infant children of believers seek to emphasise the grace of God. Whether an adult or child, the gracious call of God precedes faith. In infant baptism, what is celebrated and held on to is God's promise to the children of believers. God's promise was sealed to children in the Old Testament through circumcision, Paedobaptists believe that that same promise is now sealed in baptism.

Summary

A good summary of the Congregational position is provided by CG Kirkby, in his book *Signs and Seals of the Covenant*:

There is only one Covenant of Grace, valid from the beginning to the end of time, containing all the promises of God's grace to sinful mankind and made

³⁰ Galatians 3:17.

³¹ John Legg, *Children of the Covenant* (Beverly: EFCC, 1982), p. 5. A paper given at the 1982 Congregational Studies Conference.

over to every individual in Christ. God gave Abraham the associated sign and seal of the covenant—circumcision. God also gave a command to Abraham that every male child in his household should receive this sign. He did not say, ‘He that has the same saving faith as you have’, but he said, ‘he that is born in the house.’ It is in terms of this covenant that Abraham is the father of all the faithful, not only in the Jewish economy, but also in the Christian economy. It is in terms of this covenant that the blessing of Abraham comes upon the Gentiles as the covenant is unfolded in the New Testament.

We know that the sign of circumcision did not bring Abraham into the covenant; it confirmed that he was in it. It was ‘a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised.’ We know also that Abraham’s circumcised infant child did not receive faith through the sign of circumcision. He was not regenerated by that rite. Indeed, nothing happened to him spiritually. The significance of circumcision for the child was this. He received circumcision because it was God’s command, and this was a sign that even as God had received Abraham into the church according to the covenant, so he recognised Abraham’s family as part of Abraham himself. His children were federally holy and separate from the rest of the world. It signified this external privilege as well as the deeper spiritual privileges of God’s grace. It put the child in the way of blessing.³²

As to the question of whether we should give the sign of the covenant to those who may or may not go on to exercise faith, we say that this is none of our concern. Abraham was commanded to circumcise his house, including Ishmael, after God had told him explicitly that it would be through Isaac that the covenant would be continued. Ishmael was not one of the chosen people, yet he received the sign of God’s covenant:

Although circumcision and baptism are the signs and seals of covenant union and communion with Christ, carrying the deepest possible spiritual significance, as well as signifying external privileges, it does not follow that every individual who bears this sign and seal is an actual partaker of the grace signified and sealed.³³

In the Old Testament it is clear that God’s means of saving his people was through families. The truths of Scripture and the accounts of God’s dealings with his people were passed on through successive generations. ‘The loving-kindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children’ (Psalm 103:17). The same is true in the New Testament. When Peter proclaimed the gospel and told those

32 CG Kirkby, *Signs & Seals of the Covenant* (published by the author, 1988), p. 75.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

enquiring after salvation to repent and be baptised, he continued, 'For the promise is to you and to your children' (Acts 2:39). The question we must answer is, 'Why did Peter say that?' And 'How would a first century Jew understand it?' Peter said it because God was continuing to work as he did in the Old Testament. He would hold the children of his children in special regard. In Corinth Paul told his readers that as Christians their children were '*holy*' because of their parent's faith. This did not mean that the children were saved. Rather they were 'set apart' from others. Children born into Christian homes are set apart because their parents are God's people.

This does lead us to ask a question about children in Christian homes. 'How do we see them?'

Again, we emphasise the point that Congregationalists who baptise infants do not assume that they are regenerate; their parents must look for their conversion. By seeking to live before them as Christians, teaching and encouraging them, and praying for them, expecting them to be saved, according to God's gracious promise. At this point John Legg has some very wise words:

An important principle in all evangelism is relevant here. Faith, according to Romans 10:17, comes by hearing; the new birth, according to James 1:18 and 1 Peter 1:23, comes through the Word of truth. So we must teach our children the gospel, the promises and requirements of the covenant, so that they may manifest the new birth in repentance and faith. We must expect them to give evidence of being converted, but our expectations may be disappointed unless we remember to treat them as children, not adults, and assess the evidence accordingly.

We must beware of demanding the kind of evidence more suited to adults or even adolescents, than to children. We must look for faith in proportion as the child hears and understands the gospel. Faith grows as more is revealed and understood ... There is no reason why children, born unregenerate, should not be begotten again by the word of truth, James 1:18, as soon as they hear the first teaching by their parents. Immediately they hear the gospel they believe it according to their ability. Their faith may not appear outwardly the same as that of an adult convert, but is still genuine faith, childlike faith, and faith as a grain of mustard seed is nevertheless saving faith.

If they accept the gospel according to their understanding and ability, who are we to doubt their sincerity? We cannot read hearts and if they obey when we tell them to pray to God as their Father through Christ, or simply accept it when we do this, why should we regard them as hypocrites? We can easily

discourage them by demanding a kind of conversion experience appropriate only to those who have gone deep into the ways of sin.³⁴

How do we view our children? Is there no difference between them and those who are completely outside the Church? Do we exclude them from times of family prayer? On what grounds do we teach them the Lord's Prayer? God's rich promises to us ought to encourage us both in our prayer and in the use of the means God himself has ordained for salvation. Again, John Legg states:

It is quite true that privileges are not the same as salvation, and that it is no use relying on them. Nevertheless, we are told that the covenant child has an advantage over others. 'What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.' (Romans 3:1-2). This advantage can only be, indeed it is there stated to be, because God uses means. In terms of God's sovereign election no one has an advantage, because God is not bound, but the Word of God says that covenant children have an advantage and Paul is here writing about salvation, not carnal, national blessings. It would be ridiculous to say that they have an advantage, if that only meant that they have a greater condemnation. So we must not only pray in faith: we must also be careful to use all the means provided by the covenant setting in both family and church, knowing that, at the very least, our children are more likely to be converted than others, because God ordains means as well as ends, and that he has given them a favoured position in terms of those means.³⁵

Reasons why the position is not held

Whereas in days gone by the baptism of infants within the Congregational Tradition was generally accepted, nowadays it has almost gone by default. In 1973 EFCC published a small booklet entitled *The Practice of Baptism in Congregational Churches*. In that small work six reasons were given for why the Paedobaptist position, once generally held to in Congregational Churches, was under threat in our modern age:

- 1 We live in an age when individualism greatly outweighs social solidarity—of home, family, community. Paedobaptism stresses the significance of social solidarity in a time of excessive individualism.
- 2 We live in days of lack of interest in theology. Theology is little studied, even we must confess, among preachers. The stress is laid too much on man—man's response and faith and importance—and too little on the necessity of God's grace for salvation. Humanism is a poor foundation for an

34 Legg, pp. 13-14.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

understanding of Paedobaptism. Particularly the theology of the Old Testament (essentially the theology of the Covenant), is a neglected subject.

‘Covenant-baptism’ is essentially a theological position, depending far more upon the accumulated testimony of the whole of Scripture than upon the arguments of single texts.

- 3 We live in times when all too often those of Paedobaptist denominations have forsaken the gospel faith of their fathers. Some Christians have gained the erroneous impression that the vast majority of true believers are Baptist in their outlook.
- 4 We live in a period when ‘a debased treatment of baptism’ (Forsyth) prevails. The indiscriminate baptism of the infants of pagan families is a poor foundation indeed for a proclamation of God’s covenant promises to the true Israel. The absurdity of the modern situation is evident. We cannot imagine Muslim immigrants to Britain requesting Christian baptism for their children unless they were first converted themselves. Yet thousands of pagan Britons bring their babies every Sunday for christening. Furthermore, the widespread indifference of the Church to the training in Christian truth of its children—in their homes and in church life—is no commendation of the practice of infant baptism.
- 5 We live in days of rebellion against authority, when unbelieving parents argue that it is for the child to choose to go to Sunday School if he wishes. The teaching authority and discipline of the Christian home (the context of the baptised infant’s nurture in the gospel) is often seriously eroded. But covenant-baptism assumes that in the environment of such authority there is the divinely-appointed seed-bed for the development of saving faith.
- 6 We live in times of Christian unbelief. Covenant-baptism is for the household of faith. The baptised infant is taken into the arms of the local family of God as certainly as into the arms of the minister who conducts the service. A congregation that looks forward in joyful confidence to the spiritual birth of that child, five, ten, fifteen years hence and continues to pray in faith to the day of its rebirth, is the kind of congregation which is intended to take part in a service of infant-baptism. Minister, church and parents are uniting in an act of faith and in a testimony to the covenant-faithfulness of God.³⁶

Words written nearly thirty years ago, as relevant today as then.

Practical Suggestions

The same booklet offers some practical suggestions as to how churches may work through the issue of baptism:

36 *The Practice of Baptism in Congregational Churches* (Braughing: EFCC, 1973), pp. 5–6.

- 1 Although a very few Congregationalists have, in the past, argued for indiscriminate baptism (eg RW Dale, *Manual of Congregational Principles* 1884), our conclusion is that baptism should be restricted to the children of Christian homes. Within a surprisingly short time it becomes known that the church does not baptise children indiscriminately. A service of thanksgiving for the giving of the new life to the family can be arranged instead, together with prayer for the parents.
- 2 We should ensure that no baptism should take place except in the full assembly of the church at, or immediately after, a Sunday Service. An adequate explanation of the significance and importance of the sacrament should be given, and direct reference made by the parents to their own faith and to their responsibility for the instruction of their child in the faith. The church, through its minister and by the open acknowledgement of its members, should so accept its responsibility and declare its faith in God's grace and covenant-faithfulness.
- 3 A more comprehensive attitude to the two views of baptism should be adopted. Individual Christians may be exercised in conscience as to the validity of their own baptism, particularly if their parents were not Christians when they were 'christened'. They may also be concerned over the mode of baptism, whether it should be by immersion, pouring or sprinkling. In Congregational tradition aspersion has been accepted as an adequate mode of baptism and it has usually been thought that the case for total immersion has not been proved; but some have preferred the other modes. The individual should seek to maintain an untroubled conscience; the church should respect such scruples.
- 4 The strength of the arguments for the Baptist position should be freely acknowledged, especially in the light of erroneous views of the meaning and value of christenings so common today.
- 5 A revival of the reading and study of theology should be encouraged in our churches. This would lead to a better understanding and appreciation of the views of our Congregational forefathers.
- 6 A halt should be called to aggressive proselytising zeal within our churches by either side. Love seeks to understand and sympathise with the standpoint of brethren from whom we differ. Such love can win the response of a similar desire to understand our own emphasis. Paul insisted that love should take priority over knowledge. Such love, in harness with humility, will lead inevitably to the conclusion that we are unlikely to resolve a problem that has defied the most saintly and scholarly of Christians for so many centuries. Such love could even make us less concerned that it should be resolved. Love gives no welcome to bigotry.³⁷

37 *Ibid.*

Conclusion

As we have seen, from its earliest days Congregationalism has taken a covenantal position with regards to its understanding of God's saving dealings with man, a position which embraces the children of believers. It is a position which is enshrined in most of the Trust Deeds of Congregational Churches. It is a position which is upheld in the declarations of faith Congregationalists have published over the centuries. Yet, sadly, in our churches it is a position which is little understood.

It has been the purpose of this paper, hopefully, to highlight the biblical convictions which lie behind the practice and to encourage debate within our churches. Now baptism has been an area of controversy for centuries, a controversy which will not be put right by one paper. But what I hope will come out of such a debate is a greater understanding of the Congregational Paedobaptist position.

Over the centuries baptism has been an issue which has unnecessarily divided Christians. As such it is seen almost as a taboo subject, to be avoided. Whilst not wishing to downplay the implications of the differing understandings of baptism within our Fellowship I would close by reminding you of the attitude of John Bunyan. Though a Baptist he refused to make baptism the ground of fellowship with other believers. Bunyan desired fellowship with all Christians, and wrote:

I will not let water baptism be the rule, the door, the bolt, the bar, the wall of division between the righteous and the unrighteous ... since you would know by what name I would be distinguished from others, I tell you I would be, and hope I am, a *Christian*, and choose, if God should count me worthy, to be called a Christian, a believer, or other such name which is approved by the Holy Ghost.³⁸

38 John Bunyan, *Works*, 3 volumes (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint of 1875 edition), 2:629. Also available at www.johnbunyan.org.

Past Conference Papers

Single Papers

1981

- A Tovey MA BD Robert Browne: The Morning Star of Congregationalism
DO Swann BA BD The Church Meeting
P Seccombe BD John Angell James

1982

- J Legg BA BD Children of the Covenant (available as a booklet)
A Clifford BA MLitt PhD . The Christian Mind of Philip Doddridge
D Boorman BA MLitt The Origins of the London Missionary Society

1983

- H Elias BA BD PT Forsyth—Prophet of the 20th Century
M Boland Oliver Cromwell
N Rees BD Prayer Life of the Local Church

1984

- GT Booth BD The Hymn Writers of English Congregationalism
ES Guest John Robinson (1575–1625)
G Fielder MA BD RW Dale and the Non-Conformist Conscience.

1985

- Prof. T Jones DPhil DD Walter Craddock (1606–1659)
Prof. T Jones DPhil DD John Penry (1563–1593)
P Golding BTh MTh Owen on the Mortification of Sin

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P Collins Thomas Wilson

1987

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