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## EDITORIAL

Some years ago the author of an authoritative work on pacifism between the two World Wars was lecturing persuasively, perhaps conclusively, on his subject. In the discussion which followed, one of his older hearers, clearly impressed, nonetheless commented that somehow it had not quite been like that: "I was there". Few historians find it easy to face the certainty that what they have written was not quite like that.

So to Martin Camroux. The title of his series, "Why did the United Reformed Church Fail?" is not the sort of question that historians ask, at least not that way. Yet what other title would fit his theme? The title of his article in the present issue, "Where do we go from here?" is certainly not the sort of question that historians should ask. Yet both are the sorts of question that serious readers of history should always ask.

Whether or not it has been quite like that in the URC, that is how it has been for Martin Camroux, and his experience has certainly (if varyingly) resonated with many of his readers. A particular value of what he has written will lie in the response of readers several decades into the future. How will what seemed to him seem to them?

That question bridges the apparent discontinuity of this issue. For the historian of Puritanism, William Haller, Richard Sibbes was "a rather bland, sweet-natured, mild-mannered, charming, learned and highly respected middle-aged gentleman". He might have been the very model of a type of United Reformed Church minister. He was undoubtedly a Puritan but he was no Separatist and there is no evidence that another twenty years of life would have seen him either as an Independent or a Presbyterian. Even so, his influence on early Dissenters as preacher and writer was considerable. He was part of a shared inheritance. Michael Playdon, who has been working on the *Song of Songs* in Puritan preaching, places Sibbes in that context. Fifty-six years after Sibbes's death, Independents and Presbyterians were trying to work out some other aspects of shared inheritance: these had practical, organisational, and architectural implications. In focussing on their outworking in Cheshire, Malcolm Lovibond also draws attention to the Europe-wide bearing of the issues at stake in the course of an early and short-lived attempt at united Reformed witness. Careful readers will note that the transformative eighteenth century is not ignored: the reviews fill the gap.

Mr Playdon is a United Reformed Church minister in Leicestershire. Dr Lovibond is a United Reformed Church elder in Cheshire.

**Notes.** The Editor writes: David Peel wishes to make it clear that his text, "Still So Last Century?" (*JURCHS*, 8, No. 3, p.151) should read (2nd paragraph, line 9) ". . . the books written by non-Nonconformists . . ." The omission of the word non obscures, to say the least, Dr Peel's point about the significance for recent URC theological understanding of influences beyond the theologies of the Reformed churches.

**Reformation Pilgrimages: Calvin Quincentenary**

**TOUR** arranged by Ken Carleton and Anthony Earl

2009 marks the quincentenary of Calvin's birth. The group which in various configurations over the last five years has visited the Waldensian Valleys (2004), Luther's Thuringia (2006), the Rhineland of Erasmus and Zwingli (2007), and the Reformed areas of Hungary (2008) now plans to visit key areas for Calvin, including Geneva, and that part of Piedmont where Calvin's ideas undergirt an already existing reformation movement. The group represents learned or cultural interest with a concern for church history, especially the sixteenth century. It is ecumenical in character and, on these journeys, maintains a holiday spirit.

The visit is from Monday 28 September until Monday 5 October 2009

The outline programme is:

OUTWARD – Monday 28 September, British Airways, to Geneva.

RETURN – Monday 5 October, British Airways, from Turin.

Accommodation: Monday 28-Friday 2 in Church Guest House Geneva; Friday 2-Monday 5 in Church Guest House in Torre Pellice in the Waldensian Valleys (rooms are simply furnished but have private facilities, breakfast is included). The half way journey of Friday 2 October, from Geneva to Turin (allow 3 hours) will be by coach to enable the group to see the Alpine track by which returning Waldensian refugees found their way from Geneva to their own valleys in 1688.

Proposed visits include the Musée de la Réforme and the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Geneva, and the Museo Culturale in Torre Pellice. Special talks will be arranged and commentaries on art and political history.

Estimated prices, to be confirmed: Full Tour £675: Geneva only, £450.

Further details of the programme and final prices available from Anthony Earl: [anthonyjearl@googlemail.com](mailto:anthonyjearl@googlemail.com)

or Dr Ken Carleton: [ken\\_carleton@yahoo.com](mailto:ken_carleton@yahoo.com)

## “THE SWEET DROPPER”: RICHARD SIBBES, 1577-1635

### Sibbes's Career

The Puritan movement of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries influenced theology, ecclesiology, politics, piety and morality. The term “Puritanism” was often used pejoratively of those who were critical of conventional established religion but at best it refers to the desire for purity in personal life and in the life of Church and State. It was a spiritual movement concerned with God and the putting into effect of his will, as it was perceived in the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It grew out of the desire of English Protestants to see the English Church, which had seen considerable change, disruption, and reform under Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth, further reformed.

Many reformers, who had fled to the Continent during the reign of Mary and had come under the influence of Calvin's reforms in Geneva, found what appeared to them to be “Utopia founded on the word of God”.<sup>1</sup> On their return they looked forward to the establishment of such a Utopia in England, but found that the Reformation of the English Church had stalled. It was too slow and too restricted. As Puritans saw it, Elizabeth's predecessors had left the Church confused and floundering, and Elizabeth herself “did not reform the church but only swept the rubbish behind the door”.<sup>2</sup> The Puritan movement may be said to have sprung out of the shock of that disappointment. Many of the returned Marian exiles now became leading figures in the Church of England. Influenced by the “Geneva Bible” and the writings of John Calvin, they aimed to complete the Reformation in England and through preaching, lecturing, and writing, they worked to reshape the Church's worship and practice. They sought to introduce effective discipline into the life of parishes, to work for that “righteousness” that “exalts a nation”<sup>3</sup> in politics and economics, and to bring about the conversion of England to a Gospel faith. “England was to become a land of saints, a model and paragon of corporate godliness, and as such a blessing to the world.”<sup>4</sup>

For the most part, Puritan leaders in the Church of England, including a number of bishops, worked patiently to bring about reforms in worship and polity, though with varying degrees of frustration. Some, however, despaired of seeing the desired changes take place within the established Church, and believed it necessary to break out of it and set up separate religious institutions. Richard Sibbes was one of those who stayed inside. From that position he had no influence on and little sympathy for the ecclesiology of those who shaped Dissent but through his preaching and teaching, and the subsequent publication

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1 William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 8.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Proverbs 14: 34.

4 J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 28.

of sermons, he was a significant figure for conforming and dissenting Puritans alike. In the first quarter of the seventeenth century he made a considerable contribution to the Puritan spirituality which continues to be part of the Reformed heritage.

A native of Suffolk, Richard Sibbes entered St. John's College, Cambridge in 1595 at the age of eighteen.<sup>5</sup> As well as his formal education there were the lectures and sermons to be heard around Cambridge: "What was important for many of the future Puritan clergy . . . seems to have been not so much what they learned from the formal content of higher education, as the experience of hearing the great preachers of the university towns."<sup>6</sup> One of these "great preachers" was William Perkins, Lecturer at Great St. Andrews, and Sibbes was one of the students who came under his influence. He took his B.A. in 1599, and became a Fellow of St. John's in 1601. "It appears from the Rental Books of the college that Sibbes was a very engaged and successful Fellow and that he served in a variety of posts in college."<sup>7</sup> He received his M.A. in 1602, B.D. in 1610, and D.D. in 1627. During these years he was elected Fell Chaplain and Sublector (1603), Examiner (1604-1608), Lady Margaret Chaplain (1612-1618), and Dr. Thompson Chaplain (1612-1618). In 1615 he was elected both Senior Dean and Lector Domesticus, and in 1619 a Senior Fellow. In the wider life of the University he served in 1608 as a "tasker", i.e. a taxer, responsible for regulating traders' weights and measures.<sup>8</sup> He possessed a versatile talent, in teaching, examining, and administration.

However, as Mark Dever points out, "Cambridge was, for Sibbes, not only a place for career, but also for conversion."<sup>9</sup> At some point during 1602 or 1603 he came under the influence of Paul Baynes and was undoubtedly changed. The only contemporary account of his spiritual experience seems to be Samuel Clarke's statement that "It pleased God to convert him by the Ministry of Master Paul Baines, whilst he was Lecturer at Saint Andrews in Cambridge."<sup>10</sup> Baynes (d.1617) was later silenced by Archbishop Bancroft's chancellor, Dr. Harsnett, and removed from this lectureship "for refusing (absolute) subscription", and "was thus perforce made a nonconformist."<sup>11</sup> In February 1608, at the age of thirty-one, Sibbes was ordained deacon and priest. He quickly gained a reputation as a preacher, and Zachary Catlin records that by 1608 he

5 Mark E. Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 17, 20.

6 Paul Seaver, *The Puritan Lectureships*, (Stanford, 1970), 182, in Dever, 18.

7 Dever, 32.

8 Alexander B. Grosart (ed.), *Works of Richard Sibbes*, Vol.1, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), xxxiii.

9 Dever, 34.

10 Samuel Clarke, "The life of Doctor Sibs" in *The Lives of Thirty-Two English Divines... in A general martyrologie . . .* (London: 1677), 143, in Dever, 34.

11 A. B. Grosart, "Paul Baynes 1590-1640", *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol 1, (London: O.U.P., 1967-1968), 1376.

was already “a Preacher of good note in Cambr[idge].”<sup>12</sup> In 1609 he was elected a College Preacher, and as such he was required by the college statutes to preach “a private sermon” on the first Sunday of each month in the morning, and in the afternoon “a publick sermon” in English, open to the general public.<sup>13</sup> The following year the authorities of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge established a public lectureship and, “desireing as much as in us lyeth the more publique benefit of your ministry”, invited Sibbes to be the first Lecturer.<sup>14</sup> Sibbes’s preaching proved popular and in 1616 a new gallery had to be built in the church. Samuel Clarke records:

And when Master Sibs had been Master of Arts some while, he entered into The Ministry, and shortly after was chosen Lecturer himself at Trinity Church in Cambridge: To whose Ministry, besides the Towns-men, many Scholars resorted, so that he became a worthy Instrument, of begetting many Sons and Daughters unto God, besides the edifying and building up of others.<sup>15</sup>

Not long after the enlargement of Holy Trinity Sibbes ceased to be its Lecturer (as well as Fellow of St. John’s), and was invited to become Lecturer<sup>16</sup> at Gray’s Inn, London. *The Pension Book of Gray’s Inn* states that the Lecturer was to be unmarried, have no other cure of souls, and was to give two lectures each Sunday in the chapel for the Inn’s members.<sup>17</sup> The Inns of Court have been described as “a propaganda base and general nexus for Puritan clergy and laymen”,<sup>18</sup> and, as the largest of them, Gray’s had a considerable influence. William Haller has observed that “Sibbes’s ability, his single-mindedness, his tact and resourcefulness won for him at Gray’s Inn an audience of greater importance in the world than any of the brotherhood, except perhaps William Gouge, had yet attained.”<sup>19</sup> This audience included not only “resident readers, benchers, ancients and barristers”,<sup>20</sup> but leading statesmen, wealthy businessmen, civic dignitaries and what Haller calls “common church-goers as well”.<sup>21</sup>

It was quite usual for members of the congregation to copy down his sermons and pass copies around. Sibbes seemed to prosper during this ministry: his stipend was twice increased and the chapel’s seating capacity was enlarged.

12 Zachary Catlin, “Memoir of Richard Sibbes” in Sibbes, *Works*, cxxxv.

13 Dever, 37.

14 C. H. Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, (Cambridge, 1845), 3, 229, in Dever, 38.

15 Clarke, *A martyrologie*, 143, in Dever, 40.

16 Also known as Preacher or Reader in Divinity.

17 Reginald J. Fletcher, (ed.), *The Pension Book of Gray’s Inn . . . 1569-1669*, (London, 1901), 22, 139, in Dever, 73.

18 Wilfred Prest, *Inns of Court under Elizabeth I and the Early Stuarts*, (London, 1972), 38, 207, in Dever, 73.

19 Haller, 66.

20 Grosart in *Works*, 1, xl.

21 Haller, 66.

In 1626 Archbishop James Ussher offered Sibbes the position of Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, but this he declined. In the same year he was offered and accepted the Mastership of Katharine Hall, Cambridge.<sup>22</sup> Apparently the Gray's Inn authorities arranged for his absence during the week in the knowledge that he would continue to preach on Sundays. In this new administrative position Sibbes was clearly a success. Ussher commended him as "one that hath been well acquainted with an academical life, and singularly well qualified for the undertaking of such a place of government."<sup>23</sup> When Sibbes arrived the Hall was dilapidated and impoverished, and the student numbers depleted. But he devoted considerable energy, as Ussher put it, in "procuring some good to his new college",<sup>24</sup> erecting new buildings, and bringing in students and donations. Samuel Clarke wrote of his Mastership that he "was a means and Instrument, to establish learned and Religious Fellows there; insomuch as in his time, it proved a very famous Society for Piety and Learning, both in Fellows and Scholars."<sup>25</sup> W. H. S. Jones's assessment was that his "ability, piety and his gift for making friends" were such that the quarter century after his arrival was "the most brilliant and altogether the greatest period in the history of the college."<sup>26</sup> As well as preaching in the college chapel Sibbes preached in the University Church of Great St. Mary's to a congregation described by Alexander Grosart as "such a galaxy of men assembled as could not have been seen elsewhere in all the world."<sup>27</sup> Even when one allows for the exaggerations of his admirers it is clear that Sibbes was an effective and widely respected Master. He remained Master until 1635, but two years earlier he was presented by Charles I to the living of Holy Trinity, Cambridge, where he had previously been Lecturer. This new responsibility doubtless meant a lessening of the time he could give to both Katharine Hall and Gray's Inn, but no information survives.

### A "Conforming Reformer"

Richard Sibbes was a Puritan who wished to see reform of the Church of England from within. Although his approach was generally gentle and eirenical, he was, nonetheless, clear and firm in his convictions. While his formative years were spent in a Cambridge that was strongly influenced by Puritan convictions, and in a Church that was in many ways sympathetic to the

22 After 1860 known as St. Catharine's College.

23 Ussher, letter to Lincoln's (Gray's) Inn, 10 January 1626/7, reprinted in C. R. Elrington, ed., *Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher*, (Dublin, 1847-64), 15: 363-4, in Dever, 84.

24 Ussher, *Whole Works*, 16: 440, in Frank E. Farrell, "Richard Sibbes: A Study in Early Seventeenth Century English Puritanism" (thesis), University of Edinburgh, 1955, 37.

25 Samuel Clarke, *The Lives of Thirty-Two English Divines*, (London, 1677), in Farrell, 44.

26 W. H. S. Jones, *History of St. Catharine's College*, (Cambridge, 1936), 92, 82, in Farrell, 38.

27 Grosart, in *Works*, 1, liii.

teachings of John Calvin, yet from 1603 his academic career and ministry were pursued in steadily changing times. He was not an "activist" and certainly no firebrand, and the context in which he ministered and the way in which he pursued his ministry help to explain his influence.

Soon after the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, several hundred Puritan ministers brought the new King, James, face to face with the religious discontent of his English subjects with the presentation of the Millenary Petition. They begged for "the redress of divers abuses of the Church", including the use of the cross in baptism and the ring in marriage, the wearing of the surplice, bowing at the name of Jesus, and the observance of the Lord's Day; they wished "no popish opinion to be any more taught or defended"; "none hereafter be admitted into the ministry but able and sufficient men"; and that "enormities may be addressed regarding discipline and excommunication." They were "the faithful servants of Christ and loyal subjects to your majesty", and maintained that they were neither "factious" nor "schismatics".<sup>28</sup>

James's response was to call a Conference at Hampton Court, at which the Puritans were represented by four "moderates" selected by James himself. The outcome was largely unsatisfactory as far as they were concerned. Minor changes were made to the Book of Common Prayer; but the old ceremonies were to continue, no improvements were to be made in the provision of a preaching ministry, and the existing Church polity was to remain unchanged. They did approve of and participated in the production of the Authorised Version of the Bible, but this had not been among their principal requests. As Patrick Collinson has put it, James was "impressed by the puritans as agitators and conspirators . . . but not with the gravity of their demands. The more moderate, even trivial, their case, the less excuse for disturbing the peace and unity of the church."<sup>29</sup> James now required conformity to the Canons of 1604, which affirmed among other things that the Book of Common Prayer and the present structure of the Church were not contrary to the Word of God.

Sibbes's views on some of these Puritan grievances are known. With regard to certain externals he was a moderate, and in certain respects hesitant. This may be illustrated by his appearance before the Vice Chancellor's Court of Cambridge University in 1616 following an edict of King James respecting lectures on Sunday afternoons:

Mr. Sibbs was asked by Mr. Vice-Chancellor whether he would subscribe to the 3 articles required to be subscribed unto by the Canons. He refused to subscribe, and diverse questions being asked he made these answers: (Now in Sibbes's own hand) I said that the signe of the

28 Henry Bettenson (ed.), *Documents of the Christian Church*, (London: OUP, 1963), 397-400.

29 Patrick Collinson, "The Jacobean Religious Settlement: The Hampton Court Conference", in Howard Tomlinson, (ed.), *Before the English Civil War*, (London: 1983), 44, in Dever, 27.



cross [in baptism] was dangerous. My meaning was in regard of those that be not well instructed and not otherwise. I said that there is nihil impie in the booke of ordination. I add it is not contrary to the word of God, but allowable. R Sibbs.<sup>30</sup>

Subsequently, the Vice Chancellor wrote to the Bishop of Winchester,

The two Town Lecturers, Mr. Sibbs, and Mr. Bentley, have beine before me, and the Heads of colleges; . . . Mr. Sibbs at first made Some Question and Seemed lesse Setled in Opinion, but upon a Second conference he also Submitted and Subscribed.<sup>31</sup>

Whatever his reservations, Sibbes was willing to conform and to subscribe in matters that could be regarded, in his view, as matters of indifference.

When it came to "popish opinion", however, there was no doubting Sibbes's antagonism. On becoming a Bachelor of Divinity Sibbes had defended the proposition "Romana Ecclesia est apostatica" with the common Puritan position<sup>32</sup> that the Church of Rome was no true Church at all. His D.D. discourse in 1627 similarly was devoted to a rebuttal of Rome. In his preaching he discussed from time to time the dangers of that Church to the true people of God. In his sermon on Song of Songs 5: 6 and 7, he speaks of how some of those set as watchmen over the community of believers "that should have been defensive prove most offensive."

They smote the church and wounded her many ways, though it be not discovered here in particular. As (1.) with their ill and scandalous life; and (2.) sometimes with corrupt doctrine, and otherwhiles with bitter words; and (3.) their unjust censures, as we see in the story of the church, *especially the Romish Church*. They have excommunicated churches and princes. But not to speak of those synagogues of Satan.<sup>33</sup>

The Puritans' concern for "able and sufficient men" in the ministry was dear to Sibbes's heart. The distribution of churches and parishes and the way in which ministers were appointed, in the view of many Puritans, did not reflect current needs and in many situations was a scandal. To remedy this, in 1625, a group of twelve Feoffees,<sup>34</sup> including Sibbes, "formed themselves into an unincorporated, self-perpetuating group of trustees"<sup>35</sup> in order to raise money for the purchase of tithes and church patronage, and so "to plant a powerfull

30 CUA, Vice Chancellor's Court I.42 f. 202, in Dever, 46.

31 CUA, Lett. 11.A.A.8.d in Dever, 46.

32 Dever, 38.

33 Grosart in *Works*, Vol. 2, 119 (my italics).

34 Consisting of four lawyers, four ministers, and four wealthy merchants.

35 Isabel M. Calder, *Activities of the Puritan Faction of the Church of England 1625-1633*, (London, 1957), vii, in Dever, 82.

Ministry in Cities and Market-Towns here and there in the Country for the greater propagation of the Gospell".<sup>36</sup> By 1633 they had purchased thirteen impropriations, and it was estimated that within fifty years they would have bought all those available. Antipathetic to the Puritans, Archbishop Laud had become alarmed at this development. In his view the "end was to take away the right of patronages from the Church, to make those Ministers they preferred independent of the Bishops & dependent wholly on them, and to engross most Ecclesiastical preferments into their own hands."<sup>37</sup> He saw in the work of the Feoffees an attempt to reform the Church by subversive means. Lengthy hearings were held in the Court of Exchequer, and the Feoffees were dissolved and their funds confiscated. If Laud's judgement is to be accepted then perhaps Sibbes was not as moderate as he is so often portrayed. Christopher Hill's assessment may be correct: "the Feoffees were taking upon themselves the political and economic reconstruction of the church not only without authorization from the government, but in a way which conflicted with its polity."<sup>38</sup>

In 1627 Sibbes was one of four ministers who signed a circular letter appealing for the relief of "two hundred and forty godly preachers, with their wives and families, and sundrie thousands of godly private persons with them",<sup>39</sup> who had been left homeless and poverty-stricken by the "merciless papists in the Upper Palatinate",<sup>40</sup> and who were now in exile in Holland. This seems to have been construed as a criticism of government inaction, but more to the point it was a representation of events on the continent as a religious war between Catholics and Protestants. This was a politically sensitive area, and in consequence Sibbes and the others were summoned to appear before Laud and the High Commission and were severely reprimanded.

Reference has already been made to Sibbes's ceasing to be Lecturer of Holy Trinity and Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, before taking up the Lectureship of Gray's Inn, London. Many commentators have written of how he was "deprived" of these positions. Mark Dever notes Daniel Neal's assertion, for instance, that "he was turned out of his fellowship and lectureship in the university for nonconformity."<sup>41</sup> Alexander Grosart repeated this "legend of Sibbes as Puritan martyr."<sup>42</sup> After his death, Sibbes's writings had become highly prized by those who had themselves become Nonconformists and they

36 Thomas Gouge, "Narrative of the Life", in Clarke, *General Martyrologie*, (1677), in Haller, 81.

37 William Prynne, *Canterburies Doome*, (1646), 537, in Haller, 81.

38 Christopher Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church from Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament*, (London: OUP, 1971), 262, in Tom Webster, *Godly Clergy in Early Stuart England: The Caroline Puritan Movement, c.1620-1643*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 83.

39 PRO, SP16/56, 15, in Dever, "Moderation and Deprivation: A reappraisal of Richard Sibbes", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol.43, No.3, July 1992, 408.

40 Grosart, in *Works*, I, lviii.

41 Daniel Neal, *History of the Puritans*, (1732), in Dever, "Moderation", 398.

42 *Ibid.*, 399.

came to be read through the spectacles of those who themselves had been deprived or ejected. In the light of his later brushes with Archbishop Laud, it is not surprising that he should have been seen by 1615 as already within Laud's sights. Among his many Dissenting and Separatist admirers Sibbes had gained the reputation of being himself a Nonconformist. Mark Dever has shown conclusively, however, that "the reason for the deprivation ('his puritanism'), the time of his deprivation ('in 1615') and the agent of his deprivation ('by the high commission') are all later assumptions and are not supported by the primary sources."<sup>43</sup> "A misreading of a statement based on an assumption based on a mistake"<sup>44</sup> had led to an exaggeration of Sibbes's difficulties. The very facts that Sibbes was able to hold his Lecturership at Gray's Inn and the Mastership at Katharine Hall, and then to be presented with the living of Holy Trinity, Cambridge, by Charles I, are evidence of his ability to rise above the increasing turmoil of Church and State under the Stuart kings and Archbishop Laud.

Sibbes wished to see reform in the Church but, perhaps with these exceptions, he was circumspect in his approach. Tom Webster maintains that "The Feoffees were attempting to reform without 'tarrying for the magistrate'; the scheme was quintessentially Puritan and cannot be seen in anything but a subversive light."<sup>45</sup> He takes issue with Dever's assessment of Sibbes's part in the scheme as that of a "conforming reformer".<sup>46</sup> It seems to me, however, that Sibbes was no subversive and saw himself as taking part in a principled attempt to ensure the provision of a godly learned ministry. He remained loyal to the Church of England, and found in it all the necessary marks of "the true Church": "sound preaching of the Gospell, right dispensation of the Sacraments, Prayer religiously performed, evill persons justly punish't", and the production of "many spirituall children to the Lord." The Church may suffer from some corruptions, but, he asked, "must we make a rent in the Church for . . . circumstantial evils? That were a remedy worse than the disease."

So it is no better than soule-murder for a man to cast himselfe out of the Church, either for reall or imaginall corruptions . . . So let me admonish you to returne your selfe from these extravagant courses, and submissively to render your selfe to the sacred communion of this truly Evangelicall Church of England.<sup>47</sup>

If it is true that Richard Sibbes was a "conforming reformer", then it was surely with some reluctance that he acted or spoke in a provocative way. He kept to his obligations to the Church of England, while doing what his conscience would allow in order to bring about reform from within. It seems

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43 *Ibid.*, 401.

44 *Ibid.*, 404.

45 Webster, 83.

46 *Ibid.*, 83n.

47 "Consolatory Letter to an Afflicted Conscience", in Grosart, *Works*, Vol. 1, cxv-cxvi.

that in later years he gave more attention to the voluntary nature of the Church, but his primary concern was not ecclesiology. At the heart of his concern was Godly preaching, as the means by which the Holy Spirit might bring about purity in Church and State and in the lives of individuals.

### A Godly Preacher

Sibbes was called the “Sweet Dropper” by reason of his encouraging sermons. He drew admiring crowds in both Cambridge and London. He stammered a little in the pulpit, but his messages were clear, vivid, strong, deep, and basic for Christian living. He came across as a holy man, gentle, firm, humble, cautious and wise, a lover of Christ, of Christians, and of peace.<sup>48</sup> So James Packer summarises Sibbes as preacher. William Haller described his sermons as “among the most brilliant and popular of all utterances of the Puritan church militant.”<sup>49</sup> During his lifetime he allowed only three volumes of his sermons to be published; but in the five years following his death in 1635, ninety-nine sermons were published in at least sixty-three separate editions. This was “the Golden Age of the English pulpit . . . The seventeenth century was a time when sermons were devoutly heard and avidly read by the English.”<sup>50</sup> But what kind of preaching did the English hear and read?

The aim of Puritan preachers was the conversion, growth in holiness and assurance of salvation of their hearers. Sermons were therefore a mixture of instruction, correction, and encouragement. As Horton Davies put it, “The Puritans believed that preaching was the means chosen by God for illuminating the minds, mollifying the hearts, sensitising the consciences, strengthening the faith, quelling the doubts, and saving the souls of mankind.”<sup>51</sup> Such preaching was necessarily Biblical, exegetical, expository, and pastoral in approach. The language was generally simple with the use of Biblical examples, metaphors and similes. Sermons were practical and spiritual, intending to move the heart as much as inform the mind. It was recognised, moreover, that without the work of the Holy Spirit the preacher’s words were lifeless, as Sibbes himself illustrates:

And because of itself this ministry it is a dead letter; therefore he joins that with the word, which knocks at the heart together with the word, not severed from it, but is the life of it. *Oh! The Spirit is the life, and soul of the word;* and when the inward word, or voice of the Spirit, and the outward word or ministry go together, then Christ doth more effectually knock and stir up the heart.<sup>52</sup>

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48 James I. Packer, “Foreword”, in Dever, ix.

49 Haller, 152.

50 Beth E. Tumbleson, “The Bride and the Bridegroom in the work of Richard Sibbes, English Puritan,” (thesis) (Deerfield, IL, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1984), 29, 30.

51 Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, Vol 2, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 134, in Tumbleson, 30.

52 Grosart, *Works*, 1, 62.

This “spiritual” preaching was in vivid contrast to the “witty”, or clever, sophisticated, preaching common among non-Puritan divines. Samuel Clarke said that the Puritan preachers regarded this as “the wisdom of words” rather than “the words of wisdom.”<sup>53</sup> Their urgent desire was the salvation of souls, and they were not interested in the contemporary fashionable literary approach. The preacher was an ambassador for Christ: “not a private man”, but “commissioned to speak in Christ’s name, ‘the Apostles from Christ, and we from them’.”<sup>54</sup>

Sibbes was very conscious that his hearers were engaged in spiritual warfare. They needed to be assured that they were indeed saved and belonged to the fellowship of God’s elect. Their doubts and fears needed to be quietened. So his approach was to provide encouragement and guidance. Following the typical Puritan use of the Song of Songs<sup>55</sup>, he saw his role as that of the groom’s friend commending the groom, Christ, to his bride, the Church.

Those that bring together these two different parties, are the friends of the bride; that is, the ministers, . . . They are the *paranymphs*, the friends of the bride, that learn of Christ what to report to his spouse, and so they woo for Christ, and open the riches, beauty, honour, and all that is lovely in him, which is indeed the especial duty of ministers – to lay open his unsearchable riches.<sup>56</sup>

This was very much a pastoral approach. His delivery was personal, identifying with his hearers, and using simple, straightforward, often homely language. He wanted his hearers to know how much they were loved by God, and how much they owed to what God had done for them in the life and death of Jesus Christ. “Conversion, spiritual growing pains, the incarnation, the love of God which calls forth love in the believer, peace and joy, holy desires, and prayer”<sup>57</sup> were the constant themes of his preaching.

Sibbes was “practical” in helping his hearers see how the Gospel message applied to their individual lives, and “affective” in giving greater place to the heart or will than to reason. Knowledge of God is important, and so Sibbes’s sermons include instruction and correction, but more important was knowing God “experimentally”. As Bert Affleck puts it, when Sibbes “mentions the *heart* of man he most often is seeking to show man as he relates experientially to God in terms of the *will*. God requires first and foremost of man that man give him his *heart*. ‘What the heart doth not, is not done in

53 Irvonwy Morgan, *Puritan Spirituality*, (London: Epworth Press, 1973), 10.

54 *Ibid.*, 13, quoting from John Preston, *A Pattern of Wholesome Words*, (1658), 321.

55 After his death Sibbes’s sermons on parts of chapters 4, 5 and 6 of the Song were published under the title, *Bowels Opened, or A Discovery of the Neere and deere Love, Union and Communion betwixt Christ and the Church, and consequently betwixt Him and every beleeving soul*. (1639).

56 Grosart, *Works*, 1, 24.

57 Tumbleson, 37.

religion.”<sup>58</sup> So his sermons are full of passionate exhortation and gentle persuasion that his hearers might enjoy the fruits of conversion. For him, “Christianity was a love story. God was essentially a husband to his people: ‘with the same love that God loves Christ, he loves all his’.”<sup>59</sup> It was vital for his hearers to experience this truth, and more than rational powers were needed to appreciate it.

God hath planted the affections in us . . . Indeed, religion is mainly in the affections, whereof there is excellent use. Take away them, and take away all religion whatsoever. A man, were it not for his affections, is like *mare mortuum*, the dead sea that never stirreth.<sup>60</sup>

In his 1673 *Christian Directory* Richard Baxter included Sibbes among those “Affectionate Practical English Writers” who were most to be commended.<sup>61</sup>

Much of Sibbes’s own preaching may have been uncontroversial. He may have been, in Haller’s words, “a rather bland, sweet-natured, mild-mannered, charming, learned and highly respected middle-aged gentleman.”<sup>62</sup> Yet he gained a widespread and continuing reputation, among Dissenters as well as Conformists, as the leading devotional preacher of the time. He was successful in his academic and preaching careers, and was closely associated with important institutions in both university and capital city. Yet he was essentially a modest, humble man, whose desire was to be a faithful exponent of God’s word. A prayer of his published with his final sermons encapsulates much of the preacher and the burden of his preaching:

Gracious and holy Father! . . . thou art a gracious and merciful Father unto us in Jesus Christ, in abundance of thy love and mercy. . . speak peace unto us in thy Christ, and say to our souls by thy Holy Spirit, that thou art our salvation. And for clearer evidence that we are in thy favour, let us find the blessed work of thy Holy Spirit opening our understanding, clearing our judgments, kindling our affections, discovering our corruptions, framing us in every way to be such as thou mayest take pleasure and delight in. . . And grant . . . that . . . out of it [the word] we may learn thy holy will; and then labour to frame our lives thereafter, as may be most to thy glory and our own comfort.<sup>63</sup>

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58 Bert Affleck, “The Theology of Richard Sibbes,” (thesis), (Madison, NJ, Drew University, 1968), 214, quoting Sibbes, *Works*, 2, 369.

59 Dever, 143, quoting Sibbes, *Works* 1, 12.

60 Grosart, *Works*, Vol. 1, 368.

61 Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory, Or, A Summ of Practical Theology and Cases of Conscience*, (London, 1673), in Dever, 143n.

62 Haller, 163.

63 Sibbes, *Works* vii, 337, in Ronald Norman Frost, “Richard Sibbes’ Theology of Grace and the Division of English Reformed Theology,” (thesis), (University of London, 1996), 9, 10.

## “A MATTER OF INDIFFERENCY”: A COMMENTARY ON THE CHESHIRE CLASSIS MEETINGS OF 1691

### Introduction

Study of Reformed worship in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries points to the diversity of local and regional practices across Europe. This paper focuses on the practice of a Cheshire chapel community in 1691, but it also considers the wider implications of the matters raised.

In 1689 the Toleration Act had allowed Dissenting congregations to build meeting-houses and to worship according to their own beliefs and practices, but this toleration was subject to conditions, of which three stand out.<sup>1</sup> First, to warrant exemption from the “pains and penalties” of earlier Acts, those who dissented from the Church of England were required to take certain oaths of loyalty to the state and to make and subscribe to a specified declaration. Secondly, places used for the assembly of Dissenters were not allowed to have their doors “locked, barred or bolted during the time of such meeting”. And, finally, places of worship were to be certified by the bishop, or archdeacon, or justice of the peace, although each certificate was to cost no more than sixpence.

The years between the Restoration (1660) and the Glorious Revolution (1688/89) had been uncertain and often difficult for Presbyterians, Independents (Congregationalists), Baptists, and Quakers, especially under the provisions of the 1662 Act of Uniformity, despite the short-lived 1672 Declaration of Indulgence which allowed some nonconforming worship under licence. But, from 1689, the Dissenters could at last express themselves in new structures without the fear of fines, imprisonment, or deportation.<sup>2</sup>

The congregations of the two main strands of the Reformed tradition in England and Wales in 1689 – the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists – realised that they had much in common, including the need for paid pastors. In London, most of their ministers formed what they called a “Happy Union” in March 1691 and adopted *Heads of Agreement* for a voluntary association of ministers that respected both the Presbyterian emphasis on regular meetings of ministers (classis meetings) and the Congregational emphasis on local church

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1 The Toleration Act, 1689, was “An Act for exempting their Majesties’ Protestant Subjects dissenting from the Church of England from the Penalties of certain laws”. A useful version of this Act, with background notes on its history and theology, may be found in Gerald Bray (ed) *Documents of the English Reformation* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1994), 570-577.

2 A valuable summary of the Restoration period (1660-1688) is given in Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *The Churches of England from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II: Volume I, 1558-1680* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 232-296. Hylson-Smith sees in this Restoration period a transformation of “Puritanism into Dissent, and Dissent into Nonconformity”, especially in the events of the 1660s.

independence. Presbyterians were particularly numerous in Lancashire and Cheshire and the classis meetings of these two counties were among the first five or so such gatherings to adopt the London *Heads of Agreement*.<sup>3</sup>

Although Knutsford soon became the usual venue for the new Cheshire Classis, its inaugural meeting was held at Macclesfield in March 1691 to consider “the Case relating to the Gesture to be used by the Minister in the Administration of the Lords Supper”, because the Macclesfield minister had apparently been at odds with many of his congregation on this issue. The minister (Dr. Joseph Eaton) was said to be “Congregational in his judgement”, whereas there was a leaning towards Presbyterianism in his congregation, and the *Heads of Agreement* provided no prescription regarding the administration of communion. At a second meeting of the Classis, the contents of a separate letter received from the London ministers regarding this matter were discussed, approved, and recommended to the Macclesfield congregation.<sup>4</sup> This article looks at the content of that letter. Incidentally, at the same meeting, the London *Heads of Agreement* were “read over” but not considered and approved until the third meeting.

### The Letter

At the second meeting of the Cheshire Classis, held on 14 April 1691, the minutes record that, after prayer, “the Case above mention’d being before undetermin’d was reassum’d and M<sup>er</sup> Hows Letter in y<sup>e</sup> name of y<sup>e</sup> London Ministers relating to that Affair read and Approv’d of and Recommended to y<sup>e</sup> Congregation at Macclesfield as an Expedient to settle y<sup>t</sup> matter”. A copy of the letter addressed to the Macclesfield minister was written into the minutes:

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3 For the *Heads of Agreement* (1691) see Iain Murray, *The Reformation of the Church: A collection of Reformed and Puritan documents on Church issues* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 301-307, and introductory notes. The “Heads” deal with nine matters:—

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| i Of Churches and Church Members | vi Of Occasional Meetings of Ministers, &c                                   |
| ii Of the Ministry               | vii Of our Demeanour towards the Civil Magistrate                            |
| iii Of Censures                  | viii Of a Confession of Faith  |
| iv Of Communion of Churches      | ix Of our Duty and Deportment towards them that are not in Communion with us |
| v Of Deacons and Ruling Elders   |  |

Kenneth Hylson-Smith cites “associations of Presbyterian ministers in Devon, Hampshire, Cheshire, Lancashire, the West Riding, and probably elsewhere” who endorsed the *Heads of Agreement*. See his *The Churches of England from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II: Volume II 1689-1833* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 58.

4 See *Meetings of the Cheshire Ministers* (Ref. EUC9/4458/1 at the Cheshire Record Office) and A. Gordon (ed), *Cheshire Classis Minutes 1691-1745* (London: The Chiswick Press, 1919). Of the 122 meetings of the Cheshire ministers between 1691 and 1745, more than 85% were held at Knutsford.



S<sup>er</sup> A Case was Propounded this day among divers Min<sup>rs</sup> which I was (privately) told was Yours viz. That some of your Society scrupled to Receive y<sup>e</sup> Lords Supper otherwise than as haveing the Elements delivered immediately to them by your own hand.

Two things were in Reference hereto agree'd Unanimous

1 That they might very Lawfully and fittly passe from hand to hand, which the Rule forbids not, & (if we may judge by Parity of Reason) seems rather to favour. And herein the constant practise of the Church of Scotland hath long Concurred, & still doth.

2 However that it being a Matter of indifferency, you ought to offend none herein, nor Impose a thing not Determined Expresly by Rule, as a Condition of Church Communion. And therefore to let such as desire it from your own hand be placed near you (successively, if not altogether, as 'tis the Manner in Holland to fill the Table successively; This may [be] done with you if one Table will not Receive at once all that are unsatisfyd to receive otherwise) that So none may be deprived of so needfull a Priviledge, needlesly, either through y<sup>r</sup> own weakness or the want of y<sup>t</sup> Indulgence thereto which their Case may require.

And in this advice y<sup>e</sup> Brethren that were consulted, (formerly of both pers<sup>u</sup>sions, Presbyterian & Congregational Tho now there is no such Distinction with us) were most unanimous. And 'twas left to be Communicated to you by

Y<sup>r</sup> Affectionate Br<sup>er</sup>  
& fellow servant  
John Howe

Lond. Ap.6.91

The signatory to this letter – John Howe – was undoubtedly the same Presbyterian minister, Puritan divine, and writer who had been one of the three chief agents of the *Heads of Agreement*, the others being the Congregational minister Matthew Mead and the New England pastor Increase Mather.<sup>5</sup> But John Howe, in particular, commands our attention as an eirenecist who sought to unite Presbyterians and Congregationalists in the new climate of cooperation following the 1689 Act of Toleration. However, the letter itself raises a number of issues associated with the wider Reformed attitude to the administration of communion and the acceptance, even celebration, of diversity in worship practices. The Reformed tradition had long been an international,

5 John Howe (1630-1705). Formerly Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, domestic chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, and incumbent at Great Torrington in Devon until he was ejected in 1662. In 1676, he became a pastor of the Presbyterian congregation at Haberdashers' Hall in Cheapside, London.

Matthew Mead (1630?-1699). Formerly Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, incumbent of St. Paul's Chapel, Shadwell, but ejected in 1660. In 1671, he was ordained as pastor of Stepney Congregational Church.

Increase Mather was the son of Richard Mather of Dorchester (1596-1669) who had drafted the influential Cambridge Platform of 1648 for the New England Puritans.

multi-stranded movement that included both Presbyterianism and Congregationalism, and the ways in which worship was conducted were generally regarded as *adiaphora* or “things indifferent” to be determined locally or regionally.<sup>6</sup> In the letter, four matters stand out for comment. First, some members at Macclesfield seem to have objected to receiving the bread and wine other than directly from the minister’s hand. Secondly, the London ministers confirmed that the members “might very Lawfully and fittly” pass the elements from hand to hand. Thirdly, it was a “Matter of indifferency”. Fourthly, those who wish to receive the elements at communion directly from the minister should be placed near the minister, but all should sit “at” the table, if necessary in relays.

### The Direct Mode of Administration

It seems that there was an assumption among some communicants at Macclesfield that the proper way to receive the communion elements of bread and wine was for the minister to give them directly to each communicant. This assumption was understandable because such was the practice at Geneva under John Calvin, and still is.<sup>7</sup> It was also the practice in many francophone regions of Europe and remains the practice in Hungary.

This Calvinist practice was captured in a Lutheran satirical illustration by the German engraver Johann Krell in the middle of the sixteenth century. In his anti-Calvinist satire entitled “Le sacrement de l’autel”, the minister is depicted placing the bread directly into the mouth of a standing communicant while holding the cup ready to administer the wine. It also shows the men receiving the elements first, followed by the women.<sup>8</sup>

Calvin’s own Genevan liturgy (1542) makes no mention of the mode of reception (or even the posture for reception, whether standing or sitting), only that the Lord’s Supper should be celebrated “in good order”. Nevertheless, it seems that Calvin preferred the practice of the ministers breaking the bread and serving both bread and wine directly to the communicants, for he wrote, “. . . in becoming order the believers should partake of the most holy banquet, the ministers breaking the bread and giving the cup”.<sup>9</sup>

Although it is likely that Calvin placed the bread directly into the hands of the communicants rather than into their mouths, he generally left such matters

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6 See the introduction to my article “In the Triune Name: Some Aspects of Baptismal Practice in Early Reformed Churches”, issue 7/2-3 of *Reformation and Renaissance Review*, note 1.

7 See my article “Les premiers dispositifs réformés à Saint-Pierre de Genève”, tome 152 (2006) of *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme Français*, especially 413-417.

8 E. Doumergue, *Iconographic Calvinienne* (Lausanne: George Bridel etc. 1909). See ‘Caricatures Luthériennes Anti-Calvinistes IV: Le sacrement de l’autel’, 194, 195.

9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (ed. John T. McNeill, ET by F.L. Battles, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 4.17.43.



“Le sacrement de l’autel” (part) from E. Doumergue, *Iconographie Calvinienne* (Lausanne, 1909)

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to the church’s discretion. Other Reformers were more prescriptive. For example, in his sixth lenten sermon preached before the king in 1550, John Hooper – who had spent two years (1547-1549) in Zürich and was later to become bishop of Gloucester and Worcester – proclaimed that the minister at communion “should give the bread and not thrust it into the receiver’s mouth”.<sup>10</sup>

But it would appear that some members of the Macclesfield congregation in 1691 considered that Calvin’s Genevan practice was the only valid mode of administration and, when the elements were not given to each communicant directly by the minister, their ensuing complaint precipitated the first “affair” for the Cheshire Classis to address.

### Passing from Hand to Hand

In much of the Reformed world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – especially in the German-speaking regions, in Scotland, and in the Netherlands – the celebration of communion was influenced by the pattern of the Last Supper, as they understood it, in which Jesus and his disciples distributed the elements among themselves as they sat at table. In Scotland, for instance, the 1560 *Book of Discipline*, prepared by John Knox and five colleagues (all Johns), set out the reason for sitting at tables for communion:

<sup>10</sup> S. Carr (ed. for the Parker Society), *Early Writings of John Hooper D.D. Lord Bishop of Gloucester and Worcester: Martyr, 1555*, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1843), 534.

The Table of the Lord is then most rightly ministered when it approacheth most nigh to Christ's own action. But plain it is that at that Supper, Christ Jesus sat with His disciples, and therefore we judge, that sitting at table is most convenient to that holy action . . .

and it continued with the means of distribution:

That the minister break the bread and distribute the same to those that be next to him, commanding the rest, every one with reverence and sobriety, to break with other, we think nighest to Christ's action, and to the perfect practice of the Apostles, as we read it in St. Paul.<sup>11</sup>

The Last Supper model for the rite was also adopted by the Puritans within the Church of England (including Presbyterians and Independents) and by the Separatists outside the national church.<sup>12</sup> This meant that, by the end of the seventeenth century, the practice of sharing the elements by passing them from hand to hand at or near the table had become firmly established in the worship practices of both the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists, who together in London made up the Happy Union.

Receiving the elements directly from the minister was not thought to be wrong, but the Reformed Dissenters of London clearly preferred the practice of passing the bread and wine from hand to hand. This practice helped to strengthen the concept of "the priesthood of all believers", in which communicants acted as priests to each other,<sup>13</sup> although these matters were regarded by most reformers as *adiaphora*.

### *Adiaphora, or Things Indifferent*

In principle, "things indifferent" covered those matters that were neither prescribed nor proscribed by Scripture, especially those worship practices for which there was neither scriptural warrant nor outright condemnation. Some reformers attempted to base church life on biblical teaching alone, under the Regulative Principle,<sup>14</sup> but most of the leading reformers accepted that the

11 John Knox *et al. The First Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh, 1560).

12 See Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Cranmer to Hooker 1534-1603* (London: OUP, 1970), 331, for a description of a Separatist (Barrowist) administration of the Lord's Supper.

13 This concept is based on 1 Peter 2:9, which applies the term "priesthood" to the community of the church. The community of the church is also identified with the "body of Christ", (cf. 1 Cor. 12:27). In the Reformed tradition, the priestly role of the worshipping community takes its lead from the minister as all share in the priesthood of Christ; see David Peel, *Reforming Theology: Explorations in the Theological Traditions of the United Reformed Church* (London: URC, 2002), 239, 240.

14 Known as the Regulative Principle, this approach to church worship and government is sometimes erroneously ascribed to Calvin. See William Cunningham, "The Reformers and the Regulative Principle" in Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*, 38-50, in which Cunningham defends Presbyterianism.

practical details of worship were not critical and should be left to the churches or regions.<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that all such matters were regarded as indifferent. The vestiarian controversies of the Edwardian and Elizabethan periods in the sixteenth century (that is, whether or not traditional vestments should be worn by the clergy) severely tested the limits of *adiaphora*, as did the attitude of the Puritans to the polity and practices of the official church. In 1572, the Puritans' *Admonition to Parliament*<sup>16</sup> listed some forty instances where the Church of England had, in their view, departed from the actions and practices of the primitive church of the New Testament or the early church of the Fathers in matters of preaching, baptism, communion, and discipline. In doing so, the English Puritans tended to make some issues – such as the use of a basin instead of a font at baptism – matters of principle, although other members of the Reformed “family” on the Continent regarded them as “things indifferent”.

With regard to the Lord's Supper, as early as 1536 Calvin had written:

But as for the outward ceremony of the action – whether or not the believers take it in their hands, or divide it among themselves, or severally eat what has been given to each; whether they hand the cup back to the deacon or give it to the next person; whether the bread is leavened or unleavened; the wine red or white – it makes no difference. These things are indifferent, and left at the church's discretion.<sup>17</sup>

The principle of *adiaphora* led to much variety in the Reformed movement between local churches or regional practices, and such variety became characteristic of the movement.<sup>18</sup>

### Sitting at the Table

As indicated above, the recommendations of the London ministers differed from the practice of Geneva not only in regard to the mode of administration – preferring hand-to-hand administration rather than directly from the minister – but also in posture. In Geneva, Calvin had retained something of the practice of the Mass by inviting the communicants to approach the table to receive the elements at the hands of the minister or ministers. But, departing from medieval practice, he set the table or tables near the pulpit rather than before

15 See John Hooper, “The Regulative Principle and Things Indifferent” in Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*, 55-58.

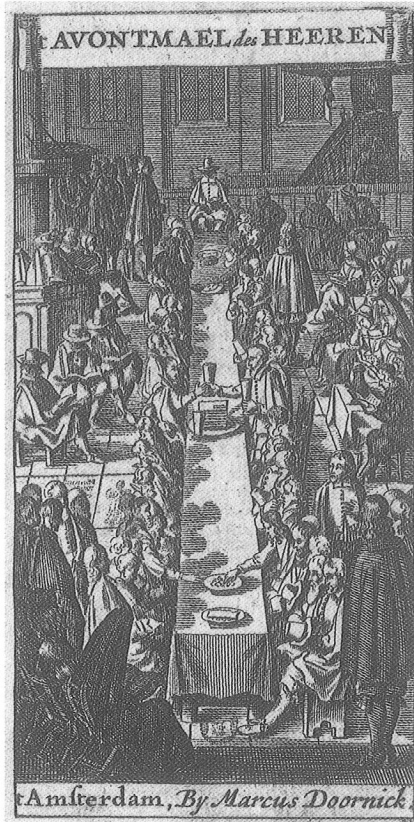
16 See Thomas Wilcox, “The Necessity of Reformation: An Admonition to the Parliament 1572” in Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*, 85-94.

17 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.43.

18 One authoritative expression of the acceptance of variety (or differences) in Reformed worship rites is given in Heinrich Bullenger, *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566), reproduced in A.C. Cochrane (ed), *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 196, 197 (Chapter XXVII, “Of Rites, Ceremonies and Things Indifferent”).

the chancel screen (which had been removed) and served the communicants standing instead of kneeling. It also seems that, at Geneva, the men and women approached separate tables, or a single table separately, with one minister serving the bread at one end of each table and another minister serving the wine at the other.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the standing or ambulatory posture used at Geneva, the London ministers advocated sitting at a table, which had been adopted in Scotland and the Netherlands.<sup>20</sup>



Communion in the Netherlands – ‘t Avontmael des Heeren (1675)

Source: C.A. Swigchem *et al*, *Een huis voor het Woord* (S-Gravenhage, 1984)

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19 The worship arrangements at Calvin’s church in Geneva – Saint-Pierre – are described in “Les premiers dispositifs réformés à Saint-Pierre de Genève” cited above (note 7).

20 C.A. Swigchem *et al*, *Een huis voor het Woord: Het protestantse Kerkintérieur in Nederland tot 1900* (‘s-Gravenhage: Staatsuitgeverij, 1984), pp. 212, 213, illustration 2.

While both Presbyterians and Congregationalists preferred a sitting posture based on the Last Supper, they differed over the means of making this arrangement available to a large number of people. Two approaches had evolved. First, the original Reformed 1525 rite at Zürich<sup>21</sup> had enabled all the communicants to receive the bread and wine at a single sitting by serving them in their seats from a central table, a practice that came to be known as sitting “about” the table and was the normal practice of the Congregationalists. Secondly, there was the practice of inviting the communicants to go forward to sit “at” a table in relays, each of the multiple sittings resembling, it was thought, the pattern of the Last Supper, which was the normal practice of the Presbyterians.<sup>22</sup>

About half a century before the London ministers wrote their letter to the Macclesfield minister, the choice of posture at communion was the subject of a heated debate at the Westminster Assembly in London during negotiations to produce a new directory for worship in England to replace the Book of Common Prayer. The main disputants on this issue were a small but vociferous group of Independents (who wished to remain seated “about” the table) and an equally small but determined company of Scottish Presbyterians (who, with a much larger party of English Presbyterians, wanted the Scottish practice of sitting “at” the table to prevail). The final agreement, as set out in the *Westminster Directory*, stated that the table should be “conveniently placed that the communicants may orderly sit about it, or at it”, thus covering both options.<sup>23</sup>

For the Cheshire Classis, which was predominantly Presbyterian, the London ministers had clearly recommended a posture of sitting “at” the table in relays, and we may assume that the approval of the London advice by the Cheshire Classis meant that it was adopted not only at Macclesfield but also more generally throughout the county.

### Meeting-house Layout

In common with many other new meeting-houses built in response to the Toleration Act, those at Macclesfield, Knutsford, and Dean Row (Wilmslow)

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21 U. Zwingli, *Aktion oder Brauch des Nachtmals* (Zürich, 1525). ET “Action or Use of the Lord’s Supper” in Bard Thompson (ed), *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961/1980), 149-155. The Preface includes this instruction:

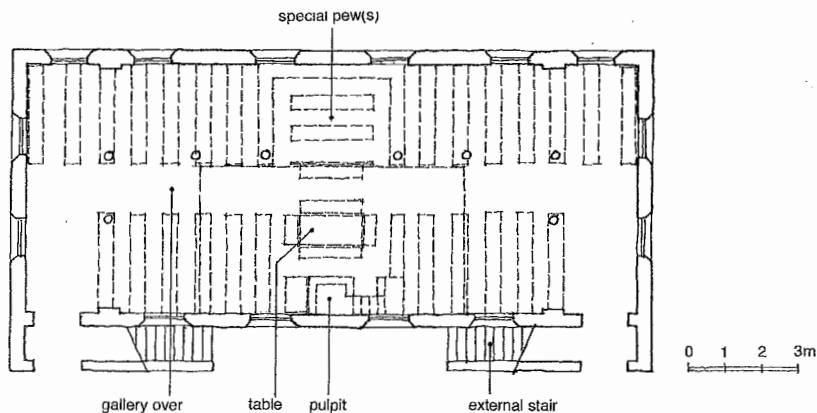
Thereupon the bread shall be carried round by the designated servers on broad wooden plates from one seat to the next – to allow each person to break off a morsel or mouthful with his hand and eat it. In the same fashion, they shall go round with the wine, so that no one need move from his place.

22 As mentioned above, illustrated by the requirements of the Scottish Presbyterian *Book of Discipline*, cited in note 11.

23 This rubric follows the short introductory Exhortation. See *The Westminster Directory being A Directory for the Publique Worship of God in the Three Kingdoms*, reproduced as *Grove Liturgical Study No. 21* (Bramcote, Notts: Grove Books, 1980), 22. Also Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948), 137, 214.

in East Cheshire were rectangular in plan, with the pulpit in the centre of a long side, galleries on the other three sides, and pews arranged so that the congregation could see and hear the preacher clearly. But these three “sister” chapels were also of similar architectural form, which made it necessary in each case for communicants (or receivers) in the galleries to descend by way of external stairs and re-enter at ground floor level to sit “at” the table. Of the three, that at Knutsford still retains much of the arrangement and atmosphere of the original late-seventeenth-century meeting-house, but both the Macclesfield and Dean Row chapels (each about two metres longer than that at Knutsford) have been altered in some way over the years.<sup>24</sup>

The internal arrangement of the three “sister” chapels is not known in detail but, noting their similar architectural form and the acceptance of the advice of the London ministers by the Classis, we may usefully draw on clues provided by the available records of the Macclesfield and Dean Row chapels to suggest a layout for the Knutsford meeting-house. From Macclesfield, a record of pew rents in 1690 gives us some idea of the chapel’s internal layout, with pews set out east and west of both the pulpit and the special pews opposite the pulpit.<sup>25</sup> More particularly, we may note that, while Dean Row and its minister Eliezer Birch were initially Congregationalists, the minister identified himself fully with the Cheshire Classis, filling most of its offices before leaving the area in 1707, and it was he who hosted its important third meeting in 1691 when the London ministers’ *Heads of Agreement* were agreed unanimously. It is



Conjectural plan of New Chapel, Knutsford, Cheshire (c1689)

Drawing: M. Lovibond.

- 24 At Macclesfield, the gallery opposite the pulpit has been removed, and at Dean Row the whole internal layout has been “turned” during Victorian improvements to provide an axial arrangement. See W.H. Burgess, *The Story of Dean Row Chapel, Wilmslow, Cheshire* (1924), 22-24, 78.
- 25 Register of pews and pew rents, 22 August 1690 (Cheshire Record Office EUC3/13/2).



therefore reasonable to assume that, when the Dean Row chapel was built, the posture for receiving communion was sitting “at” the table in accordance with the recommendations of the London Ministers. The chapel still has the old communion table (measuring 1.63 metres long and 0.79 metre wide and said to be seventeenth-century) capable of seating up to a dozen communicants at one sitting, with possibly more standing or sitting near by in the space in front of the pulpit.<sup>26</sup> The conjectural plan of New Chapel, Knutsford, is therefore based not only on its own existing records and site dimensions<sup>27</sup> but also on evidence from the Macclesfield and Dean Row chapels.

Additionally, the Dean Row communion table provides evidence of a later change in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. At some point, the corners of one of the table’s long sides were cut away, making it easier to move around the table on that side, and this would be consistent with it being placed against the pulpit to serve communion to the people seated in their pews – that is, “about” the table. This old communion table was eventually taken into the vestry and replaced by a smaller table.

### Conclusion

The letter dated 6 April 1691 from the London ministers on the matter of the proper celebration of communion was more than a piece of pastoral advice, for it encapsulated issues that had exercised the leaders of Reformed Protestantism since the early sixteenth century. Within the principle of *adiaphora* (or things indifferent), a variety of practices had evolved that occasionally led to strong debate, if not conflict. One such difference of opinion seems to have arisen at the Macclesfield meeting-house early in 1691 and, to resolve the issue, the London ministers not only suggested that communicants should sit “at” table, as in Scotland and generally in the Netherlands though not at Geneva, but they also advocated a compromise for the administration of communion in which those wishing to be served directly by the minister should sit near him, while the rest passed the bread and wine to each other by hand. That the Cheshire Classis accepted the London advice on communion practice and unanimously assented to the *Heads of Agreement* of the Happy Union suggests that a spirit

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26 A suggestion by Alexander Gordon (see note 4) that the table probably stretched from the pulpit to the opposite wall (letter to Burgess in 1923), while increasing the seating capacity substantially, would have had a major and no doubt unacceptable impact on the special seating opposite the pulpit. In the wider Reformed world, the seating opposite the pulpit was often reserved for leading laymen (lairds, burgomasters, benefactors) and/or church officers (elders, deacons). At Macclesfield, the space opposite the pulpit seems to have comprised two pews, one for the elders and deacons, with one of two leading laymen “when he Come Downe”, and one for the other leading layman.

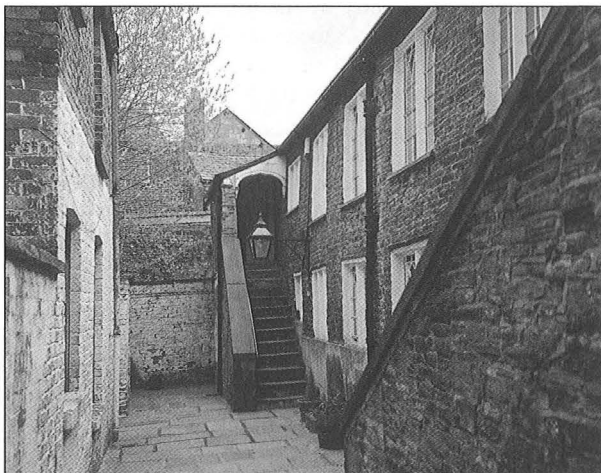
27 The pews (as well as the pulpit) were part of the building from the beginning; see George Payne, *An Ancient Chapel: Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford, with Allstock Chapel, Nr. Knutsford* (Banbury: the Banbury Guardian Office, 1934), 5. Also “Plans of the Chapel and of the Burial Ground Brook Street Knutsford” in 1872 (Cheshire Record Office EUC9/4384/1).

of toleration existed that, while characteristic of the Reformed tradition in principle, had not always been present in practice.

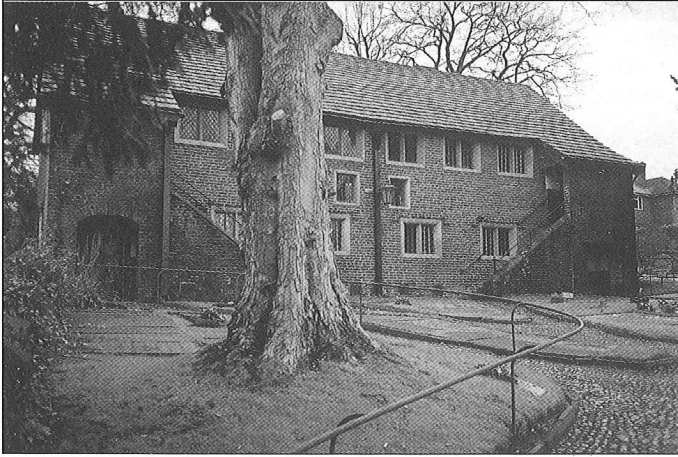
Indeed, the Happy Union itself was short-lived. After a few years its inner tensions on church polity proved too strong for the London experiment and it came to an end, but the mood of cooperation between Presbyterians and Congregationalists continued elsewhere, especially in Cheshire. The Association of Cheshire Ministers of both persuasions – the Cheshire Classis – held regular gatherings for more than half a century after its initial meetings, with the purpose of “ye Promoting of Peace and Unity among themselves & yr Congregations and for mutual Edification”, but it appears that no further discussions took place on the matter of the proper celebration of communion. The Classis produced its last minutes in 1745 and agreed to amalgamate with the Lancashire Provincial Meeting in 1764, by which time the majority of its Presbyterian churches in Cheshire were in the process of becoming Unitarian, although Unitarianism itself was not legal until the passing of the Trinity Act in 1813.

The Macclesfield chapel became Unitarian in spirit during the ministry of John Palmer (1764-1780), causing some evangelical members to move out to form a separate Congregational church, and a similar secession of Congregationalists took place at Knutsford in 1770. But all three of the churches cited in this essay – Macclesfield, Knutsford, and Dean Row – became essentially Unitarian within a century of the first meeting of the Cheshire Classis at Macclesfield in April 1691, and the “Presbyterian” communion practice of sitting “at” table in relays eventually gave way to the “Congregational” practice of sitting “about” the table with the bread and wine taken to the communicants in their seats. The records indicate that nobody again “scrupled to Receive ye Lords Supper otherwise than as haveing the Elements delivered immediately to them” by the minister’s own hand.

MALCOLM LOVIBOND



Macclesfield



Knutsford



Dean Row, Wilmslow

Reformed meeting-houses at Macclesfield, Knutsford, and Dean Row, Wilmslow  
Photographs: M. Lovibond.

## WHY DID THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH FAIL? IV WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The fates were not kind to the United Reformed Church. Originating at a time when British Churches were experiencing accelerating and devastating decline, its medium term viability was always in question. What is more, once it became clear that its vision of being the starting point for a wider ecumenical union was illusory, the question of just why it existed was bound to become pressing. One hope might have been that the creation of a new church across denominational lines would meet with a more positive response than that achieved by less ecumenically minded churches. Any such hope was soon dashed. The creation of a United Reformed Church may have excited some Church insiders; it excited no-one else. The United Reformed Church found itself in a pattern of accelerating decline. In January 1973 it had 192,136 members. By January 2008 (despite further unions with the Churches of Christ and the Congregational Union of Scotland) membership had fallen to 70,508, a decline of 121,628 or 63.3%. Over the whole period, therefore, taking into account the addition of 4,411 members from the Congregational Union of Scotland in 2000<sup>1</sup> and 2,317 from the Re-formed Association of Churches of Christ, in 1981, that is an annual decline of around 2.99%.<sup>2</sup> In some circles this gained the URC the title of the fastest declining church in Christendom. If one breaks this down into five-year periods the statistics are:<sup>3</sup>

	Members	Decline	% Decline
1973-77	192,136 to 166,378	25,758	13.4
1977-82	166,378 to 143,648	22,730	13.66
1982-87	143,648 to 129,141	14,407	10.09
1987-92	129,141 to 114,692	15,449	11.96
1992-97	114,692 to 96,917	17,725	15.45
1997-02	96,919 to 87,732	8,187	8.44
2002-07	87,732 to 73,503	14,229	16.21

It is doubtful if these statistics alone quite convey how weak most URC congregations were. In many cases people had been left on membership rolls for considerable periods after they ceased any real contact with the Church. It is true that there also would be people worshipping regularly in most congregations who did not choose to become members. In most cases, however, the

1 *United Reformed Church Yearbook*, London, 2001, 17.

2 *Directory of the Re-formed Association of Churches of Christ*, Birmingham 1980, 33-39.

3 These statistics, with others in the text, are taken from the relevant *Yearbooks of the United Reformed Church*.

number worshipping would be lower than the membership. A church like Bournemouth, Richmond Hill St Andrews, for example, may be the second largest in the URC with a membership of 294 – the average attendance however is only 161. Cheam St Andrews (the twelfth largest URC church) may have a membership of 200 but the average attendance is only 130. This disparity is particularly noticeable in the Synod of Scotland. Nairn (the ninth largest URC) claims 223 members but has an average congregation of only 90. Comparable figures for other churches are: Greenock West 189-50, Saughtonhall 137-55, Giffnock 169-76, Carluke 174-75, Righead 186-85, and Port Glasgow 90-324. Inflated membership figures mask the reality in many churches.

The perilous nature of the URC's situation is emphasised when we consider the age structure of the Church. According to the English Church Life Survey of 2001 the most numerous age group in the URC was the 65-74 cohort, which comprised nearly 25% of those attending. Another 20% was in the 75-84 age range<sup>5</sup>. Unsurprisingly the survey concluded that URC membership might expect to halve again in the following twenty years. Part of the reason for this age imbalance has been the collapse of children's work in the URC. In 1973 there were 102,027 children in URC churches (or approximately one child to every two members). In 2008 there were 17,142 children in worship (or one child to every four members). When I was ordained in 1975 one could expect to find junior churches in the vast majority of URC churches – today that is frequently not the case. In a good many churches there are no children at all. When I arrived at my first church (Freemantle, Southampton) in 1975, it had 44 children, in 2008 it had 1.

A remarkable feature of this decline is that it was not confined to small churches or to parts of the country that traditionally had been more difficult. The real strength of the United Reformed Church is in the middle-class suburbs. Even in areas like these, URC churches are mostly in steep decline. In 1973 the two largest URC churches were Cheam, St Andrews with 915 members (186 children), and Richmond Hill, Bournemouth, with 801 (84 children). In 2005 they had 262 members (52 children) and 200 members (8 children) respectively. In another highly regarded Surrey suburban church, Purley, membership has fallen from 559 (121 children) in 1973 to 155 (7 children) in 2008. The same remorseless decline has affected the great preaching churches. The City Temple in London, where people in Leslie Weatherhead's time might queue for a seat, still had 388 members in 1973. In 2005 it had 35. Carrs Lane Church, Birmingham, famous for the ministry of R.W. Dale, fell in the same period from 389 (70 children) to 100 members (4 children). Princes Street, Norwich, fell from 488 members (134 children) to 132 (no children at all).

Of course there were churches that held their own or in some cases had

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4 *URC Yearbook*, 2009.

5 Peter Brierley, *Religious Trends 1999/2000*, (London: Christian Research, 2000), UK Christian Handbook, 2, Table 4.9.1.

grown. But the scale of the collapse needs to be grasped. Visiting my old churches in 2008, what most struck me was how few new faces there were – mostly it was the residue of the people I knew carrying on with diminishing numbers and declining hope. A member of my present congregation, in her early thirties, recently moved to Brighton and looked around at different churches. One of the URC churches she tried included no-one of working age. “We’ve determined,” said one of the ladies “that as long as any of us are alive we’ll keep this Church open”. Such is the mood in many URC churches.

It is difficult to judge objectively the quality of worship in the URC. But the twenty-member choir in my first church is one of the many that has vanished. Good organists are hard to find and music groups frequently mediocre indifferent (sometimes the middle-aged trying to give young people “what they want” in the sadly mistaken hope that it will lure them back). In many churches worship is in a largely empty building with depressing music and indifferent preaching. Today in the URC the reality is devastating decline and intellectual collapse.

### Comparative patterns of decline

To assess URC decline rigorously we need to compare it first with decline in the constituent churches before 1972 and then with that in other churches in the same period. The first is simply done. Between 1947 and 1972 the Presbyterian Church of England lost 29% of its membership, the Congregationalists 32%, and the Churches of Christ 56%: an annual loss of 1.36%, 1.53% and 3.23 % respectively. This compares with an annual average decline of around 2.9% for the United Reformed Church. Steve Bruce’s claim that the “URC has shown a faster rate of decline than did any of its components before the merger,”<sup>6</sup> is not true of the Churches of Christ but is applicable to Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Rather than ecumenical commitment generating growth it coincided with accelerating decline.

The second comparison is more difficult to make. Although the format of membership in the United Reformed Church is similar to that of the other Nonconformist denominations there can be no direct comparison with either the Anglican or Catholic Churches whose membership is not measured in the same way. It is certain, however, that church attendance was generally declining. The handbook, *Religious Trends 1999/2000*<sup>7</sup>, notes that regular church attendance in Britain fell from 4.74 million in 1989 to 3.71 million in 1998; an annual rate of more than 2.5%. This is only a marginal improvement on the rate of decline in URC membership. This conclusion is supported by the analysis of membership or attendance in most other churches.

The simplest comparison is with the Methodist Church. From 1977 to 1984

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6 Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 86.

7 Brierley, *Religious Trends 1999/2000*.

Methodist membership fell from 516,000 to 458,000, a decline of 11% in seven years. From 1986 to 2001 membership fell from 443,813 to 327,724 a decline of 25.90% in fifteen years. This gives an annual decline over the period of 2%. This is significantly lower than the URC decline, although Sawkins estimates that at the current rate of decline the Methodist Church will cease to exist by 2031.<sup>8</sup>

With the Church of England, comparisons are more complicated since there is no equivalent category to membership. Since 1968, however, Sunday attendances have been collected centrally. As a percentage of the population these have almost halved in three decades, declining from 3.5% in 1968 to 1.9% in 1999.<sup>9</sup> MARC Europe Research suggests an even faster decline, from 3.6% in 1979 to 2% in 1998. Other statistics reveal much the same picture. Baptisms per thousand live births fell from 446 in 1970 to 275 in 1990. Between 1960 and 1982 Anglican confirmations fell from 191,000 to 84,500 – a fall of more than 50%. As Adrian Hastings observes, between 1860 and 1960 Anglican decline was “steady but seldom appeared calamitous.”<sup>10</sup> From 1960 things changed. “It is not exaggerated to conclude that between 1960 and 1982 the Church of England as a going concern was effectively reduced to not much more than half its previous size.”<sup>11</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church has a distinct history of secularization. For most of the twentieth century it was the great exception to church decline. In 1851 total Catholic attendance in Britain represented 3.8% of all church attendance; in 1989 it represented 35.2%. Catholic attendance peaked in the 1960s. Thereafter the numerical decline was rapid. Mass attendances fell from 1,934,853 in 1970 to 1,461,074 in 1985, an annual decline of 1.85%. From 1990 to 2002 attendance fell from 1,351,342 to 947,845: a fall of 29.85% or an annual decline of 2.91%.<sup>12</sup> Between 1965 and 1985 adult converts halved and “the number of child baptisms, confirmations and marriages declined by over two-fifths.”<sup>13</sup> From 1990 to 2002 the number of priests in England fell from 5,712 to 5,120, a decline of 10.3%.<sup>14</sup> Again this is an accelerating rate of decline not out of line with the URC.

It is true there are some churches that did not share in this calamitous decline. In the Baptist Union of Great Britain, for example, in the period 1990-2002, membership fell from 149,262 to 139,028<sup>15</sup> a decline of 6.85% or an

8 J Sawkins, *Church Affiliation Statistics: counting Methodist Sheep*, (Edinburgh: Heriot-Watt University School of Management, 1998).

9 Robin Gill, *The Empty Church Revisited*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 247.

10 Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1990*, (London: SCM Press, 1991), 551.

11 *Ibid.*, 603.

12 Peter Brierley (ed), *Religious Trends 4*, (London: Christian Research, 2003), 8.5.

13 Michael Hornsby-Smith, *The Changing Parish: A Study of Parishes, Priests and Parishioners After Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 1989), 207.

14 Peter Brierley (ed), *Religious Trends 4*, 8.5.

15 *Ibid.*, 9.3.

an annual decline of only 0.57%. The Congregational Federation, the largest grouping of those Congregational Churches which remained outside the United Reformed Church, also shows slower decline. In 1976 the Congregational Federation had 297 churches and 10,907 members. In 1994 there were 284 churches and 9,096 members, a membership decline of 16.60% or an annual decline of 0.59%.<sup>16</sup> This compares with a URC decline in the same period from 174,611 to 106,537: a decline of 38.98%, or an annual decline of 2.71%. One possible explanation of this disparity is that while continuing Congregational churches were often small (their average membership was around the mid-thirties) at least they now possessed a clearer sense of identity.

In some sections of the Church there was numerical growth. From 1990 to 2002 attendance at independent church congregations (for example Vineyard and Cornerstone) in England grew from 74,838 to 154,900,<sup>17</sup> an increase of 93.6%. The total membership of Pentecostal churches in England rose from 142,806 in 1990 to 233,065 in 2002,<sup>18</sup> an increase of 63.20%. Included in this was a strong increase, attributed to immigration, in the membership of African churches. Significant as these increases are, they have never managed to reverse or even slow the general rate of church decline. What the future of such churches will be in terms of mainstream British culture is also open to question. Revivals have always been a part of religious history. The scale of current charismatic revival is much less significant than that of its eighteenth- or nineteenth-century predecessors. Its lack of serious intellectual or institutional underpinning suggests that the long term effects may be ephemeral. Indeed, Martyn Percy even argues that "So far as charismatic Christianity is concerned, the party is largely over"<sup>19</sup> – suggesting that the future will be the routinization of charisma. That may underestimate the effect of African immigration on British religion but by any international comparison the remarkable thing is just how tangential charismatic Christianity is to the sociology of contemporary British society.

What this comparison of church decline demonstrates is a significant change in the pattern of secularization. We have moved from a time when Congregational and Presbyterian Churches were declining at twice the general rate to one in which the URC, while declining faster than either pre-union Presbyterians or Congregationalists, now shares in the general decline of the mainstream churches at a roughly similar rate. In England typical Sunday attendance in the Church of England fell by 47% between 1979 and 1998, in the Methodist Church by 44%, in the Roman Catholic Church by 42%, and in the United Reformed Church by 39%.<sup>20</sup> URC decline is no longer *sui generis*.

16 *Congregational [Federation] Yearbooks*.

17 Brierley, *op.cit.*, 9.9.

18 *Ibid.*, 9.13.

19 Martyn Percy, "A Place at High Table? Assessing the Future of Charismatic Christianity," in Grace Davie, Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead, *Predicting Religion*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 106.

20 Peter Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out*, (London: Christian Research, 2000), 33-38.



### URC decline and liberal theology

Recognition of this shared pattern enables us to dismiss one suggested explanation for URC decline. For Steve Bruce a key factor is the liberal theology of the URC.<sup>21</sup> He sees this as illustrative of his thesis that “Liberal Religion is weak because epistemological individualism makes it hard to develop consensus: reduces individual commitment: makes it hard to preserve the belief system from mutation; and weakens the will to reproduce the system.”<sup>22</sup> The breadth of the decline across churches which are quite dissimilar theologically, however, suggests a common rather than a particular primary cause.

What is more, despite its popular image, the URC is not a uniformly liberal church. It has a strong conservative wing and a fairly vacuous centre. If liberal theology were the problem one might expect to find evidence that conservative churches within the URC were escaping the general decline. But this is not the case.

Michael Hopkins, in an unpublished thesis, set out to study church growth in the URC. He selected eighteen churches, with a consistent record of growth since the formation of the URC and added to that a list of churches nominated as growing by URC Moderators, giving a total of seventy-eight churches. These were sent a questionnaire of which fifty-eight were returned, a response rate of 74.36%. Of these forty (68.97%) had registered a growth in membership between 1995 and 2000. A further thirteen churches (22.41%) had received new people into membership, but had lost members at the same rate that they gained them. Five churches (8.62%) had actually fallen in membership.<sup>23</sup>

Of the churches that replied, sixteen (27.59%) were broadly conservative evangelical, fourteen (24.14%) were broadly liberal, and the remaining twenty-eight (48.28%) represented varying degrees of being middle of the road. By comparison the 1989 English Church census showed that 24% of United Reformed Church congregations labelled themselves as evangelical, 37% liberal and 36% as “broad”.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that the growing churches matched the theological composition of the URC. As Hopkins notes, “every conceivable theological perspective was represented”<sup>25</sup> in the list of growing churches and evangelical churches were no more included than would be statistically expected on a proportionate basis.

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21 Bruce, *op.cit.*, 86.

22 Steve Bruce, “The Problems of a Liberal Religion,” in Mark Chapman (ed.), *The Future of Liberal Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 236.

23 Michael Hopkins, “Church Growth in the United Reformed Church: an investigation into situations of Church Growth in the United Reformed Church and an exploration of how the factors generating growth can be applied more widely”. Mansfield College, Oxford, April 2001.

24 *Ibid.*, 10-11.

25 *Ibid.*, 11.

One methodological problem with Hopkins's analysis is that growth is measured in a five-year period. Short-term bursts of growth or decline, or a long period between membership reviews, can cause statistics based on such a short period to be unreliable. I have, therefore, checked the membership figures of the forty growing churches over a ten-year period: 1994-2004.<sup>26</sup> Of the fifty-eight churches named as having sent in a questionnaire two were not listed as URC churches in the 1994 Yearbook. Of the remaining fifty churches, thirty showed a membership increase, three showed no change, and twenty showed a decline. Total membership in the group of churches was 3,753 in 1994 and 3,900 in 2004. That is an increase over ten years of 147, or 3.91%. This compares with a URC decline in the same period from 111,326 to 84,963, a decline of 26,363, or 23.68%.

Clearly Hopkins did not adequately identify genuinely growing churches. His conclusion that "The United Reformed Church is not in terminal decline and the future does not have to be bleak,"<sup>27</sup> can hardly be said to have been established. But if we take the twenty-seven churches which showed an increase in the ten-year period (and were prepared to disclose their theology) nine were liberal (33%), eleven middle of the road (41%) and seven evangelical/charismatic (26%). The size of the sample is small but this again matches the theological balance of the URC. Bruce's suggestion that the URC's decline is due to its liberalism is no more substantiated by its internal balance of growth and decline than it is by comparison with comparable mainstream churches of a more conservative nature. Much more clearly than for its Congregational and Presbyterian predecessors, URC decline is not primarily due to the nature of its theology, or the particularities of its life as a Reformed church, but is directly related to the general process of secularization.

### Changes in the pattern of secularisation

Secularization is a fundamental meta-narrative for understanding religious change in Britain. It is, however, important to recognise that even in British society different explanations need to be offered for secularization in different periods. It is not enough simply to use a general model of secularization for the whole process. With URC decline we need to explain why the pattern of secularization has changed from that experienced by Congregationalists and Presbyterians earlier in the twentieth century.

A major attempt to explain the process of secularization has been that of Callum Brown who argues that, rather than secularization being a long-term trend in British society, "quite suddenly in 1963, something very profound ruptured the character of the nation, and its people, sending organised Christianity on a downward spiral to the margins of social significance."<sup>28</sup> He

26 *United Reformed Church Yearbooks*, 1994, 2004.

27 Hopkins, *op.cit.*, 20.

28 Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 1.

sees the effects of second-wave feminism as a key factor in this. Changing attitudes expressed, for example, in pop music destroyed the concept of the traditional woman committed to a home-based culture and so led to the death of pious femininity. Since religious life centred upon a feminine culture this was disastrous for the church.

In its central argument this thesis cannot be sustained. As we have seen decline was a reality in the Reformed Churches well before the 1960s. The complex picture of denominational growth and decline certainly began a hundred years before this. The membership of the major British Protestant churches fell from five million to four-and-a-half-million between 1900 and 1968 at a time when the total British population rose from thirty-seven to fifty-three million, and though the Catholic population rose because of immigration, the number of indigenous recruits to Catholicism also fell.<sup>29</sup> The intellectual collapse of Christianity, and the reducing to marginality of the Christian discourse, had long preceded the Sixties. My experience of growing up in a church in that decade was to find even then that being a young person made me a rarity in an aging church. As David Thompson comments, "A distinction should be drawn between the period when a change becomes apparent and the period in which the reasons for that change are sought. Brown shows that the change became apparent in the 1960s; he does not show so convincingly that the reasons for the change lay in that decade."<sup>30</sup>

None the less the cultural change of the Sixties, with its rapid evolution of non-traditional sexual mores and non-deferential attitudes, deepened the divide between church and society. The church was increasingly seen not simply as the conveyor of a message which people no longer believed (the problem before) but as an institution fundamentally at odds with the desire for free personal pilgrimage. The rise of religious individualism has a socio-economic foundation. In the latter part of the twentieth century a form of globalised market capitalism created an integrated and universal economy across large sections of the world. This led to the dominance of consumer orientated market capitalism. Eric Hobsbawm argued that the marks of such a society were "an otherwise unconnected assemblage of self-centred individuals pursuing only their own gratification."<sup>31</sup> This is over rhetorical. People were still motivated by religious belief, or ideals such as a concern for the environment or the desire to serve the community. But it is emphatically the case that the economic nexus has increasingly shaped the institutions of society and the mind-set of the individual.

This profoundly affects all aspects of community life. As Robert Putnam has argued in the United States the same kind of decline observable in religious

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29 R. Currie, A. Gilbert and L. Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 100.

30 David Thompson, *The Decline of Congregationalism*, (London: Congregational Memorial Hall Trust, 2007), 10.

31 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, (London: Abacus, 1995), 16.

institutions can be seen in other social structures – political parties, PTAs, bowling clubs, or indeed any local organization: “In effect more than a third of America’s civic infrastructure simply evaporated between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s.”<sup>32</sup> This reflects a societal shift towards individual and material values and away from community values. The same was true in Britain where traditional class and community-based loyalty gave way to a more pragmatic attitude. As Hugh McLeod puts it, “Collective identities and communal institutions of all kinds, political as well as religious, were weakened as the life of married couples focused on the home and the nuclear family, and as individuals claimed the right to live their own way without outside interference”.<sup>33</sup>

The implications for religion were significant. Observing this in the 1960s Peter Berger suggested that religious choice was becoming like a supermarket and the phrase “cafeteria religion” was coined to indicate a situation in which you could pick and choose what you liked for religious preference.<sup>34</sup> You were no longer committed to a religion because you had been born in it – you had to see something in it for yourself. David Lyon argues that “religious activity is, increasingly, subject to personal choice, or voluntarism, and that increasingly for many, religious identities are assembled to create a bricolage of beliefs and practices.”<sup>35</sup>

For a religious tradition that was already intellectually and perhaps morally undermined, this new individualistic cultural challenge was to prove deeply destructive. To people experiencing the delights of consumer satisfaction it might be that nothing the Church offered seemed interesting any more. And even if people felt a religious need, was their local church able to meet it? And if not, why go? This was the context in which church decline accelerated – most Churches seemed to have as much relevance to whatever spiritual needs people felt as the Co-op had in the modern shopping street.

Callum Brown makes a relevant point when he argues that, while student and youth revolt was certainly a factor in the Sixties leading to people leaving churches, “the more fundamental aspect was a boredom among both adults and young with organised religion. The exodus was more a walking away from religion, rather than a revolt”.<sup>36</sup> Brown notes that among the memories and reminiscences from the period recounting the loss of contact there is none of the anguish that was found in many Victorian memoirs. He quotes an Anglican rural dean in the oral history book and film *Akenfield* as saying how “abysmally dull” the church was. It is interesting to note that a study carried out in 1997 by John Healey and Leslie Francis found that 65% of Methodist

32 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 43.

33 Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 123.

34 See J Carrette, J and R King, *Selling Spirituality: The silent takeover of religion*, (London: Routledge, 2004).

35 David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 76.

36 Callum Brown, *op.cit.*, 238.

ministers thought “Methodist worship is often dull” – a figure which rose to 78% among the under forty-six age range.<sup>37</sup>

David Hay and Kay Hunt’s study of the non-churched found that while spirituality has considerable importance for them, there are often critical feelings towards the religious institution. For example, one person compared the egalitarian nature of spirituality with the unattractiveness of the hierarchy within the church. Similarly a number of people spoke about the openness and freedom of spirituality as opposed to the closed rigidity of religious dogma.<sup>38</sup> They conclude that most people’s spirituality is in what Daniel Batson calls the “Quest Mode”.<sup>39</sup> This has left churches culturally isolated.

This need not mean the end of all religion. The sectarian social organization of some conservative churches has offered a counter-cultural haven to those alienated by post-modernity. While never making the major impact on British society that many imagined they would, the charismatic churches found a way of meeting some of those to whom pop culture was more natural than the traditional forms of church life. The growth of Islam, and of African independent churches, made it clear that immigrant communities were anxious to retain their own forms of religious life and resistant to the general secularity of British culture. Clearly some churches are able to survive in an individualistic market culture.

None of this, however, offered much comfort to the United Reformed Church or the other once culturally dominant churches. The accelerated decline of the churches in the second half of the twentieth century is evidence of how difficult the new culture was for any of the churches. It left most churches culturally stranded. From the dream of being at the heart of a breakthrough, in the renewal of the Church, the United Reformed Church now finds itself confronting the reality of a decline so severe that it has to face the question of whether it has any future.

### A future for the URC?

By 2001 it was clear that the URC was in profound, conceivably terminal, decline. The membership had halved, and looked likely to halve again over the next twenty years. Increasingly it was difficult to fill voluntary posts in District Councils, Synods or the national church. Financially the church faced increasing deficits and only legacies enabled it to balance its books.<sup>40</sup> In ten years the number of stipendiary ministers had fallen from 756 to 608 (19.57%) – a trend that could only accelerate.

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37 Peter Brierley (ed.), *Religious Trends 7*, (Swindon: Christian Research, 2008), 9.9.

38 David Hay and Kay Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People who Don't Go to Church*, (Research Report, Nottingham University, 2000).

39 D. Batson, P. Schoenrade, and L. W. Ventis, *Religion and the Individual: A Social Psychological Perspective*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

40 *Catch The Vision*, (London: United Reformed Church, 2005), 11-12.

But the failure was never simply numerical or financial. The URC had been founded on a model of ecumenism which was already becoming irrelevant when the church adopted it. Beginning with no sense of purpose beyond the ecumenical it had largely failed to develop an identity. Its intellectual life had withered and its understanding of the Reformed tradition was unsure. Increasingly it was hard to know what the purpose of the church was or why anyone should belong to it.

With the intention of seeking renewal the church launched a process known as “Catch the Vision”, which reported to the 2005 General Assembly. This recognised some of the realities of decline. “A decline in numbers means that greater burdens fall on fewer people.” Increasingly the congregations were often small. “Our membership has more than halved since 1972, but the number of local churches has declined only by 10%.”<sup>41</sup> The report recognised that this put increasing stress on ministers who found themselves coping with unfulfilling ministries. It argued, however, that the URC possessed great gifts from its heritage as a Reformed church and offered what it saw as a path to God’s future for the Church:

**1. New ways of being church and a deeper engagement in mission.**

There should be a feasibility study on the use of electronic media and an increased use of special category ministers.

**2. A slimmer, more rigorous organization.** General Assemblies would be biennial and much smaller. Most radically the Church proposed to remove one layer of government, by eliminating District Councils.

**3. A renewed ecumenical commitment.** The time was not right for a unity scheme but “General Assembly asks all congregations to look again for more local ecumenical possibilities” and the General Assembly should explore the possibility of “a church of Churches and informal conversations between the Ecumenical Committee and our ecumenical partners”.

**4. A new spirituality for the Twenty-first Century.** The report recognised the post-Christian nature of Britain (“We are a tiny minority in an alien land”)<sup>42</sup> and that the Church had little idea how this challenge was to be met. “As a steering group we have barely dipped our toes in these waters, although we have had interesting conversations about spirituality and community regeneration, and have begun to plan a small consultation on mission, spirituality and evangelism for the autumn.”<sup>43</sup>

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41 *Ibid.*, 12.

42 *Ibid.*, 30.

43 *Ibid.*

The tentative nature of much of this is evident. The reality of decline is superficially addressed. No real assessment of the URC's preferred model of ecumenism is undertaken. There is little reflection on the role of a denomination in a post-denominational society. Nor is it clear what the reality of "a new spirituality for the twenty-first century" will mean in the many churches where there is hardly anyone of working age.

Administratively the most significant proposal was the abolition of District Councils. Certainly something needed to be done in this area. For a small church the URC's structure was over-elaborate, it was becoming impossible to fill the multiplicity of posts, and in some places District Councils were effectively ceasing to exist. But whether this will make any significant contribution to the future viability of the Church is another question. In an increasingly post-denominational age, with a great stress on the local, Synods may hardly be visible to most church members. How long will local churches be able or willing to fund the increasing costs of the Synods? Certainly by adopting a structure so little linked to the church's historic theology the problem of identity is accentuated. Whatever else might have been said about Congregationalism, for example, there was no doubt it had an ecclesiology. That cannot be said for the United Reformed Church.

Perhaps the most interesting development to come out of "Catch the Vision" is "Vision4Life", an initiative based on structured discussion over a three-year period on the Bible, prayer, and evangelism with the aim of renewing the spiritual life of the Church. That this is closer to the real issues than most of "Catch the Vision" may well be accepted. However the United Reformed Church has a long track record of programmes which have been inadequately funded, too short and too superficial and which have passed without any real impact on the life of the churches. Nothing about "Vision4Life" so far indicates that it will be any different.

In a sober historical journal, offering any prognosis for the Church's future may seem unduly speculative, but the logic of this series of articles leads to questions about the future. There is no reason to suppose that URC decline is going to reverse in the foreseeable future – its age structure makes that virtually impossible. The expectation must be that increasingly the URC will cease to operate as a nationally significant church – if indeed it has ever done so such except, perhaps, at the moment of its birth. Whether the URC should seek to continue its life must be a real question. There was honesty in the question which one minister, Brian Clarke, asked in a letter to *Reform* in May 2005: "Should we as the URC disband . . . and encourage our members to join other congregations?"<sup>44</sup> Another solution might be for the URC to merge as quickly as possible with another denomination, perhaps the Methodists.

To adopt either of these solutions would be to misread the contemporary religious culture. Closing down the URC would diminish the variety of

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44 *Reform*, May 2005, 10.

churches in a culture which appreciates variety and would close what in a significant number of localities is either the strongest, or one of the strongest, local congregations. Merging with another denomination is an irrelevance. Since the differences between denominations matter little to those outside the churches ending them will have minimal effect on the mission of the church. The time and effort would be out of all proportion to any conceivable benefit and the new church would face the same problem of a lack of identity that the United Reformed Church has.

What is more, despite secularization, there continues to be a market for religion in modern British culture. Research by David Hay in 1987 found that 48% of non-church-goers had experienced a form of spiritual experience, a figure which rose to 76% in a study in 2000.<sup>45</sup> Problems of definition make it difficult to assess how many people believe in God.<sup>46</sup> In 1990, 71% indicated a belief in God but only 32% in a personal God. But however we evaluate this distinction it certainly does not justify Steve Bruce's assertion that *God is Dead*.<sup>47</sup> Religion is not about to become defunct in British society. Heelas and Woodhead, for example, argue for a bottoming-out in which congregational size will continue to shrink for the next twenty-five to thirty years and then level out at around 3% of the population by 2030.<sup>48</sup> A significant factor here is the size of Christian immigration into Britain from countries where the culture is not secularized. We cannot be certain whether such immigration will affect the long-term pattern of secularization but it has recently boosted church numbers.

What we need to recognise is that increasingly the vital centre for church renewal is the local congregation. Fewer and fewer people hold long-term commitments to a chosen denomination. Instead there is a consumer mentality. People shop around for the church of their choice. They are not so much ecumenical as post-denominational. Denominations as sociological variables have decreasing explanatory power and members freely switch from one to another with increasing frequency. The implications of this for the future of the URC are profound. For much of the twentieth century the national organization defined the church. Even in Congregationalism the national increased in significance over the local. Today that is no longer the case. There is still a role for the national and the ecumenical, but the centre of gravity has shifted from the national to the local, from national structures to local congregations. As John M. Buchanan puts it, "The time of the congregation has come."<sup>49</sup>

This might be good news for the URC. For most of the twentieth century the URC and its predecessor churches lost members to the Church of England

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45 David Hay and Kay Hunt, *op.cit.*

46 Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945*, (Oxford:Blackwell, 1994), 78.

47 Steve Bruce, *God is Dead*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

48 Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 148.

49 John M Buchanan, *Being Church, Becoming Community*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 109.



because they lacked intellectual and liturgical vitality and a significant reason for their existence. But in a context where increasingly those coming to church are either not aware to what denomination they belong, or do not care, the lack of a significant national identity no longer matters.

The key question now is what the local church can offer. In a religious market in which people shop around for the product of their choice all sorts of churches may thrive but churches that offer nothing distinctive, or do nothing well, will close. Just as the supermarket put out of business the lack-lustre corner shop so congregations with nothing much to offer but the brand name have no future. Congregations with no members of working age, no children's work, no choir or competent music group, and no depth in theology will inevitably close and this is bad news for many, perhaps even most, URC churches. It offers, however, a prospect of renewal for congregations that have a distinctive vision to offer.

The Louisville Institute recently sponsored a conference in the United States on growing mainline congregations and discovered that such churches could be found in all denominations in any geographical location but what they had in common was "a combination of a clear identity and sense of mission with resources sufficient to pursue that mission." Moreover, strong identity is not, as in conservative churches and denominations, a matter of high boundaries but of "robust stories and robust practices."<sup>50</sup> This is a real challenge for the URC where the description of churches as "middle of the road" appears sometimes to mean that if they are not evangelical neither are they sure where they stand theologically. Local churches may have liberal or evangelical theologies but they need visions of the gospel by which to live.

What matters most in the URC is the local church: the most vital job in the URC is to be pastoral minister of a local congregation. The time has come for the URC to recognise the reality of *de facto* Congregationalism and to affirm it as the future of the Church. This is against the centralizing instincts of the URC and most of its recent history. But it ought not to be wholly foreign to its theology. In 1937 Albert Peel wrote *Inevitable Congregationalism*<sup>51</sup> in which he argued the inevitability of Congregationalism in a world of educated people. The current consumer choice of *de facto* Congregationalism, where an Anglican or an Evangelical congregation is just as likely to be congregational in practice as a URC Church, is not exactly what he had in mind. But in a religiously searching, market-orientated society people will make local choices and congregations will have their own distinct characteristics. The URC needs to recognise this and respond boldly.

This is not to say that an individualistic culture needs to be uncritically adhered to. There is always a tension between Christ and culture. Churches need a mix of accommodation and resistance. But moving the centre of gravity

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50 Nancy Ammerman, Louisville Institute, [www.VitalLiberalChurches](http://www.VitalLiberalChurches).

51 Albert Peel, *Inevitable Congregationalism*, (London: Independent Press, 1937).

of the church towards the local congregation is not a surrender of a Reformed heritage, it might even lead to a rediscovery of it. In any case with a membership decline in 2007 of 4.07%<sup>52</sup> the process is likely to be forced on the church. Even assuming that the rate of decline stabilizes, the URC can expect to drop below 60,000 members in 2012 and 50,000 in 2016. The point cannot be far off where anything approaching the current expenditures on synod or the national church will simply be impossible.

But restoring the centrality of the congregation is not enough. The United Reformed Church cannot go on avoiding its theological task. Its vital need is to address the Church's lack of identity and sense of purpose or theological vitality. A Reformed identity is not of itself sufficient to attract consumers in the spiritual cafeteria of modern day religion. If it were, the Church of Scotland would not be in such calamitous decline. But in a post-Christian age local churches which are going to thrive need a motivating theology which gives a purpose for their existence and a profound way into the Christian heritage. For the United Reformed Church with its theology deficit – perhaps even a thinking deficit – there is no future without the recovery of a serious theology. The days when it could hope to get by with a concept of the church as “nice people who don't quite know why they are there but think they ought to be” are past. There is a real relevance for the United Reformed Church in Dale Turner's warning from the United States that, “A divided church that stands for something is better than a united church that stands for nothing.”<sup>53</sup>

Unless there is a theological renaissance in the URC it will neither grasp the riches of its tradition nor offer a generation of seekers anything that they need. As Douglas John Hall argues, “Our churches do not need managers, they need thinkers! They need people whose knowledge of the Scriptures, traditions, and contemporary Christian scholarship is *more developed* than has been required of clergy in the past.”<sup>54</sup>

This theological renewal can come only to a limited extent from Church councils and committees. It must come primarily from theologians and preachers and congregations wrestling with the gospel's meaning and contemporary life in such a way as can give them hope. But they can at least be encouraged in this task by the priorities set by the national church. This means putting extra resources into theological colleges and seeking to improve academic standards and expertise in preaching and leading worship. It means encouraging ministers to develop an expertise in Reformed theology. It means a much stronger emphasis on good preaching and on preaching as an intellectual task. But fundamentally it means theologically active local congregations with a vision of what the gospel is and a delight in it and the conviction

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52 *United Reformed Church Yearbooks* 2008, 2009.

53 Quoted by John Thomas: in “A United Church That Stands For Something”, United Church of Christ website June 12, 2006.

54 Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 195.

that “The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.”<sup>55</sup>

Both Congregationalism and Presbyterianism were declining traditions long before the URC was formed. When, despite its hopes, the new church found itself a continuing part of the English church scene, a crisis of relevance and identity was inevitable. The Reformed tradition, with its combination of a belief in critical thinking and in scripture, with its emphasis on the local congregation, and its belief that if God alone is ultimate everything else is open to reformation, offered resources to form such an identity. But it is not clear that the URC ever really seriously wanted to do this and consequently after forty years it finds itself with little clear sense of why it is here. This need not be its epitaph. Writing in *Reform* in 2008 John Buchanan, the minister of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, argued that “My hope, indeed my strong faith, is that when the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition is intentionally expressed in the life of a congregation, when the gospel is proclaimed authentically, when issues are joined intelligently, when mission in the world is graciously offered, there will be a compelling liveliness and a faithfully authentic church.”<sup>56</sup> It may be that this yet has some significance for the United Reformed Church.

*Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda.*

MARTIN CAMROUX

**Correction:** In “Why Did the URC Fail? III” (*JURCHS*, 8, No. 3, p.144) I attributed to David Peel a willingness to entertain episcopacy and tolerate the establishment of the Church on the basis of his assertion (*JURCHS*, 8, No.1 p.50) that “some people in the United Reformed Church are prepared to ‘take episcopacy into their system’ and do not regard ‘establishment as still a living issue’.” I thought that he was implying that he was such a person, but in fact, read with more care, I see that he leaves it open whether or not he personally identifies with that statement.

On re-reading Dr Peel’s *Reforming Theology* I find that the former (entertaining episcopacy) does seem to reflect his thinking since he discusses the conditions which would have to be met if, in a united church, the URC were to take bishops into its system (p.262). On the other hand, since he lists an end to the established status of the Church as one of the necessary conditions for this, he cannot be fairly accused of the latter. I apologise for misrepresenting his position.

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55 John Robinson’s parting words to the Pilgrim Fathers, quoted in K. L. Parry, *Companion to Congregational Praise*, (London: Independent Press, 1953), 128.

56 John Buchanan, *Reform*, March 2008, 15.

## REVIEWS

***The Puritan Millennium: Literature and Theology, (1550-1682),* By Crawford Gribben. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, (Revised Edition) 2008. Studies in Christian History and Thought. Pp. x + 296. £19.99. ISBN 978-1-84227-372-2.**

Any discussion of millenarian eschatology is fraught with danger, rising from the potential to misunderstand such doctrines (emphasising the importance of hermeneutics) and from the possibility that such doctrines can be over-emphasised. Given the inherent ambiguity, if not indeed the slippery nature, of the biblical references, the development over time of a variety of eschatological views was perhaps inevitable, and we see that variety played out in the contemporary scene as well as in the history of the church: Needless to say, eschatology played a vital part in the development of the Puritan movement, leading to extreme views and even revolutionary action and yet also petering out to the point that eschatology was “dismissed as folly” all within the period of a century. The story is recounted here with consummate analytical skill, a profound grasp of the subtle differences between the various Puritan groups, and with a lively and lucid style.

In the years between its original publication in 2000 and this revised edition, the author admits to having reconsidered his views about Puritan eschatology. Growing doubts about the appropriateness of the categories of pre-, post-, and a-millennial to define the variety of positions held by the Puritans caused him to include here an appendix which treats the issue specifically by looking to a variety of Puritan confessions. As he explains: “however useful they may be for current debate, [they] should be used with care when explaining puritan apocalyptic thought. Puritan eschatology is much less precise, much more ambiguous, than contemporary terminology allows”.

Following an introduction, with literature survey and section on methodology, the book offers an overview of Puritan eschatology before looking in detail at the specific contributions of the Marian Exiles, James Ussher, George Gillespie, John Milton, John Rogers and John Bunyan. Although there is a significant exposition in each chapter of the work of these particular authors, the book draws on a far wider analysis of Puritan literature from the period under review. England, Ireland and Scotland are all covered (though, alas, Wales – and its contribution to millennial thought specifically but not exclusively in the work of Morgan Llwyd – is not mentioned, and this is not entirely a linguistic issue as Llwyd composed in English as well as Welsh). We learn that eschatology “was not something puritans studied so much as something in which they believed themselves to be involved”. Consequently a development can be discerned from the time of the Marian Exiles, and specifically the work of John Foxe, which began by placing the millennium firmly in the past and the movement which gradually came to relocate it to the future and – most significantly – into the present. The Geneva

Bible, with its annotated text, “transformed the godly into critical readers whose manipulation of apocalyptic ideas became ever more self-reflexive and self-aware”. For some of the radicals, this meant the establishment of what John Owen called the true “way of gospel worship” and the fifth monarchists could herald the commonwealth as being of eschatological significance. Yet for others a “realised eschatology” developed, captured most fully by the Quakers, in which the “metanarrative of universal history” became a “micronarrative of ‘realised eschatology’ within the conversion experience of the individual”.

However, what put paid to eschatological radicalism, according to the thesis in this book, was the inability of the Puritans to agree either on ecclesiology or, to an extent, on the nature of Church/State relations. Ussher could not abandon the Genevan commitment to the “godly prince” which claimed that the rightful and thus divinely appointed secular authorities (i.e. the king) had been placed there by the providence of God in order to do battle for the church against the antichrist (who, Ussher believed, sat in the Vatican), and this permeated the English Puritan tradition. While the Scottish version was always more radical, Puritans there were so convinced that their ecclesiology was right that they used the Westminster Assembly to defend their Presbyterianism against the more radical Independents. Division ensued, and it was this which ultimately gave rise to the collapse of the Commonwealth and led directly to the restoration of the monarchy. The Puritan experiment was at an end. But so too was its revolutionary apocalypticism, and by the end of the period under discussion, eschatology was popularly considered a joke: “when John Mason assembled his followers to await the millennium, his neighbours found him only an object of ridicule”.

This is a fine book which argues a convincing thesis. Many sources are analysed to pour light on the subject. The blurb on the back cover mentions that this is “vital for analyzing the historical development of Reformed eschatology”. It is also vital for understanding the Puritan movement, what motivated it and what, ultimately, brought about its demise. Given the contemporary emphasis on millenarianism and its effect on politics, especially in the US, a book such as this not only has historical relevance but also possesses a contemporary resonance. It can be highly recommended.

ROBERT POPE

***Wales and the Word: Historical Perspectives on Welsh Identity and Religion.***  
By D. Densil Morgan. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008. Pp. xii + 262. £45.00. ISBN 978-0708321-218. Illustrated.

Wales without its religion, and its Nonconformist religion at that, would not be a recognisable phenomenon, for until very recent times faith and Bible and Sunday worship have made a crucial contribution to Welsh identity. This

volume gathers together eleven essays by Professor Morgan, more than half focussed on theological and historical biography, which, covering four centuries of history, provide valuable insight to that reality. Putting free-standing essays together necessarily leads to some repetition but this only serves to reinforce the most important aspects of the story. Professor Morgan is a sure-footed guide to the intricacies of connection and the subtleties of thought within this culture whose literature he probes in elegant phrase, making available to English readers both sources and secondary scholarship in the Welsh language. Strong in its focus on theological studies, other themes are not neglected in this journey from Puritanism via Evangelicalism, the Victorian commitment to mission at home and abroad, the many different facets of Liberalism, political and theological, the reaction of the neo-Reformed into a post-modern world. Calvinistic Methodism, Wales's own form of reluctant, pietist secession from the Established Church, is here described as a "movement in search of an ecclesiology", an ecclesiology which it discovered in that other home of Celtic Calvinism, Scotland. The volume happily then blends theology and history, offering valuable tracking of the way in which an older Calvinism made way for various forms of revisionism and eventually an unsustainable liberalism. In this respect the analysis ranges from disputes within the infant institution of St David's College, Lampeter, to Welsh engagement with Princeton orthodoxy which takes the analysis across the Atlantic and back again. The one part of Welsh religious history surprisingly not greatly developed here, given the emphasis on eighteenth-century revival, as also that of 1859, is the 1904 Revival, on which Morgan's summary judgment is that it "did little in the long run to turn the secular tide."

The rich diversity of Welsh Nonconformity is comprehensively displayed; even the article on John Myles, Wales's pioneering Baptist, underlines the diversity within that tradition. An article on Christmas Evans follows that on Myles, an icon of the change occurring at the end of the eighteenth century: "Whereas the older tradition withered, the Nonconformist Wales which appeared by about 1825 was the child of the popular movement", that is charismatic, revivalist evangelicalism. The fruit of that influence is seen in that the 1851 census recorded five times as many Welshmen and women listening to the preached word in the chapel as those who worshipped in their parish churches. No-one played a more important part in this transformation than Christmas Evans whose importance for church and nation is here analysed, as more generally Professor Morgan explores the continuities and discontinuities between an earlier, sober, select, doctrinally-precise Puritanism and that noisy, experience-based, populist, Welsh-language evangelicalism that was to follow. "Of the people, by the people and for the people", "Assertive Welshness became a badge of their collective identity". But herein lay a problem as some leaders became uncertain of an exclusively Welsh-language chapel experience and as the denominations, ever concerned with evangelism, responded to the migration of English workers into the valleys and towns of South Wales, whilst bourgeois families from the North West settled on the North Wales littoral.

Such a division in Welsh Nonconformist culture, in the context of the alternative appeal of socialism and an increasing secularism, represented a fatal weakness in the "Wales and the Word" equation which was to become increasingly manifest from the last quarter of the twentieth century onwards.

In his proud discussion of Wales's early reception of Barth's neo-orthodoxy Morgan emphasises the double emphasis of the new theology coupled with the prophetic stance taken by the Confessing Church against National Socialism: "the renewal of the German Church under the Word of God", that is to say Barth's theology, with its emphasis on revelation rather than exploration, was soon tested in the world of politics. Not all in Wales were happy with Barth's recall to a theology of the Word: whilst the Liberals thought Barth surrendered too much, Conservative Evangelicals such as Lloyd Jones thought that the new theology fell short of "the real thing."

If Wales is the land of preachers, it is also the land of poets. In Gwenallt Jones the verse was all the more powerful as coming after a false progression from an inherited Nonconformity into a socialism as sectarian as the religion from which he had escaped. More profound is his exploration of the pervasiveness of sin – original as well as consequential – but beyond this the hope of redemption in a world where the incarnation has given a sacramental significance to the ordinary, for flesh, though contaminated by sin, as much as spirit is part of God's good creation. Gwenallt is expert at exploring the traffic between the mundane and the sublime, so this evocative language in relation to the daily grind of the Glamorgan miner: "The cage is wound from the pit's depths to heaven/ By the steel ropes of God's sure and ancient wheels." The second poet discussed is more than that, for poetry is combined with writing novels, illuminating early Welsh literature, together with historical and theological studies, for Pennar Davies was a substantial figure in so many different fields, a brilliant exemplar of the Welsh polymath.

Two general essays bring the collection to a close, the first on twentieth-century historians of Welsh Nonconformity; ironically as Welsh society became increasingly secularised Nonconformity's historians laid down the record of a very different society, reverential and biblically very well-informed. The record, even though tainted with some antagonism between old and new Dissent, is impressive – long hours of primary research to produce articles for the Welsh Dictionary of National Biography, all presented in a manner both sympathetic and critical. The highest esteem is rightly reserved for R Tudur Jones (1921-98), "a man who invited superlatives", whose example and encouragement lies behind much of the current historical scholarship in Wales. The final chapter on "The Essence of Welshness" unpacks Nonconformity's close identity with the Welsh Nation, but also the sad way in which unguardedly such an alliance was surrendered to the forces of secularism in politics, in social behaviour and indeed in culture at large.

***The Welsh Church from Reformation to Disestablishment, 1603-1920.* By Sir Glanmor Williams, William Jacob, Nigel Yates and Frances Knight. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007. Bangor History of Religion. Pp. xv + 414. £45.00. ISBN 978-0-7083-1877-5.**

For many people the attraction of this work on the Church in Wales, from the accession of the Stuarts in 1603 until the disestablishment of the Church in 1920, will be the fact that its opening section is the final piece of work from the pen of Glanmor Williams who died shortly before this book was published. The figure of Glanmor Williams looms large throughout this volume; its authors stating that it is actually designed to be the completion of a trilogy on the Church in Wales which began with Williams's *The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation* (1962) and was continued by his later *Wales and the Reformation* (1997). But having said this, this volume is very different in both its tone and scope, its four authors each bringing their own particular approach to the period which they cover. Each chapter is united by the conviction that the Church in Wales has fared poorly at the hands of Welsh historians, overly influenced by either the Nonconformist view of history or overshadowed by the long and bitter campaign to disestablish the Church during the second half of the nineteenth century. Much of the book takes advantage of recent scholarship on religion in Wales, although there is a marked tendency to gloss over some of the deficiencies in the religious provision of the Church in Wales during in this period.

Glanmor Williams helpfully opens the book with two chapters which examine the fortunes of the Church under the early Stuarts and during the Civil War and the Interregnum. Although there is little new here, the insights of Stephen K. Roberts and Lloyd Bowen being conspicuous by their absence, these chapters set the scene for much of what follows. William Jacob examines the Church in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. At pains to stress the genuine affection in which many held the Church, particularly after the convulsions of the Civil War, Jacob's focus is largely on the improvements which occurred in the administration of the Church, particularly those aimed at the raising of standards among the clergy and educating the laity in the basic skills of literacy. Jacob sees this activity as evidence of a general revival in the religious life of Wales during the eighteenth century, one of the outcomes of which was the Methodist Revival itself. Keen to stress that Methodism was rooted in the Established Church, Jacob tends to overlook the discontinuous nature of early Methodism. While Methodism was certainly born within the Church, it is unlikely that either Howel Harris's or Daniel Rowland's repeated declarations of loyalty to the Church were taken seriously by many outside the close-knit circles of early Methodism. Jacob is aware of the tendency to separation implicit within Methodism, its Presbyterian structure of self-governing societies and associations sitting incongruously within the parochial structures of the Church, but is less willing to stress what was innovative about Methodism, and Evangelicalism more generally. It may have been that the



Methodists' over-riding emphasis on the new birth, with its inherent individuality, undermined the role of the clergy and that it was this that undercut the authority of the Church most severely.

The section by Nigel Yates (who died in 2008) covers the period from 1780 until 1850 and looks at how the Church adapted to the new religious landscape following the emergence of Methodism. An opening chapter on the impact of the Methodists' eventual secession from the Church in 1811 raises important questions about its impact, highlighting the pressing need for further archival research to establish how many people seceded, whether there were regional variations in the strength of the new Calvinistic Methodist denomination, and precisely how many Nonconformist churches were established in its aftermath. Among the issues addressed in this section is the perceived anti-Welshness of the Church in the nineteenth century. Yates goes some considerable way to show that the Church was not always motivated by an anglicising agenda. Welsh language services remained the norm and there were many gifted clergymen who contributed to the Welsh cultural revival of this period, but despite this it is still difficult to escape the impression that these individuals were very much in a minority. It is also difficult to escape the conclusion that the Church had an uneasy, even semi-detached, relationship with native Welsh culture, something which was exacerbated of course by the Blue Books controversy. The second half of the nineteenth century was overshadowed by the growth in popularity of Tractarianism and the campaign by Nonconformists to secure the disestablishment of the Church. Frances Knight's section deals with these issues and more. Rather than being a period of atrophy and decline, she argues, the second half of the nineteenth century can be seen as a period of "renewal and reinvention" for the Church in Wales.

When disestablishment came, as has been repeatedly stated, it was something of an anti-climax, and the Church in Wales actually experienced a measure of renewal during the early twentieth century as it sought to adjust to its new status. This volume concludes, naturally enough, in 1920. However, this reviewer could not help but feel that some analysis of the twentieth century, whether a separate section or in a postscript, would have proved beneficial. As it stands interested readers could do worse than to look at Roger L. Brown's, *Evangelicals in the Church in Wales* (2007) to complete the picture.

*The Welsh Church: From Reformation to Disestablishment* is a substantial volume and will undoubtedly prove to be indispensable to all those interested in the religious history of early modern and modern Wales. It sets itself an ambitious task, the rehabilitation of the reputation of the Church, and in some respects succeeds in this. However, it may be that the authors' laudable intentions occasionally overshadow the impartiality of their interpretations. This volume will undoubtedly provoke serious academic debate and it flags up many areas where the light of fresh historical research needs to be shone.

***A Man of One Book? John Wesley's Interpretation and Use of the Bible.* By Donald A. Bullen. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007. Studies in Evangelical History and Thought. Pp. xx + 230. £19.99. ISBN 978-1-84227-513-9.**

The tercentenary of the birth of Charles Wesley created a short-lived wider interest in his life, hymns and influence, but the literary spotlight has once more come to rest on his brother John. Donald A. Bullen is a Methodist minister who has profitably used his retirement to undertake academic research into the way in which John Wesley read and interpreted the Bible and this has formed the basis of both his doctoral thesis and this book. He uses the insights of modern biblical scholarship – which he describes as “Reader-Response criticism”, i.e. the importance of the role of the reader – to examine Wesley’s use of the Bible.

There is no doubt that Wesley described himself, in the words of the title, as *homo unius libri* and argued that for him, and by imputation his followers, scripture was authoritative in determining Christian faith and practice. But Bullen contends that Wesley “did not fully understand the way in which he had come to his own interpretation of the Bible.” His thesis is that “Wesley came to scripture with a theology already formed in his mind” – that of an eighteenth-century High-Church, Arminian Anglican. This approach was first formed in the rectory at Epworth, developed during the years at Oxford, extended by his contacts with the Moravians leading to the Aldersgate experience and the controversies that followed, and was to direct his approach to and understanding of scripture throughout his life. Bullen believes that Wesley “brought to the Bible the beliefs he afterwards claimed to find there” – those of a High-Church, Arminian Anglican. This was to lead to controversy with other Christians who claimed to base their beliefs on the Bible, but came to other conclusions than Wesley.

In the first two chapters, Bullen reviews the work of Wesleyan biographers and scholars on Wesley’s use of the Bible. He is critical of the nineteenth-century biographies, with their veneration for Wesley, lack of attention to the complex influences on him, and, for church-political reasons, the way they played down his High-Church Anglicanism. While he concedes that in the second half of the twentieth century, the development and assessment of the “Wesley Quadrilateral” – the Bible, tradition, reason and experience – “does offer some considerable insight into Wesley’s theological methodology and biblical interpretation”, he regards the debate over this as relating “more to the theological needs of the . . . American United Methodist Church than to the study of Wesley’s biblical interpretation”. On the whole, Bullen is critical of modern Wesley scholarship for its lack of research into (and misunderstanding and misrepresentation of) how Wesley came to interpret the Bible – a need that he would claim to have met in this study.

In his research, Bullen has made good use of Wesley’s written works, especially his Journal, his letters and his sermons. Chapters 3 and 4 cover in more detail the events, controversies, personalities, theories and other

influences that were to affect the formation of his approach to the Bible. Attention is given to his family at Epworth, his Oxford days, events in America and the influence of the Moravians, his "Conversion" and the role of experience. The conclusion reached in Chapter 5 is that "Wesley remained loyal to the Church of England throughout his whole life and interpreted the Bible accordingly". In spite of engaging in controversy with the hierarchy and the fact that some of his practices seemed to appear to contradict Anglican discipline (e.g. his ordinations and use of lay preachers), when it came to guidance on interpreting the scriptures, he turned to the Church to which he gave his allegiance throughout his life. Chapter 6 details Wesley's attitude to Calvinism and its adherents in the Church of England – it is instructive on how he dealt with the evidence of the Bible, Anglican teaching or spiritual experience which appeared to contradict his position so that he always maintained the position with which he began. This leads to Chapter 7 in which Bullen draws together his findings on Wesley's approach to the authority and interpretation of scripture by referring to Wesley's own writings about it.

In this readable, well-researched and comprehensive book, Bullen uses Reader-Response Criticism to good effect. He has successfully demonstrated that when it came to reading and understanding scripture, Wesley brought with him "consciously or unconsciously, a great deal of baggage". While Wesley claimed he was a man of one book, he was in fact a man of many books; although he saw the Bible as authoritative, he used it selectively. In many ways, Bullen presents a more human Wesley than in much of Methodist folklore, in fact a man with whom many of us can identify. Our baggage may be different from his, but we too are tempted to eisegesis rather than exegesis – what we find in the Bible confirms our beliefs, but it was those beliefs that determined the way we read the Bible in the first place.

PETER M. BRANT

***In the Midst of Early Methodism: Lady Huntingdon and her Correspondence.* By John R. Tyson with Boyd S. Schlenther. Lanham MD USA: The Scarecrow Press, 2007. Pietist and Wesleyan Studies, 19. Pp. xvi + 329. £26.00. ISBN 978-0-1085-5793-3.**

Interest in the life and career of that leader of the Calvinistic branch of Methodism, Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, has mushroomed in recent years following the publication of Edwin Welch's *Spiritual Pilgrim: A Reassessment of the Countess of Huntingdon* (1995), Boyd Schlenther's *Queen of the Methodists: The Countess of Huntingdon and the Eighteenth-Century Crisis of Faith and Society* (1997), and Alan Harding's *The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion: A Sect in Action* (2003). Now John Tyson, with the assistance of Boyd Schlenther, has made available in print a large body of the Countess's correspondence for the first time.

Following a short introduction introducing the Countess, this handsome volume contains nine chapters of correspondence, some 379 separate items, arranged according to the different phases of the Countess's life and her extensive interests. These include sections on Lady Huntingdon's domestic life, her relations with her preachers, her college and her trans-Atlantic correspondence. While this way of ordering the correspondence has obvious merits, maybe a strictly chronological approach would have enabled readers to get a better sense of the ebb and flow of the Countess's activities. The letters are drawn from a wide variety of repositories on both sides on the Atlantic and, as one would expect, the Countess's correspondence is a rich source of information on her relationship with many of the main figures in early Methodism, especially George Whitefield. But it also provides readers with an insight into the mixed fortunes of Calvinistic Methodism, under both the leadership of Whitefield in the first instance and then, following the establishment of the Countess' Connexion in the 1780s, under the direction of Lady Huntingdon herself.

This is a well-presented volume, though there are some features of it that might have been thought about more carefully before going to press. The letters are lightly annotated, perhaps too lightly in places, but the notes appear at the end of the various chapters. For a reference work of this nature, footnotes at the bottom of each page are a distinct advantage and it is a pity that this editorial practice was not adopted. The volume is rounded off with three appendices, two of which give a breakdown of the contents of the Countess of Huntingdon's connexional hymn book which was first published in 1786. This is a very useful volume and adds to the growing number of edited collections of correspondence relating to the major eighteenth-century Methodist and evangelical leaders. To those working in this area, Tyson and Schlenker have provided an invaluable new resource.

DAVID CERI JONES

***Unexampled Labours: Letters of the Revd John Fletcher to Leaders in the Evangelical Revival. Edited (with an introduction) by Peter S. Forsaith. Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2008. Pp.xv + 384. ISBN 978-0-7162-0605-7.***

For many John Fletcher, or Fletcher of Madeley as he tends to be better known, is one of those bit players in the eighteenth-century evangelical revival who came to prominence as the combative sparring partner of Augustus Toplady during the second Calvinist-Arminian controversy of the 1770s. More recently, Fletcher's role in the evangelical movement has come in for serious re-assessment as a result of Patrick Streiff's superb *Reluctant Saint? A Theological Biography of Fletcher of Madeley* (2001). Now Peter Forsaith, the co-ordinator of the Methodist Studies Unit at Oxford Brookes University, has produced a handsome edition of a portion of Fletcher's most important correspondence.

Drawn from archives on both sides of the Atlantic, Forsaith has collected and edited only those letters for which manuscript copies still exist. The majority of these were written to the leaders of the eighteenth-century evangelical movement. Within this collection of a little more than a hundred letters, the most frequent correspondent by far is Charles Wesley, but John Wesley, the Countess of Huntingdon and George Whitefield all figure regularly. Forsaith has arranged the letters chronologically, dividing them into three broad periods, those written before October 1760; those written between 1760 and 1769, his first decade at Madeley, and those which were written after 1770, following his resignation of the superintendency of the Countess of Huntingdon's college at Trevecka and the production of his more polemical theological writings. Also included are letters translated from their original French, some of which were written to Charles Wesley, allowing us to get an insight into the extent to which Fletcher's Huguenot background influenced his thinking. The letters are edited to the highest standards, and are fully and helpfully annotated.

Forsaith also provides some useful introductory material, which includes a historiographical sketch examining how Fletcher's reputation was manipulated quite radically at the hands of Wesleyan historians following his death. This is followed by a short biographical essay, an introduction to some of the main recipients of Fletcher's letters and a useful essay analysing the main themes in the correspondence. The Fletcher that emerges from these letters is therefore more multi-faceted than the traditional images of the saintly but combative theologian. It is actually Fletcher's twenty-five year ministry in the village of Madeley in Shropshire which figures most prominently in this correspondence, making this a very important resource for those who wish to understand the appeal of evangelicalism at a parish level in late eighteenth-century Britain. The letters also throw light on the tensions inherent in Methodism, and Fletcher's struggle to balance his competing loyalties to the Church of England and the Methodists. This is a very valuable collection of letters and it adds to the increasing body of eighteenth-century evangelical and Methodist correspondence already published or currently in the arduous process of preparation and editing. Those familiar with the work of W. R. Ward on the continental influences that bore on early evangelicalism will have noticed his concentration on largely German sources; it is to be hoped that the appearance of these letters will inspire historians of Methodism to do similar work on the French Protestant or Huguenot contribution to the infant evangelical movement.

DAVID CERI JONES

***Cambridge Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Enquiry, Controversy and Truth.* By David M. Thompson. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008. Pp. xiii + 208. £50.00. ISBN 978-0-7546-5624-1.**

The wonder is that a book on this subject has not been written before. The blessing is that the task has now been undertaken by one whose knowledge of the field is considerable, and whose association with the University of Cambridge is long. The saving grace is that the integrity of the scholar is at no point compromised by that haze of sentiment which has been known to overtake alumni.

Readers of this tightly packed book will be helped if they bear three considerations in mind. First, most of the Cambridge theologians who pass in and out of these pages did not spend the whole of their working lives within the University. In fact a few, though Cambridge graduates, never held an academic post there. Many held ecclesiastical posts for greater or lesser periods, with all that that entailed concerning patronage (which somehow seems much grander than mere “networking”). Secondly, undergraduate courses in theology as we should nowadays understand them were not available at Cambridge until the 1870s. Thirdly, it was only gradually that the University became “institutionally detached” from the Church of England.

Professor Thompson rightly has the “long nineteenth century” in view, for it was in the latter decades of the previous century that the impetus was given to the apologetic endeavour that in one way or another was the concern of Cambridge theologians until the First World War. We begin with Richard Watson, indebted, like many others, to Locke’s epistemology, who elevated testimony as that upon which Christianity’s truth depends. He thereby set the stage for an apologetic approach that demanded close attention to the biblical (especially the New Testament) texts – work at which Westcott, Lightfoot and Hort excelled. To the annoyance of some, Watson opposed credal subscription; he swashbucklingly maintained that “scepticism was even less plausible than Christianity”; and, with reference to Tom Paine’s thoughts on religion, he bluntly declared, “it would have been fortunate for the Christian world, had your life been terminated before you had fulfilled your intention”. Less pugilistically, Watson upheld the right of free enquiry, and in this he was followed by William Paley, who also contended for the full toleration of Dissenters. The logic of Paley’s *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* and *Natural Theology* gave the student Charles Darwin “as much delight as did Euclid”, though Darwin revised his opinion upon the discovery of the principle of natural selection (and not because Hume had demolished the argument from design twenty-seven years before Paley published his *Natural Theology*). Thompson correctly observes that Paley’s apologetics influenced not only more liberally-minded clerics, but also a number of Anglican Evangelicals.

Herbert Marsh led the way in biblical criticism as he pondered the evidential value of prophecy and the question whether certain biblical texts were God’s *ipsissima verba*. He regarded the British and Foreign Schools

Society as a ploy by Dissenters to wean children from the Church of England, and he opposed the British and Foreign Bible Society because, in distinction from the SPCK's policy in England, it did not distribute both the Bible and the Liturgy of the Church of England. The widespread and enduring influence of the preaching of the Evangelical Charles Simeon is duly noted, as is the encouragement given to patristics by John Kaye. The latter argued that where revelation was concerned, "the greater the distance from the fountain-head, the greater the chance that the stream will be polluted" (cf. Locke, *Essay* IV.xvi.10,11, and Caleb Rotheram's contrary view in his Edinburgh dissertation of 1743).

In H. J. Rose we meet a high churchman who opposed the Reformed view that confessions of faith might be modified in the light of Scripture, believed that church history should be read with the eye of faith and, whilst acknowledging the value of anti-deist writings, nevertheless lamented that "The perpetual weighing of evidences, the consideration of sophistry, the replying to fallacies, is any thing but a favourable employment for purifying and exalting the heart". Against Rose we may balance the Evangelical George Corrie, who had no time for the Oxford Tractarians, and, unlike others of his party, maintained that Charles I was a martyr who "died for the Church of England".

We come next to the considerable influence of Coleridge. His ideas were propagated at Cambridge especially by J. C. Hare who, like C. Thirlwall, had interests in German theology. Hare argued that since faith was the product of an act of will it was a moral as well as an intellectual matter. His best-known student (though Hare had not taught him theology, and their theologies diverged at many points) was F. D. Maurice. A substantial discussion of Westcott, Lightfoot and Hort introduces their work and explains its continuing influence. With them Thompson properly associates E. W. Benson. Westcott's curriculum innovations of 1871 shaped the study of theology at Cambridge for the next hundred years, while Hort urged the establishment of the Dixie Chair of Ecclesiastical History. The trio were alive to the need to challenge scepticism, but they could adopt neither the Evangelical nor the Tractarian responses to it. Westcott defended miracles, majoring on their moral significance, and echoed Thomas Arnold in maintaining that "the true revelation of the Bible is original righteousness and not original sin". He and Hort worked assiduously on the New Testament texts, challenging the dating of them proposed by Tübingen scholars, while Lightfoot and Westcott became renowned biblical commentators.

In his final main chapter Professor Thompson introduces "some Nonconformist Voices". He offers brief sketches of James Ward, minister of the Great Meeting who, assailed by doubts, turned to philosophy and eventually became the first holder of the Chair in Moral Philosophy and Logic; P. T. Forsyth, who served at Great Meeting's successor, Emmanuel Congregational Church, from 1894 to 1901; J. Rendel Harris, a Congregationalist who became a Quaker; W. Robertson Smith, deposed from his Chair at the Free

Church College, Aberdeen, because of his views in the inspiration of Scripture, who became Professor of Arabic; the text-gathering Lewis and Gibson twin sisters, benefactors of Westminster College, Cambridge; and the Baptist T. R. Glover.

While conceding that theological openness was not exclusive to Cambridge, and that even there Rose and Simeon exemplified divines of a different temper, Thompson is justified in characterizing the general tenor of Cambridge theology as evincing "the willingness to consider theology as a series of open questions rather than already determined conclusions". Further, he has clearly shown that as to method, "History and historical criticism provided the core and strength of the way in which the Cambridge theological tradition evolved during the century". He amply demonstrates his claim that "to use high/orthodox and low/liberal as a single catch-all division in which all will turn out to be on the same side on each view does not work".

In a few places a gloss seems to be required. For example, Thompson boldly affirms that "The dominating issue raised by eighteenth-century scepticism was the authenticity of the Bible in general, and the New Testament in particular". Later, however, he rightly supplements this claim by observing that "the moral objections to some of the aspects of God depicted in the Old Testament, together with the doctrines of hell and everlasting punishment" were also causes of concern. But even this is not enough: there is the apparatus of the scholastic *ordo salutis* which was construed by some in such a way as to induce moral revulsion leading to scepticism regarding Christianity as a whole. Again, Thompson rightly refers to Hort's "underlying Platonism" which shows him to be "the typical Cambridge man". But when he says that this "explains why [Hort] may be read as being sympathetic to the philosophical idealism which grew in the later part of the century" I demur; for the positions of Plato himself and of the Cambridge Platonists (or Plotinists?) differ in important respects from that of the post-Hegelian idealists (and also, incidentally, from that of Berkeley, whose psychological idealism Cambridge's G. E. Moore, who succeeded to James Ward's Chair, famously determined to refute).

This well produced book is furnished with a bibliography and an index. I noted a few slips. On p. 6 it was the nineteenth, not the twentieth century that turned; and for "Berkeley" on p. 30 we should, I suspect, read "Butler" and then delete Berkeley from the index.

In any work of this kind "then and now" thoughts will almost inevitably occur to the attentive reader. When in 1764 Richard Watson was elected Professor of Chemistry "he immediately set about learning Chemistry . . .". I understand that a more recent Cambridge scholar who applied for the Rylands Chair of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester and had to confess his innocence of Hebrew at the interview, was not as fortunate. We might ponder whether Watson's observation that "the taste of the present age is not calculated for making great exertions in Theological Criticism and Philology" applies to our own time, and if it does, how far it matters. When reading Watson's opinion that "The effect of established systems in obstructing



truth, is to the last degree deplorable: every one sees it in other churches, but scarcely any one suspects it in his own", my mind strangely flew to certain ecumenical consultations in which I have participated. It would be pleasant to think that Herbert Marsh's words would caution those who, even in mainline denominations, seem in danger of succumbing to a creeping anti-intellectualism which is at the top of a slippery slope, at the bottom of which is the declaration, "I have never sat at the feet of a theological professor, thank God, but I have stood at the foot of the Cross." Marsh said, "it is not learning, but want of learning, which leads to error in religion". Not, indeed, that Marsh was invariably helpful: Isaac Milner had him in his sights when he said, "I do not dread the dissenters, as if they were infected with a contagion". Watson may have the last word. He published a six-volume collection of tracts written by others so as to give "young persons of every denomination, and especially to afford the Students in the Universities, and the younger Clergy, an easy opportunity of becoming better acquainted with the grounds and principles of the Christian Religion than, there is reason to apprehend, many of them at present are". Googling for a sermon late on Saturday evening seems a poor exchange.

This fine study has left me with two questions which, I readily admit, Professor Thompson was in no way obliged to address given his terms of reference. I mention them merely as a way of illustrating the stimulating nature of the material he has supplied. First, I wonder how far Professor Thompson thinks the apologetic approach of his subjects can take us today? Secondly, although both Hare and Forsyth would have agreed that we must concern ourselves with what Calvin called the whole course of Christ's obedience (*Institutes*, II.xvi.5), I should like to know how the author himself stands in relation to the incarnationalism of most of the Cambridge theologians *vis à vis* a theology centring in the Cross such as was supremely expounded in the twentieth century by Forsyth; and this not least in relation to the claim, trenchantly denied by Forsyth, that the Church is a continuation, or extension, of the incarnation – a topic of some ecumenical importance.

In an Epilogue Professor Thompson recalls the series of lectures on the theme, "Objections to Christian Belief", which was mounted by the Cambridge University Divinity Board in 1962, and which he attended. The series was, he rightly thinks, consonant with the enquiring approach exemplified in his book. He also allows himself to say, "it is not easy to imagine the Oxford Faculty putting on a similar series at that time". Any reviewers of this book from 'the other place' may make of that what they will: it is a matter on which I cheerfully maintain something approaching Olympian detachment.

ALAN P. F. SELL

***Biblical Scholarship in the Twentieth Century: The Rylands Chair of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis.* Edited by Timothy Larsen. Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, Vol. 86, Number 3. ISSN 0301 102X.**

This volume fittingly marks the centenary (2004) of the Rylands Chair at the University of Manchester. The introductory chapter by J. W. Rogerson is followed by chapters on each of the seven scholars who have so far occupied the chair.

Timothy Larsen describes how from the rather circumscribed background of Primitive Methodism A. S. Peake progressed to spend a lifetime encouraging Christians to accept that the findings of biblical criticism were the only intelligible way of approaching the Bible and one could follow this path without imperilling one's faith.

James Dunn writes warmly on C. H. Dodd. Against Schweitzer's imminent apocalypticism, Dodd offered realized eschatology as the key to Jesus's teaching. His *Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* showed the inherent unity within the diversity of the New Testament writings, whilst *According to the Scriptures* opened up a whole new era of New Testament study, heralding today's study of the use of the OT in the NT. The *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* and *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* were written before the results of the Dead Sea Scrolls were available, but Dodd's conclusion is still convincing: behind the gospel is a single determinative impulse: Jesus himself. Finally, at the age of eighty-six, Dodd wrote his widely-appreciated *Founder of Christianity*. In what was probably the note on which he wanted to end, he said that the conviction that Jesus had been raised "is not a belief that grew up within the church; it is a belief around which the church itself grew up."

Morna Hooker sets out to show the contribution T. W. Manson made in the context of synoptic studies. Remarkably, his great book, *The Teaching of Jesus*, was written while he was in pastoral charge (1931). Many other volumes followed. Sceptical of the form critics and critical of the negative views of Bultmann, Manson worked to recover the "authentic" teaching of Jesus. Few shared his confidence in the Markan outline, but Manson's insistence on the importance of Jesus in the context of the Jewish world for getting closer to the Jesus of history has been vindicated by Geza Vermes and E. P. Sanders.

Peter Oakes asks: was F. F. Bruce a true evangelical or a conservative liberal? He sets out to enlighten us in a very informative article. It was in the Rylands chair that Bruce attained international fame and influence. In his autobiography Bruce pays tribute to the academic freedom of the university. But did he avail himself of the opportunity? Oakes has no hesitation in saying that he did: "he (Bruce) realized that open historical study of the Bible was likely to challenge evangelicals on many crucial issues. His greatness is that he tackled this head on". The great number of evangelical scholars in mainstream international scholarship today who did PhDs with F. F. and the respect they hold in academic circles today is in no small way due to him.

Craig Evans pays tribute to the impressive way in which Barnabas Lindars was qualified to fill the chair. His *New Testament Apologetic* had already shown the depth and range of his knowledge of both parts of the Bible. In *Jesus Son of God* Lindars began with the view of Geza Vermes and Maurice Casey that Son of Man (*bar enosh*) means a man or a human being in most of the synoptic texts, but that in Mark.13.26 and 14.62 its messianic sense comes not from Jesus himself but his followers. Jesus believed himself to be the human or “Son of Man” figure of Daniel 7, who received authority and the kingdom, but subverted Daniel by saying that the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. Sadly, Lindars’s untimely death prevented him from giving us more fruit from his great learning and commitment to the gospel.

Christopher Tuckett’s work on Q is outlined by Wendy Cotter. Q is probably from a Christian group that still operated within Judaism. The elusive question of the role of the Son of Man in Q leads Tuckett to come up with a suggestion that throws interesting light on the puzzle that Q lacks the passion narrative. He believes that sayings like Luke 6.22; 7.34; 9.58 point to the sufferings of Jesus, i.e. they are virtual “sufferings” sayings. And the eschatological Son of Man (Lk. 12.40; 17.24, 30)? Tuckett finds its origin in Daniel 7, as it was understood in contemporary texts (I Enoch 46.1-4; 4 Ezra 13.1-4). Cotter concludes that no one can go into the issues concerning Q without reference to Tuckett.

In the final chapter Eileen Schuller shows us how the current holder of the Rylands chair, George Brooke, has become a world authority on the Qumran scrolls. Brooke’s PhD on *4QFlorilegium* led to his being one of a team of international scholars chosen to expedite the editing of the remaining Qumran fragments. Through Brooke’s good offices the Reed Collection of a hundred bits of scroll was donated to the John Rylands University Library, the only collection of small pieces in the U.K. Interested in the possible light the scrolls throw on the New Testament, Brooke did a noteworthy job in summarizing the complex relationship of the scrolls and the New Testament. Looking ahead, he suggests three areas for study: “the study of shared exegetical traditions; the use of social science methodologies to explore community formation; and more attention to the place of law, and to law and covenant”.

This attractive volume is good reading.

R. J. McKELVEY

***Pastor’s Pilgrimage: The Story of a Twentieth Century Christian Minister.***  
 By Keith Forecast. Leicester: Matador, 2008. Pp. viii + 165. £8.99. ISBN  
 978-1906510-367. Illustrated. Available from booksellers or from the  
 author at 2 Queen’s Avenue, Old Colwyn, LL29 9EH. Cost £10.00 includ-  
 ing p + p (cheques payable to Keith Forecast).

“Why do people write their autobiographies?” asks the author of this book in the opening line of his foreword. He answers his own question by saying that

he writes in order to provide a record for his family. But in recognising that he has lived through a “turbulent” century, and through a “significant” time in church history (points which surely cannot be denied), he also expresses the hope that these memoirs might appeal to a wider readership (which they probably do).

Early chapters chart ancestry (the Forecasts, never strong in number, are descended from Huguenot refugees who settled in East London, though links are revealed also with the Potteries through the maternal line), early years, schooling (with performing Shakespeare upheld as a fine preparation for preaching), the Second World War, RAF days and then University and Theological College. Thereafter a chapter is given to each of Keith Forecast’s ministries successively at Bristol, Plymouth and Cardiff, the post of Secretary for Christian Education and Children’s Work, and then the return to the pastorate at Palmer’s Green. There followed eight years as Moderator of the North Western Synod before retirement to North Wales (though the question mark in the title to the penultimate chapter is suggestive of the level of activity maintained since officially standing down from full-time ministry). Although fairly positive and reasonably content with all of these, it is interesting to note that Palmer’s Green seems to have been most satisfying: perhaps the people were that bit more interesting and involved; perhaps, by that time, the author was more matured and experienced in his own practice of ministry; perhaps there are a host of other reasons too. Nevertheless, it is this – his longest pastorate – that seems to receive the most favourable treatment.

World events, UK perspectives and, naturally, church life are all mentioned. Alongside this, the reader is permitted access to personal thoughts and reflections on family life, on his wife (Frances), children and grandchildren and, most movingly, on Frances’ death from cancer just before retirement. More controversially we also find out what the author thinks about specific issues – even thorny ones – in the life of the contemporary church. Here more than anywhere else the reader will regret the inevitable condensation of argument which results from limited word space (an imposition by publishers keen to minimise costs and maximise profit). For these thoughts need – and deserve – expansion.

Having said that, there is little doubt that this is a decidedly light, though definitely interesting, read. The style is straightforward and unpretentious, and those who know Keith Forecast well and those to whom he might be a stranger will alike feel privileged to have shared a little not only of “the story of his life” but also his “commentary on life in twentieth-century Britain”.

ROBERT POPE