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# **1984 Congregational Studies Conference Papers**

**RW Dale**

*Rev. Geraint Fielder*

**John Robinson**

*Rev. Edward S Guest*

**The Hymn Writers of English Congregationalism**

*Rev. Gordon T Booth*



**Congregational  
Studies Conference  
Papers  
1984**

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

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# **RW Dale and the Non-Conformist Conscience: ‘A Study in Christian Worldliness’**

**Geraint Fielder**

## **Introductory comments**

I don't intend to make much of a critique of RW Dale's theology. There are some, who know RW Dale, who would perhaps expect that. But Peter Seccombe, in 1981, dealt with John Angell James, RW Dale's predecessor in Carrs Lane and, in that paper, are made what, I think, are the relevant critiques. The main point of my paper is not his theological perspective (although I intend to deal with some of that) but this whole element of Dale being an unworldly man of the world. And an example to us, I think, in many ways in that. Although, of course, there are cautions we shall have to draw.

It is also going to be a historical paper more than a contemporising paper, although I think that Dale is so lively in his application to his own contemporary issues that, in some ways, it doesn't need the speaker to do anything specifically for us because we can draw our own conclusions.

It is mainly the kind of talk that you can call a compiled talk rather than an analytical one, but I felt that, because the subject does relate to the world in which RW Dale lived, it therefore did need something of an analysis to begin with, in terms of how we look on the 19th century, and what was happening in the period in which Dale was living.

So I'm going to attempt to do that at the start and then (to fulfil our chairman's desire that it should be popular) go on to something of the main features of the life of RW Dale which are interesting in the telling.

## **The Nonconformist Conscience**

Can I widen it to 'A Study in Christian Worldliness' (from a title of one of Dale's sermons).

First of all, I want to make three general statements about the 19th century which can serve as a background to, and partly explanation of, Dale's life and ministry. The first main general statement, then—which I shall divide into three:

By the time Dale was at the height of his ministry in the 1870s, the decisive change in English life had come about—and that was that the secular spirit had invaded the middle classes. Noel Allan, who we often see on



television, in his article written just after the war called 'The Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians', suggests three strands of unbelief which contributed to opinion in the country being decisively secularised in the 19th century. First, the old working class atheism (Tom Paine and all that), a political view which maintained that religion stood condemned as the creed of the persecuting middle class. But intellectually this cut no ice. Why? Because evangelicalism was, even by the crudest Benthamite principles, useful, says Allen, and therefore people could see that it was daily changing the face of England. What a challenge—making men more sober, more respectable, and more humanitarian. Two other factors therefore, he said, had to come before middle class beliefs were secularised in England.

The first could be called a secular sense of history. The 19th century came to believe that truth was revealed in history, not in the Bible. Men saw truth, no longer as absolute, but as relative and evolutionary. And it wasn't science itself, but science interpreted as history, that upset the orthodox view of the world. Geology claimed that the earth existed aeons before man and therefore disproved the creation/flood story of the Bible. What science did was to offer a picture of history, both in the past before man was supposed to have existed, and in the future. This view affected even the approach to the New Testament. If we can fit the evidence historically for the arrival of Julius Caesar in Britain in 55 BC, can we not apply the same methods to Palestine in 33 AD? Handled in this manner by German theologians, the Bible was said to be riddled with contradictions. When the august Kant became the priest of rationalism in England he produced an evolutionary interpretation of history arguing the three stages of theological, metaphysical, and positive or scientific. He argued that truth evolved and it was evolving away from Christianity. So you see the dilemma for thoughtful people like Dale. Thoughtful Victorians were being bombarded by historians and scientists that the facts of Christianity as described in the Bible might not be true. This, in turn, suggested something worse. Was it not immoral to believe what was claimed to be false?

That brings us to the third strand of unbelief. It was argued, for example, by people like Francis Newman, that much of Christian dogma was immoral. Though strangely they recognised the moral fruit that it produced. (They never seem to have seen their own dilemma.) The rationalists of course lapped this up. Original sin, predestination, atonement, eternal punishment, and so much more, they described with such terms as 'horrifying'. John Stuart Mill expressed the view: 'I will call no being good who is not what *I* mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures. And if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.' The audacity of it! Unless of course you notice that he still is prepared to accept the concept of hell.

And that was the atmosphere indeed behind the 19th century rejection. 'There was a higher belief than Christianity,' these moral unbelievers said, 'Let us be good for god's sake, not for God's.' That was their theme. And, in a flash, so it appears, in the 1870s the moral flavour of the evangelicals passed from William Wilberforce's successors to the agnostics. One and all set about converting the public to their view, and this is what the Victorians had to be reassured about, that to give up Christianity did not mean giving up morality. 'A man,' the agnostics argued, 'can be moral and yet not acknowledge Christian doctrine.' And so, they claimed, can a society or a nation. (My only comment would be—so argued the unbeliever at the very moment he was busy cutting the trunk of morality from the roots of faith. And the succeeding generations have seen the cost.)

The second main point about the 19th century. (Some observations about this 'moral tenor'. We need to understand this, to see the motivations behind them—the ease with which Dale identified himself with moral, political and social endeavour.) The second main point then: the high moral seriousness that ran through the Victorian period, from the beginning almost to the end, gives us a clue to the major emphasis in Dale's life. If there were strands of unbelief which I've indicated, which he tried to battle against intellectually, there was also a strain of moral enthusiasm which affected the whole temper of the times and with which Dale felt he could cooperate. This, we will find, enabled him to identify with so many of the political and social aspirations of the time. There was something focused in the public mind (just as in the 17th century era) which meant that, though nonconformity was its most intense expression, it was not its isolated representative. It was the bond which, despite ecclesiastical differences, for example, could join Mr Gladstone to his nonconformist followers.

And Dale is a classical example of that. It was what led the Trades Union Congress in 1833 to propose a grand national and moral union of the productive classes for establishing a new moral world. There was a certain solemnity about the whole of society. But disbelievers shared in this. John Stuart Mill, who I've quoted, *evidenced* nothing. I quote Gordon Rupp here (I remember spending an afternoon with him in 1959 when he was at the University of Manchester and sensing his great respect for RW Dale). His comment here is: 'there was nothing ecstatically corybantic in John Stuart Mill's private life'. I had to look up the meaning of 'corybantic' and I found it has something to do with the extravagant dance of the atheist. Well, there was nothing ecstatic, in that kind of sense, about the unbeliever's life. John Stuart Mill and his utilitarian friends believed *earnestly*, so we are told, in the importance of being earnest. And Dale found no difficulty in identifying with

the political and moral aspirations of such men. This accumulation of a Christian and a moral consensus can be traced back for its origins, some claim, to William Wilberforce's publication in 1797 of 'A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity' (nothing less than 7,500 sold in the first edition in 6 months, which is a sensational sale for a first edition of that time).

The 19th century had signal examples of what George Holyoake, an unbelieving radical, described as saints of the church and saints of humanity in one and the same person. And he gives Shaftesbury as an example. He said: 'There are saints of the church and saints of humanity. Shaftesbury was a saint of both churches.' He is using the phrase, of course, in the sense that the unbeliever uses it. Shaftesbury was able to work wholeheartedly with an unbeliever. Edwin Chadwick, the utilitarian, was entirely single-minded in his hatred of dirt, disease, and selfish obstruction. What was Shaftesbury's motivation in joining completely with him in his ideals and in his practical attempts to eliminate it? Shaftesbury says: 'If St Paul, calling our bodies the temples of the Holy Spirit, said that they must not be contaminated by sin, we also say that our bodies, the same temples of the Holy Spirit, ought not to be contaminated by preventable disease, degraded by avoidable filth, and disabled by unnecessary suffering.'

RW Dale, as a Congregationalist, would not have welcomed the description of himself as either a saint of the church or a saint of humanity. But the description of Dale as 'an unworldly man of the world' and 'an advocate of Christian worldliness' points to the same passion in him as we see, for example, in William Wilberforce, in the Earl of Shaftesbury, and which was one of the contributory factors to that immense moral seriousness that is the temper of the times of Victoria.

Now if I can say something negative then. What were some of the effects of this on evangelicals like RW Dale? In his rather mischievous book *Evangelical Non-conformists and Higher Criticism in the 19th Century*, Willis Glover regards RW Dale as one of the evangelicals who sought to come to terms with these issues of unbelief. When acceptance of Scriptural authority declined, Dale sought verification of Christian truth in our experience of God in Christ. There is evidence that Dale lost his grasp of Biblical authority. In 1869 we find him, for example, denying, on a particular issue, the inerrancy of the Old Testament. He later on questions the historicity of Jonah. He admitted the legitimacy of higher criticism. He showed (and I feel we ought to understand him here) his sensitivity to the so-called moral pressure of the secularists when he asserted his belief in annihilationism in 1874. He had

rejected, if he ever held, the major tenets of Calvinism early on, though, of course, in his major defence of the objective atonement and his constant proclamation of the living Christ, he continued to be known as a preacher of the message of the Bible.

Dale went through tortures of uncertainty. He went through them at least twenty years before most evangelicals did. In the days of geological conflict in the 50s (conflict with Genesis, the beginnings of historical criticism) he was of the view that, even if all the rest of the Bible be lost in doubt, only if the historical trustworthiness of the Gospels was lost, would *all* be lost. By 1869, his uncertainties seemed to have gone. They were far behind him, and he gave that year, as President of the Congregational Union in a talk called 'Christ and the Controversies of Christendom', a spirited assault on the destructive tendencies of the German critics. His stand, however, was not on the verbal authority of the Bible but on Christ and on Christ's work in the believer. In 1874, he delivered his 'Protestantism—its Ultimate Principle'. One quotation will focus his position.

To a Christian man to whom the glory of Christ has been revealed, and who is personally conscious of having received redemption through him, the question of the authority of the gospels and the epistles has a speculative rather than a practical interest. The documentary evidence that a particular painting is the work of Titian or Coreggio may be very necessary to a man in the earliest years of his art study but the time comes when he recognises for himself the handwriting of his friends. The direct intuition of the glory of God in the Christ of the Gospels practically supersedes all discussion on the trustworthiness of the evangelists. And the immediate knowledge of the Divine grace and power which are illustrated in the epistles relegates into a very secondary place all enquiries concerning the authority of the writers.

He was, therefore, in a sense, a precursor of the new evangelical posture. For Dale, Christ and the Christian experience was the very heart of the Protestant and Reformation principle. This was to receive further development in his famous book, *The Living Christ and the Four Gospels*, which he published about five years before his death.

Now then, you can see something of the atmosphere of the times, something of the way in which Dale was pressurised by it, influenced by it, and how it came through in some of his teaching. There are both positive and negative lessons for us to learn, therefore, from the life of RW Dale.

We go first to look at something of his early experience. His parents were members of Whitefield's Tabernacle, Moorfields, in London. At 14, showing something of the bent of his mind, RW Dale was engrossed in Butler's *Analogy*. About 13, 'a sermon suggested thoughts about God and my relation to him

which were new and awakened anxieties which lasted for many months'. He then turned to John Angell James' *Anxious Enquirer*, a book of almost unparalleled influence in the religious life of the 19th century. 'I read it,' he said, 'on my knees and in keen distress about my personal salvation.' But still assurance was withheld. Was his belief of the right kind, he asked himself. 'He failed to recognise,' says his biographer, 'that faith in a person and acceptance of facts relating to a person are two different distinct things.' 'I continued to suppose,' said Dale, 'that I was to be saved by believing the history of the Lord Jesus Christ and the great evangelical doctrines concerning his nature and death. Conscious that I had not attained the rest and strength that ought to follow saving faith, I began to think that perhaps my belief was powerless because it was the mere result of education and not independent enquiry. Under this impression I turned, in my boyish simplicity, to Paley's *Evidences* hoping that when I had verified for myself the historical foundations of Christian truth my belief would rest on a right basis and exert greater power.' Sometime later he says, 'I thought that if I believed in Christ at all I did not believe in the right way. This set me off on metaphysical adventures which yielded no discoveries of the kind I wanted. At last, how I cannot tell, all became clear. I ceased thinking of myself and of my faith and thought only of Christ, and then I wondered that I should have been perplexed for even a single hour.'

All his doubts and difficulties nevertheless didn't disappear after he became a student. When a student of 22, his letters refer rather darkly to inward trials. The language points to a period of doubt during which his hold on the truths of the faith was altogether relaxed. One passage implies that the fabric of his earlier faith fell away from him, leaving Christ as the one certainty.

Whatever else is lost [he says] the battle is virtually won if you come to believe that in Jesus of Nazareth God was manifest in the flesh and that it is your first duty to bow before him with repentance for your sin and trust in his mercy. I can promise you on the strength of the experience of one who once saw his early faith covered with a boundless sea of darkness, that if you once reach a firm belief in this fundamental fact, the water shall some day begin to ebb, and as the flood retires that solitary truth, the manifestation of God in the person of Christ, shall gradually be surrounded by province after province of divine revelation.

It is not surprising that with this sort of atmosphere, complaints began to arise about his preaching of the gospel. In 1851, a lady passed this on about his preaching in Spicer Street in St Albans. Dale said,

What I preach surely should be related to the fact that the gospel is being presented there at Spicer Street regularly. Does the minister leave the

congregation there in Spicer Street in such lamentable ignorance of the elementary principles of the gospel that every supply should make it his only duty to teach what are the first principles of the gospel of God? The fact is that, filled with unbounded alarm, people are getting into the habit of listening with nervous anxiety to every student to discover whether he has any leanings to Germanism. I think that at Spicer Street we students should be able to preach without the misery of being conscious that all the time the hearers are watching and waiting for some trace of heresy.

Now there must have been some suspicion there, and grounds for it. He then had an interview with John Angell James, the great pastor of Carrs Lane, not long before his call there. And Mr James had heard that Dale was in danger of drifting into scepticism. They dined alone together and talked long and Dale said, 'His counsels, I am sorry to say, failed to influence me'. And certainly that would be true of any of his Reformed emphases. But even James took every opportunity, after that, to gain Carrs Lane's attention for him. And eventually, of course, he was called as James' assistant. Now, sometime later, Dale took a first in philosophy in the University of London and the gold medal, and I think we've got to remember that that's his bent of mind. He battles with it, I think, right throughout his life. He is a philosopher coming to the Word of God.

The next point that I want to bring out is that the call to Carrs Lane came at a time 50 years after the church had had a meeting of a similar nature. Of the 400 on the church roll, only one had been present at a previous meeting when a pastor had been called. Women, of course, weren't allowed to take part in the call anyway, and 370 women members sent him an official invitation alongside the official invitation that went from the men. The ordination sermon was preached by the Rev. Samuel Martin of Westminster Chapel.

Some details then of his early years in Carrs Lane. He launched in 1855 into united open air evangelism with the local Baptists in Birmingham. Four nights a week he preached in the open air. 'I enjoy it amazingly', he said, and the local papers noticed that most of the men who attended these open-air meetings were not churchgoers. Up to 2,000 gathered around the cabinet-maker's cart which served as the platform for the speakers. The earnestness, the silence, the sense of awe of an unsheltered multitude caught the attention of a secular press.

When Dale got down to the duty of preaching, a Welsh minister commented to him, 'I hear that you are preaching doctrinal sermons at Carrs Lane. They will not stand it.' 'They will have to stand it', said Dale. Now the subjects of the sermons that he preached (some themes occurred continually during his first two years) were regeneration, justification, sanctification, the

personality of the Holy Spirit, the divinity of Christ, judgement to come, faith. In addition there are indications of a later emphasis in his very practical sermons on Christian duties: justice, kindness, industry, courage, contentment etc.

Then came controversy. Peter Seccombe deals with this in more detail—I am just going to indicate it. He began a series of expositions on Romans. Distress was caused. First he argued that Paul didn't teach that those who didn't hear the gospel were irretrievably lost. Secondly, he said: 'show me a single passage which tells us that Adam has transmitted to us a nature with moral evil and I bow at once. But I see no authority in the Bible.' Such feeling, he said, filled him with horror. And, of course, produced enormous reaction in the congregation. One must incidentally never feel that Dale had a low view of sin. He was appalled at sin, his preaching is continually getting at sin. He never ranted, but he burned against sin with an immense consuming burning. We must hold that in mind as well when we see what is being said here.

Now James interviewed him and said that he was satisfied that theological differences between the two didn't touch the substance or call on evangelical truth, and he went from one to another of those in the congregation who were disaffected and he sought to remove their suspicion. 'You leave the young man alone. He has the root of the matter in him. The young man must have his fling,' said the older pastor. But there are certain indications, perhaps, that he hadn't read the situation right. But then Dale became discouraged. He felt hopeless about any future use and, by 1856, he wrote this to John Angell James. But the reply has not been preserved and we don't really know what he said. But Dale from that time on never moved from Carrs Lane.

The bent of his mind comes out in terms of what he is already, in 1858, lecturing on in the Independent College. He lectures on English literature, logic, philosophy and homiletics. Some students commented that whereas other professors taught them how to work, Dale taught them how to think.

He is by now having a powerful influence by his speaking. Can I give you one example? At a meeting in the Birmingham Town Hall he came in late. The meeting was already going, and the sky had cleared since he'd gone into the meeting, and for a week it had been dark and stormy, but Dale, when he got up to speak, by way of illustration, referred to a comet which, he said, is now blazing with matchless splendour in the heavens. To his horror he saw the audience rise up at once and file out in long lines and within a few minutes the hall was almost empty. If I were speaking to a Welsh congregation and we heard that Wales was in the process of scoring 20 tries against England, probably the same thing would happen to this congregation here.

But then other things come out from the impact of Dale's speaking. During the early years of his ministry his stress had been upon Christian doctrine. It remained so, but he also, as he became more familiar with the needs and perils of his people, he saw how Christian morality needed to be stressed. The discovery of some of those listening to him resenting sermons on what they called 'weights and measures' made him even more determined to speak on these matters. There were some people excluded from the church fellowship because of business irregularities. That deepened his desire to speak on these matters and he forced it home to heart and conscience that faith and fraud are incompatible.

He set himself in the study of the workings of the shop, the office, and the factory, of business principles, to get to know the details of them, the methods of them, and he became amazingly thorough (this perhaps is a summary of his life)—he was enormously thorough in whatever he did, and he surprised people who'd consulted him as minister on his practical knowledge of affairs. He saw that the only force that would prevent corruption in society was the man who consecrates the hours of business as fully as the hours of prayer, and who carries on his secular calling as the servant of Christ.

Then (and all pastors will appreciate this) he began to show pressures. By the time he was 30 he was under very heavy pressure. He had no relaxations, no amusements, as a safeguard. Walking was his only exercise, and walking too often left the mind in the study while the body was out abroad. Collapse was serious when it came and he had to have three months break. I wonder whether part of that was the tension of the situation he was living in, the secular things he was trying to deal with in his thinking, the pressure of writing James' biography and his awareness that he was going to criticise James—this marvellous, tremendous man whom he had immense respect for. Many, many things were coming upon him and I think something in his nervous system broke—under, as well, the ordinary pressures of so large a church which Carrs Lane was.

In 1861, just after that 3 months' break, he completed a 600-page biography of John Angell James and he was strongly criticised for his account of James' book *Anxious Enquirer*. Now he criticised it because of the trouble he himself had had as a young person. He'd been distressed and confused, he said, by the tendency of the book (and I quote him) 'to divert the mind to the act of faith from the subject of faith'. He claimed it led to a tendency to lose sight of Christ through looking to ourselves to discern whether we *are* looking to Christ. *Anxious Enquirer* was of course the whole point of his writing and Peter Seccombe's comment is, 'the more anxious you became, the happier John



Angell James would be' (I just balance that comment of Dale's own experience regarding his reading of the book).

Some indications of the personal tensions he must have been going through as he battled for a foundation for his own faith in the conflicts of the 50s (which I've already indicated) come out in a strange private statement that he makes. He makes it on his fears of mental decline in 1862. He was assailed by shadowy fears that his powers were declining. He was habitually reticent about himself and so the statement is all the more remarkable in that he doesn't write a diary until he was 60. This is what he says—'Having for some time an apprehension that my intellectual powers may before long lose their clearness and vigour, and knowing that life is uncertain, I am anxious to place on record an outline of opinions which I have arrived at on certain great theological questions, by which for many years to come the church is likely to be agitated' (I don't know what that paper contained).

Now, church visitation also caused him problems. In the early years he saw that personal contact with his people was a necessity. He wasn't, we are told, a selfish man in any way but he was (and surely bookish men amongst us understand this) apt to be self-absorbed. He was apt to be engrossed by his own thoughts. He was apt to be abstracted and so heedless of those whom he met, and of those people around him, and indeed of what went on around him on certain occasions. He often gave offence unwittingly in this. His nature, he realised, was not sympathetic. He tells, for example, how he once visited a young widow in his early years of ministry, and for some minutes he sat there without being able to say a thing and then left still unable to say a thing. He was conscious of this defect in himself, and what you find about him is typical of his whole life. He set himself to overcome it, as a fault, and he recognised it in himself as something he had to defeat. He became sympathetic by sympathising, and later life saw a transformation in his capacity to comfort—and it was the result of self-mastery.

Another cause of tension arose from the habitual absence, as he says, of large numbers of members from Sunday evening services. He writes: 'This has contributed very much to the fears, which have often disturbed me, that my ministry was not adapted to the wants of a considerable number of persons in my congregation. What can be the reason, then, that so many of you are satisfied with attending your place of worship but once on the Lord's Day? Attendances at the Wednesday evening services occasion me not less concern. It is now about eight years since I was called to be your pastor.' He spoke about hours of despondency 'such as I have known only too often during the last three years, chilling the heart, enfeebling the brain'. This is the background of the difficulties and struggles that he was going through. This letter was written

to say that he was *staying* at Carrs Lane because what he had done was just turn down an invitation to be minister of a church in Melbourne, Australia.

Thomas Binney had just returned from Australia and had conveyed to Dale on return the call of a church there. Dale was immensely attracted to go to Australia. This is what he says:

I have long been impressed with the transcendent importance of securing to the great Australian colonies in the earliest years of their history a truly evangelical theology and a free ecclesiastical system. There is no country in the world where such principles have a better opportunity. Ministers labouring there for the next 50 years will have the glory of educating a great empire and in directing the currents of Christian life for a century or two to come.

Why did Dale stay? It was related to a controversy which, he says, fairly launched him into the public eye in a new way. This was what led to a widening of his ministry and I'm going to deal with that—first his widening ministry, and then its application to more political and municipal concerns.

In 1862, it marked the bicentenary of the great ejection. The Evangelical Alliance, that John Angell James had been instrumental in founding, insisted that this be regarded in its historic character alone and have no controversial application. The nonconformists rejected this outright. An Anglican evangelical vicar in Birmingham, though recognising the folly of 1662, regretted the bicentenary. 'It is hardly likely to further the causes of Christian unity.' Now the sensitivity is partly over the growing impetus in the disestablishment movement. 'Any reference to it,' he said, 'will destroy any friendly relations between the nonconformists and the Anglicans. Nonconformists will have to make their choice.' Dale did. His reply a fortnight later in the Town Hall was sensational. Many of the seats had to be removed. People stood shoulder to shoulder. Hundreds were turned away. The passage that caused most stir was this:

There are clergymen ministering in our own time who object, as the 2,000 objected to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. The truest fulfilment of this bicentenary would be for eight to ten thousand evangelical clergy (an interesting estimate of their number at the time) who object to these services in the Prayer Book, but who obtain their office and income by avowing the unfeigned assent to all the book contains, to come out, and to declare to the English people that they can no longer retain a position which they acquired by professing to approve what now, at least, they reject: that they can no longer use in the house of God, and at the most touching and solemn moment of human history, words which their hearts condemn.

More than once in the speech he had brought the audience to their feet in tumultuous excitement. Dale always drove home his nails so hard he split the

wood. A pamphlet of what he said ran right throughout the country. The Evangelical Alliance chairman, a knight of the realm, came down to persuade him to remove his more ardent passages and say something kind and generous that would remove the imputation on the clergy. Dale refused. There were certainly passages that gave grounds for complaint. There was fever pitch in the controversy. Some feel that, if it hadn't been for the Irish question and the rise of labour troubles diverting Gladstone and the Liberals during the next 20 years, the Church of England and disestablishment might have had a very different result.

The second point. In 1864 Dale gave the Annual Sermon to the London Missionary Society at Surrey Chapel. He succeeded John Angell James who had given it many, many years before. Like Angell James, he preached for two hours. Unlike John Angell James, he didn't have the privilege of being refreshed by oranges that were thrown into the pulpit! Dean Alford, in his article in the *Contemporary View*, regarded Dale's sermon as one of the noblest we have ever read.' Time and again men and women of eminence from other traditions regard Dale's contributions as eminently worthy of reading and they're most impressed by them. An amusing story emerged from that sermon. Dale had a swarthy, foreign-looking appearance, and they say that when he was abroad he had to persuade people he was English. An old lady who had always refused to support missions heard Dale at that meeting and at once became a contributor to missions. When asked, 'Why the change?' she said she had never thought much of missions before, but when she saw what the grace of God had done for that poor Hindu she could refuse to subscribe no longer.

Next point. A few months after the death of his little daughter from scarlet fever (and his son, who writes his biography, talks about the sight of a strong man breaking down and weeping at the graveside), Carrs Lane was under alteration for two months and Dale preached in the Birmingham Town Hall. Men and women who came there never darkened a church door. Many years later, Cardinal Newman, regretting his own and other people's failures to reach people, referred with thankfulness to the hold Dale had upon the town and the force with which he preached the gospel. These services gave a further example of how he was able to do that. This is Dale's final passage in the final sermon at the end of those two months.

Now once more, and for the last time, in the presence of him who became man for us sinners and for our salvation, who died, the just for the unjust, rose again to be the Prince and Saviour of men, I implore you not to neglect the critical duties which determine your present relation to God and your future eternal destiny. Many of you, I know, will never come to hear me preach again. This, this is my final message to you—God became man and died on the cross

that he might rescue you and me from sin and wretchedness. To be ungrateful for his love, to reject his mercy, is wilfully to put away from you a life of communion with God on this side of death, and immortality and holiness and glory in the world that is to come.

For some time during the mid-70s, Dale had been looking forward to a time of revival. From time to time, he says, the power of the Holy Spirit had been manifested in striking and startling form which had constituted new epochs in the experience of the Church. His articles in *The Congregationalist* in 1873 and 1874, show his confidence that the Spirit of God was going to do great things. When a movement of the Spirit came, it was not what he had expected. Mr Moody and Mr Sankey were not at all the kind of men for whom he had been looking! But gradually he came deeply to appreciate their work. Some of their methods were not wholly congenial to him but, after a few nights, he was amazed, he was delighted. Night after night, Bingley Hall was so crowded with 12,000 or so that the doors had to be closed. Incidentally, I came across a comment in a contemporary secular magazine which awarded, in all seriousness, a special plaudit to Moody for de-populating hell by up to 2 million souls.

Mr Moody's address was simple, direct, kindly, and hopeful. He had a touch of humour and a touch of pathos, lit up with a story or two that filled most eyes with tears. But there was nothing in it very remarkable—yet it told. Don't you and I look for that, brethren? It told. Here is Dale:

A prayer meeting with an address on a damp, cold January morning is hardly the kind of thing, let me say it frankly, that I would generally regard as attractive, but I enjoyed it heartily. It seemed one of the happiest meetings I had ever attended. There was warmth in it. There was sunlight in it. On Tuesday I told Mr Moody that the work was most plainly of God, for I could see no relation between him and what he had done. Mr Moody laughed cheerily and said he would be very sorry if ever it were otherwise.

The after meetings, Dale said, impressed him even more. Without them, the preaching, he felt, would not have accomplished one fifth of its results.

He saw what he always longed to see—men and women pressing into the Kingdom, not as solitary souls, but by scores and hundreds. Between 120 and 200 were admitted to Carrs Lane, he said, over that period, and 75%, on his own testimony, stood well. When Mr Moody was abused and misrepresented, Dale met scorn with scorn and he fought with his whole heart in the conflict. He even replied to the Archbishop of Canterbury's criticisms. He saw, of course, and he analysed, the dangers of sudden conversions, but he also pointed out that there was a still greater danger in delay. 'Surely,' said Dale, 'there are many of us to whom the gift of doing very much in bringing men to

God for the first time has not come. We may have the power of helping them when they have found him, but our work needs complimenting. On the other hand, I think there are those who have the power of awakening men, who could do very little with them when they are awake. This work needs complimenting too.'

Another way his ministry widened was in his writings. He produced 18 large books and hundreds of articles. In 1875, he began to deliver his lectures in London on the atonement. And when he came to give them at Carrs Lane the building was crowded from end to end for three months. He had been profoundly stirred in his own heart by the Moody mission and the discourses, we are told, had an intensity and an emotion about them that is entirely missing in the reading of them as lectures. One letter of interest, again from Cardinal John Henry Newman: 'I rejoice,' said Newman, 'with my whole heart to see so important a defence of the cardinal doctrine of our Lord's atonement and such a straightforward recognition of his deity in this time and place.'

Can I just make one or two further comments relative to Moody, and one or two other things, before I move on to the practical, political, and municipal things.

The 400th anniversary of Luther's birth, and the second visit of Moody in 1883-84, helped to show how deeply Dale grasped the link between the New Testament doctrine of atonement, justification by faith, and the believer's joy. He wrote:

Has it ever occurred to you that justification by faith has lost its great place amongst us? Depend upon it, Luther was right in insisting on its supreme importance. It lies in immediate and vital contact with the atonement. I should like to tell you of something that was much in my thoughts during the recent Luther celebrations. You remember the kind of criticism to which Mr Moody was subjected nine years ago? People said that he did not preach repentance, he taught men that they were saved by believing, and so forth. During his present visit, no such criticism has been general. He's insisted very much on repentance and, on it, in the sense in which the word is now used by evangelical as well as other divines—as though it were doing a penance, a self-torture, a putting-on of spiritual hair shirts instead of a *metanoia*. Now observe the effect of this. He was just as earnest (i.e. Moody) as before. People were as deeply moved. Crowds went into the enquiry room. But the results, as far as I can learn, have been inconsiderable. I have seen none of the shining faces that used to come to me. From first to last, in 1875, I received about 200 converts. As yet, I have not received a dozen. In 1875, Moody preached in a manner which produced the effect produced by Luther. And received similar criticism. Why? He exulted in the free grace of God. His grace was to lead men to repentance, to a complete change in life. His joy was contagious. Men leapt

out of darkness into light and lived the Christian life afterwards. But 'do penance' preaching has had no such results. I wrote to Moody about it and he replied and said it had set him thinking and he would come and talk to me about it.

An interesting comment! A similar comment that he makes when he read Pusey's life. 'I have just finished the volumes of Pusey's life. The absence of joy in him was only the inevitable effect of his conception of God's method of saving men. In parting with the Lutheran truth concerning justification by faith, he parts with the springs of gladness.'

Now, for a moment, let's follow Dale across the Atlantic. In 1877, he received an invitation he couldn't decline. The theological faculty of the University of Yale requested lectures on preaching. It had been filled by illustrious Americans before then. Dale was the first Englishman ever to be invited. Congregationalism was the established religion in Connecticut even until as late as 1818 and Dale found it odd to find a Congregational chapel described as the parish church. He was asked to write to Gladstone on their behalf because he knew Gladstone. He did so, but Gladstone was too busy. Then he wrote to persuade Spurgeon. Spurgeon's comment is typical: 'I sit on my own gate and whistle my own tunes and am quite content.' After a series, then, in America, he was urged there, before he left the States, to speak on English politics. (This is my link point.) After two hours—he spoke from three or four small pages of notes—the applause lasted for nearly ten minutes.

The next main section—political and municipal interests. It's time to examine what later became known as the nonconformist conscience, and see it at work in Dale; his huge energies as he devoted them to his sphere.

He seemed to have passed his crisis of introversion and exhaustion etc., and for 3 years his life was an enormous cascade of energy in all sorts of spheres. His interests had begun early in political spheres. The MP for Birmingham was no less a figure than John Bright. When on the way to Heidelberg to learn German in 1862, Dale visited the House of Commons. John Bright took him, not to the ordinary gallery or to the Speaker's gallery, but to the bar of the House, the place where the House of Lords sit when they come. This, at the age of 33. In the course of the evening he heard Gladstone. 'He was infinitely fluent,' Dale says, 'with a pleasant tenor voice. Speaks with faultless accuracy and is wonderfully fertile in his thoughts. But I don't feel that he could impress me as John Bright sometimes does.' He heard Sir Robert Peel: 'Certainly vastly amusing, evidently a great pet in the house, and he amuses as the gambols of a playful mastiff might amuse anyone not afraid of him. He can't speak a sentence of tolerable English but there is a naiveté about him and a rough boyish wit that is evidently a delight to the House.'

Early in 1864, John Bright visited Birmingham and he and Dale shared the platform. Now this highlights and focuses the stress I wish to bring. Dale dealt almost wholly with one theme—the responsibilities of Christian citizenship. Of all secular affairs, politics, rightly considered, are amongst the most unworldly and, as such, a man devoted to political life ought to be seeking on personal and private good. The true political spirit is the mind that was in Christ Jesus, who looked not unto his own things but also on the things of others. He regarded it as a positive duty of the religious man to participate in political affairs. He was heartily in sympathy with the Liberal party and he was prepared to see collective responsibility replace individual enterprise. In the conflict over the Reform Bill in 1867, the leaders of the Liberal party in Birmingham organised a series of meetings to deal with questions which would most affect the new electors. The new theme ‘we must educate our masters’ began to emerge, and Dale was asked to deliver the first lecture. He discussed the politics of the future, what aims and motives the new franchise should possess.

Then came the Education Bill of 1870. Dale lived in the thick of it for two or three years. He was anxious to secure for nonconformists their due share in the control of higher education. GR Trevelyan says the main reason why English education lagged behind in late Victorian days was that no government could conceive a means of setting up a national system at the public expense that would not have given either the bitterest offence to Dissenters, or the bitterest offence to the Established Church. Sectarian differences were a heavy brake on progress.

Dale was a determined representative of the nonconformist interests. He was on the Royal Commission as the nonconformist representative for the working of the Education Act, involving enormous work: twice a week for 18 months. Let me give you his viewpoint briefly. He attached little value to undenominational religion where the central truths were ignored or diluted.

No concordat [he said] can be satisfactory with Unitarians. Unless our Lord is spoken of with the reverence which his deity should inspire, to talk to children about his earthly history must discourage faith rather than contribute to it. No concordat is possible with Roman Catholics: no concordat is possible between nonconformist and the High Church party. My conclusion is therefore—let the school be secular. Let the churches find how to draw the children to Christ. I have great faith in Sunday Schools. Out of 800/900 members in Carrs Lane, at least 400 were led to Christ through the Sunday School.

So active was Dale that some of his friends argued that he could stand for Parliament but he wouldn't listen—then or ever. The House of Commons, he felt, was incompatible with the pastorate, and it would have been a step down

from the pulpit. But the controversy over education didn't leave Dale where it found him. 'You see what a power you are', said one of the Commissioners. And John Bright, when he was sharing a platform with Dale, said, 'I can never listen to RW Dale without thinking of the church militant. There is an ardent conviction about him, whether he's preaching the gospel or whether he is declaring elements of his convictions on the political sphere.'

Let's move now to his concept of civic righteousness. When, at the age of 41, he was called to the pastorate of a church in London, the City of Birmingham united to put a restraint on him. There was an official resolution: 'All who cared for the intellectual, moral, and political life of Birmingham share our apprehension.' An effort, described by the Birmingham Post as without example, was made, and a letter signed by all the leading men of the city addressed to him, urging him on public grounds to remain. Especially did they ask Dale to retain his public interest. Somebody said, 'Men of a certain kind, like Cardinal Newman, in retirement, see angels. Others, like Martin Luther, when they're withdrawn from the turmoil and the strife of life, see devils. We believe that you are the latter kind.' Now, his church also urged him to stay, you'll be glad to note! He replied, 'I have earnestly endeavoured, with what strength has been given me, to illustrate the love and glory of God as revealed to us in Christ, and to minister to your spiritual strength and joy. I have never shrunk from any truth from fear it might be unwelcome to you. You have told me what I desire to be as minister, rather than what I am. There is so wide a gulf between my idea of what a minister of Christ ought to be, and my actual work, that your affectionate loyalty gives me pain as well as pleasure.'

He stayed, and as he stayed, he got even more involved in municipal life. People would say to him, 'there are no politics in heaven'. 'In heaven,' he said, 'there is no poverty, no crime, which unjust laws help to create.' He refused to accept that religious devotion could excuse neglect of public duty. God's commandments cover the whole of our life and when a Catholic said to him: 'When, Mr Dale, are you going to look after your soul?' he replied, 'I have given my soul to Christ to look after.'

He threw himself utterly into town affairs. When he pulled off his coat with vigour while getting up to speak in the Town Hall it was a sure sign of what was coming. If the meeting was tempestuous, he ploughed along, says his biographer, through the storm with the steady rush of an Atlantic liner shouldering its way through blustering seas. He would fight night after night, formidable as an antagonist, major reconstructions, public health, free libraries, art galleries, slums. Dale could speak on them all with a full and exact knowledge. There was nowhere in the public works, says the Birmingham Post,



that his vigorous personality was not manifested in. There was hardly any part of our public life which he did not touch and, in touching, strengthen, brighten, and elevate. He said in his Yale lectures: 'For men to claim the right to neglect their duties to the state, on the ground of their piety, while they insist on the state protecting their homes, their property and protecting from disturbance even their religious meetings in which their exquisitely delicate and valetudinarian spirituality is developed, is gross unrighteousness.' A remarkable statement.

This dictum, someone has said, expresses the rule of his public life. If it was clearly for the public good, he felt it was his Christian duty so to support it. That would be a topic of discussion, wouldn't it. But that was very much of his conviction at this time in his life.

In his passion for civic righteousness, he became great friends, of course, with significant national figures. He was a great friend of Joseph Chamberlain. When Joseph Chamberlain was elected, a London newspaper said this: 'Better men have been passed over simply because Mr RW Dale of Birmingham has nominated Mr Chamberlain for Parliament, and the will of Mr Dale is the will of Birmingham.' Chamberlain responded: 'I have seen a statement that I go to Parliament as the representative of Mr Dale. Well, if that be so, there is not a member of the House of Commons who will have a better, livelier, wiser, or nobler constituency. But you will at least remember this, that if Mr Dale has any influence over the 50,000 electors of Birmingham, he owes it to his devotion to their highest interest. He owes it to his eloquent and outspoken advocacy of all that is good and great.'

The thing that he was most involved in, in terms of his correspondence with Gladstone, was over the Home Rule Bill. He got very involved in the Irish question. There are many things we could learn for the contemporary situation in the way he approached that. One comment: Gladstone wrote to him, thanking him 'for the masterly manner in which you have confronted a most difficult situation. It is only by a temper like yours, conjoined with ability, which in such a case cannot by itself suffice, whatever its amount, that the Irish question can be satisfactorily dealt with.' In his reply to Gladstone, Dale, unable to keep out the faith from secular affairs, finished his letter: 'I am a Puritan, but I understand what Easter is to a Church-man. I trust it has come to you, Mr Gladstone, with great joy and glory.'

I want to bring some of his reflections and regrets and priorities in his closing years. If Dale was an unworldly man of the world, how did he continue as a spiritual, Biblical man in the pulpit? And secondly, what were his own feelings, later on in life, about the way he had divided out his time between these two spheres?

In 1891, when he was 61, he took a cottage in North Wales and there he would read his Bible, book after book, with minute care noting the truths it had seemed to him he had dwelt too lightly upon. He also reviewed the spirit and method of his preaching. Preaching, he now felt, should be his chief, perhaps his sole, work. His failure to reach men as he had seen Moody reach them, and to move them as he longed to do, weighed upon him. I quote:

I have been thinking much about my preaching. It has a fatal defect. I don't think I should state the exact truth if I said I was not anxious for the conversion of individual men, and cared only for the setting forth of the truth. But I fear that the truth occupies too large a place in my thought, and that I have been too much occupied with the divine instrument for effecting the ends of the ministry, and too little with the actual persons to be restored to God. This comes from a moral and spiritual condition which involves serious guilt. God forgive me. It is even now possible by divine grace for this sin to disappear. It is want of conformity in me to the mind of Christ, a hardness of heart which must be subdued and melted by the grace and truth of God, if the remaining years will have a different character from those that have gone before.

And then a little later:

Is it too early to record the hope that God has given to me a new element of power in my preaching? The word which has often been used to denote the excellence of my preaching really suggested the qualities in which it has been defective. 'Stateliness', that is not the characteristic of effective preaching. It suggests a whole set of intellectual and spiritual elements that account for failure. I think that in the sermons of the last two Sundays, the 'stateliness' has disappeared, and there has been more of a brotherly access to the people. I aimed at more freedom—God gave it to me. I believe that there was a new sense of the presence and power of God.

At the same time as he was thinking in this way, Dale was concerned in preparing his lectures 'The Living Christ and the Four Gospels'. For 18 months this principle of the living Christ and faith in him had filled his thinking. In the summer of 1891, the International Congress of Congregational Churches met in Britain and Dale was elected president. But he was knocked down by influenza. He had a heart condition, he was brought close to death. 'I was too weak to find direct consolation in the eternal songs of joy. God was a kind of background to everything, hardly discerned, but he was there. When I became a little stronger, the sense of justification has given me great bliss. The great words "as far as the east is from the west, so far hast thou removed my transgressions from me", gave me more than peace. At times they filled me with light ... Had great peace last night in a vivid sense that

redemption began on Christ's side, not mine. That my safety was the fulfilment of his thought.'

Then (when he returned to Carrs Lane) 'I returned to you from the gates of death,' he said, 'I entreat you to ask God that neither you nor I may have reason to regret that, when I'd come so near the happy shores and was just coming into the harbour, I was brought back to the stormy seas of this present life. Entreat God that my ministry among you may be charged with more of his Spirit and truth, and may to a far greater extent than in past years come to the rescue from sin and eternal death of those who as yet know him not.'

But he was ill again, and, writing to his church, says: 'How wonderful the Gospel of Christ is! After 40 years I am learning new truths all the time. I trust that when I return I will have a time of great spiritual revival. Pray for it. Expect it.'

His letters show the yearning in his heart to convey the gospel of the grace of God. He says in a letter to his assistant: 'Forsyth said a good thing the other day. He said the time had come to bring back the word "grace" into our preaching. Both word and thing have too long disappeared.' And then to Mrs Richard Davis of Anglesey, 'The trouble is, the impressions of God's transcendent grace, which have come to me at times during the past few months, are not to be translated into words. I feel like a dumb man, wanting to speak and knowing that I cannot. If God would but touch my lips!'

Then, in the last three years, George Barber, his assistant, speaks of their prayer times together. 'How earnestly he would pray that God would save the unsaved. It was in these Monday prayer times that he would make me almost oppressed with a burden to save sinners. No one could have listened to such prayers and not have felt that to save men was the height of all Dr Dale's life and work.' A member of the congregation, at the close of an hour's sermon, which he preached amidst a stillness most painful, with nothing heard in the stillness of the pauses but the ticking of a clock—a sermon on the awfulness of the sinful life, and the glory in Christ. This person said: 'If Dr Dale continues to preach like that I shall not come and hear him. I cannot stand it. It goes through me.' Dale's comment was: 'Ah yes, but it was more awful to me. It's hard to preach like that, but it must be done.' The main memory of his assistant was the impressions he felt at Dale's family prayers. 'Night after night have I made an excuse to call on that I might stay to family worship. It was as though we were in the presence of the burning bush, and often as we rose from our knees we saw a new light shining in each other's faces.'

Then I want to say one brief thing before the final point about his own thinking about his political and municipal involvement. Mingled with the re-inflamed longing for the salvation of men, there was a haunting feeling that he

had given too much attention to his political and social affairs. Writing to the acting Governor of Southern Australia in the 1890s—‘It is a cowardly thing perhaps, but I am glad to be wholly out of politics. As the shadows lengthen, I am more disposed than in the past years to think that my vocation lies in the abstention from it. It is late to have made the discovery, but the ghost came to me some years ago when I was examining Puritanism. There is something startling in the sudden extinction of the fires that burnt during the Commonwealth. Twenty years after Cromwell, the first vigour and zeal were almost gone. Twenty years still, they had quite vanished. The question assailed me, whether the explanation did not lie, in part, in the premature attempt to apply to the political order the laws of a diviner kingdom, and to do it by direct political action.’

But then more poignantly in 1894, ‘I had an occasion to look at *The Eclectic* for the year I began to write. I was puzzled by a paragraph in which I deprecated the waste of strength by inter-meddling with politics. It seemed odd that, at the beginning of my ministry, I should have seen, apparently with such clarity, the truth that has come to me as if it were quite fresh and unfamiliar, at the close of it. It is a clear sense of seeing the better path but choosing the worst. Alas, alas!’

It’s also significant that, in 1892, when he was 63 years old, the Free Church Council began to be formed, and, of course, the desire of the Free Church Council was to be a kind of pressure group on moral, political, and social things. Dale stood against it from the first. His objections? ‘The formation of a council,’ he said, ‘to enable nonconformists to make concerted actions bearing on the social or moral welfare of the people, I oppose.’ He felt that they had come to the parting of the ways in regard to the methods by which Christians should attempt to regenerate the social life of a nation.

He was always convinced that the Church was a spiritual institution, and social and political reforms were not the object of the Church’s activity. It must not be degraded, he said, into a political organisation. ‘I look back some 20 years. I remember a successful movement for reform in Birmingham. The individual men who took part in that movement had learned the principles, and derived their spirit, then largely from the nonconformist churches in the town. I do not believe, however, that if the nonconformist churches of Birmingham had been organised to secure such results in municipal reform their efforts would have been in any way effective, as the efforts of their individual members were as Christian citizens in the Community.’ That is the theme that he underlines and which we need, if at all, to apply. ‘I have the gravest fears that the churches will be changed into political and municipal caucuses.’ He never therefore identified with the Free Church Council at all.

In the end, thinking of the nonconformist conscience, the Victorian nonconformist is strong, in that he had his greatest and most ennobling influence on the English people, in that he was an honest, humble, believing man or woman. He loved justice, he treasured mercy, he was not ashamed to own his God. And on that ground alone surely we have ground for giving God thanks for the valiant endeavour of RW Dale.

His stress was experience. There is little doubt about that. One sees that he preached marvellously and passionately the great doctrines of salvation and, yet, in the pressure of the criticism of the time, he was working not, trying to seek a foundation for authority. The authority he found was, of course, in the fact of the living Christ and the way that Christ meets the individual. We see him defective in that.

Can I just close on that famous experience that seemed to focus all this in his own personal life. We all know surely the story of him writing an Easter sermon and, when he was half-way through, the thought of the risen Lord broke in upon him as it had never done before. I quote him:

Christ is alive, I said to myself. Then I paused—alive? Then I paused again—alive! Can that really be true? Living as really as I myself am? I got up and walked about. I repeated, 'Christ is living—Christ is living'. At first, it seemed strange and hardly true. But at last it came upon me as a burst of sudden glory. Yes, Christ is living! It was for me a new discovery. I thought that all along I had believed it. But not until that moment did I feel sure about it. And then I said, 'My people shall know it. I shall preach about it again and again until they believe it as I believe it now.'

Amen! And the Lord be with you.

# John Robinson, 1575–1625

## Edward Guest

As I sat down to prepare this study in its final form, I felt like a man who had been presented with a jig-saw of 3,000 pieces, given half-an-hour to complete it, and told he must fit it onto a tea-tray. I hope I do not knock too many pieces out of shape in trying to present a picture of John Robinson this morning.

I want to look, first, at the man, then at some of his writings, and finally at his message.

## The Man

A man of uncommon gifts of intellect as well as rare virtues of character, a learned theologian and an accomplished writer.<sup>1</sup>

He, more than any other, is to be considered the founder of Independency as a developed and organised system.<sup>2</sup>

Though a vigorous controversialist, he was a noble and commanding figure, of wide outlook and lofty and benign nature.<sup>3</sup>

He organised a congregation that for harmony and piety would have been an honour to any branch of the Catholic Church, and proved in the end probably the most famous single congregation that Christendom has known since the apostles went to their rest.<sup>4</sup>

None of these testimonies to John Robinson was written by a Congregationalist. Indeed, in 1645, Robert Baylie, one of the most violent opponents of the Brownists and Independents described him as

a man of excellent qualities and the most learned, refined and level-headed mind that ever seceded from the Church of England.<sup>5</sup>

What then do we know of him? Often a man's childhood and upbringing is a guide to his character but this is what the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church has in its entry on John Robinson:

Very little is known about his early life. He was a native of Lincolnshire or Nottinghamshire, probably studied at Cambridge, was ordained in the Church of England, and seems to have held a curacy at Norwich.

It does give his date of birth as 1575, but even that I have found in one source as 1578, and in another as about 1576.

He probably went to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge in about 1592. It was a time of great religious excitement, with several zealous Puritan clergymen

preaching there, and causing great offence to the University authorities. Robinson excelled in theological study and became a fellow of the college in 1597.

On 15 February 1604, he married Bridget White and this was the probable cause of his leaving university. He went to a parish in Norfolk but it is doubtful whether he was fully appointed to a living. He had strong and lasting scruples concerning ceremonies and vestments and because he omitted or modified them he was suspended by his bishop from clerical duties. He went to Norwich and gathered a congregation of Puritan worshippers, many of whom being fined or imprisoned for resorting to him and praying with him.

Although he was suspended, he still wanted to stay in the Established Church. He tried to become chaplain to an institution so that perhaps in its private chapel he might be less tied to conformity. He applied for a post at the Great Hospital in Norwich but without success. Perhaps the authorities still remembered that, in 1580, a Robert Harrison had been appointed to a hospital in Norwich, that a certain Robert Browne (!) had joined him and that, together, they had gathered a church. Robinson's attackers were later to say that it was his disappointment and pique at not being appointed to this post that led him to separate from the Church of England but this is to do him grave injustice. In fact, the reason he had not separated earlier was the high regard he had for Evangelical Puritan brethren who seemed content to stay within the Establishment. In his *Justification of Separation* (1610) he was to write:

I do indeed confess, to the glory of God and my own shame, that a long time before I entered this way [of separation] I took some taste of the truth in it by some treatises' published in justification of it, which, the Lord knoweth, were sweet as honey to my mouth: and the very principal thing which, for the time, quenched all further appetite in me, was the over-valuation which I made of the learning and holiness of these and the like persons [Evangelical Puritans] blushing in myself to have a thought of pressing one hair-breadth before them in this thing, behind whom I knew myself to come so many miles behind in all other things. Yea, and even of late times, when I had entered into a more serious consideration of these things, and, according to the measure of the grace received, searched the Scriptures whether they were so or not, and by searching found much light of truth, yet was the same so dimmed and overclouded with the contradictions of these men, and others of the like note, that, had not the truth been in my heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, (Jeremiah 20:9) I had never broken those bonds of flesh and blood, wherein I was so straitly tied, but had suffered the light of God to have been put out in mine own unthankful heart by other men's darkness.<sup>6</sup>

I quoted this in full at this point because it gives many an indication of the humble and spiritual qualities of the subject of this study.

From 1593 to 1603, the year Queen Elizabeth died, there had been a lessening of signs of life among the Puritans and Brownists. The defeat of the Armada in 1588 had caused a rally of popular support to the Queen and the national church (a sort of Falklands effect!) and also the Puritans were expecting James I from Scotland (James VI) to develop the Church along more Presbyterian lines.

However, in 1604 Richard Bancroft, one of the chief instruments in the persecution of Puritans, became Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1604, under James I, there was held the Hampton Court Conference, to suppress nonconformists of every name, and especially the Separatists, who had become extremely obnoxious to the ecclesiastical authorities. And in 1604 John Robinson arrived at Scrooby. He had been born nearby and also married a wife who came from a nearby village. The fellowship at the Manor of Scrooby, led by William Brewster, had already covenanted as a church 'with the Lord and with each other, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all his ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatever it should cost them'. William Brewster was presiding elder, Richard Clyfton was pastor, and John Robinson became their teacher.

Their numbers increased and they became two fellowships, each with their own pastor. When both congregations removed to Amsterdam, John Robinson continued as pastor of the remnant that stayed behind at Scrooby.

There being no let-up in persecution, the remainder of the church, with John Robinson, decided to join their brethren in Holland. This in itself was not easy, for the authorities harassed them at every turn. One party hired a boat but the master betrayed them and they were robbed and imprisoned. In another attempt, they hired a Dutch boat to pick them up in the banks of the Humber near Grimsby (now the site of Immingham Dock). Their small boats got stuck in the mud. The next tide released them but only the first boat, containing some of the men, reached the Dutch vessel before the Captain saw troops coming to capture the party. He immediately set sail, leaving wives and children, and some of the other men with John Robinson. The magistrates harried them to and fro but, eventually, not knowing what to do with so many people, released them. Eventually they made their journey and John Robinson arrived in Holland in 1608.

There are those who talk about the New Testament church as if it were a perfect pattern of Christian fellowship. Sadly, the Book of Acts and the letters of the Apostle Paul show that this was not so. They had their failures and their problems of human relationships. So, also, did the folk who had fled from England to Holland. Like the church earlier organised at Middleburg by Robert Browne, the church at Amsterdam suffered from serious trouble. They



had had division over baptism from John Smyth, formerly Robinson's neighbour and colleague at Gainsborough. Francis Johnson, the pastor, and Henry Ainsworth, the teacher, differed on the powers of elders to excommunicate. Matters were not helped by members' complaints about Mrs Johnson. She possessed private means and apparently wore rather fashionable hats. She was said to have whalebone in her stays and cork soles in her shoes, and was given to sleeping on Sunday mornings until 9 o'clock. When John Robinson and his party arrived in 1608 they found even more serious allegations of immorality were going around the church and the city and, within a year, they had decided to move on.

The Dutch town of Leiden contains this entry in the Municipal Archives:

To the Honourable Burgomasters and Court of the City of Leiden. With due respect and submissiveness, John Robinson, Minister of God's Holy Word, together with some of the congregation of the Christian Reformed religion, born in the Kingdom of Great Britain, and numbering about a hundred people, men as well as women, present this petition for permission to come and settle in this town, by the first day of next May, and to have the freedom of the town to earn their living with their various trades, without being a burden to any one. Therefore the petitioners apply to your Honours earnestly praying that your Honours would grant them free and liberal consent to betake themselves as aforesaid.

In the margin is the resolution:

The Court making a disposition of this present request, declare that they do not refuse honest persons free and liberal entrance to come into this town and to settle there, provided they will behave themselves honourably and submit to all laws and regulations of this town and that therefore the coming of the petitioners will be welcome to them.

Thus done in their session at the town hall this 12th February 1609.<sup>7</sup>

Life was not easy. The majority of them had been farmers in their native land but now, in order to support themselves, they had to master very different trades, especially in the textile industry. The marriage register of Leiden gave their occupations as blacksmith, hatter, woolcomber, twiner, tailor, printer, mason, weaver and glover, among others (a preparation in the Lord's providence for their future life in America). They settled well into their new society and the Leiden Magistrate was later to testify:

These English people have now lived amongst us these twelve years and never any complaint or accusation has been brought against any of them.<sup>8</sup>

The church now called John Robinson to be pastor and ordained him. The fact that he accepted ordination at this time is taken by some to prove that he had never been properly ordained in the Church of England. But this is not

necessarily so. His own views on ordination were very clear. He was ordained, he wrote, 'publicly, upon the solemn call of the church in which I serve, both in respect of the ordainers and the ordained'. He constantly insisted that ordination is a church act, and for a specific church, and cannot be performed scripturally by any other parties called in to officiate on the occasion.<sup>9</sup>

There is a testimony to the nature of the Leiden church in *The Pilgrim Fathers of New England*, by John Brown:

Edward Winslow, an able and educated young English gentleman from Droitwich, being on his travels, happened to come to Leyden in 1617, and was so struck with the Christian life of this brotherhood that he cast in his lot with them, and not only became a member of the fellowship, but went with them to New England, his name standing third amongst those who signed the compact on board the Mayflower.

Writing a quarter of a century later he says:

I persuade myself never people upon earth lived more lovingly together and parted more sweetly than the Church at Leyden did: parting not rashly in a distracted humour, but upon joint and serious deliberation, often seeking the mind of God by fasting and prayer, whose gracious presence was not only found with us, but his blessing upon us from that time until now.<sup>10</sup>

Robinson's scholarly ability showed itself again in Leiden and he began to attend lectures at the University under the moderate Calvinist, Johannes Polyander and also those of the Arminian, Simon Episcopius. He was admitted a member on 5 September 1615, quite an achievement for a foreigner and one, moreover, so obnoxious to the English hierarchy at home. Among the privileges he obtained from his membership was an entitlement to receive, free of town and state duties, half a tun of beer every month and about ten gallons of wine every three months.

He was so highly thought of that, when a public debate was arranged on the Calvinistic and Arminian controversy raging at that time, Robinson was persuaded to be the advocate and champion of the Calvinist position. He did this reluctantly, not so much from a humble sense of his own incompetence, but more likely from a realisation that little good would come out of it. Those fears were justified some seven years later by the harsh proceedings and consequences of the Synod of Dort when Robinson's opponent in the debate and his fellow Arminians were condemned and banished.

Although thankful for the toleration then enjoyed in Holland, the church at Leiden were still British and did not wish to become submerged in an alien background. Few were joining them, young men were leaving home or intermarrying with Dutch families. They were concerned at the desecration of the Sabbath and the general looseness of morals around them. At the same time,

they were experiencing the spiritual restraints of not being able to evangelise freely nor to spread their church principles to others. Both language and the Dutch authorities were barriers to this.

So their eyes were raised to the new settlements that had been formed under British auspices on the American coast. Guyana, West Indies, Virginia were all possibilities. Virginia was agreed as preferable, if only they could establish a new colony by themselves and run it on their own principles. Messengers went to England to seek the king's permission but this was greatly delayed. Who wanted settlers in opposition to the English Church? But William Brewster had only been a tenant at Scrooby and his Landlord, Sir Edwin Sandys, was appealed to for help. Promising him their prayers, which they recognised it was all (!) they could offer in return, John Robinson and William Brewster wrote to him from Leiden on 15 December 1617. Part of their letter well reveals the spirit and courage of these men.

We verily believe and trust the Lord is with us, unto whom and whose service we have given ourselves in many trials, and that he will graciously prosper our endeavours according to the simplicity of our hearts therein.

We are well weaned from the delicate milk of our mother country, and inured to the difficulties of a strange and hard land, which yet, in great part, we have by patience overcome.

The people are, for the body of them, industrious and frugal, we think we may safely say, as any company of the people in the world.

We are knit together as a body in a more strict and sacred bond and covenant of the Lord, of the violation whereof we make great conscience: and by virtue whereof we do hold ourselves straitly tied to all care of each other's good, and of the whole by every, and so mutual and, lastly, it is not with us as with other men, whom small things can discourage, or small discontentments cause to wish themselves at home again. We know our entertainment in England and Holland. We shall much prejudice both our arts and means by removal: where, if we should be driven to return, we should not hope to recover our present helps and comforts, neither indeed look ever to attain the like in any other place during our lives, which are now drawing towards their periods.<sup>11</sup>

By the good providence of God, and in answer to fervent and importunate prayer, permission to settle in Virginia, was, at last, obtained, with an assurance that, though no formal document was issued, they would not be disturbed or injured on account of their peculiar religious opinions and practices. The brethren held a day of humiliation, thanksgiving and prayer to seek Divine direction in the present position. John Robinson preached on 1 Samuel 23:3,4. 'And David's men said unto him, "Behold, we be afraid here in Judah: how

much more then if we come to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?" Then David inquired of the Lord yet again. And the Lord answered him and said, "Arise, go down to Keilah: for I will deliver the Philistines into thine hand".'

Now came the question of who should go first and prepare the way for the remainder. The pastor agreed that, if the majority went first, he would accompany them but, in the event, only a minority volunteered for the first adventure and they were to be accompanied by their elder, William Brewster. He would take ministerial oversight until Mr Robinson or some other pastor from England should arrive.

The story of John Robinson is now overtaken by the story of the Pilgrim Fathers and that is not the subject of this lecture. When the time came for the departure of the Speedwell from Delft Haven, the port of Leiden, the whole congregation met for humiliation and prayer on 21 July 1620. Deeply moved, their pastor preached from Ezra 8:21,22. 'Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen, to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him".'

So he sent them forth. He wrote letters to them, obviously longing to be able to join them. But it was not to be. The problems of settlement were great and only hardly overcome. Five years after the departure of the Pilgrims, John Robinson died at the age of 50, on 1 March 1625. He was buried at Leiden in St Peter's Church. One of his church members, Roger White, wrote to tell the church in Virginia the news.

I know not whether ever this will come to your hands, or miscarry, as other of my letters have done: yet in regard of the Lord's dealings with us here, I had a great desire to write unto you, knowing your desire to bear a part with us, both in our joys and sorrows, as we do with you.

These, therefore, are to give you to understand that it hath pleased the Lord to take out of this vale of tears, your and our loving and faithful pastor, and my dear and reverend brother, Mr John Robinson, who was sick some eight days: yet the next day, being the Lord's day, he taught us twice, and the week after, grew every day weaker than other, yet felt no pain, but weakness, all the time of his sickness. The physic he took wrought kindly, in man's judgement, yet he grew every day weaker than other, feeling little or no pain, yet sensible to the very last. He fell sick the 22nd February, and departed this life on the first day of March. He had a continual inward ague, but I thank the Lord, was free of the plague, so that all his friends could come freely to him: and if either

prayers, tears, or means would have saved his life, he had not gone home. But he having faithfully finished his course, and performed his work, which the Lord had appointed him here to perform, he now rests with the Lord in eternal happiness. Now for ourselves, here left, (I mean the whole church) we still, by the mercy of God, continue and hold close together in peace and quietness, and so I hope we shall do, though we be very weak: wishing (if such were the will of God) that you and we were again together in one, either there or here: but seeing it is the will of the Lord, thus to dispose of things, we must labour with patience to rest contented, till it please the Lord otherwise to dispose of things.<sup>12</sup>

The confusion concerning the early life of John Robinson seems to have been repeated over the subsequent movements of his wife and family. The Leiden tourist handbook states that his widow ‘stayed on in the old house, where she was living in 1643 when she made her will before the Notary J. Van Merwen on 28 October. From the poll tax register in 1622 it appears they then had six children. John, Bridget, Isaac, Mercy, Fear and James. A seventh, Anna, was born after 1622. After his death, the handbook continues, the family became partially members of the Netherlands Reformed Church to which their friends belonged.<sup>13</sup> However, a completely different story is given in *The Works of John Robinson*, by Robert Aston. Here, in a paper prepared by Dr William Allen, Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Member of the American Antiquities Society, etc., etc., it is stated:

It was four or five years after the death of Mr Robinson, before provision could be made for the removal of his wife and children to Plymouth. In 1629, thirty five families were transported from Leyden to New England at the heavy expense of five hundred pounds, paid by the brethren in the colony, another company came over the next year at still greater expense—‘a rare example of brotherly love and Christian care in performing their promise to their brethren, even beyond their power.’ In one of these companies were the wife and children of Mr Robinson.<sup>14</sup>

### **His Writings (and now my jig-saw puzzle becomes impossible!)**

What can be said in small compass about his writings? They do not lend themselves to lengthy quotations. It is the long involved sentences of one well-versed in Latin that are the problem.

In 1619, he wrote an Apology to the Dutch Reformed Church. In Amsterdam there used to be a street called ‘Bruinistonbrang’ (Brownists’ Alley) which led to the meeting place of Browne’s English adherents. The title ‘Brownist’ was not a pleasing one to John Robinson<sup>15</sup> and he felt the need to

explain himself and his church principles to the Dutch. He published it, first, in Latin, but then translated it and re-published it in English.

Touching the Reformed Churches ... we account them the true churches of Jesus Christ, and both profess and practise communion with them in the holy things of God, what in us lieth: their sermons, such of ours frequent as understand the Dutch tongue: the sacraments we do administer unto their known members, if by occasion any of them be present with us ...

He accepted they were

not like-minded with them in all things ...<sup>16</sup>

He wrote firmly against the notion of any kind of territorial Church.

There is ... the most full and perfect Communion of the Body in the holy things of God, which is the next and immediate end of the 'visible church', when all the Members thereof do convene in some one place ... Now that the Church, commonly called 'visible' is then the most truly visible indeed, when it is assembled in one place: and the communion thereof then most full and intire, when all its members, inspired, as it were, with the same presence of the Holy Ghost, do, from the same Pastor, receive the same provocations of Grace at the same time and in the same place; when they all, by the same voice, 'banding, as it were, together', do with one accord, pour out their prayers unto God; when they all 'participate of one and the same holy bread' and, lastly, when they all together consent unanimously, either in the choice of the same officer, or censuring of the same offender ...<sup>17</sup>

Of Written Liturgies he wrote:

We cannot but mislike that custom in use, by which the Pastor is wont to repeat and read, out of a Prayer-book, certain forms for his and the church's prayers.

He found this nowhere in the written Word, not even from Paul to Timothy.

Writing of 'The Lord's Prayer' he stated:

We doubt not that this very form of words may be, and is, rightly used in prayer unto God, provided there be neither opinion of necessity, by which superstitious persons think themselves stinted by the Lord to words and syllables: nor of perfection, by which many are of mind that they have then at the last, and not before, prayed perfectly, when they have repeated this form of words.

And it is well, if some spot of this mire cleave not to the fingers of many Ministers, which make it a matter of great conscience to conclude their and the church's prayers, applied especially to the present state of things, with this number and measure of words. Which custom, as it is used very commonly, so, in my judgement, with no great reason, for these two causes: First, it seems to cross all good order and method by which men should descend from the

more general unto that which is more special: and not go the clean contrary way, as in this they do. Secondly, since the rule, according to philosophy and good reason, is always before the thing ruled and that this form is, by Christ, instituted for this purpose, that it might be the rule and square of all our prayers ... and should rather be used in the first place.<sup>18</sup>

The Apology ends with an appeal for acceptance—but, if not, he says,

this alone remaineth: That we turn our faces and mouths unto thee, O most powerful Lord and gracious Father: humbly imploring help from God, towards those who are, by men, left desolate. There is with thee no 'respect of persons': neither are men less regarders of thee, if regarders of thee, for the world's disregarding them. They who truly fear thee, and work righteousness, although constrained to live, by leave, in a Foreign Land, exiled from country, spoiled of goods, destitute of friends, few in number and mean in condition, are, for all that, unto thee, O gracious God, nothing the less acceptable. Thou numberest all their wanderings, and puttest their tears into thy bottles: are they not written in thy Book? Towards thee, O Lord, are our eyes: confirm our hearts, and bend thine ear, and suffer not our feet to slip, or our face to be ashamed, O thou both just and merciful God. To him, through Christ, be praise for ever in the church of Saints: and to thee, loving and Christian reader, grace, peace; and eternal happiness. Amen.<sup>19</sup>

In 1624, he wrote in *Defence of the Doctrine propounded by the Synod of Dort*. There are chapters on: Predestination, Election, Falling Away, Free-will, The Original State of Mankind, Baptism. In that last, extending over 48 pages, is a careful and detailed examination of objections to infant baptism and of his defence of it. He looks at the whole subject of baptism, both of the believer and of the infant, and comments upon such matters as 'children considered as holy', 'household baptisms', 'infants brought to Jesus', 'seal and seed of the covenant' and etc.

When he had first gone to Amsterdam, one of the serious arguments breaking the fellowship of the church there had been caused by John Smyth. This brother had been influenced by Anabaptist and Mennonite teachings, had rejected infant baptism, and had re-baptised himself. In the closing sections of his chapter on baptism, Robinson considers the role of the baptiser. He argues against the idea that any believer may baptise at will. He considers the pastor to be the proper person but he does not restrict it to pastors. Any church member may baptise but only if the church has appointed him to do so.<sup>20</sup>

A collection of 62 'New Essays, or Observations Divine and Moral', written in his closing years, were published in the year of his death. In the Preface, he writes:

In framing these mine Observations, Christian Reader, I have had, as is meet, first and most regard to the Holy Scriptures: in which respect, I call them divine [referring to his title] next, to the memorable sayings of wise and learned men, which I have read or heard, and carefully stored up as a precious treasure, for mine own, and others' benefit: and lastly, to the great volume of men's manners, which I have diligently observed, and from them gathered no small part thereof: having also had, in the days of my pilgrimage, special opportunity of conversing with persons of divers nations, estates and dispositions in great variety.<sup>21</sup>

## Separation

Obviously, a great issue which taxed, and grieved, the heart of John Robinson was that of 'Separation'. He wrote two main replies on this: one, to Joseph Hall, Rector of Halstead, and one to Richard Bernard, Vicar of Worksop. The latter runs to over 500 pages. We can but catch the atmosphere. And, if the language is at times strong, this is mild compared to most of that day! First, here is Hall, in pleading mood, referring to the church as 'mother'.

We hear of your separation and mourn: yet not so much for you, as for your wrong. You could do no greater injury to your mother, than to flee from her. Say, she were poor, ragged, weak: say, she were deformed: yet she is not infectious: or, if she were, yet she is yours. This were cause enough for you, to lament her, to pray for her, to labour for her redress: not to avoid her. This unnaturalness is shameful: and more heinous in you, who are reported not parties of this evil, but authors.

If we all should follow you, this were the way of a church, imperfect, as you plead, to make no church: and of a remedy, to make a disease. Oh, that you loved peace, but half so well as truth, then this breach had never been: and you that are yet brethren, had been still companions.

(Hall goes on to list all the aspects of Rome that had been cast out of the English church and points out all the evils over in Holland.)

Compare the place you have left with that you have chosen! Here, you drew in the free, and clear air of the gospel, there you live in the stench of (Judaism, Arianism, Anabaptism, and more). Say, if you can, that the Church of England is not a heaven to Amsterdam. How is it, then, that our gnats are harder to swallow than their camels.

The God of heaven open your eyes, that you may see the injustice of that zeal which hath transported you: and turn your heart to an endeavour of all Christian satisfaction: otherwise, your souls shall find too late, that it had been a thousand times better to swallow a ceremony, than to rend a church.<sup>22</sup>

(Now a paragraph or two of Robinson's reply)



The 'crime' here objected, is 'separation': a thing very odious in the eyes of all them from whom it is made, as evermore casting upon them the imputation of evil, whereof all men are impatient. And hence it cometh to pass that the Church of England can better brook the vilest person continuing communion with it, than any whomsoever separating from it, though upon never so just and well-grounded reasons. And yet, separation from the world, and so from the men of the world, and so from the prince of this world that reigneth in them, and so from whatsoever is contrary to God, is the first step to our communion with God, and angels, and good men, as the first step to a ladder is to leave the earth.<sup>23</sup>

The Church of England, say you, is our 'mother', and so ought not to be avoided. But, say I, we must not so cleave to 'Holy Mother' Church as (that) we neglect our Heavenly Father and his commandments. The reformation you have made of the many and main corruptions we do ingenuously acknowledge, and do, withal, embrace with you, all the truths which, to our knowledge, you have received instead of them: but Rome was not built all in a day.

The 'mystery of iniquity' did advance itself by degrees: and, as the rise was, so must the fall be. You have renounced many false doctrines in Popery, and, in their places, embraced the truth. But what, if this truth be taught under the same hateful prelacy, in the same devised office of ministry and confused communion of the profane multitude, and that mingled with many grievous errors? If Antichrist held not many truths, wherewith should he countenance so many forgeries?<sup>24</sup>

The air of the gospel which you draw in, is nothing so free and clear as you make show. It is only because you are used to it, that makes you so judge. The thick smoke of your CANONS: especially of such as are planted against the kingdom of Christ, the visible church and the administration of it, do both obscure and poison the air which you all draw in, and wherein you breathe ... the daily sacrifice of the service-book, which, instead of spiritual prayer sweet as incense, you offer up, morning and evening, smells so strong of the Pope's (Mass-book) as it makes many hundreds, amongst yourselves, stop their noses at it: and yet you boast of 'the free and clear air of the gospel wherein you breathe'.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, the terrible threat you utter against us: 'That even whoredoms and murders shall abide an easier answer than Separation', would certainly fall heavy upon us, if this answer were to be made in your Consistory Courts, or before any of your Ecclesiastical Judges: but because we know that, not Antichrist, but Christ, shall be our Judge, we are bold upon the warrant of his Word and Testament, which, being sealed with his blood, may not be altered, to proclaim to all the world, separation from whatsoever riseth up rebelliously

against the sceptre of his kingdom: as we are undoubtedly persuaded the Communion, Government, Ministry, and Worship of the Church of England do!<sup>26</sup>

Yet—Robinson's separation was always against things and ideas, never against persons. This was brought out clearly in the posthumous publication *Of the Lawfulness of Hearing of the Ministers in the Church of England*. It was published in 1634, delayed because the printers were concerned that some members of his church would not agree with Robinson's conclusions, and they wanted to preserve the peace of the church.

Robinson was asked by a church in London for advice. One of their members had been going to hear Church of England ministers preach. Some members of that church called for her excommunication. When the church refused this, they themselves threatened to leave. Robinson wrote to the church and then prepared a treatise on the subject. He lists, as replies to, sixteen objections, and then declared his own position:

For myself, this I believe with my heart before God, and profess with my tongue, and here, before the world. That I have one and the same Faith, Hope, Spirit, Baptism, and Lord, which I had in the Church of England, and none other. That, I esteem so many in that Church, of what state or order soever, as are truly partakers of that Faith,—as I account many thousands to be, for my Christian brethren: and myself a fellow-member with them, of that mystical Body of Christ scattered far and wide throughout the world. That, I have always, in spirit and affection, all Christian fellowship and communion with them: and am most ready, in all outward action, and exercises of religion, lawful, and lawfully done, to express the same. And withal, that I am persuaded the Hearing of the Word of God there preached, is both lawful and, upon just occasion, necessary for me and all true Christians withdrawing from the Hierarchical Order of church-government and ministry, and the appurtenances thereof: and uniting in the Order and Ordinances instituted of Christ, the only King and Lord of his church, and by all his disciples to be observed. And, lastly, that I cannot communicate with, or submit unto, the said Church order and ordinances there established, either in state or act, without being condemned of my own heart: and therein, provoking God, who is greater than my heart, to condemn me much more. And, for my failings—which may easily be too many one way or other,—of ignorance herein: and so for all my other sins, I most humbly crave pardon first and most at the hands of God: and so of all men whom therein I offend, or have offended, any manner of way: even as they desire and look that God should pardon their offences.

Perhaps we may add here, for it is pertinent to the present day, a paragraph from his work *Of Religious Communion: Private and Public* (1614) written in

answer to the Baptist, Thomas Helwisse (baptised by John Smyth) who criticised Robinson for ‘retaining the baptism received in England: and administering of Baptism unto infants’.

Robinson distinguishes between personal and church action.

The thing I am at in this whole discourse ... is ... That we who profess a separation from the English national, provincial, diocesan, and parochial church and churches, in the whole formal state and order thereof, may, notwithstanding, lawfully communicate in private prayer, and other the like holy exercises—not performed in their church-communion, nor by their church-power and ministry,—with the godly amongst them: though remaining, of infirmity, members of the same church or churches: except some other extraordinary bar come in the way between them and us.

He shows, from the writings of Barrowe and Penry, that they, with himself, distinguish between the corruptions of the Church of England and a ‘good hope of many hundred thousands’ of those who were educated in it.

And surely, if the Lord’s people be there, it is no difficult thing for ‘the spiritual man’ conversing with them, to discern and judge, ordinarily, which they be. The Spirit of God in one of his people, will own itself in another of them, though disfigured with many failings: especially in outward orders and ordinances: and ‘faith’, if it be not ‘dead’, may be seen ‘works’, of him that hath a spiritual eye, through many infirmities ...

Exhorting, hence, against an undue assumption of purity by either party, he believed still,

never church in the world, in which so many excellent truths were taught, stood in such confusion both of persons and things, and under such a spirit of bondage, as that of England doth at this day.<sup>27</sup>

## More Light And Truth

Speaking to our local vicar the other day, I told him I was going to give a paper on John Robinson. He seemed a little surprised and I suddenly realised why. ‘Oh no,’ I cried, ‘it’s not the John Robinson of *Honest to God* fame. It’s the John Robinson of *More Light and Truth*.’

No paper on our subject could be complete without a look at this famous quotation from his parting message to the ‘Pilgrims’. Indeed, the New International Dictionary of the Christian Church states in its entry on John Robinson, ‘He is, perhaps best known for his farewell sermon to the Pilgrims of Leyden on 21 July 1620’. I have already referred to the text: ‘Ezra 8:21,22’.

In the Autumn 1983 issue of EFCC’s *Contemporary Concern*, a review of JI Packer’s *Freedom, Authority & Scripture* refers to the Holy Spirit as one who ‘reveals all of what the hymn writer states when he says: “The Lord hath yet

more light and truth to break forth from his word". The hymn, of course, is that by George Rawson, 'We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind'. The footnote in *Congregational Praise* states: 'Based on parting words of Pastor John Robinson to the Pilgrim Fathers, 1620.'

The words are also quoted in the June/July 1983 issue of the American magazine, *The Congregationalist*, in an article on 'Understanding the Bible'. Former Baptist Union secretary, Ernest Payne, concludes his book, *The Free Church Tradition in the Life of England* with the 'famous' words, and who else has not quoted them at some time or other!

Doubt has been raised as to whether Robinson actually said them. The first written statement of them came 26 years later. But the man who thus recorded them had been present in Leiden and who can doubt that the last message of a beloved pastor would not have been repeated again and again as the pilgrims made their long journey and as they sought to encourage each other in the months and years of their early trials. In any case, the remembered words are hall-marked again and again by statements in Robinson's writings themselves.

But what did he mean? This is what the Congregational historian, Albert Peel, thought he meant. Writing in his *Brief History of English Congregationalism*, he states: 'Here we see how the early Separatist notion that the Scriptures must determine every detail in the government and worship of the Church for all time is beginning to break down. In Robinson is evident a willingness to re-adjust organisation and make adaptation to changing environment. The Spirit of God is to lead the Church and fit it for altered circumstances.'<sup>28</sup> I say, with all respect to the historian, he must have been singing George Rawson's hymn since he had last read John Robinson. For nothing could be further from the truth of Robinson's stand on the full authority and inerrancy of the written word of God. Let us hear the whole passage, for even in these few sentences I believe there is sufficient to substantiate my claim. It is written in the third person.

We are now ere long to part asunder, and the Lord knoweth whether ever he should live to see our faces again. But whether the Lord had appointed it or not, he charged us before God and his blessed angels, to follow him no further than he followed Christ: and if God should reveal anything to us by any other instrument of his, to be as ready to receive it as ever we were to receive any truth by his ministry: for he was very confident the Lord had more truth and light to break forth out of his holy Word. He took occasion also miserably to bewail the state and condition of the reformed churches, who were come to a period in religion, and would go no further than the instruments of their reformation. As, for example, the Lutherans, they could not be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw: for whatever part of God's will he had further

imparted and revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it. And so also, saith he, you see the Calvinists, they stick where he left them: a misery much to be lamented: for though they were precious shining lights in their times, yet God had not revealed his whole will to them: and were they now living, saith he, they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received. Here also he put us in mind of our church covenant, at least that part of it whereby we promise and covenant with God and one with another, to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known to us from his written Word: but withal exhorted us to take heed what we received for truth, and well to examine and compare it and weigh it with other scriptures of truth before we received it. For, saith he, it is not possible the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick antichristian darkness, and that full perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.<sup>29</sup>

I would close by looking at something of the significance of these words. First, it should be clear that the whole truth of God cannot be set down in black and white, and equally clear that no one man can grasp the whole of that which is set down in Scripture. Moses declared: 'The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children for ever' (Deuteronomy 29:29). Paul wrote to the Roman church: 'Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?' (Romans 11:33,34).

The purpose of Scripture is set out by Robinson in an essay which begins  
The holy Scriptures are that Divine instrument, and means, by which we are taught to believe what we ought, touching God, and ourselves, and all creatures: and how to please God in all things, unto eternal life ... God would have his will, that is, his Word to become Scripture, partly for more certainty of truth to men, and to preserve it the better from being corrupted: as all make account, that things set down in black and white, as they speak, are most firm: partly, for accord, and unity of churches, and Christians in the same truth: who, if they differ so much, notwithstanding they use the same rule, what would they do, if their rules were different, or uncertain? and partly, for more community: seeing books and writings may both easily be dispersed whither the voices of teachers cannot come, and also be read in private by Christians, when they are apart from their teachers.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, one might ask just when was it that the thick darkness that Robinson refers to, first came down upon the Church? And has the Holy Spirit yet completely dispelled it from us all? Robinson wrote, in his defence of Separation, 'We believe by the Word of God, that the things we teach are not new, but old truths renewed'.<sup>31</sup> One supposes that the Baptists would argue thus about the baptism of believers only, and the charismatics about their

acceptance of tongues and prophecy. Are the first shadows of the thick darkness even visible in the New Testament itself with the Lord's challenging rebukes to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3?

One could also ask how much of that darkness has crept in again over the Congregational churches that look to John Robinson as a spiritual founder. Have they tested carefully enough the 'instruments' to make sure they were Christ's: have they taken heed carefully enough what they received for truth: did the full perfection of knowledge break forth, only to be once again clouded over with 'light' or 'truth' that is no light or truth because it is not clearly established upon the written Word of God. I just ask questions ...

One of the first books I consulted in my research was one on my own book shelves, *Church Rebels and Pioneers* by Rev. JM Witherow (published by the Religious Tract Society in 1927). I have written to the publishers and consulted many ministerial lists but I have failed to find out anything about the author. But one of the 'rebels' (?) or 'pioneers' (?) about which he writes is John Robinson. I should like to end with something he says.

On the other side of the Atlantic the nobility of his character and his remarkable place in history have long been recognised. The true founder of modern Congregationalism with its world-wide ramifications, the educator of men who founded a new State since expanded into a giant republic, John Robinson occupies as yet a small place in the memory of his countrymen compared with many who in talent, character, and achievement were immeasurably inferior. Some of the latter lie in Westminster Abbey. Robinson sleeps in unfamiliar Leyden, in an aisle of St Peter's Church, among strangers, unremembered. Yet surely the time will come when men will not allow their discernment of solid service to humanity be warped by the glitter of arms and the pomp of civil power, or by ignoble ecclesiastical prejudice. Then the man who sent forth the Pilgrim Fathers to lay the corner-stone of New England, and sent forth the little barque of Congregationalism to found a power perhaps even more widespread and enduring, will receive the honour that has long been overdue, and be seen in his own land to hold a place among the immortals of human history.<sup>32</sup>

## References

- GPF—GP Fisher, *History of the Church* (1898)  
 EAP—Ernest A Payne, *Free Church Tradition in the life of England* (1944)  
 JMW—JM Witherow, *Church Rebels and Pioneers* (1927)  
 JWV—JW Verburgt, *Pilgrim Fathers in Leiden* (1970)  
 Words of John Robinson are quoted from *Works of John Robinson* (3 volumes) edited by Robert Ashton (1851) (WJR) and *Independent Memorials* (Vol. I)

edited by Benjamin Hanbury (1839). (This more fully entitled *Historical Memorials Relating to Independents*) (IM).

### **Additional Note:**

One reason for the disparities in the historical details of John Robinson's life could well be the awakened interest in the 'tourist attraction' of the Pilgrim Fathers. Many want to 'stake a claim' to a connection! A brief but very detailed account is *The Mayflower Story*, published through the church at Babworth. Richard Clifton, pastor at Scrooby, had been rector there. Here are the details given about John Robinson.

John Robinson was born in the nearby village of Sturton-le-Steeple in 1578. He too was a Cambridge scholar (like William Brewster), entering Corpus Christi College in 1592. Excelling in theological study, but with great sympathy for the Puritan point of view, he became a fellow of his college in 1597. He was obliged to resign his fellowship when he married his boyhood friend, Bridget White of Sturton. They were married in the parish church of St Mary, Greasley, in Nottinghamshire, for Bridget was then living at Beauvale Priory. His first appointment after taking Holy Orders seems to have been to the parish church of Mundham in Norfolk.

### **References**

- 1 *GPF*, p. 462.
- 2 *GPF*, p. 462.
- 3 *EAP*, p. 36.
- 4 *JMW*, p. 36.
- 5 *JWV*, p. 31.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52.
- 7 *JMV*, 19.
- 8 *JMV*, 27.
- 9 *WJR*, Vol I, xxx. He saw ordination of both pastor and elder as 'perpetual and for life'.  
*IM*, p. 378.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 11 *WJR*, Vol. I, xli.
- 12 *WJR*, Vol I, lxxviii.
- 13 *JWV*, p. 21.
- 14 *WJR*, Vol I, lxxxvi.
- 15 *IM*, p. 393.
- 16 *IM*, p. 372.
- 17 *IM*, p. 372.
- 18 *IM*, p. 375.
- 19 *IM*, p. 388.
- 20 *WJR*, Vol. I, pp. 261–470.
- 21 *WJR*, Vol I, pp. 1–260.
- 22 *IM*, p. 185f.
- 23 *IM*, p. 187.
- 24 *IM*, p. 189.
- 25 *IM*, p. 201.
- 26 *IM*, p. 202.
- 27 *IM*, p.25.

- 28 Ibid. p. 46.
- 29 *WJR*, Vol I, xliv.
- 30 *WJR*, 16 I, p. 43.
- 31 *WJR*, Vol. II p. 43.
- 32 *JWV*, p. 43.



# The Hymn Writers of English Congregationalism

## Gordon Booth

Our subject divides very naturally and exactly into two equal sections, first, from 1707 when Watts' first hymns were published, to 1836, when the first Congregational Hymn Book saw the light or, if preferred, to 1831 when the Congregational Union of England & Wales was born. The second period takes us to the publication of the last CUEW Hymn Book, *Congregational Praise*, in 1950. Watts to Conder and Lynch to Carter (or Caird or Pigott or whosoever).

Watts' *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs* is divided into four parts; first, *Psalms*, then *Hymns* in three books. It should help our appreciation of what was involved in writing hymns for the 18th century church to sing one of Watts. It is No 100 in Book 1. The words are probably unfamiliar and the tune is 17th century (Tune—Eisenach *Congregational Praise* 269). We will follow the practice of 'lining-out', still, says Tudur Jones, 'very much in use in 1848'.<sup>1</sup>

[Here the company were invited to stand and sing, with each line called out separately]

Not to condemn the sons of men,  
Did Christ, the Son of God appear.  
No weapons in his hands are seen,  
No flaming sword nor thunder there.

Such was the pity of our God,  
He lov'd the race of man so well,  
He sent his Son to bear our load  
Of sins, and save our souls from hell.

Sinners, believe the Saviour's word,  
Trust in his mighty name and live;  
A thousand joys his lips afford,  
His hands a thousand blessings give.

But vengeance and damnation lie  
On rebels who refuse his grace;  
Who God's eternal Son despise,  
The hottest hell shall be their place.

It will be helpful to sub-divide the first part of our study into the foundation and the continuation.

## Part 1: 'The Glories of the Lamb'

Isaac Watts was born in 1674 and died in 1748. His hymns were published in 1707 and 1709 and the Psalms in 1719. That strikes a blow at one of the most popular fallacies, great hymns do not have to come out of times of revival. Watts lived to see the Great Awakening, but his glorious contribution to worship was made in a time of spiritual dearth and sad and dreadful apostasy.

Baptists sometimes like to tell us that Keach was the pioneer of English hymn writing. Perhaps! But who has ever read, let alone sung, a hymn by Keach? But as recent a collection as *Christian Hymns* (1977) includes 71 by Watts, and *Gospel Hymns* (1915), of the Strict Baptists, no fewer than 167. I would happily include about 150 out of Watts' 700 hymns and paraphrases in a modern collection, surely an extraordinary proportion.

Shuttleworth says that Watts 'revolutionized the worship of dissenting churches and established the English hymn'.<sup>2</sup> Bernard Lord Manning refers to the prejudice against hymns in the late 17th century 'as both Popish and unscriptural'.<sup>3</sup> To Watts more than to any other man is due the triumph of the hymn in English worship. All later hymn writers are his debtors. Benson in *The English Hymn* writes: 'He produced a whole cycle of religious song which his own ardent faith made devotional, which his manly and lucid mind made simple and strong, which his poetic feeling and craftsmanship made rhythmical and often lyrical, and which his sympathy with people made hymnic. The larger part of his work proved to be an abiding enrichment of Church Song, and to many its only adequate expression. His best hymns remain permanently, after the winnowing of two centuries, among the classics of devotion.'<sup>4</sup>

The Methodist, Gordon Rupp, compares Watts and Wesley, a popular pastime. 'I may honestly concede that on the whole I think Watts the greater hymn writer, though both together are incomparable and should still form the staple of Nonconformist hymn singing, as they stand head and shoulders above the whole spate of sentimental and precious ditties of the 19th and 20th centuries.' The quotation is from *Six Makers of English Religion*. Watts made English Nonconformist worship what it is or should be.

We sing hymns because of Watts. He delivered us from the tyranny of the metrical psalms. It is an odd commentary on literary taste and theological insight that some dare to argue for the singing Psalms as the inspired work of the Holy Spirit, but exclude hymns as uninspired. But their daring extends to insistence on the singing of the Psalms in the dreadful doggerel of the metrical version! For sheer impertinence that is hard to beat, especially as it implies that God is to be blamed for the doggerel!

May I remind you of the greatness of Isaac Watts. He was a distinguished scholar and leading theologian of his day. His textbook on logic was standard reading at Oxford and Cambridge, Harvard and Yale. He wrote a successful popular book on astronomy and geography. He was accomplished in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and French. He was poet, philosopher, preacher and theologian. Dr Johnson admired his poetry. Rupp remarks that 'he became the all-time children's best seller before the advent of ... Enid Blyton'.<sup>5</sup>

Watts was not the first to write hymns in English. The Anglican, John Mason, had produced a small collection which included a few by Thomas Shepherd, the Independent minister at Braintree. Together with Barton's *Psalms and Hymns*, they formed, says Garrett Horder, 'the thin end of the wedge, by means of which at last, hymn singing found its way into the services of the Independents, who, therefore, are the true pioneers of hymn singing in English'.<sup>6</sup>

The tradition is that young Watts complained of the poor standard of the hymns used in the Southampton Meeting-House where his father was minister. Challenged to do better he produced—

Behold the glories of the Lamb  
Amidst his Father's throne,  
Prepare new honours for his name,  
And songs before unknown.

It stands as number 1 in the first book of his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, a fine hymn which last appeared in Dr Barrett's Congregational Church Hymnary of 1887.

Historically, Watts stands supreme as the true pioneer and explorer. But will he do for 1984? Is his language now too archaic and obscure? Are his themes appropriate to contemporary life? Are we not guilty of antiquarianism to insist on using so out-dated a writer?

Certainly language has changed greatly and Watts' vocabulary sometimes sounds quaint or even comic. Such words as admire, affections, bowels, clay, cordials, darling, entertainment, favourite—right through the alphabet to worms and wretches, may make us wonder whether he must not be set aside for more modern compositions. I conclude that, with minor alterations for ease of understanding, Watts can and should be a major component of a hymn book for our times.

Some agree. *Christian Hymns* gives us 71 of Watts out of 900 hymns and only 23 by living authors. *Hymns for To-Day's Church* allows us 20 (and 26 by Wesley), out of 585, with 232 by living authors (half by members of the Words committee!) evidently they think differently.

But what of the themes? Emphases must adjust to changing circumstances of individuals and communities. Life expectancy is so much greater, infant mortality so reduced, that provision for bereavement and affliction may be less needed in a modern hymn book. But the great doctrines of the faith are as prominent in the scriptures as when Watts was writing.

No writer can be outdated who provides for worship what we find in Watts. Manning again: 'Hymns are for us Dissenters what the liturgy is for the Anglican. They are the framework, the setting, the conventional, the traditional part of divine service as we use it.'<sup>7</sup> Or 'A hymn's business is to strengthen the faith of today'.<sup>8</sup>

Our hymns provide opportunity not only for praise and adoration, but for testimony, confession, affirmation of our faith, thanksgiving. The right kind of hymns can enrich, educate and inspire. The wrong sort will impoverish by adversely affecting the whole spiritual life of the congregation as well as by the insidious infiltration of false doctrine. Our concern is not the emotional elation that may accompany the lusty, enthusiastic singing of invigorating music, it is the deep penetration of spiritual truth through the indirect medium of the hymn.

Watts' hymns were only gradually accepted by his own denomination, but ultimately so whole-heartedly that other hymns were only collected as supplements. *The Congregational Hymn Book* of 1836 was a supplement of 620 hymns. Manning says that 'hymns are the safest protection and the surest vehicle of orthodoxy'.<sup>9</sup> It is plausibly argued that when Presbyterianism and the General Baptists slid, wholly or in part, into Unitarianism, the Independents generally remained sound. Whatever the fashionable speculations of the pulpit, the framework of worship was the solid, scriptural, reformed truth of Watts' hymns.

Manning is usually a sound guide. 'There is a sense of the spaciousness of nature, of the vastness of time, of the dreadfulness of eternity in Watts which is missing or less felt in Wesley. You constantly find Watts "surveying" the whole realm of Nature and finding at the centre of it, its crucified and dying Creator.'<sup>10</sup>

Book 3 of Watts is a collection of 25 communion hymns, including as No 7 the greatest hymn ever written, 'When I survey the wondrous cross'. Here is poetical expression of high quality, and poetic form is an essential ingredient of a hymn. Dr Johnson remarks of Watts that 'the sanctity of the matter rejects the ornaments of figurative diction'.<sup>11</sup> Poetry, yes, but poetry restrained and disciplined, in the strait-jacket of rhyme and stress, compelled by congregational singing and with imagination held on a tight rein. Tait, in *Symphony*, observes that Watts, the poet, felt the burden of such limitation.<sup>12</sup>

And how he was restricted! With only C.M., L.M. and S.M. (Common, Long and Short Metres) and the occasional 6.6.6.6.4.4.4.4 or 6.6.8.6.6.8 metre to use! But he still wrote poetry, not uninfluenced by the accepted forms of his own day. In our times it may well be that the formal anarchy of modern poetry has contributed to the formlessness and indiscipline of the songs accepted into some contemporary worship.

A good poet may be a poor hymnographer, incapable of the restrained expression imposed by his sacred task. But no good hymnographer can be entirely inadequate as a poet. Hymns provide a congregation with proper relief for feelings aroused by the contemplation of God and his grace, Christ and his work, our sin and our hope of salvation. In the context of a quickened awareness of a holy and gracious God, emotion is natural and right, emotionalism is false fire. Good hymns, impregnated with wholesome scriptural content, allow and promote feeling. The devout singing of Doddridge's 'My gracious Lord, I own thy right' is a very different thing from the psychological quackery of interminably repeated and banal phrases so sadly commonplace nowadays.

Watts is a great writer of hymns because his grasp was of a great God, his mind was filled with Scripture and strong doctrine, and he could feel as well as think.

## Part 2: 'The Lord is King'

Despite the overwhelming dominance of Watts, 18th century Congregationalists produced many hymns. Simon Browne (1680–1732) supplied 266 hymns in his *Hymns & and Spiritual Songs* published in 1720, but he is remembered only for 'Come, gracious Spirit, heavenly dove', usually somewhat mangled by editorial emendations. Of others included in this section, little remains apart from the three major names. Andrew Reed (1787–1862) is known only for 'Spirit divine attend our prayers', and Jonathan Evans (1748–1809), undeservedly, only for 'Hark the voice of love and mercy'. A pleasant hymn by Thomas Gibbons was included in the 1836 hymn book and two of William Shrubsole (1759–1829), both missionary hymns and good. He was one of the luminaries of the early days of the London Missionary Society. Time fails to tell of George Burder, Thomas Raffles and Ann Gilbert!

The second greatest name in Congregational hymnody is that of Philip Doddridge (1702–1751). Routley places Wesley first, Watts second, Montgomery third and Doddridge fourth in English hymnody and suggests that 'nobody ... who wrote after 1850 will stand a chance against the enduring work of an author a century older. We believe him to have been done less than justice by 20th century editions.'<sup>13</sup> Doddridge's hymns were published after

his death by Job Orton, 375 in number. Orton's preface tells us that 'these hymns being composed to be sung after the author had been preaching in the Texts prefixed to them, it was his Design, that they should bring up again the leading thoughts in the Sermon, and naturally express and warmly enforce those devout Sentiments, which he hoped were then rising in the Minds of his Hearers, and help to fix them on the Memory and Heart ...'<sup>14</sup>

Routley insists that the virtues of Doddridge are those 'of the poet and of the hymnographer' and he explains 'a certain tendency away from the style and subject matter ... in our times' as due 'to his virile and salty Calvinism'. He goes on to observe that 'Calvinism is not gloomy but expansively optimistic' and in Doddridge 'manifests itself in—the note of faith, the fact of Divine judgement and the hope of heaven' (the most frequent ending of a Doddridge hymn).<sup>15</sup> Of course, as with Watts, the doctrines of grace were not topics for argument but accepted Biblical truths, truths shared by the preachers' congregations. Deacon makes the same point 'Doddridge's Calvinism pervades his hymns, which were written to reiterate the main points of his sermons ... [they] ring with tremendous confidence and expectation. God is seen as mighty and omnipotent, and worthy of the thankfulness of his people for his continuing goodness and faithfulness.'<sup>16</sup>

It is a commentary on modern Congregationalism to note how few of Doddridge's many glorious compositions appear in the last three official collections of the denomination.

Joseph Hart (1712–1768) is the second big name of this period. His 'Come, Holy Spirit, come ...' and the two verses, 'How good is the God we adore', taken from a lengthy hymn, both deserve inclusion in any respectable hymn book, and his invitation hymn, 'Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched' is valuable and well written. But Hart is usually dull and pedestrian. *Christian Hymns* is a little generous, *Gospel Hymns* wildly injudicious, with 56 contributions. This is a judgement on the collection. The committee was evidently strong in doctrine and weak in poetic insight, or had their taste been impaired by the strong diet of the 18th century Baptists, Kent and Medley, Gadsby, Burnham, Stennett, Swain and Beddome? All, good men, with hardly a drop of poetic feeling between them!

Lastly, Josiah Conder (1789–1855), ignoring his wife Joan. Conder edited the 1836 *Congregational Hymn Book* and contributed 57 hymns to the 620 which form that collection. His preface passes the blame, as far as he can, on the committee. Subsequent generations have not treated him so kindly and make much of the dangers of using an hymnographer as a compiler. By the time of Barrett, Conder's contribution was reduced to 12 and *Congregational Praise* has only 6. The warning is justifiable. For instance, *Songs of Praise* was

edited by Percy Dearmer and included 21 from his hand, all competently written and none worthy of a place in a hymn book. But Conder was a true poet with a capacity for wise selection and he was also a sound theologian with a devotional spirit and a capacity for the unusual insight and expression. An examination of many hymn books shows that hymns need a constituency in which to circulate and find favour, and that is usually denominational. Thanks to 19th century Congregationalism we have ‘The Lord is King’, ‘Thou art the everlasting Word’, ‘Bread of heaven’. But we have lost too much of a great writer. How good it would be to have, ‘Welcome, welcome! Sinner, hear’, or ‘Be merciful, O God of grace’, or ‘O thou whose covenant is sure’, and many another, lost, forgotten hymn.

### **Part 3: ‘Change and Decay’**

A time of transition is sure to supply plenty of contradictions. Several writers are represented in collections by a single hymn. Outstandingly we have Binney’s ‘Eternal Light’, John Harris’s ‘Light up this house with glory Lord’, and Jemima Luke’s, ‘I think, when I read that sweet story of old’. William Bengo Collyer (1782–1852) supplied books with a number of useful hymns and William Tidd Watson (1833–1899) is rightly valued for ‘Lord, I was blind’, ‘O blessed life, the heart at rest’ and others. But they show the change from the strong objective note of Watts, Doddridge and Conder to a more introspective attitude. Paxton Hood and Benjamin Waugh wrote for children—but also for adults, and Waugh’s ‘Now let us see thy beauty, Lord’ is choice, though subjective. George Coster (1835–1912) is a neglected writer. He was a poor poet and lacks originality of imagery and thought, but was competent in rhyme and stress. His hymns are better than his poems. I find seven of his compositions in various books. An unusual hymn of social concern, ‘King of the City splendid’, is strong in feeling for the scourges of poverty and drink, the misery of the slums and of children. ‘From north and south and east and west’ is a fervent missionary hymn. His limited poetic gift is expressed most happily in ‘O God our Father, throned on high’. My preference is for two hymns written to the rather rare 8.5.8.3 metre, ‘Dost thou bow beneath the burden...’ and, best of all, ‘Prove him! An Almighty Saviour’. It is a good gospel hymn.

Time forbids mention of Thomas Hornblower Gill, regarded by Dr Dale as the best hymn writer of his time, of George Rawson or George Wade Robinson. We must get to business with Thomas Toke Lynch.

William Garnett Horder spoke thus of Lynch—‘He is one of the most original and poetic hymnists that could be named. *The Rivulet* is pure, fresh, sparkling, like a breath from the hills ...’<sup>17</sup> For those to whom Horder’s is a

strange name let me quote Dr Tudur Jones. He was 'the man who did most to create a catholic attitude towards hymns ... a scholar whose certainty of taste and wide knowledge made it possible for him to disregard denominational affiliations when choosing hymns for his collection.'<sup>18</sup> Dr Jones refers to Horder's influence on Barrett's 1877 hymnal and to the theological presuppositions that made him select 'no more than 14 hymns of Watts and 15 by Wesley' for his own book.

*The Rivulet* was published in 1855 and called, alternatively, *Hymns for Heart and Voice*. It raised a storm. Dr John Campbell, editor of the Congregational Union magazines, attacked it with characteristic vigour in the *British Banner*, which he also edited. James Grant, of the *Morning Advertiser* said it contained 'not one particle of vital religion or evangelical piety'. Lynch's preface indicates that he was not too sure whether it was a book of religious poems or a collection of hymns. But since he suggested tunes for each one of the 100 poems (or hymns), we may suppose he wanted them to be sung in worship. And nine of his hymns (5 from *The Rivulet*), appeared in Barrett.

We may think that Campbell was a little rough on Lynch, especially when we look at his portrait and realise that he wrote more or less as he looked. But the eighteen fifties were dangerous days and mark the beginning of the end as far as orthodoxy and the Congregational denomination is concerned. Horder did far more harm than Lynch. He was an unmitigated disaster, far too affected by poetic imagery (of the less subtle variety) and more seriously by his abandonment of gospel truth. But to speak of 'certainty of taste' is curious. I noted his choice of Watts' four greatest hymns, including Book 1, No 18. Checking my notes I was so amazed I thought I must have made a mistake!

Lynch defended *The Rivulet* delightfully under the nom-de-plume of *Silent Long* in *Songs Controversial*. Here is 'A Negative Affair'.

When sugar in the lump I see,  
I know that it is there;  
Melt it, and then I soon suspect  
A negative affair;  
Where is the sugar, sir? I say,  
Let me both taste and see;  
Sweetness instead of sugar, sir,  
You'll not palm off on me.

Don't tell me that the sugar lumps  
When dropt in water clear,  
That they may make the water sweet,  
Themselves must disappear;  
For common sense, sir, such as mine,



The lumps themselves must see;  
Sweetness instead of sugar, sir,  
You'll not palm off on me.

For instance, sir, in every hymn  
Sound doctrine you must state  
As clearly as a dead man's name  
Is on his coffin-plate:  
Religion, sir, is only fudge,  
Let's have theology;  
Sweetness instead of sugar, sir,  
You'll not palm off on me.

A dip in *The Rivulet* is needed to get a feel of Lynch. Here is No 71.

Our heart is like a little pool,  
Left by the ebbing sea,  
Of crystal waters still and cool  
When we rest musingly.

And see, what verdure exquisite  
Within it hidden grows!  
We never should have had the sight  
But for this brief repose.

And such a sight shall not be vain,  
These beauties they require  
That we, though waves return again,  
Return when waves retire.

I'll oft return as to a book  
Written with heavenly art;  
Intent beneath the surface look,  
And read in thee, my heart.

Or some lines from No 40.

Is life a groping and a guess,  
A vain cry in a wilderness,  
No light of home at distance seen?  
And do our hearts like fallen trees  
Drift down the rivers to the seas,  
Though hope hath once exalted been?

He pursues the image relentlessly. 'We are not driftwood on the wave; But like the ships, that tempests brave ...' We need not be like ships 'to spring a leak, and seen no more, sink, though still with sail unfurled'.

Eventually we get to the point.

His soul a haven found for rest  
 Who leaned upon his Saviour's breast—  
 An island mid the water's foam:  
 But once at rest, lo, soon we are  
 At sea again, and Christ our star,  
 And God our final port and home

Pass the sickness pills! Of course it is unfair. Lynch is not always so hilarious. There is 'Gracious Spirit, dwell with me' and 'My faith it is an oaken staff ...' is set to a rather delightful tune. But I am prepared to take Lynch at his own word: 'Sweetness, such sickly sweetness, sir, You'll not palm off on me.'

It is not difficult to mock a writer of verse, but when it is tried on someone like Watts, parodied more than any other, it only succeeds by the dubious artifice of ignoring the development of language, or by sneering at solemn truth.

Lynch was theologically lax and sentimental. He begins with man, experience and a pretty picture, rather than with God and his word. Lynch foreshadowed what was to come.

With sympathy we shall not fail to find some good in hymns by such men as Charter Pigott, RF Horton, Silvester Horne or Henry Child Carter or GB Caird, but we are, in fact, in a different world from that of Watts and Doddridge, Hart and Conder. Some, like Thomas Crippen, made successful attempts to fill gaps in the hymn books with verses, like Crippen's for the election of deacons or 'Before a parliamentary election' but the fire that produces worthy praise to God was no longer burning.

May I conclude by urging that the spiritual descendants of Isaac Watts ought not to be content with worship as all too commonly experienced in our day. Our hymn singing should be our glory, the hymns we sing selected intelligently and sung warmly and thoughtfully. Out with the pathetic jingles of songs more suited to pop-culture than divine worship! Out with the Newmans and the Fabers and the Kebles! With three-quarter of a million hymns in the English language surely we need not resort to popish rhymes or the whimsies of a Whittier. It is not wrong to want 'to sing a new song' to glorify the Lamb, we are not antiquarians. Are there none in our churches to give us such a new song?

Good hymns, great hymns, come from a firm grasp of great doctrines, from minds steeped in the scriptures, from hearts gladdened by grace. In a word, their source is evangelical experience of evangelical truth. Let us try! If we have enough music within us to feel the pulse of a metre, ears capable of hearing a rhyme, enough of our native tongue to speak it plainly, then let us see if God the Holy Spirit may not care to bless Christ's people with our feeble

words. We may not have the 8,000 hymns of a Fanny Crosby within us, but perhaps there is one hymn of lasting worth to give our brethren. Disciplined, unhurried endeavour, with pains to polish and improve, may not produce the lyrical outpouring of a Wesley, but the very effort will be good for the soul.

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