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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


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**John Angell James**
*Rev. Peter Seccombe*

**Robert Browne—The Morning Star of Congregationalism**
*Rev. Alan Tovey*

**The Church Meeting**
*Rev. Derek Swann*

# Congregational Studies Conference Papers 1981

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**and**
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# Contents

**Foreword**
Rev. Derek O Swann ..... 5

**John Angell James**
Rev. Peter Seccombe ..... 9

**Robert Browne—The Morning Star of Congregationalism**
Rev. Alan Tovey ..... 29

**The Church Meeting**
Rev. Derek Swann ..... 51

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.

# John Angell James

## Peter Seccombe

On the morning of Wednesday 12 May 1819 a vast throng of people filled the old Surrey Chapel situated south of the Thames in Blackfriars Road for the annual sermon of the London Missionary Society. In order to secure a seat the majority had arrived two or three hours before the service was due to commence. In the front row of the balcony which ran round the church sat many of the most well known ministers of the day. What had brought this vast and enthusiastic crowd together was not simply enthusiasm for the missionary enterprise initiated some twenty or so years earlier but the growing reputation of the preacher. Only 34 years old, he had lost his wife less than four months previously. He had accepted this invitation to preach from the Mission's directors partly in the hope that it would help him to rise above his sorrows.

While he preached that morning his brother sat at the back of the pulpit with the preacher's manuscript in his hand ready to prompt at the slightest hesitation. The precaution was unnecessary. The sermon, preached from memory, and corresponding word for word with the manuscript, lasted for two hours. The eloquent and rousing flow was interrupted only by a hymn at the end of the first hour, during the singing of which some of the congregation threw oranges into the pulpit to refresh the weary preacher and encourage him to go on!

As you will have guessed, the preacher was John Angell James. And this sermon not only established him as one of the most sought after preachers in the land, but both as to its occasion and content summed up the major concerns of his lifelong ministry. We will return to it later.

But why devote a session at this conference to this man from the last century? The first reason must be because of his qualities as a pastor, preacher and Christian. Charles Spurgeon, who was commencing his ministry in James's closing years, referred to him as 'that eminent servant of God'. The second reason I suggest is the times in which he lived and ministered. The blessings and effects of the 18th century revival were still being felt. Congregationalism or Independency had emerged from a period of decline and relative deadness to become the strongest nonconformist denomination. It was evangelical and evangelistic. But this state of affairs was not to last long. During James's lifetime the influence of the Higher Critical movement originating from Germany began to make itself felt, and the seeds of doctrinal drift and spiritual decline were being insidiously sown. So as evangelical Congregationalists we may suspect that we have something to learn from this fascinating period of

our history. Here we are, the evangelical remnants of a denomination, the greater part of which has turned away from the faith once delivered to the saints. Perhaps we sense a measure of renewed spiritual life. But we have no reason to be complacent regarding the future. The third reason is that John Angell James was one of the founding fathers and prime initiators of both the Congregational Union and the Evangelical Alliance.

## 2 An outline of his life

### Early life and conversion

John Angell James was born in 1785, the son of a draper, in Blandford Forum, Dorset. His father's faith seems to have been somewhat nominal, at least until towards the end of his life, but his mother was a devout Christian to whose prayers he was in later life to look back with deep thankfulness.

The local Independent church was typical of many in the last decades of the 18th century. Spiritual power had been replaced by efficient refinement. The minister was something of a scholar but a drowsy preacher. So, although her loyalties were there, Mrs James often went to the little Methodist meeting where there was less polish but more power—and she took young John with her.

His schooldays, he tells us, were marked by more pugilistic prowess than learning, and they passed by without any decided religious thought or feeling. At the age of thirteen he was sent to Poole to be apprentice to a draper, and about a year later he began to think seriously about religion. He says 'I wanted to be pious but knew not how' and he prayed that God would raise up someone in the house where he was living to help him.

God answered by bringing a new apprentice who shared a room with him and who each night knelt at his bedside to pray. This lad introduced James to a local shoemaker who was very poor but rich in faith and piety. They, together with two others, would go to his home after church on Sunday evenings. A decided Calvinist, he taught them and prayed with them and got them to pray. This, together with the preaching in the Independent church in Poole—more orthodox and more lively than that at Blandford—was the means of his conversion. Incidentally, his three companions at the cobbler's cottage, including the lad who had originally influenced him, all turned away from the faith in later life, one of them becoming an atheist and another a drunkard. Such is the distinguishing grace of God, four young men under similar influences and with the same opportunities, one converted and the others not.

His conversion was no sudden or dramatic affair. But there were evidences of a real change, not least a great delight in prayer. Sometimes his praying in

the attic of his lodgings was heard downstairs, and on at least one occasion when home at Blandford for a Saturday night he was up in time to walk the thirteen miles to Poole in order to be at the 7 a.m. prayer meeting! He became a Sunday School teacher and began to feel a call to the ministry. His pastor at Poole discouraged him and so did his own father. But through the influence of a family friend, his father was persuaded to allow him to terminate his apprenticeship three years early at the age of seventeen and to go to study under Dr David Bogue at Gosport.

## Preparation for the ministry and call to Carr's Lane

Dr Bogue was himself an Independent minister and had been one of the founders of the London Missionary Society. His academy was attended by a handful of students and met in his church vestry. A number of the students were missionary candidates and one of James's contemporaries was Robert Morrison, later to become famous as a pioneer missionary to China. His friendship with Morrison was almost certainly the most significant benefit of his time at Gosport. The course itself was extremely limited and James was always to regret the inadequacy of his academic preparation for the ministry. Perhaps in the providence of God even that proved in the end to be an advantage.

In the summer of 1804 after he had been at Gosport for just a year and a half, he was invited to supply the pulpit of Carr's Lane Chapel in Birmingham for three or four consecutive Sundays. The church was in a low state. It had recently dismissed its minister on a charge of immorality and he had gone off with nearly half the congregation to set up elsewhere in the city. This left about 150 people, many of whom were elderly, in a chapel seating 800. Only 49 members but the preaching of the young 19-year old made a great impression. The congregation increased during those few Sundays, and having been asked to stay for an additional weekend before he left Birmingham, to James's astonishment the church had invited him to become their pastor. He took some months to give a firm reply, but early in the following year he wrote his acceptance and in September, having completed his course at Gosport, moved to Birmingham to take up his responsibilities. And here he remained until he died 54 years later despite various attempts to persuade him to move to pastorates in London, Liverpool and Manchester.

## Pastorate at Carr's Lane

The first seven years were comparatively lean ones and James became discouraged. He himself blamed his lack of diligence and his successor and biographer, Dr RW Dale, comments rather acidly, 'He was scarcely conscious that hard work is the indispensable condition of great success'. But Dale had

seven years to prepare for the ministry compared with James's 2½ years! Perhaps like many another young minister he took time to sort out his priorities amidst the multifarious calls upon his time and energy presented by the pastorate.

However, at the end of this period it was decided to renovate the rather uncomfortable chapel and while the work was being done the congregation met with another in the city. This gave rise to a measure of publicity and when Carr's Lane reopened the chapel began to be crowded. Within a few years it was too small and at a meeting of subscribers on Christmas Day 1818 (an interesting sidelight on the attitude of non-conformists to Christmas in that day and age!) it was agreed to proceed with the erection of a new chapel. A year and a half later it was opened with a seating capacity of 1800. This was soon filled regularly for the Sunday services and remained so till the end of his ministry, by which time the actual membership of the church had increased from 50 to about 1,000.

During those 54 years the activities and influence of the church mushroomed. Nearly 2,000 children attended the Sunday and day schools. There was a Dorcas Society for the poor, a Maternal Society with many branches in different parts of the city, a Female Benevolent Society for visiting the sick poor, a Religious Tract Society employing 90 distributors, and a Young Men's Brotherly Society for general and religious improvement running a library of 2,000 volumes. There were night classes and Bible classes for young men and women. The church raised large sums of money for the London Missionary Society and the Colonial Missionary Society, and supported two town missionaries in Birmingham. Several new churches were started on the outskirts of the city, the founder members and initial financial support coming from Carr's Lane. But as he looked back on all this at his Jubilee, James could say

> This is but an average of congregational exertion and liberality in this day of general activity. Yea, many churches of our own and other denominations perhaps greatly excel us. And after all, we none of us come up to our resources, our opportunities, or our obligations. We all could do more, ought to do more, must do more.

A young man who attended the church during the early years of James' ministry, and himself was to be the minister of a Congregational Church in Dublin for 50 years (and whose son was one of my own predecessors), William Erwick, gives us an idea of a typical Sunday at Carr's Lane.

> I go to our prayer meeting at 7 o'clock and return at half past eight, school and morning service from 9 till 1, school again at 2 till 5, service at half past six in the evening, ending at 8.

I imagine most of the congregation would have worked all day on Saturday!

Throughout his ministry the church at Carr's Lane enjoyed almost unruffled peace and unity. But he had his trials outside, especially in the family circle. His first child was stillborn and three years later he lost a little girl aged six weeks. His first wife died before their thirteenth anniversary and his second after they had been married less than twenty years. His only surviving daughter was a lifelong invalid with whom it was difficult to communicate because of her deafness.

For the last six years of his life the responsibilities of the pastorate were shared with RW Dale, who was first Assistant Pastor and then Co-Pastor. But James continued to preach both in his own church and wider afield until the last Sunday morning of his life. He died aged 74 and was buried in a vault in front of the pulpit in Carr's Lane where for so long he had preached the Gospel with great power and effect.

## 3 His Preaching and Theology

John Angell James was pre-eminently a preacher. Everything took second place to that, not least because of his conviction of its prime place amongst the means God uses to save men and women.

As a preacher he was in popular demand around the country. In the pulpit he would appear to be perfectly at ease—but he often suffered agonies of apprehension before he got there. It was common for him not to be able to sleep on a Saturday night. Then for about ten years when he was in his fifties he declined nearly all invitations to preach away from Birmingham. When he did not do so, immediately he had accepted the invitation he began to worry about it, not sleep, and then live in fear of not sleeping until the date arrived! Once in the pulpit, peace returned.

In addition to preaching, he wrote a considerable amount, his collected works running to some sixteen volumes, much of it originally preached as sermons.

There is a story of a Scotsman who visited Carr's Lane with his son, who attended there regularly. This man had bitterly opposed the suggestion of introducing an organ into his own church in Edinburgh and had threatened his pastor that if one was brought in he would take a stick to it. Well, he had heard about James and was expecting a treat that Sunday when he went to hear him preach. But to his horror he had not been sitting in his seat in Carr's Lane for long when he heard a great 'bum-bummin' and he realised that they had an organ! He nearly got up and left before the service had even begun. However, to save embarrassing his son and to avoid missing James' sermon (though his expectations for this had suddenly diminished somewhat) he decided to stay

and simply protest in his own conscience. We take up the story in his own words,

> I got some quieter in my mind when Mr James came in—he was such a fine saintly looking man. Then he gave out the hymn and the organ began bum-bummin again and the congregation stood up to sing but I determined to keep my seat and let them bum away with their organ. But they sang so heartily that before they'd finished I began to think it might be real praise after all. Then Mr James gave a grand prayer and put all thoughts of the organ out of my head. When the second singing came on I was in such a fine frame of mind that I stood up with the rest, though I would not sing. Then came the sermon—and such a sermon. It was grand, grand. Then the next hymn came on I just thought that if a holy man like Mr James could see no harm in the organ I was not going to hold out against him. And I sang the hymn with all my heart, and I really thought it was all the better for the organ.

He returned to Edinburgh and gave his full agreement to an organ being introduced!

But what did he preach? I believe that that sermon at Surrey Chapel in 1819 is a fair sample of the great burden of his message. His text was John 12:32,33 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me'. He preached the *centrality of the cross:*

> the atonement is not so much a doctrine of Scripture as the very Scripture itself,

and again

> from the cross, as the tree of life, hang in maturity and abundance all those fruits of grace which are necessary to the salvation of the soul. Are we guilty? Here is pardon. Are we rebels against God? Here is reconciliation. Are we condemned? Here is justification. Are we unholy? Here is sanctification. Are we agitated with conscious guilt? Here is peace for a wounded spirit. Here every curious enquiry which the mind might originate concerning God and the soul and death and eternity and moral obligation and personal accountability is answered satisfactorily and set at rest for ever.

He insisted on the *deity of Christ:*

> While the hope of a guilty world can rest nowhere else than on an atonement, that in its turn can be supported by nothing short of the Rock of Ages.

Salvation was through grace alone and by faith alone. Without Christ, men and women would perish 'amidst the flames that cannot be extinguished'. He believed in the sovereignty of God in salvation

> Not that this effect will ever be produced independently of the influence of the Spirit or merely in the way of moral suasion. Nothing short of a supernatural

> agency accompanying the truth will render it in any case the power of God unto salvation.

With regard to the *future* his views would now be described as *post-millennial.* He looked forward to the widespread triumph of the Gospel in an era when

> the power of anti-Christ shall be dissolved, all fundamental errors in Christendom shall be exploded, the blasphemies and infidelity shall be hushed. The Jews shall believe in Jesus, the pearl crescent of Mohammed shall set for ever in the blaze of the Son of Righteousness, the multiform systems of idolatry retire before the growing brightness of eternal truth, and the whole earth be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, the fruits of righteousness and the works of peace. So has God decreed. So has prophesy declared.

—and so he thought did present evidence around the world encourage him to believe.

His belief in the necessity of the work of the Spirit to make preaching effective did not prevent him from doing all he could to apply his message to his hearers and obtain a response from them. So as he concluded this sermon he urged first the *Directors of the Mission* to cultivate friendly relations with other missionary societies in their great enterprise. He exhorts *missionaries and ministers* to preach the Gospel of the cross of Christ with unbounded confidence in its power. He exhorts the congregation first of all to ascertain that they themselves are saved and then by believing prayer and sacrificial giving to do all they could to send the Gospel to the 600 million without Christ. If necessary they should sell the church plate in order to send missionaries. But, he adds, it shouldn't be necessary.

Like others in his day, purple patches were scattered fairly liberally throughout some of his sermons in a way that would not go down well today and did not, in fact, with some of his own hearers. But there can be no doubt about the solid Gospel substance in all his preaching. John Elias was, I think, rather unfair to comment after that Surrey Chapel sermon,

> I believe the cross was there but it was so heaped up with flowers I could not see it.

Certainly it is clear enough as we read it today.

Along with his forthright preaching of the Gospel, he urged his people to a life of deep devotion and practical piety. For him, prayer was the life of religion, holiness the hallmark of the Christian and the pre-requisite for usefulness. 'Talents may make us shine, but piety alone can make us glow'. In a New Year's sermon addressed to young people he warned them against,

> inflammatory novels, stimulating romances, lewd poetry, immoral songs, satires against religious characters, and arguments against religion.

As for the theatre, it's

> that school where nothing good and everything bad is learnt, that resort of the vicious and seminary of vice, that broad and fiery avenue to the bottomless pit.

The manager of the Theatre Royal took some exception to this. A lengthy controversy ensued which led to the manager writing to James 'Sir, I perceive that thou art a fallen angel!' How greatly have the views of evangelicals changed in some of these matters.

RW Dale calls James a 'moderate Calvinist'. I suspect he would have used the same description of George Whitefield in whose line of succession he saw James standing. For James a concern for maintaining strict Calvinistic orthodoxy was subordinated to his concern for the salvation and holiness of his hearers. The young Spurgeon and the elderly James held each other in high regard and frequently exchanged notes. In the very early years of his own ministry Spurgeon had made the journey to Birmingham especially to hear James preach. Spurgeon never forgot that sermon and told James some years later of how much he had appreciated it. James replied,

> Ah! that was a Calvinistic sermon. You would enjoy that, but you would not get on with me always.

A young man once asked James why he didn't preach so much on Calvinistic doctrines. Perhaps with tongue in cheek, James replied

> Well, there's not so much about them in the Bible!

No doubt James reacted against the deadness in some Calvinistic preaching in the previous century and it would seem to me that he judged that in his day there was no need for him to fight over-much for, or emphasise, some of the great truths which it is nevertheless clear he himself believed. After all, Calvinistic evangelicalism was in the ascendancy in nonconformity at least during the first half of the last century. However, towards the end of his days he was becoming apprehensive about the Arminian tendencies in the ministry of Charles Finney for example.

Addressing his congregation in the preface of one of his books, he can say,

> loose generalities, cautious reserve, and ambiguous statements have not been characteristic of the sermons you have heard.

But it was all important that doctrine should be preached with warmth and fire.

## 4 His major concerns

I want now to focus on five areas which seem to have been major concerns of James' ministry.

## Evangelism

For James the supreme aim of any minister of the Gospel must be usefulness in the conversion of the lost. They are

> not merely to preach well or to preach acceptably but to preach successfully, and what is successful preaching short of the conversion of immortal souls?

Everything else in a minister's work must be subservient to this. He felt deeply his responsibility in this respect for his own congregation. Writing to them whilst absent in Wales he says

> I cannot forget that the interests of your immortal souls are in a measure confined to my hands. Oh, what a deposit! Lord, who is sufficient for these things? If through my neglecting to instruct you in sound doctrine, or to admonish you with seriousness and fidelity, you should be lost, indescribably dreadful will be the consequences both to you and to me. *You* will die in your sins and your blood will God require at *my* hand.

Whilst he regarded preaching as the pre-eminent means of discharging this tremendous responsibility, it did not in his view end there. He was aware of the danger of an impression created by preaching being lost afterwards. So from time to time he would announce a series of mid-week evening classes to which those who were anxious about their souls were invited. For a number of weeks he would instruct the class in the way of salvation, and after this he would invite each member of the class to come and talk with him personally. His most famous book entitled *The Anxious Enquirer After Salvation Directed and Encouraged* was originally written for such a class (at a time when there were 50 or 60 enquirers attending it), and gives us the substance of his teaching during those sessions. Elliott Binns says of this book that it has made some enquirers too anxious! To this I am sure James would have replied 'the more anxious the better'. Hundreds of thousands of this book were sold in James' lifetime and it was translated into several languages. Spurgeon rates it alongside Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, and Alleyne's *Alarm to Unconverted Sinners*, all books which had had an influence upon him as a young lad. It was partly the means of the conversion of James' successor, RW Dale—despite his criticism of certain aspects of it in later years.

There can be no doubt that James' single-minded desire to be useful in the conversion of others was amply honoured and rewarded by God. He could look back at the end of his ministry to great numbers of people who had turned to the Lord as a result of his ministry.

## Missions

It was natural—though not inevitable—that his deep concern for evangelism at home should be linked with a great missionary heart. Remember it was a missionary sermon that established his reputation.

I have already referred to his friendship with Robert Morrison which dated back to his college days in Gosport, and it was China and its millions without Christ that filled his mind, and the cause of the Gospel in that land ever found in him an eager and eloquent advocate. He prayed for China daily. He organised an appeal to raise funds to send a million New Testaments to China through the British and Foreign Bible Society. The appeal was so successful that twice that number were sent. A year before he died, in 1858, the western powers secured freedom and protection throughout China for Christian missionaries, and toleration for Chinese Christians. James was thrilled and seized the opportunity to write and circulate a pamphlet pleading the interests of China and calling for a hundred new missionaries to that great land. Listen to him:

> The conversion of China is, one way or other, the business of every Christian upon earth—and every Christian upon earth *can* do something for it and ought to do what he can. The man who says 'What have *I* to do with this matter?' is either ignorant, indolent or covetous and is altogether heartless towards the cause of Christ. He that says 'What concern have *I* in China's conversion?' just asks the question 'What fellowship have I with Christ?' We are all too apt to think of what the *church* can do and ought to do and not what *we* individually can do and ought to do, and either through modesty, timidity or avarice, lose ourselves and our individual obligations in the crowd. Do you ask then whose business the conversion of China is? I answer *yours* whosoever you are who may read this page. Yours, I say, as truly as that of any other man on the face of the earth. Here it is, I offer it to *you*, and in the name of Christ bid you take it. Take it into your hand, your heart, your purse, your closet—you dare not refuse it!

## Christian Unity

As we have already noted, James was one of the founders of the Congregational Union. But we would be quite wrong to conclude from this that he was of a strongly denominational turn of mind. In fact quite the opposite was true. He was an evangelical first, a nonconformist second, and a Congregationalist third. Indeed, RW Dale was critical of his lack of concern for denominational witness. He didn't like his 'undenominational temper' or his satisfaction with 'fellowship of an accidental and precarious kind'.

In the autumn of 1830 James called together a meeting at Carr's Lane Chapel of a number of ministers from the Midlands, and it was agreed to seek

the formation of a Congregational Union, similar perhaps to the one which had already existed in Scotland for a number of years. The idea had been mooted some years before but had come to nothing, not least because the Independents wished to do nothing which would shut them off from other churches. In May of the following year, at a meeting of ministers and church delegates in London, the following resolution proposed by James was adopted,

> 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 principles, namely the Scriptural right of every separate church to maintain perfect independence in the government and administration of its own particular affairs, therefore, that the Union shall not in any case assume legislative authority or become a Court of Appeal.

At a meeting in May 1832 after James had read a paper on *Principles of Faith and Order* the Union was formed.

Interestingly in the light of its subsequent history, the whole idea had met with some serious opposition. Some of the older men looked upon it as a 'germ of mischief in the way of an organised controlling body'. They feared it would threaten the equality of pastors and the independency of churches, also that it would involve all churches in responsibility for the purity of others. How could discipline be exercised without a central body exercising control over the churches? James thought the fears were groundless—but alas he was to be proved wrong. In the last few years of his own life, the Union came near to breaking up on this very issue of discipline. This was in relation to the publication of Thomas Toke Lynch's collection of hymns *The Rivulet*. And whilst James never seems to have expressed any regret for what he had encouraged to take place, he was nevertheless disappointed by its outcome. The amount of time consumed by meetings was in his view hardly warranted by what was achieved. How many would echo that sentiment in the decades that followed!

Ten years after the formation of the Congregational Union, James was advocating a wider expression of evangelical unity in the form of a general protestant union. His aim was to secure at least the mutual recognition by evangelical Christians of one another as brethren in Christ and the mutual recognition of pastors across the various denominational barriers. Whilst his first concern was with nonconformists he hoped that evangelicals in the Anglican church might join in such a union—and indeed he hoped that before long such a union might become a world-wide body. He secured the support of the Congregational Union and of some brethren in the Scottish churches for his scheme. A meeting of 200 ministers drawn from nearly twenty

denominations was held in Liverpool in 1845, at which the Evangelical Alliance was formed.

But once again, James was to be disappointed. Although remaining an enthusiastic supporter of the Alliance to the end of his days, he felt it had achieved little. On reflection he felt that it would have been better to begin in a small way rather than with the blaze of publicity that had in fact been the case. To begin at the grass roots rather than to try and impose something from the top. He also came to feel that its aim had been too vague. It had come to be known as a 'do-nothing society'. He himself had urged that the Alliance should adopt as one of its objectives the diffusion of evangelical truth on the continent of Europe. But this had been rejected.

James' concern for visible evangelical unity was surely wholly good and right. Behind it was a concern for greater evangelistic effectiveness, and a strong defence against popery, Puseyism, and Plymouth Brethrenism! The difficulties he encountered in bringing it into being are still with us today. There are lessons we have to learn from the subsequent failures of James' schemes, but we surely cannot rest content with the status quo.

## Training for the ministry

Despite or perhaps because of his own meagre preparation for the ministry, James took an intense interest in those who were training to preach in this country or go to the mission field. Whilst still a young minister, he had clashed with the Directors of the London Missionary Society over the very inadequate opportunity they were giving to missionary candidates for training. During his pastorate at Carr's Lane, Spring Hill College was founded in Birmingham and from the outset he was the Chairman of its Board of Education. On Saturdays he would regularly invite two or three of the students to have lunch with him and then spend the afternoon talking with them about the work of the ministry. For many a man, those Saturday afternoons left an impression never to be forgotten. He would urge upon them the priority of effective evangelism and the necessity of personal piety.

> An academy whilst a hot house for the mind is often an ice house for the heart.

Addressing students of Spring Hill College on one occasion he said that to be useful preachers they would need *brains*, *bowels* and *bellows*. *Brains* to take in learning, *bowels* because pathos and tenderness were essential for successful preaching, *bellows* to make themselves heard.

> Get out of doors in the summer months and give free play to your lungs in the open air, and make all your classical attainments bear on the one great object—saving souls.

## Revival

Although James ministered in an age which was still enjoying some of the fruits of the 18th Century revival, and despite the fruitfulness of his own ministry, he longed to see days of revival again. His awareness of the need of it seems to have intensified during his latter years. He lamented the decay of piety in the evangelical churches and the relatively small numbers of conversions compared with the means employed to secure them. There was much sowing but little reaping, a tremendous amount of activity but all too little effectiveness.

His desire for revival was quickened by what he heard of what was happening in America . He corresponded regularly with a number of ministers in the States, including James Sprague whose *Lectures on Revivals* he was responsible for getting published in this country. He wrote a preface for the British edition. No doubt he would have met with one of the great evangelists that God used in revival in America, Asahel Nettleton, when he visited this country in 1831. He also wrote a preface to an edition of Jonathan Edwards' account of revival and to Finney's *Lectures on Revival.* In the latter case he warned the readers of certain deficiencies in Finney's approach, but nevertheless thought there was something good to be learnt from the book. The danger he says is with those who swallow Finney whole without any discernment. Finney preached in a Baptist Church in Birmingham in 1849 and was a bit put out by James' rather ambiguous attitude to him. He quotes in his own autobiography the Baptist Minister's comment that James had '1500 impenitent sinners in his congregation'—the kind of sweeping generalisation which some ministers are all too ready to make about the ministry of others! In the last year of his life he wrote several letters to the *Evangelical Magazine* concerning the low state of the church and the need for revival. These were subsequently reprinted along with some additional material as a book but it was not well received.

In this connection the date of his death was of course profoundly significant—1859! He had prayed much for revival and urged others to do so. As God called his servant to his reward in heaven, prayer was being answered at least in many churches in Ireland and Wales. But, alas, England and his own denomination was little affected. Perhaps part at least of the reason lies in what follows.

## 5 His Successors

James was succeeded by RW Dale who had responded somewhat reluctantly to a pressing invitation from James to become his assistant immediately on completion of his course at Spring Hill College in 1853. Mercifully, I suspect,

this meant Dale had to abandon plans to study in Germany for a year or two. Things might have been worse! A year later he became co-pastor.

During those six years James and Dale seem to have worked happily together. Each held the other in high esteem, and the younger man in no way undermined the congregations' loyalty to, or love for, its ageing senior pastor. Undoubtedly Dale was a godly pastor who shared with James a very real evangelistic zeal. He was to become one of the greatest names in Congregational history.

There were, however, very considerable differences between the two men and their ministries. Dale had a far greater intellect and was much more of a theologian than James. But sadly his theology diverged increasingly from that of his predecessor.

Like many another young evangelical in his day and in ours, Dale wanted to question some of the assumptions of evangelical orthodoxy. In his early years at Carr's Lane and whilst James was still alive, Dale preached a series of sermons on Romans. These caused quite a furore in the congregation, particularly amongst the older members. First of all he suggested that some of the heathen might be saved in virtue of Christ's death even though they had never heard of him. When he came to Romans chapter 3 whilst holding to the fact of the atonement, he rejected the idea that Christ had paid the debt for sin in his death on the cross. When he came to chapter 5 he outrightly rejected the traditional understanding of the doctrine of original sin. Whilst Adam's sin affected the whole race this did not mean that children were born with a depraved nature.

Later on he came down on the side of conditional immortality—the view that says that the unsaved are annihilated and only the saved live for ever. On this point he once summed up the difference between him and his predecessor in this way

> Affection and reverence for my friend and predecessor prompt me to say that when he is described as believing in the eternity of punishment and plenty of it, a wrong impression is given of the kindliness of his nature. He believed an appalling doctrine but had a most tender heart.

Furthermore he is said to have declared that a doctrinal acceptance of the deity of Christ was not essential to the experience of saving faith. For him, Christian experience was the final authority for the Christian and thus he was able to sit lightly to the attacks made on the reliability and infallibility of Scripture that had come in particularly with the Higher Critical movement. Though in fact he seems to have retained a conservative view himself, the defence of that view was effectively undermined. In a book in 1890, he could argue that Christ is not lost to us though we discard the old belief in the inerrancy of Scripture.

It is interesting and significant to note also that Dale was much more involved in political and social issues than James had ever been. James regarded his responsibility as the conversion of souls and the building up of the church of Christ. Dale believed that he should be directly involved in seeking to reform society and didn't hesitate to align himself with the Liberal Party. This tendency was even more pronounced in Dale's successor, Dr JH Jowett—and became a boasted characteristic of Congregationalism in this century.

Dale remained at Carr's Lane until his own death in 1895—so he was there for 40 years altogether. He was followed by JH Jowett, a renowned preacher but one whose theology was, I suspect, even more divergent from the old evangelicalism. The same, I think, would have to be said of all his successors down to the present day. So I believe we are justified in saying that John Angell James was the last full-blooded evangelical at Carr's Lane. His ministry there represents the end of an era. And Carr's Lane was typical of the denomination as a whole in the following century. The differences between him and Dale were subtle but highly significant. They were the beginning of a trend, a theological downgrade which was to gather increasing momentum. Inevitably we want to ask who was to blame? Was there an inherent weakness in James' ministry or in his personal judgement?

In part at least perhaps the answer has to be yes—at any rate with regard to James' judgement. After all, he had introduced Dale to the church and when the trouble arose from Dale's exposition of Romans, he had urged the protesters to let 'the young man have his fling' because he was convinced he had 'the root of the matter in him'. No doubt he had—but he had the roots of other things as well! Undoubtedly James was aware of the very real differences in emphasis between the two of them. A year after Dale's arrival at Carr's Lane he wrote to him:

> continue your attachments to evangelic truth … watch against the liberalism to which I think you have some little tendency.

Less than a week later he wrote:

> Perhaps also there may be in you a little too much of the subjective in religious experience—a tinge of mysticism which turns away the eye of the mind from the great objective realities of our faith. I have sometimes thought your mind is still struggling with unacknowledged, perhaps almost unsuspected, doubts on some points of dogmatic theology, and I do not think your Unitarian association likely, though it is professedly only a literary one, to be of service to you.

But despite that he went on:

> not that I suspect you of heterodoxy, or tending to it.

He warned him against the errors of the writings of men like FD Maurice and urged him to read alongside some of the modern authors men like Howe, Baxter and Owen. Again to quote his letter:

> I know that among most of our young men there is an extreme aversion to go in the ruts, but is there not also a danger of getting off the rails? There is a richness and fullness of divine truth in the old writers which, with all their antiquated style and scholastic technicalities and somewhat narrow views, the moderns lack. And oh their devotion—their communion with God, their sustained and elevated piety! This, this is what we want—this is our deficiency.

James' warm heart, his desire to believe the best about his young colleague, his concern for the unity of the brethren and peace in the church, made him reluctant to admit that there was any real danger in Dale's teaching. But one has the impression that he was beginning to be uneasy.

But what about the congregation itself? All too easily do we blame all the ills of the church on its ministers! But after all, the place we give to the solemn responsibility of the church membership is both the strength and the weakness of Congregationalism. The same congregation who had sat for years under the robust evangelicalism of James sat under Dale, and after the initial protest received his ministry gladly. Could this at least warn us of the fearful possibility of being more in love with good preaching than with sound truth? With learning rather than with Scripture? Dr Lloyd-Jones used to say 'The last thing your people will learn is discernment'.

A great evangelical ministry does not secure the future even for the pulpit in which it has been primarily and for many years exercised. 'The devil is a roaring lion, walking about seeking whom he may devour.' The Congregational principle which we embrace lays upon us all the solemn responsibility to be ever watchful and on our guard, to hold fast the form of sound teaching which has been delivered to us, to search the Scriptures daily to see whether those things which we hear are so.

## Conclusion

Finally, a word about the man himself. And here I simply want to focus on two things—his humility and his seriousness.

No one would have been more surprised than John Angell James to know that well over a hundred years after his death we should be meeting here to hear about his life and ministry. He'd always resisted requests to write an autobiography. In his view his life and ministry was not of sufficient significance to merit it. When he did at last agree to do something of this kind in a rather fragmentary fashion he wrote:

> I do not at all desire, what probably no one will think of writing, a published biography. I believe without vanity I may say that my life has been in some measure a useful one, but even that has been in a very common method of procedure. I have been no comet in the solar system of Christianity but one of the planets revolving in the attraction and reflecting a little of the light of the sun of righteousness. No one could say more about me than that for fifty years I was the pastor of one church, preached the Gospel, wrote some books, and was honoured of God to save many souls and all this with a very slender stock of secular learning. Most thankful do I feel that this can be said of me.

The University of Princetown awarded him a DD but he says:

> I locked it up in my drawers and said nothing to anybody about it and hoped that nobody would know it.

Similarly the University of Glasgow conferred a D.D. upon him, but he immediately wrote to say that he did not mean to assume it.

> May I but be considered as a faithful, earnest and successful minister of the New Covenant, and be accounted such by the Great Master, and I am quite content that my name shall stand, wherever it is recorded, without any academic affix.

With regard to his *seriousness*, we have already seen many examples of this. As a minister he sought to model himself on Baxter's *Reformed Pastor*. He was scrupulous in his use of time—although when his son tells us that he can't ever remember his father giving up an evening to the family, one wonders whether he had the balance quite right! He was equally scrupulous in his personal behaviour. He was once criticised for using his pony and cart on the Sabbath. He responded that he always walked on Saturday so that his pony could have its Sabbath then!

And what was the foundation for this humility and seriousness? Surely it was what the Scriptures call the *fear of the Lord.* Like the Apostle Paul, he had an intense awareness that he lived to face the all searching eye of the Lord before whom he must one day appear. At the age of 55 he thought he had not long to live. After his death 19 years later (!) there was found amongst his papers a copy of a letter he had written to the congregation at Carr's Lane at that time. I will close this paper with a couple of extracts from it.

> In looking back upon the 5 and 30 years, or nearly that term, which I have spent among you and your fathers before you, I see abundant cause of gratitude and adoring love to the divine head of the church for directing my youthful feet to this town. My ministerial course among you has been one of such prosperity and comfort as rarely falls to the lot of a minister of Jesus Christ, and never, no never, has fallen to anyone who less deserved it or had less reason to expect it. I am filled with delighted surprise, not of what I have

done, but of what God has done by me. I cannot of course be ignorant and I have not the hypocrisy to effect ignorance of what has been done, but now as in the sight of God, and perhaps shortly about to appear in his presence, I can truly adopt the language and with it I believe the humility of the apostle where he says, 'Not I but the grace of God in me', for I am nothing.

Dear brethren, we must meet at the bar of Christ. I think that in prospect of that awful interview, I can in some measure adopt the language of the apostle Paul and say I take you to record that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you the whole counsel of God. You are my witnesses that I have not been afraid or backward to bring forward any truth, however unpalatable it might be supposed to be to any that heard me. As far as I have known the truth I have declared it, not fearing the frown of many by fidelity or causing his smile by the suppression of what I deemed it to be my commission to make known. Some of you have been my witnesses also of my fidelity in private, though here perhaps I have been more deficient as we all are than in public. And now dear brethren, if you perish, your blood will not be upon me. Your ruin will lie at your own door. You know how constantly and how anxiously I have reminded you that to be a church member is not at all the same as being a real Christian; how often and how emphatically I have told you that many will spend eternity in the bottomless pit with Satan and his angels who have spent their time on earth in the nominal fellowship of the church of Christ. Once more I tell you this awful truth. I remind you of it now, not as before from the pulpit or the sacramental table, but from my grave and from my seat in glory. Once more, let me solemnly entreat you to examine your hearts whether ye are in the faith and Christ be in you. The mere name of a Christian will serve you in no stead in a dying hour and in the Day of Christ. Nothing but the reality will stand his scrutinising search. Oh brethren, do not deceive yourselves. It is no easy thing to be a Christian however easy it is to be called one.

# Robert Browne—The Morning Star of Congregationalism

**Alan Tovey**

Several months ago I went to my local Christian bookshop to collect a book I'd ordered on Philip Doddridge of Northampton. The book proved to be an excellently produced volume, with beautiful plates, and was very reasonably priced at £4.95. The bookseller, I later discovered, had another copy of the book on his shelves. I said: 'What's the response to it been like?' To which he replied: 'A few people have picked it up, had a good look at it, remarked on the excellence of the production and then asked: "But who was Doddridge?"'

If Philip Doddridge is in need of such a rescue from oblivion I rather suspect that Robert Browne is in much greater need of such a reclamation.

However, Robert Browne (his followers were, by the way, called the Brownists) was a founding father of Independency, the morning star of Congregationalism, as I've described him. He was, however, a star which flickered, and apparently went out, since, having broken free from the Church of England and been involved in the establishment of independent churches, he later renounced this position and returned to the Anglican Church.

He wasn't a true Independent in the classic sense of the seventeenth century—but he represents the early stages of a complex historical development which eventually produced Independency.

The details available of Browne's early life are scant, but he was born about 1550 into a well connected family—he was a distant relative of Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley, to whose protection he was to owe a great deal during the many vicissitudes of his life. Where he was born we do not know, but he was educated at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and graduated BA in 1572. After this he became a schoolmaster for several years until he went to live at Dry Drayton, outside Cambridge, where the rector, Richard Greenham exercised an exemplary godly ministry and sought to influence young potential ministers. Browne, however, was not destined, at least in the short term, to become an Anglican cleric. His views at this time were those of a thoroughgoing Presbyterian and he was developing an antipathy towards bishops. He refused a bishop's licence permitting him to preach, and when his brother insisted on procuring one for him, Browne destroyed it:

> But to be authorised of them, to be sworn, to subscribe, to be ordained and to receive their licensing, he utterly misliked and kept himself clear in those matters. How be it the bishop's seals were gotten him by his brother, which he

> both refused before the officers, and being written for him would not pay for them, and also being afterward paid for by his brother, he lost one, and burnt another in the fire and another being sent him to Cambridge, he kept it by him, till in his trouble it was delivered to a Justice of peace, and so from him, as is supposed, to the bishop of Norwich.

Let Browne himself now take up the story. We are well blessed in that he has left the details of this period of his life on record in the work from which we have just quoted, a work with the cumbrous but descriptive title: *A True and Short Declaration, both of the Gathering and Joining Together of Certain Persons: and also of the Lamentable Breach and Division which Fell Amongst Them*.

In other words Browne was becoming convinced that he should separate from the Church of England—an advance on his Presbyterian views. He puts it like this:

> While he thus was careful, and besought the Lord to show him more comfort of his kingdom and church, than he saw in Cambridge, he remembered some in Norfolk, whome he heard say were very forward. Therefore he examined the matter, and thought it his duty to take his voyage to them.

It was his conviction that if a church had been overtaken by grave faults and open wickedness, and those misdemeanours could not be redressed—either because there was no will to do so, or, because of an uncooperative church hierarchy such as he had experienced at Cambridge, the local congregation was unable to do so—the only course remaining for any conscientious member of that church was to leave it and seek to establish a true church elsewhere.

About 1580 Browne had married Alice Allen (a Yorkshire lass), by whom he was to have a large family: anticipating the story somewhat, she died in 1610, whereupon, in 1612, Browne married Elizabeth Warrener—but the marriage proved to be an unhappy one.

So, Browne betook himself to Norwich where he resided with an acquaintance of Cambridge days, Robert Harrison, who was headmaster of a school there.

> They often had talk together, of the lamentable abuses, disorders, and sins which now reign everywhere.

Harrison, diffident at first, came round to Browne's views.

> Therefore both to R.H. and to the company that afterward joined, were such things spoken as follow, and also set down in writing: namely that we are to forsake and deny all ungodliness and wicked fellowship, and to refuse all ungodly communion with wicked persons. For this is it that is most and first of all needful: because God will receive none to communion and covenant with him, which as yet are at one with the wicked, or do openly themselves transgress his commandments.

Hence, they took the logical step and formed themselves into a Separatist church:

> There was a day appointed, and an order taken, for redress of the former abuses, and for cleaving to the Lord in greater obedience. So a covenant was made and their mutual consent was given to hold together. Where were certain chief points proved unto them by the scriptures, all which being particularly rehearsed unto them with exhortation, they agreed upon them, and pronounced their agreement to each thing particularly, saying, to this we give our consent. First therefore they gave their consent, to join themselves to the Lord, in one covenant and fellowship together, and to keep and seek agreement under his laws and government: and therefore did utterly flee and avoid such like disorders and wickedness, as was mentioned before. Further they agreed of those which should teach them, and watch for the salvation of their souls, whom they allowed and did choose as able and meet for that charge. For they had sufficient trial and testimony thereof by that which they heard and saw by them, and had received of others. So they prayed for their watchfulness and diligence, and promised their obedience.

And so an illegal, Separatist Church was formed, a church described by historians, not with full justification since we are only in the twilight of a new era, as a Congregational Church.

Browne now left Norwich and, after a brief spell at Bury St Edmunds, went to London. Imprisonment was his lot several times during this period in Norfolk, Bury and London itself. In fact during his lifetime he was imprisoned a total of thirty-two times.

The congregation back in Norfolk were by now contemplating emigrating to avoid further suffering and to gain greater liberty for their worship. Some thought of going to Scotland to join forces with the Presbyterians there (an indicator that they were more Separatist than Congregational?), others wished to take the bigger step of journeying to Holland—Dutch merchants visiting Norwich had given the Separatists an attentive hearing.

So, to Holland—Middelburg in fact—they went. But their troubles were by no means at an end:

> There fell out questions, offenses and taking of parts, as we know it has always and shall come to pass in the church of God,

records Browne, surely rationalising the situation. In short, division entered the company, and in particular there was strife between Browne and Harrison. We need of course to remember that the detailed account we have of the dispute is by Browne, and is thus one side of the story. But the whole episode is unseemly, and all too reminiscent of what has too frequently happened in Congregational churches. Misunderstandings, criticism, gossip, slander and

confusion in church meetings were sadly the order of the day. (This is a problem Independency has always faced and never satisfactorily been able to solve.)

> Notwithstanding their disposition was perceived of some, and some stirring and disquietness they began to make was stopped and cut off for the time[.] But when the pastor fell sick and could not be present at the exercises, nor visit them privately in houses, the stirring did freshly begin again. They made ado secretly and talked many matters among themselves, but never told them to the pastor, nor asked counsel for them of the church by admonishment, doubt, or question in prophecy, before they had troubled the whole church about them. Hereby the contention grew so far, that some fell from questions to evil speeches and slanders, and from slanders to open defiance and railings.

As Browne describes the arguments they consisted of accusations against himself over statements he is supposed to have made about his own wife and about Robert Harrison. There is also mention of disagreement over the pawning of a silver spoon, though the details relating to this are obscure. We can imagine the trivial points which thus disturbed the peace of the church. Attempts to patch up the differences failed and eventually the congregation split—some lining up behind Harrison and some behind Browne. The whole dispute was accompanied by great bitterness. (Read James 3:13ff.)

Let me interrupt the account to say that while he was in Holland, Browne wrote three of his famous books: *A Treatise Of Reformation Without Tarying For Any*, and *Of the Wickedness Of Those Preachers Which Will Not Reform Till The Magistrate Command or Compel Them*, the significance of which will be explained in a moment, *A Treatise upon the 23rd of Matthew, both for an order of studying and handling the Scriptures, and also for avoiding the Popish disorders, and ungodly communion of all false christians, and especially of wicked Preachers and hirelings*, and *A BOOK WHICH SHOWS THE life and manners of all true Christians, and how unlike they are unto Turks and Papists, and Heathen folk*, the latter being his only systematic work.

Browne left Holland to return to England by way of Scotland. He quarrelled with the Presbyterians in the North and on his arrival in England and the publication of another work arguing for separation from the Church of England he quite remarkably signed a recantation, the terms of which are as follows (we only know of the details of this submission through Stephen Bredwell's vitriolic account of Browne's activities in Bredwell's *Rasing of the Foundations of Brownism* (1588)):

> I do humbly submit myself to be at my Lord of Canterbury's commandment, whose authority under her Majesty I will never resist nor deprave, by the grace of God. *Rasing,* 127.

II. (I acknowledge that) where the word of God is duly preached, and the sacraments accordingly ministered, there is the Church of God. *Rasing,* 134.

III. (I acknowledge) the Church of England to be the church of Christ, or the church of God and promise to communicate with the same in prayers, sacraments and hearing of the word and to frequent (the) Churches according to law. *Rasing,* 134.

IV. (I promise) quietly to behave myself, and to keep the peace of this church: and not to preach nor exercise the ministry, unless lawfully called thereunto. *Rasing,* 137

V. I refuse not to communicate in the Sacraments. For I have one child that is already baptised, according to the order and law, and by this time in my absence, if God have given my wife a safe deliverance, and the child do live, I suppose it is also baptised in like manner. Further, my servants being three, do orderly come to their own Parish Church, according to the law and communicate also according to the law. *Rasing,* 140

That submission was made on 7th October 1585.

In 1586 Browne was appointed Master of St Olave's School, Southwark, and in 1591 he took deacons' and priests' orders and became Rector of Achurch cum Thorpewaterville, Northamptonshire, until 1631. However, at heart he remained a Dissenter, ministering to various clandestine groups. From 1617 to 1627 he was suspended from his living, during which time he lived at a nearby village and ministered to a small Dissenting congregation. In 1632 he was deprived of his living and died in October, 1633.

'There, embodied in a single person, is sixteenth-century English Dissent.' So writes Dr Erik Routley in his book *English Religious Dissent*. Browne, along with a second generation of Separatists—Henry Barrow, John Greenwood and John Penry, all of whom were executed in 1593—gave expression to theological and ecclesiological principles which within half a century were to develop into Independency or Congregationalism.

What were those principles?

In the first place Brownism was a Dissenting Movement.

In his autobiography, *Scenes from a Clerical Life*, Dr Alec Vidler, a High Anglican and renowned church historian, recalls a sermon he preached as a young curate on Tyneside in 1924:

> As regards Protestant nonconformity (as the Free Churches were then known), I said that 'we must recognise that they have produced in a remarkable way the fruits of Christian character and devotion', and that the blame for their separation was in part to be assigned to the Church of England itself. What had really led to their breaking away was the 'laxity, the low standard of spirituality, which they found in the Church of their day'. Still they should

> have worked for reformation from within the Church, instead of breaking away from it. Catholics [by which he means Anglo-Catholics] had much to learn from Protestants, especially about the place of the Bible in the Church and the importance of Bible-reading.

But the basis of Browne's disagreement with the Church of England was that it had forfeited its right to be called a church. The Church of England was inclined to embrace the entire population within its membership. The country was divided into parishes—*parish* deriving from the Greek word *paroikia*, *sojourning* (1 Peter 1:17), with the clear implication that all citizens were to be regarded as Christians. Browne, on the other hand, believed that the true church consists only of manifest believers, that is, he rejected the national church and substituted in its place the idea of the gathered church. That concept is a principle of Congregationalism.

What then are we to make of Browne's defection from the Separatist ranks and his return to Anglicanism?—an action which, by the way, earned for him the reproach of the next generation of Separatists. It is arguable that he was an unstable personality (that is the way in which he has been traditionally viewed) but such explanations of his behaviour underestimate the tensions involved in the act of Dissent. It may be that he was a somewhat unstable personality, but in a recent article Professor Diane Willen has argued a point which I have long suspected myself, namely that Browne's retraction of his earlier position and his subsequent behaviour simply demonstrate the tensions involved in Dissent. Disillusionment ultimately followed Browne's separation from the Anglican Church, as he discovered that the grass on the other side of the fence is not always as green as it looks and that the Separatist system had its faults. However, his was an uneasy conformity, he remained at heart a Separatist.

In the second place, Brownism was a Back to the Bible Movement.

Do we find Archibishops, Bishops, Archdeacons, Vicars and Curates in the New Testament? The answer is clearly 'No'. And do we find a church which has to consult the civil authorities (the Monarch and the Parliament) before it can change its constitution? before it can reform itself? Again the answer is an unequivocal 'No'. And yet in the Church of England, Browne found a hierarchy of ministers, a church subject to the authority of the Queen and the Parliament, unable to reform itself without reference to them.

Browne and his followers maintained this to be an unacceptable situation. However, when we ask how the Church of England arrived at such a position we discover that the answer is a theological one, that the Anglican Church looks to Scripture as a rule book in matters of salvation only, the Bible is the sole authority in the essential tenets of the Christian Faith, but not in other matters such as the constitution of the church and the form of the ministry.

Here we are to follow whatever patterns have gained acceptance during the church's history, especially those developments which took place during the first 500 years of the church, unless there are good reasons for rejecting them: the church itself has authority to regulate these areas so long as it does not contradict the Bible's clear teaching.

Browne, following the great Reformers like John Calvin, maintained this to be an unacceptable position: we should look to the Bible for direction in all points relating to the Christian Faith and the Church. So, as the Brownists turned to the Acts of the Apostles, the letters to Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Timothy and Titus—together with some passages in the Gospels—they emerged with a church independent, more or less, of the State, made up of professing believers only, and with an order of ministry in which in each congregation we find pastors, teachers, elders and deacons.

Anglicanism allowed for development in its doctrine of the church. Browne reasoned that in the Bible there is a blueprint of church order which the present day church must simply discover and implement.

Now compare Browne's conclusions with what John Owen, the foremost Congregationalist theologian of the mid-seventeenth century, has to say. Writing with reference to the Church of England in his book *Of Schisme* (1657) he says:

> In her design to reduce Religion to its primitive purity, she always professed, that she did not take direction from the Scripture only, but also from the Councils and examples of the four or five first Centuries … What I beseech you shall bind my conscience to acquiesce in what is pleaded from the 4 or 5 first Centuries consisting of men, that could, and did err: More than did hers, what was pleaded from the 9 or 10 centuries. Have I not liberty to call for Reformation according to the Scriptures only?

Thirdly, Brownism was a movement which anticipated the form of church government in later Congregationalism, perhaps the only major differences being its obsessive emphasis on the local church's right to discipline its members and so keep the church pure, and the attitude to the Established Church.

Browne rejected Episcopal and Presbyterian forms of church government: his rejection of church government by bishops and his advocacy of 'Congregationalism' is to be seen in this classic statement of his position:

> Now next under Christ, is not the bishop of the diocese, by who so many mischiefs are wrought, neither any one which hath but single authority, but first they that have their authority together: as first the church, which Christ also teaches, where he said, if he will not vouchsafe to hear them, tell it unto the church, and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto you as an heathen man and a publican, Mat. 18:17—Therefore is the church called the

> pillar and ground of truth. 1 Tim. 3:15 and the voice of the whole people, guided by the elders and the forwardest, is said to be the voice of God. And that 149 psalm does show this great honour, which is to all the saints.

Experiments in Congregationalism were made by a variety of groups during the closing years of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century. Tracing the relationships between these churches is an exceedingly complex task. The most recent and exhaustive treatment of this subject is by Professor Murray Tolmie in his book: *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London 1616–1649*, Cambridge University Press 1977 (see also Michael R Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution*, OUP, 1978).

However, Congregationalism reached its zenith in the 1640s and 1650s, with the support of Oliver Cromwell. Its theology was articulated by such outstanding men as John Owen and Thomas Goodwin, not to forget its stern defence by the Dissenting Brethren, as they are known, at the Westminster Assembly of Divines. By the 1640s the Presbyterians were gaining the ascendancy in England. The long awaited revolution had begun. Among other things the Westminster Assembly—which met between 1643 and 1648—was summoned to draw up a Directory of Public Worship to replace the Anglican Prayer Book: the church order was to be Presbyterian of course. While the Presbyterians dominated the Assembly there were at least seven Congregationalists present, five of whom petitioned Parliament with a book called *An Apologetical Narration* (1643). Its authors, Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Sidrach Simpson, Jeremiah Burroughs and William Bridge wanted a national Congregational system of church government. (It is in this work that the word Congregational in a denominational sense appears for the first time.) The following quotation indicates their position:

> Besides other calumnies, as of schism etc., … that proud and insolent title of Independency was affixed to us, as our claim, the very sound of which conveys to all men's apprehensions the challenge of an exemption of all churches from all subjection and dependence, or rather a trumpet of defiance against what ever Power, Spiritual or Civil, which we do abhor and detest: Or else the odious name of Brownism … must needs be owned by us … We believe the truth to lie and consist in a middle way betwixt that which is falsely charged upon us, Brownism, and that which is the contention of these times, the authoritative Presbyterial Government in all the subordinations and proceedings of it.

They did, in fact, as we have shown, exhibit some of the essential principles of Brownism, but they were anxious not to be thought of as political anarchists or ecclesiastical separatists. Thus, for instance, they accepted the Anglican Church

as a true church and many of the Congregationalists still, at this point, worked within its ranks.

So, Robert Browne was the harbinger of a movement of immense significance in the religious history of this country, and of which we are a part, namely, Congregationalism.

(The early quotations were all in 16th century spelling and we have revised them where thought necessary)

# The Church Meeting

## Derek Swann

At the annual lecture of the Congregational Historical Society, delivered on 12th May 1970 on the subject *The Survival of the Church Meeting 1691*, John H Taylor began by saying 'For more than seventy years these lectures have come and gone and this year we begin the 21st volume of Transactions (*The Journal of the C.H.S.*), yet in all that time there has never been a contribution on the church meeting' (*Transactions* Vol. XXI, No. 2, Dec. 1971). Considering the centrality of the Church Meeting to Congregationalism this is an astonishing fact. In 1952 the Life and Work Department of the Congregational Union of England and Wales published a pamphlet entitled *The Church Meeting* which states, 'Nothing is more distinctive of Congregationalism. Nothing can take its place. For us the Church Meeting is vital,' (p. 3), and again '… if Congregationalism is to survive and if it is to make the contribution it should to the whole Church of Christ, the Church Meeting must come into its own' (p. 4). Yet for the past 150 years there has been no significant work of scholarship on the Church Meeting and even the popular booklet has appeared but spasmodically.

Those of us who have been brought up in Congregationalism are not surprised. In 1871, RW Dale of Carr's Lane, Birmingham, spoke of Church Meetings as 'meetings for the transaction of formal business in which no rational man can feel any intense interest' (*Essays and Addresses*, p. 141). The above mentioned pamphlet *The Church Meeting*, laments, 'Yet, as all of us know, it is often poorly attended and sadly ineffectual. Many of our members, otherwise splendidly loyal in their support of the church, regard the Church Meeting as dull and unimportant. They rarely attend, unless some special business has to be done, some never attend. One result is that new members are quickly discouraged. They too stay away. We are caught in a vicious circle.' (p. 3).

In our own day the Church Meeting has certainly fallen from grace; in fact in many instances it has become a disgrace. In some cases it is only a business meeting or a debating society. Occasionally it resembles a political assembly and not infrequently a boxing match. Often those who never attend a Bible Study or a Prayer Meeting make a point of never missing it and taking part in it.

The question is, 'Can anything be done to restore the Church Meeting to its original spiritual position?' Dale was critical of the Church Meeting in

1871, but in 1886 he delivered an address to a Joint Assembly of the Baptist and Congregational Unions in which he spoke ecstatically of it:

> and so, to be at a Church Meeting—apart from any prayer that is offered, any hymn that is sung, any words that are spoken, is for me one of the chief means of grace. To know that I am surrounded by men and women who dwell in God, who have received the Holy Ghost, with whom I am to share eternal righteousness and eternal rapture of the great life to come, this is blessedness. I breathe a diviner air.

Can the Church Meeting become again 'one of the chief means of grace'? In order to answer that question we must know what position it has held in Congregationalism.

The Church Meeting as we know it, as a special meeting, held monthly or quarterly, was not in the minds of the founders of Congregationalism. The Church Meeting as they knew it was part of a gathering of the Church. Our forefathers thought much more in terms of a meeting of the church than of a Church Meeting. At Rothwell, in Northamptonshire, business meetings of the church were held on the Sabbath. This was also true of Nightingale Lane Church, London and John Cotton's congregation in New England. We know that at Castle Gate Congregational Church, Nottingham, there were quarterly Church Meetings until 1843 when they became monthly, and that such meetings were held 'after public worship on the Wednesday evening before the first Sabbath of the month'. (AR Henderson, *History of Castle Gate Congregational Church Nottingham 1655–1905*). At Bury Street, in Isaac Watts's time, they were held on a Friday:

> on the Friday in the afternoon, before the Lord's Supper there is generally a sermon preached on some evangelical subject, and if any church affairs require it, as the admission, the dismission or the seclusion of any members, or any other matter of importance that relates to the spiritual or temporal concerns of the church, the members are desired to tarry a little for that purpose. (Bury Street Church Records, CHS Transactions, VI, 336).

Church Meetings as such were part of the meeting of the church for prayer, preaching, worship and the Lord's Supper. All business was conducted in a spiritual context. Consequently the modern distinction between spiritual and business meetings is meaningless.

We need to lift the spiritual tone of our Church Meetings. They should begin with a short act of worship and that spirit of worship should pervade the whole of the meeting. Some churches have made a point, for example when missionary matters are being discussed, of concluding with a time of congregational prayer for the blessing of God on the preaching of the Gospel

world-wide. At almost any point on the agenda of a Church Meeting, prayer can be called for and if it cannot, the matter has no right to be on the agenda.

How did the founders of Congregationalism see the future of the Church Meeting? 'A church,' writes Isaac Chauncey, is 'impowered by commission from Christ to choose its own ministerial officers, and if they are one or more belonging to other churches, or non-members, they can receive them members. Likewise they can admit other members that desire to join them. Lastly it has power to admonish or reject any scandalous or any offending member and that before such a church has Elders or Deacons. These are plain from the nature of a body corporate.' (The Divine Institution of Congregational Churches, 1697, p. 49). Election of officers, reception and excommunication of members were the main concerns of the 'meeting church'. Such matters, Chauncey affirms, should be dealt with 'by the hands of the Brethren: for though each sister is a true member of this corporation and accordingly upon that ground should vote, yet Christ, having made a particular exception upon that account that women may not speak or exercise authority in the church, therefore whatever passeth in the Church by the majority of the Brethren is a church act, so that it be done in a congregation, the sisters present, otherwise it is no Church Meeting' (p. 105).

John H Taylor in his article on the Church Meeting notes that up until 1872 women were not allowed to vote at Carr's Lane Congregational Church, Birmingham, and that in fact the men sat on the right and the women on the left hand of the chair. I believe that our own Church Meetings would greatly benefit if in fact men took a leading role. That is not a popular thing to say in a feminist age, but as we are not to be governed by the spirit of the age it needs to be said. In a husband and wife partnership where only one can be present at a Church Meeting, it should always be the husband.

Regarding the admission of members, Chauncey writes that after a candidate has been examined by the pastor or elders,

> he is in a Church Meeting to be propounded to the Church and a competent time (should be) allotted to the Church for converse with the said person and enquiry after his Christian deportment, that all the members of the congregation may be satisfied in a person whom they admit to so holy a communion with them, which time being expired and nothing objected against the said person, the elders bring him before the Church to give the reasons of his hope either by word of mouth or by writing (if bashfulness hinders him or her from speaking) (p. 109).

We need to observe the closeness and warmth of those early fellowships, 'so holy a communion'. The *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*, 1658, says

> in the carrying on of church-administrations, no person ought to be added to the church but by the consent of the church itself, that so love (without dissimulation) may be preserved between all the members thereof (p. 45, § 17 of the Evangelical Press edition).

The preservation of love was, and is, important. The Congregational Church at Ipswich formed in 1686 bound themselves together in the form of a covenant (signed by the seventeen who formed the church) and

> related to each other what God had done for their souls, embodied together as a Church of Christ, giving themselves to the Lord and to one another to work together as a Church of Christ in all God's holy ordinances according to the rules of the Gospel, to the glory of God and their mutual edification and love.

The church formed at Woodbridge in 1651 made a similar covenant:

> We freely and cheerfully give up ourselves to the other to become one lump and stick in the Lord's hand and will, the Lord assisting us, submit ourselves one to another in the fear of God, watch over one another, bear one another's burdens, taking the same care one for another and doing all things becoming those of the same body and whose heart is one and way is one in the Lord.

We need to remember the words of PT Forsyth that salvation is personal, but not individual. We are saved into the community of the local church and as such we have both the responsibility and the privilege of caring for each other. The Church Meeting ought to be one of the places where such care is demonstrated.

The admission of members into the fellowship of the local church was always a happy but serious matter. Take the church at Manchester under William Roly, one of the 'fathers and founders' of the London Missionary Society. Dr Gordon Robinson in his life of Roly writes,

> Much of the life of the church centred in the Church Meeting held regularly at monthly intervals … New members, especially those who came on profession of faith were proposed for membership at the Church Meetings and were then visited by two deacons, or other persons, appointed by the church. After this visit, candidates appeared before the Church Meeting and read a written statement of their religious experience and of their desire to be united to the church. There is a good example of this method belonging to the period of the ministry in Grosvenor Street, preserved in the pamphlet *The Converted Atheist* published by Roly in 1820, which gives the statement presented in 1817 by a 'reclaimed infidel' who was a candidate for membership … Not all the statements of candidates can have been as full and eventful as this, and sometimes candidates were hard put to it to express themselves. But the statement was insisted upon, and after the vote of the Church Meeting had been taken, and if 'the evidences of his religious character and experience' were

> considered satisfactory, the new member was admitted to the fellowship. (W. Gordon Robinson, *William Roly 1766–1830,* pp. 76-7).

Our Baptist brethren make use of the service of Believer's Baptism to encourage the giving of testimonies. Would it not be enriching to our own Congregational churches if prospective members could be encouraged to give testimonies at the Church Meeting?

Regarding discipline the *Savoy Declaration* has this to say,

> Every church hath power in itself to exercise and execute all those censures appointed by him (the Lord Jesus Christ) in the way and order prescribed in the gospel. The censures so appointed by Christ are admonition and excommunication … in the case of non-amendment upon private admonition, the offence being related to the church, and the offender not manifesting his repentance, he is to be duly admonished in the name of Christ by the whole church, by the ministry of the elders of the church, and if this censure prevail not for his repentance, then he is to be cast out by excommunication with the consent of the church. (p. 46, 18 & 19).

We can see this illustrated in 1776 at Castle Gate Congregational Church, Nottingham.

> A still more interesting case is that of a woman who made very serious charges against a fellow member of the church. She, however, declined to attend a meeting of the Church to substantiate or retract the charges. A deputation was appointed to go and hear the charges in presence of the accused. She declined to receive the deputation. This was taken as a proof that she had been guilty of making accusations which she was unable to confirm and would not retract, and she was separated from the Church. A letter was sent to her in which was written, 'No one can be continued in any society who refuses to submit to its discipline and its rules of government. The Church has thought it its duty to separate you from its communion and prays that you may be convinced that you have sinned and that you may be led to exercise true and sincere repentance.' (p. 98)

The woman, in this case, was restored to the Church eight years later.

At Rothwell, under the ministry of Richard Davis, discipline was very severe. The records give the following cases:

> Richard Gam for injustice about hiring a horse.
>
> Bridget Rowlott for sloth in business.
>
> Sarah Kirk for idleness and rebellion against her parents.
>
> Sister Hollick for her pride.
>
> John Cussens for threatening to knock his brother's brains out.

Brother Campion for professing love to a sister, when engaged to another.

Of Roly's church at Manchester, Dr Robinson writes,

> Great care was to be taken to avoid uncharitableness, censoriousness and provocation, so that 'it may evidently appear that [the Church] hath no other aim but the glory of God and the good of the brother reproved.' If there was no amendment by the offender, the Church Meeting specially called proceeded to censure him or to cut him off. But first the pastor prayed for 'a blessing on the ordinance' (of discipline), confessed the offender's sin, spoke on the gravity of the offence, and then put the question. Henceforward the offender was 'to be reckoned amongst the ungodly, and his conversation to be avoided so far as it may be without any violation of natural or civil bonds' …When a member was to be suspended Roly addressed the church as its pastor and reminded them that one of the duties incumbent upon members was to watch over each other, to warn the unruly and to put away those who 'walked disorderly'. However painful the process it must be attended with partiality. This must be done, he continued for the glory of God (who would be dishonoured by its neglect), for the safety and prosperity of the church and for the good of disorderly brethren … When a suspended or excluded member was received back again, it was Roly's custom (as indeed it was the custom of all Independent ministers) to hear a statement from the offender and then, after the vote had been taken, to address the church to which the offender was now reunited. He used the opportunity to 'improve' the occasion and to reflect on human liability to sin, on the sad effects of sin and declension in religion, on the faithfulness of God and the gratitude men owe him for forgiveness and restoration, and on the human need of dependence upon God and of prayer. (pp. 77–79).

There is nothing that is more likely to show up the true spiritual state of our Congregational churches than the question of discipline. Let a pastor try to execute discipline and he will quickly discover, I suspect, that his normally docile, loving fellowship will show marks of pride, arrogance and self-righteousness. I have always held to the view that the true spiritual state of our churches is not to be gauged by either public worship or prayer meetings, but by the Church Meeting. What we are there, and how we behave there, is the true test of our spiritual state.

Nothing shows up the desperate need for revival more than the present state of Church Meetings, and while we can do much to restore the Church Meeting to its former spiritual state, our labours will not be attended with a great degree of success unless we beseech God in his grace and mercy to pour out his Spirit upon our languishing fellowships. May God soon bring us to the place where with RW Dale we can say in all honesty that the Church Meeting is where we 'breathe a diviner air'.

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