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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_congregational-studies-conference_01.php

Independency in Practice and Theory

Congregational Studies
Conference 2008



Independency: in Practice and Theory

**Arthur Fraser
Joseph Greenald
John Semper**

**Congregational Studies Conference
Papers 2008**

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Contents

Foreword.....5
John Semper

Congregationalism and Spiritual Renewal in the
Scottish Highlands.....7
Arthur Fraser

Congregational Independency 1689–1735:
Standing Firm in an Age of Decline35
Joseph B Greenald

The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 1658.....57
John Semper

The papers are printed in the order in which they were given at the Conference; as usual the contributor is entirely responsible for the views expressed in his paper.



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Photographs by Dr Digby L. James

Foreword

One of the privileges and joys of being able to write the Foreword to the Conference papers each year is the opportunity it gives to thank all those involved in making it such a day of warm fellowship and encouragement. Only those who attend will really appreciate the value of such a time.

Among those we would thank are the EFCC staff who do the publicity, handle the bookings, and provide a bookstall, and whose valued contribution might easily be overlooked. We continue to be grateful to the officers of Highbury Quadrant Congregational Church for allowing us to use their building. This year, too, we had great cause to appreciate the food prepared for us by ladies from Woolwich Congregational Church. Our thanks to Aaron Flanagan for arranging this. Finally, we must express our deep appreciation of all the hard work—in research, planning, writing and presentation—which our speakers put in each year, to provide fascinating insights into the lives of individual Christians, individual churches, or our Congregational constituency as a whole.

We were not disappointed this year. Any paper which touches on Revival reminds us again of the sovereign work of God's Spirit, the remarkable operations of grace which often take place in the space of just a few years, and the unique means which the Lord seems to use on each and every occasion when there is such a gale of grace. In the Highlands and Islands, it was initially very much down to a few individuals, especially the Haldane brothers—though the evil one endeavoured to sow seeds of division, as he so often does. Much, however, derived from the faithful, heroic, self-sacrificing efforts of the itinerating evangelists who travelled vast distances in all weathers to proclaim the good news in Gospel-starved areas; not forgetting, of course, the fact that God himself had prepared so many hungry hearts with a readiness to respond to His Word.

Similarly, our second paper covered another little known period of our Congregational past. As was pointed out, it has often been the view that the Dissenters were generally in decline, until the Evangelical Revival brought new spiritual life. Joe Greenald showed us that even in the darkest days, it was possible to remain faithful in maintaining the essentials of the Gospel, in the confidence of God's good hand supporting them. Surely, this is a word for all those brothers and members who serve in small and struggling churches today. One of the interesting facets of the paper was the account of the considerable number of Christians leaving increasingly Unitarian congregations to form new Independent evangelical churches. Perhaps we should be on the lookout for similar trends in our own day.

The final, and shorter, paper looked at the circumstances surrounding the Savoy Conference of 1658 and the production of the Savoy Declaration. If nothing else, it showed clearly both the complete independency of each local church, and at the same time the real need felt by those same churches for fellowship and inter-action with one another. In a day when the method of expository preaching is increasingly, and rightly, being adopted, a strong plea was made for some systematic, doctrinal teaching such as the Declaration provides, in order to bring the truths of Scripture into a meaningful and readily digestible whole.

So do not miss next year's conference! Who knows what God will have to say to us on that occasion? Come with a prayerful expectancy, and you will not, I'm sure, be disappointed. We meet on Saturday, 14 March 2009, at 11.00am at Highbury Quadrant Congregational Church. May the Lord help us to rejoice together at what He has done, is doing now, and what He may have in store for us in the future.

John Semper

Wigtown



James Alexander Haldane

Congregationalism and Spiritual Renewal in the Scottish Highlands

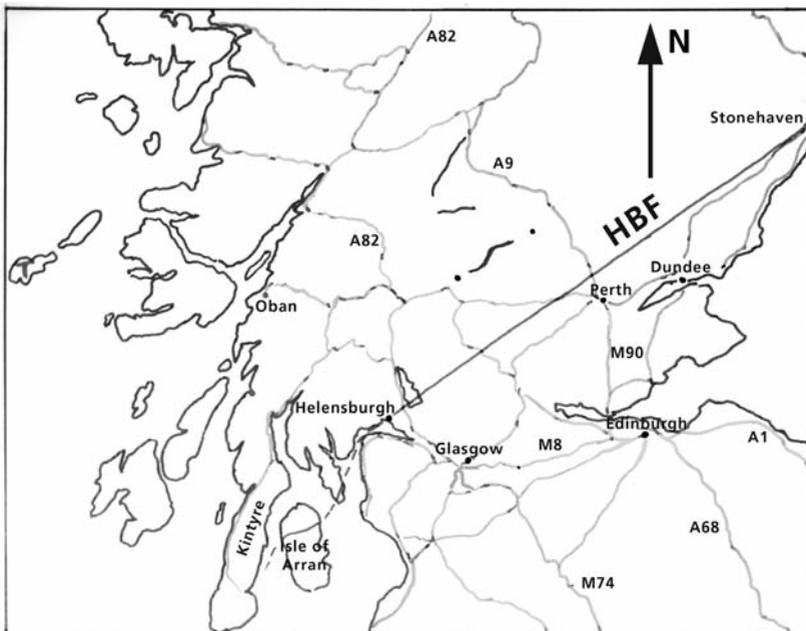
Arthur Fraser

1. Introduction

a. The *Period* we are considering is roughly the first half of the 19th century; that proved to be the heyday of Congregationalism in Scotland.

b. *Location*. As an ex-geologist, I define the Scottish Highlands as all parts of the mainland and off-shore islands which lie to the north and west of the Highland Boundary Fault, a major geological feature which runs from Stonehaven on the north-east coast to Helensburgh on the Firth of Clyde. Specified in this way, the Highlands form a distinct geographical as well as geological entity. Location maps pinpoint the main areas and centres of population referred to in the paper.

c. *Scope of Paper*. The following account is not intended to be geographically comprehensive; rather, it focuses on Highland regions of particular interest and significance in the rise and spread of Congregationalism, especially where we have first-hand accounts of revival.



2. Setting the scene

a. *Social Conditions*

The vast majority of Highlanders were crofters who lived very near the breadline, often below it. In view of what we will learn of their response to the gospel, it is worth noting how they were regarded by the Lowlanders. According to one contemporary journalist, the Gaels were ‘an indolent, ignorant, and *dirty race*, steeped in such wretchedness as never yet fell on a whole people.’¹

The profound social changes which occurred during the first half of the 19th century arose from a number of factors. One was urbanization which resulted in a steady migration of Highlanders to the cities in search of work. Repeated crop failures aggravated this trend. However, by far the most important factor was the appalling episode of the Highland Clearances whereby a great number of crofters were forcibly displaced from the land to make way for sheep farms. Most of those evicted from their land emigrated, notably to Canada and Australia.

b. *Spiritual and Moral Conditions*

In the second half of the 18th century, Moderatism dominated the Established Church of Scotland. The origin of the term is obscure but its general character can best be inferred from the words of Hugh Miller who, anticipating the Disruption of 1843, predicted that, ‘Moderatism will be left behind, weighed down with the guilt of perishing souls.’² Amongst other things, the Moderates were happy to accept the evil system of patronage, and indeed to enforce it with the power of the law. They were also strongly opposed to foreign missions, believing that the gospel should only be preached to the civilized. Besides, they claimed there were enough heathen at home; sadly, an all-too-true state of affairs to which they had largely contributed by substituting empty moral homilies for gospel preaching. John Campbell of Edinburgh, one of the early Congregational itinerants, testified,

I have been often sorry to find that the Highlanders were, as to the means of salvation, almost the same as the Hottentots previous to societies in this country sending out preachers with the gospel of Jesus Christ.³

1 The *Scotsman*, 10 February, 1847. Quoted in K. Fenyő, ‘Views of the Highlanders and the Clearances in the Scottish Press, 1845–1855: *The Witness in Context*.’ In L. Borley [Ed], *Celebrating the Life and Times of Hugh Miller* (The Cromarty Arts Trust and the Elphinstone Institute of the University of Aberdeen, 2003), p. 321.

2 Quoted in N. Needham, ‘The Religious and Political Background to the Disruption.’ In L. Borley [ed], *Celebrating the Life and Times of Hugh Miller*, p. 289. [For a full explanation of the layout of references cited and abbreviations used, see Appendix]

3 *The Christian Herald*, 1833, p. 239. [McNaughton, p. 113]

Describing these times, John Wiseman, minister of the Congregational Church in Wick, Caithness, wrote:

The Parish ministers, ... were, almost without exception, ignorant of the Gospel, or, ... did not preach it, either contenting themselves with a discussion of moral duties, ... or teaching doctrines positively erroneous, and many of them paid personally little attention to the duties of morality; ...⁴

These were times when drunkenness was rife, even at funerals. On one occasion in Lochaber, James Kennedy records how

... he met a large crowd of Highlanders following a neighbour to the grave, who became so drunk in the churchyard, that they left the coffin unburied by the open grave!⁵

In another Highland locality, we are told that

[a] respectable female applied to one of [the Parish ministers] while she was under great distress of mind, but instead of directing her to the Saviour, he bade her apply a blister to her head. A young man in similar circumstances applied to another Minister, and the instructions he gave him, were to procure a fiddle, cheer himself up, and banish from his mind all gloomy thoughts.⁶

However, it would be wrong to suppose that the Church of Scotland was uniformly moribund at this time. Stellar figures were already on the horizon and would reach their zenith in due time as the Evangelical party within the Church steadily increased in its influence.

As we shall see later, the rise of Congregationalism was closely linked with the establishment in 1797 of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel at Home. But in a significant sense, this new society was building on and continuing the work of a much older organisation, the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) founded in 1709. The main thrust of evangelistic outreach in the Highlands by this older society was through charity schools in which the schoolmasters also functioned as catechists. In 1824, there were still 134 society schools in Gaelic-speaking parishes. It is a point of incidental interest that the SSPCK contributed to the support of missionaries among North American Indians, including David Brainerd.

By 1800, the Presbyterian body in Scotland was fragmented by a series of secessions during the 18th century, all of which were ultimately related to the vexed issue of patronage. The First Secession Church, which broke away in 1733, soon subdivided into Burghers and Anti-Burghers, while a second

4 G.A.C.S., Section 3, pp.11–12. [McNaughton, p.223]

5 S.C.M., 1864, pp. 378–380. [McNaughton, p. 271]

6 G.A.C.S., Section 12, pp. 4–5. [McNaughton, p. 185]

secession in 1761 resulted in the formation of the Relief Church. Each of these different branches sent out missionaries, in the words of the Associate Antiburgher Synod, to ‘preach in those places which are most necessitous in the northern counties.’⁷

3. Catalysts in the Congregational Enterprise

The main agents for change were the Haldane brothers, both initially members of the Church of Scotland. James Haldane, who, like his older brother Robert, had been converted through the influence of David Bogue of Gosport, was challenged by the taunts of the Moderates who asked, ‘Why send missionaries to foreign parts, when there is so much ignorance, unbelief, and immorality at your own doors?’⁸ A retired naval man, James Haldane had been frustrated in his attempt to establish a mission to Bengal, and was at a cross-roads in his life. The spiritual impact made on him when he accompanied Charles Simeon on a brief, mainly recreational, tour of the Highlands was considerable, deepening his commitment to Christ and intensifying his desire to spread the gospel, not least through tract distribution which he had seen Simeon employ to great effect.

After overcoming his doubts about the legitimacy of lay-preaching, James Haldane planned the first of a series of reconnaissance preaching tours to the Scottish Highlands, taking John Aikman as his co-evangelist. Reports based in part on Haldane’s Journal, encapsulate the mission and its impact as a whole. For example, on one Sunday morning in Thurso, Haldane

... went to church, where a melancholy sermon was delivered, in which the minister cautioned the people against trusting for acceptance with God to the blood of Christ. ‘His peace-speaking blood,’ says the Journal, ‘was only for the holy and the good!’ But against this false doctrine he testified in the evening to no less than 3,000 persons, assembled from places far and near, to whom he proclaimed the true Gospel of the grace of God.⁹

One eye-witness describes the atmosphere while Haldane preached:

A solemn silence pervaded the multitude. Many were seen to shed tears; and when some truths were expressed, sighs were heard throughout the congregation. ... there was an astonishing authority, and a sort of indescribable evidence attending the word ... others ... thought what they heard was addressed to them individually, and they were sometimes afraid lest their very names should be mentioned. In short, the attention of almost

7 M.M., 1798, p. 237. [McNaughton, p.3]

8 A. Haldane, *The Lives of Robert & James Haldane* (reprinted Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), p. 135.

9 Ibid. p. 177.

everyone was drawn to what they called *this gospel*. It was indeed new to most who heard it, both as to the matter and the manner of delivering it.¹⁰

Convinced by the evidence he had personally seen on his Highland tour that there were indeed ‘enough of heathen at home’, James Haldane, along with his Edinburgh friend John Campbell and several other members of the Established Church, formed the interdenominational Society for the Propagation of the Gospel at Home (SPGH) early in 1798. All the Society’s finances came from the proceeds of the sale of Robert Haldane’s estate at Airthrey near Stirling. In fulfilling its aim to make known ‘the everlasting Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ’, the Society employed Ministers to work under its direction, and catechists to teach evening schools in the villages. One report states that

Before the close of 1799, nearly forty catechists were travelling throughout the length and breadth of the land, [and] thirty or forty thousand tracts had been distributed ... The Established clergy complained that the world was going out of its place, and the old landmarks of things, both civil and sacred, were fast disappearing.¹¹

Other developments swiftly followed. From 1798 onwards, preaching centres modelled on Whitefield’s ‘Tabernacles’ were opened in several major cities such as Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dundee. In 1799, Robert Haldane, again with his personal financial backing, instituted a Seminary for the rapid training of ministers and evangelists. Regional training classes were also established. But the most significant development at this time concerns Greville Ewing, a renowned expository preacher at Lady Glenorchy’s Chapel in Edinburgh, who became closely linked with the Haldane brothers in 1796. Ewing was a strong advocate of home and foreign missions, a passion which led him to become one of the founders of the *Missionary Magazine*. More importantly, when Greville Ewing left the Church of Scotland ministry in 1798, he skilfully piloted the new evangelical movement away from the Established Church. His convictions on church polity had already been flagged up in his contributions to the *Missionary Magazine*, and he may rightly be regarded as the main architect of Scottish Congregationalism.

In contradistinction to the practices of the Parish Churches, the new Independent churches were to admit to membership only those showing evidence of a vital Christian faith, to hold the Lord’s Supper weekly instead of only twice a year, and to convene, in Ewing’s words, ‘a Church-meeting

¹⁰ M.M., 1803, pp. 409–410. [McNaughton, 227]

¹¹ Rev. G. Struthers, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Principles of the Relief Church* (Glasgow, 1843), p. 402. [McNaughton, p. 4]

weekly, for the purposes of social worship, discipline and mutual edification.¹²

As for the Haldanes, they had no intention of breaking away from the Established Church. Their aim had simply been to open up new centres of worship where people could hear the gospel. However, on mainly pragmatic grounds, they fell in line with Ewing's principles. The earliest Congregational churches were constituted in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee. By 1800 there were 14 and by 1807, 85. This rapid growth partly reflects other independent congregations becoming associated with the movement. Thanks to Ewing's statesmanship coupled with the financial support of the Haldanes, the Congregational cause in Scotland was given a flying start.

4. Disputes, divisions and developments

It is a sad and salutary fact that the new churches were soon caught up in contentious issues which had far-reaching effects on the subsequent direction of Congregationalism across Scotland. Indeed, so great was the convulsion that hit the movement around 1808, that it was often subsequently referred to as 'the disruption', a term normally restricted to the momentous event of 1843 by which the Free Church of Scotland came into being.

The first and foremost dispute concerned church order and practice. In their desire to achieve churches which they considered to correspond most closely to the apostolic churches of the New Testament, the Haldane brothers advocated a number of new practices, such as mutual exhortation in public worship on Sundays, a plurality of elders in each of the churches, and the ordination of lay pastors. However, it was their rejection of paedobaptism and their embracing of Baptist convictions in 1808 which proved to be the breaking point.

One of the earliest consequences of the new views was a five-way split in the Edinburgh Tabernacle Church of which James Haldane was the pastor. This divisive spirit spread to the whole of Scotland, causing much bitterness. For example, Neil McNeil of the Congregational Church in Elgin, reported in sorrow many years later that,

The Spirit of Speculation, jealousy, strife and alienation spread like the mildew of death. The bitter effects of these waters of Marah have scarcely subsided to this day. ... Our difficulties and long dissolutions have chiefly arisen from strife about *new* things respecting Church order, division on the Baptist controversy, the stumbling which these things have occasioned to the weak and the young, and the prejudice with which they have saturated and fortified the public mind. I have had a world of prejudice to try and live down in this place.¹³

¹² A. Haldane, *op. cit.* p. 356.

¹³ G.A.C.S., Section 10, pp. 12–13. [McNaughton, p. 314]

John Kennedy similarly recalled the effect of the troubles on his father, James, at Aberfeldy:

The church in Aberfeldy had other difficulties to contend with in the days of its infancy and weakness—the difficulties which beset almost all the churches of the same order in connexion with the adoption of Baptist opinions by the Messrs. Haldane. My father never wavered in his conviction of the scriptural authority of infant baptism, and never gave way to the innovations with which the young Independent churches were then flooded and almost desolated.¹⁴

One major consequence of these deep divisions was Robert Haldane's decision to withdraw all financial support from those employed by the Society for the Propagation for the Gospel at Home who did not conform to his new position. In fact, the SPGH was soon to be dissolved. Dr McNaughton observes that

... his decision had tremendous implications for those who wished to hold true to the Congregational way. Some had to vacate buildings owned by Haldane and others were faced with the prospect of having to repay their debts immediately.¹⁵

Personal relationships and working partnerships were torn asunder in the wake of these developments. Of these, the most significant was the permanent break between Robert Haldane and Greville Ewing. As a result, the Theological Seminary where Ewing was a tutor was moved from Glasgow, and the Glasgow Tabernacle building was eventually sold, a decision which deeply upset Ewing. John Aikman, who had assisted James Haldane in his preaching tours, withdrew his membership from the [Edinburgh] Tabernacle, believing it to be

... for the general good of the cause *to have no visible* or Church fellowship with brethren who have ... been acting upon a system which appears to me to be destructive, both of the pastoral office, and of all order in the house of God.¹⁶

In the Providence of God, lasting good came out of these divisions. In his biography of the Haldane brothers, Alexander Haldane, son of James, emphasizes that 'these divisions [were] ... fatal to the progress of Congregationalism in Scotland, ...'¹⁷ However, as Dr McNaughton convincingly argues, the rupture between the fledgling churches and the Haldane brothers was actually a blessing in disguise because it compelled the

¹⁴ S.C.M., 1864, p. 343. [McNaughton, p.167]

¹⁵ William D. McNaughton, *Early Congregational Independency in the Highlands and Islands and the North-East of Scotland* (Tiree: The Trustees of Ruaig Congregational Church, 2003), p. 57.

¹⁶ A. Haldane, op. cit. p. 361.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 362.

former to stand on their own feet financially and to organise themselves on distinctively Congregational principles. The establishment of the Glasgow Theological Academy in 1811 and the Congregational Union of Scotland in 1812 both came about as a direct result of the Haldane brothers' actions. The aims of the Union were church aid and home mission, and 55 churches immediately joined it, this number rising to 72 by 1822. In Greville Ewing and Ralph Wardlaw, the Academy had very able tutors who imbued their academic teaching with their evangelistic zeal.

Another important development which occurred in the years following the dissolution of the SPGH in 1808, was the establishment of several Itinerant Societies. These arose from a recognition that the continuation of evangelism in the Highlands was essential, and that financial support had to be provided, now that the resources formerly supplied by Robert Haldane were cut off. One such society was the *Society in Paisley and its Vicinity, for Gaelic Missions to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, for which James Kennedy worked in Perthshire. All the Itinerant Societies formed in this period employed ministers connected with the Congregational Union. Indeed, in large measure, Congregationalism in Scotland owed both its beginnings and its advance to itinerant evangelism, i.e. to mission. In the words of Angus Galbraith,

Our fathers felt that *their* vocation was to *preach the gospel*. Our preachers were missionaries. Our churches were the mission churches. Our Union was a Missionary Union. The policy of our denomination was characteristically *aggressive*.¹⁸

It is pertinent to note that the founding of the London Missionary Society in 1794 was a major factor in inspiring this vision.

5. Records of revivals

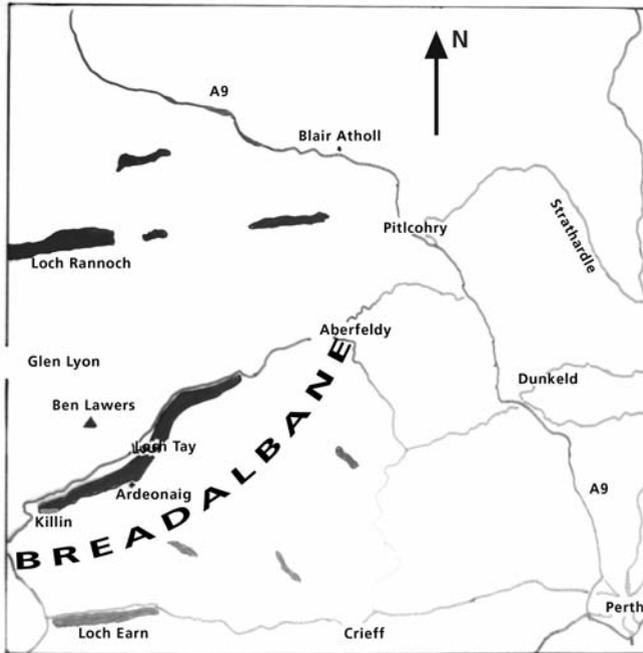
During the early itinerant work and subsequent settled ministries, the preaching of the Congregational evangelists and pastors was blessed by special visitations of the Holy Spirit. Here we examine five sample areas in the Highlands for which we have first-hand accounts of spiritual renewal.

(i) Breadalbane (1801–1802; 1816)

On modern maps, Breadalbane is the long strip of land located south of Loch Tay between Killin and Aberfeldy. The area of the same name in earlier times seems to have also included large tracts to the north of Loch Tay.

At the turn of the 19th century, it was apparently a well populated area in which the inhabitants were,

18 S.C.M., 1855, p. 191. [McNaughton, p. 1]



... grossly ignorant of the way of salvation, and evidently lived without God in the world. ... [T]hey lived without prayer; and at all their public assemblies, ... not a word was heard about Christ, the soul, death and eternity.¹⁹

The outstanding figure in the Breadalbane revival was John Farquharson, a native of Blair Atholl, who was sent by the SPGH into the area to work as a catechist. Given the low spiritual state at the time, we can imagine his astonishment when at Killin on week-nights, 200 people turned up in each meeting, and even 400 on occasion, while on the Sabbath, at least 800 attended. Farquharson commented that ‘... although the people are in general very ignorant, they are very desirous to be instructed.’²⁰

John Campbell of Edinburgh tells how that

... By the blessing of God, the preaching of Mr Farquharson was the means, amid much discouragement, of awakening many to a sense of their lost condition. The first-fruits of the very extensive revival which followed, were Mr. J. Ferguson, Mr. Campbell, and Mr. Dewar, whose conversion was the

19 S.P.G.H., 1803, p. 33. [McNaughton, p. 177]

20 M.M., 1800, p. 448. [McNaughton, p. 178]

prelude to the professed conversion of above 300 more, ... from among whom three Congregational churches were subsequently formed.²¹

These three named men, John Ferguson, John Campbell, James Dewar, together with Dewar's brother, Alexander, were all called by God to be preachers of the Gospel. Following their conversion, John Campbell and James Dewar found that

... the love of God burned within them. .. 'and they two made a covenant before the Lord.' ... This short interview turned out to be the commencement of their fellowship meetings, which were at first held by stealth in the open air, in vacant out-houses, or in barns. *There*, night after night, when all around had retired to rest, did these young men meet with other converts, engaging in prayer, and reading the Scriptures when they could procure a light, and praying and conversing when they had none. ... The meetings were soon after kept in a more public manner, but still with much opposition from all quarters.²²

We read the following in the *Missionary Magazine* of 1803:

At the first open meeting two of the strangers, who had been opposers, were so deeply affected while the brethren were engaged in prayer, that they fell down to the ground. When they recovered, their mouths were filled with the high praises of Jesus, ... In consequence of these two being awakened, the members were encouraged to hold a meeting the following evening in a house to which they were invited. At this meeting fourteen were affected in the very same way during the time of prayer; and at the request of the hearers, the members continued in prayer the greater part of the night. The brethren continued their meetings, and for eight or ten days hardly one was without some instances of awakening.²³

We later learn that

[s]ome months after the general awakening, the converted, to the number of *sixty-six*, were formed into a church, ... and they unanimously invited Mr Farquharson to be their Pastor, ...²⁴

Farquharson's ordination and induction to the charge in Breadalbane took place in November 1802. As the church had no meeting-place of its own, the service was held in the open air. One of the participants at the induction was Robert Little, minister of the Congregational Church in Perth, and he later recalled that

21 S.C.M., 1843, pp. 145–146. [McNaughton, p. 180]

22 Ibid. p. 146. [McNaughton, p. 180]

23 M.M., 1803, pp. 370–372. [McNaughton, p. 182]

24 Ibid. pp. 373–374. [McNaughton, p. 183]

those who believed found it absolutely necessary to distinguish themselves by a decided attachment to the truth, and by coming out from among the world and being separate. Persecution tried their faith, and in many it has hitherto proved as gold. ... As to their general character now, it seems much to resemble the idea given us in the New Testament of the first Christians. Much brokenness of heart for sin—great simplicity and teachableness, so that many of them seem to be *little children* indeed—vast eagerness to hear the word; many of them walk ten or twelve miles or more, through bad roads, and even heavy rain, to sit on the side of a mountain, (for they have no house to meet in) and listen to the joyful sound. On the Sabbath that I was with them, it rained most of the day, yet they continued without dispersing for five hours, without any shelter. To this should be added, the manner in which the word is received by them, with such attention, seriousness and joy, as clearly evidences that they consider it as the word of God.²⁵

From the statistical records, we learn that by June 1803, the church numbered one hundred, and this excluded those who had died in the meantime or had moved out of the district. Interestingly, we are told that ‘the greatest part of the church consists of persons between 14 and 24 years of age, six from 40 to 50, and two upwards of 60’.²⁶

Breadalbane Congregational Church subsequently divided into 4 separate churches in 1805, a practical measure arising from the local geography. All prospered initially but were very adversely affected by the 1808 ‘disruption’. John Farquharson himself relinquished his charge in 1805 though continued to itinerate for a time from Killin. At some point, perhaps en route to Nova Scotia to which he emigrated c. 1806, he preached in Skye and was instrumental in the conversion of Donald Munro, a local blind man who not only became a notable Highland catechist with the SSPCK, but also was at the centre of the great Skye revival of 1812–14.

Revival visited Breadalbane again in 1816. The occasion which marked its beginning was Mr Findlater’s Communion season at Ardeonaig on the south side of Loch Tay at which the great Gaelic preacher, Dr John MacDonald of Ferintosh, also known as ‘the Apostle of the North’, assisted. James Kennedy was also involved; he was the minister of Aberfeldy Congregational Church at the time and his son John gives a vivid description of how it started:

... In September 1816, some people from [Glenlyon] crossed Benlawers to hear Mr. McDonald of Ferintosh preach at Mr. Findlater’s communion; and a sermon which they heard from the words ‘Thy Maker is thy husband’ was the means of awakening and quickening some of them. This operated like the

25 S.P.G.H., 1803, pp. 35–36. [McNaughton, p.184]

26 Ibid. p. 44. [McNaughton, p. 184]

kindling of a spark. My father went to preach in the glen soon after, and the effects produced by the proclamation of divine love were such as led all to exclaim, 'This is the finger of God'. Day after day, and night after night, crowds assembled in barns and under the shelter of the woods to listen to those strange things which had been brought to their ears. Sometimes amid bleak winds and drifting snows, with their lamps suspended, fairy like, from the fir trees which sheltered them, preacher and people were so overcome that the service was interrupted by the strength of their emotions. The great theme on these occasions was the love of Christ. ... For weeks together the Aberfeldy pastor was compelled to neglect his own flock, or leave them to feed themselves.²⁷

(ii) Glenlyon, Strathardle and Aberfeldy (1816–1820)

The name of James Kennedy, which we have already encountered, is inseparable from the spiritual renewal which occurred in these three areas. At the time Kennedy was regarded as the Whitefield of the Highlands, and also known as 'the great Kennedy', whose preaching captivated many to such an extent that they followed him from place to place. A native of the region, and a student of Robert Haldane's seminary, he was appointed the minister of the Aberfeldy Congregational Church in 1806, six years after its formal constitution.

We have details of the revival in Glenlyon, and Kennedy's part in it, in the *Annual Report of the Congregational Union* in 1817:

By a letter, dated the 2d of April, we find that our brother [James Kennedy] paid a visit to Glenlyon ... on the 20th of November last, intending to stop only three days ... But such was the attention excited to the word, and the very extraordinary effects produced by it, that he felt constrained to remain *three* weeks; preaching, with two exceptions, once every day, frequently twice, and three times on Sabbaths, till his bodily strength was quite exhausted. ... 'What numbers,' he remarks, 'are brought to a knowledge of the truth, no one, I believe, can at present say with certainty; but there are above two hundred known to be in a hopeful way since this revival commenced; one hundred of these are rejoicing in the truth, (among whom there are some as young as from nine to fourteen years of age,) and the rest are under deep convictions.' Nor will the people in that district now hear any thing but the Gospel. ... He says in his letter, 'Two Sabbaths ago there were about sixty of them here, a distance of from seventeen to eighteen miles; among whom was a woman between sixty and seventy years of age, who walked all that distance in the morning to hear the word, and after the services of the day returned a great part of the way home.'²⁸

27 S.C.M., 1856, p. 386. [McNaughton, p. 168]

28 A.R.C.U.S., 1817, pp. 12–13. [McNaughton, p. 169]

The Free Church minister of Lawers, Rev. David Campbell, records his impressions of Kennedy's preaching 48 years later:

I was but a young laddie then, but the appearance, voice, manner and awfully solemn piercing appeals of the preacher I can never forget. He laboured with a most passionate ardour and marked success. His whole soul was in the blessed work. He continued in Glenlyon preaching every Sabbath and week day ... and scarcely a sermon was preached but some new case of awakening occurred. ... However busy at their lawful avocations the people might have been, when 'the hour of prayer', Mr Kennedy's fixed hour to begin the sermon, was come, all work was thrown aside, and a rush to the barn, hamlet, or hillside might be seen from every corner of the glen. I have seen ... [Kennedy] stand almost knee-deep in a wreath of snow, while at the same time it was snowing and drifting in his face all the time he was preaching, and the people gathered round him patiently and eagerly listening to the fervent truths that proceeded from his lips. ... 'Ach gu bhi a-comhdhunnadh.' 'But to conclude,'—when he came to that, his voice faltered, his eye brightened, and you would think he was as it were rushing between men and death, or plucking them out of the fire.²⁹

Revival broke out in and around Strathardle in 1820, some 3 years after that in Glenlyon. Among the many converted was Archibald Farquharson, who subsequently ministered at the Congregational Church in Tiree, and was destined to be God's instrument for revival there.

These were evidently wonderful days of spiritual life and vigour. John Kennedy described the delights of Lord's Days in Aberfeldy in a piece he wrote for the *Scottish Congregational Magazine* in 1864:

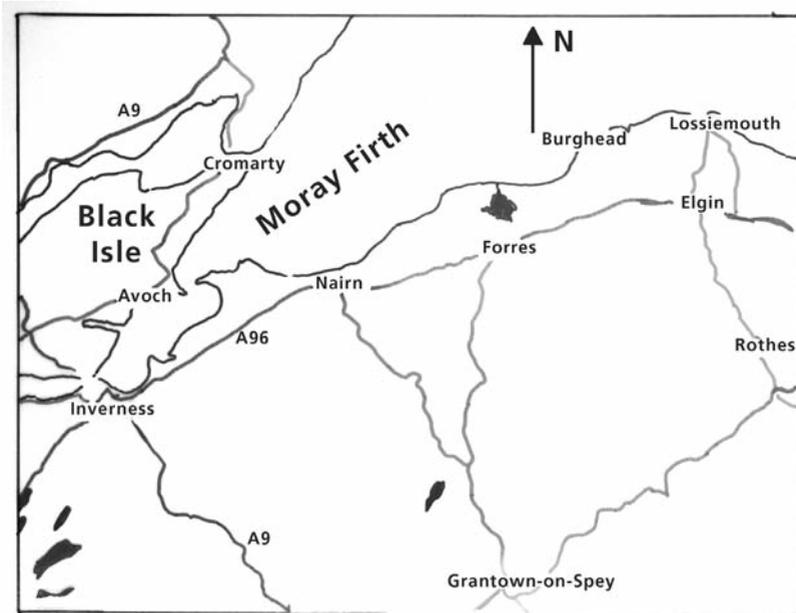
Well do I remember the scenes which the village and my father's house presented on summer Sabbath days. Large numbers of persons used to come 'from the east and from the west', from Lochtay side, Glenlyon and Strathardle, a distance in some instances of from fifteen to twenty miles. Leaving home sometimes at four o'clock in the morning, some on foot, some on horseback, some in carts, they would reach Aberfeldy long before the hour of service, and enjoy the humble but hearty hospitality of the village disciples. After two sermons, one in English and one in Gaelic, which were preached without interval, followed by the Lord's Supper, which was observed weekly, these travellers were supplied with food before they began their homeward journey.³⁰

(iii) Avoch (1829 and 1840)

The revivals at the Congregational Church in Avoch occurred during the 43-year ministry of Alexander Dewar who, along with his brother James, was

29 S.C.M., 1864, pp. 344–345. [McNaughton, pp. 169–170]

30 Ibid. p.377. [McNaughton, pp. 171–172]



converted in the revival at Breadalbane. After completing his studies in Edinburgh, Dewar was sent by the SPGH to Inverness to occupy the preaching station there. Having received £5 from the Society for the journey, he walked the full 150 miles! After preaching in Inverness and district for a few months, Dewar decided to settle permanently in Avoch, a village on the south coast of the Black Isle, about 10 miles from Inverness.

In a detailed document about the church in Avoch, Alexander Dewar records the following:

We had two very interesting revivals, the first in 1829 and the last in 1840. I observed that at both periods, there was a deep impression on the minds of members of the Church, of the low state of religion among us, and the great need we had of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to revive believers and convert sinners; this led us to hold meetings for prayer more frequently, to pray more earnestly and to set apart some days for fasting and prayer, which by many were kept to the letter, not breaking fast till the sun went down; by the mercy of God prayer was heard, the Church revived and the Lord began to bless the preaching of the Gospel, ... Of those who were at that time turned to the Lord in Avoch, the greater number were young persons and of that class which to all human appearance were the most hopeless characters. Very few of that class which might be characterised as hopeful, were affected. The

impressions were so general, that almost all subjects of conversation gave place to the enquiry, how does it fare with your soul? ... Previous to the revival of 1840, the Members of the Church felt as before, the necessity of a revival, and prayed earnestly and with confidence, as they had formerly experienced an answer to their prayer. It happened that my Brother Mr Dewar of Nairn and I exchanged for a Sabbath and on that day two young persons were brought under serious impressions and proposed next week to keep a prayer Meeting in some private house in the village. ... and they asked me to meet with them; to this I agreed; there were about 100 present; I gave to them an address suitable to the occasion and intimated that we would continue to meet every evening and for nine successive weeks the people met to the number of from two to three hundred. I gave them every evening a short address, bearing upon the object in view, and now nothing became so much a delight of the young and old as prayer Meetings, and the impression was so universal, that in this small parish, which is only three square miles, containing a population of 3,000, there would be thirteen prayer Meetings weekly, and even young boys and girls, not more than twelve years of age met and prayed among themselves. Then the Lord began to bless the means of Grace, so that during that occasion twenty two Members were added to the Church, besides a number who removed to other places.³¹

(iv) Oban (1841)

Several revivals were experienced during the ministry of John Campbell, a native of Breadalbane and converted during the revival there. We have this record from him regarding the revival of 1841 after Mr McLean had been sent from Tiree to assist him.

When Mr. McL. came, we continued labouring with increased energy. We did not expect that the people would continue long to turn out in such numbers; but in this we were agreeably mistaken, for they were daily increasing. Our chapel was almost full every night, and generally on Sabbath evening we had no room for them, so that some had to stand without at the door and windows. ... We gave no expectation to the people that [the meetings] should be continued for any length of time, ... However, when we saw the eagerness of the people to hear, and the word taking effect, we pledged ourselves, while they would continue to hear, that we would continue to address them as long as we had strength to do so. Thus we continued for ten weeks labouring every night except Saturdays, and the desire of hearing not diminished.

The preaching in general was of that sort which is calculated to arouse the careless, by giving them a view of their own character as ruined and lost, ... A full and free salvation through Christ and him crucified was pointed out to

31 G.A.C.S., Section 14, pp. 1–34. [McNaughton, pp. 247–248]

the most guilty as the only refuge, and all, without exception, were invited to come and be saved.

... Some at first made light of what they heard; but soon their attention was arrested; they listened with solemnity and anxiety; there was no remarkable visible excitement; everything went on very quietly. Sometimes an involuntary sigh was heard, and the tears, in large drops, were seen rolling down their cheeks, and some bowing down their heads upon the seats, and covering their faces to screen their feelings. Anxious inquirers were requested to come to my house, that we might converse with them about their case individually. For several weeks we had a number of such almost every night; many of them under poignant conviction, so that they could not suppress their feelings, and some in such agony of mind, that we could not converse with them till their burst of feeling had abated. Some, while directing them to the finished work of Christ, received immediate peace, others continued days and weeks before they submitted to the truth. ... Others who came to town on business, and peeped into our meeting, and some who listened at the windows of our chapel, went away with the arrows of conviction in their consciences. When it was noised abroad what was going on at Oban, the country people crowded every night to hear the Word; some of them from 4, 6, and 8 miles distance. On Sabbath some came as far as 12 and 16 miles. When the truth began to work it operated like leaven in families and among their neighbours. ...

For some weeks it seemed as if the fear of God had fallen on the inhabitants in general. The meetings and their effects were the general topics of conversation; so that the minds of all classes seemed to be absorbed by them. ...

The characters on whom impressions were made were of all classes, old and young, from 10 to 70, the most part from 15–25,—some of them had a profession of religion, others had not,—some were moral, others immoral,—almost the whole of them are poor, and of the working classes.³²

(v) Tìree (1839–1846)

As we noted earlier, Archibald Farquharson (1801–1878) had been converted in the Strathardle revival of 1816–17 under the preaching of James Kennedy. He subsequently attended the Glasgow Theological Academy and became an evangelist under the auspices of the Congregational Union. Almost all his preaching was done in Gaelic, a language which he found much more expressive than English when dealing with spiritual concerns. He was inducted to the charge of the Tìree Congregational Church in 1835.

Towards the end of 1839 and at the beginning of 1840, revival visited Tìree under his ministry. Here is how he himself describes what happened:

32 S.C.M., 1842, pp. 154–156. [McNaughton, pp. 46–48]

... Friday the 13th of December was set apart as a day of humiliation and prayer, which was very refreshing; an address delivered in the afternoon seemed to have a powerful effect upon their minds. The Sabbath following I preached from these words, Mal. iii. 10. 'Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse,' &c. Whether it was the sermon or the address that impressed the minds of the members most I know not, but the next time I heard them praying, I thought they were not like the same individuals—they seemed to be reconverted ... Their full confession of sin, particularly the sin of unbelief—their ardent desires for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, both upon themselves and their unconverted friends and neighbours, was truly astonishing, so that some of the individuals who, a few weeks before, would weary a person with their long, heartless, formal prayers, would now bring tears from his eyes. For a fortnight there was a sermon appointed every evening except Saturday, and two short prayer meetings—one early in the morning and the other before sermon. These prayer meetings were truly refreshing, and the effects produced by the sermons remarkable. Some of the most violent opposers of the truth were converted, and the decided change which took place in their conduct, along with the preaching of the word, struck opposers dumb; so that many who do not seem converted, are convinced of the importance of religion, and the necessity of a divine change, and there is a general desire for hearing the gospel.³³

As to his approach to those who had been brought under concern about their souls, Farquharson had this to say:

... I found, on looking over them, that they had all a desire to find something good in themselves. The great difficulty was, to get them away from trusting in their own self-righteousness, in some shape or other. In regard to that feeling, I all along, considered it would be wrong in the sight of God were I to endeavour to move their feelings in one way or other, except by operating on their minds through the instrumentality of the truth of God. There is a great deal too much of working upon the minds of the people in the Highlands, without enlightening their minds in the truth as it is in Jesus. There was no roaring, and crying and fainting, and falling down in Tiree, while the revivals were going on. The fact is, we would not give any countenance to it.³⁴

On those who were distressed Farquharson made this observation:

... [T]he principal thing they were concerned about [was] the manner in which they dishonoured God, and the magnitude of their sins.³⁵

In a still later revival, which began in a Baptist Chapel in Tiree, Farquharson was again engaged in preaching the gospel, fully supporting this new work of

33 A.R.C.U.S., 1840, pp. 26–27. [McNaughton, pp. 86–87]

34 S.C.M., 1848, pp. 178–179. [McNaughton, p. 87]

35 S.C.M., 1841, pp. 389–392. [McNaughton, p. 90]

God. As a convinced paedobaptist, he must have wondered why several of his converts became Baptists, even Baptist preachers! According to Dr Meek, he sometimes quipped that he was like ‘a hen that had hatched ducklings, since his *brood* tended to take to the water.’³⁶

6. Persecution and prejudice

The activities of the early Congregational evangelists usually aroused considerable hostility from various sources within their communities and both preachers and their converts were targetted by their opponents.

At its General Assembly in 1799, the Church of Scotland issued the famous Pastoral Admonition, a letter to be read from every pulpit, whose aim was to forbid all church members from attending gatherings organised by dissenting preachers, on pain of losing their rights as parishioners. When Alexander Dewar moved north into the Inverness area in 1806, he found that because of the Admonition,

... the whole North Country was in array against our principles and actions, ... its injunctions pressed home upon every congregation by the Incumbent who read it, so that to hear what was then called an unauthorised preacher, and an enemy to Church and State, was a serious crime, yea a sin not to be endured.³⁷

Many who desired to hear Dewar’s preaching drew back for fear of the consequences.

Another source of persecution were the landlords, often acting in collusion with the Parish ministers. A typical example relates to the Congregational Church in Kintyre of which Archibald McCallum was ordained pastor in 1802. By April, 1803, the membership had risen to between 80 and 100. However, we read in the *Missionary Magazine* account that

‘The brethren ... were exposed to much shame, reproach and evil speaking, on account of their principles’, and eight families from ‘about Carradale who were farmers were exposed to much loss and inconvenience on account of their connection with the Church, having been dispossessed of their farms by the landlord, through the influence it was supposed of the parochial clergy’. The proprietor of the estate on which they lived put it in their option either to relinquish all connection with McCallum or to leave their farms against Whitsunday, 1803. They chose to adhere to their pastor, and Duncan Ferguson, a brother who was thus dispossessed, while removing his effects in a boat, was drowned in the sea, leaving a widow and several young children.³⁸

36 Donald E. Meek, 1988, p. 21. [McNaughton, p.96]

37 G.A.C.S., Section 14, pp. 1–34 [McNaughton, p. 249]

38 M.M., 1803, pp. 364, 368. [McNaughton, p. 13]

One further example of landlord opposition is from Alexander Dewar, who recalls the occasion when

... the farmer in whose house I lodged and on whose farm I preached there, was turned out of his farm for allowing me to preach after the Laird had warned him against it, and I myself was threatened to be sent to jail for my presumption in preaching against the Laird's will.³⁹

Some of the evangelists were ostracised in the communities where they laboured. During the revival in Breadalbane, it was reported that

[s]o great was the opposition to Mr Farquharson that in a circle of 32 miles around Loch Tay, three families *only* would admit him into their houses, and in spite of the love of gain, all public houses were shut against him.⁴⁰

It hardly needs mentioning that, in addition to the above, all the more normal forms of persecution, such as mockery, ridicule and threats to the person, were very common in these times.

7. Travels, travails and triumphs—the dedication of the itinerant

We have already seen that Congregational churches in the Scottish Highlands and Islands were planted as the firstfruits of dedicated missionary endeavour on the part of the travelling evangelists. In this section, we see how the Congregational cause was extended and consolidated through the itinerancy of pastors in a settled ministry. From its beginnings in 1812, the policy of the Congregational Union was that

...every pastor was regarded as an evangelist and every church a home-mission agency. And initially, of the funds distributed by the Union a part was in most cases for 'the immediate relief of the Pastor, and a part to assist him in Itinerating'.⁴¹

When we realise that their evangelistic tours were additional to their pastoral responsibilities, we must judge their achievements as little short of phenomenal.

The documented experiences of three such pastors illustrate well the title we have given to this section. We consider first of all Alexander Dewar of Avoch. Writing in 1846, he quotes from his pocket book that in 1836,

... I preached in a tour of five weeks forty seven sermons in thirty-six stations in thirteen different parishes, walked four hundred and fifty nine miles and had ten thousand one hundred and ninety hearers. There was an interval as I

39 G.A.C.S., Section 14, pp. 1–34 [McNaughton, p. 245]

40 G.A.C.S., Section 12, pp. 5–6. [McNaughton, p. 185]

41 McNaughton, op. cit. p.5.

returned home, and went out again; the number of hearers at these stations varied from 20 to 500, 1000, 1500 and on one occasion in Stornoway, when there was no sermon in the Lewis, I had 2,500. ... I used to itinerate for at least eight weeks in the Summer and Harvest, and walk from five to seven hundred miles, and preach eighty sermons from home. Yet great as that labour was, for a period of thirty six years I preached every Sabbath either at home or abroad except six on an average, one for every six years; but I am now so broken down that I am obliged to confine my little itinerancies to the immediate neighbourhood.⁴²

The 'broken down' nature of his health underlines the great personal cost to Dewar of these labours. He himself confesses that,

[o]n these journeys I suffered much privation both in food and lodgings, but the gratification I experienced, compensated for all these. If I were to give a detailed account of the incidents which befell me in these travels, this answer would swell into a volume but I must refrain.⁴³

Despite this last remark, he continues:

However, it is true that I have during these travels slept all night on a hill side, without cloak or great coat; that many nights I have slept among a little straw in a barn with a straw rope of three plies for my pillow; that many nights I have slept in houses so open and ruinous, that I had to put my umbrella up over me in bed, to prevent the rain pattering on my face; that on some such occasions when I have put my feet on the floor the water came over the ankles, so much had fallen through the roof during the night; that I often got my clothes all destroyed with the smoke and soot, the only houses I could get lodging in being unprovided with a chimney, but having a hole in the roof for the smoke to find its way out at. It is true that I have walked from eight o'clock in the morning till ten o'clock at night without tasting food, and then slept among some hay; that I have in the course of three weeks worn out a pair of the best shoes that could be made, and that so late as the year 1840 I walked fifty-six miles from Lochbroom to Avoch between six o'clock in the morning and eight o'clock at night. I was often obliged to wade rivers, and ... my shoes would not let out the water when they got full, ... but kept my feet wet all day. I had often to scramble on my hands and feet in passing through places almost impassable, when making my way to sequestered spots to preach to the isolated inhabitants. Such labours for such a number of years brought upon me infirmities from which I could hardly expect to recover, but my consolation is that very happy effects resulted from these labours, believers professed to receive edification, and in a great number of instances, sinners gave evidence of conversion, so that in most places I was enabled to hold as

42 G.A.C.S., Section 14, pp. 1-34. [McNaughton, pp. 250-252]

43 Ibid.

sweet converse with these comparatively isolated Believers as with those of our own Church at home. I have known many of these be at all the sermons I preached in a week, and in doing this would travel not less than forty miles and would say to others ‘This is our Sacrament week, and we shall keep it entire as we only get the privilege once a year.’ I made a point of starting about the same day of the month every year for fifteen years for the respective districts, so that the people expected my visits, and arranged their work so that they could attend, and it was remarkable with what speed the news of our arrival would spread, in some places they had fire signals on the hill tops to announce our arrivals. I have seen smoke raised on a certain eminence, and in a short time six and eight boats full of people rowing from the different islands separated from the mainland by arms of the sea to our usual place of meeting. I have known instances of our entering a country on a certain day, and before the same hour on the morrow it was known thirty miles beyond. Such was the change in the public mind regarding us after some years that the whole North was open to receive us, and the parish Minister would only have a few hearers, while we have had large numbers. In one of my last distant tours, there were only eighteen in the Kirk while we had fifteen hundred.

As for their effects, the day of Judgement alone will declare it, but there is every reason to believe that these Labours were blessed to a considerable extent, by the blessing of God. We have kindled a fire which will not be quenched and stirred up other parties to such exertions as they had never put forth at any former period.⁴⁴

Similarly, we read of James Kennedy, first of Aberfeldy and then of Inverness, that he

... was in the habit of itinerating ‘through some of the most destitute districts of the Highlands, sometimes to the distance of 50, 60, 70, and once to the distance of 100 miles.’ For about twenty years, he had been in the habit of ‘travelling yearly at the rate of about 600 or 700 miles, and of preaching 60 to 70 sermons annually, exclusive of his labours among his church and stated congregation at home.’⁴⁵

From his journal for 1840, we read,

I have been enabled, by the good hand of God upon me, to visit four counties, and seventeen parishes, and preach in these excursions sixty-three sermons, when, I think, from 9000 to 10,000 were addressed on the momentous concerns of their souls. This involved a travel of 574 miles. But besides these more extended itinerancies, I have three very promising stations within twelve miles of Inverness, where I preach both on week days and on

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ P.P., Vol. XXIII, 1839, p. 45. [McNaughton, p. 269]

Sabbath evenings. My congregations in these places are, on week evenings, upwards of 200, and on Sabbath evenings more than 400 ...⁴⁶

His son, John Kennedy, recalls that,

The largest assemblies which Mr. Kennedy had the opportunity of addressing were in Sutherlandshire. On a Sabbath day the people would come from immense distances, sometimes twenty miles, and gather at a central spot, 3,000 in number, to spend the whole day in hearing the word of God. In some well chosen natural amphitheatre, the multitude gathered themselves around the preacher, as the people of Galilee often did around his Lord and Saviour. Sometimes it was at the head of one of those beautiful mountain-girt lochs through which the western Atlantic penetrates into Ross and Sutherland. Looking around him of a Sabbath morning, the preacher often wondered where his congregation was to come from. Not a hamlet was to be seen, scarcely a cabin. By and by a white sail would make its appearance on a distant part of the loch. Down a bleak mountain side the Highland plaid would be seen variegating with the heather or the scant herbage. Through a gorge or narrow valley others would be observed wending their way to the appointed place. And there, with a large congregation around him, the preacher might well take for his text—'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.' Sermons were never too long on these occasions. The people seemed as if they could not get enough. And it was with a full heart and solemn feeling the preacher saw the loch again studded with sails, and the people going their various ways to their distant homes, expecting to meet many of them no more till they should all assemble before the great white throne.⁴⁷

At the age of 79, James Kennedy recalled his itinerant ministry:

It has been my privilege and pleasure to be engaged in itinerating labours from my youth, all through a long life. I have found the work a delightful one, still find it so in old age. ...⁴⁸

As for Neil McNeil, pastor of the Elgin Congregational Church from 1815–1854,

during a period of twelve years, from 1819 to 1830, inclusive, in addition to his ordinary stated labours at home, he preached 959 sermons, travelled 12,461 miles, and addressed on an average 125,000 souls. ... The record of these labours closed with May 1850, after which affliction prevented him from prosecuting them as he had done. In 1849, it is found that he preached 53 sermons from home, in fifteen different parishes, to an aggregate of 6500 persons, travelling to and from the places upwards of 1000 miles.⁴⁹

46 A.R.C.U.S., 1840, p. 21. [McNaughton, pp. 269–270]

47 S.C.M., 1864, pp. 378–380. [McNaughton, pp. 271–272]

48 S.C.M., 1856, pp. 122–124. [McNaughton, p. 272]

49 *Sketch of the History of the Congregational Church, Elgin* (Elgin, 1846), p. 25. [McNaughton, p. 318]

Another source tells us that

he engaged zealously in itinerating work, ... For many years after coming to Elgin he walked to Burghead, eight and a half miles, and preached there on the Sabbath evening, after having preached twice in his own chapel. ... In the village of Lossiemouth, five miles from Elgin, he preached frequently at a period when it was seldom visited by any minister but himself. ... The number of sermons which our brother preached in a year is almost incredible. Our friend sowed in all weathers and in all seasons, ... On one occasion a woman came from Lossiemouth and said that they expected him there on Tuesday evening to preach, and on being told that if it were a good evening they might look for him, she replied, 'I wadna like to see that nicht that would keep him back.' On the afternoon of a Sabbath day he intimated that there would be no sermon in the chapel that night as he was going to Rothes to preach. But so severe a storm of drifting snow set in in the evening that the people insisted he would not risk his life by going. His reply was, that the sting of his conscience would be worse to bear than all he could suffer from the storm.⁵⁰

Regrettably, as the finances of the Congregational Union diminished, support for itinerancy also waned, a situation which prompted one author to write a piece in the *Missionary Magazine* entitled, 'The Importance of Itinerancies'. He posed the question,

does not past experience furnish sufficient encouragement for adopting with vigour and perseverance, such a plan as we are now recommending? Were there not hundreds, perhaps thousands, even in Scotland, brought to repentance by means of itinerancies, of whom the greater part perhaps remain to this present ...?⁵¹

8. Declension and dispersion

Although revival occasionally visited the churches after around 1840, the general trend in the second half of the 19th century was one of decline in the Congregational enterprise, both in terms of numbers and spiritual vigour. A number of contributory factors can be identified:

(i) The Disruption of 1843. Many of those who aligned themselves with the Congregational churches in the early days did so out of a desire for authentic gospel preaching and not out of any denominational conviction. Greatly dissatisfied by the moralistic teaching they were receiving in the Established Church, they voted with their feet in order to obtain good spiritual sustenance. However, as noted earlier, all the while Congregational

⁵⁰ S.C.M., 1855, p. 299. [McNaughton, p. 317]

⁵¹ M.M., 1813, p. 100. [McNaughton, p. 5]

churches were being planted in the Highlands, the Evangelical Party in the Church of Scotland was steadily gaining strength and influence, a trend which culminated in the founding of the Free Church in 1843. Many adherents of the Congregational churches, evidently still Presbyterian at heart, transferred their allegiance to the nascent church, seriously depleting the former in many cases. It is significant that this large-scale transfer of allegiance was accepted without apparent resentment.

It should be added that significant numbers also moved to Baptist Churches.

(ii) A second factor was a gradual loss of spiritual vision and evangelistic zeal. This trend was eloquently expressed by the Congregational Union's treasurer, David McLaren, at the Annual Meeting of 1857 in Dundee. After recalling the open-air preaching of 'the venerable Greville Ewing' at the Annual Meeting of the Congregational Union in 1827, also in Dundee, he went on to say:

Things are somewhat changed with us since then, ... We have more members, we have more wealth, we have more rank, we have more intellectual power in our pulpits, we have more of the aesthetic in our worship and in our buildings; and if these had been our ambition it has been attained. God grant that it may not be also true of us which is written, 'He gave them their desire, but he sent leanness into their souls.'⁵²

(iii) A third factor in the decline of the Congregational constituency, which also affected the other denominations, was the mass migration of Highland populations resulting from the profound social changes taking place at the time. Emigration to foreign lands, notably North America and Australia, had the greatest impact in depleting the churches of their members, although the exodus to cities as displaced crofters went in search of work also had its effect.

However, there was a very positive benefit from these movements of population. Highlanders scattered to distant countries included many who had been converted to Christ through the witness of the Congregational evangelists. For example, several Congregational churches in Canada were founded as a direct result of emigration and in some cases were pastored by their ministers who followed them to their new pastures. One is reminded of Acts 8 and how the Christians scattered by persecution preached the word wherever they went.

What Alexander Mackay eloquently wrote in connection with his ministry of over 40 years in the island of Arran is applicable more generally to Congregational witness in the Scottish Highlands:

52 S.C.M., 1867, pp. 190–191. [McNaughton, p. 127]

The Lord has done great things here in days gone by, and he is still the same God, and is able to save to the very uttermost. The population is now thin and far-spread. Sheep farms, emigration, and lordship of the soil, have already done here, what they are at this moment doing all over the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, clearing out the habitations of men, for sheep and cattle. But what shall we say to these things? Though *loss* to our churches be great, *very great*, yet it is *gain* to the world. The principles for which we contend and toil to disseminate are thereby widely scattered, and whatever work we may have really done, although lost to the enjoyment of the eye, and in its immediate returns, and although the labourers may mourn, yet neither their work nor their reward is lost, for the one is enlarged to more extensive results, and the other thereby increased. ... Many have thus gone far hence from Arran, with the Bible in their hands, and Christ in their hearts, and have become a praise and an honour in the whole earth. The desert has been gladdened by their presence, and the distant vales have blossomed as the rose.⁵³

9. Summary and conclusions

Although from an evangelical viewpoint, the Congregational cause in Scotland, especially in the Highlands, flourished for only a relatively short period, it nevertheless fulfilled a vital role in the sovereign purposes of God. Through the dedication of its evangelists, catechists and ministers, men on fire for God and for the gospel of our Lord Jesus, the spiritual darkness in many a Highland glen was dispelled and large numbers were soundly converted to Christ. Whole communities were transformed by the power of God, and Bible-based churches were planted in widely separated localities.

The seed of God's Word, faithfully sown, brought forth much good fruit through the work of the Holy Spirit who graciously visited His people in seasons of refreshing and revival. Those saved by the grace of God were also seeds, in a manner of speaking; men and women who were scattered far and wide from their Highland stock, and who, through their faithfulness to Christ, likewise produced lasting gospel fruit in other parts of the world.

Truly, 'This was the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.'⁵⁴

Appendix

Sources

The preparation of this paper has owed much to Dr McNaughton's volume on Congregational Independency in the Scottish Highlands, and grateful

⁵³ S.C.M., 1852, p. 231. [McNaughton, p. 36]

⁵⁴ Psalm 118:23.

acknowledgement is gladly given of his excellent and superbly indexed work. The full bibliographic details of the volume are: William D. McNaughton, *Early Congregational Independency in the Highlands and Islands and the North-East of Scotland* (Tiree: The Trustees of Ruaig Congregational Church, 2003).

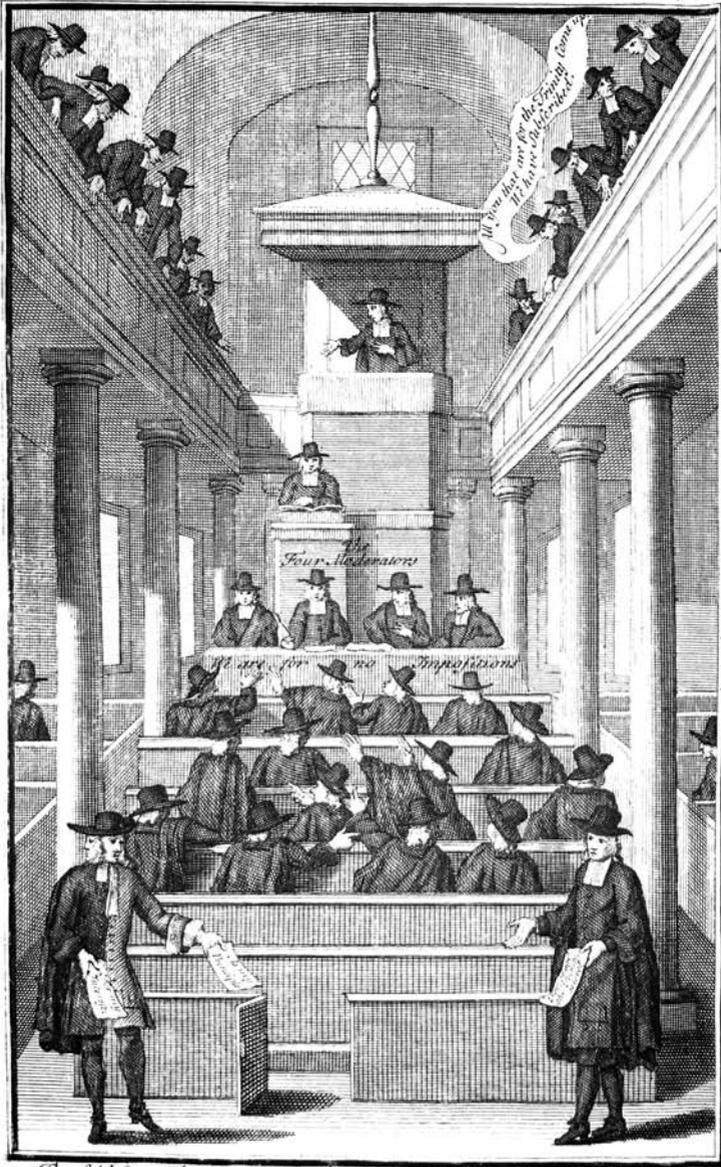
As most of the quotations in the present paper have been drawn from this work, the references in the footnotes show the original sources as listed by McNaughton, followed in square brackets by the corresponding page numbers in his book.

An invaluable source of information on Scottish Congregationalism is the *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).

Abbreviations

- A.R.C.U.S. Annual Report of the Congregational Union of Scotland, Edinburgh, 1830–1880.
- G.A.C.S. General Account of Congregationalism in Scotland from 1798–1848 and Particular Accounts Referring to Separate Counties, Typescript, no date (c.1848)
- M.M. Missionary Magazine, Edinburgh, 1796–1813.
- P.P. Reports from Commissioners, Religious Instruction (Scotland), Parliamentary Papers, Edinburgh, 1837–1839.
- S.C.M. The Scottish Congregational Magazine, Glasgow/Edinburgh, 1835–1880.
- S.P.G.H. 1803 An Account of the Proceedings of the Society for Propagating the Gospel at Home, From Jan. 1802, to May 1803, Edinburgh, 1803.

The Heretical SYNOD at Salters-Hall . p.39



*The Self Same Things they will allow, | As if Religion was intended,
One way, and none another Way, | their nothing else, but to be mended*

*Salter's Hall Synod, reproduced with the kind permission of
the Trustees of Dr Williams's Library*

Congregational Independency 1689–1735: Standing Firm in an Age of Decline

Joseph B Greenald

Introduction

This paper will attempt to delineate the history and to analyse the significant events in Congregationalism between the Toleration Act of 1689 and the beginning of the Evangelical Revival in the 1730s.

It will also propose some answers, albeit tentative, to a controversial question: Why did the Congregationalists remain faithful to the major doctrines of historic Christianity, whilst other Dissenting groups, chiefly the Presbyterians and the General Baptists, declined into Arianism and Unitarianism?

The paper will examine the different explanations that have been put forward for this difference of outcome, and suggest which is most agreeable to the facts as we know them.

1. The Glorious Revolution and its consequences

A. William III, the Protestant hero

On 10 June 1688, an event occurred which caused consternation and despair among Protestant Englishmen, both Churchmen and Dissenters, Tories and Whigs. A son was born to Mary of Modena, wife of James II. They had been expecting that the queen would have no children who would survive infancy. Rather, they had assumed that the eventual successor to the throne would be Mary, daughter of James by his first wife Anne Hyde. Mary was a staunch Protestant and married to the great Protestant champion, William of Orange.

The new prince, later known as ‘The Old Pretender’, seemed healthy and was undoubtedly Mary of Modena’s son despite rumours invented by Protestants that he was the son of a kitchen maid and had been introduced into Mary’s bed in a warming pan. The prospect of an established Catholic dynasty ruling over the nation for many years to come led many prominent Englishmen to invite William of Orange to come over to England to save the nation from Romanism. William became King; James and his family fled to France; and the ‘Glorious Revolution’ became a fact of history.

Shortly before William set out for England, he expressed his intention ‘to endeavour a good Agreement between the Church of England and all

Protestant Dissenters'. Holland was a country in which almost complete religious toleration prevailed and William wished that all the subjects of his new kingdom should enjoy a similar liberty.

B. The Toleration Act 1689

Early in 1689, a deputation of ninety nonconformist ministers waited on the new king and his wife Mary to thank them for coming and saving the nation from Catholic domination. On 28 February, 1689, the Earl of Nottingham introduced the Toleration Bill into Parliament. Its full title was, 'An Act for exempting their Majesties' Protestant Subjects, Dissenting from the Church of England, from the Penalties of certain Laws'. The Act was passed with a very large majority and received the royal assent on 24 May. The Act granted certain liberties to orthodox Dissenters and to Quakers, but not to Roman Catholics and Unitarians.

The Act allowed freedom of worship, but with some restrictions. It was somewhat limited in its provisions. The Dissenters were allowed freedom of worship on condition that they accepted the doctrine of the Church of England. They were to subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion with the exception of those that were distinctly Anglican, i.e. the 34th, 'Of the Traditions of the Church', the 35th, 'Of Homilies', the 36th, 'Of Consecration of Bishops and Ministers', and, for Baptists, the final clause in the 27th Article regarding infant baptism. The following restrictions also applied:

No meeting could be established until the place of meeting had been notified to the bishop of the diocese or to the archdeacon or to the magistrates at the Petty or Quarter Sessions of the Peace.

Tithes still had to be paid.

Dissenters still had to fulfil certain duties, such as those of church warden, parish constable and beadle (poor law officer in England, not a church caretaker, as in Scotland). At a higher level, a Dissenter might be chosen as mayor or sheriff (the officer responsible for ensuring that decisions of the courts were implemented, organising executions, sending in bailiffs to distrain goods of debtors etc.). The Test Act and the Corporation Act were not repealed. Hence, a Dissenter called to one of these offices was obliged either to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in a parish church or pay a very large fine for refusing to serve. The Mansion House, the official residence of the Lord Mayor of London, was largely built with money from fines paid by Dissenters who refused to receive the sacrament in a parish church or serve in the office to which they had been called. However, the Toleration Act did provide that ordained ministers were exempt from being called to one of these

appointments and that anyone disturbing Dissenters' services was liable to prosecution at quarter sessions.

Tudur Jones observed that Congregational churches that had survived the twenty-five years of intermittent persecution 'had suffered much'. He states that 'Many congregations had disappeared entirely; others were in sore straits'.¹ He refers to Alexander Gordon's book *Freedom after Rejection* quoting from the *Review of Nonconformity 1690–1692* concerning the Keswick Congregational Church. The *Review* makes reference to a sad fact which must have been true of many congregations:

There was a church of which Mr. Cane was pastor but the grave and the Church of England have swallowed up all the members but one or two.

On the other hand, some churches seem to have thrived during the period of persecution with large congregations and well paid ministers. At Dover, Comfort Starr had a congregation of some seven hundred while Henry Godman had a congregation of around five hundred at his meeting house at Deptford.

C. The attempt at Comprehension

The issue of 'comprehension' arose after the Restoration of Charles II. The term 'comprehension' referred to the inclusion of Dissenters within the Established Church. From the time of the Restoration, Richard Baxter had hoped that the Dissenters might take their place in the Established Church. He himself had been offered the bishopric of Hereford but had reluctantly refused. Edward Reynolds, another leading Presbyterian, accepted the diocese of Norwich. John Owen, a leading Congregationalist, was opposed to the idea of comprehension, but wanted complete toleration instead, knowing that inclusion in the national church would mean the death of the Congregational Way. When comprehension failed, Baxter wanted, as a second option, at least a union of Presbyterians and Congregationalists. He suggested, as the basis for church membership and union, simply the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Apostles' Creed. Owen pointed out that Romanists and Socinians (later known as Unitarians) would accept that basis, to which Baxter replied, 'So much the better'. Already it was becoming apparent that Presbyterians like Baxter differed from Congregationalists in their view of the basis for church membership.

This desire for comprehension on the part of Baxter and the Presbyterians generally brought into focus the different attitudes of the two denominations

¹ R Tudur Jones, *Congregationalism in England* (London: Independent Press, 1960), p. 109.

to English society and to the relationship between the churches and society in general. The Presbyterians wanted to regard as members of the visible church all who had been baptised in infancy and accepted the Christian religion. On the other hand, the Congregationalists argued that church membership should be restricted to those who made a personal profession of faith. Their faith was in all three persons of the Holy Trinity, and particularly in Jesus Christ as Lord and Redeemer. They submitted to his infallible teaching and kingly authority, trusted in his redeeming grace and agreed to serve him and his kingdom in fellowship with a particular gathered church. In other words, they were 'visible saints'. They held that those outside such gathered churches might be believers but until they made profession of their faith and united with a particular church fellowship in solemn agreement to serve God together, they could not be regarded as church members. The principle laid down by Robert Browne still held. He had stated in his book *Reformation without tarrying for Anie* that God did not begin with whole parishes but with 'visible saints' (a later term) 'though they be never so few'. This difference between the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists influenced all the debates between them and helps to explain why the Congregationalists remained orthodox in this period whilst the Presbyterians declined into Arianism and subsequently Unitarianism. As RW Dale has pointed out, evangelical faith in the hearts and minds of church members has always helped to ensure evangelical truth in the pulpit and will always do so. Such members would instinctively recognise when the trumpet was giving 'an uncertain sound' and either expel the minister or withdraw from his ministry to found a new Independent Church. Approximately 60% of the new Congregational churches founded in the 18th century were composed of just such people.

A 'Comprehension Bill' never reached the statute book. As it became obvious that attempts at 'comprehension' were proving abortive, the leaders of the two groups began to consider their relationship to each other in a different way.

2. The 'Happy Union'

A. What was it and why was it formed?

The so-called 'Happy Union' came into being on 6 April 1691 as a result of the desire of some London ministers for closer association between the two groups. It was never a union of congregations, merely a fellowship of Congregational and Presbyterian ministers in the London area. It was not a precursor of the United Reformed Church, but rather a formal and binding kind of ministers' fraternal. It did not last. It came to grief in theological

controversy and because of the uneasiness of some Congregational ministers, who felt that it impaired the autonomy of the local churches.

A major reason for the experiment was that both groups had experienced twenty-seven years of persecution. They had often worshipped together, sometimes in secret, and had listened to the same preachers. They had often appeared before the same magistrates and judges and had been imprisoned in the same gaols. They had also educated their divinity students in the same academies. They had formed ‘sacred links’, and it is understandable that some of the ministers thought that some form of association might be appropriate. A start to united action had been made in the summer of 1690. Fourteen ministers, seven of each persuasion, formed a committee to create a ‘Common Fund’. This was to relieve poor ministers and their widows and to help support divinity students in the academies.

B. John Howe’s initiative

The Happy Union was brought into being by the initiative of John Howe and John Faldo. Howe, who had formerly been chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, subsequently became uncommitted to either group. Now, however, he adopted



John Howe

a Presbyterian position. Faldo was an elderly and long serving Congregational minister with a very large London congregation. He co-operated with Howe in discussions for tentative union. However, Faldo died on 7 February 1691 and Howe drew up a completely new scheme known as the 'Heads of Agreement' which was a little nearer to Congregational ideals. Some Congregational ministers were a little apprehensive about the provisions of the document, but it was agreed and signed by almost all the London ministers of both persuasions, over eighty pastors in all.

A note on John Howe

Martin Sutherland has put forward the view that Howe's emphasis on the invisibility of the church led ultimately to the decline of Dissent. He states that Howe influenced the views of Calamy, Watts and Doddridge.² However, making a distinction between the visible and invisible church was already a commonplace of Presbyterian ecclesiology. Howe merely gave it more prominence and tended to neglect the organisation of the visible church. Whatever influence Howe's ideas may have had on Watts and Doddridge, the Congregational churches remained committed to the 'visible saints' concept of church membership throughout the eighteenth century.

C. The inauguration of the Happy Union

The inaugural meeting took place in the large Stepney meeting house, and the minister, Matthew Mead, preached on the text Ezekiel 37:19, 'Two sticks made one'. This service took place on 6 March 1691.

D. The Heads of Agreement and its shortcomings

One month later, the agreed statement was published as *The Heads of Agreement Assented to by the United Ministers in and about London, formerly called Presbyterian and Congregational*.

This statement has been described by Tudur Jones and others as 'an unsatisfactory document'. It was rapidly put together by a group of ministers who wanted to obtain an agreement to it and form a federation of ministers as soon as possible. It did not address several issues which had been matters of contention in the recent past. A number of ministers were unhappy that such matters were glossed over and felt that this would only lead to future controversy. Several Congregational ministers who had been involved in the discussions refused to support the Union or to sign the 'Heads of Agreement'.

The main tenets of the 'Heads of Agreement' were as follows:

1. The catholic visible church is a part of the catholic church in heaven and on earth.

2 Martin Sutherland, *Peace, Toleration and Decay* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003).

2. Every particular society of Christians is an instituted church of Christ if it consists of morally blameless persons who believe the fundamental doctrines of Christianity.
3. Such a church has authority to choose its officers, who are to 'rule and govern'. It is the function of 'the brotherhood to consent'.
4. Ministers ought to be competent in learning, faith and morals to fulfil their ministry. Ministers should be chosen by a particular congregation after consultation with neighbouring congregations. The ministers of these neighbouring congregations should show their approval by participating in the ordination. They should also approve preachers' qualifications before new preachers begin to preach.
5. Synods should be convened to deal with particular problems. Their decisions should be accepted unless they are clearly contrary to Bible doctrine.
6. Deacons are to be responsible under the authority of ministers for the finances of the church.
7. Because of differences with regard to the office of non-preaching ruling elders, each congregation must decide the matter for itself.
8. The subordinate standards were to be the doctrinal Articles of the Church of England, the Westminster Confession and Catechisms and the Savoy Declaration.

An atmosphere of apparent good fellowship and Christian toleration characterised the early months of the Happy Union. In the West Country, John Flavel rejoiced when he read the 'Heads of Agreement'. He thought it meant an end to contention between the two leading dissenting groups and co-operation in the work of the kingdom. He recited the opening words of the Nunc Dimitis, 'Lord lettest now Thy servant depart in Peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation'. He retired for the night and died in his sleep! However, all was not well. Within a few years, the Union was shattered by theological strife and perhaps by personal animosity.

What was the cause of this strife?

A major and fatal mistake in the case of the Congregationalists was that the ministers had not consulted their church members. It came to their notice that the Church Meeting could do no more than give its consent to the decisions of the pastors and elders. They were consequently filled with some indignation and refused to be reduced to rubber stamps. They had been used to initiating action and making decisions, even when those decisions were not in accordance with the ideas of their officers. They were not agreeable to the new arrangements. Indeed, their holding firm to Congregational principles allowed them in later years to oust Arian and Unitarian ministers. By contrast,

the only action that hearers in Presbyterian congregations could take was to withdraw from the ministry of these heretical ministers. There are several recorded instances of just such withdrawals, leading to the formation of new Congregational churches.

The year before the 'Happy Union' came into being, Isaac Chauncey had stated the Congregational position very clearly. Tudur Jones quotes Chauncey's *Ecclesiasticum* (1690), where he wrote, 'Officers are for the due, orderly, honourable, solemn management of church power, not for taking it away'.³ Had the 'Heads of Agreement' been placed before the Congregational churches for their formal approval with a view to a regular church union, the Congregationalists would have almost certainly thrown it out. It was doomed from its commencement, since it was much closer to Presbyterian than to Congregational ideals. It shifted the seat of authority from the church meeting, leaving it merely with the function of 'consent', and impaired the autonomy of the churches. This botched attempt at hybridisation brought into focus the ecclesiastical cleavage between the two groups. 'Presbygationalism', to use an early nineteenth century term from New England, is very difficult indeed to achieve. A parallel may be drawn with events in late twentieth century England and Wales after the formation of the United Reformed Church. Small churches which joined were later closed down or forced into an amalgamation because they could not reach the required level of contribution. They learned the hard way that they were no longer Congregationalists.

E. Richard Davis and trouble at Rothwell

Not only did differences in church order come to light, but a theological disagreement emerged which rent the Union in two and effectively brought it to an end. Instead of promoting unity and ministerial fellowship, the Happy Union brought into the open doctrinal differences alongside differences regarding church discipline and polity. On 20 February, 1689, the Rev. Richard Davis had been called as the Congregational minister of the church at Rothwell, Northamptonshire. His ordination took place on 7 March 1689 and immediately there had been trouble. The visiting ministers were not invited to join with the Rothwell church officers in the ordination. They affected a fit of offended dignity and sulking and withdrew. Davis was asserting that a church had a right to call and ordain its ministers and other officers without external authorization. This started a storm of criticism against himself and his church. From that time onwards, he was subject to ongoing detraction and defamation for all that he did in his ministry.

3 Tudur Jones, op. cit. p. 113, quoting Isaac Chauncey, *Ecclesiasticum: or A Plain and Familiar Conference concerning Gospel Churches, and order* (1690), 67–8.

Davis was endowed with great gifts as a preacher and organizer. He had a powerful voice and a forceful and animated manner in his preaching. His sermons were lively and closely applied to the hearts of his hearers. Any member of his church who had the gift of preaching and had acquired sufficient knowledge of the Scriptures and Christian doctrine he sent out to preach. His preachers included tradesmen as well as others of a higher status. Within three years, that is, by the year 1692, he had gathered thirteen new churches, made up of between two and three thousand members in total. His methods anticipated those of the Evangelical Revival but were not acceptable to ministers in his own day.

His energy was derived from a theology best described as High Calvinism. He believed and taught that the elect were justified in the death of Christ, and not as a forensic act of God in time, when a sinner receives and rests on Christ alone for forgiveness and acceptance. He believed that no repentance, no work was necessary other than accepting God's free gift in order to be reckoned sinless in God's sight, with the righteousness of Christ reckoned to one's account. This High Calvinism was interpreted by his enemies as antinomianism and considered to be inimical to moral effort. However, the case of Richard Davis shows that, contrary to a commonly held opinion, strict Calvinism does not necessarily inhibit evangelistic endeavour. Tudur Jones has observed that 'Davis stands as an early precursor of the Methodist Revival'.⁴ Perhaps other ministers were envious of his success. Certainly letters were being sent to the United Brethren of the Happy Union in London complaining of the heresy which was being propagated by Davis in Northamptonshire and the surrounding counties. The United Brethren began to take notice.

F. Tobias Crisp and Hypercalvinism

In 1690, the year before the Happy Union was formed by the London ministers, Samuel Crisp published the *Works* of his father Tobias. Tobias Crisp, DD, had been the rector of Brinkworth in Wiltshire earlier in the century. He was regarded as a very high Calvinist and even the Westminster Assembly had proposed to publicly burn his first edition of *Christ Alone Exalted* in 1643. Crisp was in fact a believer in the doctrine of eternal justification, which, in effect, conflated justification with the decree of election. He was therefore a hypercalvinist. To the United Brethren, the teaching of Crisp and Davis seemed very similar. On receipt of the aforementioned complaints, the United Brethren began to investigate the happenings at Rothwell.

4 Tudur Jones, op. cit. p. 118.

Davis went to London on two occasions. After his second visit (May 1692), Dr Daniel Williams, a leader of the London Presbyterians, warned Davis that he was concerned about his doctrine. Before the end of May, Williams had published his *Gospel Truth Stated and Vindicated*, in which he mounted a very robust critique of Crisp's views. Davis interpreted this as an attack on himself by Williams 'over the shoulders of Dr Crisp'. A supporter of Williams' views, using a fictitious name, followed this with a vicious attack on Davis, entitled, *A Plain and Just Account of a Most Horrid Plague, begun at Rothwell*.

Whilst this altercation between Davis and the United Brethren was in progress, several prominent Congregational ministers expressed their strong opposition to Dr Williams' assault on Crisp. They put forward to the United Brethren a 'Paper of Objections', which was signed by Isaac Chauncey, George Griffiths and Robert Trail, and the three ministers, Nathaniel Mather, Thomas Cole and Richard Taylor, who had refused to join the Happy Union. This 'Paper of Objections' was put away without any perusal. The reason the United Brethren gave for this was that three of the signatories were not members of the Happy Union. The Congregational ministers were probably not as high in doctrine as Crisp and Davis, but they resented this attack by Dr Williams, who was known as the 'bishop of the Presbyterians' and whom they suspected of Arminianism or something more heterodox.

The United Brethren were determined to deal with the situation at Rothwell. They sent a commission of their members to Kettering to collect evidence against Davis. Davis called them 'an Inquisition'. His church meeting advised him not to attend, since a group of London ministers had no authority over him. In November 1692, Davis published a self-justification entitled, *Truth and Innocency Vindicated Against Falsehood and Malice*. It was a closely argued and very convincing defence of his personal life and ministry. He regarded Dr Williams as 'the great Patron and Defender' of the Neonomian party and the enemy of Congregational Independency. Davis stated that the commission revealed the real and sinister motive behind the establishment of the Happy Union. He declared that its 'design was to hook away Judgment from a particular church of Christ and fix it in a Presbyterian Classis' (presbytery).

The United Brethren made public their findings from the Kettering inquiry. The report was a stinging critique of Davis. It was virtually the end of the Union. In October, Isaac Chauncy had made a very strong speech to the United Brethren. He had had as much as he could stand. He left the Union and slated Daniel Williams in *Neonomianism Unmasked*.

An attempt was made to patch things up, but it was too late. In 1693, there was a bitter pamphlet war regarding Neonomianism and Antinomianism and the Happy Union disintegrated with the two factions setting up their own lectures, the Presbyterians at Salters' Hall, and the Congregationalists at Pinners' Hall. In 1695, the Congregationalists established their own fund to replace the Common Fund. For many years it helped poor ministers and churches and some grants were paid to divinity students.

The whole theological conflict was of great importance. It showed that the Presbyterians were drifting away from the moderate Calvinism of Richard Baxter, whilst Congregationalists remained firm in their Calvinism.

H. Provincial attempts at union

Although the 'Happy Union' had disintegrated in London, attempts at union in the provinces were more successful. In Yorkshire, Cheshire and Lancashire, ministers of the two groups came together on the basis of the 'Heads of Agreement'. In Lancashire especially, something approximating to a Presbyterian system was established. There were four classes set up. These were in Manchester, Warrington, Bolton and in the north of the county. It is interesting to note that, later in the eighteenth century, Unitarianism became particularly strong in Lancashire. In Lancashire, 'Presbyterian' came to mean 'Unitarian'. Also, its ministerial college retained the name 'Manchester College', even after it moved to Oxford in the nineteenth century.

In Exeter and in the counties of Hampshire, Norfolk and Nottinghamshire, similar meetings were established around the same time, that is, before the death of William and the accession of Queen Anne in 1702. In addition, the Baptists joined the other two denominations before the death of William, so that the 'Committee of the Three Denominations' was able to present a loyal address to Queen Anne.

3. Dissenters stand together in the cause of political freedom

After the bitterness which characterized the early 1690s, a pressing need arose for Dissenters to unite together against the Tories and the High Churchmen. Together they expressed their support for William III after the failed attempt at his assassination in 1696, when they signed the so-called Association Rolls. The Committee of the Three Denominations worked assiduously to prevent the repeal of the Toleration Act. They were determined not to lose the limited privileges it afforded to Dissenters.

Renewed fear of persecution arose with the untimely death of William whom they regarded as their friend. After William died, following a fall from

his horse after it stumbled on a mole hill, the Jacobites toasted the 'little gentleman in black velvet' (the mole) who had caused the death of their great enemy. The Dissenters' fears were founded on the High Church proclivities of the new queen and the Tory general election victory in the summer of 1702.

4. The occasional conformity issue

A. Dissent in danger from the Tories

At this time, the practice of occasional conformity became quite common in order to avoid the penalties of the Test Act. Presbyterian Dissenters appointed to public offices took the sacrament according to the Church of England Prayer Book to avoid a large fine. However, the Baptists refused to conform even for one service, and most Congregationalists also refused. The practice of occasional conformity had been advocated by John Howe since 1689. Some few Congregationalists who did occasionally conform infuriated the High Churchmen by their ostentatious display of their Dissent, when they wore their robes of office to their Dissenting meeting houses in the afternoon, after having attended their parish churches in the morning. Even Daniel Defoe, Presbyterian though he was, described occasional conformity as 'playing Bo-Peep with God', but the Tories were seriously enraged by the practice.

After being defeated twice by the Whig peers, the Occasional Conformity Act was finally passed in December 1711. It imposed a huge fine of £40 for worshipping in a meeting house after taking the sacrament in a parish church. It was one of several measures designed by the High Church party to persecute and suppress Dissenters.

B. Defoe lampoons the Tories

About this time, Daniel Defoe published his brilliant satire, *The shortest Way with Dissenters*, in which he lampooned the Tories' desire to persecute Dissenters. He proposed hanging Dissenting ministers and transporting church members as slaves to the West Indian plantations! The High Church party really believed it was a feasible option for dealing with the problem of Dissent. They were made to look utter fools, as most intelligent citizens realized it was a clever critique of the Tories' attitudes to Nonconformists. The Tories were incensed at the contempt that was heaped upon them in this matter, so they prosecuted Defoe who was made to stand in the pillory. Rather than being pelted with bad eggs and rotten fruit, he was garlanded with flowers. He emerged from the pillory literally smelling of roses.

The accession of George I

A. The Schism Act is rendered ineffectual

This Act was designed by the High Church party with the aim of closing the Dissenting Academies which in turn would have had the effect of cutting off the supply of learned ministers who could fill the pastorates of the Dissenting churches. These academies were providing an excellent education, but the Schism Act provided that any master or tutor who worshipped in a Dissenting meeting house was to be dismissed from his post without redress. The Act was to come into force on 1 August 1714. Providence and the Whigs came to the rescue of the Dissenters. Queen Anne died on 1 August 1714 and a new King (George I) ascended the throne, establishing a new (Hanoverian) dynasty. In Thomas Bradbury's meeting house on the Sunday in which the Schism Act was to come into force, a handkerchief was deliberately dropped from the gallery as a signal that the Queen was dead. It was appropriate that a Congregationalist was the first to offer public prayer for the Divine blessing on the new king. The Tories went into the political wilderness, where they were to remain for half a century. The offending parts of the Occasional Conformity and Schism Acts were largely ignored from 1714 onwards and on 10 January 1719, an Act to repeal them was passed. In 1727, an Annual Indemnity Act was passed, ensuring that the remaining punitive measures in the Test and Corporation Acts were not enforced.

B. The reaction in rural areas

However, in the rural areas, at the accession of George I, many Tory mobs who wanted to bring back the Stuarts started rioting and burning Dissenting meeting houses. The money to rebuild them was given to the Dissenters by the government. The House of Hanover and the Dissenters offered each other mutual support; the Riot Act was passed in response to the disturbances; and the Dissenters became loyal Whigs, and, much later, in the 19th century, Liberals.

Opposition from the Tories certainly drew the Dissenting groups together, but once the threat of persecution ceased, the cracks within Dissent began to appear.

6. Heresy in the West and the Salters' Hall controversy in 1719

A. Theological ferment

Ever since the break up of the so-called Happy Union and the close of the antinomian controversy, theological ferment had continued. Some

Presbyterians and a few Independent ministers had embraced Arian views. The influence of contemporary rationalistic philosophy (it was the so-called Age of Reason) was making itself felt among some students in the Dissenting Academies. The doctrines which obviously depended on Divine revelation, such as the doctrine of the Trinity and the Person of Christ, became the chief targets of rationalistic criticism. Nathaniel Lardner was almost certainly an Arian. The Established Church was riddled with anti-Trinitarian ideas and the writings of William Whiston and Samuel Clarke were being read and discussed by some students in Dissenting Academies.

B. The Exeter Three

The preaching of three Exeter ministers, and especially their unsound views on the Eternal Deity of Christ, led to complaints. The three ministers were Joseph Hallet, principal tutor of the Exeter Academy, and also minister of James Meeting in Exeter; James Peirce, who was accepted as his assistant in 1713; and John Withers, their friend and ministerial colleague. The complaints were made to the Committee of Thirteen, which was in overall charge of the Presbyterian meetings in Exeter. In January 1718, the Committee asked the three ministers to expound from their pulpits their beliefs in the Eternal Sonship and full Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. They disapproved of the request, regarding it as inquisitorial and onerous. They therefore refused to preach as requested. The United Ministers of Devon and Cornwall decided in September 1718 that they should express their faith in the Holy Trinity in the formula, 'That there is but One God and that the Father, Word and the Holy Spirit is that One God'. The reluctance of the Exeter Three to subscribe to this formula led the United ministers to appeal to the London ministers. They advised caution in such matters and on a second request for advice, they kept the Exeter people waiting until 6 January 1719, when they again declined to intrude into what they regarded as a local matters. Their caution, however, was futile, for a group of political Dissenters led by John Shute Barrington, who was an MP at the time and very influential in Dissenting circles, insisted on referring the affair to a meeting of the Three Denominations.

C. London Ministers summoned to Salters' Hall

A General Meeting of the London Ministers was called together at Salters' Hall on 19 February, 1719. The Congregational ministers were almost unanimous in insisting that any advice sent to Exeter should include a clear statement of faith in the Trinity. At the second session on 24 February, the staunch Independent and Calvinist Thomas Bradbury proposed a motion that just such a statement of faith should be included in the advice to be sent to Exeter. The motion was defeated. Some put the numbers at fifty-seven against

any human credal formula and fifty-three in favour of subscription to a credal statement of the catholic doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Others quote seventy-three against and sixty-nine in favour. The discrepancy is probably the result of the difference between voting numbers and the number of signatures on the Advices. The atmosphere began to get very unpleasant. Sir John Jekyll, Master of the Rolls, who was present as a Presbyterian layman, expressed the result in these terms, ‘The Bible carried it by four’.⁵

D. The Assembly divides—upstairs and downstairs

At a third session on 3 March 1719, the issue was raised again. Bradbury again proposed that a statement of faith in the Trinity be included in the Advices sent to Exeter. The moderator, Dr Joshua Oldfield, refused to put the question a third time. Thomas Bradbury and his adherents, taking umbrage at this, went upstairs to the gallery and continued to hold a separate meeting. Since they wanted a confession of orthodox faith included in the Advices, they became known as the ‘Subscribers’. They wanted all present to sign the first of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (asserting faith in the Holy Trinity) and the fifth and sixth Questions and Answers of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (concerning the Eternal Deity of Christ). Those who refused to subscribe were known as Non-Subscribers.

Thomas Bradbury was not preoccupied with the idea of Subscription or with Statements of Faith, but he did assert that, at a time when many were suspected of drifting away from orthodox faith, church officers and members had a right to know what doctrines their ministers or prospective ministers held. Serious heresy regarding the Holy Trinity or denial of the Deity of the Son and/or the Holy Spirit on the part of a minister would give a Congregational church the right to expel him or a Presbyterian congregation the right to withdraw from his ministry.

E. The Exeter trustees take action

Whilst these events were unfolding at the Salters’ Hall, the Exeter trustees apparently grew weary of waiting for the London ministers. They insisted on an orthodox confession, and Withers agreed, reluctantly, to sign the first of the Thirty-Nine Articles, but Peirce and Hallet refused. On the 6 March, the trustees took charge of the keys and locked the Meeting House doors against the ministers, thus expelling them from their pulpits. They withdrew with about three hundred followers and started a new meeting.

⁵ A.H. Drysdale, *History of the Presbyterians in England: Their Rise, Decline and Revival* (London: Presbyterian Church of England, 1889), p. 502.

7. Theological Decline amongst Presbyterians

Although within twenty years of 1689, the three Dissenting denominations had built over one thousand meeting houses (of which three hundred and eighty were, in the reign of George I, estimated to be Independent), after 1719, the next generation began to feel the pull of the Establishment. Between 1714 and 1732, over fifty (mostly Presbyterian) ministers became clergymen of the Church of England. Bishop Butler and Archbishop Secker had been educated in Presbyterian Dissenting Academies.

The Salter's Hall controversy was a great watershed. It became apparent with the passage of time that whilst most Congregationalists continued staunchly Trinitarian and Calvinistic, many Presbyterians were becoming increasingly vague about the great doctrines of the Christian Faith. The result of this trend was that over the course of the eighteenth century, the English Presbyterian denomination disappeared and was replaced by a new denomination, the Unitarians. Arianism represented an intermediate stage in this theological downgrade. Arianism, after Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, was the belief that the Lord Jesus Christ was created by God the Father and was the highest of created beings. He was of like substance, but not of the same substance with the Father; hence, the words of the Nicene Creed, 'begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made', were directed against the Arians of the fourth century A.D. The decline continued into full-blown Socinianism, named after Faustus Socinus (1539–1604) and Laelius Socinus (1526–62), who first proclaimed this detestable heresy. Socinianism reduced the Son of God to the status of a mere man, the best man that ever lived, a martyr for the truth, but not God manifest in the flesh. Socinianism was later called Unitarianism because of its rejection of the Holy Trinity.

The decline was gradual but inexorable. By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, the doctrines of the Westminster Confession were no longer proclaimed from the pulpits of English Presbyterian churches.

This decline led to secessions and expulsions. The church at Great Yarmouth suffered a large secession because of the heresy of Ralph Milner. The seceders formed a Congregational church. At Taunton, the Arians withdrew from the Presbyterian Meeting House in 1732. The orthodox remainder became a Congregational church. Almost the whole of Yorkshire had become Unitarian by the middle of the century. In Lancashire, where Presbyterianism had been particularly strong, most congregations became Unitarian and the name 'Presbyterian' became synonymous with 'heretical'. Henry Newcome's congregation in Manchester became Cross Street Unitarian Chapel. Elizabeth Gaskell's husband was minister there in the nineteenth century.

Many Presbyterians became Unitarian, and those that remained orthodox eventually became Independent. Those congregations which became Unitarian often retained the name ‘Presbyterian’ on their notice boards, in later years sometimes followed by such terms as ‘non-subscribing’ or ‘free Christian’. The English Presbyterian denomination had in effect disappeared by the year 1800. The Presbyterian Church of England, which became part of the United Reformed Church in 1972, was founded by Scots living in England in 1876.

8. Congregationalism after Salter’s Hall

What was the state of the Congregationalists after the Salters’ Hall controversy? The answer usually given by the more liberal historians within the denomination is that, although remaining orthodox, they became semi-moribund until the Evangelical Revival broke out in the 1730s. Albert Peel wrote, ‘The old religious earnestness disappeared, as did the sense of joy and privilege in belonging to a church composed of Christian believers’. He blamed strict Calvinism. He stated that ‘there was an undue and narrowing emphasis on traditional orthodoxy, and Independency, with the rest of Christendom, became a valley of dry bones’.⁶ Erik Routley is a little kinder, but he states that after Salters’ Hall, ‘Congregationalism entered on a period of undistinguished peace’.⁷

Is this a true picture? Were the Independents merely marking time until Whitefield and the Wesleys appeared to arouse the nation by their preaching? Bernard Lord Manning takes a different view. Commenting on Peel’s theory, which typifies the commonly held view, he states,

That is the specious, the popular, the classical theory. I venture to suggest that it is wrong, that it makes nonsense of history, that it hides the supreme achievement of eighteenth century Congregationalism for the catholic faith.⁸

Erik Routley stated that no adequate explanation had ever been given for the fact that most Congregationalists remained orthodox.⁹

However, the explanation is obvious to a conservative evangelical. It lies in two major factors.

Firstly, the autonomy of the local church was combined with the evangelical commitment of the members.

R.W. Dale was surely correct when he wrote:

6 Albert Peel, *A Brief History of English Congregationalism* (London: Independent Press, 1931), p. 65.

7 Erik Routley, *The Story of Congregationalism* (London: Independent Press, 1961), p. 62.

8 Bernard Lord Manning, *Essays in Orthodox Dissent* (London: Independent Press, 1939), p. 185.

9 Routley, *op. cit.* p. 61.

The great majority both of the Congregational ministers and of the Congregational churches held fast to the Trinitarian faith. The principal cause of the difference between the fortunes of the two denominations lies in their polity. The Presbyterians trusted the management of their affairs to persons for whose religious life there was no guarantee—to trustees, subscribers or seat-holders: among the Independents the church consisted of those who had declared their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and who had been received into communion on giving evidence that their faith was a real spiritual force and not a mere tradition. [They] elected and, in extreme cases, dismissed the pastor. Evangelical doctrine in the preaching of the minister was secured by the presence of Evangelical life in the people.¹⁰

It was not simply the authority of the church meeting, but the competent knowledge and determined commitment of the church members to ‘the faith once delivered to the saints’ that counted. Both factors were necessary. Without the full and unrestricted authority of the church members meeting together, sound ministers could not have been chosen, nor unsound ministers rejected or expelled. No doubt in the earlier part of the 18th century many Presbyterians who realized that they were sitting under an Arian or Unitarian ministry would like to have evicted their preacher, but their only feasible option was withdrawal and the formation of an Independent church. Let us in our day value the church meeting and let no influence, be it ministerial autocracy or new fangled ruling elders, impair its prerogative.

Secondly, the great doctrines of the faith were presented in the worship of the Independent churches. The hymns of Watts and Doddridge, unlike many modern ‘warbles’, are rich in the doctrines of the faith. Someone has said, ‘Let me choose the hymns which make up a denomination’s hymn book and it will go a long way in determining its beliefs’. The Presbyterians sang metrical psalms, but this did not preserve their orthodoxy. The Congregationalists started to sing the hymns of Isaac Watts in addition to the psalms. They remained orthodox.

A note on Isaac Watts

Almost forty years ago, as a very young minister, I used to attend the Westminster Ministers’ meeting. On one occasion the state of Dissent before the Revival was under discussion. Someone mentioned Dr Watts as an example of a faithful minister of that period. A very well known Baptist minister from the North East of England suddenly interjected with, ‘Isaac Watts was a Unitarian’. I was shocked and decided to check the actual words

¹⁰ R.W. Dale, *A History of English Congregationalism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), p. 542.

of Watts in his hymns. This is my conclusion. Isaac Watts was not a Unitarian; he was not even an Arian. One only has to read the following verses from his hymns to realize that.

(Regarding the Holy Trinity, the Deity and the Eternal Sonship of Christ)

We give immortal praise
 To God the Father's Love
 For all our comforts here
 And better hopes above;
 He sent his own eternal Son
 To die for sins that man had done.

Almighty God to Thee
 Be endless honours done,
 The undivided Three
 And the mysterious One:
 Where wisdom fails with all her powers,
 There faith prevails and love adores.

Well might the sun in darkness hide,
 And shut his glories in
 When God, the mighty Maker, died
 For man, the creature's, sin.
 What equal honours shall we bring
 To thee O Lord our God the Lamb
 When all the notes that angels sing
 Are far inferior to thy name?

I wish that prominent ministers would do their homework before coming out with such egregious nonsense in a public meeting.

What is the problem regarding Isaac Watts? He did hold a rather curious and unconventional view on the origin of our Lord's human soul. He believed it was created by God the Father at the creation of the universe and was immediately united with the Second Person of the Holy Trinity; that the incarnation was the assumption of a human body by the Second Person, the Logos, already united to a human soul. It was a curious view, but not Arian, and certainly not Unitarian.

9. Applying the lessons of the early eighteenth century to our own day

We should:

- Value the church meeting. Pray about it. Emphasize that we meet not merely to discuss business, but to seek the will of God for His church and kingdom.

- Ensure that the people are well instructed in the great doctrines of the faith. The Calvinism of the early eighteenth century did not merely stress the sovereignty of God but equally emphasized the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, the Ascension and Reign of Christ and his Coming to judge the world. Rather than stultifying the work of the gospel, the tough outer layer of Calvinism protected the precious doctrines of the catholic faith, as Bernard Lord Manning observed:
To whatever else he is committed, the Calvinist is committed to catholic and evangelical doctrine. In a century when the solvent acids of rationalism were so potent, was it a misfortune (as is often suggested), was it not an authentic gift of God for our churches, that a hard, bitter rind of tough Calvinism covered their faith?¹¹
- Emphasize the reality of Christian fellowship and worship which is rich in the great doctrines of the Faith. Do not be content with the minimalist warbles which pass for worship in some churches today.

10. Conclusion

My conclusion is best expressed in the words of Bernard Lord Manning. He wrote:

In an age of spiritual depression, these forefathers of ours walked and did not faint ... the faithful remnant, maintaining the ministry of the Word and Sacrament, won a victory more illustrious than the victories of Naseby and Marston Moor and Worcester, more enduring than the victories in the nineteenth century ballot boxes. They showed once for all that ecclesiastical liberty and orthodoxy were not incompatible. They exhibited the two side by side. They asserted triumphantly in the most unfavourable circumstances that the irresistible grace of God preserves the faith in freedom and freedom in the faith. Upon faith and freedom loyally guarded there fell in due time the fire from heaven, the fire of the evangelical revival. Then the Word had free course and was glorified.¹²

11 B.L. Manning, *Essays in Orthodox Dissent* (London: Independent Press, 1939), pp.191–192.

12 *Ibid.* p.195.

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A
DECLARATION
OF THE
FAITH and ORDER
Owned and Practised
IN THE
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES
IN
ENGLAND:

Agreed upon and consented unto
By their
ELDERS and MESSENGERS
IN
Their Meeting at the *SAVOT*,
October 12. 1658.

LONDON,
Printed by J. P. and are to be sold in *S Pauls Church-
yard, Fleet-street, and at Westminster-Hall.*
1659.

The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 1658

John Semper

Introduction

The full title of what many of us have come to know as The Savoy Declaration is *A Declaration of the Faith and Order owned and practised in the Congregational Churches in England; agreed upon and consented unto by their elders and messengers in their meeting at the Savoy, 12 October 1658*. The date immediately reminds us that it was a rather inauspicious time for its publication. Oliver Cromwell had died (3 September 1658), just twenty-six days before the Conference began on Wednesday, 29 September. It completed its work speedily in a mere fourteen days. Future prospects for the Independents were poor as the political situation deteriorated, leaving the way open for Monck to march in and restore the monarchy. In addition, Oliver's son, Richard, who had succeeded him as Protector, had strong Presbyterian sympathies, and had already, as Chancellor, removed John Owen from the Vice-Chancellorship of the University of Oxford in 1657. The whole situation was not encouraging.

Opinions differ on the value of the Declaration. The royalist, Thomason, whose great collection of tracts has survived the years, sneeringly ascribed it to 'Philip Nie and his Confederat Crew of Independants'. John Owen, to whom its preface is generally attributed, had a more serious and positive evaluation of its usefulness. Several of the purposes for which it was compiled remain valid today, and I hope to add a few other reasons why we would do well not to overlook its value for us, both as individual Christians and as churches.

Perhaps it is also important to say, by way of introduction, that all records of the Conference appear to have been lost. Our information about its gathering, its proceedings and its methods of approach have to be pieced together from items of correspondence, the records of individual Congregational churches and various comments to be found in contemporary writers such as Calamy. It is important to acknowledge our indebtedness to Rev. AG Matthews who edited an edition of the Declaration in 1959, and to Rev. G Nuttall, for their work in gathering together what little information is available. Perhaps more is out there waiting to be discovered!

Why was it produced at that particular time?

It is hard to isolate any one of many influences which may have led the Independents to feel the need for a statement of their faith and order. Perhaps one of the major factors is expressed by Thomas Goodwin in the address he delivered when presenting a copy of the Declaration to Richard Cromwell on 14 October 1658: ‘We (desired) in the first place to clear ourselves of that scandal, which not onely some persons at home, but of forein parts, have affixed upon us, viz. That Independentism (as they call it) is the sink of all Heresies and Schisms. We have therefore declared what hath been our constant Faith and Order, to be published to the World.’¹ As Tudur Jones puts it, ‘It was meant for those in the outside world who had misunderstood the nature of Independency’² (and, of course, still do!). In this particular it was unlike the Cambridge Platform of 1648 which was very much intended as a means of ordering the churches of New England.

Other reasons are expressed in John Owen’s lengthy Preface. With the Presbyterian Westminster Confession very much in mind, he affirms the desirability of expressing ‘the substance of the same common salvation, or unity of their faith; whereby speaking the same things, they shew themselves perfectly joyned in the same minde, and in the same judgment.’ In other words, it would cement the sense of unity among the churches. It would knit them more closely together in the face of times which were rapidly becoming uncertain, perilous and difficult. (A good historical precedent for affirming our oneness today!)

Owen also makes it very clear that the Declaration ‘was not to be made use of as an imposition on any.’ He adds that ‘Whatever is of force or constraint in matters of this nature causeth them to degenerate from the name and nature of Confessions, and turns them from being Confessions of Faith, into exactions and impositions of Faith.’ The Declaration was not to serve as a test of faith or orthodoxy in the way in which the Westminster Confession has often been used, and most Congregationalists would go along with that. Incidentally, it is worth noting that a good number of the existing Congregational churches already had very similar statements of faith written into their church covenants, which made the drafting of the Declaration so much easier and quicker. So it was felt that there was a need for such a statement, since as Owen has famously described it ‘... The generality of our

1 *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order 1658*, AG Matthews (ed.) (London: Independent Press, 1959) p. 12.

2 R. Tudur Jones, *Congregationalism in England 1662–1962* (London: Independent Press, 1962) p. 36.

churches have been in a manner like to so many ships (though holding forth the same general colours) lancht singly, and sailing apart and alone in the vast Ocean of these tumultuating times, and they exposed to every wind of doctrine'. Both AG Matthews and G Nuttall argue that the lack of fellowship and association among the Independent churches was not as great as Owen suggests, and that his famous simile of the ships was somewhat exaggerated. This may have been true where such local associations existed, but elsewhere churches must have felt quite isolated.

Owen also freely admits that they have had before them 'the Articles of Religion, approved and passed by both Houses of Parliament, after advice had with an Assembly of Divines called together for that purpose (i.e. The Westminster Confession, Shorter Catechism, etc.) to which Confession, for the substance of it, we fully consent ... A few things we have added,' he continues, 'for obviating some erroneous opinions ... and made some other additions and alterations in method, here and there, and some clearer explanations, as we found occasion'. So the Declaration had the useful function of identifying the Faith of the Independents as being virtually identical with that of the increasingly powerful Presbyterian party, but at the same time in its section on Church Order clearly distinguishing themselves from that system of church government. In fact Owen indicates that this was their thinking by explaining that this was the basic reason for keeping the two sections of the Declaration—the one on Faith and the other on Order—completely separate. 'What is of Church Order, we dispose in certain Propositions by itself.' Some felt, particularly Richard Baxter, that this was untimely, and militated against the possibility of an accommodation between the Congregationalists and Presbyterians initiated by Oliver Cromwell, but not pursued by his son. This had to wait for the 1689 Revolution Settlement before any progress was made. However, Baxter disliked the Congregational Way, especially as 'they too much exploded synods', declaring that 'their building wanteth cement.'³ Perhaps the lack of cement has both its advantages and disadvantages!

In summary, then, we might say that the Declaration of Faith demonstrated that the doctrine of the Independents was virtually identical with that of the Presbyterians in the Westminster Confession and with other Reformed Churches. On the other hand the closing section on Church order expressed sharply and clearly the distinctiveness of the Congregational Way.

3 Quoted in Geoffrey Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way 1640–1660* (1957, second edition Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 2001) p. 100.

Who was responsible for the Conference?

Initiative

Peter Toon, in his useful biography of John Owen,⁴ comments that at that period church assemblies of any kind were a rare occurrence. The Westminster Assembly had taken place some ten years earlier, and cannot be termed a church or even a Presbyterian assembly, being in fact a gathering of ministers called together by Parliament, and with the remit of reporting back to it. It is true that the Savoy Conference had to seek the approval of Oliver Cromwell, who despite his predilection for Independency, gave it without much enthusiasm. (Oliver felt, according to Neal in his *History of the Puritans*, that it militated against his efforts to diminish sectarianism and achieve a union of Independents and Presbyterians.⁵ Such a scheme had been mooted in Parliament in 1657, but died when Parliament was dissolved early in 1658.) This, however, did not make Savoy a government sponsored conference, and although the completed Declaration was presented to Oliver's son on the day of its completion, by a deputation led by Thomas Goodwin, this was a gesture of respect (and perhaps of political expediency) rather than a requirement imposed upon it. So it was an unusual and unprecedented event for the Independent churches to hold such a general assembly and produce a Confession. In fact it didn't occur again until the establishment of the Congregational Union in 1832 and the issue of the 1833 Declaration.

The original idea of holding such a meeting seems to have arisen during a gathering of ministers in Oxford in July 1658, at an academic ceremony known as the Oxford Act. The Act, (abolished in 1856) comprised candidates for degrees submitting their theses and then having to defend their arguments. Goodwin mentions this occasion in his address to Richard Cromwell. 'The rise of our meeting was at the last Oxford Act where many of us ministers being present (more than at any time before) we appointed September 29 for this our more general Meeting at the Savoy which was made known to and approved by your Royal father.' [sic]⁶

Invitations

The arrangements for notifying the churches were delegated to the elders of the churches in the city and vicinity of London. This obviously eliminated travelling long distances and enabled them to confer together more easily. Matthews suggests that perhaps there was a standing body of elders from the

4 Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1971), p. 103.

5 Daniel Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 4 vols, 1732–38.

6 Quoted in A.G. Matthews (ed.), *op. cit.* p. 12.

area. There is certainly a record of such a meeting being summoned on 15 June, some time before the Conference or Assembly was mooted. These elders asked George Griffiths, preacher at the Charterhouse, to write on their behalf to leading Congregational ministers throughout the country, asking them in their turn to approach the churches and to use their influence to achieve a good representation from their area. The churches were requested to send messengers to the Savoy for the convening of an assembly on 29 September. It would appear that this is what actually happened, particularly as in some counties there were existing networks of Congregational churches.

In a collection of letters and papers, published by the Rev. Francis Peck (1692–1743), an Anglican clergyman, and entitled ‘*Desiderata Curiosa*’, we find replies from fourteen of the churches. The churches had been asked to acknowledge the receipt of the invitation by writing to Henry Scobell, Clerk to the Council of State. However it was in his role as an Independent, a member (and possibly an elder) of the church which gathered in Westminster Abbey, that he collated the replies. It seems very unlikely that he was acting as a representative of the Protectorate either at this early stage or throughout the Conference. The replies were certainly not franked as state business, even though some earlier enquiries Scobell had made to the churches in 1656 were. It appears from these letters that the original invitations were not of a stereotyped nature—there were no duplicators or photo-copiers available! Obviously they all gave the same necessary basic information, but George Griffiths seems to have varied what he wrote to the individuals concerned. We can speculate that he wrote more or less depending on the closeness of his acquaintance with each minister.

This method of notifying the churches seems to have worked well. The men contacted in various counties or regions did their work efficiently and there were replies—no doubt many more than the fourteen Peck has preserved. Those of us who have attempted to elicit replies from Congregational churches will stand amazed at that! Most of them were brief and to the point, but some added a few thoughts. In the letters still available it is perhaps surprising to find that nobody had any qualms about attempting this new thing. The longest reply was from the redoubtable Vavasor Powell, dated 26 August. He mentions that he had no personal knowledge of Henry Scobell, because he (Powell) was out of favour at Whitehall, being a Fifth Monarchy man who did not approve of the Protector and his possible aspirations towards kingship. He was a useful contact for Griffiths, having what Matthews calls ‘a unique knowledge and influence with the Welsh churches’.⁷ (Almost a seventeenth century Dr Lloyd-

7 Ibid. p. 17.

Jones!) It appears that he himself did not intend to be at the conference, but thought that some from Wales would wish to attend such an auspicious gathering. He was very much concerned that the messengers or delegates at the conference should not become embroiled in 'political and worldly accounts ... lest there be such a mix'd work carried on now, as was in Constantine's time'.⁸

In fact one is left with an impression of the efficiency and smoothness with which these arrangements were made, the invitations sent out, the details circulated in the counties, and the replies received all in a remarkably short time. Some replies intimated that they would have liked longer notice, but generally speaking there was a happy acceptance of the proposal for such an assembly. It does seem that there was something of a hunger for closer fellowship among the churches.

Assembly

The ministers, and elders or messengers of the churches gathered together at the Savoy Palace on 29 September 1658. The venue was probably chosen because it had what Williston Walker calls 'a reputation of being a meeting place for Dissenters and for representatives of Continental Protestant Churches.'⁹ It was situated on the bank of the Thames and had served many purposes. Built by Peter, Earl of Surrey and Richmond in 1245, it had become John of Gaunt's Palace and later a convent. In Henry VIII's day it was a hospital, and under Cromwell it provided rooms for various court officers.

There are various estimates of the number of people present. Thomas Goodwin in his address to the Protector mentions that 'above a hundred' churches were represented. Increase Mather, later to play a significant part in Congregational life in New England, was then pastor of a Congregational church in Devon. Some 40 years later, he recalled that there were about 120 churches represented. James Forbes of Gloucester informs us that there were over 200 elders and messengers gathered together and Neal declares that most of these were laymen. This perhaps shows how highly the priesthood of all believers was esteemed among the Independents, and also a desire in the minds of those calling together the conference that it should not be merely a gathering of ministers like the Westminster Assembly. Since the conference was not government-sponsored, there was the matter of expenses (unlike the Westminster divines, who were promised, but not always paid, four shillings a day by Parliament). It has been suggested that the preponderance of laymen present indicates that they were in a better position than the ministers to pay

8 Ibid. p. 17.

9 Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (1893, reprinted USA: Pilgrim Press, 1960) p. 347n.

the considerable cost of travelling, e.g. seven days by coach from Exeter to London. We know that some churches provided for their minister's travel, the church at Beccles in Suffolk recording in its church book that 'þ^t þ^e charge of the jorneye should be mutually borne by the brethren of the socyete'. Other churches may have felt that they did not want their minister out of the pulpit for an unspecified length of time!

What happened at the Conference?

Procedure

Although the somewhat meagre comments we have on the way the delegates set about the work occasionally vary in detail, the overall picture of what took place during the fourteen days from 29 September to 14 October is fairly clear. John Owen in the Preface to the Declaration states that after the first day, when ways of proceeding were decided, they spent 'but eleven days, part of which also was spent by some of us in prayer, others in consulting; and in the end all agreeing.' We also learn that there were days of fasting and prayer, which James Forbes says were kept from morning till night, with preaching in between the sessions and obviously on the two Lord's Days.

George Griffiths, who had sent out the original invitations, was appointed clerk to the conference. Early on, it was decided to more or less follow the pattern of the Westminster Confession. A committee of six ministers was chosen to prepare and put together the articles of the Declaration. We know their names—they were all notable men: Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, William Bridge, William Greenhill, Joseph Caryl and John Owen. The first five had been members of the Westminster Assembly and had expressed at that time their dissent from the Presbyterian form of church government. Goodwin and Nye in particular had been much influenced by John Cotton's book *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven* (1644) and the kind of Congregationalism it advocated. William Bridge was the pastor of the Congregational Church at Yarmouth, which is believed to have been one of the largest and most influential in the country.

Most of our knowledge of what took place comes from Neal's *History of the Puritans*, and he does not tell us where he obtained the information. However, we have no reason to suppose that he fabricated or imagined it. 'While these six were employed in preparing and putting together the articles of their confession, the synod heard complaints, and gave advice in several cases which were brought before them, relating to disputes and differences in their churches.'¹⁰ In addition Thomas Jollie, the minister of Altham, a

¹⁰ Neal, *op. cit.* vol. 2, p. 690.

chapelry in the huge parish of Whalley in Lancashire, records that he set before the conference papers drawn up by an association of ministers from Lancashire, Cheshire and Yorkshire, which related to the religious decline of the times and the need for revival in the churches. Neal also mentions that when the committee of six had agreed and prepared various statements of doctrine, these were presented to the whole gathering every morning, read out to them by the clerk, George Griffiths, who also acted as scribe to the committee.

That the work of the conference was completed so quickly was a source of wonder and thankfulness to all the delegates, not least to John Owen who in his Preface comments 'It is therefore to be looked at as a great and special work of the Holy Spirit, that so numerous a company of ministers, and other principal brethren, should so readily, speedily and joyfully give themselves unto such a whole Body of Truths that are after godliness'. There was indeed a sense of spiritual unity, and of the presence of God with them, which gave them great joy. Thomas Jollie again records that he was able to preach before the Assembly 'with acceptance, and found much of God's presence in the meeting, and of His grace in the management of matters from first to last'.¹¹ James Forbes, some forty years later, remembered that 'it was a kind of heaven on earth I think to all who were present.'¹²

Needless to say that, from a purely human angle, the work was completed quickly because it was modelled so closely on the Westminster Confession in matters of doctrine. It was also the case, as we have mentioned, that many of the churches had such statements of doctrine in their church covenants, especially the church at Yarmouth, whose messengers were able to bring these to the assembly. However, we would in no way wish to diminish what the delegates themselves felt, that the hand of God and the reality of his presence was with them.

Distinctives

Since the Declaration was based so closely on the Westminster Confession, there are obviously no major doctrinal differences. There are just a few distinctives which are worth noting. The omissions are to be expected: Chapter 30 of the Westminster Confession on 'Church Censures' is absent, together with Chapter 31 on 'Synods and Councils'. Perhaps more surprisingly much of Chapter 24 on 'Marriage and Divorce' is missing, and there is no statement on divorce. Various other chapters are re-written: Chapter 25 on 'The Church', of necessity, but also chapter 15 on 'Repentance unto Life',

¹¹ Quoted in A.G. Matthews (ed.), *op. cit.* p. 33.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 33.

where the title is extended to ‘Repentance unto Life and Salvation’ and there is a greater emphasis on the grace of God.

There are also occasional additions in the Declaration, as in chapter 8 on ‘Christ the Mediator’ which inserts the words ‘according to a Covenant made between them both’, i.e. between God and the Lord Jesus, thus highlighting the covenant theology which undergirded their thinking. There is one extremely important addition in the Declaration: Chapter 20 is not in the Westminster Confession. It is entitled ‘Of the Gospel and of the Extent of the Grace Thereof.’ It in no way disagrees with Westminster theology but it exhibits what Williston Walker calls ‘the more gracious aspects of the religion of Christ, in at least as clear a light as the sanctions of the law.’¹³ Robert Davis, in his Introduction to the Declaration (2005) writes that this chapter ‘summarizes many statements previously made, putting them together in a glorious manner, pointing the reader to the grace of God.’¹⁴ It suffices to say that the final and separate section of the Declaration on ‘The Institution of Churches and the Order appointed in them by Jesus Christ’ is unashamedly Congregational in its treatment of the subject.

Publication

The draft was in fact completed in twelve days, and a copy presented to Richard Cromwell on the fourteenth of September. I am presuming it was a manuscript copy. However, it was pretty quick work! This is particularly the case as the draft was sent to various individuals not at the Conference for comment, with a promise that the Declaration would not be published until their answer had been received. One of these, Calamy informs us, was Edward Reyner, the Congregational minister at Lincoln. He expressed his satisfaction with the Confession of Faith, but was a little unhappy with some of the details in the section on Church Order. Meanwhile the Conference representatives or messengers of the churches went home to report their achievements to their congregations. Printed copies of the Declaration did not become available until December.

Apparently it was soon available on the streets of London—bearing in mind that it was very much aimed at the critics of Independency, to try to clear the Congregational name of accusations of heresy. Strangely enough George Fox, the founder of The Society of Friends, obtained a copy before publication, and had written and put on sale his reply by 1660. Williston Walker records the first publication of the Declaration as November 1658,

¹³ Williston Walker, op. cit. p. 351.

¹⁴ Robert E. Davis (ed.) *Historic Documents of Congregationalism* (USA: Puritan Press, 2005) p. 5.

followed by four editions in the following year, perhaps amounting in all to five thousand copies. The price was 6d (2½ pence), as listed in the Register of the Stationers' Company, though all the other books on the Register seem to have been similarly priced! After that nothing much happened until the end of the period of persecution, when there was a 1688 edition, and then another in 1729. Various editions were published in different parts of the country during the same period.

Why has the Declaration not proved popular with Congregational Churches?

Generally speaking, after the initial burst of interest, the Declaration has not received much attention. It was largely written off by Dr John Stoughton (1807–1897), who held Congregational pastorates at Windsor and in Kensington. He ended his days in the Chair of Historical Theology at New College. He suggests that the Declaration 'never had much weight with Congregationalists' and is 'a document now little known except by historical students'.¹⁵ One cannot help feeling that this is a rather sweeping judgment, motivated by the downgrade in doctrinal concern towards the end of the nineteenth century.

It was most probably the years of persecution, and the lack of new editions of the Declaration which led many Congregationalists to use the more widely available Westminster Confession. This became particularly relevant during the attempts made soon after 1689 to establish a union of Congregationalists and Presbyterians under the 'Heads of Agreement' (1691). There is evidence that some Congregational groupings, such as the Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire association, accepted the Declaration as their standard, and even individual churches like that at Sweffling in Suffolk still held to it. A deacon of the church there published the Declaration together with the church's own covenant as late as 1745.¹⁶ So the Declaration was still around!

Perhaps the formation of the Congregational Union in 1833 and its production of the much briefer *Declaration of Faith, Church Order and Discipline* contributed in some measure to the neglect of the Savoy, in favour of something more easily assimilated—Savoy has 32 chapters on Faith and 30 propositions on order—and more generally acceptable, i.e. less Calvinistic! Does this suggest that the taste for a rich evangelical theology was already on the wane? Certainly as the nineteenth century wore on, the myth of Congregational dislike of any formularies became the 'received understanding',

¹⁵ Quoted in A.G. Matthews (ed.), *op. cit.* p. 46.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 46.

especially as destructive biblical criticism developed in the Congregational colleges and spread among the churches. As we have seen, however, Owen in his Preface makes a clear distinction between stating their faith and order as accurately as possible, and imposing such a confession on individual churches. In no way was their independency to be infringed, but they were clearly not to believe anything they fancied! The Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire association, meeting in 1674 in the midst of dark days, still sent two of their number to meet and deliberate with a Cheshire minister who had doubts about our Lord's work of satisfaction for the sins of His people, as set out in Chapter 11 on Justification.

We should also remember that many English Presbyterian churches had lost their way in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and become Unitarian. The Congregationalists stuck firmly to an evangelical theology, and members in fact seceded from old, (1662) Presbyterian causes to found Congregational churches. Something of the truth declared in the Savoy Declaration and the Westminster Confession must have rubbed off on these stalwarts of the faith.

Still, it is an indication to us today of how easily and how quickly a decline may set in even among evangelical churches. The Savoy Declaration is an excellent summary of the Christian faith, and it is not without significance that it has been published in *Evangelical and Congregational*, alongside the EFCC's own Basis of Faith. David Wells in his Foreword to *Historic Documents of Congregationalism* wisely remarks that 'a passion for Biblical truth is what drives the desire to state that truth with care and precision, and to see the life of the Church shaped by it. The loss of Biblical passion is what makes creeds and confessions of faith seem cold, mechanical and unimportant.'¹⁷ It is a statement that we would do well to read and take to our hearts. I have personally found among congregations of evangelical people, who have often sat for lengthy periods under the faithful exposition of Scripture, book by book, an inability to gather together statements of truth from various places in the Bible, into a rudimentary systematic theology. We really need to tackle this problem. It is not enough to have a clear understanding of a particular Biblical book. We must be able to put together the pieces of the jig-saw which form Biblical truth. May I suggest that a study of the Savoy Declaration (perhaps at the mid-week meeting) in this 350th anniversary year would go a long way towards alleviating this problem.

17 David Wells, Foreword to the Savoy Declaration in Robert E. Davis (ed.), op. cit. p. ix.

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