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# **1988 Congregational Studies Conference Papers**

**That Proud Independency**  
*Rev. Alan Tovey*

**Richard Mather—The True Use of Synods**  
*Rev. Gwynne Evans*

**The Countess of Huntingdon and the  
Congregationalists**  
*Rev. Gilbert Kirby*



**Congregational  
Studies Conference  
Papers  
1988**

**Alan Tovey,  
Gwynne Evans  
and  
Gilbert Kirby**

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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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# That Proud Independency

**Alan Tovey**

**T**o speak about *That Proud Independency* in a gathering such as this must put the speaker at considerable risk. In order to secure my safe passage from this room, I had better explain that the phrase is not mine.

Besides other calumnies, as of *schism* etc., ... that proud and insolent title of Independency was affixed to us, as our claim; the very sound of which conveys to all men's apprehension the challenge of exemption of all churches from all subjection and dependence, or rather a trumpet of defiance against whatever *Power, Spiritual or Civil*, which we do abhor and detest ...

So wrote Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Sidrach Simpson, Jeremiah Burroughs and William Bridge, five of the seven Independents who flew the Congregational flag at the Westminster Assembly (1643–48). Their book was called *An Apologeticall Narration* and it appeared in 1643. The passage we have quoted is a stern disclaimer of the isolationist connotations in the term Independency and reminds us that classical Independency always espoused what John Owen chose to call 'The Communion of Churches'.

The Independency of the mid-seventeenth century had a long and complicated history which reached back to the Separatism of Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

## 1 Elizabethan Separatism

The two extreme Puritan groups which emerged in Elizabeth's England, and which caused her much trouble, were the Presbyterians, under the leadership of Thomas Cartwright, who wanted to presbyterianise the Church of England, and the Separatists, who understandably gave it up as a bad job, pronounced it to be no true church at all, and left to start their own congregations.

We must avoid the idea that sixteenth century English Presbyterianism was the southern counterpart of its Scottish manifestation. Scottish Presbyterianism consisted of a fairly rigid, hierarchical system of courts from a General Assembly down to the local congregation. CG Bolam and Jeremy Goring, in the compendium *The English Presbyterians*, say that while the English Presbyterian, John Field, sought to encourage the Scottish pattern among his English colleagues they disapproved of his suggestion. They write:

The ministers were lukewarm in their support of Field's proposals for regular meetings of conference and synods. The majority of English puritan parsons looked no further than their parish boundaries and could muster little



enthusiasm for the ‘classical’ or hierarchical presbyterial system that was finding such favour in Scotland ... In furthering his idea of a church as a commanding unity embracing and controlling individual congregations he was introducing a concept that was unfamiliar and probably unacceptable to most English puritans.

Scholars have also underlined the similarity in their vision for the church between these English Presbyterians and the Separatists. So, in his *The English Separatist Tradition*, Dr BR White writes:

In many of their positive ideas, as well as in many of their negative criticisms, the Separatists were always to stand close to those of their less radical brethren who remained, albeit rather precariously, within the outward communion of the Church of England. The differences between the two groups, from the point of view of their picture of the true or ideal Church, were often slight; their chief difference was in their attitude to the Church of England as it then appeared.

While acknowledging the general thrust of these arguments, two points may be made.

Firstly, the Elizabethan Separatists certainly viewed the English Presbyterians as advocating a more centralised church structure than they themselves approved of, hence Barrow’s description of the Presbyterian system:

This council (the General Assembly) also executeth all the censures and duties of the church, as to make or depose ministers, to censure, excommunicate, *etc.* To conclude, as all these counsels have and exercise power and jurisdiction over the Church, so are they in authority one above an other: as the synods above the classes, the counsel above the synods, to confirm, abrogate, or disanul whatsoever constitutions or actions the other hath made.

Barrow is uneasy about Presbyterian synods because they consist only of ministers, because of the loss of privileges by individual congregations subsumed in the synod, and because their decisions are binding.

Nonetheless, secondly, while the Elizabethan Separatists placed great stress on the local gathered congregation, they did not themselves envisage such congregations as existing in isolation. Rather, they thought that churches should be in fellowship with like minded churches and make reference to each other on matters of mutual concern. This introduces us to the theme of this paper.

Robert Harrison (?–1585?) mentions the word synod, but does not elaborate. His contemporary Robert Browne (1550?–1633), who succeeded in disagreeing with most people in his time, is more specific. A synod is

a ioyning or partaking of the authoritie of manie Churches mette together in peace, for redresses and deciding of matters, which can not well be otherwise taken up.

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Again:

There be synods or the meeting of sundrie churches: which are when the weaker churches seek help of the stronger, for deciding and redressing of matters: or else the stronger looke to them for redresses.

Synods are envisaged, it seems, as comprising meetings of whole churches, not just of church leaders.

Henry Barrow, according to CS Lewis the finest prose writer of the sixteenth century, offers a similar argument. He says that Christ has not given one church more power than another and

synods and councils were not instituted to plucke away the power or to execute the publicke duties of the church, but to introduce, stir up, and confirme them in their duties, to help them to decide controversies, to show them the rules of God's words, and not to breake them or to make news.

Barrow sees the Council of Jerusalem of Acts 15 as the scriptural justification for his position.

## **2 Jacobean Separatism**

These Separatists were known to their contemporaries as semi-Separatists. They are often seen as the first Congregationalists proper. Whereas the earlier Separatists had totally eschewed any hint of fellowship with the Church of England—regarding it as ‘Babylon’—these Separatists were prepared to communicate with those congregations within the established church where the Word of God was truly preached. Among them were Henry Jacob (1563–1624), founder of the first Congregational Church here in Southwark in 1616, and John Robinson (1576?–1625), pastor to the Pilgrim Fathers. The earlier Separatist position with respect to the relationship between churches was continued by these Separatists. Hence, in one of seven articles signed by John Robinson and William Brewster in 1618, the authors said:

We beleeve y<sup>t</sup> no sinod, classis, convention or assembly of Ecclesiasticall Officers hath any power att all but as y<sup>e</sup> same by y<sup>e</sup> magistraet geven unto them.

And Henry Jacob affirmed

that no synod vnder y<sup>e</sup> Gospell hath power by Gods ordinance to prescribe & rule ecclesiastically sundry whole Churches if they severally consent not ...

### 3 Independents Of The Mid-seventeenth Century

The Separatists and early Congregationalists were writing in a largely theoretical situation. They had minimal opportunity to put into practice their conviction regarding synodical government. Thus they do not go into detail about it.

John Owen (1616–1683), with three-quarters of a century of non-conformist history behind him, does. Owen was converted to Congregationalism by reading John Cotton's *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*. Cotton (1585–1652) had become Vicar of Boston in Lincolnshire in 1612. He emigrated to America in 1633 and became pastor of the Congregational Church at Trimountain (i.e. Boston, Massachusetts). Owen had set out to refute Cotton's work. In his recent book *Saints: Visible, Orderly and Catholic: The Congregational Idea of the Church*, Dr Alan Sell comments on Owen as follows:

True, as regards the 'autonomy/fellowship' polarity within Congregationalism he traversed what he called 'the valley (I had almost said the pit) of *democratical confusion* and the precipitous rock of hierarchical tyranny'; but *temperamentally* his sympathies were more with Reformed concern for order than with the Anabaptist openness to the Spirit.

We may just add that the resolving of this tension between order and openness seems to be characteristic of the Separatist/Congregational tradition. And Owen, like Cotton, as we shall see, tended towards a firmer view of synods than some of his fellow Independents.

So to John Owen on synods.

#### i The area of their jurisdiction

That is, with what kind of issues are synods to deal? Owen lists four:

- 1 To preserve the Rule of Faith
- 2 To deter unruliness and schism
- 3 To protect church members from maladministration of discipline
- 4 To prevent anything 'Superstitious or vain' from being introduced into the worship of the churches.

#### ii Their Composition

Owen's exposition of this is particularly strong:

The persons to whom all sorts of ecclesiastical synods are to consist must be enquired into; and there is nothing of mere human prudential constitution that hath longer obtained in the church than that these should be officers of the churches only. And whereas, after the days of the apostles, we have no record of any synods of more churches than one, until after the distinction was made between bishops and presbyters, they were made up of both sorts of

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them; but afterward, those who were particularly called bishops enclosed this right unto themselves,—on what grounds God knows, there being not one tittle in the Scripture or the light of reason to give them countenance therein.

It must therefore be affirmed, that no persons, by virtue of any office merely, have right to be members of ecclesiastical synods, as such; neither is there either example or reason to give colour unto any such pretence. Further; no office-power is to be exerted in such synods as such, neither conjunctly by all the members of them, nor singly by any of them. Officers of the church, bishops, pastors, elders, may be present in them, ought to be present in them, are meetest for the most part so to be, but merely as such it belongs not unto them. The care, oversight, and rule of the churches whereunto they do belong, the flock among them distinctly, is committed unto them; and for that they are intrusted with power and authority by virtue of their office: but as unto their conjunction in synods, which is a mere act and effect of the communion of churches among themselves, it is not committed unto them in a way of peculiar right by virtue of their office.

### **iii Their Authority**

‘Advice’, ‘Counsel’, ‘Recommended’ are the words which make frequent appearance in Owen’s description of the precise nature of the jurisdiction the synod over the local church. He is fearful of the abuse of authority; so, he says, that before the member churches accept the judgement of the synod they must have regard as to whether Christ was present in the deliberation of the Assembly, and whether the synod has given due regard to the teachings of Scripture. He continues:

Without due exercise of judgement with respect unto these things, none can be obliged by any synodical determinations, seeing that, without them and on the want of them, many assemblies of bishops, who have the outward appearance and title of synods or councils, have been dens of thieves, robbers, idolaters, managing their synodical affairs with fury, wrath, horrible craft, according to their interest, unto the ruin of the church. Such were the second Ephesine, the second at Nice, and that at Trent, and others not a few.

Yet it was clear that Acts 15, the Council of Jerusalem, provides evidence for the rightfulness of Ecclesiastical synods and he devotes a page and a half, briefly considering, as he says, the nature of that synod. He concludes his exposition with a firm advocacy of the power of the synods.

Hence it will follow that a synod convened in the name of Christ, by the voluntary consent of several churches concerned in mutual communion, may declare and determine the mind of the Holy Ghost in the Scripture, and *decree* the observation of things true and necessary, because revealed and appointed in the Scripture; which are to be received, owned, and observed on the

evidence of the mind of the Holy Ghost in them, and on the *ministerial authority of the synod itself*.

In this statement, Owen goes further than the Separatists and some of his fellow Independents, and actually approaches the Presbyterian position. But, of course, in his activities he stops short of that.

Another leading Congregationalist, Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680), along with Philip Nye, commended John Cotton's *Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* in a preface to the volume. Yet together they felt that Cotton gave too much power to synods and rejected his appeal to Acts 15 as a precedent for such gatherings. However, they did acknowledge the usefulness of synods. Thus Goodwin, on another occasion, as Alan Sell has pointed out, wrote:

Though particular churches are not subject to synods, yet they are not wholly independent, but there is communion which they ought to hold with one another.

Clearly, there were some variations within the Separatist-Congregational tradition on this question of communion between churches and the role of synods. Nonetheless their position is to a large extent homogeneous and stands in *some* contrast to the Presbyterian teaching of the mid-seventeenth century. This contrast may be seen if we parallel the Savoy Declaration (1658) which, by the way, John Owen supported, with the *Westminster Confession* (1643–1646).

According to the *Savoy Declaration*, synods are to be convened to discuss points at issue, either in doctrine or administration, between the constituent churches. These churches may

by their Messengers meet in a synod or council, to consider and give their advice in, or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; Howbeit these synods so assembled are not entrusted with any Church-Power, properly so called, or with any Jurisdiction over the Churches themselves, to exercise any Censures, either over any Churches or Persons, or to impose their determinations on the Churches or Officers.

The *Westminster Confession* goes further. Ministers, 'by virtue of their office' may either meet in a synod by themselves 'or they, with other fit persons, upon delegation from their churches, may meet together in such assemblies'. *The Confession* goes on:

It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially, to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his Church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for

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their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God, appointed thereunto in his Word.

We are almost at an end. But I thought you may like to compare all this with the later Professor Gordon Rupp's summary of the early Baptist teaching on this subject, in his magnificent work *Religion in England 1688–1791*, published just a week before his death. Quoting CA Underwood's *A History of the English Baptists*, but with what is perhaps something of an overstatement, he writes:

Nor do they [the Baptists] succumb to the congregational atomism of some Independents. The seventeenth-century words 'Association' and 'Assembly' were important for them. Some congregations were so closely linked as to resemble the later Methodist circuit, and there were those who walked or rode great distances to meet their fellows, like the family which commuted between Watford and London.

The seventeenth century saw the emergence of regional associations of churches which were to endure for centuries, and had something of the robust vigour which comes from being earthed in an English county. Nor were these more improvised groupings, for the many seventeenth-century Baptist confessions offer a rationale of such solidarity. Thus the General Baptist Creed of 1678 affirmed that 'General Councils or Assemblies ... of the several churches of Christ ... make but one church and have no lawful right in this general assembly to act in the name of Christ.' The first assembly of the Particular Baptists was held in 1689 and to it more than a hundred congregations in England and Wales sent representatives, affirming their intention 'to be helpers together of one another by way of counsel and advice' while disclaiming 'all manner of superiority or superintendency over the churches'.

## **Conclusion**

Hence, Congregationalism in its formative years clearly saw a place for synods. Furthermore, there have been attempts to unite the Congregational and Presbyterian systems as, for example, under *The Heads of Agreement* of 1691—the so-called *Happy Union*. No doubt the early Congregationalists were heirs of their reformed theological background, which meant that, to a considerable degree, they had a common inheritance with their Presbyterian brethren. However, though differing emphases on the authority of synods are to be found among the Congregationalists, they all laid out considerable stress on local autonomy. But some of them saw synods as ordained by Christ, and sought specific scriptural justification in the Council of Jerusalem of Acts 15. They saw synods as gatherings of representatives of the churches, not merely to act as a talking shop but to recommend and advise

the constituent churches. Some, such as Owen and Cotton, went further than this, while stopping short of Presbyterianism. It would certainly have been viewed as a serious thing for an individual church to reject the counsel of the other churches. And while such an assembly would not be able to enforce its judgement as in a rigid Presbyterian scheme, it held the ultimate sanction of its member churches withdrawing fellowship from the errant church.

What about modern-day Congregationalism? It has a strongly independent streak. The term Independent, renounced by the early Congregationalists because of its insubordinate implications, is now a cherished epithet; a badge proudly to be worn and displayed! Our forefathers, however, detected a clear danger, namely that Independent can be a mask for self-will, and spiritual insubordination—the refusal to submit to legitimate spiritual authority. Sometimes Congregationalism is almost viewed as little more than the championship of the spiritual rights of the individual. All this of course is a travesty. It does seem that Congregationalism has been influenced by democratic aspirations generally as, it appears, the Methodist denomination has been. It might also be said that political leaders in the early years of Dissent, feared that the congregational rights advocated by the Separatists might be transferred to the state! Historic Congregationalism held in tension rights and responsibilities. It was no doubt encouraged to do this by the political situation in which it often found itself. Civil disabilities and penalties, such as Dissenters suffered, encouraged them generally to co-operate, or at least sometimes to show a united front against the common foe.

In the early years, Congregationalism was a proscribed form of churchmanship: after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and the Great Ejection of 1662, Dissenters suffered from a series of Acts which virtually prevented them from worshipping publicly (the *Conventicle Act* of 1664); and it made it impossible for pastors to earn a living (the *Five Mile Act* of 1665). Their situation was considerably relieved by the *Toleration Act* of 1689, though disabilities still remained and Nonconformists were barred from studying at Oxford or Cambridge until as late as the last century. The Evangelical Revival revived and strengthened Congregationalism and gave a new impetus for the Congregational churches to work together. The eventual outcome was the formation of the Congregational Union in May 1832, when 26 out of 34 of the County Associations agreed to the Union. The foundation document of the Congregational Union—the Declaration of 1833—saw a place for co-operation between the churches, while denying any assembly authority over the local congregation. It stated:

no church, nor union of churches, has any right or power to interfere with the faith or discipline of any other church, further than to separate from such as, in faith or practice, depart from the gospel of Christ.

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So Congregationalism has always toyed with the question: how are churches to relate together? What is taken as granted is that somehow they should!

Let me close with a passage which seems to epitomise the spirit of true Congregationalism:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interest, but also to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:1-4



# Richard Mather—The True Use of Synods

**Gwynne Evans**

In the last forty years there has been a great resurgence of the Biblical truths found in the Puritan declarations of faith of the seventeenth century, ie the Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration and the 1689 Baptist Confession. This fact is surely a matter of much thanksgiving to God that there are many ministers within the EFCC who whole-heartedly subscribe to such doctrinal statements as the Savoy Declaration, which English Congregationalism is based upon, and, by the grace of God, are seeking to preach the truths found in these declarations, because they are convinced of the Biblical source that they are derived from.

Whilst this is true, the question of whether we have fully rediscovered the ecclesiology of our founding fathers is another matter. Whilst acknowledging we have a minimum basic confession of faith which we subscribe to each year within the Fellowship, there is a tremendous diversity of opinions and interpretations on many important subjects and practices within the churches which our forefathers were clear about. Examples of this are: What constitutes worship? Who should preach? What is the role of women in the church? What is the role of the eldership? What is the role and authority of the minister? Who do we marry? What do we do when open sin is found in the fellowship? What do you do when the minister is accused of some failure or even dismissed from the church for no Scriptural reason? What is the relationship of the elders to the church meeting?

You may well say, 'Well the Lord Jesus is the head of the church' and thank God he is! You might well say, 'he guides each one of us when we meet in our church meetings' and yes, we can thank God that the Holy Spirit has promised to presence himself with us in the meeting and guide us, but we need to remind ourselves that it doesn't mean to say that all church meetings are infallible. John Owen (Vol. 16, p. 223): 'Churches,' he said, 'can make mistakes in doctrine, discipline and administration, these maladministrations should then be rectified.' God is not the author of confusion but order. And, sad to say, there is an awful lot of confusion within our independent churches, with all manner of matters and subjects and things which take place which are totally unscriptural. I am sure we think of the verse in Judges 'that every man did what was right in his own eyes'. We need to remind ourselves that it is Christ that rules the church and we are ever to seek to do that which is right in Christ's eyes, not in our own eyes.

One such person who contributed greatly to the ecclesiology and practice of the church in the seventeenth century was a man called Richard Mather. If you were present last year or have read Digby James' paper on 'John Cotton's Doctrine of the Church', you will know that he mentioned his name as the author of the Cambridge Platform which is the Confession of Faith and Practice of the New England Congregational Churches, 1648. But, for most people, the name is unfamiliar. You may have seen *The Great Works of Christ in America* written by Cotton Mather. Cotton Mather was the grandson of Richard Mather and John Cotton.

Now what I propose to do is to consider:

First of all, a brief outline of Richard Mather's life and ministry. A great man of God; a giant in this country and New England.

Secondly, the historical background to Richard Mather's involvement in the question of synods.

Thirdly, his view of the church.

Fourthly, Richard Mather's view of the Scriptural place of the synod.

Fifthly, Richard Mather's view on the purpose of the synod.

Sixthly, his view on the power of synods.

## **Life and Ministry**

Richard Mather lived from 1595 to 1669. He was born in Lowton, half way between Manchester and Liverpool, on the East Lancashire Road. His parents, though affected by debts and a large mortgage, were able to educate him at Warwick. At the age of 16 he became the first school teacher at Toxteth Park, Liverpool. Here he lodged with a godly man, Mr Aspinall, and his family. It was here, through the godliness of this man, that he realised that he was 'out of the way'. It was also by the preaching of a Mr Harrison of Huyton and the reading of William Perkins on 'How Far a Reprobate May Go in Religion' that he became under great conviction of sin and it was after some time in this condition that the Holy Spirit healed his broken heart by the great and precious promises of the gospel.

Isn't it marvellous just to remind ourselves of the fact that the Spirit of God not only brings conviction to men's hearts and brings us awareness of our great need of Christ and our sinfulness, but he is also able to heal us and to apply the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel remedy for our souls.

It was said that what the Mathers—Richard, his four sons and many grandsons—did for New England under God, may be attributed in no small degree to the holy life of Edward Aspinall. Mr Aspinall encouraged him, with the church at Toxteth, to prepare for the Christian ministry. What an encouragement this is

to any of you who may be Sunday School teachers or youth workers. We never know what God is able to do through our faithful and godly witness.

In 1618 he was sent to Brasenose College, Oxford. This stay at Oxford was cut short when the church at Toxteth Park extended a call to him to instruct their children and themselves. He commenced preaching and was ordained in 1619. The Bishop of Chester said to him after his ordination 'I have an earnest request unto you sir and you must not deny me, 'tis that you should pray for me, for I know the prayer of the man that fears God will avail much and you, I believe, are such a one'. Well, it was certainly an indication of the powerful ministry this man had, and was able to give, that right at the beginning of his ministry the Bishop of Chester could make this comment.

William Gellibrand, a noted Puritan preacher from Warrington, asked his name after hearing him preach. He answered 'Richard Mather' (pronounced with a northern short 'A'). No, he replied 'His name is not Mather but Matter, for believe it, this man has substance in him'. Thomas Hooker said of him 'His preaching was not over the heads, but into the hearts of his hearers'. And surely that gives us a measure of what sort of man he was. A great man of prayer, a great preacher who could stir men, who could direct the arrow of the gospel to the heart. God grant that we who preach may preach not over the heads but into the hearts and may our preaching be full of the MATTER of Christ.

Richard Mather continued at Toxteth for 15 years until 1633, when various complaints by other clergy of his non conformity to the ceremonies—making the sign of the cross, wearing of the surplice, receiving of the elements kneeling—came to the ears of the church leaders. This earned him a harsh and severe suspension from the church. Before the commissioners he was scolded in the most gross and offensive manner. He says:

The terror of their threatening words and the rest of their pomp, did not terrify my mind. I could stand before them without being daunted in least measure, but answered for myself such words of truth and soberness as the Lord put into my mouth, not being afraid of their faces at all.

During this time of suspension he made a careful study of the Congregational way asserted by Cartwright, Parker, Baines and Ames which he became convinced was Biblical. Realising his difficult plight, he corresponded with Thomas Hooker and to other brethren who had similar views. (Thomas Hooker, like Richard Mather, went to New England in 1635.) He consulted with the church at Toxteth and with Lancashire ministers as to what course of action he should take.

In 1634 Archbishop Laud ruled with a rod of iron. Even the churches in the north were not exempt from his jurisdiction. Proceedings were again brought against Richard Mather by the Archbishop of York, who suspended him, yet again, for his non-conformity. This was the final straw and after much prayer

and heartache he decided it was right to move to New England. In *Great Works of Christ in America* (Vol. 1, p. 448) he gives six reasons why he left England.

- 1 A removal from a corrupt church to a purer.
- 2 A removal from a place where the truth and professors of it are persecuted, unto a place of more quiet and safety.
- 3 A removal from a place where all the ordinances of Christ cannot be enjoyed, unto a place where they may.
- 4 A removal from a church where the discipline of the Lord Jesus Christ is wanting, unto a church where it may be practised.
- 5 A removal from a place where the ministers of God are justly inhibited from the execution of their functions, to a place where they may more freely execute the same.
- 6 A removal from a place where there are fearful signs of desolation, to a place where one may have well grounded hope of God's protection.

When Richard Mather came to New England, he received numerous invitations to minister, and was in a great strait. He took counsel, as an ordinance of God, for direction. John Cotton and Thomas Hooker advised him to accept the invitation of the church at Dorchester. Here he settled on 23 August 1636 and continued to be a blessing to the churches in the area until his home call 34 years later, at the age of 74, in 1670.

Such was the esteem of the church at Huyton, Liverpool, that they had extended an invitation for him to return to Liverpool when the hierarchy of the church had been removed, round about 1640, but he declined to go.

## **Family**

In 1650 Richard Mather's wife died. They had six sons, among whom were Samuel who became a pastor in Dublin, Nathanael who became the minister at Dorchester after his father's death, Eleazer who was the minister of Northampton, and Increase who was minister at Boston (he was the father of Cotton Mather). In 1656, Richard Mather married the widow of John Cotton.

## **Historical Background to Mather's Involvement in the Question of Synods**

When Richard Mather came to New England the church organisation was almost complete.

- 1 The church was restricted to visible saints, those who gave evidence of holiness—those who said 'Yes, I know the Lord', and evidenced it by the life they lived.

- 2 The church was self governing, separated from the state and other institutions, though depending upon the state, in part, for support. The church in New England has been described as non-separated Congregationalism.
- 3 Members were in covenant one to another. The promises made to God were a very important part of the life of the church in New England and have certainly been in our own land. We are men in covenant relationship, and the promises we make to one another before God, we make to God, and the church recognised they were in covenant one to another, to pray for one another, to support one another, to care for one another.
- 4 Ministers were called to the local church through election and then, once ordained and inducted into the church, would require obedience from the church to the office bearers of the church, being the elders. Members were at liberty to give consent to major decisions taken by elders. The church was involved in the admission of new members and the discipline of 'strays among the faithful'. Ministers required obedience from their congregations. This particular view proved susceptible to amendment and change in practice. The strong pastor could render the liberty of the lay brethren almost meaningless if the pastor chose. Equally so, the church in some cases expanded its liberty from consent to an authority to rule the pastor and eldership.

A variety of form and various questions troubled the church in New England at this time, from 1636 onwards. What authority did the minister have? What authority did the members of the church have in governing the church? Could churches enter into ecclesiastical arrangements i.e. synods?

One such dispute had arisen by the views of a Mrs Hutchinson which were found to be antinomian (meaning that the Christian is freed from the moral law). The first synod ever held in New England was on 30 August 1637 in Cambridge. Thomas Hooker and Peter Bulkeley acted as moderators and by 82 members, ascribed her teaching as antinomian.

Also in New England were many brethren who left England as non-conformists rather than separatists. They refused to reject the Church of England as 'anti-Christian' and hoped for a resurgence of the established church in a Presbyterian form. During Richard Mather's early years in New England much correspondence took place between the brethren in England and in New England. In 1639, Mather answered a questionnaire of thirty two questions, on behalf of the New England churches, sent by the Puritan brethren, who were later to assemble at the Westminster Assembly 1643–1647. The questionnaire covered the whole field of church polity and procedure, constitution, church membership, methods of procedure in ministerial settlements (placements) and lay preaching.

News of the direction of the church polity and practice through this questionnaire brought the Presbyterians in England and Scotland to be greatly alarmed at the

direction of the New England church. On the one hand it smacked of repression but on the other hand of anarchy. Two leading Presbyterians—Samuel Rutherford (Scotland) and Charles Herle (England) challenged the Scriptural validity of the New England Congregationalists. Samuel Rutherford (later to become Professor of Divinity at St Andrews) wrote the *Due Right of Presbyteries* in 1644. Charles Herle (who preached before the Long Parliament) wrote the *Independency of Churches* in 1643. Their criticism drew answers from Thomas Hooker, whose reply is found in the *Survey of the Sum of Church Discipline* and John Cotton referred to Rutherford and Herle in *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*. Richard Mather answered Herle in *A Brotherly Answer to Mr Charles Herle Against Independent Churches*, declaring the true use of synods in 1643 (copy in Rylands Library, Manchester). He also replied to Mr Rutherford in 1647 (this book is found in the Congregational Library).

In 1647 a synod was convened by the churches in New England to deal with pressing questions of baptism and church membership. Circumstances made these questions less important as the question of the broad function of the synod was debated. The reason for this was that the churches of New England had received copies of the (not yet printed) Westminster Confession of Faith which states that the synod's power is over and above the local church. This was unacceptable to the New England churches. At this synod, they declared the Westminster Confession as 'holy, orthodox judicials in all matters of faith. Only in those things which had respect to church discipline and church government did they disagree' (*Great Works of Christ in America*, p. 180).

It was then that the church requested three men to draw up codes of church discipline—Ralph Partridge, John Cotton and Richard Mather. In the following year the synod met and accepted the code of church discipline drawn up by Richard Mather which is called 'The Platform of Church Discipline'. The Platform gives to us a wealth of Scriptural teaching on the nature of the church, members' responsibility to the church, pastors' and elders' responsibilities and inter-church fellowship and the power and function of the synods and much more.

## **View of the Church**

In *The Platform of Church Discipline*, the nature of particular visible churches is described.

A Congregational Church is, by the institution of Christ, a part of the militant visible church, consisting of a company of saints by calling, united into one body by a holy covenant, in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus (*CPC*, p. 205).

Richard Mather gives us helpful information on the size of local churches and the quantity. He says that the quantity of members ought not to be of greater

number than ordinarily meet together conveniently on one place. Also, he goes on to say

and not fewer than may conveniently carry on church work. If a congregation cannot carry on its functions as a church it is better to join with brethren who are of a near geographical location and thus strengthen the brethren there.

Yet he says

Such a gathering of saints was and is a complete church in and of itself, even though the numbers be few, having power of the keys to admitting and discipline, to ordain and to censure.

But the question is posed by Thomas Herle (in *Independency of the Churches*), does two or three mean that those people are a church? Have two or three the power of the keys?

In Richard Mather's reply to Thomas Herle, he gives us a helpful explanation of Matthew 18:20 (in connection with small congregations)—'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst.' Does two or three constitute a church? I put this in because I believe it is relevant to our own situation in EFCC and as we have many small causes. Mather says:

If any hold to small numbers, two or three, to be a church, so complete as to have the power of excommunication etc., we for our part see a church that has such power, must be of a greater number than two or three [this quote is condensed].

He sees it as impossible to implement Matthew 18:15–16 without more people in the church than four, the offended brother, the offender, the witnesses, and then the church. He says:

before any offence can be brought to the church the offended brother must go to the person who was offended personally, tell him of the offence and, if he fails to hear him, he then takes with him witnesses, one or two.

Scripturally, in the Old Testament, it is in the light of two witnesses that every word shall be established and the one who has been offended tells the offender, and then if he fails to hear him in the light of witnesses, he is to tell the church. Which he says

Is of another number greater than they and distinct from them to whom the matter is brought.

The Lord does not acknowledge two or three to be a church but our Lord uses an argument from the lesser to the greater to prove the inviolable authority of Christ and her censures of which he speaks in verse 18, 'whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven'. If in verse 14, two or three gathered together on earth shall be heard in whatsoever they ask, how much more will the whole

*Richard Mather and the True Use of Synods*

church, which is the greater number and the more solemn assembly, be heard in their prayers, and here Christ's presence with them to bind and loose in heaven what they bind and loose on earth. Since verses 19–20 are true for two and three, how much more the latter, the church, in verse 18 (John Owen Vol. 16, p. 36 makes a similar point).

In the Cambridge Platform, chapter 15, Richard Mather brings out the distinctive characteristics of the local churches, that they are distinct and equal and do not have power over one another. And he goes on to say 'All churches ought to preserve Church-communion one with another, because they are all united unto Christ'. This communion, he goes on to say, is evidenced in six ways—

- 1 By way of mutual care in taking thought for one another's welfare.
- 2 By way of consultation one with another, when we have occasion to require the judgement and counsel of other churches, touching any person or cause wherewith they may be better acquainted than ourselves.
- 3 By way of admonition (Galatians 2:11,14). Paul had no authority over Peter, yet when he saw Peter not walking aright he publicly rebuked him before the church, though churches have no more authority over one another than one Apostle had over another yet, as one Apostle might admonish another, so may one church admonish another and yet without usurpation.
- 4 By way of participation: the members of one church occasionally coming unto another, to partake with of the Lord's Table, it being the seal of our communion not only with Christ, nor only with the members of our own church, but also with all the churches of the saints.
- 5 By way of recommendation: when a member of one church hath occasion to reside in another church, if but for a season, we commend him to their watchful fellowship by letters of recommendation.
- 6 By way of Church-communion: to minister relief and succour one to another, either of able members to furnish them with officers, or of outward support to the necessities of poorer churches (Romans 13:26–27).

Well, there's much there to give us food for thought. Are the stronger churches caring for the weaker churches? Are there churches which could be helped by your work in that local assembly? If the pastor and eldership feels it right, are you prepared to go along and help in a very difficult situation.

All of these are expanded—one helpful illustration he gives is of how churches should plant other churches:

It is fit to propagate one church out of another, by sending forth such of their members as are willing to remove and to procure some officers to them as may enter with them into church estate among themselves. As bees, when the hive is too full, issue forth by swarms and are gathered into other hives, so the Church of Christ may do the same upon necessity (*CPC*, p. 231–233).



## Scriptural Place of the Synod

Richard Mather was convinced of the Scriptural validity of synods. He states in the Platform:

Synods, orderly assembled and rightly proceeding according to the pattern of Acts 15, we acknowledge as the ordinance of Christ. And though not absolutely necessary to the being, yet many times, through the iniquity of men, are necessary to the well-being of churches, and for the establishment of truth and peace therein (*CPC*, p. 233).

In Richard Mather's answer to Thomas Herle (chapter 4, *The True Use of Synods*) on Acts 15 in which Herle states the occasion, subject and form and end of the synod, Richard Mather states—

for our part, we deny not that there ought to be synods and your argument concludes no more.

He proceeded to give two reasons why the assembly at Acts 15 was a synod. He defines a synod, as he understood it, to be a consociation (conference) or combination of more churches than one even of two at least. It is neither a general council nor a national or provincial synod but a particular council. The fact that those who took part in the synod were not only apostles (those extraordinary officers) but elders and brethren of Jerusalem, Acts 15:6,22–23, besides Paul and Barnabas and certain others who were sent from Antioch.

The means they used for clearing the controversies then in hand was not the apostolic authority nor any extraordinary persons. The means they used to clear the controversy was the ordinary means of disputation and debate as in verse 7. 'And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up and said unto them, men and brethren.' Peter related God's leading and blessing upon his ministry to the Gentiles—to Cornelius and his family. In verse 12, Paul and Barnabas spoke of how God had used them in mighty miracles and in the salvation of sinners. James reminds the council of the testimony of the prophets and by these means and no other was the subject in hand cleared, no prophecy or vision or apostolic word.

So Mather's argument, that it was through the discussion of the Scriptures and through the debate of the Scriptures, that the brethren at Antioch came to a clear understanding that circumcision was no longer necessary for salvation. Mather then, in *The Platform of Church Discipline*, saw synods as being spiritual, ecclesiastical assemblies and are therefore made up of spiritual and ecclesiastical causes. He says—

The next efficient cause of them under Christ is the power of the churches sending forth their elders and other messengers who, met together in the name of Christ, are the delegates of the synod and they, in arguing and debating and

determining matters of religion according to the word and publishing the same to all the churches whom it concerns, do put forth the proper and formal acts of a synod, to the conviction of errors and heresies and the establishment of truth and peace in the churches which is the end of a synod.

## **The Purpose of the Synod**

Mather states the case found in Scripture. The church at Antioch had a fundamental problem, which was a doctrinal dispute. Is circumcision necessary for salvation in addition to faith in Christ? (*The True Use of Synods*, p. 60)

The churches at Antioch did undertake to end the matter among themselves and spent much time about it. Before there was any speech or seeking out for help from elsewhere, as appears from verse 2 when therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

This does sufficiently declare it that they were not necessarily dependent upon any other church or churches, but had the right to have ended the matter within themselves if ability had served thereto, or else, this understanding of theirs had been *sinful* as being an attempt to do that which they had no right. And though by reason of much dissension among themselves they were forced to seek help for ending the dissension. This may argue want of ability and light, but argues not any want at all of authority or right (in which respect they might be independent, notwithstanding their imperfection) being Independent churches. From this argument, section 4 of the Cambridge Platforms, Mather states—

The purpose of the synods is to determine controversies of faith and cases of conscience and to clear from the Word holy directions for the worship of God and good government of the church. To bear witness against maladministration, corruption in doctrine, in manners and in particular churches and to give direction for the reformation thereof.

## **The Power of the Synod**

Richard Mather makes a distinction that the synod has the power of the decrees i.e. to clear up the truth dogmatically—the word ‘decrees’ is drawn from Acts 16:4, where the Greek word is *dogmata*—doctrine. ‘And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for them to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and the elders which were at Jerusalem.’

This power we confess is in a synod though not all in the synod alone, but also in the presbytery of a single congregation.

The synods directions, as according with the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and admission, not only for their agreement therewith but also, secondarily, for the power whereof they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his word.

Those churches who would not receive the teaching of the synod accepted by the churches, being declared from the Scriptures, would, if in continual disagreement and conflict with such doctrines that had been decided, would then be disassociated from the fellowship of churches. This is what Thomas Hooker said—

Such consociations [conferences] and synods have allowance to counsel and admonish other churches, as the case may require (*CPC*, p. 147).

Mather saw that the power of censure was not in the synod, ultimate power of church discipline was in the local church. But the churches that did not heed or pay attention to such direction or doctrine, agreed by the synods and accepted by the churches, and who remained obstinate in error and sinful miscarriages of administration which had taken place were, in effect, separating themselves from the universal body of Christ. And the synods of churches renounced the right hand of fellowship, which is different from excommunication (see *CPC*, p. 147). By this means, churches which walked together in fellowship, were able to recognise and reprove those disorderly churches in an orderly way, so that they might once more walk in the light of Scripture, thus glorifying God.

## Conclusions

I have sought to give an outline of Richard Mather's view of the use of synods. We need to remember that a similar view of synods was held in England by Thomas Goodwin (Vol. 11) and John Owen (Vol. 16) and was reflected in the *Savoy Declaration*. Recently, Rev. David Kingdom gave a paper at the Carey Conference which also showed that Baptist churches in the Oxford area and in South Wales held a similar view on inter-church relationships and of synods. I don't think anyone will deny that within 'Independency' in the country, there have been many occasions in which churches have acted in unscriptural ways. Sometimes we hear of grave injustices and summary dismissals of pastors for no scriptural warrant. Likewise, we hear of elders or deacons removed from office without just and Biblical cause, and occasionally, members can be disciplined wrongly.

In the area of church practice, the maxim seems to be 'every church does that which is right in its own eyes', hence our churches vary so much from congregation to congregation. Also doctrinal difficulties have caused churches to be rent asunder. Such problems bring nothing but grief and sadness to the churches concerned and, more importantly, it is a disgrace and dishonour to God.

Yet the cry goes up 'there is nothing we can do, as each church is Independent'. How long are we going to continue in our Independency which is so far removed from the Congregationalism envisaged by our forefathers. In this respect they would not recognise us!

## **What Can be Done**

Surely we need again to consider the relevant Scriptures which relate to this important subject and their implications within EFCC.

When problems do come, for which we find that, as pastors and churches, we are unable to come to satisfactory Biblical answers, either by lack of ability or knowledge to solve the problem, then we should not be too proud to consult our fellow churches, ministers and elders (office bearers) who walk in fellowship with us, whose advice and counsel should be taken and weighed and acted upon. If the problem is so complex and difficult that local men have not been able to help, then a much wider group of those leaders within the fellowship nationally should be consulted and that counsel then weighed and acted upon in the light of Scripture by the local church which has the difficulty. This will be time consuming and demanding on every church within the Fellowship but this is honouring to God, whereas unsettled strife and division always dishonours God.

When we hear of churches who are in the Fellowship experiencing difficulties and who have gone into error in trying to remove the problem, it is no good 'burying our heads in the sand' and saying we can't do anything about it. We have a responsibility to find out the facts and then endeavour to place before the church with the problem the Biblical answer. 'If they fail to act upon Christ's command and will to them, then they may admonish them and withdraw communion from them' (Goodwin in Vol. II p. 244).

Richard Mather's view of synods didn't usurp the authority of the local church, but it brought about a much healthier inter-dependency of Congregational churches upon each other, instead of isolationism. Such inter-dependency of local churches serves to strengthen the church of Christ, bringing about a greater co-operation and care for each other, and hence, bring glory to Christ in the mutual building up of the saints, and a church which is far more effective in the day and age in which we live. We need afresh to look again at the work of synods in the light of Scripture. May God grant us help to do so in the days ahead.

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## **Appendix I**

### **Chapter Analysis of The True Use of Synods by Richard Mather**

#### **Chapter 1**

Observations upon passages which state Thomas Herle's questions—

That Independency denies to a synod, as a name of a church, to all manner of power of Jurisdiction either to determine or in any way oblige such as they shall in any way represent.

#### **Chapter 2**

Answer to Charles Herle's first argument taken from the manner of government in the Jewish Church laid down. Herle's argument proposed in a form of a syllogism.

As the congregation of Israel were dependent, so must corrections be in these days. But congregations in Israel were dependent on the ministerial government of a synod, therefore, in these days congregations must be dependent on the ministerial government of a synod.

#### **Chapter 3**

An answer to the second argument taken from Matthew 18.

#### **Chapter 4**

An answer to the third argument from Acts 15.

#### **Chapter 5**

An answer to the fourth argument taken from 1 Timothy 4:14, the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.

## **Appendix II**

### **Cambridge Platform**

#### **Chapter 16 on Synods**

- 1 Synods orderly assembled and rightly proceeding according to the pattern of Acts 15, we acknowledge as the pattern of Christ and though not absolutely necessary to the being, yet many times through iniquity of men and perverseness of times, necessary to the well-being of churches, for the establishment of truth and peace therein.
- 2 Synods being spiritual and ecclesiastical assemblies are, therefore, made up of spiritual and ecclesiastical causes. The next efficient cause of them, under Christ, is the power of the churches sending forth their elders and other messengers (Acts 15:2–3), who being met together in the name of Christ, are the matter of a synod; and they in arguing and debating and determining, matters of religion (verse 6) according to the word, and publishing the same to the churches it concerneth (verses 7–23) do put forth the proper and formal acts of a synod (verse 31) to the conviction of errors and heresies; and the establishment of truth and peace in the churches, which is the end of a synod (Acts 16:4,15).
- 3 Magistrates have power to call a synod by calling to the churches to send forth their elders and other messengers to counsel and assist them in matters of religion (2 Chronicles 29:4,4–11): but yet the constituting of a synod is a church act and may be transacted by the churches (Acts 15) even when civil magistrates may be enemies to churches and to church assemblies.
- 4 It belongeth unto synods and councils to debate and determine controversies of faith and cases of conscience, (Acts 15:1–2,6–7; 1 Chronicles 15:13; 2 Chronicles 29:6–7; Acts 15:24,28–29) to clear from the word holy directions for the holy worship of God and good government of church; to bear witness against maladministration and corruption in doctrine or manners, in any particular church, and to give directions for the reformation thereof; not to exercise church-censures in way of discipline, nor any other act of church authority or jurisdiction which that presidential synod did forbear.
5. The synod's directions and determinations, so far as consonant to the word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement therewith (Acts 15) (which is the principal ground thereof, and without which they bind not at all) but also secondarily, for the poor whereby they are made of being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his word.

- 6 Because it is difficult, it is not impossible, for many churches to come together in one place, in their members universally; therefore they may assemble by their delegates or messengers, as the church at Antioch went not all to Jerusalem, but some select men for that purpose (Acts 15:2), because none are or should be more fit to know the state of the churches, nor to advise of ways for the good thereof, than elders; therefore it is fit that, in the choice of the messengers for such assemblies, they have special respect unto such; yet, inasmuch as not only Paul and Barnabas but certain others also (Acts 15:2,22–23) were sent to Jerusalem from Antioch (Acts 15) and when they were come to Jerusalem, not only the apostles and elders, but other brethren, also do assemble and meet about the matter; therefore synods are to consist both of elders and other church members, endued with gifts, and sent by the churches, not excluding the presence of any brethren in the churches.

# The Countess of Huntingdon and the Congregationalists

**Gilbert Kirby**

**Y**ou may wonder what qualifications I have to speak on this subject. I'm beginning to wonder myself. However, it is 50 years since I was ordained as a Congregational minister in Essex. I went to what was originally known as the Old Independent Meeting, a Church that had been founded in 1662 when the local vicar had been expelled from his living and had founded the Independent Chapel. In my day it had been rebuilt of course, and it was known as the New Congregational Church, in Halstead, Essex. I served there for about 7 years, right to the war, and then went to Ashford in Middlesex—of which you've certainly heard since you have such a distinguished chairman here this afternoon! There was one pastor in between me and Derek Swann but he is, in a sense, my successor at Ashford.

So I served two Congregational Churches and then, to my intense surprise, I was eased out of being Congregational minister at Ashford. I had no wish to leave whatsoever, but I was invited unanimously to become the general secretary of the Evangelical Alliance. I had never done an office job—I didn't see myself particularly as an administrator—but it did seem a compelling call. I served there for 10 years and enjoyed it very much, but I felt all the time that I needed to have pastoral input. I needed to meet ordinary people and not just sit round boardroom tables and discuss, with pundits, policy matters. And so I offered myself as honorary pastor to a Countess of Huntingdon Church in Turners Hill in Sussex and I served there in all for thirteen years, ten of which while I was in London at the Evangelical Alliance, and the remainder of the time while I was principal of the London Bible College. And it was from that position that I retired 8 years ago this year. So you now know who you're dealing with—a proper hybrid in many ways but I'm not apologetic for that, because it's given me an insight into the way different Christians think. I've been privileged, in a marvellous way, to get to know a lot of people in the course of these 50 years. But I must keep to my subject.

I'm not going to say a great deal about the Countess of Huntingdon—I'll say a little of course. This isn't a commercial, but I did write a book called *The Elect Lady* some years ago now. It's probably a bit out of date although, of course, when you're dealing with history it doesn't get out of date like other issues do. If anybody wants to read more, I haven't got a supply of them, but if you leave



me 50p I'll send you a copy when I can get hold of some because I haven't got a supply with me.

Now Selina (we were very naughty when I was at college, we used to call her Semolina) but her name was Selina. I was, by the way, trained at the college which she had founded, so that's another link between the two. It then existed in Cambridge—sadly it doesn't exist any more—and was known as Cheshunt College. Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, who has been referred to as the 'Queen of the Methodists' was, undoubtedly, a formidable lady and one who played a significant part in the evangelical revival two centuries ago. She could be described as the patroness of the revival. She was influenced as a young woman by the preaching of the word and particularly by the preaching of John Wesley, George Whitefield and many others who were caught up in the revival. But the remarkable change in her way of life followed her conversion which was largely influenced by seeing a change in the life of her sister-in-law, Lady Margaret Hastings.

When the Countess did anything she did it thoroughly and when she became a Christian she was certainly not half-hearted. She gave herself generously, completely, to the Lord's work, even selling her jewels to help pay for a church to be built. She was a staunch member of the Church of England and her position in society was such that she was entitled to have domestic chaplains. At one time, she was said to have more private chaplains than the Archbishop of Canterbury. Among her chaplains was William Romaine, Thomas Haweis and John Berridge. George Whitefield, however, became her favourite chaplain and she sponsored him in many ways. He declared her to be 'all aflame for Jesus'. Philip Doddridge said of her 'I think I never saw so much of the image of God in a woman on earth'. The king, George III, said to a bishop 'I wish there was a Lady Huntingdon in every diocese in the kingdom'.

She was a woman of strong personality, considerable discernment, and outstanding organisational ability. She pioneered what later became known as cottage and drawing room meetings. She opened her house—she had a number of homes of course—she opened them for this purpose. Members of the aristocracy were ushered upstairs to hear the great preachers of the day, whilst the poor were received into the large kitchen, given a good meal and then given the opportunity to hear such men as John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield and Henry Venn. She founded a college at Trevecca, in Wales, for the training of preachers, and built or subsidised many local Chapels. The first of her 'proprietary Chapels', as they are referred to, was opened in Brighton in 1760. Her method was simple; she would build a Chapel with a small house attached, she then placed one of her chaplains in charge and opened the Chapel for public worship. At her death, there were 84 Lady Huntingdon Chapels, as they became known. Her declared

## *The Countess of Huntingdon and the Congregationalists*

aim was not to found a new denomination but to awaken and rekindle faith within the established church.

It was a matter of very great disappointment to her that before her death she was expelled from the Church of England. She was, however, compelled to become a dissenter and she forfeited the support of her Anglican chaplains who left her at that point. The ecclesiastical hierarchy objected to the fact that she appointed chaplains and arranged their ordination without always referring to the bishops. For some, Lady Huntingdon was too much of a dissenter, but for others, she was too much of an Anglican. (You can't win can you!)

Thomas Haweis, after her death, was one of those instrumental in forming her Chapels into a Connexion and on 1 February 1793, a trust deed was drawn up to safeguard the future of the Chapels. Prospective students to her college, and also members of the Connexion, trustees and so on, have always been asked, indeed it is insisted upon, that they sign the 15 Articles of Faith which were drawn up, largely based on the 39 Articles of the Church of England, and at the same time they were called upon to renounce all Pelagian, Arian, Socinian, Antinomian and Arminian doctrines and principles and to accept those doctrines only in the 15 Articles of Faith. Those 15 articles still stand. The original Scheme which now operates, was drawn up in 1899 and slightly amended in 1906. The first trustees of the Connexion were appointed in the will of the Countess and it is laid down that, of the trustees, there mustn't be more than, I think it's 9, and only 2 of them are allowed to be ministers—the others are laymen. And ministers, before they are appointed to a Countess of Huntingdon Church are required by the trustees to subscribe to and assent in writing to the Articles before mentioned, the 15 Articles, before their appointment can be ratified. The trustees have power to make appointments and, if deemed necessary, to revoke an appointment. It is their duty to ensure, as far as possible, that the teaching given in the Chapels of the Connexion is in accordance with the Articles.

Today there are about 25 Chapels still in existence of which less than a dozen aspire to have a full-time pastor and the total membership of the Connexion is now only 600 or so. So it's a very small group that we're talking about. Over the years, the Connexion has had a very chequered history. There have been times when it was in danger of being swallowed up by the Congregational Union and, on the other hand, a few churches have been absorbed into Methodism.

The identification of a Chapel within the Connexion has often been dependent on whether the minister at the time is himself in the Connexion. For example, the Chapels at Kingsbridge in Devon and Soham in Cambridgeshire passed in and out of representation at the district committee of the Connexion according to the minister's Connexional affiliation or otherwise. So at one point you could say, it is in the Connexion; then the minister goes, a new man comes and he's

not particularly interested, and so it's no longer in the Connexion. The Countess herself had invited both Anglican and Dissenting ministers to preach in her Chapels and in her college at Trevecca but, after her death, Congregational ministers were increasingly accepted into the Connexion.

One example of this was the appointment of the Rev. JB Figgis, who had been trained at New College, to the Brighton Chapel. By this time, the Connexion was in danger of losing its identity. Figgis, however, was a loyal Connexion man. Speaking at the Annual Conference in 1891 he advanced the claims of the Connexion, as the middle way between Anglicanism and Dissent. He deplored the possibility that the Connexion should disappear, either into the establishment or into Congregationalism. Figgis' ministry at Brighton was greatly blessed in 1874/75, he took part in a Convention at the Corn Exchange out of which the Keswick Convention eventually grew.

A history of the different Connexional Churches reveals that, at some time or other, most of them had been pastored by Congregational ministers. In some cases, churches left the Connexion and were reconstituted as Congregational Churches. This was so at Chichester. A cause there had been started by the Countess, supplied by students at the college at Trevecca, but the *Evangelical Magazine* for 1811 records that, on 30 May of that year, a man by the name of Hunt was set apart over the church at Chichester, late in the Connexion of Lady Huntingdon. The Congregation were desirous of having a settled ministry and so they formed themselves into a Congregational Church, apparently with the approval of the trustees of the Connexion.

A number of other Congregational Churches seem to have had their origins in the Connexion. Others, like the churches at South Street in Eastbourne and Shoreham-on-Sea, started off as Congregational Churches but today are in the Connexion. Some churches were only identified with the Connexion during the ministry of one particular pastor. This was the case at Beverley where, it seems, the Lairgate Chapel was in the Connexion during the ministry of John Mather, from 1807–1850 but at no other time.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Connexion was in particularly low water. The newly appointed editor of the Connexional magazine *The Harbinger* was convinced he knew the reason why. In 1899 the Scheme had been adopted which vested considerable power in the hands of the trustees of the Connexion. Speaking in 1919, the secretary at the time declared that much of the decline in the Connexion could be attributed to that unwanted scheme of 1899. He desired to see ultimate authority vested, not in trustees, but in the Conference of the Connexion—they hold an annual Conference. He deplored what he called the 'in and out ministry' from one denomination to another. He felt strongly that men who minister in Connexional Churches should display a personal attachment

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and loyalty to the Connexion and all it stands for. He pleaded for denominational control by the Conference. He felt the trustee system had failed abysmally. He held the view that the Congregational element on the trust had encouraged the new scheme.

In June 1925, an application was made by the trustees to the Charity Commissioners for permission to vary the existing scheme but the Charity Commissioners declined to allow this. The late JB Figgis of Brighton, who was one of the Connexion's ablest ministers, had something to say about the influence of Congregationalism in the Connexion.

Give us, I say to the Congregationalists of England, give us the liberty you delight in and desire for yourselves, but don't Congregationalise our section of evangelical service or hinder us in any way in trying to carry on the work they and we love best; the work of winning souls and of building them up in faith, in love in Christ Jesus.

In attempting to account for the sad decline in the numerical strength of the Connexion, a number of men blamed, as I've said, the trustee system in the Scheme, drawn up in 1899. One leader declared, 'we seem to be without leadership and without a clear vision of future service'. It was argued that in the days when the Conference held sway, ministerial appointments were carefully screened and the 'in and out ministry' from one denomination to another was not encouraged. Had the affairs of the Connexion been handled by Conference, rather than by trustees, it was claimed, far less Church buildings would have been disposed of.

The cry to abolish the trustee system was frequently heard in the early days of this present century. The Rev. J Kemp Foster, who was president of the Countess' college 150 years ago, declared, 'The characteristic principles of Methodists and the Connexion are in both essentially the same'. Wesley had the penetration to know that men will never do anything great so long as they are dependent on others, and we must admire his foresight in the constitution of a Conference which should come into real and legal operation at his decease. Unhappily for the Connexion, it adopted a trustee system and this system, as far as the extension of the general cause was concerned, has not worked well. It has crippled the energies of ministers, compelling them to act a subordinate part, and paralysed talent which ought to have been used in the great work of extension. Had Wesley placed his ministers under the control of a few lay or clerical trustees, Methodism would exhibit a very different form to that which it now presents.

During this period we're talking about, the present century really, many of the Connexional Churches were also in the Congregational Union of England and Wales and this caused a good deal of embarrassment to some men in the ministry. Questions were raised as to whether churches were morally justified in accepting financial help from the Congregational Union, as it was then. Some

argued it was a most humiliating position for a Connexional minister to have to sanction an appeal to the Congregational Union for a grant to make up his stipend. I'm sure there are others who had less scruples, but there it is. When I first came into contact with the Connexion, many of the Churches were listed in the Congregational Year Book, including the one to which I went, and several of the ministers at that time owed their allegiance to the Union.

The trustees, as I first knew them, were a very mixed bag. Few, if any of them, really understood the theological stance of the Countess, and subscription to the Articles was regarded very much as a formality. And some must have subscribed with their tongues in their cheeks. In those days (30 years ago I'm talking about) there were a number of crumbling edifices, such as the churches at Brighton and Tunbridge Wells, from which the glory had long since departed. Some of the churches were still adhering to the use of the book of Common Prayer. The trustees met regularly at that time, as they do still, and an annual Conference was held, but few had any vision for the future.

There was one man, however, who was not content to see the Connexion die a slow lingering death. His name was Quinton DeAth. War time circumstances had brought him down from Croydon to Turners Hill in Sussex and very soon he was serving as lay pastor to the local Countess of Huntingdon Church. He later was invited to become a trustee of the Connexion and subsequently General Secretary. He was, by profession, an insurance broker but, by conviction, a Bible-believing Christian. He was determined, as far as it lay in his power, to rescue the Connexion from the inroads of theological liberalism and he knew he must begin by gradually replacing the trustees with Bible-believing men. God honoured his endeavours and one can truthfully say the trustees are today all men thoroughly committed to an evangelical position. The sad fact remains, however, that with several notable exceptions, the Connexion is still dwindling numerically. Of the few remaining churches, only about five could be said to be going ahead. Phrases applied to various of the seven churches in the book of Revelation could equally well be applied to some of the Connexional churches—'You have forgotten your first love: you have a reputation for being alive but you are dead: you are neither hot nor cold.'

We may well ask, are there any lessons to be learned from the chequered history of the Connexion? One or two perhaps. A church cannot live on past traditions or on the hero worship of former worthies. It needs to be continually renewed. Furthermore, credal statements, however carefully renewed, are no ultimate guarantee of maintaining theological rectitude. You couldn't find anything so explicit as the 15 Articles but, sadly, there was a time when the Connexion was riddled with liberal teaching, liberal theology. The Countess of Huntingdon Connexion has suffered, like most other denominations, at the hands of liberal

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infiltration. And every form of church government has its weaknesses simply because it is in the hands of fallible men and women. If you think you've got the perfect system of church government I should be surprised if it is perfect. It is fallible, and the degree of spirituality of those who manage it, who have as it were in their hands to govern, will determine the effectiveness of it from the spiritual point of view. The trustee system may be desirable or undesirable but its success or failure is directly related to the calibre of the men who hold office.

One may well ask, what does the future hold for such a small denomination as the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion? If membership continues to decline at the rate it has done over the last twenty years, the answer is clear—its days are numbered. There are, however, a number of reasonably virile churches that are likely to survive whatever happens. Whether they will perpetuate the name of the Countess is open to question. They will survive largely as Independent local churches with strong evangelical convictions and they will continue to uphold the Biblical truths which were so dear to the heart of the Countess and that is the thing that really matters.

A number of ministers have expressed a desire for the Connexion to line up or to link up with some larger body of Christians holding similar convictions. Some were pointed in the direction of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches; a few have looked at the possibility of lining up with the Wesley Reform Union. As you will appreciate, the situation is complicated by the fact that, although in practice the Churches of the Connexion function as Independent local Churches, calling their own ministers, they are, in fact, part of the Connexion in which the trustees do have the last word. It may be the Connexion as such will have to die but certainly there are churches in it that will not die. Maybe one day some of them will apply for membership of an Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches. Who knows, miracles can still happen!

I'm not intending to say anything more, as it were, formally. I think the most useful part of this afternoon will be in question time. I may say that I happen to have been a trustee of the Connexion for a number of years so I do see it from the inside and I'll try and answer any questions that you may have. Probably, some of you may never have come across a Connexional Church, which isn't surprising because they tend to be in groups in different parts of the country. In Sussex, for example, there are Connexional Churches at a place called Turners Hill, where I was, and Copthorne and West Hoathly, all quite nearby and there used to be one at East Grinstead. And then at Shoreham there is one, and then there is a little group near Malvern, more to the west, and then of course there is Middleton near Manchester; that's quite a thriving church. And then at Ely in Cambridgeshire there's one. So most of you will never have come across such a church.

As far as their order of service is concerned, you wouldn't know you were not in a Congregational Church. One of the interesting things is that the Countess was very strong on paedo-baptism. It is in the 15 Articles but, in actual fact, most of the churches tend to practice believer's baptism these days but they are pledged, because of the Articles, to acknowledge the validity of paedo-baptism and indeed to apply it when requested to do so. That may seem a get out to some people, but that's how it is.





