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# ***Lovers of the Truth of God***

Congregational Studies  
Conference 2002





# **Lovers of the Truth of God**

**Michael Plant,  
Edward S Guest  
and John Semper**

**Congregational Studies Conference  
Papers 2002**

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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 title of our published papers this year covers, firstly, all the ordinary folk, whom Michael Plant describes for us, drawing up their own church covenants, which summarised both their basic beliefs and their act of joining themselves to one another as the body of Christ in their particular town or village. However, it can also refer to those early Congregationalists who loved the Geneva Bible deeply, and appreciated the helps to understanding which it so amply included, and which upset Elizabeth I, James I and their bishops so much, as Stan Guest explains. Finally, the title is a good description of William Huntington—nicknamed ‘the walking Bible’ from his comprehensive memorising of its pages—and his followers, the Calvinistic Independents. These our forebears in the faith encourage us by their example, and instruct us from their strengths and weaknesses.

People have asked whether a conference with a theme would be possible. The answer, as so often, is both ‘yes’ and ‘no’! Some years lend themselves to a theme and to perhaps one or two speakers. This was true when we celebrated the four hundredth centenary of the Congregational martyrs in 1993, and will happen again next year, as we commemorate the three hundredth anniversary of Jonathan Edwards’ birth in 1703. In other years we are more dependent on the subjects which individuals have researched, though we do have in mind a missionary theme for 2005.

We look forward to your continuing support, and would encourage you to make the conference more widely known in your churches and among your friends. As with church services, it is helpful to bring folk along with you! Next year’s conference will be held, God willing, at Westminster Chapel on Saturday, 15th March 2003.

**John Semper**

***Wigtown***



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.*

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

*Title page of the first edition Savoy Declaration*

# Congregationalists and Confessions

Michael Plant

## Introduction

How did I end up as an evangelical Congregational minister? I was brought up by Christian parents, who attended an evangelical Anglican church. I was converted at that church and when I left home, to go to college, I attended another evangelical Anglican church. I remain deeply influenced by, and deeply grateful for, those churches and their contribution to my life. Some things however happened to change the obvious course that I was on and to lead me into contact and ministry with churches I knew nothing of until I was well into my twenties.

- 1 *I was exposed to non-conformist worship.* Many may now feel that the long minister's prayer is boring and has no place in modern worship. However my experience was of a man of God praying in the Spirit and there is nothing like that. This made a commitment to liturgical worship unattractive.
- 2 *I was exposed to Reformed Theology.* The ministry that I was experiencing in Student Conferences and locally was often Calvinistic. I encountered something thrilling and mind expanding that I had not come across before.
- 3 *I began to examine what the Bible taught about the church.* I had a very clear sense of call to the ministry and had to sort out where I should train and where I might minister. Even apart from any reservations I might have about mixed denominations and the direction of evangelical Anglicanism, and these were not unimportant factors, I could not see a complex denominational structure, such as would be essential in Anglicanism or Presbyterianism, anywhere in Scripture.

So here I was, and incidentally I was also a convinced believer in infant baptism, and I believed I had a new grasp of Biblical truth but I didn't know if there had ever been anybody who believed the same as me. Then somehow I came across a copy of the *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*, as then in print from Evangelical Press, and realised that I was not all alone in the world and that the position I now held had been believed down the years by many other people. So my attraction to ministry with the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches came about through a confessional document. Subsequently I managed to get hold of a copy of the 1833 *Declaration of Faith*

and that, in my opinion, is broadly in line with Savoy but, being far less complex and detailed, is better adapted to be of value as a contemporary statement of faith.

However, the next stage in my discoveries was that in the EFCC, *Savoy* might have some relevance as a historic and foundational statement of faith but is not used in the sense that subscription to it, or any adherence to it, is asked of ministers or member churches. So the *Savoy Declaration* was reprinted in *Evangelical and Congregational*, but only as a guide to what Congregationalists historically believed, and not as something to be subscribed to. The church to which I was called, and which I have been pleased to serve for over nineteen years, has six very basic doctrinal points in its statement of faith, which is in its Trust Deeds and which the minister must preach in accord with. These Trust Deeds also refer to the need for the minister to be a Congregationalist and a Paedo-Baptist. Clearly, while many evangelical Presbyterians give the *Westminster Confession* a central place in their thinking, and many Reformed Baptists feel the same about the *1689 Confession*, the majority of Congregationalists are not giving, and historically have not given, such a central place to their confessions of faith.

What are the reasons for this different viewpoint? It is not the belief, characteristic of Liberal Theology, that truth cannot be defined in objective propositions. Doubtless this belief has fuelled anti-creedalism but not on the part of evangelical Congregationalists. Nor is it the truth that Congregationalists are essentially non-creedal even if evangelical—they would hardly have produced the above named declarations if this was their position. Indeed it could be argued that Congregationalists have been particularly active in formulating new creeds on a regular basis. This could certainly be argued from the proliferation of creedal statements in Congregational church covenants; a strong case could be made for this. Nor do I conclude that this simply means that modern Congregationalists suffer from pernicious doctrinal anaemia and that this means we have radically departed from the attitudes to creeds that earlier generations of Congregationalists held. Rather I believe that there may be a thought out and Biblical rationale for this stance. If we are not conscious of this rationale then, if we belong to the modern Reformed movement, we will simply make the mistake as Independents, and the same problem would apply to Baptists, of being David trying to fight in Saul's armour or rather Independents trying to fight in Presbyterian armour. It may be that, even were it possible to stimulate such a change, a renewed emphasis on Confessions and subscription to them would not be a good way forward for us.

In order to properly explore this question today what we will be doing in this paper is examining a number of questions:—

*1. Why do the 1658 Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order and the 1833 Declaration of the Faith, Order and Discipline of the Congregational or Independent Dissenters simply seem to disappear from view in our church history? If the declarations pass so swiftly from prominence what was their original purpose?*

That the declarations play a far more minor part in Congregational church history than does the *Westminster Confession* in Presbyterian church history is inescapable. In churches which date back to the 17th and 18th Centuries, you will not find that the Trust Deeds involve the *Savoy Declaration* although in the 19th Century some churches did have the *1833 Declaration* attached to their trust deeds—this is the case at Eston and Staithes Congregational Churches. The general practice in the 17th and 18th Centuries would be to have a Statement of Faith, which might resemble but would probably be far less complex than the *Savoy*. The Statement of Faith would be part of a church covenant and was often drawn up by the minister. One common practice was that the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* would form the doctrinal basis for a Congregational Church as is the case at Bridgenorth and at Reeth. I don't know of Congregational churches to which this applied but some of the Calvinistic Independent churches used the doctrinal articles in the Anglican *39 Articles* as their basis of faith. Our own church, which was founded within fifty years of the publication of the *1833 Declaration of Faith*, has six very basic articles of faith:

- 1 The divine and special inspiration of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and their sole authority and entire sufficiency as the rule of faith and practice.
- 2 The unity of God with the proper deity of Father, Son and of the Holy Spirit.
- 3 The depravity of man and the absolute necessity of the Holy Spirit's agency for man's regeneration and restoration.
- 4 The incarnation of the Son of God in the person of Jesus Christ and the universal sufficiency of the atonement by his death and free justification of sinners by faith alone in him.
- 5 Salvation by grace and the duty of all men to believe in Christ.
- 6 The resurrection of the dead and the final judgment when the wicked shall go away into everlasting punishment but the righteous unto life eternal.

There is a statement in our trust deeds, which states that the minister is to be a Congregationalist and a Paedo-Baptist although no such restrictions are stated as applying either to members or church officers. I assume, but it is nowhere stated in the trust deeds, that the general definition of a Congregationalist would have been intended to be taken as that given in the *1833 Declaration*.

The reasons for the ephemeral nature of Congregational declarations of faith may relate to the purpose of creeds amongst Congregationalists—that is that they were never intended to be for subscription but as a vehicle for the declaration of the faith of churches of the Congregational way. This may be inferred from the fact that the term ‘declaration’ rather than ‘confession’ is used. I wrote to a distinguished Congregational historian to ask whether there is intended to be clear distinction between the two terms and he replied ‘that there is all the difference between confessions and declarations. Confessions are given, authoritative, orthodox, conceived as ideally timeless truth, declarations are worked out anew as what is believed to be the truth as understood now by a particular group—the more, the better, as proceeding from a living community.’<sup>1</sup>

With respect to this opinion, it does need to be noted that the preface to the *Savoy Declaration*, said to be written by John Owen, happily uses the term ‘confession’ to refer to the *Savoy Declaration* and does so consistently and not as an isolated instance. Having said that, the preface also states:

And accordingly such a transaction is to be looked upon as a fit *medium* or *means* whereby to express *that* their *common faith and salvation*, and no way to be made use of as an *imposition* upon any: Whatever is of force or constraint in matters of this nature causeth them to degenerate from the *name* and *nature* of *Confessions*, and turns them from being *Confessions of Faith*, into *exactions* and *impositions of Faith*.<sup>2</sup>

Again,

The Spirit of Christ is in himself too free, great and generous a Spirit, to suffer himself to be used by any humane arm to whip men into belief, he drives not but gently leads into all truth, and persuades men to dwell in the tents of like precious faith; which would lose of its preciousness and value, if that sparkle of freeness shone not in it.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Geoffrey F Nuttall, letter dated 30 October 2001.

2 Williston Walker, *Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York: C Scribner's Sons, 1893, reprinted Boston, Pilgrim Press, 1960), p. 354.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 355.

I conclude here that the general point about a distinction being intended is correct but that there was not, at least at the time of the *Savoy Declaration* being produced, the sharp distinction between the two terms that is inferred. The distinction that exists, I think, is between *expressions of faith* and *impositions upon faith* rather than between timeless statements of truth and the current consensus of a particular community. However, as I shall demonstrate later, the Congregational Way often seems to involve framing new statements of faith in which to express eternal truths when it is faced with deviations from the Faith. One reason that the *Savoy* and other later declarations of faith were made was actually to safeguard the eternal truths contained in the faith once delivered to the saints. The reason for producing the *Savoy Declaration* was due to attacks on ‘The great and fixed truths of the gospel’<sup>4</sup> and for it to act as a doctrinal marker for the churches which previously were ‘like ships launched singly, and sailing apart and alone in the vast ocean of tumultuating times’ by holding out to them: ‘common lights ... Whereby to show where we were.’<sup>5</sup>

Following in the same footsteps as the *Savoy Declaration*, the preliminary notes to the *1833 Declaration of Faith* read: ‘It is not intended that the following statement be put forward with any authority, or as a standard to which assent should be required’, rather it is ‘designed to state the leading doctrines of faith and order maintained by Congregational Churches in general.’ In each case the declaration is made to show where we stand, so that others may stand with us, rather than to be a standard to be imposed on others.

Before proceeding further, I want to raise with those who would tend to favour subscription and are not at home with the viewpoint I am outlining, a general point about the nature of subscription and the difficulty of defining what is required from those subscribing to a confession. A reluctance to insist on subscription is very understandable when the creeds in question are complex and detailed in many areas. Must someone who is subscribing to the *Westminster Confession* agree that the pope is the Man of Sin and that not only adultery but also desertion is a biblical ground of divorce? While those who advocate subscription may say that you can fully subscribe to a confession without absolute commitment to the wording and that if you ‘scruple over a statement here and there’ you can ‘still remain true to the doctrinal intent of the confession’ they are still left with the fact that there is actually no objective way that these distinctions can be defined and upheld. Once you admit the

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4 Ibid., p. 355.

5 Ibid., p. 359.

viewpoint that the wording isn't binding it is possible to disbelieve virtually any detail of the confession, and yet claim that you 'still remain true to the doctrinal intent of the confession'. For example, could you hold to the Amyraldian position, of election of individuals to salvation but of a universal atonement rather than an atonement limited to the elect, and still subscribe to the *Westminster Confession*? People's understanding of the idea of limited atonement, even amongst those who claim to hold to it, vary considerably and there is a spectrum of possible views rather than two stark alternatives. Where on the spectrum will the line be drawn? A paper I have at home, which actually originates from amongst Reformed Baptists, lists three varieties of subscription—absolute subscription: 'every word as it is written'—historical subscription: 'agreeing with the author's intention'—or full subscription which I have defined above, where you can reject details provided you are generally in agreement. I think that the above points about subscription are worth making because if you are to dismiss the case that I make and insist, against the intention of the writers, that subscription to documents like the *Savoy* and the 1833 declarations is desirable, then you will need to think through what you mean by subscription and how closely agreement is to be insisted on. It is not the simple matter some may assume.

In EFCC where we annually affirm our oneness and our shared belief, it seems common-sense to say that where we are going to insist on agreement of a meaningful kind we are best to keep the statements simple and basic, such as any evangelical holding to a congregational polity would agree.

A reason for this distinct perspective against subscriptionism amongst Congregationalists, which we should not be unaware of, is the historical background to the production of the *Savoy Declaration* and *1833 Declaration*. Prior to *Savoy* the value of creeds was partly in the fact that they formed a useful tool of persecution and that this was an experience and danger all too real to the early Congregationalists. Nor should we doubt that the *Westminster Confession*, which was intended to form the basis of a national church settlement, was seen as a tool of persecution against those who did not conform. This is one reason why *Savoy* and the *1689 Baptist Confession* both stress their indebtedness to the Westminster standards and largely adopt their wording. Peter Toon wrote: 'the Congregational way was in 1658 a cause under both attack and siege. It was being described as a "sink of all heresies and schisms"; it wanted legal recognition under the rule of Richard Cromwell or whoever succeeded him; and it wanted to affirm its Reformed Theological

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6 Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism* (Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, 1973), p. 83.

basis'.<sup>6</sup> As regards the 1833 *Declaration*, all Congregationalists still suffered the loss of most normal civic rights until 1828, and of some rights until 1871, as a punishment for refusal to subscribe to Anglican doctrines or the liturgy which expresses them. Geoffrey Nuttall writes: 'Historically there is much justification for associating creeds with persecution.'<sup>7</sup>

It should also be pointed out that at no stage did *Savoy* necessarily reflect the views of all, or even of a majority of, the English Congregationalists. The *Declaration* was drawn up very speedily in response to the urgent need for legal recognition. The whole proceedings of the conference took just eleven days and the wording of the doctrinal portion of the *Declaration* was delegated to a sub-committee, consisting of Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, Philip Nye, William Bridge, Joseph Caryl and William Greenhill. This explains the reasons for, and was enabled by, the almost wholesale adoption of the *Westminster Confession* as a doctrinal standard. Richard Baxter, who is an unfriendly critic, wrote 'They once met at the Savoy, and drew up an agreement of many Pastors. But in this they differ from many other churches called Independants.'<sup>8</sup> The *Declaration* was at no stage circulated for approval by the churches, although publication was delayed until some other pastors had the opportunity to state their agreement or disagreement with them. Some disagreed because they were more open to recognising and fellowshiping with parish churches where a godly ministry existed and others might disagree with the distinction made in the 'Platform of Order' between 'pastors' and 'doctors' or 'teachers'.<sup>9</sup>

By the 18th century *Savoy* was already a dead letter. However, another possible reason for the failure of strong and defined creedalism in Congregationalism may be the influence of the Great Awakening and the Missionary Movement. The London Missionary Society was largely Congregationalist in composition, with people like David Bogue and Philip Doddridge amongst its founders, and became increasingly Congregationalist over the years. Generally the missionaries were Calvinists but some held views of church polity which were not Congregationalist. The policy of the Society was that the missionaries would plant churches, which reflected the ecclesiastical polity held to by their founders: 'The Society's purpose is not to send Presbyterianism, Independency, Episcopacy, or any other form of Church Order

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7 GF Nuttall, 'Congregationalists and Creeds', the 1966 WM Llewelyn Lecture in *Studies in English Dissent* (Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 2002), p. 113.

8 GF Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way 1640-1660* (Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 2001), p. 18. notes.

9 Ibid.



and Government ... but the glorious Gospel of the blessed God.’ As the missionary movement developed and as the Spirit was poured out during the Great Awakening, the eyes of 18th century Evangelicals were moved from the perspective of being a denomination in ‘Christendom’ to being Christians in ‘Heathendom’. Suddenly the world was bigger than Christianised Europe. This perspective on the gospel and the missionary task was a sea change in British evangelicalism and resulted in a cast of mind that was not as friendly to the magisterial and complex confessions of the 17th Century. When you consider the importance of the emphasis on mission and evangelism in the New Testament all the 17th Century Confessions are notably deficient in this area of thought.

*2. How did Congregationalists continue to declare their faith without having a nationally recognised and binding confession?*

I would suggest that there are many ways the faith of a church is affirmed and declared which do not require subscription to a nationally recognised confession of faith. One prominent way in the early centuries of Congregationalism was by the use of church covenants. Congregational churches covenanted together at their inception and on occasions would renew their covenant or make a fresh covenant with the Lord. I will give you the wording of the covenant entered into, and frequently renewed by the Independent Church at Axminster in Devon:

The Lord having called us into fellowship with His Son, and convinced us of the necessity of church fellowship we do solemnly profess in the strength of Christ, the accepting of the Lord for our God, and the giving up of ourselves to Him to walk, through the strength of Christ, together in all His holy commandments and ordinances according to the rule of His word. And we do likewise give up ourselves to one another in the Lord, to walk together in all those graces and discharging all those duties which are required of us as a church of Christ.<sup>10</sup>

On one occasion the covenant was renewed in a fresh form:

O Thou most holy God, and Searcher of all hearts; we, Thy poor people, unworthy to be called Thy children by reason of our manifold backslidings and violations of Thy holy covenant, are emboldened through Thy goodness, promise and covenant mercy in Thy Son, to prostrate ourselves our souls at the feet of grace, confessing from our hearts all our transgressions against Thy holy law and gospel, with our breaches of covenant with Thee and our great unfaithfulness, desiring to be ashamed in Thy sight, to abhor ourselves in dust and ashes for them, humbly begging Thy pardon in the blood of Thy dear

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<sup>10</sup> KWH Howard (ed.) *The Axminster Ecclesiastica 1660–1698* (Sheffield: Gospel Tidings Publications, 1976), p. 29.

Son, and desiring and professing from our hearts our willingness to return unto Thee, and to walk more closely with Thee in Thy covenant for the time to come. And therefore do we this day re-give up our souls, bodies and all that is ours to Thee, to be more entirely Thine for ever; and do, in the strength of Christ, resolve and bind our souls by solemn vow and covenant to Thee and one another in Thee, to walk with Thee in all Thy holy will, and with one another in the fellowship of the gospel, as Thou hast required of us in Thy Word, solemnly covenanting in Thy presence and through Thy Son, to take Thy Word for our rule and to endeavour the ordering of our conversations according to it, and to be more careful in attending on Thy holy ordinances and keeping up our communion in the duties of Thy worship according to our capacity; to love and watch over one another; to endeavour the building up and saving each other's souls; to be governed in all things by Thy holy will and to persevere with Thee too through good report and bad report, through life and death, through Thy grace strengthening us. So help us, O God.<sup>11</sup>

William Gordon Robinson distinguishes several periods in the making of church covenants:—

- 1 The Separatist period when they majored on separation from the world and from the apostate church.
- 2 The period of early Congregationalism when they were characteristically concerned with walking together in the gospel way.
- 3 A later period when the gospel was perceived to be under threat from Arianism, which later deteriorated into Unitarianism.<sup>12</sup>

In this third period the statements of faith would characteristically be detailed and sometimes greater flexibility in covenanting together was allowed. In the Bury St Edmunds Church in 1655 the statement of faith, which is integral to the church covenant, has 11 principal heads and 29 subordinate divisions. John Browne describes it as: 'a masterly performance' which is 'comprehensive judicious and scriptural.'<sup>13</sup> It was 'signed by all the brethren and sisters, but not as a mere matter of form. Those who dissented from any article or statement in it carefully noted their dissent at the time of subscription.' It is recorded that two women added after their signatures the words 'being clear in all but that of infant baptism'.<sup>14</sup>

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11 Ibid. pp. 30–31.

12 William Gordon Robinson, Collection of Material on Church Covenants kept at the Congregational Library.

13 John Browne, *History of Congregationalism and memorials of the churches in Norfolk and Suffolk* (London: Jarrold and Sons, 1877), p. 397.

14 Nuttall, 'Congregationalists and Creeds', op. cit., p. 115.

I have had the opportunity to examine in detail the doctrinal statement, which is contained in the 1770 Church Covenant of the Blanket Row Church in Hull. The group had left Dagger Lane Presbyterian Church in 1769 due to doubts as to the orthodoxy of the minister. The reasons for the drafting of the Statement of Faith are also given: ‘in every church of Christ, formed on a gospel-plan, there should be a regular, methodical and scriptural Confession of the Faith of that Society, because it is impossible there should be a united Contention for the Faith, if there is not a united profession of it.’<sup>15</sup> The statement here has some 20 sections, each with scriptural proofs and the phrasing is reminiscent of earlier declarations without being directly copied from them. The theology is the High-Calvinism of the *Savoy Declaration*, and the presentation of it cannot be said to have been improved, but it is significant that the way in which Congregationalists often responded to an attack on ‘the faith once delivered’ is not by appealing to bygone statements of faith but by framing new ones. However, some churches might declare their orthodoxy by referring to some of the 39 *Articles* or to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* in their church covenants.

Preaching is another obvious way of declaring the faith of a congregation. Our church doesn’t have a detailed statement of faith but the preaching embodies a statement of faith, albeit not in a systematic form. Nonetheless none of us would want to say that a statement of faith has the power that preaching has to form and to hold together the people of God. There is a richness, a variety and a distinctive ethos to the Word of God that no statement of faith can equal. This is something vital which we need to take on board in our consideration of how a congregation is to achieve a doctrinal and ecclesiastical identity. It does so chiefly through the preached Word, and the failure to see this makes the church to be viewed as too much an organisation governed by a rule book and too little as the community of faith indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Another obvious area in which our faith is declared is that of hymn-writing and singing. This is an area in which Watts and Doddridge spring to mind as great and gifted exponents. How helpful hymns like ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’ and ‘O God of Bethel’ are to Christian faith and devotion. In *Christian Hymns* Isaac Watts has hymns in almost every section, and I am sure that you could construct his systematic theology and certainly a confession of his faith from his hymns alone. Other less known ministers did the same. Richard Davis of Rothwell in Northamptonshire composed many

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15 The Congregational Historical Society *Transactions*, Vol. IX 1970, pp. 248ff.

hymns and the one I am quoting is actually chosen because it is not very wonderful in terms of poetry and writing style. It can be misleading to concentrate our studies on the greatly gifted and exceptional, and it is helpful to see that many practitioners of the art of hymn-writing were not very gifted but served their own times and congregations. In common with most hymn-writers of his generation none of Davis's work has survived in modern hymn-books. The hymn reads:

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

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

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

The practice of many ministers, Philip Doddridge among them, was to preach and then use the hymn after the sermon, often written specially for the occasion, to enforce and apply and further elucidate the doctrine. So the hymn-writing was virtually a memory aid for use with the sermon. This may imply much about our choice of hymns because it is those your people will remember and carry with them into their everyday lives. The value of this hymnody is not its enduring quality, for even the greatest of hymn-writers will only have a small fraction of their output used by future generations, but its utility as a means of teaching Christian truth and causing it to be remembered.

I want to make a further point, which has great relevance to our current situation as the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches. Stan Guest points out, in his book *Wandering Pilgrims—What happened to the Congregational Churches?*,<sup>16</sup> that it was probably not just reasons of economy that meant that from 1918 the *1833 Declaration* was no longer printed in the *Congregational Year Book*. Liberalism had swept through the denomination prior to the beginning of the 20th Century. Two obvious areas of contention were over eternal punishment and over the appearance of a hymnal called *The*

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16 ES Guest, *Wandering Pilgrims* (Beverly: EFCC, 1998), p. 12.

*Rivulet*. Though deviations in both areas were strongly attacked, notably by Dr John Campbell, editor of the *British Banner* and several Congregational Union publications, the tide of the times meant that once the furore died down deviations from the evangelical faith could be quietly assimilated and accepted. Despite the resolution of 1878 affirming the evangelicalism of the Union, which stated ‘That the Congregational Union was established on the basis of these facts and doctrines [of the evangelical faith as revealed in Scripture] is, on the judgement of the Assembly, made evident by the *Declaration of Faith and Order* adopted at the Annual Meeting, 1833, and the Assembly believes that the churches represented in the Union hold these Facts and Doctrines in their integrity to this day’,<sup>17</sup> Liberalism was triumphant and the Congregational Union was probably the worst affected of all the major denominations.

We now move on to a period of church history in which some who are still alive and with us were involved—that is the founding of the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches. If people in EFCC wish to deplore the departure from the 1833 *Declaration* on the part of others as a sign of their unfaithfulness to evangelical truth, it is somewhat strange that we ourselves never bothered to return to it and indeed I am assured that ‘it was never on the agenda’ that we do so.<sup>18</sup> The founders of EFCC chose not to return to the 1833 *Declaration* but to draw up and adopt another statement of faith, which is briefer, less clearly Reformed and totally silent on infant baptism. I would contend that those who founded and initially led EFCC were simply making a contemporary declaration of their faith, which was less detailed doctrinally, less Calvinistic and was strongly influenced by the fact that evangelicalism as a whole was Baptist, having become increasingly Arminian during the latter end of the 19th Century and during the 20th Century. The EFCC statement of faith, then, declares the faith held by the founders of EFCC, whom I honour and admire, but honesty should compel the admission that the faith they held is not identical with the vigorous Calvinistic and Paedo-Baptist faith which the *Savoy* and 1833 *Declarations* set forth. It is of course far closer to that faith than the formularies of the Congregational Church in England and Wales and of the United Reformed Church.

3. *Has there been a strong objection to subscription to creeds amongst Congregationalists, and if so, what were the reasons given for this?*

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<sup>17</sup> Full resolution quoted in Guest, op. cit., pp. 27–28.

<sup>18</sup> Phone conversation with ES Guest, March 2002.

We will see that there has been, and that this is not a question of the strength of the evangelicalism of the persons concerned, although clearly the success of Liberalism amongst Congregationalists, especially ministers, did influence attitudes towards any form of creedalism. Rightly understood at least some of the problem comes from the very concept of the Church held by Congregationalists when they are most faithful to their own principles.

In the early 18th Century we find that Isaac Watts, who is clearly evangelical, declined to subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity during the Salters' Hall controversy. He writes in a foreword to a sermon by Matthew Henry on 'Religious contentions':

I confess, if the Matter of Debate at London were the glorious Doctrine of the Trinity, whether Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God, there would be more occasion for some Fervour of Spirit: The Scripture seems to me to be sufficiently expressive of this great Truth, and the more important Doctrines of our Religion appear to rest firmly on such a Divine Foundation. Yet even then the mere manner of Subsistence of Three Persons in One Godhead, ought never to become a warm controversy (because of its deep mystery). But while the Subject of the Contest in this City is reduced to this one point, (*viz*) Which is the best way to preserve truth and peace? Whether by subscribing the Words of Scripture or humane forms? I think a happy medium might be found out to secure Liberty and the Gospel together, by every one's declaring his own sense of Scripture in his own Words, at all proper Times, Places and Occasions, and particularly to the Satisfaction of all persons who have any just concern therein.<sup>19</sup>

Now I would not want to comment on whether Watts was correctly discerning his times because that is irrelevant to my argument. Indeed I readily confess that the subsequent doctrinal downgrade does throw that judgement into question. What is important for our present study is that he does reveal several significant convictions:—

- 1 The Doctrine of the Trinity is vital to the preservation of the Faith once delivered to the saints.
- 2 Because of the mysterious nature of the Doctrine of the Trinity we would be wrong to fall out over the precise details of this doctrine.
- 3 To insist on particular wording of someone else's statement of belief is wrong.
- 4 Those concerned as to the content of a Christian preacher's preaching and teaching are entirely right to seek clarification.

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19 Isaac Watts, Foreword to sermon by Matthew Henry on 'Religious contentions'.

This seems to me to preserve a balance. There is a historic, biblical Christian Faith, which we must hold to and which we are to be concerned that others hold to. Much dispute doctrinally is simply about the words in which we try to express mysteries. We are to recognise the historically conditioned nature and hence the limitations of creedal statements. Gerald Bray writes:

Historically speaking, Christian Theology has developed in the context of ancient Greek Philosophy and Roman Law. These influences have produced traditions of thought which have been used to explain the teaching of the Bible. From them two different (though often complementary) traditions have emerged, each with its own strengths and weaknesses.<sup>20</sup>

How then can we force someone to state detailed doctrinal convictions in language they may find unhelpful and misleading and which by its very nature is unbiblical? By ‘un-biblical’ I do not mean ‘anti-biblical’ (*i.e.* teaching what the Bible does not teach) but simply that Biblical truths are expressed in non-Biblical words and categories.

Behind what may seem to be an extreme example of refusing to subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity lies a conviction that is very important and which relates to the nature of the church. For the Congregationalist the church is primarily to be regarded as ‘the fellowship of believers’ and not, as in classic Presbyterian expositions, ‘the company of those who hold and profess saving doctrine’. As someone of Presbyterian convictions, who used to worship at our church, said to me, ‘The only point of church membership is to uphold the church’s statement of faith’. The same man couldn’t understand why I gave him a copy of the *Savoy Declaration* when asked what I believed but wasn’t worried by the fact that neither I nor my church officers had to subscribe to it. Because of their understanding of the nature of the church, Congregationalists historically laid great stress on the emotional, spiritual and volitional aspects of faith as well as the intellectual understanding and assent to the truth. An area where this understanding is fundamentally important is that of church membership. James Bannerman asserts that the difference between Presbyterians and Congregationalists is,

broad and fundamental. With Independents, a saving belief in Christ is the only title to admission to the Christian society; and the candidate for admission is bound to bring with him at least credible evidence such a title belongs to him, and that he has been effectually called unto salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus. With Presbyterians, on the other hand, an intelligent profession of belief in the Gospel is the title for admission to

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20 Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), p. 51.

Church membership; and the candidate for admission is only required to show that his conduct and life are in accordance with and accredit his profession.<sup>21</sup>

Let me give you three examples of the outworking of the Congregational view of the church and its membership; one is from the period of Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate, one from the period of the Glorious Revolution and one from the 19th Century. The examples I am using therefore span three centuries and three dramatically changing contexts in which the Congregational Way was being followed. The first, which I want to look at involves Richard Davis of Rothwell, Northamptonshire:

An indication of Davis's gentleness as regards doctrinal exactness in a prospective church member comes in his letter to John Beart, the pastor of a church founded from Rothwell, about an applicant for church membership who holds to eternal justification. [Eternal justification is the belief that the elect are justified from eternity and that faith recognises an already existent justification rather than receiving justification at the moment of belief.] Davis carefully refutes this error and then writes,

I do hope our brother daily knows experimentally that he comes as a perishing sinner to Christ and his righteousness in every prayer to God for present pardon and justification. And when he is helped to receive this present declaration, he can then reflect with comfort upon the eternal thoughts of God his Father toward him. And if he witnesses this experience to the church, they may be certain he holds faith to be somewhat else than the manifestation of his being eternally justified, however he may express himself.<sup>22</sup>

The second involves Thomas Goodwin, who was content to allow Zachary Mayne, a fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford to partake of the Lord's Supper despite his avowed Socinianism.<sup>23</sup> The final example is RW Dale, who wrote: 'Can a man have faith in Christ—the faith which saves—and yet deny the Divinity of his person ...? I say Yes.'<sup>24</sup> He also comments 'What seems to be a fundamental principle of Congregationalism requires that the gates of the church should be open to a Unitarian.'<sup>25</sup> Putting it more thoughtfully he writes in his *Manual of Congregational Principles*

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21 James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (first published 1869; reprinted London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 1:74.

22 M Plant, 'Richard Davis and God's Day of Grace' in *Congregational Studies Conference 1987* (Beverly: EFCC, 1987).

23 Nuttall, *Visible Saints*, op. cit., p. 13, notes.

24 AWW Dale, *Life of RW Dale* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898), p. 345.

25 Ibid., p. 344.



personal faith in Christ ... may exist, and there may be decisive evidence of its existence, in persons who have no clear intellectual apprehension of many of the great truths of the Gospel; ... in persons by whom some of these truths are rejected.<sup>26</sup>

Probably few of us would wish to identify ourselves with all the sentiments expressed above but to say this is to miss the point. We may all feel that we would draw the line in different places from Davies, Goodwin and Dale, but the principle that genuine Christian experience, whether inadequately or inaccurately expressed, is the paramount consideration as regarding church membership clearly underlies these varied situations and responses and is a correct and biblical principle. We might ask what relevance the text (Romans 15:7): 'Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God' has for our receiving people into the membership of our churches. The text does not after all read: 'Accept one another just as they accept your Statement of Faith!' My understanding is that we accept all who belong to the Lord Jesus regardless of the level of understanding and expression of their faith. If we regard the church as primarily the community of believers then I find it hard to see how we could work in any other way. If a church will willingly exclude those who belong to Christ from its membership then my view is that it has become a theological club (most people would say a sect) rather than a church, which is professedly part of the Universal Church. RW Dale states:

A Christian society which imposes any other conditions of membership other than faith in Christ is a sect, and not, in the highest sense of the term, a Christian church. It is a private Christian club. It receives persons into membership, not because they are brethren in Christ, but because they are brethren in Christ professing certain religious opinions or observing certain religious practices.<sup>27</sup>

*4. A modern question, which may have some well established answers. Is subscription to detailed confessions the way forward in Christian unity?*

The original idea for this paper originated in a discussion on local church unity which took place during a ministers' fraternal meeting at my home. Everyone else present, and they were reformed Baptists to a man, insisted that the unity of their congregations was based around the congregation's adherence to a full statement of faith, in nearly every case the *1689 Baptist Confession*. I found myself in a vocal minority of one, although I did manage to convince some that perhaps their own congregation's unity had not come

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<sup>26</sup> RW Dale, *Manual of Congregational Principles* (first published 1884, reprinted Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 1996), p. 179.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

about in this way at all. I then decided to follow through my thinking on this subject and so this led to today's paper, which I have also test-run at the fraternal.

My own questions about this have really touched on two areas in which I am involved. Firstly my own pastorate; and I entered the pastorate with the conviction that it would be most desirable that our church adopt, as explaining its commitment to Congregational faith and order, the *Savoy Declaration of Faith*. Later, when I came across the *1833 Declaration* I would have favoured that as shorter and more practicable for my congregation. In fact, nearly twenty years into the ministry in the same church, we still haven't adopted either declaration, nor have I ever proposed that we should. The reason is not that there would be such strong opposition to this move as would make life difficult, but that I have come to doubt the benefits of such a move. However, a need to respond to changing circumstances and attacks on the Faith might change my mind.

The other area is that of the fellowship of churches, the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches to which we belong. For many years I would have seriously held the view that subscription to the *Savoy Declaration*, or at the least the *1833 Declaration*, would be strongly desirable, if not actually practicable, for our churches as a means to enhance our unity. I have now decided that I was completely wrong about that. There are a number of reasons for this change in conviction that I want to share with you. Firstly, and not in order of importance, church history and particularly recent tragic events in church history north of the border have made me believe that uniformity in doctrine and practice enforced by strong creeds is not the way to ensure and encourage unity in denominations or congregations. In fact the greater the uniformity and detail insisted upon, the greater the brittleness of the union, seems to be the rule. Secondly, I have become convinced and have seen in my own experience that real unity can be developed without such a method of subscription to creeds. Thirdly, I have come to see that the New Testament, which is passionately concerned about the problems of unity in the fellowship of God's people and devotes much space to the problem, adopts an entirely different strategy in order to promote that unity. It is this third and most important area of thought to which we now turn.

The point I want to make is that the Congregational Way, as regards creeds and creedalism, has actually captured the essence of a significant area of the thought within the New Testament. It may be helpful for us to consider two areas of life that had the potential to become strongly divisive for the New

Testament Churches. Those are the division between Jew and Gentile, including matters of food laws, and the problem of eating meat that had been offered to idols (which may have been a greater problem to new Gentile believers, with long established belief in idols, than to strongly monotheistic Jewish converts to Christianity). Paul devotes 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1 and Romans 14:1–15:13 to these problems. It is not sarcastic to suggest that if he felt strong creedalism was the answer to incipient disunity he could have done a far quicker and neater job. After all the whole matter can be reduced to a few propositions, which must be assented to so that unity may be achieved. There is still today a mindset abroad, which is intolerant and impatient with slow understanding and would like to legislate unity through confessions. As a method of approach it is neither Biblical nor workable.

Let us look at the possible propositions and then at Paul's handling of the matters involved.

## Propositions

- 1 Romans 14:14 'No food is unclean of itself'; that on its own tells you all you need to know to be correct doctrinally in the situation Paul addresses in Romans 14:1–15:13.
- 2 1 Corinthians 8:4 'We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and there is no God but one.'
- 3 1 Corinthians 10:21 'You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in the Lord's table and the table of demons.' You can eat food offered to idols, as virtually all meat would have been, but not in the context of heathen worship.

The problem is that these creedal statements, which are completely correct, have to be understood, and their implications lived out, in a context where not everybody is able, as yet, to understand and to fully accept them. Weak Christians may defile their consciences eating meat offered to idols because they are still so accustomed to idols (1 Corinthians 8:7). Non-Christians may have hang-ups about Biblically permitted behaviour (see 1 Corinthians 10:27–29 where the non-Christian's conscience, about a Christian eating meat offered to idols, is to be respected). Conscience is precious and to go against conscience, however weak and wrongly informed, is sinful because (Romans 14:23): 'everything that does not come from faith is sin.'

So Paul must teach them that (1 Corinthians 8:1) 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.' That it is right to give up our rights (see 1 Corinthians 9) and that (Romans 15:1) 'We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of

the weak and not to please ourselves' and we should (Romans 14:19) 'make every effort do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.' Paul exhorts us (Romans 14:20): 'Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food'—nor, I would exhort us, for doctrinal shibboleths.

The overall point that I want to make is this: in any congregation there will be different levels of understanding, and of misunderstanding also, of the gospel. What is the way forward to unity when we are faced with such barriers? There are several propositions I would want to make which are relevant to the matter of creeds and subscription to them:

- 1 Truth and affirming truth is not unimportant within the local congregation; indeed they are vital activities if the church is to function as (1 Timothy 3:15): 'the pillar and the ground of the truth'. We are not saying that strong creedal statements cannot be made or that they should not be made. It is hard to imagine a creedal statement much stronger than the *Savoy Declaration*. Paul's creedal stance on clean and unclean foods and foods offered to idols is crystal clear. I am not suggesting that doctrinally weak and indecisive preaching or hymnody is something that would be at all desirable in our churches.
- 2 However the presentation of such statements of truth must bear in mind that often those who are confronted with them have stumbling blocks in their minds concerning the statements. For example: the converted Jew to whom pork will never be a clean food; the converted animist for whom sacrifices offered to the spirits still have an objective reality; and the converted Nazarene in my congregation for whom Calvinism is a 'heresy'.
- 3 Hence to preserve unity we need to recognise that not only does the gospel mean that I can clearly state what I believe and that my statement of faith must be formed by Scripture, but also that I must have gospel-formed attitudes to those who also believe. As there were those in the early church whose attitudes showed that they were quite ready to destroy the work of God for the sake of food, or to act so that (1 Corinthians 11:11) '(a) weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by (their) knowledge', so such have their successors in the modern church. They are prepared to destroy the work of God for the sake of a particular phraseology as to the extent of the atonement, or a particular way of stating what the believer may expect in his experience of the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead we must (Romans 14:1) 'Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgement on disputable matters.'
- 4 How do we do this? Two points are worth noting:

- We are to see that the gospel sets a pattern for our relationships and that following this pattern is what brings glory to God. Romans 15:7 ‘Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.’
- We are to remember the things that are most important. Romans 14:17 ‘For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.’ Most church troubles and disunity come about when something else becomes more important.

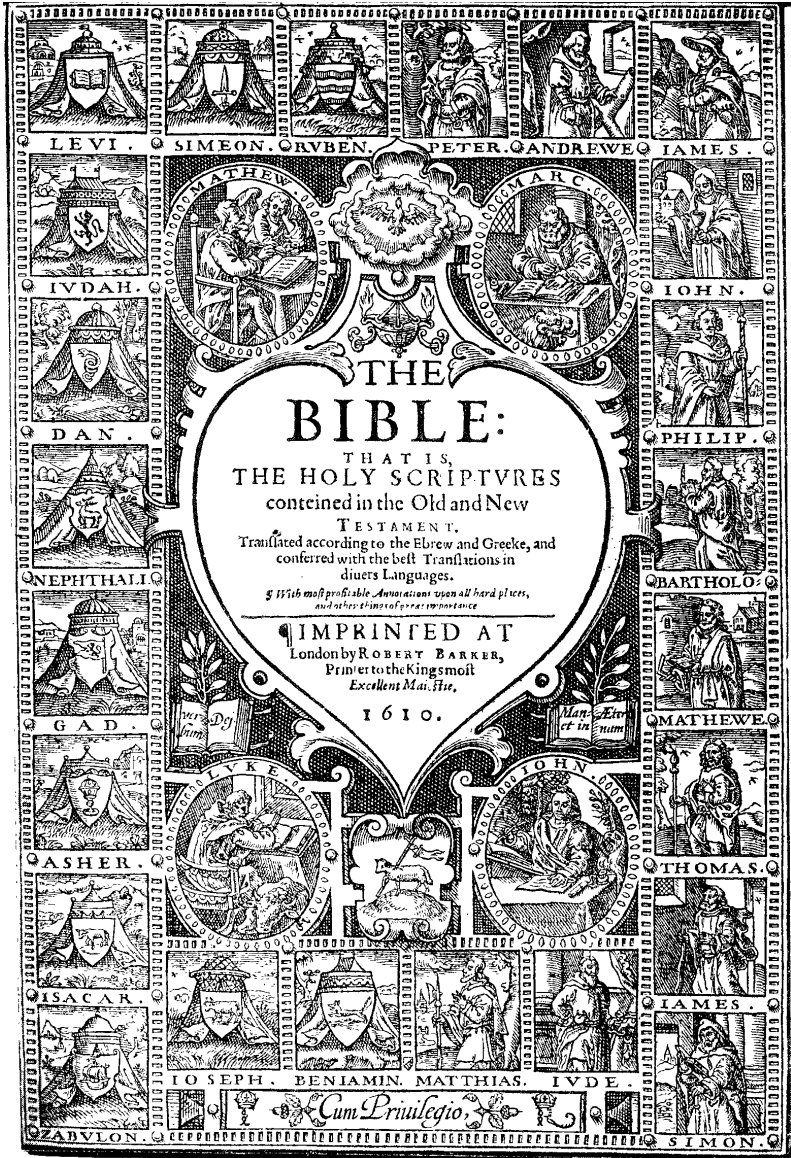
## Conclusion

Many years ago, early in my ministry, I read a book at the recommendation of the Rev. Alan Tovey; whether this was intended mainly for my education or my encouragement I do not know. The book was very interesting and informative but its greatest value to me was in helping me develop my understanding of church life and ministry. The book is by Murray Tolmie and is called *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London 1616–1649*.<sup>28</sup> It is about the early Congregational churches in London and what I found helpful is the way it explodes romantic myths about church history. We may think that it would have been wonderful to be in the early Congregational churches where the members were of one mind and were not the rag-bag of denominational backgrounds that we so often accumulate. What Tolmie shows decisively, by painstaking research and documentation, is that they were not of one mind in their ecclesiology and attitudes and each congregation consisted of several groups. In each congregation some were Congregationalists, but some were the Brownists and Separatists, from which roots Congregationalism had sprung, and some were Baptists, not necessarily at that stage ‘dippers’. When I thought about that situation I had exactly the same emotions that I was having when I looked at my own congregation: ‘What a mess and what a mixture!’ What I found helpful was this: there is no golden age of church life in which unity could be achieved by promoting rigid formularies and tight doctrinal agreement, nor are we in such a situation today. Unity never comes about by seeking uniformity. Churches are preserved in unity and thrive and grow by the application of Christian love and the teaching of Christian truth in unpromising and difficult circumstances.

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28 Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London 1616–1649* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).





**THE BIBLE:**  
 THAT IS,  
 THE HOLY SCRIPTURES  
 contained in the Old and New

TESTAMENT.  
 Translated according to the Hebrew and Greeke, and  
 conferred with the best Translations in  
 diuers Languages.

*g With most profitable Annotations upon all hard places,  
 and other things of great importance*

PRINTED AT  
 London by ROBERT BARKER,  
 Printer to the Kings moit  
 Excellent Mai. Maie.

1610.

*Cum Priuilegio*

# The Geneva Bible—the Bible of Congregationalists

## Edward S Guest

May I begin with a personal story? It was about 1954 and I was serving my first church in Southend-on-Sea. One day, as I was walking along, a man, standing at his gate, called me over. I did not know him but he evidently knew me for he said: ‘Mr Guest, would you like a Bible?’ ‘Well, thank you very much’, I replied, and he gave me a Geneva Bible, published in 1610. It had obviously been rebound but in very good condition. I have treasured it ever since and the news that the Geneva Bible was being republished encouraged me to prepare this paper.

And, of course, the Geneva Bible was the Bible of the first Congregationalists. We have had Study Conference papers on Robert Browne, the Morning Star of Congregationalism; John Robinson; John Penry; Henry Barrow and John Greenwood. All would have drawn their inspiration and encouragement from the Geneva Bible. In fact Alan Tovey, in his 1993 Congregational Library Lecture ‘Whatever Happened to the Separatists: A Commemoration of the Martyrdom of Barrow, Greenwood and Penry’,<sup>1</sup> spoke of a work by Penry and said, ‘and biblical references, following the Genevan version, are supplied on Penry’s title page, in order to help elucidate the title’. John Penry, as a Separatist, was writing against the false doctrines of the English Church. His title was a long one. Referring to Numbers 16, he described ‘The Histories of Corah, Dathan and Abiram, applied to the Prelacy Ministerie and Church assemblies of England’. Here is verse 26, Geneva version: ‘And Moses spake unto the Congregation, saying, Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, least ye perish in all their sinnes’. Penry also added Revelation 18:4, ‘And I heard another voice from heaven say, Go out of Babylon, my people, that ye be not partakers in her sinnes, and that ye receive not of her plagues’.

Would it not have been the Bible that the Pilgrim Fathers took to America in 1620? They would hardly have welcomed the newly-published edition authorised by the opponent of Independency, King James I.

Why Geneva? Why not London or Oxford? Well, why was Robert Browne arrested; why were Penry, Barrow and Greenwood executed? Why did the

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1 Alan Tovey, Congregational Library Lecture 1993, p. 5.



Pilgrim Fathers go off to America? The answer is simple. It was because of the persecution by both state and church authorities. And why was there persecution? Because individuals were claiming the right to hold and to publish ideas that were contrary to those held by the authorities. The renaissance of learning had been followed by the Reformation. God was working his purposes out and, just as he was working in the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus, and Jesus was opposed by both secular and religious authorities, so it happened again. It has been my privilege to have visited every site connected with the Pilgrim Fathers, both in Europe and in America. I was interested, therefore, to read in *An Illustrated History of the USA*, an account of the religious state of the England they left:

The Europe that the Pilgrims left behind them was torn by religious quarrels. For more than a thousand years Roman Catholic Christianity had been the religion of most of its people. By the sixteenth century, however, some Europeans had begun to doubt the teachings of the Catholic Church. They were also growing angry at the wealth and worldly pride of its leaders.

Early in the century a German monk named Martin Luther quarrelled with these leaders. He claimed that individual human beings did not need the Pope or the priests of the Catholic Church to enable them to speak to God. A few years later a French lawyer named John Calvin put forward similar ideas. Calvin claimed that each individual was directly and personally responsible to God. Because they protested against the teachings and customs of the Catholic Church, religious reformers like Luther and Calvin were called 'Protestants'.

Few people believed in religious toleration at this time. In most countries people were expected to have the same religion as their ruler. This was the case in England. In the 1530s the English King, Henry VIII, formed a national church with himself as its head. In the later years of the sixteenth century many English people believed that this Church of England was still too much like the Catholic Church. They disliked the power of its bishops. They disliked its elaborate ceremonies and the rich decorations of its churches. They also questioned many of its teachings. Such people wanted the Church of England to become more plain and simple, or 'pure'. Because of this they were called Puritans. The ideas of John Calvin appealed particularly to them.<sup>2</sup>

But how did these 'Puritans' obtain the truths for which they were prepared to suffer and die? The answer is so simple—they had the Bible in their own language. In other words: they were men who went by the Book. What a wonderful example we have of this in the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus. When he was tempted by the devil he did not respond (as he could have

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2 Bryn O'Callaghan, *An Illustrated History of the USA* (Harlow: Longman, 1990), p. 16.

done): 'I know what is right.' Instead, each time he replied, 'It is wrtten'. We sometimes think that Roman Catholics are not encouraged to read the Bible. I have a copy here of the Douai New Testament which starts with an extract of a message sent in April 1820 by Pope Pious VII to the Vicars Apostolic of Great Britain. Among other things he urges them to encourage those in their pastoral care to (I quote) 'abstain from reading vicious books, by which, in these most calamitous times, our holy religion is in all directions assailed; that by reading pious books, and above all the HOLY SCRIPTURES'. However, he does add 'In the editions approved by the Church'—but have we not said that ourselves! Certainly, we would wish all Catholics to read and learn 'For God so loved the world, as to give his only begotten Son; that whosoever believeth in him, may not perish, but may have life everlasting.' (John 3:16, Douai Bible).

What a wonderful debt we owe to our forefathers who ensured that we could read God's Word in our own language. The Hebrew and Greek had been translated into Latin but that was hardly the common tongue. So, in the 1380s John Wycliffe began the work in English. Then came William Tyndale with, in 1525, the first ever New Testament printed in our tongue. The first complete Bible in English was the Coverdale version of 1535. In 1539, at the request of King Henry VIII, Coverdale published the 'Great Bible', to be chained to the desk of every church and with a reader provided so that the illiterate could hear the Word of God in plain English.

But there were Latin scholars questioning some of the wording, among them, William Whittingham in Geneva. So, with the help of such as Anthony Gilbey and Thomas Sampson, the version of the Bible was produced which William Shakespeare quoted so many times in his plays.

One of the best and most-detailed accounts of the Geneva Bible was published in 1966 by Lewis Lupton. He was an artist and his life story was written by Iain Murray in the *Banner of Truth* magazine of October, 1996. In December 1959, Mr Lupton spoke on the Geneva Bible at the Puritan Conference at Westminster Chapel. Mr Murray comments,

and it is not likely to be forgotten by them who were there. The Puritans, he told us, were 'mountainmen' and by the time he finished we all felt we had breathed the very air of Geneva.<sup>3</sup>

Incidentally, Mr Lupton also came across the Bible by chance. Here is his account:

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3 Iain Murray, *The Banner of Truth*, October 1996, p. 17.

It was on a sketching tour soon after the War that I fell in love with a Bible. It lay invitingly open in a shop window in Chichester. The left-hand page had an old map with galleons and sea monsters on it while the right had a gorgeously decorative title and border. It was early closing day so we drove on to Bosham with our easels and canvasses. But I always regretted missing that Bible and in the end, some three years later, I wrote to see if it was still there. It was, and thereby hangs this tale. I soon found that there was more to the volume than met the eye, especially for people who feel a sneaking sympathy with those underdogs of our school history books—the Puritans and Roundheads. I found that this book was a real Puritan Bible.<sup>4</sup>

Now that is a key phrase in our study. Here is the entry on the Geneva Bible in *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*:

GENEVA BIBLE: A revision of great importance in the history of the English Bible, undertaken by English exiles during the Marian persecutions and first published in 1560. It was the work of William Whittingham, assisted by Anthony Gilbey and Thomas Sampson. The Geneva version was the first English Bible to be printed in roman type instead of black letter, the first in which the chapters are divided into verses (taken by Whittingham from Robert Stephen's Greek-Latin Testament of 1537), and the first in which italics are used for explanatory and connective words and phrases (taken from Beza's New Testament of 1556). It was immensely popular; from 1560 to 1616 no year passed without a new edition, and at least two hundred are known.<sup>5</sup>

Brewer's Dictionary says it was the work of William Whittingham, assisted by others of course. Let us consider this man as an example of all the threads that resulted in the great tapestry of the Geneva Bible. He was born at Chester in 1524 and went to Brasenose College, Oxford, at the age of 16. He must have done well for in 1545 he was elected a Fellow of All Souls and two years later moved to Christ Church. He travelled quite widely in Europe and, after visiting Geneva, returned to England. This was towards the end of the reign of King Edward VI. However, the young king died and when Queen Mary came to the throne, she began to restore Romish practice and doctrine. Some 800 refugees fled to Europe, setting up English colonies in eight different cities. Whittingham was among them and he took a leading part in the organisation of the English congregation at Frankfurt, where he supported John Knox. But all was not well. Sadly there were differing views between the companies, some wanting to hold to Prayer Book services and, others, like that at Frankfurt,

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4 Lewis Lupton: *A History of the Geneva Bible*, Vol. 1 'The Quarrel' (London: The Olive Tree, 1966), p. 11.

5 *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* 9th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 100.

being what we might consider to be a truly non-conformist independent church. However there were problems at Frankfurt too. John Calvin now comes into the story. He was very troubled over the quarrelling and, in fact, there is a letter expressing his concern. It was sent from Geneva on 20th January 1555 and addressed to ‘the godly and learned men, Master John Knox and Master William Whittingham his faithful brethren at Frankfurt’. Here is the letter, translated out of Latin by William Whittingham:

It is a great shame that contention should arise among brethren banished and driven out of their country for one faith. In the Liturgy of England there were many tolerable foolish things which were for a season to be tolerated but it behoved the godly ministers of Christ to enterprise farther and to set forth something more filed from rust and purer. Now, when a Church must be set up in another place where it may freely make an Order which shall be for the edification of the Church, I cannot tell what they mean which so greatly delight in the leavings of the Popish dregs.

Fare ye well, beloved brethren: and faithful servants of Christ. The Lord defend and govern you.<sup>6</sup>

The troubles were increasing in Frankfurt, and just two months after receiving that letter, both John Knox and William Whittingham left Frankfurt on their way to Geneva. Whittingham was expert in Latin and the translation of the Geneva Bible was under way.

But let us complete the story of William Whittingham. He returned to England and was made Dean of Durham in 1563. However, his repeated failures to conform to the Book of Common Prayer led to an attempt by the Archbishop of York to remove him on the ground that he had never been properly ordained. But Whittingham died in 1579 before the proceedings were concluded.

Now back to the Geneva Bible. *Brewer’s Dictionary* says it was immensely popular. Why, then, was it replaced by the Authorised Version of 1611?

Before we consider that, let us read some passages of the Bible that you will know well. I have chosen them quite arbitrarily. Here is the Geneva Bible version of the first five verses of Genesis:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the deep, and the Spirit of God moved upon the waters. Then God said, Let there be light: And there was light. And God saw the light that it was good, and God separated the light

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6 Lewis Lupton, op. cit., p. 93.

from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness, he called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.

And now Psalm 23:

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to rest in green pastures and leadeth me by the still waters. He restoreth my soul, and leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake. Yea, though I should walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou dost prepare a table before me in the sight of mine adversaries; thou dost anoint my head with oil, and my cup runneth over,

Doubtless kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall remain a long season in the house of the Lord.

If that last verse troubles you, I will quote from *Cruden's Concordance*:

Many believe that the words 'for ever' and 'everlasting' are not to be taken as synonymous with eternal, as being without end, but to be understood merely as meaning a very long time.

We today can rejoice in our understanding of the words 'for ever' but we should realise that, in Hebrew grammar, a word stated once does not have the same emphasis as a word repeated. In several places in the Bible we have the words 'for ever and ever' but they refer to the attributes of God himself.

Now listen to John 14:1-6.

Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many dwelling places: if it were not so, I would have told you:

I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go, ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas said unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; how can we then know the way? Jesus said unto him, I am that Way, and the Truth, and that life. No man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

And just a verse or two of 1 Corinthians 13.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not love, I am a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I had the gift of prophecy, and knew all secrets and all knowledge, yea, if I had all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and had not love, I were nothing.

Yes—love!! After all, the Greek is 'agape'.

Why then the Authorised Version? Lewis Lupton called the Geneva Bible 'a real Puritan Bible'. He wrote later in his history:

The word 'Puritan' still makes the sparks fly. It was always hated by State and Church officialdom and ultimately the main stream of English religious life was forced into nonconformity. The Geneva Bible was made by Puritans and read by Puritans. The stigma attached to them has so obscured their version that the story of the best English translation to issue from the Reformation is almost unknown. It met with opposition as soon as it appeared. The bishops had a private grudge against the translators. Queen Elizabeth herself liked it no better. ('Geneva jigs' was her name for the metrical psalms usually bound up with the Bible). James [I] liked it even less. He included it in the list of versions to be consulted by the translators of the Authorised Version as something to be avoided rather than copied. Fortunately the A.V. men were too sensible to heed his prejudice. Later the Geneva Bible became even more obnoxious. In Charles's [I] time Archbishop Laud forbade it by law but nothing could stop its popularity. At least eight editions were printed in Holland and imported into England with fake title pages dated 1599. Their real date is about 1630. Between 1560 and 1644 (the dates of the first and last editions) it ran through some 200 editions. Cromwell, Milton, Puritan divines, Scottish Covenanters, Anglican Bishops, and the Westminster Assembly all used it. Ordinary folk read it, Shakespeare quoted it and it went with the Pilgrim Fathers to New England.<sup>7</sup>

Why then? Could it have been, not the text itself, but the explanatory notes down the border of every page? The Puritans held very firmly to certain theological truths and these were reflected in their comments upon the text. An American publication called the *Sixteenth Century Journal* had an article in 1981 by Dan G Danner entitled 'The Contribution of the Geneva Bible of 1560 to the English Protestant Tradition'. It gives many examples of Puritan truths that were drawn out again and again in the notes. Truths such as the authority of Scripture, the sinfulness of man, the sovereignty of God, the true nature of Holy Communion, and the rejection of images in worship. By the time one gets to the book of Revelation the 'notes' occupy more of the page than the text. The errors of Rome are fully exposed and, in Revelation 13:18, the 666 mark of the beast is clearly identified with the Pope.

A new book has just been published by Hodder & Stoughton. It is by Alister McGrath and called *In the Beginning—The Story of the King James Bible*. McGrath has much to say about the Geneva Bible and clearly accepts that opposition to it was caused by the notes. He writes:

Despite its obvious popular appeal, the Geneva Bible was studiously ignored by the authorities of the Church of England. The truth of the matter is that they felt threatened by it. It was clear that Archbishop Matthew Parker (1504–75) disliked the Geneva Bible, not on account of the translation it offered, but

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7 Lewis Lupton, op. cit., p. 13.

because of the notes that accompanied it. Like Matthew's Bible before it, the Geneva Bible alienated the establishment on account of its marginal notes.<sup>8</sup>

However, could it have been the note on just one word that sparked off the opposition? The word 'bishop'. The note to Philippians 1:1 reads: 'By the Bishops are meant both the Pastors, which have the dispensation of the word, and the Elders that governe'. The New International Version does not use the word 'bishop'. Instead it has 'overseer'.

Now the title 'bishop' would also have been a key word for King James. He saw that his own position of power in the land depended so much on the support he received from the bishops. He was strongly opposed to the Presbyterianism in the Scottish Church as he saw this as a threat to the bishops. He would say, 'No bishop, no king'. He would certainly not have liked the Geneva Bible version of Job 34:30: 'Because the hypocrite doth reign, and because the people are snared.' The note reads: 'When tyrants sit on the throne of justice which under pretence of executing justice are but hypocrites and oppress the people, it is a sign that God hath drawn back his countenance and favour from that place'.

In the Hampton Court Conference of January 1604, James argued fiercely with the Puritan representatives and warmly approved the suggestion that a new translation of the Bible should be issued. GP Fisher in his *History of the Church* says that the Conference also 'heard [the suggestion] with favour, on account of the objection of James to the notes of the Geneva Bible, then in common use, some of which were offensive to his [James] notion of the sacredness of kings'. Dr Fisher continued, 'James was delighted with the display which he made of his reasoning power, and equally rejoiced in the adulation offered him by the bishops, who were naturally overjoyed at his unexpectedly thorough support of their cause. The Bishop of London fell on his knees before him, saying that there had been no such king since Christ's time.'<sup>9</sup>

So the Authorised Version came, authorised by King James. Our American brethren, in fact, always call it the King James Version. Which is hardly surprising if you read its dedication. Here is part.

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8 Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning—In the beginning, the story of the King James Bible and how it changed a nation, a language and a culture* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001), p. 124.

9 GP Fisher, *History of the Christian Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1887), p. 397.

TO THE MOST HIGH AND MIGHTY PRINCE, JAMES,  
BY THE GRACE OF GOD, KING OF GREAT BRITAIN, FRANCE AND  
IRELAND, DEFENDER OF THE FAITH, ETC.

The Translators of the BIBLE wish Grace, Mercy, and Peace, through JESUS  
CHRIST, our Lord.

Great and manifold were the blessings, most dread Sovereign, which Almighty God, the Father of all mercies, bestowed upon us the people of England, when first he sent Your Majesty's Royal Person to rule and reign over us ...

But among all our joys, there was no one that more filled our hearts than the blessed continuance of the preaching of God's sacred Word among us, which is that inestimable treasure which excelleth all the riches of the earth; because the fruit thereof extendeth itself, not only to the time spent in this transitory world, but directeth and disposeth men unto that eternal happiness which is above in heaven.

Then, not to suffer this to fall to the ground, but rather to take it up, and to continue it in that state wherein the famous Predecessor of Your Highness did leave it; nay, to go forward with the confidence and resolution of a man in maintaining the truth of Christ, and propagating it far and near, is that which hath so bound and firmly knit the hearts of all Your Majesty's loyal and religious people unto You, that Your very name is precious among them: their eye doth behold You with comfort, and they bless You in their hearts, as that sanctified Person, who, under God, is the immediate author of their true happiness ...

There are infinite arguments of this right Christian and religious affection in Your Majesty; but none is more forcible to declare it to others than the vehement and perpetuated desire of accomplishing and publishing of this work, which now, with all humility, we present unto Your Majesty. For when Your Highness had once, out of deep judgement, apprehended how convenient it was, that, out of the Original sacred Tongues, together with comparing of the labours, both in our own and other foreign languages, of many worthy men who went before us, there should be one more exact translation of the Holy Scriptures into the English Tongue; Your Majesty did never desist to urge and to excite those to whom it was commended, that the Work might be hastened, and that the business might be expedited in so decent a manner, as a matter of such importance might justly require.

And now at last, by the mercy of God, and the continuance of our labours, it being brought unto such a conclusion, as that we have great hopes that the Church of England shall reap good fruit thereby, we hold it our duty to offer it to Your Majesty not only as to our King and Sovereign but as to the principal mover and author of the Work. ...

The Lord of heaven and earth bless Your Majesty with many and happy days: that, as his heavenly hand hath enriched Your Highness with many singular



and extraordinary graces, so You may be the wonder of the world in this latter age for happiness and true felicity, to the honour of that great God, and the good of his Church, through Jesus Christ our Lord and only Saviour.

Now hear the dedication of the Geneva Bible.

TO THE CHRISTIAN READER

Besides the manifold and continual benefits which Almighty God bestoweth upon us, both corporall and spiritual, wee are especially bound (deare brethren) to give him thanks without ceasing for his great grace and unspeakable mercies, in that it hath pleased him to call us unto this marveilous light of his Gospel, and mercifully to regard us, after so horrible backsliding & falling away from Christ to Antichrist, from light to darknes, from the living God to dumme and dead idoles, and that after so cruell murder of Gods Saints, as alas, hath bene among us, we are not altogether cast off, as were the Israelites & many others for the like, or not so manifest wickednes, but received againe to grace with most evident signes and tokens of Gods especial love and favour. To the intent therefore that wee may not bee unmindefull of these great mercies, but seeke by all meanes (according to our dutie) to be thankfull for the same, it behoveth us so to walke in his feare and love, that all the dayes of our life wee may procure the glory of his holy Name.

Now forasmuch as this thing chiefly is attained by the knowledge and practising of the worde of God, (which is the light to our pathes, the key of the kingdom of heaven, our comfort in affliction, our shield and sword against Satan, the schedule of all wisdome, the glasse wherein we beholde Gods face, the testimonie of his favour, and the onely foode and nourishment of our soules) we thought that we could bestowe our labours and studie in nothing which could bee more acceptable to God and comfortable to his Church, than in the translating of the holy Scriptures into our native tonge: the which thing, albeit that divers heretofore have indevoured to archieve: yet considering the infancie of those times and imperfect knowledge of the tongues, in respect of this ripe age and cleare light which God hath now reveiled, the translations required greatly to be perused and reformed. Not that we vendicate anything to ourselves above the least of our brethren (for God knoweth with what feare & trembling we have bene for the space of two yeares and more, day and night occupied herein) but being earnestly desired, and by divers, whose learning and godliness wee reverence, exhorted, and also encouraged by the ready willes of such, whose hearts God likewise touched, not to spare any charges for the furtherance of such a benefit & favor of God toward his Church (though the time then was most dangerous, and the persecution sharpe & furious) we submitted ourselves at length to their godly judgements, and seeing the great opportunities and occasions, which God presented unto us in his Church, by reason of so many godly and learned men and such diversities of translations in divers tongues: we undertooke this great & wonderful worke (with all

reverence, as in the presence of God, as intreating the word of God, whereunto we thinke ourselves insufficient) which now God, according to his divine providence & mercy, hath directed to a most prosperous end. And this we may with good conscience protest, that we have in every point & word, according to the measure of that knowledge which it pleased Almighty God to give us, faithfully rendred the text, and in all hard places most sncerely expounded the same. For God is our witness, that wee have by all meanes endeavoured to set forth the puritie of the word and right sense of the holy Ghost, for the edifying of the brethren in faith and charitie.

Therefore, as brethren that are partakers of the same hope and salvation with us, we beseech you, that this rich pearle and inestimable treasure may not be offered in vaine, but as sent from God to the people of God, for the increase of his kingdome, the comfort of his Church, and discharge of our conscience, whom it hath pleased him to raise up for this purpose, so you would willingly receive the worde of God, earnestly studie it, and in all your life practise it, that you may now appear in deede to be the people of God, not walking any more according to this world, but in the fruits of the Spirit, that God in us may be fully glorified, through Christ Jesus our Lord, who liveth and reigneth for ever. Amen.

The Geneva Bible was also known as ‘The Breeches Bible’. The name is often given to this version from its description of the fig leaf dress of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:7: ‘And they sewed figge tree leaves together and made themselves breeches’. This undignified label is said to have been given to it by envious Elizabethan bishops whose own version (the ‘Bishops’ Bible’), was such a flop. However that may be, the name has certainly stuck, which is a pity, since it is not really accurate. Other earlier versions also used ‘breeches’ in the same place.

The second edition of the Geneva Bible was also called ‘The Placemaker’s Bible’. This was because of a printer’s error in Matthew 5:9: ‘Blessed are the placemakers for they shall be called the children of God.’

But all versions have suffered from printer’s errors. I have a copy of the first printing of the New Testament in the New International Version. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16 it refers to ‘the voice of the archangel’ but spells it ‘archangle’. In the story of the Good Samaritan, in Luke 10:31, instead of the priest going down the road, he is said to be doing down the road. In 2 Timothy 4:19, instead of ‘Greet Priscilla and Aquila’ we have ‘Great Priscilla and Aquila’. The Women’s Lib. Bible?

As we have seen, there are many helpful notes and supplements in the Geneva Bible. May we close by reading a poem at the front of this version

published in 1610 by Robert Barker. The poem itself has scripture references to substantiate all its parts. It is headed ‘Of the Incomparable Treasure of the holy Scriptures, with a prayer for the true use of the same’.

Here is the Spring where waters flow,  
to quench our heat of sinne:  
Here is the Tree where trueth doth grow,  
to leade our lives therein:  
Here is the judge that stints the strife,  
when mens devices faile:  
Here is the Bread that feeds the life,  
that death cannot assaile.  
The tidings of Salvation deere,  
comes to our eares from hence:  
The fortresse of our Faith is heere,  
and shield of our defence.  
Then be not like the hogge, that hath  
a pearle at his desire,  
And takes more pleasure of the trough  
and wallowing in the mire.  
Reade not this booke, in any case,  
but with a single eye:  
Reade not, but first desire Gods grace,  
to understand thereby.  
Pray still in faith, with this respect,  
to fructifie therein,  
That knowledge may bring this effect,  
to mortifie thy sinne.  
Then happy thou, in all thy life,  
whatso to thee befallles:  
Yea, double happy shall thou be,  
when God by death thee calles.

It ends with a prayer:

O Gracious God and most mercifull Father, which hast vouchsafed us the rich and precious jewell of thy holy Word, assist us with thy Spirit, that it may be written in our hearts to our everlasting comfort, to reform us, to renew us according to thine owne image, to build us up, and edifie us into the perfect building of thy Christ, sanctifying and increasing in us all heavenly vertues. Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christes sake. Amen.

¶ Of the incomparable Treasure of  
the holy Scriptures, with a prayer  
for the true vse of the same.

**H**ere is the Spring where waters flow,  
 to quench our heat of sinne:  
 Here is the Tree where truth doth grow,  
 to leade our liues therein:  
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O Gracious God, and most mercifull Father, which hast vouchsafed vs the rich  
 and precious icwell of thy holy Word, assist vs with thy Spirit, that it may be  
 written in our hearts to our euerlasting comfort, to reforme vs, to renew vs ac-  
 cording to thine owne image, to build vs vp, and edifie vs into the perfect building  
 of thy Christ, sanctifying and increasing in vs all heauenly vertues. Grant this, O  
 heauenly Father, for Iesus Christes sake. Amen.



WILLIAM HUNTINGTON  
LONDON.

yours affectionately  
in Christ Jesus,  
W<sup>m</sup> Huntington  
W H S S

# William Huntington and the Calvinistic Independents: Grace, Eccentricity and Idiosyncrasy in Conflict

**John Semper**

I suppose that my interest in Huntington stems from the fact that my home county of Sussex (together with parts of Kent) might be considered the heartland of Calvinistic Independency, but also because I preached for the first time from the same pulpit that Huntington used when he opened Providence Chapel, Chichester, on 6 September 1809.

Many of you will know something of the difficulty of dealing, in a balanced way, with Huntington's life and work. Apart from a few recollections published by some of his hearers soon after his death, no proper biography was produced until 1909, nearly one hundred years after his death in 1813, and then by one of his admirers, Thomas Wright.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it has the merits of using many of the autobiographical allusions that Huntington makes to his early life and conversion in such works as *The Bank of Faith* and *The Kingdom of Heaven taken by Prayer*. One must also add that Huntington's reputation suffered greatly at the hands of his enemies, especially in a journal entitled *The Satirist or Monthly Meteor*, and, after his death, at the hands of Southey and Macauley. He seems to have been the sort of man whom you either loved or hated, and I must confess that in the course of my reading about him, I have felt a strange combination of delight, amazement and exasperation at what he sometimes said and did.

Men like William Romaine (more or less his contemporary) and JC Philpot admired him, whilst others such as Rowland Hill attacked him vigorously. You might feel if you ever come across a publication called *The Voice of the Years*<sup>2</sup> that someone has already attempted a balanced picture, especially as the anonymous writer<sup>3</sup> claims to be giving an 'impartial

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1 Thomas Wright, *The Life of William Huntington*, S.S (London: Farncombe & Son, 1909).

2 Anonymous, *The Voice of the Years* (Maxwell, 1814, reprinted, Coventry: John Crowter) This was summarised, with mainly adverse comment on Huntington, in *The Banner of Truth* in July 1988.

3 The author described himself as 'a disciple of Jesus' and is thought to be J Lincoln or a Mr Croucher, whose father was a great admirer of Huntington.

recollection of his ministerial character and conduct, humbly designed to excite imitation and caution; imitation as to what was right and caution as to what was wrong'. However, as you read it, I think you realise that the writer was not as impartial and unprejudiced as he strenuously claimed to be. In fact, he devotes forty-seven pages to Huntington's bad qualities and only twenty-one to his good, and even these are intermixed with criticism. In recent years considerable weight has been given to the assessment of Huntington made by Ebenezer Hooper in his brief recollections published in 1871,<sup>4</sup> which is more critical than Wright's later full-length account. But even his angle is open to some question because of a family situation claimed to have resulted from attendance on Huntington's ministry.

Perhaps the best way to understand William Huntington is to bear in mind that all ministers are only men at the best, and that our idols have feet of clay. A true biography will reflect both a man's strengths and his weaknesses, without ascribing perfection to him. Unhappily this is what the most recent biography of Huntington by George Ella<sup>5</sup> seems to do, explaining away or ignoring some of his weaker points. So we must always remember that he was a man with failings like ourselves. However, the reason for the second part of this paper's title, 'Grace, Eccentricity and Idiosyncrasy in Conflict' is to emphasise first and foremost that he was a child of God, in whom the grace of God continued to work throughout his life, chiselling away at the less admirable aspects of his character. Huntington's experience would have been very much like Paul's in Romans 7, understood in the orthodox way, of the struggle going on within the life of any Christian.

His presentation of truth is characterised by a very vivid and distinctive quality which for some has been compelling and for others offensive. I want, in the remainder of the paper, to give a brief summary of his life, some assessment of what he achieved, including both his strengths and the criticisms of his ministry, and finally an account of the fate of the chapels which he established.

## **1. His Life and Ministry**

We only have time to give a brief resume of his life and later ministry at Providence Chapel in London. His dates are 1745 to 1813, and we must note

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4 Ebenezer Hooper, *The Celebrated Coalheaver (or, Reminiscences of the Rev. William Huntington, S.S., consisting of numerous Original Anecdotes, Letters and Interesting Facts, chiefly of His Latter Years and Death, collected from most authentic sources and Never Before Published)*, arranged and edited by Ebenezer Hooper (London: Gadsby, 1871).

5 George Ella, *William Huntington: Pastor of Providence* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1994).

their significance, covering as they do the period of the Evangelical Awakening, and the subsequent quickening and growth among the churches. They were years when the power of the Spirit was abroad in the land, when many chapels were built and churches formed. That was the background against which he grew up and preached. However, the fact that he does not appear to have encountered any of the great preachers of those days, apart from William Romaine when he moved to London, reminds us of the parochialism of the times, when news of what was happening in more distant parts of the country would not easily or speedily become known. His dates also take us from the year of the Jacobite Rising, through the loss of the American colonies and almost to the conclusion of the French wars in 1815 with Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. They were difficult days in which to live, particularly for dissenters, who were frequently suspected of disloyalty, and for the poor, many of whom lived on or below what we would call subsistence level.

### **His Birth and education**

From his birth in 1745 in Cranbrook, Kent, he received little in the way of human help. It has perhaps not been sufficiently realised how much the dreadful disadvantages under which he grew up had a bearing on his later manners and behaviour. At the same time, they remind us of the remarkable way in which, by the grace of God, he was in many ways able to surmount these difficulties.

Although known as William Hunt (which he later lengthened to Huntington), his real father was a local farmer named Barnabas Russell. Russell employed a William Hunt as a farm labourer, and it was this man's wife who, possibly unwillingly, became Russell's mistress and bore his illegitimate child, naming him after her own husband. William Hunt junior was her tenth child, but only he and five girls reached adulthood in those days of high infant mortality and grinding poverty. William Hunt, whom Huntington later described as a 'poor, honest, quiet God-fearing man, who was shut out of his own bed for years by a wretch', earned only nine shillings a week in summer and eight in winter, and the family was poorly clothed and ill-fed, enjoying only one cooked meal a week. Hence his very real enjoyment of the blessings which he experienced later as a notable figure in London.

He received very little in the way of formal education, for a while at a dame's school, and again for a brief period up to the age of eight at the Grammar School in Cranbrook, but even these short periods were frequently interrupted by the need to fetch wood, go gleanng, run errands, or assist in



the farm work, to supplement the family's meagre income. Considering that he had barely learned to read and write (spelling and grammar were never his strong points), his amazing output of over ninety-four publications, apart from innumerable letters, suggest the ability of a latent genius.

## **His early employments and wanderings**

There followed, from 1753–1769, sixteen years of temporary jobs and many wanderings through the Home Counties which are evidence of a restless spirit, a troubled conscience and a lack of peace, all of which would only cease with his conversion. During those years, there was a love affair with Susan Fever, a tailor's daughter, whose parents forbade marriage to such a poverty-stricken individual with few prospects. She bore William a son, John. Added to his wanderings in search of work were his efforts to escape the attentions of the Cranbrook magistrates, when he was unable to make the stipulated quarterly payments in support of Susan and her child.

## **His Conversion**

The wanderings were to continue for another thirteen years, involving temporary stays in a number of places in Surrey. In his quaint way, Huntington describes these places as his five sacred spots, since looking back he saw God's hand upon him, leading him to the place of repentance and submission. He referred to his stay in Mortlake as his Ur, to Kingston-on-Thames as his Sinai, to Sunbury as his Bethel, to Ewell as his nursery, and finally to Thames Ditton as his Holy of Holies, where he first began to preach. He would revisit these spots from time to time, right up until the year before his death, to remind himself of God's dealings with him. During this time he married Mary Short. Their first child died, probably through under-nourishment and lack of warmth.

The loss of his child led him to think of eternal things, and very gradually spiritual progress began to be made. He left his old companions behind at Mortlake. He tried to establish his own righteousness by constant reading of the Bible by rushlight, prayer behind a curtain which he rigged up to give a little privacy, and by attendance at the parish church every Sunday. He set himself an impossibly high standard of behaviour, from which he often fell! He was under strong conviction of sin and felt there was no forgiveness available to him. 'The indignation of the Almighty had drunk up his spirit', to use one of his later expressions. This conflict went on for seven or eight months. Of this period, he commented, 'the law with all its awful contents flowed into my soul, and all false hope flowed out'.

At last, at Sunbury, after further distress of soul and all sorts of doubts about God and the Bible, he experienced a remarkable conversion. He had tried all the neighbouring churches without receiving much help; he resorted to the ale-house to drown his sorrows; he read *The Whole Duty of Man*,<sup>6</sup> which gave him no peace; and he studied the Articles of the Church of England and was particularly impressed by Article Ten on free will and Article Seventeen on election and predestination. At this stage he found it almost impossible to concentrate on anything or anybody. He became more and more convinced of the truth of election and predestination, which seemed to him to be ‘the principal arteries of the whole body of divinity’. He began asking himself whether he was a chosen vessel.

These thoughts were running through his mind as he stood on a ladder pruning a pear tree in his employer’s garden. Suddenly a light of exceeding brightness shone round him, bringing many Scriptures to his mind, especially John 14:26–27. He came down the ladder in great fear, and heard a voice commanding him to ‘lay by your forms of prayer and go pray to Jesus Christ ...’. He retired to the tool-shed and prayed, crying for mercy, when ‘the Spirit of grace and supplication’ was poured upon him. He was able to pray with great energy and fluency, and walked for miles on Sunbury Common, praising God. From this time, he was a changed man.

I have spent some time on the details of his conversion, because they are another of the keys to understanding his later ministry. His lengthy spiritual struggle and deep conviction of sin persuaded him that this should be the normal experience of every genuine child of God. In this, of course, he was mistaken, since God deals with those he will save in an infinite variety of different ways.

## His early associations

He was invited to go and hear the Methodist preachers at Richmond, and though uneasy at first, he was impressed by the ministry of the Rev. Torial Joss—a formal naval commander and colleague of George Whitefield—declaring to his wife on his return, ‘I have found a man who preaches the Bible. The Methodists are the Lord’s elect’. He did not always hold to that opinion!

Still living, literally, on the bread-line, with the occasional bonus of a sleepy eel or a dead partridge, he began praying and preaching among the

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6 Anonymous, *The Whole Duty of Man* (London: 1674). The author is believed to be Richard Allestree (1619–1681), provost of Eton College.

Methodists at Kingston, who failed to appreciate the strength of his assurance or the depth of his conviction of sin. He began to read and pray with his neighbours and to expound the Scriptures, although at first he felt presumptuous. Then he began preaching two or three times a week. Some complained that he strayed from his subject and simply attacked their dishonesty, drunkenness and profanity (was this the later anti-nomian?), but others were converted. He later described this period at Ewell as 'the nursery where my first weaning time came on, where I also was taught the mystery of providence, and learned to live depending on it'.

After refusing to work on a Sunday, he and his family moved to Thames Ditton, where he became a coal-heaver and a shoe-maker for fourteen months, preaching three times on Sundays, and once during the week. (There was a real thirst for the Word in those days!) His family continued to endure great privations, and the children often cried for food, though he received some help from various friends, including John Thornton, the wealthy and philanthropic merchant. As his ability became known, he was invited to become the pastor of a small congregation of Baptists, the only condition being that he should be immersed. When, however, he prayed about it on the morning on which he was to be baptised, he heard a voice asking him 'William, what are you going to be baptised for?' He replied, 'For forty pounds a year, Lord.' This determined him not to go through with it. Soon after, he was invited to pastor a small congregation of Independents, or Congregationalists, in Woking. His ordination service, which was in 1776, was conducted by the Rev. Torial Joss and others. Joss told him, 'You may now take your axe and go to work', and he did! He walked the fourteen miles from Thames Ditton every Sunday. He soon met with violent persecution, particularly following his attacks on drunkenness. The meeting house was attacked by rioters, the seats broken up, the windows smashed, and other unmentionable things done. He was pursued all the way back to Thames Ditton, and suffered similar persecution in other towns and villages in Surrey where he preached. During this period the famous incident occurred when King George III passed through in his carriage and enquired the cause of the noise and rioting. It was described to him as 'only some affair between the town's people and the Methodists.' 'The Methodists,' said the king, 'are a quiet, good kind of people, and will disturb nobody; if I can learn that any persons in my employment disturb them, they shall be immediately dismissed.' Huntington often spoke of the king in later years with enthusiasm and affection!

## His London Ministry

His rise to public notice and success in the ministry of the Word followed rapidly on an invitation to preach in London at Margaret Street Chapel, Cavendish Square. On his first visit, he preached to a sparse congregation in the large, bare chapel, but his earnestness, intensity, and homely illustrations, forceful vocabulary and poetical outbursts (you see why I used the word ‘idiosyncrasy’ in the title of the paper!) created a great impression. He began to preach as part of a rota of ministers at Margaret Street, but others sharing the ministry were Arminians, Arians, and even Deists. Many of his supporters were unhappy with such a mixed ministry and soon withdrew, building a new chapel, the first Providence Chapel, in Titchfield Street. This was opened in 1783, with seats for one thousand, and later, with galleries added, for two thousand. Just prior to this, Huntington had moved to a house in London as a result of another very distinct voice speaking to him in a dream.

His fame spread, and the chapel was crowded with hearers from the east end of London—Whitechapel, Bow—and also from the Borough, Soho and Bermondsey. This was no mean achievement when John Newton, William Romaine, Rowland Hill, Abraham Booth and John Rippon were all ministering in London, together with the successors of Whitefield at the three Countess of Huntingdon chapels. WJ Styles comments that:

the peasant preacher differed from all the rest, and in many respects excelled them; none so ably analysed the ever-varying experiences of the Christian, or detected spurious religiousness in all the windings of its subtle delusions or open impostures, with such faithful discrimination; none spoke words in season to the weary with such tenderness. Wholly unconventional in style, natural in manner and original in matter, he presented the strongest contrast to every other living preacher.<sup>7</sup>

From this time, he never looked back, even when the chapel was either accidentally or deliberately burned down in July 1810. A new one was opened less than a year later in June 1811 in Grays Inn Road. He often referred to his chapel as his ‘Noah’s Ark’, and spent much time in the tiny room behind it which he called ‘the Cabin’. He went there early on a Saturday morning, ate his meals at a nearby house, where he also slept on Saturday and Sunday nights, although at a later date he also had a bed in the Cabin. Here he spent at least half of every week in study, correspondence and writing. He writes about his Cabin in one of his letters, ‘I am now in my Cabin, my sweet, my

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7 WJ Styles, *The Earthen Vessel*, November issue, 1906, p. 326; quoted by Thomas Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

lovely retreat. God, and none but God knows how many struggles, blessings and praises I have sent up from this delightful oven!’ and in another, ‘the life and soul of real religion lies in being alone with God, and in seeking his blessed face by humble prayer; the little Cabin and my own bedchamber are the favourite and consecrated spots for this business’.

On Mondays, he generally dealt with his very considerable correspondence, much of which has survived, and preached in the evening. Tuesday was devoted to visiting friends and the sick, although pastoral visitation was not one of his strengths. Until the death of William Romaine in 1795, he would also attend St Andrew, Wardrobe, to hear him preach. Romaine often assisted him with Hebrew and Greek words. During the rest of the week, he would be occupied with preaching at another chapel in Monkwell Street, and with frequent visits to different parts of the country to preach, often at the invitation of friends and former members of ‘Providence’. We find him at many places in Sussex, especially ‘Providence’ in Chichester, (which, as we have mentioned, he opened in 1809) and in ‘Jireh’, Lewes, for his great friend Jenkin Jenkins, whom he nick-named ‘the Welsh ambassador’, and in whose tomb he lies buried, behind Jireh Chapel. Ralph Chambers mentions sixteen or seventeen places in Sussex where chapels were built.<sup>8</sup> Other favourite preaching places were Cranbrook, with its connections with his early days, and to which he transported a wooden prefabricated chapel, (which I believe still exists today as a Strict Baptist Chapel), Grantham and Newark, Gainsborough, Northampton, Bristol, Bedford, Sunderland, Devonport, Richmond in Surrey, and Welwyn. A chapel directory published in 1871 listed about forty chapels. His capacity for preaching so many times a week, writing so many books and keeping up his huge correspondence was extraordinary.

I thought it might be of interest to read an account of one of his services in London, to give us the feel of the situation:

The congregation began to assemble long before the time, and nearly one hundred persons would be waiting at the three entrances before the door opened, which was half an hour before the services began; the people then came pouring in, and upwards of fifty carriages and hackney coaches drove up till the last minute ... The aisles were also generally crowded by the time of commencement.

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<sup>8</sup> RF Chambers, *The Strict Baptist Chapels of England II: The Chapels of Sussex* (privately published, undated), pp. 122–129.

The chapel was large and square, having a deep gallery all round—the pulpit standing near the vestry, which was underneath the hinder gallery, from which a flight of stairs opened into the pulpit so that the minister had no occasion to pass through any of the congregation, and no one could speak to him in going up and down. When the man of God entered, all was silence, attention and devotion; he ascended the stairs alone, and shut the pulpit door himself—he then privately prayed to God, and sat down ... When at the old chapel he used to carry up a large bulky Bible ... and used glasses in referring thereto. Latterly he did not have one in the pulpit at all. The service began by the old clerk giving out the hymn: they used none but Hart's, till after the clerk's death, when his son frequently in the evening introduced one of Dr Watts'—they were sung slowly to old tunes. Mr H. appeared to tolerate rather than to approve the singing, for he never joined the least in the hymns, but sat still as a statue, motionless and silent, with his eyes directed downwards, as if in deep contemplation. Strangers might suppose that this was from extreme bashfulness, or fear that the sight of so many faces upon him would confuse him, and for that reason never took the least glance at his hearers; but it was not so, for he invariably did the same, and yet was in no way confused in prayer or preaching, but for the purpose of meditation, and to prevent any dissipation of mind from the solemn view of his subject. He continued thus till a repeat in the last two lines gave him the signal to rise; and when the hymn concluded, the vast congregation, as one man, rose also, for vice versa to modern dissenting congregations, they sat to singing and rose to prayer. He looked very grave and solemn, almost severe; those that saw him can never forget it, but have him vividly before the mind for years after, even till now. His custom was to pray with his eyes fixed, looking upward, after the manner of our dear Lord. His prayers were special addresses to the Father, as a man speaking to his friend, and almost entirely in the words of Scripture,—one passage after the other flowing out in confession, supplication, or thanksgiving; he frequently used these words, 'If it please the Divine Majesty.'

Having no Bible latterly, he read no chapter, and had no lights in the pulpit, yet was never known to make a mistake in his text, which he repeated twice verbatim; he was never at a loss in quoting Scripture, and always gave the book, chapter, and verse, for no man probably was ever better acquainted with the word of God. The people manifested such deep devotion, that they seemed to hang upon his words: after he had spoken for about ten minutes, he made a pause, which relieved the attention, and gave opportunity to cough; a general sound was heard throughout the chapel as of approval, which was succeeded by profound silence, and the great preacher went on again. Having taken his text, he proceeded directly to his object, and never deviated from the course he set out, except an occasional digression or word of rebuke, such as 'Wake that man!' or 'Take care of your pockets!' (if he suspected pickpockets among the congregation) and once to Mr Howells, a clergyman, sitting below

him, 'And what are you laughing at?' Mr Howells calmly replied, 'I smile, Sir, with approbation at your discourse,' 'Oh, very well', said the minister, and proceeded. Once when a man turned his head to look at the dial in front of the gallery, he said, 'We do not preach here by the hour!' His command of Scripture was astonishing, as if the whole word of God from beginning to end was at his finger's end: he disclaimed all reliance on commentators and referred much to parallel texts, giving more or less, the meaning of each, which though new to strangers might have been heard often before by his own people; he illustrated all by solemn reflections and appeals to his own experience. ... He never turned round in the pulpit, nor used any action whatever while preaching, except crumpling a white handkerchief in his hand, and then passing it to the other, now and then wiping his mouth with it. He never raved or ranted, nor even exerted his voice, which was clear and agreeable, and if it had ever been powerful, became softened in his latter years. He laid great weight or emphasis upon the concluding words of his sentences which made them very forcible. Anything which he meant to be noticed, was marked by a significant, self-complaisant nod of the head. The Scriptures seemed as if made for him, and he used the words so suitably and appropriate, and was never at a loss for their meaning as he went on, and was rich at times in metaphors and allegory. He had a pleasant style of preaching ... slow, solemn and emphatic in his delivery. At times he rambled so far astray from the text as to lose sight of it altogether, and with a multiplicity of heads, his sermons were inordinately long, seldom less than one hour and a half, sometimes exceeding two hours! ...

The ordinance of the Lord's Supper was administered once a month, in the afternoon of the Lord's Day; it was handed around the table-pew to thirty-six persons at a time, Mr H. giving the bread as he broke it, followed immediately by Mr Lock, who gave the wine; (he had no such officers as Deacons, being singular in this as in various ways.) Mr H. spoke all the time on the sacred subject, often very delightfully on the Vine, and the union of the Church with Christ and communion with him. After one row had received the emblems they rose up and went out at one end quietly, and others came in until all the communicants had partaken. The mode of admission was by a private interview with Mr H. himself, who, if satisfied with the answers to his questions, gave a Communion card engraved with a picture of our Lord supping with his Apostles, surrounded with emblematical figures and appropriate texts: there was no other membership.

This account was written by the Rev. Samuel Adams, who sat under his ministry for the last two years of Huntington's life; he was later Vicar of Thornton. It was originally published in *The Gospel Magazine* in 1850.<sup>9</sup> You

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9 Quoted, with a few additions, by Ebenezer Hooper, op. cit., pp. 31-33.

will notice that Huntington had no organ in his chapel. ‘Pompous appearances and public parading to assemble and excite the curiosity of a multitude, with the assistance of an organ and such trumpery rattletaps, may serve to charm fallen nature, lay carnal prejudice in a trance and fill a house with hypocrites; but conversion to God is another thing.’ ‘Christ All in All needs no addition.’ Such views may not surprise us, but his ban on prayer meetings and also church meetings may come as something of a shock! Prayer meetings, he held, were ‘seminars for hypocrisy’, and he regarded many of their effusions as unacceptable. Some of his objections probably arose from his earlier experiences among the Methodists at Kingston and his dislike at hearing himself prayed for. There was no church membership as such, except for the purpose of communion—and therefore no church meetings and no deacons. His was the sole decision, after interview (and these were not easily obtained) on admission to communion, and he assumed total authority in the church. In this, of course, he was far from the true principles of Independency! His pastoral role was described, even by an admirer, as ‘more despotic than Scriptural’. This emphasis no doubt contributed to the blind reliance on him which many of his hearers developed, and against which he warned in vain.

## His Last Days

His last services were taken at the new chapel in Grays Inn Road, which had been opened in 1811. On Sunday 6 June 1813, he preached what might be considered two farewell sermons; his final appearance was on the following Wednesday evening, when he spoke from Revelation 3:3. At the close, he beat his hand on the pulpit cushion, which was unusual for him.

He became increasingly ill with diabetes, though still receiving many calls and enquiries at his home. Whether with his consent or not, he was taken by his wife to Tunbridge Wells, where he lingered until 1 July. Among the comments he made during these last days were ‘My heart overflows with the goodness of God and I lament being unable to find epithets sufficiently expressive to describe to others the sense I have of it’, or again, ‘All lies straight before me; there are no ‘ifs’ or ‘buts’. I am as sure of heaven as if I were in it.’ His final words were, ‘Bless His precious name.’

During these last days, he is supposed, on rather shaky evidence, to have dictated to his wife his own famous epitaph, concerning which much play has been made by his critics! It reads:

Here lies the coal heaver:—  
Beloved of his God; but abhorred of men.



The omniscient judge, at the grand assize,  
shall ratify and confirm this  
to the confusion of many thousands;  
for England and its metropolis shall know  
'that there hath been a prophet among them.' W.H.S.S.

The quotation marks are important.

He was 68 years old. His funeral procession from Tunbridge Wells to Lewes stretched for over a mile. He was buried in silence in the tomb behind Jireh Chapel alongside his friend and colleague Jenkin Jenkins. Again, at his request, no funeral sermon was preached, although the Rev. Joseph Chamberlain preached in the evening in the chapel on Isaiah 57:2.

## **2. His Strengths and Weaknesses—Criticism of his Ministry**

Before we turn to these it may be appropriate to mention here his second marriage in 1808, to Lady Elizabeth Sanderson, the widow of the Lord Mayor of London, which provoked much criticism. He was accused by many of marrying above his condition, acting indiscreetly (by accompanying her in her carriage to some preaching engagements—though usually he was careful to use a separate carriage) and marrying for money, which was certainly untrue (her income at her marriage being £600 a year, while Huntington's was around £2,000, much of this from the amazing popularity and sale of his books). Perhaps he was unwise, as many of his closest friends felt, and the marriage led to estrangements, especially from the Rev. WJ Brooks, one of his warmest supporters and associates, who pastored Providence Chapel, Brighton, for some years. (The disagreement between them was only made up at the opening of the Chichester Chapel the following year.) However, the marriage is hardly surprising when one considers the considerable difficulties he experienced with his first wife, who had been unable to rise to the task to which she was called, took to drink, developed gout and became enormously corpulent; she died in December 1806. The relief which he must have felt in the company of Lady Sanderson can only be imagined. As always, there was 'a crook in the lot', since she did not get on well with his family and was somewhat parsimonious, particularly in the matter of food. It is reported that on one occasion Huntington returned home famished, discovered the cupboard to be empty, wondered what to do or say, and then threw a plate to the ground with a great crash. When his wife appeared and questioned his behaviour, he stated that plates were made for holding food, and that since there was none, they were superfluous!

Let's look first at some of his successes and strengths. It would not be fair to him if we failed to highlight the great appeal of his preaching, in an age of great preachers. He had the ability to appeal to all classes of hearers. Crowds of ordinary working folk flocked to hear him, though his increasing popularity, which led to the reduction of free seats in the chapel, may have militated against this. He certainly also attracted those from the very highest ranks of society—members of the royal household, especially the Princess Amelia, daughter of George III (who himself read the works of evangelicals such as John Newton and William Romaine, and also those of Huntington himself which he first picked up from his footman). Other hearers included Lord Liverpool, who was to become Prime Minister from 1812–1827, Mr Hannah, Comptroller of the Household to Princess Charlotte, Mr Hunter, keeper of the Royal Observatory in Kew Gardens, Sir William Hay and Sir Ludlow Harvey, and Mr Henry Peto, the builder of London Bridge.

Part of the reason for this extraordinary popularity, certainly with the ordinary man in the street, came from his use of very direct and vivid language and an abundance of scriptural illustrations and quotations which caught their imagination and lit up the Scriptures for them. He had a phenomenal knowledge of the Bible, arising from his constant re-reading of it in the days leading up to, and after his conversion, and his extraordinary ability to memorise what he read. He was nick-named by some 'the Walking Bible'! It is almost impossible in this short time to give the flavour of his preaching, particularly because it flows on at great length! You must read some of his sermons for yourselves. Not the least fascinating are some of the colourful titles he gave to them: 'The Apartments, Equipage and Parade of Immanuel' on Psalm 104:3; 'The Heavenly Workfolks and their Mystic Pay' on Matthew 20:1–6; 'The Eternal Setting of the Sun' on Colossians 3:1; 'The Breath of the Lord and the Sieve of Vanity' on Isaiah 30:28; 'The Utility of the Books and the Excellence of the Parchments'; 'The Funeral of Arminianism'; 'The Music and Odours of Saints', being just a taste.

He has been described by Dr Doudney as 'a great anatomist of the soul', and much of his time was spent encouraging the seeker and exposing the hypocrite or mere professor of religion. It has been suggested that against the background of the revival times in which he preached, he was raised up by the Lord as a sieve to strain out the unregenerate from his church. While I would not wish to press such an idea too hard, it is surely true that amidst teaching that it was possible to fall away from the faith and be lost, he was able to provide the certainty and assurance of a salvation based firmly on the doctrine of eternal election, effectual calling and the final perseverance of the saints. It

is noticeable that a number of Huntington's chapels came into being through the dissatisfaction of groups of Christians with the watering down of the Calvinistic faith in existing Independent or Baptist Chapels.

He certainly was a man whom God raised up—from nowhere and with no human advantages as we have seen—and to whom he gave considerable gifts, whose ministry was blessed by the working of the Spirit, despite all the weaknesses, eccentricities and sinful shortcomings which marred his testimony. Even the critical writer of *The Voice of the Years* had to acknowledge that he was scriptural, evangelical, plain and natural, and also of an independent mind in his ministry. Interestingly, he comments that Huntington did not preach as if all his hearers were saints (as was often the custom), nor did he omit truths which were disagreeable to some, in order to please all men. God's blessing on his ministry between 1782 and his death in 1813, when he was preaching to thronging crowds, seems self-evident. Many attributed their spiritual awakening and conversion to him and regarded him as their spiritual father. William Stevens, who heard him for about 7 years, wrote 'I bless God that I ever heard or knew him, and that I possess all his works. I have never found any like them, nor have I ever heard any minister like him since his death'.

What is so amazing is that all this stands alongside the constant and sometimes bitter controversy in which he was engaged for most of his ministerial life. He was indeed a great controversialist, and a large percentage of his writings are in fact replies to his opponents' attacks on him. But not all of them—some controversies he was responsible for stirring up himself. But the bitterness and acrimony with which these disputes were carried on, on both sides, may surprise us. That with Rowland Hill generated great heat, and at one stage Hill was following him from place to place on a preaching tour, seeking to undermine his teaching. This seems, with hindsight, to have been totally unnecessary. Huntington felt himself to be in an isolated position, and had a sense of insecurity by reason of his background, which encouraged him to act in this way, and sometimes to ask for trouble. However, surely a more sympathetic approach, though it would have been difficult and costly, an attempt to get alongside him to modify some of his idiosyncrasies, would have been more helpful and a better testimony to the world at large.

Huntington was not much kinder to his own people. He could be quite ruthless with visitors to his home, especially if he suspected that they were not genuine. Perhaps, again, his background made him unnecessarily gauche. Without a doubt, he trusted far too quickly to his own instincts and feelings about a person and sometimes had to revise his opinion. However, when he

detected genuine spirituality or piety he treated men and women with great kindness, and was incredibly generous—perhaps even to the point of foolishness—with those who were in distress or financial need. He never forgot his own early experiences of hunger and poverty.

What we today would probably have most difficulty with would be his understanding of the doctrine of the providence of God. He was so conscious of the hand of God in his own life and conversion that he attributed everything which happened, particularly to his critics, to the direct intervention of God. His notorious book entitled *The Naked Bow* was devoted to this thesis: the almost immediate judgment of God, by death, illness or accident, on his opponents. While it is true that he received remarkable answers to his prayers, his doctrine of providence was inadequate. As Kenneth Dix says (in his recently published thesis on Strict & Particular Baptists), Huntington's view 'fails to recognise that both good men and bad suffer loss in natural disasters, both experience remarkable deliverances from extreme danger'.<sup>10</sup>

However, the aspects of his teaching which have provoked the strongest and warmest criticism concern the place of the Law in the life of the believer, and closely connected with this, his understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith. Much ink has been spilt, both in his day and since, in accusations of antinomianism and unorthodoxy. I do not wish to spend too much time on the issue. Huntington was no systematic theologian, being largely self-taught and having a low view of commentaries as being 'dead men's brains', and it is possible to produce all manner of quotations from his multitude of writings which prove the case one way or the other. Sometimes he does not seem to be clear in his own mind on the subject. What I do want to emphasise is that, whatever tangles Huntington got himself into concerning the Law of God (the Decalogue), his motives were genuinely of the highest. His primary aim was to exalt the grace of God in the whole work of salvation, and to avoid any suggestion that the Law contributed anything to the believer's justification. It is also apparent that his teaching did not lead to any of his own congregation becoming practising antinomians by falling into immorality, but rather to them seeking that holiness of life without which 'no man shall see the Lord'. Much of the confusion seems to have arisen from his teaching that the Decalogue was not the believer's rule of life, which he also qualified by emphasising that the whole Word of God was to be the basis for

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Dix, *Strict and Particular: English Strict and Particular Baptists in the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2001), p. 19.

holy living. Some have understood this as an afterthought and an attempt by Huntington to defuse the storm of criticism which had arisen. But surely we ourselves would accept that there are many things, particularly in the New Testament, in the teaching of our Lord himself and in the epistles, which have a direct bearing on how a Christian should live. Huntington genuinely seems to have wanted to take a wider view of what was available to guide us, going far beyond the Decalogue. It may be that the expression ‘as a rule of life’ raised his hackles about any form of ‘legalism’, which was anathema to him in his desire to exalt grace. Even if there was a lack of clarity, that did not invalidate his ministry which was spiritual, Christ-centred, and at times very searching.

Similarly, on the subject of justification by faith, Huntington does not appear to have strayed too far from the orthodox understanding of this truth. In his distrust of any thing ‘legal’—for he never really grasped the giving of the Law as an act of grace, despite his own conversion experience—he understood the sinner’s justification to be a sovereign act of God, by his Spirit, producing repentance, faith, regeneration and a transformation of life, and not the response to a conviction of law-breaking. His desire was to emphasise the radical change worked by God in a sinner’s life by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This, along with the new heart and new desires created by the Spirit, would result in a greater hunger for holiness and Christ-likeness than anything the Decalogue could achieve. In this, he was not far from the emphasis of the earliest Congregationalists which Geoffrey Nuttall describes in his recently re-published book *Visible Saints*: ‘The essential experience was of God’s having made himself known to them—his redeeming love in Christ and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit—in a way utterly new and revolutionary’.<sup>11</sup> ... ‘These early Independents,’ Nuttall points out, were also often branded as antinomians, because of a ‘desire to give glory to God, not to themselves’.<sup>12</sup> Huntington would certainly have gone along with such sentiments, and perhaps believed more strongly than we do today in that radical change of attitude and desires produced by the Spirit in every genuine believer.

### **3. The Decline of the Calvinistic Independents**

Why was there such a rapid decline after Huntington’s death? Partly because there were no successors of significance. Algar Lock, who had been his assistant for some years, and Thomas Burgess continued the ministry at

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11 Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way 1640–1660*, 2nd ed. (Weston Rhyn:Quinta Press, 2001), p. 158.

12 Ibid.

Providence Chapel, but to decreasing congregations which dwindled to about sixty persons. After a while they could not even pay the ground rent and, following lengthy disputes in Chancery over Huntington's will, the chapel was sold under an order of court for about £4,000. It became an episcopal chapel, later known as St Bartholomew's, Grays Inn Road, was seriously damaged by bombing in World War II and later demolished. No doubt we could think of other great preachers whose congregations dispersed in a similar way. The Rev. Henry Cole wrote concerning Huntington's followers:

By an infirmity of natural affection, some of the best Christians are drawn aside unto the unlawful partiality of setting up one of God's servants' 'line of things' as a standard to judge of, and receive or reject all other ministrations by, whereas no two lines can be alike, nor are two to be found alike in all the scriptures, nor in all the Church of Christ from the beginning down to our own age ... This evil has been seen in the over-honouring partiality to the person and testimony of that pre-eminent servant of God, the late Mr Huntington.<sup>13</sup>

A judicious comment!

That is not to say that the work did not continue in other parts of the country, and does to this day. The number of chapels holding to a 'Huntingtonian' tradition increased until the early years of the twentieth century. In 1905 there were sixty-two preaching places, almost one third of these in Sussex. Many, however, which became dependent on a supply ministry from Strict Baptist Churches, eventually became Baptist Churches. This was not surprising since Huntington's position on baptism was somewhat equivocal. He would, I think, have regarded himself as an Independent or Congregationalist, and some of his writings are dedicated 'to the Congregational Churches of Christ among whom I labour'. However, he never administered the baptism of children in public, but always in private, in his vestry. The children were those of his friends and others whom he thought proper; otherwise he refused to officiate at all. When asked once what he intended by the baptism of infants, he replied 'to show that they stood in need of conversion'—a novel argument! It is estimated that at least half of his congregation were of Baptist persuasion, and when adults came expressing a desire to be baptised, Huntington would, on being satisfied concerning their conversion, recommend them to go to the Rev. Jonathan Franklin at a near-by chapel in Red Cross Street, to be baptised, giving them a guinea to be donated

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13 Henry Cole, writing in *British Zion's Watchtower*, quoted by Ebenezer Hooper, op. cit., p. 115 (this has no connection with the 'Jehovah's Witnesses'!)

as a fee or offering. No discouragement or obstacle was put in their way. Thus many Huntingtonian chapels became Strict Baptist in practice. This was assisted by the fact that the trust deeds of many of his chapels consisted of a selection of the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England, excluding those on baptism and the state connection, so there was nothing, apart from the wishes of the local trustees, to prevent such a change.

Another reason for the decline seems to have been the fossilisation of a tradition, something which we all need to guard against. It was done, no doubt, out of the great respect, almost idolisation, felt for Huntington by his followers, but with the power no longer there, this tradition became a dead hand upon them. Such matters as the length of services, the avoidance of prayer meetings, the holding of mid-week preaching services became part of the 'tradition' which was passed on from generation to generation. Closely associated with this has been a tendency to seek for textual assurance for everything which is done—perhaps a reflection of the 'voices' which Huntington himself heard. This was not only true in the matter of salvation, where it became necessary for the Spirit to apply a particular text of Scripture to the heart, but also in the choice of a text for preaching, and in the calling of pastors. (The chapel at Chichester struggled on for seventy years from 1908 to 1978 without an under-shepherd.) Huntington's preaching, as we have seen, was very much in terms of his own experience of conversion, and this was passed on to the churches. Each sermon might begin with a different text, but soon fell into the same pattern of tracing the experience of the coming sinner. There was little in the way of expository preaching of a consecutive kind. Connected with this was a fear, perhaps justified in the first half of the twentieth century, of an 'educated ministry', and a suspicion of commentaries. Because Huntington did it, it was right to leave notes behind in the vestry, and if necessary, to preach on a text which was 'given' at the last moment, just before entering the pulpit. This has led to congregations which are great experts on experience and Biblical knowledge, but lack a systematic knowledge of doctrine.

Let me close with some warnings which Huntington's ministry brings to us, and a final comment on his worth. We must realise how much, although sometimes unconsciously, we are influenced by our own Christian experience, just as he was. We see how dangerous it can be to idolise men, who are but men at the best. We can recognise the value of fellowship between ministers and churches which helps to avoid the development of some of the idiosyncrasies and eccentricities which were part and parcel of Huntington's life and work. Positively, we can admire his concern to encourage his hearers to

examine the motives and desires of their hearts, and his wish to exalt Christ and his grace above everything else.

Hear what a man of worth concluded about William Huntington's ministry. It is from the Rev. DA Doudney, Anglican incumbent of St Luke's, Bristol and editor of *The Gospel Magazine*:

We are proud with the opportunity of testifying to the character and works of William Huntington—the more so because, differing as we do from some of his opinions, our estimation of him is held in doubt by certain of those who seem to lose sight of the fact, that the 'treasure is hid in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us'. Extensive as was his light into the written word—familiar as he was with the God of heaven—and signally blessed as his ministry and writings were, and shall be down to time's remotest bounds, William Huntington was after all but a man—a fallible creature, like other sons or daughters of Adam. Had it been otherwise, in how small a degree would he have been fitted for the exalted position in the Church which he so honourably occupied. It was his knowledge of human nature—his personal acquaintance with its various operations—that, under the ministry of the Holy Ghost, so adapted him to the peculiar post he was eternally designed to fill.<sup>14</sup>

This ultimately is the vital thing. God prepared this extraordinary and somewhat eccentric man for that particular place in the on-going progress of His Church which He intended him to fill.

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<sup>14</sup> DA Doudney, writing in *The Gospel Magazine*, November issue, 1843; quoted by Ebenezer Hooper, op. cit., p. 35.









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