"THE OLD, GLORIOUS, BEAUTIFUL FACE OF CHRISTIANITY"

CONGREGATIONALISM AND BAPTIST LIFE

BY MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN

Benjamin Keach

Numerous Christians in the British Isles during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were deeply concerned to discover from the Scriptures what constituted the true form of church life and government. Some, members of the state church in England and Wales, argued for episcopacy. Others, part of the state church in Scotland and in the ranks of the Puritans in England and Wales, argued for Presbyterianism. Yet others were convinced that the New Testament supported congregationalism, or what John Owen (1616–1683), a leading representative of this perspective, called "the old, glorious, beautiful face of Christianity." Today, there are different controversies that energize Christians and this passionate concern about what is the true form of church government seems a mere relic from the past, interesting possibly from an antiquarian viewpoint but of no relevance for the present-day. Yet, this early modern discussion should be of importance to us, for at its heart lay a distinct desire to recover what made early Christian churches alive and vital.[1]

We begin with the Reformation, for without the foundations laid by that great work of God, Congregationalism would not have emerged. We then look at early attempts to affirm Congregationalist principles in the 1580s to 1620s. Then, finally, we will spend some time looking at the Congregationalists of the 1640s, who played the chief role in establishing Congregationalism.

THE HERITAGE OF THE REFORMATION

The Reformation, although it led to a deep split in the late mediæval Roman Catholic church, was undoubtedly a work of God. In three key areas, where superstition and unbiblical thought had long reigned, the Reformation sought to bring about biblically-grounded reform.

First, the Reformers were passionate about displaying in all of its glory the biblical way of salvation. There is one and only one way of salvation, they affirmed, and that is through Jesus Christ alone and is fully received by faith alone. The mediæval Church had effectively shrouded this biblical teaching in darkness for close to a millennium. The struggle by the German reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) to find a gracious God and the way of salvation for ten years or so is well known and typifies the experience of so many in that period. As he later wrote after his conversion:

> When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule… Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: "You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession." Therefore the longer I tried to heal my uncertain,

> weak, and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more uncertain, weak, and troubled I continually made it.[2]

In plainer language Luther later stated of himself at this time, "If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy."[3] The Reformers thus left their heirs with distinctive soteriological concerns.

Second, there was the desire, especially among those in the Reformed tradition, to restore worship according to the pattern of the Scriptures. The latter meant purifying the church of the superstitions and idolatry that had shaped it during the Middle Ages, things such as the use of relics and prayer to Mary and the saints. There was thus a great concern to find the truly biblical way in which to worship God. The French Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564) could thus state that "a part of the reverence" we owe to God "consists simply in worshipping him as he commands, mingling no inventions of our own"[4] and that "nothing pleases God but what he himself has commanded us in his Word."[5] In the generations immediately following the Reformation this concern to worship according to his Word became tied to the search for the biblical blueprint of church government.

In the generations immediately following the Reformation this concern to worship according to his Word became tied to the search for the biblical blueprint of church government.

Finally, underlying both of these concerns was the issue of authority: what determines what we should believe about the nature of salvation and how worship is to be conducted? Is it the case that Scripture and tradition are on an equal footing, as the Roman Church maintained and this because Scripture is insufficient to provide answers for all of the church's questions? The Roman Catholic apologist Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), put forward this position plainly when he stated: "we assert that all necessary doctrine concerning faith and morals is not expressly contained in Scripture, and consequently, besides the written Word there is needed an unwritten one."[6] Or is it the case that Scripture is the pre-eminent authority for doctrine, faith, and worship, and therefore quite sufficient for these matters, as the Reformers argued? Careful study of the Scriptures themselves revealed to the Reformers that God's voice in his Word is what is to be our chief guide, though it needs to be noted that they did not thereby despise tradition.

THE EMERGENCE OF PURITANISM

Now, the Reformation had come to England during the reign of Henry VIII (r.1509–1547), but it was really not until the reign of his son Edward VI (r.1547–1553) and his daughter Elizabeth I (r.1559–1603) that they got a firm foothold. After Elizabeth I ascended the throne there was little doubt that England was firmly in the Protestant orbit. The question that arose, though, was to what extent the Elizabethan state church would be reformed. It soon became clear that Elizabeth was content with a church that was Calvinistic in theology, but in which the head of state was the head of the Church—a perspective known as Erastianism—and in which worship was largely mediaeval in form.[7] As a response to this "settledness" in the Church of England there arose the Puritan movement.

Initially the main theological concern of Puritanism was to effect a thoroughgoing reformation of the Elizabethan church after the model of the churches in Calvinist Switzerland, especially those in Geneva and Zürich. In these continental churches there was a definite attempt to include in the church's worship only that which was explicitly commanded by Scripture.

As Douglas Kelly has noted, this concern with proper worship arose out of the fact that Puritanism was a movement of revival. In his words:

> They [i.e., the Puritans] were so concerned with worship because they were so concerned with God. Puritanism budded during a revival movement, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which gave them an immediate sense of the nearness, the holiness, the beauty and the grace of the Triune God. …Everything less than God was secondary to knowing and serving Him aright. Worship was first; even the most legitimate concerns were second. If worship was of such supreme significance, what could matter more than to do it in a way that would please God?[8]

THE SEPARATISTS AND ROBERT BROWNE

As the sixteenth century wore on, though, the goal of bringing about a full reformation of the English state church seemed no closer. Consequently, in the latter part of that century, a number of Puritans came to the conviction that the Church of England would never be fully reformed, and they decided to separate from the state church and organize their own congregations. These Puritans would be known as Separatists and they would argue for what was essentially a Congregationalist form of church government.

One of their earliest leaders was Robert Browne (*c.*1550–1633), who in a tract entitled *A Treatise of*

Reformation without Tarrying for anie (1582), provided the "clarion-call" of the Separatist movement.[9] Browne—nicknamed "Troublechurch" Browne by his opponents—came from a family of substance and was related to Robert Cecil, Elizabeth I's Lord Treasurer and chief minister. During his undergraduate years at Cambridge University, Browne had become a "thoroughgoing Presbyterian Puritan." Within a few years, though, he had come to the conviction that each local congregation had the right, indeed the responsibility, to elect its own elders. And by 1581 he was of the opinion that the setting up of congregations apart from the Established Church and its parish churches was a necessity for, he wrote that year, "God will receive none to communion and covenant with him, which as yet are at one with the wicked." That same year he established a Separatist congregation at Norwich. Experiencing persecution he and his Norwich congregation left England the following year for the freedom of the Netherlands.

What attracted the Separatists to the Netherlands was its geographical proximity to England, its policy of religious toleration, its phenomenal commercial prosperity—the early seventeenth century witnessed such a flowering of Dutch literary, scientific and artistic achievement that this period has often been called "the golden age of the Netherlands"—and the Reformed nature of its churches.

It was in the Netherlands that Browne published the book for which he is remembered, *A Treatise of Reformation without Tarrying for anie* (1582). In this influential tract, Browne set forth his views that, over the course of the next century, would become common property of all the theological children of the English Separatists, including the Congregationalists and the Calvinistic Baptists.

First of all, Browne willingly conceded the right of civil authorities to rule and to govern. However, he drew a distinct line between their powers in society at large and their power with regard to local churches. As citizens of the state the individual members of these churches were to be subject to civil authorities. However, he rightly emphasized, these authorities had no right "to compel religion, to plant Churches by power, and to force a submission to ecclesiastical government by laws and penalties."

Then, Browne conceived of the local church as a "gathered" church, that is, a company of Christians who had covenanted together to live under the rule of Christ, the Risen Lord, whose will was made known through his Word and his Spirit. Finally, the pastors and elders of the church, though they ultimately received their authority and office from God, were to be appointed to their office by "due consent and agreement of the church … according to the number of the most which agree."

The key principle that Browne had seen clearly was that the kingdom of God cannot be brought about by the decrees of state authorities and that ultimately Christianity is "a matter of private conscience rather than public order, that the church is a fellowship of believers rather than an army of pressed men" and women.

Browne returned to the British Isles not long after publishing this treatise. To the consternation of many of his friends he subsequently recanted his views, and rejoined the Church of England. But he had begun a movement that could not be held in check. Browne's mantle fell to three men—John Greenwood (*c.*1560–1593), Henry Barrow (*c.*1550–1593) and John Penry (1559–1593)—all of whom were hanged in 1593 for what was regarded by the state as an act of civil disobedience, namely secession from the Established Church.

Prior to his death, Penry rightly emphasized to the state authorities that "imprisonment, judgments, yea, death itself, are not meet weapons to convince men's consciences, grounded on the word of God."[10] The response of the English state was swift and brutal. In April 1593 a law was passed that required everyone over the age of sixteen to attend their local parish church. Failure to do so for an entire month meant imprisonment. If, after three months following the individual's release from prison, he or she still refused to conform, the person was to be given a choice of exile or death. In other words, the Elizabethan church and state was hoping to rid itself of the Separatist problem by sending those who were recalcitrant into exile.

…conceived of the local church as a "gathered" church, that is, a company of Christians who had covenanted together to live under the rule of Christ, the Risen Lord, whose will was made known through his Word and his Spirit.

But the preaching and writings of Greenwood, Barrow and Penry led a significant number in the English capital, London, to adopt Separatist principles. And as British Baptist historian Barrie White has noted: "For many it was but a short step from impatient Puritanism within the established Church to convinced Separatism outside it."[11]

THE CALVINISTIC BAPTISTS AND THEIR CONGREGATIONAL VISION

It was among these Separatists, as they came to be known, that believer's baptism was rediscovered, and Baptist congregations subsequently formed in the first half of the sev-

enteenth century. The earliest Baptist group to develop was that of the General Baptists, so called because of their conviction that Christ died for all men and women. Along with this conviction went a firm commitment on the part of these Baptists to Arminian theology.

Although historical research has tended to focus on this first group of Baptists, in the long run they are not tremendously significant, for the majority of General Baptist churches ended up in the arid wasteland of eighteenth-century Arianism and Unitarianism. The more influential Baptist group ultimately, the Calvinistic or Particular Baptists (so-called because of their commitment to particular redemption), appeared in the late 1630s. By the mid-1640s there were at least seven Calvinistic Baptist congregations, all of them located in the metropolis of London.[12] Among their key leaders in the seventeenth century were such men as William Kiffin (1616–1701), Hanserd Knollys (1599–1691) and Benjamin Keach (1640–1704).

In other words, the local church should consist only of those who have professed faith in Christ and who have borne visible witness to that faith by being baptized.

To dispel various charges that had been levelled against them and to demonstrate their fundamental solidarity with Calvinists throughout western Europe, these Calvinistic Baptists issued a statement of faith in 1644, which is now known as the *First London Confession of Faith*. It was issued as the Westminster Assembly was meeting (July 1, 1643 to February 22, 1649) and on the eve of the publication of the Presbyterian *Westminster Confession of Faith* (completed November 1646 and issued April 1647).

The First London Confession of Faith is the doctrinal standard for the first period of Calvinistic Baptist advance, which ended in 1660 with the restoration of Charles II (r.1660–1685). It went through at least two printings in its first year of existence. It was then reissued in a slightly amended second edition on November 30, 1646 (four days after the Presbyterian *Westminster Confession of Faith* was completed, though not yet published). Two further editions subsequently appeared in the early 1650s.[13] As the exemplary historical research of Barrie R. White has shown, this confession gave these early Baptists an extremely clear and self-conscious sense of who they were, what they were seeking to achieve, and how they differed from other Puritan bodies at this time.[14]

The 1644 edition of the *Confession* consists of fifty-three articles. In one of them, Article XXXIII, the Congregationalism of these Baptists is clearly affirmed. The local church, it is emphasized, "is a company of visible Saints, called & separated from the world, by the word and the Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel, being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement."

In other words, the local church should consist only of those who have professed faith in Christ and who have borne visible witness to that faith by being baptized. As Benjamin Keach, the most important theologian of the Calvinistic Baptist movement at the end of the seventeenth century, put it: an essential part of a local church's "Beauty and Glory" is the fact that it is built with "all precious Stones, lively Stones; all regenerated Persons."[15]

As we have noted, this vision of the church clearly ran counter to a major aspect of the *mentalité* of most Christians of that day, who believed in the idea of a state church. We, their heirs, thank God for those men and women who had the courage of their convictions to stand fast for this key biblical truth of congregationalism. GW

1 Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way 1640-1660* (1957 ed.; repr. Weston Rhyn, Oswestry, Shropshire: Quinta Press, 2002), 1-3.

2 Cited Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith. Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 7.

3 Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (1982 ed.; repr. New York: Doubleday, 1992), 315.

4 *Institutes* 4.10.23 [trans. Ford Lewis Battles in John T. McNeill, ed., Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1202].

5 *Daniel I (Chapters 1-6)*, trans. T.H.L. Parker (Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 20; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co./Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1993), 130. Cp., though, the remarks of Douglas Kelly, "The Puritan Regulative Principle and Contemporary Worship" in J. Ligon Duncan, III, ed., *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century. Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2004), 71-72.

6 Cited Kelly, "Puritan Regulative Principle and Contemporary Worship" in Duncan, III, ed., *Westminster Confession*, 65.

7 Robert C. Walton, *The Gathered Community* (London: The Carey Press, 1946), 59.

8 Kelly, "Puritan Regulative Principle", 73.

9 On Browne and for what follows, see B.R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition from the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 44-66.

10 For a recent study of Penry, see Geoffrey Thomas, "John Penry and the Marprelate Controversy" in *The Trials of Puritanism. Papers read at the 1993 Westminster Conference* (London: The Westminster Conference, 1993), 45-71.

11 White, *English Separatist Tradition*, 84.

12 For the full story of the emergence of the Calvinistic Baptists from the Puritan-Separatist matrix, see especially B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (Rev. ed.; London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996).

13 Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints. The Separate Churches of London 1616-1649* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 61-65; B.R. White, "The Origins and Convictions of the First Calvinistic Baptists", *Baptist History and Heritage*, 25, No.4 (October, 1990), 45.

14 See, in particular, his "The Organisation of the Particular Baptists, 1644-1660", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 17 (1966), 209-226; "The Doctrine of the Church in the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644", *The Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S., 19 (1968), 570-590; "Thomas Patient in Ireland", *Irish Baptist Historical Society Journal*, 2 (1969-1970), 36-48, especially 40-41; "Origins and Convictions of the First Calvinistic Baptists", 39-47; *English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 59-94.

15 *The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline display'd* (London, 1697), iii, 56.