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A table of contents for the *Congregational Studies Conference Papers* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_congregational-studies-conference\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_congregational-studies-conference_01.php)

*Freedom  
and  
Faithfulness*

Congregational Studies  
Conference 1996





# **Freedom and Faithfulness**

**Stan Guest, Digby James  
and John Semper**

**Congregational Studies  
Conference Papers 1996**

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# Contents

## Foreword

Rev. Derek O. Swann ..... 5

## From CERF to EFCC

Rev. Stan Guest ..... 9

## Heroes and Villains: Christians Persecuting Christians—The Controversy between John Cotton and Roger Williams in Seventeenth Century New England

Dr Digby L. James ..... 25

## Edward Parsons of Leeds— Influence from a Local Church

Rev. John Semper ..... 43

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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Rev. John Semper is the minister of Seacroft Congregational Church, Leeds.

# Foreword

Once again we are grateful for the papers delivered on 16 March 1996 at the Congregational Studies Conference held at Westminster Chapel, London. We are hopeful that a growing number of church members are learning to appreciate the value of Church History, and we would like to think that the number will continue to grow. For any who have doubts about the value of such a study, may I commend to you the following comment by Dale Ralph Davis in his Commentary on 1 Samuel chapters 1–14 (p. 77):

Some may berate us for living in the past. I think the Bible would tell us that we could do a lot worse. There is a sense in which the saints must live in the past if they are to remember Yahweh's mercies and be able to sing, 'O to grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be.' We can put it this way: we stand in the present, but dwell on the past in order that we can be steadfast for the future.

Stan Guest examines a slice of modern history, tracing the creation of the CERF in 1947 and its subsequent transformation into an EFCC in 1970.

Digby James considers the 17th century controversy between John Cotton and Roger Williams, with some relevant application to our own day.

Finally, John Semper uncovers the life of an ordinary, faithful pastor, Edward Parsons of Leeds. '... and that is,' John says, 'at bottom what Congregationalism is all about; not just about the great names and famous men, but about faithful pastoring of congregations and the spiritual preaching of the Word of God' (p. 43).

We trust that these papers will provide both mental and spiritual stimulation.

**Derek Swann**

**Cardiff**



# STANDFAST

issued by the Congregational Evangelical Revival Fellowship

## CONGREGATIONALISM

COLIN R. GARWOOD, B.D.  
Cliff Tonn, Southern

Whilst the New Testament appears to indicate more than one form of Church Order, it is clear that a simple form of Congregationalism developed from the very beginning of the life of the Church of Christ. Its great characteristic was the emphasis on the presence of the Risen Christ in the life of the gathered Church, and experience within the early Church bore testimony to the reality of that Presence wherever Christians gathered in fellowship with their Lord.

The 'local Churches' to whom reference is made in the New Testament accepted responsibility for the organisation of their life and the management of their affairs under the direct Lordship of Christ as He spoke to them through individual members.

At the same time, because their fellowship was with Christ, these Churches were aware of the fellowship they also had with each other. Accordingly, whilst they acknowledged no authority other than Christ, they voluntarily accepted responsibility for each other and the oversight given to them by St. Paul and other apostles. One example of this is the way

representatives of the Church at Antioch were present at the Council in Jerusalem reported in Acts 15, and accepted the guidance given to that Council.

In the Reformation, at the beginning of the 16th Century, much of the simplicity of the New Testament Church Order was seen to have been neglected because of the elaborate organisation of the Western Church. In this country men raised their protest for a return to the early simplicity, and there were formed covenanted fellowships of 'dissenters' who sought to experience again the reality of the guidance of the Risen Christ in the gathered local Church.

The reality of such guidance was re-discovered, and became the basic principle of the life of the Independent Churches which were so formed, and which today are called Congregational Churches. Through the extension of the principles of Independency within association, these Churches have learned to share with one another whilst retaining at the same time, the independency of the local Church.

It is within the fellowship of these Churches, and such Churches that may come into association with them, that the C.E.R.F. exists to bear witness to the faith of the fathers, to pray for revival, and to afford fellowship for those who share a concern for these things.

## CONCERNING THE CONSTITUTION

EDWARD GUEST,  
Sawbridgeworth

There is no constitution for the Kingdom of Heaven. All is of love and grace. And if all Christians were perfect we should not need a constitution in our churches. We should all listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and obediently follow His leading.

But all Christians are not perfect. We are liable to misunderstand, or even willfully ignore, the will of God. So, if we

doing it. This agreement is expressed in a constitution. Here we should declare our foundations, our methods, and intentions.

The Church of Jesus Christ is so rich and wonderful that no organised body on earth can fully express it. Each denomination of the Church bears witness to some particular aspect of churchmanship. The distinctive emphasis of Congregationalism bears witness to the nature of church authority and the responsibility of the individual.

Authority, in a Christian church, is the right or power to decide what is the will of God in a particular situation. Some Christians hand over this right to their priests. Congregationalists, however, em-



'The world is governed by  
Thy hands  
Thy saints are ruled by love;  
And Thine eternal kingdom  
stands  
Though rocks and hills  
remove.'

Isaac Watts

every true believer and that, on the basis of the Scriptures, the Lord Himself will guide the believer to the truth.

However, as Congregationalists also accept that believers must be united in fellowship with others, they are prepared to hand over something of that personal authority to their local church. Here men and women, who know and love each other, wait together upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This guidance, tested and proved by the Scriptures, they accept.

The questions before Congregationalists now are such as these. 'Can this authority be taken yet a further stage away from the individual? Will it impair our witness to "personal responsibility" if we acknowledge authority in a gathering of representatives of churches? Can an assembly of men and women with little personal knowledge of one another and meeting perhaps not more than once a year be a responsible vehicle for the guidance of the Holy Spirit? On what foundations will they meet? By what standards will they judge their decisions?'

It is no answer to say that all things could be worked out in love. We question the integrity of no man but we accept the fallibility of all. If a Constitution is to have any value, it must clearly uphold and safeguard the principles we most surely

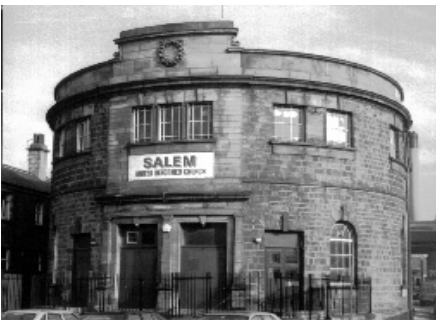
*Front page of the broadsheet, Standfast published by the Congregational Evangelical Revival Fellowship in 1964, warning of the decline in Congregationalism. Two pages were given to articles on each of the words in CERF's title. See p. 17.*



*Statue of Roger Williams in Providence, Rhode Island. The words on the book are SOUL LIBERTY, 1636*



*Edward Parsons*



*Two views of Salem Independent Chapel, Leeds (now Salem URC). The side view shows the body of the chapel which dates from the time of Edward Parsons.*



# From CERF to EFCC

## Stan Guest

The Congregational Evangelical Revival Fellowship came into being in 1947 as the outcome of an informal meeting of like-minded Congregational ministers gathered in London to share in the May Assembly of the Congregational Union of England and Wales. So what was it? Well, can we do better than turn to the official Year Book of the Congregational Union itself? Here is their entry in the Year Book for 1965–66!

Congregational Evangelical Revival Fellowship. A fellowship which seeks to enlist the interest and co-operation of evangelically-minded Congregationalists and to stimulate prayer for spiritual revival in the Churches, through newsletters, rallies and house-parties in different parts of the country. Membership is open to all ministers and members of Congregational Churches. Chairman: Rev. E J R Bentliff MA. Secretary: Rev. Edward Guest, The Manse, Hoestock Road, Sawbridgeworth, Herts. Tel: Saw. 2373.

The stated purpose, then, was ‘to stimulate prayer for spiritual revival in the Churches.’ Now the literal meaning of ‘to revive’ is to bring back to life something that is dead. Was Congregationalism dead then? Some people evidently thought so. My home town was Enfield, Middlesex and, early in my ministry, I called into the Christian book shop there. The manageress knew me and introduced me to another customer in the shop. ‘This is Mr Guest,’ she said, ‘He’s the minister of a Congregational church.’ ‘Oh’, came the reply, ‘that’s the denomination that’s dead, isn’t it!’

Rather strong, but that was one person’s assessment of Congregationalism in the early 1950s. And something of that concern came through in a report that was presented to the Council of the CUEW in October 1952. The churches had been called to a ‘Forward Movement’ and, as a consequence, several committees had been set up. One had the rather mundane task of considering ‘the existing structure and administration of the denomination, whether these are economical and effective.’ Mundane maybe, but their first statement went right to the heart of the matter.

The Committee records its conviction that no scheme of re-organisation can of itself produce satisfying results unless it is accompanied by a new breath of the Spirit. We may produce skeleton bones. The question remains: Can these dry bones live? It is recognised that a first condition of the success of the efforts of your Committee is that they must find a response in renewed devotion to the Scriptures, a revived life of prayer, a new surety in the faith and a heightening of the sense of the reality of the grace received in the fellowship of the Church.

That these aspects of spiritual life were seriously lacking in Congregationalism as a whole had already been recognised some years earlier. In March 1939, a representative group of eight professors and ministers addressed a letter to their brothers in the ministry. It had been written jointly by Mr Bernard Manning and Dr John Whale, then President of Cheshunt College. It has not been possible to find the entire letter, although, in 1988, Dr Whale (then 92) did kindly search through his papers. However, the *British Weekly* of March 23, 1939, printed part of it. It began with the traditional Assembly greeting:

FATHERS AND BRETHREN—This is an age of manifestos. Everyone seems to be exhorting and warning everyone else. The nation, the democracies, Europe, the Church, the world—to all of these nowadays seasonable messages are sent frequently. Concerning many, perhaps concerning most, of these documents, one might fairly say what was said concerning the roll of a book once spread before the prophet Ezekiel: ‘There is written therein lamentations, and mourning, and woe.’

The condition of our churches, as they actually exist to-day, in great cities, in country towns and villages, is itself often almost desperate. There is no need to emphasise this, for it is plainly obvious to those who best know and best love our churches. We are short of men and money, but this is not our most serious need, for God is able to take the weak things of the world to confound the strong. Our dreadful weakness is religious. We are not declaring the Gospel with power to a dispirited and disillusioned age; we are not living in the discipline of Gospel fellowship; only in a very imperfect degree are our churches God’s resting-place and holy habitation.

The depressing and alarming thing about our churches is not their tiny congregations, their shabby buildings, their social insignificance, their political impotence. If our churches are in peril, it is not because they are less crowded than cinemas, less powerful than the promoters of dog-racing, less correct than Sunday golf, less fashionable even than Romanism or Christian Science. If our churches are in peril, it is because they have forgotten what they are.

Concerning a Church which even comes near thinking so of itself and presents itself in this manner to our maddened and distracted world, there is but one thing to be said: it is neither hot nor cold. It is serviceable neither to the worldly nor to the devout. The worldly, of course, neglect it. All that it offers they can obtain elsewhere, with no overhead charges for the maintenance of ministers and buildings, with fewer taboos, and in more sprightly company. The devout also neglect it. They drift to churches which proclaim unceasingly with sincere confidence their supernatural origin and powers.

It would be amusing, if it were not tragic, that some devout men and women who want from religion something that goes deeper and higher than human

fellowship, should assume that it is to be found only in Anglicanism or in Romanism. They turn, that is to say, to bodies which seemed to our Congregational forefathers not even to deserve the name of church, so pallid seemed the divine flame when contrasted with the fierce heat of supernatural grace in the churches of our order.

While searching through the old CERF files I came across another assessment of Congregationalism at the time CERF began. It was in the *Godalming and District Congregational Magazine* for June 1947. In a report on that year's May Meetings, the writer spoke of 'the formation, within the denomination, of a Revival Group of Evangelicals, which number at present over 60, pledged to affirm the old essentials and truths which have been cast aside by ultra-moderns. We have humanised Christ and deified man to such an extent that man today does not feel his need of a Saviour. And in the whole sorry process many of our Churches have degenerated into nothing more than glorified Sunday Clubs, with plenty of comforts, fed on the sops of philosophy or ethics in place of the 'strong meat of the Word'.' The clamant need of Congregationalism today is not more knowledge but a re-discovery of the Old Gospel of Christ, which is still the Power of God unto Salvation.'

That, then, was the situation in which the CERF began.

Now who began it? The names of Gilbert Kirby and E. Harland Brine are inseparably linked with this. Mr Kirby has sent this message especially for our paper today.

When I sensed a clear call to the ministry I found myself perplexed as to the direction in which I should go. My parents were active members of Bromley Congregational Church but I was more at home at a local evangelical Anglican church, although attending the Congregational Church in the morning. I was persuaded to see the minister of that Church and he advised me to seek admission to Cheshunt College, Cambridge, which was basically a Congregational College.

I was distinctly apprehensive as I heard the College was theologically liberal in outlook. Some keen Christian friends put me in touch with a Rev. Harland Brine who had been at the College years before and who was thoroughly evangelical in his stance. This proved invaluable, and he became very much my mentor. We kept in touch and when, after my first pastorate in Essex (Halstead), I came to the London area, we met on several occasions. Feeling the isolation of conservative evangelicals in the Denomination, we decided to put a letter in the *Christian World*, proposing that like-minded Congregationalists got together to encourage one another and to take a stand in a denomination which was noted for its liberalism.

Thus CERF was born and the rest is history! I send warm greetings to CERF's successor EFCC and rejoice in the increasing influence of that body. Being a Bible-believing Christian and a convinced Congregationalist is now seen more clearly than ever not to be a contradiction in terms or mutually exclusive. God bless and prosper EFCC.

The last paragraph is anticipatory but it is good to include it. Gilbert Kirby, in 1947, was the minister of Ashford and Stanwell Congregational churches in Middlesex, and he has always had a great concern for evangelical truth. In 1956 he was appointed General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance and later became Principal of London Bible College. The CERF Autumn Rally in October 1956 revealed a further indication of the way Congregationalism was regarded. Mr Kirby reported that he had received many letters of surprise that a Congregational minister had been called to make a contribution to such an evangelical movement as the Evangelical Alliance.

Rev. Harland Brine, who was minister at Staplehurst, Kent, also shared this concern for the Gospel. In the first issue of the CERF News-letter, September 1947, he wrote:

It seemed good to a number of us, Congregational ministers, to seek a closer fellowship within the borders of our own Denomination for witness to Evangelical Truth and our deepest need today—Revival. We earnestly believe that the Evangel is our sufficient sword for the Christian warfare today and tomorrow. As Dante so declares:

Christ said not to his first Conventicle  
 Go forth and preach impostures to the World.  
 But gave them Truth to build upon—and the sound  
 Was mighty on their lips: nor needed they  
 Beside the Gospel other spear or shield  
 To aid them in their warfare for the Faith.

Our witness is to the reliability and authority of the Evangelical Faith, 'once for all delivered to the saints'. For this we are exhorted to contend earnestly.

We have spent quite a bit of time considering the reason that lay behind the formation of the CERF and surely that is important. It would be a waste of time and effort to write about an organisation that had sprung out of the whims and fancies of a few old-fashioned die-hards. Let us look at each word of the title and see how it worked out.

## **Congregational**

There should be no doubt that the members of CERF were fully involved in the Congregational denomination. At first, there were some who thought it was a break-away body, but the stated Aims and Purposes of CERF clearly

showed that this was not so. Number 2 read: 'To promote Fellowship and Co-operation among Congregationalists who are in sympathy with our Basis'. And Number 5 read: 'To advise regarding Evangelical methods and matters in relation to the Denomination'. As we have already noted, the Fellowship was included in the official Congregational Year Book.

The CERF Annual Meetings were held in conjunction with the May Assembly of the Union, and when, in 1950, the Union put forward its plan for a 'Forward Movement', the CERF Annual Meeting unanimously approved a resolution expressing whole-hearted support. Later that year, the CERF committee had a helpful discussion on ways and means of making a more effective contribution to the life and work of the Denomination. They agreed to hold future committee meetings at the Congregational Memorial Hall.

Gilbert Kirby, as secretary, strongly urged members to work within the denomination. At the Annual Meeting in 1951 he had this to say:

The fact remains that our chief contention must be made as individuals in our Churches and at County Union and other assemblies. I am more than ever convinced that there is a place within Congregationalism for the conservative Evangelical and moreover I believe many are waiting for a lead from us. I do believe we must be on our guard, however, lest we should prove a cave of Adullam for 'all the cranks in Christendom'. Our distinctive witness is nothing more and nothing less than that of historic Congregationalism—we have no strange axe to grind and no new doctrine to propound—we are merely calling attention to the facts of the faith that are and have been for many generations enshrined in the Trust deeds of most of our churches.

In 1950, a very sympathetic letter was received from the London Union Moderator, Rev. Alan Green. By 1954 it was reported that he was showing an increasing interest in CERF and wished to be identified with the Fellowship. That news was heartily received, linked with the fact that he had become a member of the Billy Graham Crusade committee.

In 1958, the secretary of the CUEW, Rev. Howard Stanley, accepted an invitation to speak at the CERF autumn rally. He said how grateful he was that the work of CERF was being carried out from within the fellowship of the Churches of the Order; that it was not critical and negative, but positive and challenging. He said that he had secretly hoped that one day he might be invited to speak and he told of his hopes for our Churches during the next ten years, and of the way in which CERF could make its own special contribution.

But now we note that our title is CERF to EFCC—in other words, a change from a fellowship of individuals to a fellowship of churches, separate from the main body. The reason, quite simply, is that members of CERF were committed to a principle rather than an organisation. The key principle of



Congregationalism was set out in the Declaration made when the Union was formed in 1833. This said:

That it is highly desirable and important to establish a Union of Congregational Churches and Ministers, throughout England and Wales, founded on a full recognition of their own distinctive principle, namely, the scriptural right of every separate church to maintain perfect independence in the government and administration of its own particular affairs; and therefore, that the Union shall not in any case assume legislative authority, or become a court of appeal.

That was the principle, but the organisation was seen to be moving away from this, first in the covenanting in 1967 to be the Congregational Church in England and Wales, and then in the forming of the United Reformed Church in 1972. Congregationalists have always covenanted together, on agreed terms, to form a local church. Now, the churches themselves were asked to covenant to form a national Church. It was called ‘Congregational’ but it could never ‘congregate’—except through appointed delegates in a national assembly. Five years later, the URC removed the principle completely.

Its ‘Scheme of Union’ stated that ‘a Church Meeting will be competent to raise concerns for consideration.’ But it then stated ‘The General Assembly will be competent to pronounce authoritatively.’ Instead of ‘the perfect independence of every separate church’ and ‘the Union not in any case assuming legislative authority or becoming a court of appeal’, the final statement of the URC constitution reads: ‘The decision of the General Assembly on any matter which has come before it on reference or appeal shall be final and binding.’

## **Evangelical**

But now back to the CERF and to the second word in its title: *Evangelical*. In passing, it is interesting to note that neither the Baptist Revival Fellowship nor the Methodist Revival Fellowship actually used this word. It should not have been necessary in Congregationalism. One object declared at the formation of the Congregational Union in 1833 was ‘to promote Evangelical Religion, in connection with the Congregational Denomination.’ In 1878 the Union Assembly passed a resolution re-affirming that their primary object was ‘to uphold and extend Evangelical Religion’ and that ‘the Evangelical Faith (was) an essential condition of Religious Communion.’

The meaning of the word ‘evangelical’ has not changed. Chambers Concise Dictionary, published in 1991, gives the definition: ‘Of or pertaining to the Christian Gospel’ and ‘of the school of religious belief that insists especially on the total depravity of human nature and the exclusive authority

of the Bible.’ The first statement in the CERF Basis of Faith was: ‘We affirm our belief in the Divine Inspiration and Supreme Authority of the Holy Scriptures.’

Such a position with regard to the Bible is absolutely essential if the true doctrines of the evangel are to be safeguarded. Here are the remaining four statements in the CERF Basis of Faith. How many of them are clearly affirmed by those who have drifted away from the full and final authority of Scripture?

The Unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the Godhead.

The fact of our Sin, and the necessity for the Atonement.

The substitutionary Death of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fact of his Resurrection, as the way of salvation from sin, through faith.

The Personal Return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I said ‘drifted away’ and that is surely what happens. I doubt if any minister has stood in his pulpit and said, ‘I am no longer going to say what is in the Bible. I am going to give you my own ideas.’ What he does, in fact, do, is shown in Hebrews 2:1–3. ‘We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?’ The AV has ‘if we neglect so great salvation.’

Congregationalism was dithering over its attitude to the Bible. Between 1958 and 1969, in various draft constitutions for the Congregational Church in England and Wales, and the United Reformed Church, no less than seven different forms of words were used to express their attitude to the Bible. The final statement reads: ‘The United Church ... acknowledges the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments, discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God’s people.’ The evangelical says the Bible is the Word of God. The statement we’ve just read says the Word of God is in the Bible. It is sometimes stated as: ‘The Bible contains the Word of God.’ Well, my cup of coffee contains milk and sugar!

Now that is not meant to be facetious. It is a statement of fact. And the amount of milk and sugar depends upon my own judgment as to what is acceptable to me. So I can acknowledge the Word of God in the Bible as I discern it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. One can see, therefore, how far the drift can go.

An attempt to stem the drift was made at the Congregational Assembly in 1966 when the constitution of the CCEW was adopted. The actual covenant began ‘We, the members of (so and so) Congregational Church, accepting the

Word of God made known in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God's people, acknowledge'—then followed doctrinal statements. Mr John Halse was commissioned by his church at Honiton to move an amendment deleting the words 'the Word of God made known in.' The covenant would thus read 'accepting the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the supreme authority.' Mr Van den Broek of Ashford gave an impassioned plea to the churches not to touch the Scriptures and warned of the serious consequences of departing from them. The Revs John Bentliff and Gordon Booth gave quiet and carefully reasoned arguments for the deletion of the words. But the Assembly was in no mood to listen and overwhelmingly dismissed the amendment.

Then, in the following year, 1967, the Assembly showed just how far the drift had gone. The occasion was the final consideration of a Declaration of Faith. This had been prepared by a committee over several years. It covered forty-five pages of small print and set out many great truths that any evangelical would be happy to affirm. But in its section on the Bible it stated: 'the Bible is not free from human error and confusion and contradictions'. So much for the 'supreme authority'. Now, as we have said, there was much in the declaration with which we would agree. It could have been difficult to vote against it as a whole on the basis of one sentence. However, that sentence was dealt with on its own. Seacroft Congregational Church, Leeds, requested its minister, Rev. William Tordoff, to move an amendment to delete those unhappy words. The vote was taken and the amendment was again overwhelmingly rejected. 'Of course,' said the chairman as he announced the vote, 'The statement is correct.'

The committee of the CERF had, of course, spent a lot of time in considering this Declaration and the various attempts to formulate the constitution, first of the CCEW and then of the URC. In July 1963, feeling the need for a time for prayer and careful thought, they held a three-day conference in Birmingham. A report of the conference, entitled 'If My People', was sent to all CERF members. The conference had not been confined to the committee. According to the minute book it was to 'include suitable members other than the committee'. The minute also stated that it was 'not at this stage to include non-members such as the 'Anxious Congregationalists'.

That calls for a word of explanation. It was not only members of CERF who shared a concern about the direction in which the denomination was moving. 'The Anxious Congregationalists' was the nick-name given to a group who first adopted the title 'The Congregational Association', and then in 1972 became 'The Congregational Federation'. Why then, if both were concerned

to preserve independency, could they not work together? The answer is that several leading figures in the Association were also members of the extreme liberal body, 'The Union of Modern Free Churchmen.' One could say that CERF wanted more doctrine but the Association wanted less.

The 'Union of Modern Free Churchmen' was very unitarian in its position. We realised the need to add the word 'evangelical' to both the titles of CERF and EFCC. Who would have thought that any Congregational Church would need to add the word 'Trinitarian'? Well, in October 1995, the closing service of the World Evangelical Congregational Fellowship was held in a church in Boston, Massachusetts. The church's notice board bore the title: 'Park Street Congregational Trinitarian Evangelical Church'.

## Revival

We come to the third word in the CERF title. *Revival*. Now we have already looked at the state of Congregationalism when CERF began. Most surely revival was needed. At the first CERF conference in March 1949, Rev. Harland Brine spoke on 'Revival in the Past'. He had himself known something of the burden for revival ever since he experienced its powerful blessing in the Welsh Revival of 1904/5. He was then studying at Cheshunt College and the student-pastor of Nazeing Congregational Church, Essex. He described what happened in a pamphlet *Standfast*, published by the CERF in 1964.

The winds of the Spirit were sweeping through the Churches in Wales. As the good news spread, Christians of all denominations gathered to see and share in the blessing. The Chapels were crowded with folk of all ages praying and praising. In field and coal-pit real conversions were taking place as one rejoicing soul shared his secret joy with his fellows. It was an experience I shall always rejoice to remember for the blessing to my own soul and the overpowering sense of the living Jesus in the midst.

I returned to my student pastorate and told them of my experience. They asked, 'Why should not God give us a real revival here?' We prayed and claimed the blessing. From that night onward the sacred Presence filled that place, and the power of the Lord was present to heal. The good news spread quickly and from other villages came young and old to warm their hearts at the holy fire. In those few days about fifty people, out of a community of only a few hundred, found Christ as personal Saviour, and, filled with a new peace and joy, were earnestly witnessing among their neighbours.

If only such a blessing could be seen in all Congregational churches—both then and now. No wonder the first Aim and Purpose of CERF began 'To stimulate prayer for Spiritual Revival'. In March 1952 a quiet day was held at

Orange Street Church for members and friends of CERF. Numbers were small but a very helpful and inspiring time was spent under the leadership of Rev. Harland Brine who led thoughts on the theme of Silence, Meditation, Prayer and Revival, with periods of meditation and prayer. Later that year a Night of Prayer was held with the Baptist Revival Fellowship.

The Autumn Rally of 1956 was reported to be the best ever. The main address was by Rev. AE Gould of Chelmsford who spoke on 'Conditions of Revival'. The spiritual atmosphere was deeply felt throughout the Rally. The church was crowded to capacity, with some having to stand. A coach-full came from Chelmsford and another from Ashford. The minute states: 'It was very cheering to see so many non-members, and so many of the male sex, and so much youth. People came from far and near.'

At the Annual Rally in 1958, the secretary of the CUEW, Rev. Howard Stanley, was obviously very concerned about the future of our churches. He said that from correspondence he had had with our churches, particularly during the previous 12 months, he was convinced that our great need was the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He stressed the need for each one of us to 'expose ourselves' to the Holy Spirit.

An echo of Mr Stanley's words came from his successor as secretary of the Union, Rev. John Huxtable. Writing in the *Congregational Monthly* in 1969, Mr Huxtable referred to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and suggested we should not dismiss too easily those who claimed to know these gifts in a very real way. Then he made this sad admission: 'It is not as though what we have ourselves looks all that promising or is all that effective.'

The CERF News-letters contained many articles on the subject of 'Revival'. One further reference to revival in the CERF committee minutes came in October 1967, when 'members exchanged experiences and reports, and from these concluded that there were signs of a 'gentle revival' manifesting itself in certain places.'

## **Fellowship**

No person can live a full Christian life on their own. A study of the New Testament phrase 'one another' would bear that out. Jesus said, in John 13:34-35 'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.' Paul wrote in Romans 12:5 'So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.' Hebrews 10:24-25 seals the argument: 'And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting

together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.’

A Christian needs to encourage and be encouraged. So one object of CERF was ‘To promote Fellowship and Co-operation among Congregationalists who are in sympathy with our Basis.’ If ever this needed justifying, it was shown in a letter received by Gilbert Kirby and which he printed in the April 1952 CERF news-letter.

A few days ago I was told that you are the Secretary of the CERF and, although I am a staunch Congregationalist, I must admit to never having heard of such an organisation. I joined the Congregational denomination before I even knew what it was to be truly born of God’s Spirit, and when I found, through evangelist Mr Tom Rees, a new life in Christ, I immediately turned to my Church for encouragement and help. I found neither and was made to understand that my enthusiasm was out of place and unwanted. Folk at my Church told me openly that they did not believe in ‘conversion’. For a year I struggled against this coldness and apathy until I felt I could do no more. My own zeal started to wane, and how I longed for a really keen Church fellowship!...I should love to become a member of the CERF. You have no idea how the idea of the Fellowship has inspired me once again to go into the ranks of my own denomination and really work and pray, knowing that there are others with me.

Similar letters were published in later editions of the news-letter. In July 1955 there was a letter from Lancashire which said: ‘I was thrilled to discover from *The Christian World* that there is an Evangelical fellowship within the denomination.’ The editor commented: ‘Letters like that make you think and make us feel the work of CERF is abundantly worthwhile.’

When the CERF began in 1947 its membership consisted entirely of ministers, but in 1949 it was agreed to include lay people. In the following year, however, the secretary reported only a small response. He commented:

It is becoming increasingly clear to me that the rank and file in our Churches are not on the whole alive to theological issues and, therefore, it would seem they do not see the real necessity for a movement such as ours. It does show how necessary it is in these days to train our people in the truths of the Bible.

A year later, Gilbert Kirby spoke about finance. He said, in his annual report:

Finance does not trouble us unduly as our expenses are kept to a minimum. But our very worthy treasurer would, I know, feel ten years younger if men could pay their subs occasionally. Our expenses will, I fear, increase now that every news-letter we send out will have to bear a 1½d stamp.

The treasurer’s balance in hand that year was £3.5s.2d!

But, as we have already noted in looking at *Revival*, the 1956 Autumn

Rally was crowded to capacity. And at the 1957 Annual Meeting it was reported that membership was close on 500. This now included a number of members worldwide.

The main source of deepening fellowship was, of course, the quarterly newsletter. This contained news of members and their churches, and articles of encouragement. The Annual Meetings and Autumn Rallies were also seen as times of real blessing, as were several House Parties. The first of these was held at Cowes, Isle of Wight, in 1950. In 1953, an auxiliary fellowship was formed in the Midlands. The news was received with great enthusiasm. A message of greetings and goodwill was sent, together with a donation of £5. Now here is an interesting piece of information that came to light just a month ago. The secretary of that northern group was Mrs Betty Lowe of Dukinfield. She, in fact, was one of the persons referred to earlier as having written to Gilbert Kirby expressing surprise that a Congregational minister had been considered suitable as the secretary of the Evangelical Alliance. Mr Kirby's reply led to her and her husband, Bill, becoming members of CERF.

One of the most ambitious steps that were taken to encourage fellowship was the preparation in 1964 of a broadsheet called *Standfast*. It had eight pages, with two setting out each of the four words of the title of CERF. I was secretary at the time and was greatly helped by having a graphic artist in the church at Sawbridgeworth. We had much encouraging response from around the country. A well-known leader in evangelical circles wrote: 'I have rarely seen anything of this nature which appealed to me so much.' And a minister in Africa who happened to receive a copy wrote: 'Any group which produces such a wellproduced and clear statement of belief is worth investigation!'

The true key to fellowship was set out in large print on the last page of the broadsheet. It is Philippians 1:27 'Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the Gospel.'

## **CERF to EFCC**

In our consideration of the word *Congregational* we tried to show that the members of CERF were fully committed to working within the denomination as a whole. It was to be a fellowship of Congregational members not of churches. In 1959 the secretary reported that he had received requests for consideration to be given to the possibility of whole churches affiliating to the CERF. The committee unanimously agreed that it would not encourage this kind of relationship, which might be interpreted as an attempt to form a denomination within the denomination. In 1965, the church at Yaxham, Norfolk, applied for membership. They received the same reply and quite a number of members joined individually.

But, as we have also already seen, the ‘wind of change’ was blowing strongly in the national denomination. CERF members were in the denomination so they could not help being affected, first by the call to covenant as the Congregational Church of England and Wales and, secondly, by the moving towards union with the Presbyterians. Both issues produced differences of attitude among members of the CERF committee. It was a time of strong pressure from the ecumenical movement, so it is not surprising that some were not prepared to take the rather firmer line for which others were calling. Some were ministers who were serving churches where the membership as a whole would not be clearly evangelical, or even truly Congregational. They would know an obligation to continue to serve the churches to which the Lord had called them.

The CERF committee minutes during the year 1961, for instance, show something of the varying positions being taken. In January, reference was made to the article in the previous news-letter which seemed to give the impression that CERF agreed with the Draft Confession of Faith that had been sent to the churches in connection with the Covenant issue. The editor, Rev. Norman Cave, was asked to insert an explanation in the next issue. In July, reference was made to a circular letter sent by Revs Gordon Booth, Edward Guest, and David Marshall to evangelical Congregational ministers expressing alarm at the terms of the Covenant. It was agreed that, in the next news-letter, the then secretary, Rev. Colin Garwood, should try to summarise the two positions. In October, it was reported that Garwood had resigned owing to increased pressure on his time.

Sadly, the question of the Covenant took up much of the committee’s time for several years. The October 1965 minutes said that Congregational Union Covenant proposals were considered together with the future of the CERF. Some members of CERF felt they should immediately withdraw from the Union. Others felt there was still a testimony to be made in the Denomination. It was agreed the secretary prepare a statement for the Newsletter and that members should be encouraged to retain membership of the CERF even if they left the Union.

There was such an atmosphere of uncertainty that, at the December 1965 committee, the Rev. Derek Swann threw down a challenge. The minute reads: ‘Swann submitted the following resolution in order to start discussion: ‘Evangelical churches entering the Covenanting body virtually deny the Inspiration and Infallibility of Scripture. In view of the CERF’s refusal to warn them against this I propose the deletion of the first clause from the CERF Doctrinal Basis, it now being obsolete.’

The minute continued: ‘Dupont pointed out that most churches were not



in complete agreement and this obliged us to speak as individuals.’ The committee agreed that in view of the clear views expressed on Scripture in our Congregational/Presbyterian statement no action be taken on this resolution’.

The problems, however, continued. Three months later, the minutes record a letter of resignation by Rev. John Marshall on the basis of what he felt to be an indefinite CERF attitude towards the statement on Scripture in the proposed Congregational Covenant. And two more months later came a letter from Colin Garwood resigning from the committee and from CERF, and the reported resignation of Norman Cave from the committee and editorship of the Newsletter. In 1967, both of these brethren, Cave and Garwood, were invited to return to the committee. Cave agreed to do so and, in fact, chaired the final meetings. Garwood declined, expressing the confidence that an evangelical fellowship would be formed, if necessary, in the Reformed Church. Both these brethren later went with their churches into the United Reformed Church.

So the sad story continued. In January 1968 it was agreed that a questionnaire be sent to members asking for opinions on the future role of CERF. Only 77 replies were received with just 61 wishing to remain on the mailing list. A year later another letter was sent to 361 names. The minute records: ‘27 replied with greetings or apologies and £5.11s.0d.’

The last committee meeting took place on 6 February 1970 and the final minute reads:

Moved and agreed that the CERF in its present form be dissolved and that (a) those who feel led of God to join an Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches, with its association with the British Evangelical Council, should do so: and (b) those who feel led of God to remain in the CCEW, with the possibility of joining the United Reformed Church, should set up a steering committee to consider the formation of a new association. There should be fraternal relationship between these two fellowships but they should operate independently. This was carried unanimously.’

It was obviously the last meeting for the minutes were not signed.

Now that could have been the tragic end of an evangelical witness in Congregationalism but we praise God that this was not so. The minute refers to An Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches—and the title of this paper is ‘*CERF to EFCC*’. Now, put simply, what that really meant was a move from a fellowship of individuals to a fellowship of churches.

By 1966, it was clear that there were churches which were not going to join the new covenanting Congregational body. The CERF committee called an open meeting for 10th September to consider how non-covenanting evangelical churches might associate. The options considered were (i) Church

affiliation to the CERF. (ii) Fellowship with non-evangelical churches through the Congregational Association. (iii) Forming a new and separate evangelical body. (iv) Affiliation, separately or as a group, with the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches. The open meeting set up a steering committee and they, in turn, called for two meetings to be arranged, one in London and one in Manchester, to which representatives of interested churches could be invited. The meetings were held on Saturday 8th April 1967. Contact was made by telephone and, by the end of the day, both companies had been led to agree to the setting up of An Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches. Thus there began a whole new chapter of fellowship in the gospel in the historic denomination called Congregational.

Today's programme makes the comment that without the links formed in CERF it is debatable if an EFCC would have got underway as quickly as it did. I am sure that is true. CERF had built up personal links and an awareness of evangelical brethren. They knew where each other stood, and at a time when denominational upheaval might well have left them stranded and alone, they were able to realise and affirm a oneness which has stood the test of time. One evidence of that is our presence here today.

The following question was raised in discussion after the paper was given:

*Why didn't the churches join the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches?*

I would give two reasons; one, obvious from the start, and, one that became very apparent later.

For the first, I would say that 'no-one can cross a river in two jumps'. We were asking churches to take a big step in coming away from their old denominational body. Would it not be too much to expect them to take an extra step and link up with a body that was not called 'Congregational'?

We worked very closely with the FIEC. Their then secretary, Rev David Mingard, attended our first committee meetings and gave us much helpful advice. Several churches did join the FIEC but also remained in membership of an EFCC.

The second reason was both a legal and financial one. The Congregational Churches that were joining the United Reformed Church were, in effect, changing to a Presbyterian form of church order. Because this meant they were moving from their trust deed position, an Act of Parliament had to be passed. That Act also required the sharing out of all Congregational funds. Now, because an EFCC was a recognised Congregational body, it was entitled to share of all national and county union funds in proportion to its membership. As a consequence, a large sum of money was safeguarded for evangelical congregational purposes.

At our committee meeting in February, our treasurer informed us that our assets now totalled about 2 million pounds. In addition to this, in 1996, our Fellowship is receiving a grant of £64,000 from the Congregational Memorial Hall Trust. And that, at 6.4%, could be the interest on a further million pounds!

Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones at first encouraged our churches simply to join the FIEC, but, later, he recognised the value of our decision. The Memorial Hall position had to be settled by a High Court action. I submitted an affidavit on behalf of the Fellowship and when, a few days later, the Doctor passed me in a car, he leaned out, waved his arm and cried, 'Victory!'

## Appendix

I have referred above to personal links. May I close by mentioning the names of members of CERF who are still with us today and the churches they would have encouraged to join An EFCC.

Unfortunately, the only surviving membership list is one of ministers and pastors dating from about 1961. If there are any omissions I should be pleased to hear about them.

Rev. Leslie Alcock .....	<i>Stanwell</i>
Rev. Gordon Booth .....	<i>Oldbury</i>
Miss Vera Coleman .....	<i>Nazeing</i>
Miss Jean Croucher .....	<i>Stanwell</i>
Rev. Brian Dupont .....	<i>Beverley, Staines</i>
Mr Michael Eavery .....	<i>Lexden</i>
Rev. Stan Guest .....	<i>Sawbridgeworth, Little Hadham, Much Hadham</i>
Mr John Halse .....	<i>Honiton</i>
Mr Eric Hedges .....	<i>Thornton Heath</i>
Rev. George Hemming .....	<i>Leigh-on-Sea</i>
Mr W Kennedy .....	<i>Larne</i>
Rev. Gilbert Kirby.....	<i>Ashford</i>
Rev. Douglas Legge .....	<i>Seacroft, Thorpe Edge</i>
Mr and Mrs Bill Lowe .....	<i>Dukinfield</i>
Mr Jack Peplow .....	<i>Droylsden</i>
Rev. Neville Rees .....	<i>Morrison</i>
Rev. David Saunders .....	<i>Rochford</i>
Rev. David Smith .....	<i>Braughing, Puckeridge</i>
Rev. Derek Swann .....	<i>Pontnewydd</i>
Rev. Hector Watson (died 6/2/96) .....	<i>Rochford</i>
Rev. Philip Williams .....	<i>Stuckton, Frogham, Cripplestytle, Alderholt</i>

# Heroes and Villains

## Christians Persecuting Christians: The Controversy between John Cotton and Roger Williams in 17th Century New England

**Dr Digby L. James**

### Why the Title

The title of this paper requires a little explanation. Some people will be aware of my interest for many years in the theology of John Cotton, and that I am seeking to reprint his complete works. In some regards, Cotton could be described as one of my heroes of church history, along with George Whitefield, Asahel Nettleton and, of course, everyone's hero, Martin Luther. There is a tendency among Christians to endow their heroes of the faith with infallibility. So Calvin is often absolved of his involvement in the execution of Servetus for heresy. I have heard theological discussions where the final word on a subject is 'but Dr Lloyd-Jones said...' In this paper I shall seek to demonstrate that in part of his theology, John Cotton was sadly very much in error, and as a result, a villain, and that Roger Williams, often portrayed as a villainous firebrand, was, in the matter under consideration, correct.

So who were they?

### John Cotton

I delivered a paper in 1987 on the subject of John Cotton's view of the church. In that paper I gave a brief biography of Cotton, and those unaware of this man and his importance in the history of Congregationalism should obtain copies of that paper from the EFCC administrative secretary. Briefly, Cotton, born in 1585 in Derby, was a Puritan who ministered in Boston, Lincolnshire and Boston, Massachusetts. He was regarded as the theological colossus of New England, and is forever associated with Congregationalism because he wrote one of its earliest defences (*The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*) and coined the very word *congregational* as a description of church government in his book *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England Churches Cleared* (which later became known as *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*).

### Roger Williams

There is some dispute about where he was born, both London and Wales being suggested. If Wales, he may have been a relative of Oliver Cromwell, whose Welsh ancestor changed his name from Williams to Cromwell under Henry VIII. Leighton James (no direct relation!) argues that Williams was

born in Wales, and gives an appendix to the evidence. I believe that it is most likely that he was born in London in approximately 1603.<sup>1</sup> Exact details of his ancestry were lost in the Great Fire of London of 1666. It is known that his family was well-to-do, and that they had contacts at court. Williams said in later life that he had spoken to King James I.<sup>2</sup> He appears to have been converted around the age of 10, and adopted Puritan principles, much to the horror of his conforming family. He records later in life that he had known persecution, even in his own home, from an early age. As a result of his skills at shorthand he became a scribe for Sir Edward Coke, to take notes of Star Chamber proceedings. Under Coke's patronage he studied at Charterhouse and then moved on to Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, where he was registered as a pensioner in 1623, and graduated in 1627. He continued studying at Cambridge until he felt compelled to leave because of the growing zeal of William Laud. In 1629 he became a chaplain to Sir William Masham, at Otes in Essex. It was here that he met and married his wife, Mary, a maid. It was about this time that his religious ideas began to change and he became more of a Separatist. It was this that led him to consider emigration to Massachusetts, and with this in view, he visited Cotton in Boston with other ministers. One of the purposes in emigrating was to be the taking of the Gospel to the Indians (this was some years before John Eliot began his work). By 1630 his religious views made remaining in England dangerous, and so he sailed for America. When he departed these shores, those who knew him in Essex described him as a good friend, a good man, a godly young minister, passionate and precipitate, and divinely mad.

Soon after arriving in New England, he was chosen to be teacher of the church in Boston, a post Cotton was eventually to fill. He refused the call when he discovered that the Boston church was not separatist. The church still had communion with the Church of England. Instead he accepted the call to be the teacher of the church at Salem. Shortly after his settlement there, the General Court of Massachusetts declared the colony a theocracy, and that no one was to be admitted to the 'body politic' unless they were a member of some church within the colony. This was later to have very serious consequences for Williams, since he was opposed to theocracies in principle. An almost immediate consequence was that he was forced to leave Salem and he accepted a call to Plymouth, on the southern edge of the colony.

Plymouth had been established by the Pilgrim Fathers after their arrival on the *Mayflower* in 1620.

After landing, the colony became a communistic state, in religious, social, and economic things. This experiment failed because of their unstable economic organisation, and communism was abandoned in 1632 for a democratic

theocracy in the interests of individual profits at once resulting in greatly increased production. Mr Williams was present when the communistic experiment was abandoned.<sup>3</sup>

Although more tolerant than the Puritans in Boston, the Pilgrims of Plymouth were still a persecuting church. They allowed neither religious liberty, or separation of the functions of the church and the state. In this they followed Robert Browne and virtually every other religious group of the time. They believed in religious liberty for themselves, but not for those with whom they disagreed. The magistrate was responsible for upholding *their* view and suppressing the others'.

When Williams discovered the religious position of the Plymouth church, he refused to associate with them any longer. While in Plymouth, his income was based upon his farm and trade with the Indians. The latter required him to learn the Indians' language, which enabled him to carry out missionary activities among them in 1632, fourteen years before John Eliot. His work among the Indians led him into deeper waters with the authorities. No-one had paid the Indians for the land that the settlers now occupied. It was granted to them by the king of England. Williams wrote a pamphlet declaring this to be unjust, and that only direct purchase from the Indians, voluntarily entered into by both sides, was valid. In spite of this, the church at Salem issued him a second call to be assistant to their pastor in 1633. This time he accepted the call. At Salem he resisted attempts to impose an oath of allegiance upon the people, part of the requirements of the theocracy, and legislation requiring church attendance and the paying of tithes. This only served to antagonise the rulers of the theocracy. They were further antagonised when the church at Salem appointed Williams as its teacher. Not long after, because of Williams' persistence in his views of religious liberty and the role of the state in the church, he was finally sentenced to banishment in the autumn of 1635.

He fled from the jurisdiction of Massachusetts, as he had heard of plans to put him on a ship to England. He eventually found himself at the place that is now called Providence, Rhode Island, and there established a colony. He was very careful to buy the land from the Indians, and, later, passed on ownership of the land to his fellow colonists. He travelled to England to obtain a charter for the new colony, which was to be a haven for religious freedom. While he welcomed into Rhode Island those of very divergent opinions, he would debate with them and seek to show them where and why he thought they were wrong. This is illustrated in a book he wrote entitled *George Fox Digg'd Out of his Burrowes* published in 1676.

*The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* was published in England in 1644, although initially without the name of author or publisher, probably because

Williams was in England obtaining the charter for Rhode Island. It was denounced by Presbyterians and Independents alike. It drew a response from John Cotton in 1647, *The Bloudy Tenent Washed and Made White in the Bloud of the Lambe*. Williams' response came in 1652, *The Bloudy Tenent Yet More Bloudy*. A reply by Cotton was prevented by his death in the same year.

Williams began increasingly to despair of finding a true church. He had become a Baptist in 1639, partly, I believe, because of his dissatisfaction with the New England Congregational Churches. He became a Seeker, that is, he acknowledged that churches existed, but none were sufficiently free from false teaching or associations with false churches for him to join with them. His Seekerism is sometimes used to justify a general questioning spirit with regard to all religious matters. This is totally unwarranted. Williams, to the day of his death, held to the Gospel as revealed in Scripture. It was only concerning the existence of a visible church on earth at his time that he had doubts.

Roger Williams died in May 1683, nearly 80 years old. His banishment from Massachusetts was never lifted, even though he had proved invaluable to that colony in helping them with their relations with the Indians. In spite of this, it was testified of him by Cotton Mather, the grandson of John Cotton:

It was more than forty years after his exile that he lived here, and in many things acquitted himself so laudably, that many judicious persons judged him to have the 'root of the matter' in him, during the long winter of his retirement: He used many commendable endeavours to Christianize the Indians in his neighbourhood, of whose language, tempers and manners he printed a little relation with observations, wherein he *spiritualizes* the *curiosities* with two and thirty chapters, whereof he entertains his reader. There was always a good correspondence always held between him and many worthy and pious people in the colony, from whence he had been banish'd, tho' his keeping still so many of his dangerous principles kept the government, unto whose favour some of the English nobility had by letters recommended him, from taking off the sentence of his banishment. And against the Quakers he afterwards maintained the main principles of the Protestant religion with much vigour in some disputations; whereof he afterwards published a large account, in a book against George Fox and Edward Burrowes, which he entituled, '*George Fox digg'd out of his Burrowes.*'<sup>4</sup>

To the end of his days, Williams could be described as a firebrand. He appears to have been an abrasive character in his controversies with people, whether right or not. Cotton Mather described him as a 'windmill' having less 'light than fire in him.'<sup>5</sup> While much of his theology may be correct, his manner of dealing with people is probably not one to commend.

## The Situation in England

The first English Civil War was underway, with the Scots and Presbyterians hoping for victory over the king in order to establish a presbyterian hegemony. The Westminster Assembly had begun to meet, dominated by Presbyterians, apart from the five dissenting Independent brethren. The Assembly hoped to snuff out all traces of religious freedom. The Confession they eventually produced states:

And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another, they who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God. And for their publishing of such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation), or to the power of godliness; or, such erroneous opinions or practices, as either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the Church, they may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against, by the censures of the Church, and by the power of the civil magistrate.<sup>6</sup>

Put bluntly, anyone who propagates non-Presbyterian views are to be arrested and taken to court. Those of us present who do not subscribe to Presbyterianism would find ourselves in prison under such a political system. The Confession goes on to say in a subsequent chapter about the role of the civil magistrate:

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, and that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.<sup>7</sup>

If such a situation prevailed in England today we would have no problems at all about charismatic aberrations in any of our churches—all of those who proposed things charismatic would be behind bars! (To be fair to our Presbyterian brethren, these aspects of the Westminster Confession are largely ignored today).

As the modern descendents of the Independents, we might expect such a



situation from those dreadful Presbyterians. Our Independent forefathers were much better, were they not? Do not the parallel passages in the Savoy Declaration give true liberty of conscience? It is true that Chapter 21 merely states that liberty of conscience does not provide licence to believe and practise anything perverse against the Word of God; no civil sanctions are imposed. However, Chapter 24, 'Of the Civil Magistrate', merely tones down the Westminster Confession, allowing liberty of conscience only on what are perceived to be secondary matters:

Although the magistrate is bound to encourage, promote, and protect the professors and profession of the gospel, and to manage and order civil administrations in a due subserviency to the interest of Christ in the world, and to that end to take care that men of corrupt minds and conversations do not licentiously publish and divulge blasphemy and errors, in their own nature subverting the faith and inevitably destroying the souls of them that receive them: yet in such differences about the doctrines of the gospel, or ways of the worship of God, as may befall men exercising a good conscience, manifesting it in their conversation, and holding the foundation, not disturbing others in their ways or worship that differ from them; there is no warrant for the magistrate under the gospel to abridge them of their liberty.<sup>8</sup>

Rephrased in a modern context, the Charismatics are acceptable; only the so-called Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, etc. will be thrown into prison!

## **The New England Situation**

To what degree was this kind of thinking prevalent in New England? It would seem that the Congregationalists who dominated the churches of Massachusetts Bay tended towards the Westminster Confession position.

[Three Anabaptists from Rhode Island, John Clark, John Crandall, and Obadiah Holmes] held a private meeting with sympathizers on a Sunday morning, and, being detected, they were compelled to the public service in the afternoon and then remitted to Boston for trial. There they were fined by the General Court, and when they asked what law they had broken, Governor Endicott said they had denied infant baptism, and then, 'being somewhat transported broke forth' and told the prisoners they really deserved death. The magistrates of Massachusetts, Endicott said, 'would not have such trash into their jurisdiction; moreover he said, you go up and down, and secretly insinuate into those that are weak, but you cannot maintain it before ministers.' The Court's statutory ground was questionable, but its cultural ground was made clear by Endicott when he tired of legal haggling: the Anabaptists were trash, socially disreputable, and they were ignorant and preyed on the ignorant. Unable to cope with the learning of the ministry, they stirred up the discontents of others who were equally unlearned.

Obadiah Holmes elected not to pay the fine, although he knew that the alternative was whipping and imprisonment. As he awaited his stripes in prison, Satan came to him and urged him to pay the fine rather than make a spectacle of himself: 'Remember thy self, thy birth, breeding, and friends, thy wife, children, name, and credit,' the devil in him said. For Holmes the voice of the tempter was that which spoke of family and worldly esteem, as it was for all who felt that religion was at odds with established society. In Massachusetts, however, birth, breeding, friends, wife, children, name, and credit were the temporal rewards of God's disposition toward His people. Holmes was struck thirty times with a three-corded whip and when it was over he told the magistrates, 'You have struck me as with roses.' Two men were fined for coming up to him and congratulating him when he was cut from the whipping post. Roger Williams, hearing of the punishment, wrote his former Salem ally, John Endicott, underlining for him the monstrousness of the position he took against conscience and emphasizing the connection between powerlessness on earth and power in heaven: 'The Lord Jesus Christ foretold how wonderfully the wisest of the world, should be mistaken in the things of Christ, and a true visible Christ Jesus! When did we see thee naked, hungry, thirsty, sick, in prison, &c. How easy, how common, how dreadful these mistakes?'<sup>9</sup>

Such a situation arose because Massachusetts was a theocracy, where only those who were church members were allowed to be citizens. Not all of the inhabitants were able to join churches, with only about 4,000 church members out of a population of 16,000. People had emigrated from England for a variety of reasons, and religious persecution was only one of them. The Puritans of New England practised infant baptism in the hope and expectation that their children would be converted. As the years passed, not many of them were, and so an underclass grew up who had been baptised, but as they were unconverted, could not be church members and hence not citizens. This generated discontent and was overcome by the Halfway Covenant. By this, a second tier of church membership was created for the unconverted but baptised, thus allowing them citizenship. Eventually this proved a disaster for the New England churches. This is illustrated by the fact that Jonathan Edwards was expelled from his church in Northampton by the unconverted church members who objected to his proposal to withdraw the Lord's Supper from all but true believers.

## **The Origin of the Controversy**

Someone, we know not who, was languishing in Newgate prison in London on account of their testimony to Jesus. In 1632, this unknown person wrote a short treatise concerning the invalidity of persecution by the state on the

grounds of conscience. He wrote on paper smuggled into the prison as stoppers for his milk ration bottles, wrote with the milk, and smuggled them out in the same way that they had come in. Several arguments were advanced, including the parable of the wheat and the tares (leave the weeds until the judgement), and the many statements of Jesus to his disciples warning them of persecution to come. This treatise was sent to Cotton, asking for his comments. Cotton sent a private reply expressing his views. This letter came into the hands of Roger Williams who wrote an extensive treatise, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, dissecting it and showing Cotton's error. In his letter, Cotton had justified persecution of those whose consciences had been instructed in the truth, on the basis that since their conscience had been instructed, they were sinning against their own conscience.

Cotton explained the parable of the wheat and the tares to refer to Gospel hypocrites, who were difficult to detect. It did not refer to those who can be detected, people who were clearly ungodly, heretics, etc. All references in the New Testament to persecution related to the response of private Christians, not to the duty of the civil state. The state had been given the power of the sword, and this included upholding true religion, and suppressing false.

## **The Bloody Tenent of Persecution**

The *Bloody Tenent* is a *tour de force* exposing the wrong-headed thinking of Cotton's position. Williams sets out his plan for the work right at the start:

First. That the blood of so many hundred thousand souls of protestants and papists, spilt in the wars of present and former ages, for their respective consciences, is not required nor accepted by Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace.

Secondly. Pregnant scriptures and arguments are throughout the work proposed against the doctrine of persecution for cause of conscience.

Thirdly. Satisfactory answers are given to scriptures and objections produced by Mr. Calvin, Beza, Mr. Cotton, and the ministers of the New English churches, and others former and later, tending to prove the doctrine of persecution for cause of conscience.

Fourthly. The doctrine of persecution for cause of conscience, is proved guilty of all the blood of the souls crying for vengeance under the altar.

Fifthly. All civil states, with their officers of justice, in their respective constitutions and administrations, are proved essentially civil, and therefore not judges, governors, or defenders of the spiritual, or Christian, state and worship.

Sixthly. It is the will and command of God that, since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-

christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God's Spirit, the word of God.

Seventhly. The state of the land of Israel, the kings and people thereof, in peace and war, is proved figurative and ceremonial, and no pattern nor precedent for any kingdom or civil state in the world to follow.

Eighthly. God requireth not an uniformity of religion, to be enacted and enforced in any civil state; which enforced uniformity, sooner or later, is the greatest occasion of civil war, ravishing of conscience, persecution of Christ Jesus in his servants, and of the hypocrisy and destruction of millions of souls.

Ninthly. In holding an enforced uniformity of religion in a civil state, we must necessarily disclaim our desires and hopes of the Jews' conversion to Christ.

Tenthly. An enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state, confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh.

Eleventhly. The permission of other consciences and worships than a state professeth, only can, according to God, procure a firm and lasting peace; good assurance being taken, according to the wisdom of the civil state, for uniformity of civil obedience from all sorts.

Twelfthly. Lastly, true civility and Christianity may both flourish in a state or kingdom, notwithstanding the permission of divers and contrary consciences, either of Jew or Gentile.<sup>10</sup>

From the parable of the wheat and the tares, Williams showed that the tares are not hypocrites but unbelievers. The field is described by Jesus to be the world, not the church. From this there can be no grounds for seeking to establish a 'godly commonwealth', since that would be attempting to establish the new heavens and the new earth before the judgement.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to Cotton's view that 'Christian' emperors had done the church good, Williams points out that these same emperors had done greater harm to the cause of Christ than had Nero!<sup>12</sup> Under persecution the church had flourished. Under 'Christian' emperors it had become weak and eclipsed. Indeed, we could add to this argument the fact that the conversion of Constantine led the way for the beginning of the Dark Ages and the development of Roman Catholicism, a religious system that was intensely intolerant of dissent.

Williams asked whether or not the civil magistrates of the Roman empire had a responsibility to uphold both tables of the Law (that is, the Ten

Commandments). Since the emperors were ignorant of the Scriptures, how could they be in a position to uphold the Scriptures?<sup>13</sup> Though many rulers had been told that they were defenders of the faith, it was a recent innovation. Henry VIII was given the title by the pope for writing against Luther. After it was taken away after the break with Rome, parliament conferred it on him again. Rulers were told that this was a crown from heaven, but no Scripture could be found to justify it.

In theocratic terms, the magistrate was charged with upholding and promoting the Gospel. But Williams asks, where is the Scripture that gives the magistrate authority to gather churches, when the church has already received this commission in Matthew 28:19–20?<sup>14</sup>

He makes the point that civil government is common to all men, and not dependent upon any nation holding to true religion.<sup>15</sup> Its power derives from the common consent of the people that compose it,<sup>16</sup> religious and irreligious. Its only concern with matters of religion come about when it affects the civil peace of the state.

In summary, Williams held to certain basic religious and political tenets. The religious tenets were that the church was a free society, separate from the state, and dependent only upon God for support. The church was responsible for internal discipline; the supreme sentence that it was able to pass was that of excommunication. The state was concerned with the affairs of *all* those who lived within its borders, of whatever belief, seeking to uphold their collective benefits.

## **The Bloody Tenent Washed and Made White in the Blood of the Lamb**

In reply, Cotton merely sought to answer Williams chapter by chapter, although in reality, he merely restates in greater detail the points he had made in his earlier letter. That is, that a person may dissent from the teaching of the state church for conscience sake, until he has been instructed from the Scriptures. Once that has been done, the man's conscience has been instructed, and so now he cannot be persecuted for conscience's sake, since now, if he persists in his non-conforming ways, he will be sinning against his own conscience. In the early chapters of *The Bloody Tenent Washed* he states this view with tedious monotony.

Based on Old Testament examples of kings who were commended for suppressing false prophets and other errors, Cotton justified modern kings and magistrates following the same example.<sup>17</sup> He supports the idea of 'Christian' emperors, and says that it was because of their *laxity* that the church was damaged—they should have been more thorough in suppressing Arianism.<sup>18</sup>

Cotton rejected Williams' views partly on the basis that they were unknown amongst any churches with which Cotton was familiar.

It is a wise proverb ... of a wiser than Solomon: the 'backslider in heart [from any truth or way of God] shall be filled with his own ways.' They that separate from their brethren further than they have *just cause*, shall at length find cause, or at least think they have found cause just enough to separate from one another. I never yet heard of any instance to the contrary, either in England or Holland; and for New-England, there is no such church of the separation at all that I know of. That separate church, (if it may be called a church) which separated with Mr Williams, first broke into a division about a small occasion (as I have heard) and then broke forth into Anabaptism, and then into Anabaptism and familism, and now finally into no church at all.<sup>19</sup>

## The Reformers and the Anabaptists

It is common, especially for Americans, to see Roger Williams as the first person to argue for a full and absolute liberty of conscience. In actual fact, the Anabaptists had been arguing for this a hundred years earlier in continental Europe.

Just the mention of the word *Anabaptist* has bells ringing in the minds of many, so it is first necessary to define what is meant by the term in this context. Just as with the Charismatic movement today, there was a wide range of types. Today there are Charismatics who are doctrinally sound, sane and not that different from the doctrinally sound, sane non-Charismatics. There are also those at the other extreme whose doctrine is perverse and who practise such things that most conclude to verge on the insane. The so-called *Toronto Blessing* is an example of the latter. Then there are also those who are Roman Catholic Charismatics, who say that their charismatic experience makes them more devoted to the Pope, the Mass and the worship of Mary. In the sixteenth century there were Anabaptists who were not that dissimilar from present day evangelicals, like EFCC churches, and others who could only be described as the lunatic fringe, such as those who took over the city of Münster and practiced polygamy as they awaited the imminent return of Christ. In this paper, it is the sane and sensible Anabaptists that are being referred to.<sup>20</sup>

An early, if simple, statement of evangelical Anabaptist belief was the *Schleitheim Confession*, published on 24 February 1527. With regard to the civil authorities it states in article 6:

We have been united as follows concerning the sword. The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and kills the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the law the sword is established over the wicked for punishment and for death, and the secular rulers are established to wield the same.

But within the perfection of Christ only the ban [excommunication] is used for the admonition and exclusion of the one who has sinned, without the death of the flesh, simply the warning and the command to sin no more.<sup>21</sup>

The Anabaptists did not depend for their spiritual life and evangelistic success on the use of the courts. Indeed, they put no trust in their rulers at all for anything to do with their spiritual life. They argued for a complete separation of church and state. For this ‘heresy’ they were severely persecuted by both the Reformers and by Rome. The average lifespan of a person after they became an Anabaptist was two years. Roger Williams had come to similar conclusions and was also persecuted, but thankfully not as severely. He probably did not have any contact with Anabaptists

The thinking lying behind the opposition to the Anabaptists and Roger Williams was the same—that is, that the church and the state are co-extensive, and that any dissent in matters of religion harms the civil peace. To what degree are the modern day ecumenical and inter-faith movements motivated by the same thinking? Leonard Verduin, in his magnificent book, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*<sup>22</sup> has ably chronicled the history of this view. It stems not from the Bible but from paganism. Verduin’s book is all the more fascinating because he wrote it with funding from Calvin College, and as a result of his studies became very sympathetic towards the Anabaptists. He shows how ancient rulers believed that society required religious ‘glue’ to hold it together. In order to maintain peace and harmony within a nation it was necessary for all the members of that society to subscribe, even if only in name, to the same religion. In ancient Rome the religion was emperor worship. The early Christians refused to bow down to the emperor and so were executed for treason. With the so-called conversion of Constantine this thinking came into the professing church, and came to dominate Europe through Roman Catholicism, which vigorously pursued this policy. With the coming of the Reformation, Roman Catholic doctrine was largely put aside, but not the view of church and state. Such views were maintained by the major Reformers throughout Europe and were accepted by the Puritans. The absurdity of this view can be easily shown by reference to the New Testament. Where is there a single verse stating that the state has a role in the church? Did Nero (and the other Roman emperors) have the power to call synods, and attend them (as the Westminster Confession says)? Did the church look to Nero to preserve the Gospel and suppress error throughout the empire? Are the churches in Iran or Saudi Arabia to look to their Muslim rulers in the same way? Just asking these questions shows the absurdity of this view.

## Lessons for Today

It is often thought that conferences such as this have no useful purpose for Christians living at the end of the twentieth century, being no more than nostalgia for the past. This cannot be the case, as the following quote demonstrates:

### *WELCOME TO GENEVA!*

Calvin's Geneva provides an example of what commonly occurred in Reformation territories. 'In Geneva, as in all Europe, church and state were co-terminous. That is, all citizens were by birth members of both societies' (W. Fred Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin* [John Knox Press, 1978], p. 61). 'Calvin never gave up the idea of the *Corpus Christianum* (the Christian society, in which church and state alike work together under Christian commitment)' [John Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed tradition*, p. 205; cf. Graham, pp. 62–63].

Life in Geneva was very regulated cf. Graham, 'Sumptuary Laws,' pp. 110–115). People were told 'how many different items can be served at one meal, and which colours and what quality of clothing you may wear.' A woman was put in prison for 'arranging her hair to an immoral height.' 'Children must have names to be found in the Bible.' A 'child was actually beheaded for striking his parents.' 'In one five year period during the theocratic rule, 76 individuals were banished and 58 were executed for such crimes' (Eli Oboler, *The Fear of the Word: Censorship and Sex* [Scarecrow Press, 1974], pp. 60,61,62).

### *GENEVA AGAIN?*

In our day, the Chalcedon (Christian Reconstruction) movement exults in the prospect of new Genevas being established (cf. R.J. Rushdoony, *God's Plan for Victory*, p. 15). One segment of the 'Christian Reconstruction' movement is reprinting Calvin's sermons on Deuteronomy (1555–1556), 'in the hope and prayer that these will assist the continuing reformation of the churches.' 'These sermons on Deuteronomy are especially valuable in showing how God's law was relevant for the civilisation that the Reformers were trying to build' (Gary North, 'Introduction,' *Calvin Speaks*, Vol.1, #1, July 1980).

And what is the first 'controversial' sermon they chose to help us in realizing 'the civilization the Reformers were trying to build'? '*The Execution of rebellious Children, Deut. 21:18–21!*' In this sermon, Calvin submits that it is the duty of Christian parents to deliver their 'unreformable' child 'into the judge's hands to be put to death...God's will is that upon this evidence [of rebelliousness] the child shall be stoned to death' (*Calvin Speaks*, Vol. 1, #1, Part 1, p. 3).



The Christian Reconstructionists have linked the hopes for ‘Christian nations’ with (what I call) ‘idealistic post-millennialism,’ in which they expect ‘the nations to be converted, [where] people will *want* to live godly lives, will *voluntarily* institute theocracy (Christian republics) in their nations, and will unify their churches freely and cordially. This is a triumphalism of a sort, but a triumph gained by converting the heart, not imposing the will’ (James Jordan, personal letter to E.A.P., June 25, 1981).<sup>23</sup>

The whole article is worth reading, particularly the second half from which this quotation comes. Zens goes on to discuss how America developed into a pluralist society *in spite of* the Puritans, and bemoans the various attempts, such as those of the Christian Reconstructionists and the Moral Majority, to return to a Puritan type position. It could be said that by the Christian Reconstructionists pushing these theocratic views of Calvin would result in many people being dissuaded from reading Calvin’s other writings which are of tremendous value. A more detailed analysis of the Christian Reconstruction/Moral Majority movement (often now referred to by the media as the Religious Right in America) can be found in an article by Mark McCulley, *Exile or Conquest? Power-Seeking and the New Puritans*.<sup>24</sup>

We have to ask, where on earth in the New Testament do we find the Apostles seeking to do such things? There is not a word concerning taking over society in order to establish godly commonwealths. The nearest the New Testament comes to this is when it speaks of the Old Covenant as being obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). It is usually because people still understand the society in which they live in Old Testament rather than New Testament terms that they seek a return to Puritan politics.

For example, it is not uncommon to read literature bemoaning the condition of the state church and the activities of the monarch and her family. But should Christians have any concern about this, apart from a sadness to see once great institutions in such decline, and sinful failures amongst those in the public eye? The argument is made that the disestablishment of the Church of England would be spiritually harmful and would imply that there is no place for the spiritual in society. To have no established church would result in moral decline in the nation and leave no Christian voice in Parliament.

Calls for disestablishing the Church of England (little is said of the Church of Scotland in such debates, but it is implicit in the debates) rose in the nineteenth century with the growth of the free (i.e. non-Anglican) churches, but this move eventually declined before the end of the century.<sup>25</sup> There was, however, success in bringing about the disestablishment of the Churches of Ireland and Wales. The Church of Ireland was disestablished in 1871 as part of Gladstone’s efforts to pacify Ireland’s call for home rule. The basis was that

there were less than 700,000 members of the established church in Ireland out of a population of 5.8 million.<sup>26</sup> At the time, Dean Burgon described it as the nation's formal rejection of God.<sup>27</sup> The Church of Wales was disestablished after it was found that only 25% of church attenders attended that church. Legislation was brought forward and passed into law in 1914 and enacted in 1920.<sup>28</sup> Since that time there has been no established church within the Principality.

In the light of this, I ask, has this country not already plumbed the depths of moral depravity *with* an established church? Are there *no* believers in Parliament to speak for the cause of Christ? Are Wales and Northern Ireland the epitome of depravity because they have not had an established church for a great many years?

All such thinking derives from the theocratic mentality of Cotton, not the New Testament emphasis of Williams. It can be said that Williams' view triumphed in America with the passing of the Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments to the Constitution), the first of which says:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

In Britain, Cotton's view prevailed, much to the hardship of non-conformists. This view prevails today, since we still have a state church in England and Scotland. We bemoan the decline of religious influence within the United Kingdom, even with its two state churches. In America, with religious pluralism and a complete separation of church and state, the Christian influence is not only stronger, but also a *much* higher proportion of people attend church on Sundays.

At the heart of the issue is the understanding one has of the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments. Is the New Testament church a continuation of Old Testament Israel, or is Israel a type for which the church is the anti-type? Is Old Testament Israel the physical example and the church the spiritual fulfilment? If the former, then persecution is justified on the basis that God required Israel to be doctrinally as well as morally pure. False teaching, blasphemy, false prophecy was punishable by death. If the latter, the only responsibility that the church has is to discipline those within it, the ultimate sanction being excommunication. What might be termed 'theocratic' views are also often based on the Old Testament concept of a nation (Israel in the Old Testament) being in a covenant relationship with God.

But what if Deuteronomy is true? What if it applies? What if this nation [he is speaking in an American context] is under a covenant, and the terms of breaking this covenant are those spelled out in Deut. 28:15–68? What then?<sup>29</sup>

These are obviously summary views, and it must be admitted that there are many shades of opinion in between these apparent extremes.

It is an interesting fact that in the sixteenth century in Europe there was a haven of religious toleration. This was in Transylvania, and the region of Hungary controlled by the Muslim Turks and later the Poles.

The Turks tolerated all creeds, although least favourable to the Catholics; in Transylvania, religious equality between Catholics and Protestants was proclaimed in 1557. During the ‘Long War’ (1593–1606), a confused, triangular struggle, Sigismund Báthory [Polish ruler] was victorious over the Turks, but the imperial armies under Georges Basta occupied Transylvania and initiated a violent persecution of the Protestants until Stephen Bocskay, calling the Turks to his aid, expelled them and, by the peace of Vienna (June 23, 1606), obtained for all Hungary a promise of religious liberty and political federation and for himself recognition as sovereign prince of an enlarged Transylvania.<sup>30</sup>

Part of the reason for this toleration can be found in the words of Sigismund Báthory’s Roman Catholic grand chancellor, John Zamoyski’s words,

I would give half my life to bring back to Catholicism those who have abandoned it, but I would give my whole life to prevent them from being brought back by violence.<sup>31</sup>

As a consequence of this attitude of toleration on the part of the Turks during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent (who ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1520 to 1566), the Christian population of Morea (who had been under Venetian rule) and certain Christian areas of Hungary chose Turkish rule.<sup>32</sup> It is a pity that modern Islamic states do not always have the same enlightened attitude.

Taking the theocratic view can do great harm to the progress of the Gospel in missionary situations. In discussing this matter with a missionary to Nepal, he said that state churches were a hindrance in his work. Street preaching in Nepal is seen as a political act, since Nepalese politicians speak on the streets. When Christians do this it strengthens the view of the government that an attempt is being made to overcome the state and impose a foreign state religion.

There are a great many corollaries that flow from the conclusions in this paper concerning religious freedom and the separation of church and state. Let me suggest just two to consider (which I will not elaborate on). To what extent should Christians seek to have ‘Christian’ legislation passed in the countries in

which they live? To give a specific example, should Christians seek to have Sunday trading laws passed or upheld? Was Israel commanded to bring sabbatarian legislation into the surrounding countries? Was the church commanded so to do in the New Testament? Secondly, should Christians encourage the state to provide religious education in state schools, or should they seek the abolition of religious education? Do we want children taught the *state's* understanding of Christianity?

A final question: Is the power of God in the Gospel so weak that we need the power of the state to bolster and uphold it?

We have, in this subject, an example of where our heroes have feet of clay. Let us be reminded of that fact and seek to put our trust only in the God of heaven.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> James Ernst, *Roger Williams: New England Firebrand* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), p. 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Ernst, p. 24.
- <sup>3</sup> Ernst, p. 73.
- <sup>4</sup> Cotton Mather, *Great Works of Christ in America* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust reprint), 2:499.
- <sup>5</sup> Mather, 2:495.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 20, section 4.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* chapter 23 section 3.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*, chapter 24.
- <sup>9</sup> Larzer Ziff, *Puritanism in America* (New York & London: The Viking Press & Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 134, 135, with quotes from John Clark, *Ill Newses from New-England* (London: 1652), pp. 7, 19, 22.
- <sup>10</sup> Roger Williams, *The Boudy Tenent of Persecution* (London: The Hanserd Knollys Society, 1848), pp. 1, 2.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 72.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 154.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 204.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 255.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 313.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 315.
- <sup>17</sup> John Cotton, *The Bloody Tenent Washed and Made White in the Bloud of the Lambe*, p. 61.
- <sup>18</sup> Cotton, p. 131.
- <sup>19</sup> Mather, 2: 498–499.
- <sup>20</sup> The word *anabaptist* literally means *re-baptise*. This term was used because the Anabaptists rebaptised their followers. This was not a rejection of infant baptism *per se* (although it usually was) but a rejection of infant baptism as a badge of citizenship of any state. Some Anabaptists retained infant baptism, rebaptising those of their children who had been baptised by the state church.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Schleithem Confession*, Trans. and ed. John H Yoder (Scottsdale, AR: Herald Press, 1973, 1977), p. 14.
- <sup>22</sup> Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1966).
- <sup>23</sup> Jon Zens, 'After Ten Years: Observations and Burdens On My Heart', *Baptist Reformation Review* (now retitled *Searching Together*), Vol. 11, #1, 1982, pp. 28,29

- <sup>24</sup> Mark McCulley, 'Exile or Conquest? Power-Seeking and the New Puritans', *Baptist Reformation Review*, Vol. 11, #4, 1982, pp. 20–33
- <sup>25</sup> David L. Edwards, *Christian England: From the 18th Century to the First World War*, 3 volumes (London: Collins, 1984) 3:232–235 passim
- <sup>26</sup> Edwards, 3:227,228
- <sup>27</sup> JRH Moorman, *A History of the Church in England*, (London: A & C Black, 3rd ed. 1973), p. 382.
- <sup>28</sup> Moorman, p. 382n.
- <sup>29</sup> Gary North, *Judgement*, Christian Reconstruction, Vol. VI, Jan./Feb., 1982, p. 2.
- <sup>30</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1961 ed., s.v. 'Hungary', 11:904.
- <sup>31</sup> JH Elliott, *Europe Divided 1559–1598*, Fontana History of Europe (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1968), p. 240.
- <sup>32</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1961 ed., s.v. 'Turkey', 22:594

## **Additional Suggested Reading**

Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1966)

Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976)

George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962)

Alan Simpson, *Puritanism in Old and New England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955)

Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1963)

Most of Cotton's writings, including *The Bloody Tenent Washed and Made White in the Bloud of the Lambe* can be downloaded from [www.quintapress.com/PDF\\_Books.html](http://www.quintapress.com/PDF_Books.html)

# Edward Parsons of Leeds— Influence from a Local Church

## John Semper

Edward Parsons (1762–1833) was the minister of Salem Independent Chapel, Leeds, for 47 years. Despite such a lengthy and influential ministry, little has been preserved in the church's records, and so far as I can tell, no full biography has ever been written. He apparently left no memoirs or letters. You might well ask, 'Why then resurrect such a nonentity?' There are several reasons that I would like to suggest. The first is the obvious one that the longer we ignore the lives and contributions of such men, the more we lose and the more difficult it becomes to present a realistic portrait of them. Secondly, he was an ordinary, faithful, Congregational pastor, and surely that is, at bottom, what Congregationalism is all about; not just about the great names and the famous men, but about the faithful pastoring of congregations and the spirited preaching of the Word of God. In the third place, he was convinced of the distinctives of Congregationalism, and was not ashamed to propound them on suitable occasions, at inductions or the opening of churches. Finally, he was an orthodox Calvinist at a time when it was still the basic framework of Congregational theology.

He lived in what appear to us, looking back, to have been exciting times! During his lifetime, this country still owned, but soon lost, the American colonies. It was the period of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. He died soon after the Great Reform Act was passed in 1832. From a spiritual point of view, the influence of the Evangelical Awakening was still at work in the land and in the churches. George Whitefield, who preached on several occasions in Leeds, was there for the last time in 1767, and John Wesley continued his visits to the town, almost up to his death in 1791. Nonconformity in Leeds had in fact degenerated into Unitarianism, with Joseph Priestley ministering for a period, from 1767 to 1773, at the well-known Mill Hill Chapel. It was as a result of Wesley and Whitefield's preaching that in 1754 the first chapel—White or White Hall Chapel—connected with modern Congregationalism was erected, and John Edwards became its first minister. Volume 2 of the Congregational Historical Society Transactions declares quite unequivocally that this church, of which Parsons was later to become minister, was 'entirely the offspring of the Evangelical Revival'.

We could spend much time looking at the development of Leeds during

Parsons' ministry there, by way of background. Our time, however, is limited, and I want to give you, if possible, the feel of his preaching and an over-view of his work. Suffice it to say that in these years Leeds was developing into a large industrial town. Its population increased, both by natural increase and by immigration, from some 30,000 in 1775 to 123,000 by 1831. The development of Leeds as a transport centre through the building of canals and the emergence of primitive railways (like the Middleton waggonway, opened in 1758) was matched by expansion in the clothing industry, and in engineering, to power the machinery in the rapidly developing mills and factories. Such was the Leeds in which Parsons lived and worked.

## His Life

Very little information exists about his family background. The Dictionary of National Biography tells us that he was descended from a good Irish family, but gives no details. We do know that he was born in the parish of Stepney, London, on 16th July 1762 (or 1760). John Morison, in his monumental 'The Fathers and Founders of the London Missionary Society', describes him as being of humble origins, mischievous and daring as a boy, and on one occasion narrowly escaping death, but utterly careless about religion. In addition to Morison's account, which he calls a memoir (it covers 9 pages), there is a brief summary of Parsons' life in *The Imperial Magazine or Compendium of Religious, Moral and Philosophical Knowledge* for January 1829 (its motto was 'Reading imparts energy to the mind!'). It tells us that in his youth, he was a butcher in Whitechapel, London. *The Evangelical Magazine* for October 1833, commenting on his recent death, suggests that he was converted at an early age but that no record exists as to how.

What seems to be generally agreed is that he was brought to the attention of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, and became one of the earliest students at Trevecca College. She had a kind concern for his welfare and was responsible for initiating him into the work of the ministry. In his early days he had to overcome a natural diffidence to speaking in public, but after one or two discouraging failures began to show prospects of great usefulness.

On leaving college, he engaged in several short ministries in the Countess' Connexion, first of all at Tunbridge Wells, and then at Norwich, where his health gave way under the stress of the work, which included 5 services each week. Despite a burst blood vessel and the apparent prospect of an early death, he received treatment at Bristol Hot Wells (at Selina's expense) and was able to resume his ministry, for a short period in Bristol. He then moved to Wigan at Selina's request, where a good congregation was formed. Remember that these were days when congregations and churches were being formed here, there and

everywhere; they were still revival times. It is recorded that during a service a magistrate appeared, ordering him out of the pulpit and the congregation to disperse. Parsons, with something of his later boldness and courage in the defence of dissenters, reminded the magistrate that *he*, Parsons, was under the *protection* of the law, and that *he*, the magistrate, would be under the *penalty* of the law if he did not withdraw. It was reported in the town that 'a young dissenting parson was about to send Mr Justice \_\_\_\_ to jail!' This resulted in even larger congregations and the building of a larger chapel, to which the sister of the magistrate made one of the largest donations!

In 1781, still under 20 years of age, we find him at St Saviour's Gate Chapel in York, but in early 1784 he went to London to take charge of the chapel in Mulberry Gardens, Wapping, but he soon retired from the Countess' Connexion. If we did not have in the back of our minds the knowledge of his 47 years of ministry in Leeds, we might think him something of a *flibberty-gibbet*, but we must also take into account the fact that Selina liked to keep the ministers in her Connexion circulating. Some of them had almost an itinerant ministry, and the desire to settle in one place may have been a factor in leading Parsons to leave the Connexion and join the Congregationalists. A more serious reason was the unwise proposal made in early 1784 that all ministers admitted to the Connexion should be ordained by those who themselves had received episcopal ordination. It seems likely that this desire for closer conformity to the established church drove Parsons into Congregationalism.

He preached for some months at the Independent church in Cannon Street, Manchester, with much acceptance, and attracted considerable attention, though he was regarded as being too young to exercise pastoral responsibility. God had other ideas about that! He moved from Manchester to become the assistant of the aged John Edwards at the White Chapel in Leeds, in the autumn of 1784, having been head-hunted by Edwards' roving representative, Mr Groves, the pastor at Rotherham. Groves had heard Parsons preach in Bristol, and had tried to persuade him to come to Leeds, but Parsons had declined because of his existing associations with the Connexion. Now these had ended, he felt no difficulty in becoming Edwards' assistant. This arrangement lasted only a few months, for in February 1785 Edwards died and Parsons undertook the complete charge of the church and congregation, of which he remained minister until 1832.

Soon the White Chapel where they met, though enlarged several times, became too small for the congregation, and Salem Independent Chapel was built in the same neighbourhood in 1791. The account of Edward Parsons' ministry written in 1829, observes that the chapel was always well attended and that 'few kept up their popularity for so long a period with such a large



society under their care'. Salem itself was described in a Leeds Guide of 1806 as a 'large handsome stone building. The pews are very conveniently disposed and are capable of seating near 1,000 persons'. Sunday services were at 10.30am, and then in the afternoon, at 2.30pm in winter and 3.00pm in summer, with a prayer meeting at 6.00pm. Mid-week activities comprised a Monday morning prayer meeting and a Friday evening lecture. There was instrumental music and the singing was led by a precentor.

Most of the sources available speak of the continuing prosperity of the church, and how Parsons was noted for his faithfulness and industry. This continued until his resignation at the age of 70. He was twice married, his first wife dying without children. By his second wife he had a large family, of whom two of his sons became Congregational ministers at Halifax and York. He resigned reluctantly because of increasing ill-health, though he was still able to preach from time to time, with what the *Congregational Magazine* of 1833 called 'his wonted acceptableness'. The church expressed its love and gratitude by making a liberal provision for him for the rest of his life. After visiting London to preach in the spring of 1833, his health deteriorated, so in the July he travelled with his eldest unmarried daughter to Douglas, Isle of Man, where he had received much kindness on a previous visit in 1831. His health seemed to improve, and he was actually able to preach for 4 sabbath mornings. The subjects are indicative both of the nature and content of his preaching and of his own consciousness of his approaching death. The texts were: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us...' (Ephesians 1:3); 'The glorious gospel of the blessed God' (1 Timothy 1:11); 'My times are in Thy hands' (Psalm 31:15); and 'To those that fear His name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings' (Malachi 4:2). He felt no special indisposition until the evening of August 25th 1833 when, at the home of a friend, John Calvin (!), he required medical attention. He was in fact able to walk to his lodgings, but during the night his condition deteriorated, and he died peacefully on the morning of the 29th at 9.30am. The disease, it is recorded, 'had assumed the character of malignant cholera', and he was interred in the churchyard at Douglas on the following day. In the days preceding his death, he had been re-reading the New Testament, marking all the passages that struck him. The last passage marked was Revelation 22:20.

Edward Parsons was:

## **1. A Comforter of the Bereaved**

Seven or more of his funeral sermons are still available. Such sermons were of course particularly popular in those days, and we must not let that fact present us with an unbalanced picture of the man. It is obvious that he was in great

demand, especially on the deaths of various ministers, chiefly in Yorkshire. He preached the funeral sermon of George Lambert, notable for his lengthy ministry at Fish Street, Hull, and of Samuel Bottomley of Scarborough, who were Independents, but also of William Price, the minister of Ebenezer Particular Baptist Church in Leeds. There are several sermons for ordinary folk as well! The subjects preached on are both suitable, and probably a good deal more challenging than our own addresses at funerals. Perhaps the separation of the funeral from the funeral sermon gave greater freedom and opportunity to open up the Scriptures. Subjects included ‘The Believer’s Joy in anticipating the Second Advent of the Redeemer’ (Job 19:23–26); ‘The Sorrowing of a Bereaved Church’ (Acts 20:38); ‘The Life of the Righteous lamented and improved’ (Isaiah 62:1); ‘The Personal Glory of Believers at the Resurrection’ (Philippians 3:20–21); and ‘The Believer’s Confidence in the Dominion of Christ over Death’ (Job 19:26). Much greater time is spent on the subjects announced than on tributes to the departed, and the texts are opened up in full sermonic fashion.

In one of these sermons, he comments that already too much had been said about the last hours, life and character of the deceased! However, this in no way diminished his empathy towards the bereaved, but was linked with a great sense of urgency in pressing the claims of the gospel upon his hearers. Here is a taste:

‘My aged friends, the invariable course of nature precludes on your part all calculation upon future years. Under these circumstances, it cannot be unreasonable to ask, are you prepared for the hour of your death? Are you ready to depart and to be with Christ? As there is now but a step between you and death, is it not high time that you should seriously enquire into the state of your soul, and be scripturally satisfied that ‘to die will be gain’? An old man, a man grown grey in the slavery of sin, and still persevering in a course of obdurate enmity against the only way of salvation, is the most awful character on this side of the grave!’

There was also a word for the young friends present!

## **2. An Encourager of Students for the Ministry**

Parsons seems to have particularly enjoyed passing on very practical advice to his young friends in training. Addresses to the students at the Idle Academy on 18 June 1823 and to those at Blackburn on 27 June 1832 have survived. With great frankness he admits to the Idle students that ‘his mind was completely afloat’ as to the subject on which to speak to them. Eventually he settled on ‘Prudence’! What a practical and useful subject and how sensibly he treated it! ‘Prudence is a lovely quality, which teaches us to speak every word, and to

perform every action of life, at a proper time, in the proper place, and towards the proper person.' He goes on to describe prudence as 'the offspring of wisdom, nurtured by experience, its operation carried on by foresight, by reflection, by deliberation, by cautious observation and decision, and by unimpassioned firmness and uniform perseverance'. There is a lot of practical advice—to those of an irascible hasty temper, or who are inconstant and fickle; on the purchase of books: 'Never buy a book till you want it and have time to read it. Buy no book unless you have some knowledge of its character and merits'; on the use of time: 'Be as avaricious, as covetous, as ardent to gain and save time and as parsimonious in parting with it, as many are in reference to their money. Beware of that thief of time called sleep. Form yourselves to the habit of early rising'. There is much more that is worth quoting. How they should behave when being given hospitality overnight. They must discover the 'arrangement of the home, the hours of worship, the time for retiring at night'; they must be 'kind and conciliating to the servants and attentive and familiar to the children, easy and affable, and give as little trouble as possible'. It is important to retain confidences: 'A gadding, gossiping, prying, news-gathering, blabbing, tale-bearing preacher is to be despised as the most despicable, and to be feared as the most dangerous man in the religious world'. Finally, they are 'to know nothing among men save Jesus Christ and Him crucified'. Their ambition must be 'to imbibe His spirit, follow His steps, proclaim the glad tidings of His love and have an exclusive regard for His glory'.

The students at Blackburn are treated to an address on 'Self-possession in Preaching', which Parsons describes as 'a subject of peculiar importance to your personal happiness, if not to your relative usefulness in the ministry'. He goes on to distinguish self-possession from self-confidence and self-complacency. He warns against desire for approbation and applause, and against 'fear of the severity of hearers of superior wisdom, especially preaching hearers'. 'I have often known the appearance of one such hearer in a moment damp all the previous vivacity of a preacher, and involve the friendly sympathising part of his audience in the greatest anxiety for the issue of the confusion he had not the power of concealing.' He continues by listing 6 prerequisite considerations and 4 pieces of general advice.

### **3. A Believer in Fellowship among Churches**

We shall see him later at stone-layings and the re-opening of chapels, and particularly at ordinations. Here I want to mention his participation in the monthly lectures set up among the Independent ministers of the West Riding of Yorkshire in 1787. The twelve rules are signed by sixteen ministers who

formed an extensive network throughout the county. They include Edward Parsons, who had only recently begun his ministry in Leeds. The ministers intimate in the preamble that ‘we, considering ourselves in Duty bound, according to our abilities, to promote the Interest of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Good of our Fellow Creatures in the Earth, with a View hereunto have agreed to the following rules’. Let me pick out a few of them which may be of interest:

- I. That there shall be a monthly Lecture for eight months in each year, to be held at our several Places of Residence by regular Rotation...
- II That two Ministers in this Connexion shall preach at each Lecture; subjects left to their own Discretion.
- VI That wherever the Church or Congregation shall of their own Goodwill choose to bear the expenses of a Dinner for the Ministers, or any part thereof, it shall be thankfully accepted, without any murmurings or hard Thinking against other congregations(!)
- IX As the Scriptures call upon Ministers to be Examples to the People, we mutually agree, that if any Member of this Association shall be guilty of such Immoralities as exclude Persons from Church Communion, or deny the fundamental Doctrines of the Scriptures, viz., The Fall of Man and all his Posterity by Sin—The Deity of Christ—Atonement by his Death—Justification by his Righteousness and eternal life by him, he shall first be admonished as a brother; but if no Reformation take place, and a Majority appear against him, he shall be excluded from this Society.
- X Be it further observed, we have no objection to hear the cases of contending Parties between whom Differences may arise, but give up all Pretensions to any Power in us to decide upon other Churches’ Matters of Dispute. We can only give what we wish alway to be ready to receive viz., Advice in disputable Cases.

A fascinating cameo of Congregationalism at its best! Incidentally, any minister who was absent from a meeting was required to pay a forfeit of one shilling towards the expenses of the association.

#### **4. A Strengtheners of Hands**

Let us move on to another aspect of Parsons’ ministry. He was out and about throughout the county, being frequently invited to preach at the opening of chapels and the ordination of ministers. Morison notes that ‘he excelled in the charges he delivered. Several were published and provide valuable counsel, clear and at times eloquent’. That is certainly the case in those that have survived. They include ‘the Public Separation to the Pastoral Office’ (as it was usually described) of Samuel Wydown at Jubber-Gate, York on 18 April 1797,

of Samuel Bradley at Doncaster on 17 September 1800, of his own son James at Lendal Chapel, York on 24 October 1822, and of James Fox at Fish Street, Hull on 21 March 1827. It is comforting and reassuring to find that the pattern for such ordinations has come down to us virtually unchanged, though the examination of the ordinand was generally more extensive and detailed than today. The charges by Parsons are full. Samuel Wydown is reminded that he is variously a steward who must be found faithful, an ambassador, a bishop(!), a watchman, a shepherd, an architect or builder, a labourer in the vineyard and an angel. He must excel in wisdom, purity, zeal, humility and intimacy with the Lord Jesus. He is also exhorted to 'give attention to reading'. 'In almost every book, deserving the attention of a sensible man, you will meet with something to assist you in the composition of your sermons: But let the sacred writings occupy the chief place in your affections. Study them with intense application; that you may bring out of their inexhaustible treasures things old and new. You are called an extemporary preacher; but God forbid you should ever be such in the literal import of the term, at least when under no providential disability for study. Labour in your closet, as if you had *no* expectations of spiritual assistance in the pulpit; and preach with such unreserved dependence upon the Holy Spirit, as you would profess to do, if you had not previously studied!'

At Doncaster in 1800, Parsons is at pains to challenge the church. His sermon is entitled 'The Nature and Present Effects of a Regular and Careless Walk in Professors of Religion'. In the introduction, he reminds them that 'you will love your minister, you will encourage him and his labours, you will pray for him and rejoice in his success, you will prove eminent blessings to him and to each other, if you live according to that injunction in Ephesians 5:15'. We have only time to mention the heads of the sermon: I. The Characteristics of Genuine Religion; II. Careless Walking a melancholy reverse; III. Motives to enforce the exhortation, which include 'An evidence of your union with the Son of God; a test of your gratitude; and a compassion for those who are living without God and without hope in the world'.

He was again busy addressing the people at Fish Street, Hull in 1827, preaching from Romans 14:19. His aim is to establish the truth 'that mutual edification is the leading design of church communion'. He speaks first of all about the constitution and character of the Church of Christ: Its spirituality, its independence and its indivisible unity. Under the heading of its spirituality, he points out in his usual practical and down-to-earth manner that this leaves 'no place for vain speculations, selfish interests, inordinate passions, pride of superiority, love of power, ambition of wealth and honour, jealousies of competition, which obscure the beauty of the church'. Secondly, he

encourages the people to become members of the church and to participate in the communion service (which suggests it was confined to church members), and thirdly he suggests that the leading purpose of association is edification. They should devote themselves to all the means by which edification can be attained. There is a telling passage on avoiding hearing for others: ‘Hear for *oneself!* Avoid a fastidious spirit...Avoid conceit of superior intelligence and love of disputation—some nice point to discuss, some novel or favourite opinion to urge, some hair to split, some curious distinction to make. Rest not in your present attainments’.

Perhaps the most moving of all these charges is that to his own son, James Parsons, who was being ordained to the ministry in Lendal Chapel, York. It is full of the most practical and helpful advice. His theme from 1 Corinthians 2:4 is ‘powerful preaching’. Before coming more particularly to his subject, he warns his son to avoid being an ‘obtrusive, loquacious egotist, to preach not himself but Christ Jesus the Lord.’ He declares that ‘A preacher cannot be too parsimonious, cautious, and delicate in speaking of himself. Similarly, James is not to become a ‘magisterial and imperious dogmatist: the man who impiously assumes the chair of infallibility, and whose dictum is to supersede the exercise of the understanding, the use of reason, the authority of revelation...’ He should avoid ‘all show of learning that is not necessary to the illustration of divine truth. He is the most learned man, who has learned ‘not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think’”.

As he turns to his subject, he points out that ‘the means employed to produce effect in preaching must correspond with the effect intended to be produced. The weapons of your warfare, the resources of your ministry, if ‘mighty through God’ are not ‘carnal’. ‘If, like Moses, you would be ‘mighty in words’, you must preach the ‘quick and powerful word of God’, ‘the truth as it is in Jesus’, that truth, to the exclusion of everything else; that truth fully, in all its parts; that truth faithfully, in all its connexions; that truth freely, in its application to sinners; that truth, with the clearness and perspicuity that leaves no one in doubt of its meaning; and with all that decision and fidelity that shall leave no one in doubt of your sincere and hearty attachment to its interests.’ He laments the decline into either Arminianism on the one hand or Antinomianism on the other, and encourages James to search the Scriptures: ‘He is the most learned man, who possesses most biblical knowledge. The more scriptural you are, the more clear and powerful you will be in ‘demonstration’. One passage of the word of God appositely introduced, lucidly explained, and judiciously applied, will produce happier effect than the most flourishing and flashing oratory.’ He must aim to be natural in his preaching: ‘Whatever is affected or assumed, will weaken our power, and

frustrate our purposes of usefulness...’ He will strive for variety, but may allow himself the ‘occasional review, revision and republication of ‘our old sermons’! He will seek to overcome the love of praise, to control his own passions in the pulpit, to be lively and animated, and to eschew elaborate composition. ‘Finally—remember that to preach with power, you must keep a steady eye upon the glory of the cross of Christ as your end, and exercise an exclusive dependence upon the Holy Spirit, by whose omnipotent influence it is invariably secured.’ ‘Keep one passage above all others in lively remembrance; be it deeply engraven on your heart; write it as the motto of every sermon you preach: imagine that you see it written upon the walls of your study—that you see it written upon the walls of this house: ‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts.’

## **5. A Convinced Congregationalist and an Unashamed Nonconformist**

We have already seen him introducing some of the basic tenets of Congregationalism into an ordination charge. He was totally convinced of the independency of the local church, and the Headship of Christ over each local church was for him a reality, not merely a matter of words. He preached one of three sermons on 25 December (sic!) 1812, at the re-opening of the Independent Chapel at Selby, on ‘The Church of God compared to a building’ (Ephesians 2:19–22), describing the character of the Architect, the peculiar denomination (name) of the building, the stability of the Foundation, the materials of which the building is composed, the labourers employed in carrying on the work (which he admits is not in the text!), and the visible progress of the building—‘the increase of his government’. He has some telling words concerning the critics who will be at work within such a society: ‘In most of our congregations some individuals may be found, who arrogantly assume pretensions to superior intelligence in the discovery of doctrinal truth, and who boast a more extraordinary concern, for the honour of free grace. These wonderfully illuminated brethren have discovered that we are chosen to eternal life, not as fallen sinners, but as being perfect in Christ, that we are justified before we existed, that it is sinful to pray for the pardon of sin, that sin can do the believer no harm, and that we have nothing to do with the moral law. In this statement I give you a specimen of their creed and what is the general cast of their character ...’

Again at the laying of the first stone of the new Congregational Chapel at Huddersfield on Wednesday, 14 July 1824, he defends both Congregational principle and nonconformity in general: ‘It is true we dissent from the church established by law, because we conscientiously think her constitution and her

modes of worship are anti-christian—that her constitution is repugnant to the spirit of that kingdom which is not of this world—that her modes and forms are incompatible with the simplicity of New Testament worship—and that both her constitution and modes derogate from the authority and glory of Christ, as the only king and legislator of His church.’ But he is quick to add that ‘we do not dissent from the leading doctrinal sentiments of her articles or the evangelical spirit of the devotional parts of her liturgy’. Later in the address, he also maintains that ‘every man who preaches Christ, the cross of Christ, of whatever denomination, is to be received and loved as a brother. Every place where the doctrine of atoning love is faithfully preached is the consecrated house of God’.

His comment on the opportunities then existing in the growing centres of population emphasises the nature of the period in which he was ministering, when the ‘Word of the Lord had free course’: ‘There is a great increase in the spirit of hearing and inquiry. Wherever a church or a chapel is now built in a populous district, occupied by a holy, active, evangelical, plain, lively, energetic preacher, there you are sure to see a respectable numerical attendance. But nothing else will do.’

That is not to say that he could not be severe and intensely satirical when occasion demanded. He engaged in a lengthy pamphlet battle with an anonymous opponent of nonconformity, who turned out to be the Rev. W. Atkinson, Lecturer at the Parish Church in Bradford. His most extensive reply is entitled ‘A Vindication of the Dissenters against the Charge of Democratic Scheming’ (1801). We have to remember that there was still very considerable hostility towards and suspicion of nonconformity, especially in the climate of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, the Chartist movement and other pressures for reform. Hence it was necessary for Parsons to demonstrate that dissenters were not conspirators, ‘democratic cormorants’, bigots, rebels, enthusiasts, hypocrites, ‘disaffected meddling mortals, wild beasts, savage brutes, the devil’s children’ and so on (do you recognise yourselves under any of these epithets that Atkinson used?) Parsons seeks calmly and coolly, but incisively, to demolish these arguments and to demonstrate how ridiculous they really were. Miall in his ‘Congregationalism in Yorkshire’ (1868) says that he ‘replied with a style of dignified but trenchant severity’. Parsons was also a signatory to an address from the dissenting ministers of Leeds in response to various accusations from the local clergy, on the occasion of the third attempt to obtain the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. He also dedicates his abridgement of Neal’s *History of the Puritans* in two volumes to ‘the friends of religious liberty whose united action frustrated the alarming measure introduced to the House of Peers by Lord Viscount Sidmouth’.



He was always quick to demonstrate the loyalty of Congregationalists to their country and their concern for their fellow-men. On Wednesday, February 8th 1809, we find him preaching at Salem on the Fast day (presumably a national one) a sermon (of 46 pages) on Psalm 122:6, entitled 'The True Patriot'. In it he declares that a true patriot will be 'a good husband, a condescending, conciliatory, just, merciful, generous Magistrate, a Merchant free of avarice and fraud, an ingenuous industrious Mechanic, an improving Author, a Zealous, holy truth-loving minister', in other words 'a man of genuine religion'. The true patriot will also be 'deeply affected by the vices and the calamities of his country'. He will be 'ready to sacrifice his individual interests for the public welfare'. He will be 'a man of prayer for the peace and prosperity of his country'. A few years earlier, in February 1805, he had preached at Salem on 'The Temper of Jesus towards the afflicted' from Isaiah 63:9, before a collection was taken up for the General Infirmary at Leeds. He mentions the growing population of the town and neighbourhood, the great increase of factories, producing disease and danger, and daily casualties. At that time the outgoings of the Infirmary (which is still there today) exceeded the annual subscriptions by £1,300, and its work would have to be reduced. After dwelling for some time on the love and sympathy of our Lord, he has some words of exhortation for his hearers, which (one wonders) might have increased or decreased the collection. 'Beware a pretended confidence in the atoning death of Christ, while the governing tempers and dispositions of His life are totally renounced and despised. Guard against a revengeful spirit and against covetousness (treated extensively!), against pride and ostentation, to be seen of men, against a spirit of bigotry which destroys the dignified principles of humanity and brotherly kindness.'

## **6. A Supporter of Evangelical Causes**

Parsons' parish was, however, much wider than Leeds, the West Riding or the north of England. He was prominent in the establishment of the London Missionary Society in 1795, a connection arising from his friendship with Matthew Wilks and his annual visits to preach at the Tottenham Court Road Chapel and the Tabernacle, Spa Fields (which incidentally he continued for a period of 40 years, when it still took three days to get from Leeds to London!) He was a director of the Society for some years, preaching at Surrey Chapel in 1797 from 1 Corinthians 15:58 at the departure of two missionaries for West Africa. Morison comments that he contributed 'much excellent advice'. He was also called on to preach the Society's annual sermon in 1811, this time speaking from John 3:30. In August 1813, he assisted in the organising of an auxiliary of the Society in the West Riding, when there was a feast of preaching

from Drs Bogue and Waugh, and the Revs L. Burder, W. Thorpe and T. Raffles. The meeting concluded with the Lord's Supper at Salem, and there was apparently a 'remarkable impression' experienced after the benediction had been pronounced, when, following a time of silent prayer, Parsons 'suggested the singing of the last verse of Psalm 116 as a seal of their devotion to the missionary cause'. Miall informs us that some 60–70 ministers were present, and that collections and donations amounted to £460! Morison also records the powerful effect of a sermon by Parsons at a Manchester anniversary in 1816 on Haggai 2:6–7 which greatly influenced the Rev. Robert Moffat.

Parsons was one of the original promoters and a trustee of the *Evangelical Magazine*, from its inception in 1793 right up to his death in 1833. He had a great concern for the dissemination of good books. In addition to his abridgement of Neal, he also found time to edit the works of Doddridge in ten volumes and of Charnock in nine, and, together with Dr E. Williams of Rotherham, the works of Jonathan Edwards in eight volumes and the works of Watts. He re-published David Simpson's 'A plea for the Deity of Jesus', with a memoir of the author and an extended preface entitled 'The Spirit of Modern Socinianism Exemplified'. Together with Thomas Scales and Richard Winter Hamilton, he produced in 1822 'A Selection of Hymns, compiled and original, intended as a Supplement to the Psalms and Hymns of Dr Watts, for the use of the Protestant Dissenting Congregations of the Independent Order in Leeds'. Let me just give you one or two quotations from the preface 'The principal design of the present compilation is, in some degree, to obviate the difficulty, which perhaps every minister has found, in attempting to adapt hymns to his public discourses.' There are 865 hymns, listed under the books of the Bible, each with a reference and a brief quotation, 400 on the Old Testament and 465 on the New. Strangely there is no indication of authorship, although the compilers acknowledge their gratitude to Montgomery for the use of his existing hymns and several originals. They comment: 'Throughout the volume, the Editors have been careful to preserve a uniform and unequivocal adherence to evangelical truth and practical holiness'. They hope that the collection 'will be of assistance to the preacher in supplying an appropriate hymn after the sermon, imbue other parts of the devotional exercise with the spirit of the sacred Scriptures, and act as an auxiliary to the reading of those Scriptures in the duties of secret and domestic religion'. In the second edition the words 'in Leeds' were omitted from the title page, as the book was being used elsewhere in Yorkshire and the adjoining counties.

## 7. Conclusion

I trust that the quotations from Parsons himself will have demonstrated what a useful and practical minister he was, and how it is possible to exercise an influential ministry from a local independent church. This was felt, not only in Yorkshire but also in London at Whitefield's former chapels and in Edinburgh where he preached for the Haldanes. He seems to have been unspoilt by the spiritual prosperity of his lengthy ministry or by his popularity as a preacher. One cannot but admire him for the low profile he maintained, for his faithfulness to one congregation, and for his evangelical orthodoxy. There was no imposition of his considerable personal authority or any usurping of the rights of other independent churches.

The *Evangelical Magazine* in its brief memoir/obituary, concludes: 'His ministry was distinguished by its judicious and pungent character. He was a warm and energetic defender of the evangelical scheme of doctrine, and a nice discriminator in matters which, in his opinion, did not belong to it. There was nothing vague or indefinite in his theology'. A contemporary describes him as 'a man with whom it was a pleasure to consort. His bearing was of a cheerful kindliness. The effects of his earnest, faithful ministry still live'.

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