

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

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

The Gospel: Preached and Practised

Congregational Studies
Conference 2014



The Gospel: Preached and Practised

**Digby James
Mike Plant
Jonathan Hunt
Bill Calder**

**Congregational Studies Conference
Papers 2014**

For information on EFCC and previous
Congregational Studies Conference Papers, contact:

The Operations Manager,
The Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches,
Latimer Memorial Congregational Church, Grovehill Road,
Beverley, England HU17 0JD

Visit the web-site: www.efcc.org.uk

The Evangelical Library is a source of most of the books referred to in the papers, many available for loan to members. Details are available from The Evangelical Library, 5/6 Gateway Mews, Ringway, Bounds Green, London, N11 2UT, tel: 020 8362 0868. www.evangelical-library.org.uk

Many old Congregational writings can be found on the internet, particularly at www.quintapress.com/PDF_Books.html

Contents

Foreword.....	5
George Whitefield and the influence of his preaching on Congregationalism.....	7
<i>Digby L. James</i>	
Gospel Truth	21
<i>Michael Plant</i>	
Gospel Independence	35
<i>Jonathan Hunt</i>	
Gospel Fellowship	47
<i>Bill Calder</i>	

The contributor is entirely responsible for the views expressed in his papers.



Dr Digby L. James is minister of the Quinta Independent Evangelical Church, Weston Rhyn, Shropshire, and is chairman of the Congregational Studies Conference.



Mike Plant is the general secretary of EFCC and associate minister of Cannon Park Congregational Church, Middlesbrough.



Jonathan Hunt is the minister of Morton Baptist Church, near Thornbury, Gloucestershire. He is a personal member of EFCC.



Bill Calder is the minister of St John's Congregational Church, Thornton Heath and Chairman of the EFCC Committee.

Photographs by Dr Ian Densham

Foreword

We met again this year at Wesley's chapel, with about 50 people in attendance.

This year marks the 300th anniversary of George Whitefield, 'the grand itinerant' so greatly used by God to bring revival to the English speaking world. Though an Anglican, much of the fruit of Whitefield's ministry found themselves joining or forming Congregational churches.

Since the adoption of the new EFCC logo several people have asked me what was meant by 'gospel truth', 'gospel independence' and 'gospel fellowship'. Mike Plant showed us that truth derives from God's revelation of himself in the Scriptures, and it is there that we find the good news of Christ, the gospel, which is the bedrock of EFCC's beliefs. Jonathan Hunt showed us that each church being independent is biblical. Also, it is not democracy. It is the rule of Christ in each church. Finally Bill Calder showed us that, while it is possible to have cordial relations with those with whom we disagree, true fellowship is found among those who believe the gospel. It is these characteristics that mark out EFCC, biblical truths for which we believe it is worth standing for.

The year since we last met saw the deaths of two of the founders and stalwarts of EFCC, Edward Stanley (Stan) Guest and Gordon Thomas Booth. Would EFCC have come into existence but for the efforts of these two, working with others. Both laboured faithfully in the Gospel and in promoting the principles of evangelical congregationalism. Their dedication to the cause of Christ will be sadly missed by those of us who remain. We join their families in mourning their loss, but we rejoice that Stan and Gordon's hope of being with Christ 'which is far better' is now theirs forever.

Dr Digby L. James

Quinta Church, Weston Rhyn



George Whitefield (from Robert Philip's biography)

George Whitefield and the influence of his preaching on Congregationalism

Digby L. James

A short life of George Whitefield

George Whitefield was born at the Bell Inn,¹ Southgate Street, Gloucester² on 27 December 1714.³ All that now remains is the Old Bell Inn, next to the inn that Whitefield knew. He was baptised in the font of St Mary de Crypt, a short distance from the inn. The Crypt School is also where he received his education. Several of his ancestors were Anglican vicars, one of whom was vicar of Rockingham, walking distance from Morton Baptist Church, near Thornbury. At school he showed an aptitude for acting, and loved reading plays. He showed little knowledge of or interest in true religion. He and his friends would enter Southgate Street Independent Chapel and mock Mr Cole, the minister. He stated that were he ever to become a preacher he would not tell stories like “Old Cole”.

The family

Deciding that there was little hope of the family funding his education at Oxford University, he persuaded his mother to allow him to give up his education and work in the inn. That was until a family friend visited and explained how he was able to study at Oxford as a lowly servitor. He had to serve the needs of the wealthier students, but in

1. One author (Susan Martins Miller, *George Whitefield: Clergyman and Scholar* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001, p.13) helpfully includes a photograph of The Bell Inn. Unfortunately it is The Bell Inn, Moreton-in-Marsh.

2. The book *The Divine Dramatist* by Harry Stout (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) erroneously states that Whitefield was born in the Bell Inn, Southgate Street, Bristol. This does not inspire much confidence in the reliability of the rest of the book. This is further confirmed when he states on p.134 “America, like Scotland, emerged from the English Reformation”. On page 156 he states that Whitefield married his wife in Abergavenny, whereas, in fact, she was from Abergavenny and they they married in Caerphilly.

3. Those familiar with Whitefield’s life will immediately say this is wrong and that he was born on 16 December. In fact, both dates are correct. When he was born Britain and its colonies used the Julian calendar. In 1752 Britain switched over to the Gregorian calendar. There was an 11 day difference between the two calendars (today the difference is 13 days) which is why the eastern Orthodox Christmas is in January, as they still use the Julian calendar.

return for the payments he received an Oxford education. ‘This will do for my George’, said Mrs Whitefield. So Whitefield returned to school to prepare for going up to Oxford. Going up to Oxford in 1732 he heard about the Holy Club and was invited to join by Charles Wesley. This was a non-evangelical group seeking to earn their way to heaven by their good works. Whitefield was immediately caught up with the rigorous legalism of the Wesleys. They methodically planned each day into prayer, Bible reading and good works, as well as their studies. They were mockingly known by a variety of names, including Bible Moths, Bible Bigots and Methodists. Charles Wesley lent Whitefield the Henry Scougal book *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. The start says:

I cannot speak of religion, but I must lament, that among so many pretenders to it, so few understand what it means: some placing it in the understanding, in orthodox notions and opinions; and all the account they can give of their religion is, that they are of this and the other persuasion, and have joined themselves to one of those many sects whereinto Christendom is most unhappily divided. Others place it in the outward man, in a constant course of external duties, and a model of performances. If they live peaceably with their neighbours, keep a temperate diet, observe the returns of worship, frequenting the church, or their closet, and sometimes extend their hands to the relief of the poor, they think they have sufficiently acquitted themselves. Others again put all religion in the affections, in rapturous hearts, and ecstatic devotion; and all they aim at is, to pray with passion, and think of heaven with pleasure, and to be affected with those kind and melting expressions wherewith they court their Saviour, till they persuade themselves they are mightily in love with him, and from thence assume a great confidence of their salvation, which they esteem the chief of Christian graces. Thus are these things which have any resemblance of piety, and at the best are but means of obtaining it, or particular exercises of it, frequently mistaken for the whole of religion: nay, sometimes wickedness and vice pretend to that name. I speak not now of those gross impieties wherewith the Heathens were wont to worship their gods. There are but too many Christians who would consecrate their vices, and follow their corrupt affections, whose ragged humour and sullen pride must pass for Christian severity; whose fierce wrath, and bitter rage against their enemies, must be called holy zeal; whose petulance towards their superiors, or rebellion against their governors, must have the name of Christian courage and resolution.

But certainly religion is quite another thing, and they who are acquainted with it will entertain far different thoughts, and disdain all those shadows and false imitations of it. They know by experience that true religion is a union of the soul with God, a real participation of the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul, or, in the apostle's phrase, "It is Christ formed within us."—Briefly, I know not how the nature of religion can be more fully expressed, than by calling it a *Divine Life*: and under these terms I shall discourse of it, showing first, how it is called a life; and then, how it is termed divine.

This shook Whitefield as it undermined everything he believed about salvation. He purposed to try everything to find peace with God. When he finally came to an end of himself, almost killing himself in the process, he found rest in Christ. He was later ordained by the Bishop of Gloucester and 'sent 15 mad' when preaching his first sermon at St Mary de Crypt. He was invited to preach in various places, filling in for friends. It was after standing in at the Tower of London for a friend that a newspaper published a report of Whitefield's preaching. He was horrified, and asked that no further reports be made. But the journalist said he would continue to do so as long as it sold newspapers. This brought about a profound change in Whitefield's attitude, and he realised that publicity could promote the gospel, and for the rest of his life he used the print media, and advertising, to do just that.

Visits to America

John and Charles Wesley had gone as missionaries to Georgia and invited Whitefield to assist them. Whitefield went to America for the first time in 1737. His departure had been delayed because General Oglethorpe, with whom he was travelling, was not ready. Eventually he set off on board *The Whitaker*. Because of adverse winds the ship was delayed in the Downs, the sea just off Deal, in Kent. As providence would have it, the adverse winds preventing Whitefield leaving brought John Wesley back from his fairly disastrous time in Savannah, Georgia. Wesley had gone to save the Indians but, he said, 'who, oh who, will save me?' Having been the one who had persuaded Whitefield to go to Georgia, Wesley felt he should 'consult God' as to whether Whitefield should continue. After all, if Wesley could not make a success in Savannah, how on earth could the younger and less experienced Whitefield. So Wesley used his favourite method of 'discovering God's will'. He cast lots. He wrote two options of pieces of paper and drew

one from a hat. He sent the lot to Whitefield with a note. It said 'Let him return to London'. Whitefield thought this odd advice and ignored it.

Preaching in the open air

Returning to England to be ordained a priest of the Church of England, he started his other great innovation came in February 1739. With the large numbers attending his preaching, Whitefield began to be concerned for the large numbers who could not get into church buildings. When he mentioned the possibility of preaching outside they thought it was a mad notion. It was in February 1739 that he and a few supporters went and stood on Hanham Mount, a rough area of Bristol with coal mines. Whitefield preached, with his loud Gloucester voice, from the Beatitudes. About 200 curious miners heard him that day. Within a week many thousands turned up to hear. Some, doubtless, out of curiosity, but many professed faith as a consequence. This began the pattern of Whitefield's life. Where buildings were available he made use of them. Where not or he was refused, he took to the open air. Wesley was introduced to Whitefield's Bristol congregations as Whitefield was leaving for America. Wesley commented that 'I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which [Whitefield] set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.'⁴

Whitefield continued to preach in this manner in Britain, Ireland and America. Eventually, after preaching for two hours on a plank between two barrels at Exeter, New Hampshire, he rode to Newburyport where he was to preach the following day. He died about 6am on 30 September 1770 in the parsonage and is buried under the pulpit of First Presbyterian, a church founded as a consequence of his preaching.

Whitefield's style

Whitefield was admired by many unbelievers for his oratorical style. David Hume said he would travel 20 miles to hear Whitefield. David

4. John Wesley's Journal, Vol. 2, p. 167 quoted in Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), vol. 1, p. 274.

Garrick, the greatest actor of the age, said he would give 100 guineas to be able to say 'Oh!' like Mr Whitefield. He also said that Whitefield could make people laugh or weep by the way he pronounced the word 'Mesopotamia'.

So was Whitefield no more than a greater actor than David Garrick? At the Desiring God conference in 2009, John Piper said:

I think the most penetrating answer comes from something Whitefield himself said about acting in a sermon in London. In fact, I think it's a key to understand the power of his preaching—and all preaching. James Lockington was present at this sermon and recorded this verbatim. Whitefield is speaking.

"I'll tell you a story. The Archbishop of Canterbury in the year 1675 was acquainted with Mr Butterson the [actor]. One day the Archbishop ... said to Butterson ... 'pray inform me Mr Butterson, what is the reason you actors on stage can affect your congregations with speaking of things imaginary, as if they were real, while we in church speak of things real, which our congregations only receive as if they were imaginary?' 'Why my Lord,' says Butterson, 'the reason is very plain. We actors on stage speak of things imaginary, as if they were real and you in the pulpit speak of things real as if they were imaginary.'"

"Therefore," added Whitefield, 'I will bawl [shout loudly], I will not be a velvet-mouthed preacher."

This means that there are three ways to speak. First, you can speak of an unreal, imaginary world as if it were real—that is what actors do in a play. Second, you can speak about a real world as if it were unreal—that is what half-hearted pastors do when they preach about glorious things in a way that says they are not as terrifying and wonderful as they are. And third is: You can speak about a real spiritual world as if it were wonderfully, terrifyingly, magnificently real (because it is).⁵

Whitefield was not a great actor, he was a great preacher.

5. John Piper, <http://www.desiringgod.org/biographies/i-will-not-be-a-velvet-mouthed-preacher>. Retrieved 14 March 2014.

Dissent in the 18th century

It was not that long since the Great Ejection of 1662. Dissenters were considered dangerous, even seditious, and were social outcasts. Only Anglicans could hold public office, everyone else was looked down on. So it was inevitable that the lifelong Anglican, George Whitefield, would be regarded with suspicion by any self-respecting Nonconformist. Whitefield often suggested to his fellow Anglicans that if only they would preach on the new birth and justification by faith there would be many fewer Dissenters. But Whitefield's approach to gospel preaching shocked society, even Dissenters, with his innovations. He had encounters with two notable Congregational worthies.

Isaac Watts

Whitefield visited Isaac Watts on 24 January 1739. While he was received amicably, Watts had concerns about Whitefield. He was an Anglican, and thus opposed to Dissent. In 1743 Watts wrote to Doddridge about his concerns in Whitefield being allowed the use of the pulpit in Northampton.

Philip Doddridge

Whitefield first met him on 23 May 1739. Doddridge became well-disposed towards Whitefield, but this enraged other Dissenters.

Other Dissenters were less generous. John Barker, Presbyterian minister at Hackney, David Jennings and John Guyse were at one in warning Doddridge to be careful. But Nathaniel Neal, son of the historian of the Puritans and Secretary of the Coward Trust, was blunt to the point of rudeness when Doddridge granted the freedom of his pulpit to Whitefield. He said that it was the opinion of Doddridge's friends that association with the Methodists with their 'forward and indiscreet zeal, and an unsettled injudicious way of thinking and behaving' was threatening a great diminution of Doddridge's usefulness. It was this attitude that created the impression that Dissenters were as opposed as Anglicans to the work of Whitefield. And it may well be a true impression of the early years.⁶

6. R. Tudor Jones, *Congregationalism in England*, pp. 148–149.

Whitefield an evangelist, not a church planter

Whitefield did not see it as his responsibility to organise converts into churches. That was a task he left to others. Converts were encouraged to attend the services of local parish churches, especially when there was a evangelical ministry. But there were not so many available. Often they would attend out of duty and meet together outside of Anglican structures. But this was not satisfactory for many and they began to organise themselves into 'societies' (effectively churches).

Four churches trace their origins directly to Whitefield. The Whitfield Tabernacle in Kingswood was erected in 1741 as a meeting place for those who held to Whitefield's Calvinistic doctrines after Wesley began to preach vigorously against election. The church became Congregational and in the 1800s. A more impressive building was erected on adjacent land. The church joined the URC in 1972. Both buildings are now unused. The original Tabernacle has suffered severely, including an arson attack. The last time I checked the Grade I listed building was still without a roof and in a dangerous condition. It appeared on the 2005 BBC programme 'Restoration' as a project worthy of support. Even though Roy Hattersley spoke in favour it did not progress beyond the first round.

Rodborough Tabernacle, south of Stroud, dates its foundation to 1739 and Whitefield's preaching in the area. Thomas Adams was its first minister, and was assaulted by a mob and dumped into a pond on Minchinhampton Common. In 1743 Whitefield took out a private prosecution against the ringleaders of the persecution. The building has been enlarged since Whitefield's time. In the pulpit, the preacher sits on Whitefield's chair. The church, still going, joined the URC in 1972.

In Tottenham Court Road Whitefield erected a chapel in 1756 which was known as 'Whitefield's soul-trap'. The building was enlarged during his lifetime, and was often frequented by the rich and powerful as well as actors from the West End. Elizabeth Whitefield and Augustus Toplady are buried in the crypt, and it was Whitefield's plan to be buried there had he died in Britain. At the end of the 19th century, having joined the CUEW, it was found that the building was in danger of collapse. The bodies were disinterred from the crypt and moved to a large plot at the back of Chingford Mount Cemetery—except for Toplady, whose coffin could not be moved. The new building lasted until 1945 when it was destroyed by the last V2 to land on London. It was rebuilt in the 1950s and was named the Whitefield Memorial

Church. In 1972 it joined the URC. In 1976 the congregation had dwindled, and the American Church in London was offered the use of it, which continues to the present time.

The fourth building was erected a short distance from here. It was originally a timber structure erected by supporters of Whitefield designed to keep the rain off. Whitefield was not pleased as it was so close to Wesley's headquarters. But Whitefield's regular preaching on the open spaces of Moorfields made it a necessity in inclement weather. After 12 years the wooden structure was taken down and a more permanent structure erected. This lasted till 1868 when a new building was erected at the corner of Tabernacle Street and Leonard Street. The building is still there, but no longer used by a church. This was a result of the growth of the area as the financial centre of the country. Few people lived locally and open spaces were taken over for office space. The property was sold in 1906 and is now part of the local school. The foundation stone can still be seen in Tabernacle Street.

English presbyterianism was already well on the way to full Unitarianism, and so held no appeal to those who had received the gift of the third person of the Trinity in their hearts as a guarantee of their inheritance. Those presbyterians who remained trinitarian, in the absence of any presbyterian national structure, tended to become congregational.

America

In America, with its vast distances, there was a broader spread of religious denominations. Congregationalism held sway in New England, but further south were mainly presbyterians and Anglicans.

Whitefield's preaching, and the preaching of those who followed him, emphasised the need for the New Birth. Had Whitefield been asked 'why is it that you keep preaching "you must be born again?"' Whitefield would have answered, 'it is very simple—it's because you *must* be born again.' Preaching to paedobaptists or baptists the message was the same. As Jesus had told the child of the covenant, Nicodemus, who had received the sign of the covenant, the necessity of the New Birth applied to everyone. This caused great divisions. Some paedobaptists believed that children of the covenant, who had a pious upbringing, did not need the New Birth. They were Christians by virtue of their birth and upbringing. A good example of this view is Jedidiah Andrews, who said in a letter to a friend in 1741

A prevailing rule to try converts is that if you don't know when you were without Christ and unconverted, etc., you have no interest in Christ, let your love and your practice be what they may; which rule is as unscriptural, so I am of the mind will cut off nine in ten, if not ninety-nine in a hundred, of the good people in the world that have a pious education.⁷

Those who took Andrews view were called 'Old Lights' and those who followed Whitefield were called 'New Lights'.

The Countess of Huntingdon

Though converted through contact with the Wesleys, Selina, Countess of Huntingdon joined herself to Whitefield and his side of the movement. As a peer of the realm she was entitled to appoint her own personal chaplains and have them preach in her own personal chapels. Whitefield, John Berridge, William Grimshaw were among her chaplains. She encouraged other evangelical peers to do the same. She had chapels attached to her home in London, Bath and Tunbridge Wells.

Problems arose with a dissenting congregation that was meeting in the Pantheon, at Spa Fields.⁸ The local vicar disliked the competition and sought to have it closed. The Countess took it under her protection and declared it to be one of her private chapels, and therefore Anglican, and protected. The vicar took legal proceedings and showed that far from being a private chapel, it was regularly attended by large numbers of members of the public. The Countess resisted the inevitable, but eventually gave in and became a dissenter, and with her chapels, took refuge under the Toleration Act. Not all her chaplains, who often had much to lose, went with her. These included Thomas Haweis, who had ministered at Spa Fields. The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion was formed in 1783 to provide a denominational home for some these churches, based upon a trust deed drawn up by the Countess. A number of these churches subsequently declared themselves Congregational and joined the CUEW. The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion still continues, with thirteen churches.

7. Quoted in Lewis Bevans Schenk, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940, reprinted Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), p.71.

8. The Anglo-Catholic Anglican Church of Our Most Holy Redeemer now occupies the site.

Trevekka College

In 1768 six Methodist students were expelled from St Edmund Hall, Oxford, for their Methodism. Seeing that potential gospel preachers were in increasing danger of being denied a university education, the Countess of Huntingdon purchased a lease on a farmhouse just south of the village of Talgarth, close to Howell Harris's 'family' home (which is now Coleg Trevecca—the former Trevecca College is now College Farm). Whitefield preached at the opening. When the lease expired the college moved to Cheshunt in north London and became one of the colleges training men for the Congregational ministry. It moved again in 1906 to Cambridge and in 1967 merged with Westminster College, the training college of the Presbyterian Church of England and Wales.

Evangelistic Calvinism

John Wesley split from Whitefield in 1739 after he preached a sermon entitled 'Free Grace' in which he argued that if election were true preaching would be pointless. At the time Europe was being influenced by the so-called Enlightenment (it would be better called The Endarkenment). Religion and revelation were being rejected in favour of unaided, but sinful, reason. Rationalism was becoming the way people were supposed to understand the world. Inevitably it infected the way Christians and other religious people thought. Amongst presbyterians it tended to focus on the doctrine of the Trinity. How can God be one and three at the same time. This is not rational (it was said) and so the doctrine was rejected. Amongst some Baptists and Congregationalists rationalism was applied to the doctrine of the Atonement. They rejected Arminian notions that Christ died for everyone and thus made salvation possible if anyone chose to believe. Rather, Christ died only for the elect, and therefore how can the gospel be freely offered to those who are not elect? Thus developed a hypercalvinistic rigidity.⁹

Whitefield fully accepted the teaching of the Church of England's 39 Articles that teaches traditional Calvinism, the five points, total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement (or particular redemption), irresistible grace and final perseverance of the faith (usually expressed as the acronym TULIP). But Whitefield never held

9. This is detailed in Peter Toon, *Hypercalvinism* (London: The Olive Tree, 1967) and Geoffrey Nuttall, 'Northamptonshire and the Modern Question' in *Studies in English Dissent* (Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 2002), pp. 205–230.

back in offering the gospel to the unconverted. It was not for him to know who were and were not elect. That was a matter for God. He knew that no matter how he preached, the elect would be saved through believing the gospel and the non-elect would not believe. He did not tie himself up in rationalistic knots but freely preached the free grace of God.

Whitefield could not have understood the hypercalvinistic mentality. The Lord Jesus commanded the gospel to be preached to the lost. The apostles had no problems doing that, so why should he. If God was pleased to save men through his preaching what a great privilege that was. If God was pleased to save men through hypercalvinistic or Arminian preachers he rejoiced that men were saved, then that was God's prerogative. He would be faithful to his master who called him.

The legacy of Whitefield

He was not concerned about denominationalism. He was a lifelong Anglican, but found himself shunned by the Anglican hierarchy. He was happy to preach for anyone and everyone. When told by the Associate Presbytery that he should only preach for them, because they were the Lord's people, he responded that clearly he should preach to everyone else as they were the ones who needed to hear the gospel.

Lessons to learn

1. Innovations in church life and evangelism are not necessarily wrong. In Whitefield's case he broke through the stifling tradition that preaching could only take place within a church building. It has long been a tradition that we should invite the unconverted to gospel services. The world doesn't want to go to church. Perhaps we should consider going to meet the world with the gospel where they are.
2. Communication of the gospel to unbelievers is what is necessary, however that is done. The AV translation of 1 Corinthians 1:21 speaks of 'the foolishness of preaching' suggesting it is the *method* that is foolishness. But newer translations, I believe following the Greek, say 'through the folly of what we preach' (ESV), meaning it is the *message* not the *method* that is foolishness. So any legitimate *method* of communicating the *message* can be used.
3. Acceptance of people on the basis of a shared experience of salvation, not an acceptance of an historic statement of faith. This is what Paul teaches in Romans 15:7, "Therefore welcome one another as Christ

has welcomed you, for the glory of God.’ That is, is this person converted. At his first meeting with Howel Harris, Whitefield refused to shake hands until he had a positive answer to the question ‘Do you know you sins are forgiven?’

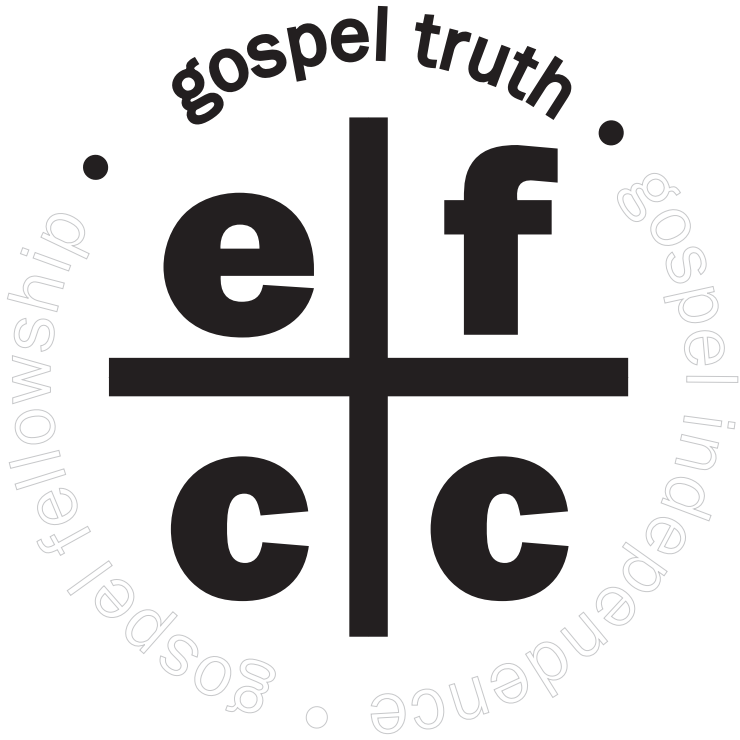
4. Organization of converts is not unimportant. Converts need to be directed to churches, or new churches need to be established. This is one of the big issues with regard to large scale collaborative evangelism—where do the converts go. Can I, in all conscience, agree to involve myself in collaborative evangelism with churches which do not hold to the basic truths of the gospel, knowing that anyone converted may be sent to unbelieving churches. As an aside, in the light of the situation in Thessalonica, where Paul spent a maximum of five weeks, can new converts in new churches be left to themselves?
5. Large numbers do not guarantee spiritual success. Whitefield regularly preached to large numbers. Some were there just for the spectacle, others to admire the oratory.

Sermons of Whitefield, a new edition of his Journals and accounts of the revival can be found by going to www.quintapress.com and clicking on the Whitefield link and following further links, or clicking on PDF Books.



In Memoriam
Stan Guest
and Gordon Booth





Gospel Truth

Mike Plant

Introduction

Speaking first in a series of addresses brings with it responsibilities. If a series of addresses begins badly it can destroy appetite for what follows. That is particularly a risk where the subject matter of the second and third addresses is logically dependent on the first one. ‘Gospel Independence’ and ‘Gospel Fellowship’ obviously rest on ‘Gospel Truth’. So I see my task as laying foundations, perhaps even erecting the basic structure on which and within which my fellow-speakers can elaborate and furnish out the building.

Laying Foundations

I want to start by sketching out what I am aiming to do. I want to deal firstly with the nature of truth particularly dealing with the source of the truth we are to believe as Christians. We will also examine the barriers that have existed and currently exist to receiving this truth. Then secondly I want to look at some of the content of the truth we believe as Christians particularly at the nature of the gospel and its implications for the Christian community. We will conclude by looking at a unity founded on Gospel Truth.

Firstly: where does Gospel Truth come from and how is it received?

In Romans 1:1–6 Paul deals with the issue of the gospel’s source:¹

Paul a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead. Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace

1. Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, published by HarperCollins Publishers copyright 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations,

The answer is that the truth God gives us concerning our salvation is given to us in God's saving acts which are both anticipated and reflected on and then interpreted and explained to us in Scripture. The gospel is about what God has done in his saving acts in Christ not about mankind's long philosophical and religious search for God.

The Reception of the Gospel Truth in the New Testament context

1. The Reception of Gospel Truth by the Jews

The Jewish nation was clearly resistant to the gospel and we need to understand their reasons. They were not antagonistic, at least not widely so, to the authority of the scriptures. The Sadducees, who would only accept the authority of the Pentateuch, were a small if politically powerful minority. When Paul says (1 Corinthians 1:22), 'Jews demand signs' he is not saying that they do not accept scripture as authority but as Craig Blomberg writes, 'Many Jews looked for dramatic, miraculous confirmation of Jesus' claims, which he refused to give ... Many Jews viewed the crucifixion as ultimate proof that Jesus had been cursed by God for some sin of his own.'² The Holy Spirit's response was that the New Testament is full of ways in which the Old Testament is claimed as its rightful possession by the New Testament Church as Jesus' death, suffering and present reign are seen to be fulfilments of Old Testament prophecies. I have heard Dick Lucas give vivid expression to this by picturing the frequent misunderstanding people have that the church has the New Testament and the Jews have the Old Testament and adding the scenario that the Christians call at the synagogue to collect the Old Testament, 'Because that belongs to us as well!'

2. The Reception of Gospel Truth by the Greeks

Again quoting Blomberg, 'Many Greeks considered speculative philosophies the highest human ideals, with the concomitant emphasis on rhetoric, esoteric and elitism ... Many Greeks found numerous aspects of the story of Christ's death foolish—a suffering God, the idea of a perfect order destroyed, a criminal Messiah, and a way to God

2. Craig Blomberg, *NIVAC Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (Zondervan, 1994), p. 53

not based on human speculation.³ It is worthwhile drawing out two elements of this view of reality. Firstly: that it is essentially humanistic in a bad sense reminiscent of Algernon Charles Swinburne's infamous lines, 'Glory to Man in the highest! For Man is the master of things.' We impose on God's truth a grid which is man-centred rather than God-centred. Secondly however it does have in common with the Christian Faith in that it believes truth is unified and objective and knowable and this will be important in our later discussion.

3. The Wider Greek and Roman World

Paul in Corinthians singles out the search for Wisdom as characteristic of the Greek World and it was partially true, and doubtless particular relevant in his Corinthian correspondence that this was so, but does not give a universal picture of the world to which Paul ministered. Paul's ministry at Lystra (Acts 14:9–18) presents us with traditional Greek mythological religion and one suspects a real undercurrent of paganism and animism. Similar issues also may lie behind the Gnosticism and attachment to mystery religions which may be detected in various parts of the New Testament. Paganism lurks in the background whatever outward veneer the society may exhibit. David Wells⁴ lists six characteristics of paganism, 'each of which has at least its echoes in the modern mind.' Firstly: 'In as far as they were known, the gods were known through *nature*'. Secondly: 'Pagans proceeded from the basis of their *experience* to understand the supernatural. Apart from nature there was no other revelation, and apart from experience there was no other means of knowing the intent of the gods. The pagan mind did not search for truth so much as it looked for the meaning of experience'. Thirdly: 'The supernatural realm was neither stable nor predictable ... Making sacrifices basically amounted to paying protection money.' Fourthly: 'The pagan divinities were sexual'. Fifthly: 'Pagans made no appeal to moral absolutes. They determined what was right experimentally ... Pagan religion sought to bring society into harmony not with moral absolutes but with the rhythm of life'. Sixthly: 'History had no real value for the pagans; their lives were centred in the experience of the moment ... experience was everything, for the activity of the gods in the past offered no reliable indications of how they might act in the present.'

3. Ibid.

4. David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Eerdmans, 1993) p. 267 ff.

As we consider the contemporary situation for our proclamation of Gospel Truth we will reflect on the present scene as a reviving of paganism, highlighting particularly the dismissal of revelation, the exalting of experience above reason, the dismissal of moral absolutes, and the dismissal of the value of history.

However before coming to that I want to look at the world of the first Congregational declarations of faith, particularly the Savoy Declaration of 1658.

Discussion of Gospel Truth in the 17th Century context

Particularly I want to look at the Savoy Declaration and also, because I have written about him before, the thinking of John Owen on the matter of Gospel Truth. In fact as John Owen is commonly regarded as the chief architect of the Savoy Declaration of Faith of 1658 the two topics are pretty much the same although Owen's writings are more wide-ranging.

Firstly: Matters of Widespread Agreement

Chapter One of the Savoy Declaration is 'Of the Holy Scripture' and would have received almost universal agreement in the wider 'Christian' world, although the Quakers would have been an exception to that rule. I quote chapter one, section one in full:⁵

The light of nature and God's work of creation and providence reveal the goodness, wisdom and power of God, to the extent that people who reject God are without excuse, but they are not sufficient in themselves to give the knowledge of God and of his will that is needed for salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at various times and in different ways, to reveal himself and declare his will to his church. Furthermore in order to better preserve and propagate the truth, and to establish and comfort the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and the world, he caused this revelation of himself and his will to be written down in all its fullness. As God's way of revealing himself and his will in this manner to this people has ended a long time ago, the Holy Scripture is absolutely necessary in order to know God and his will.

5. All quotations from the Savoy Declaration are from *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order of 1658 in Modern English*, ed. Matthew Jolley. 2009.

Now after listing the books of Holy Scripture, not including the Apocrypha, in section two, and stating the Apocryphal writings are 'not divinely inspired' in section three, the Savoy then goes on to deal with how we know the Bible to be the Word of God and how we understand the truth of the gospel for our salvation, these matters were of course more a matter of debate and discussion.

Secondly: Matters of Dissent and Discussion

I will begin by quoting from my 2011 Congregational Studies Conference paper on: 'John Owen on the Attestation and Interpretation of the Bible.'

we note that Owen in his writing is very aware of two dangers to his orthodox, Reformed position. These two dangers came from opposite ends of the ecclesiastical spectrum and were both clearly in Owen's mind as threats to correct and biblical understanding. One threat was from the Roman Catholic Church and, while volume 14 of Owen's works is specifically devoted to the controversy with Rome, concern about this threat is evident in the way in which he handles his subject. A principal issue of debate during Owen's day was Scripture's perspicuity and clarity and hence he is insistent that the authoritative and binding interpretation of the Church of Rome was both a false claim and was not a necessary provision for the church. The other threat was from the more radical Protestants, particularly but not exclusively the Quakers, for whom the inner light was more authoritative and necessary than the light of God's word. While we can sometimes deduce where Owen would have stood on such subjects as infallibility and inerrancy it is important that we realize that Owen's own focus is more likely to be on the perspicuity and clarity of Scripture, in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church, and its sufficiency without additional revelation, in opposition to the Quakers.

The concerns Owen had are very much those expressed in the Savoy Declaration. Sections 4 and 5 of chapter one says:

The authority of Holy Scripture, because it ought to be believe and obeyed, does not depend on the testimony of any person or church but entirely upon God, its author, who is truth itself. Therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God.

We may be moved and influenced to have a high and reverent regard for

the Holy Scripture by the testimony of the church and by the heavenly character of its content. The powerful effectiveness of its doctrine, the majesty of its style, the way all its different parts are in agreement, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full disclosure it makes of the only way of salvation, and its many other incomparable excellent qualities and its entire perfection, are all arguments by which it gives abundant evidence that it is the Word of God. Nevertheless, our full persuasion and assurance of its infallible truth and divine authority is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit who bears witness to us in our hearts, by and with the Word.

Summing up the essentially Sola Scriptura position of the Reformed Faith, and balancing beautifully Scripture, Reason and the Work of the Holy Spirit, section 6 reads:

The whole counsel of God concerning everything necessary for his own glory and , for mankind's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly stated in Scripture, or may be deduced from what is contained in Scripture, by good, logical, and necessary inference. Nothing is to be added to Scripture, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or by human traditions. Nevertheless the inward illumination of the Spirit of God is needed to give anyone the saving understanding of the things revealed in the Word.

Summarising:

1. Scripture is sufficient and contains all that we need for our salvation.
2. Reason is rightly used to understand and to make necessary inferences from Scripture.
3. God's Holy Spirit assures us of the truth of Scripture bearing witness with and by it to its truthfulness so that we inwardly know that the Bible is Gods' Word of Truth. We cannot believe and experience these truths savingly without the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

Holding to and proclaiming Gospel Truth in the 21st Century

From the 17th Century through to Today

Clearly we jump a lengthy period of time in moving on to the 21st Century and I want to make one or two observations about the interim period. There are certain changes that took place in people's

thinking and certainly, we all talking in terms of trends not of every individual, they replaced the authority of God's revelation with the authority of human reason. However they did not initially question certain assumptions of the period of the Reformation and the 17th Century. They still believed in a unified and coherent and objective system of truth and that reality was capable of description and analysis. Modernism was antithetical and antagonistic to the gospel but in a different way to our current situation and its antagonism. The current predominant pattern of thought, which is often called postmodernism, or regarded as a late and degenerate modernism, is antagonistic to the possibility of revelation and to the existence of objective and universal truth.

A Brave New World or Deja Vu All Over Again

As we consider the contemporary situation for our proclamation of Gospel Truth we will reflect on the present scene as a reviving of paganism, highlighting particularly the dismissal of revelation, the exalting of experience above reason, the dismissal of moral absolutes, and the dismissal of the value of history. The citing of the world of the Corinthian letters as particularly relevant for 21st Century Christians has sound reason behind it.

We need to hold to the truth in a world where its very existence is questioned and where the claim to hold to the truth is seen as matter of seeking to exert authority and power over other people. How do we do this as effectively as we can in a situation where people are often either antagonistic or at best indifferent to our message? Here are some themes which characterised the 1st Century church response to the paganism of their own time:

1. A Loving Community

The pagans said: 'See how they love one another!' is something the apologist Tertullian⁶ quoted the pagans as saying of the Christians. There is a desire for authenticity and authentic community amongst many non-Christians. It is observing Christ's love in community that then authenticates the gospel to non-Christians (John 13:34–35).

6. Tertullian, *Apology*, 39:7

2. A Community Whose Love reaches Out

Christians were distinguished by their care for the elderly and for babies who were simply abandoned to die. What distinguished them was personal kindness and care rather than political campaigning which was not an option in the 1st Century. Such behaviour clashes with society's norms but it also awakens conscience. The denial of moral absolutes does not eliminate the role of conscience but is simply a way non-Christians in a pagan society suppress the truth.

3. A Commitment to the Truth and the Experience and Life that flows from It

In a Social and Philosophical Context where often the emphasis was on experience we do not deny the reality of experience, we can all too easily over-react, but we do emphasize that contentless experiences which do not stay in line with God's revelation and reason based on and under that revelation are precisely that = without content and value. A book like 1 John wonderfully ties together the doctrinal, the experimental and the practical.

4. A Commitment to Defend the Truth

When we revised the EFCC Statement of Faith it was because of a commitment to state again with clarity what had already been stated 40 years earlier with EFCC's initial Statement of Faith. The need to change was not because we had changed but because the world in which we seek to stand for the truth has changed. Taking just one example among many we revised what the statement said about God. In our initial draft we referred to God knowing all things but one of those advising suggested we refine our statement to say that God: 'knows all things past, present and future'. You might say, 'What's the difference?' but the point he made that is that some who advocate an Open Theism will agree God knows all things but hold that no-one including God can know the future in that it involves man's free will and is therefore unpredictable. God knows all things means for them that he knows all things that anyone can know but this cannot include the future. It is a timely reminder to us that anti-intellectualism and the promoting of a non-doctrinal Christianity simply assimilate to the culture rather than confronting it firmly and lovingly with the truth of the gospel and also run the risk of the gospel being substantially undermined by the culture.

Secondly: what is the content of Gospel Truth?

Under this heading I want to look at some of the content of the truth we believe as Christians particularly at the nature of the gospel and its implications for the Christian community. For convenience I will use three main resources—chapter seven of the *Savoy Declaration of Faith* ‘Of God’s Covenant with Man’, chapter eight ‘Of Christ the Mediator’ and chapter twenty ‘Of the Gospel, and of the extent of its grace.’ Obviously the subject could be analysed differently but this content is historically typical of Congregationalism.

Reservations Expressed

I would like to make it clear that I agree with what these chapters say—certainly regarding substance if not always wording—but sometimes grieve over what they omit. The main areas of omission are potentially damaging to our view of the gospel in failing to fully represent God’s heart and mind on this vital subject. Firstly, and this is a fault of their era, they fail to give a proper and biblical place to the command, often referred to as the Great Commission, of Matthew 28:18–20 where Jesus says:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Secondly, in failing to fully express that all are invited to come to Christ and partake in all his benefits. That is that God’s sincere love and desire for people to be saved is wider than a desire simply to save the elect.¹ John 3:16 alone should make that clear to us:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

The truths of election and predestination so grip the minds of the compilers of the Declaration that they fail to declare with equal clarity other truths that also need declaring.

1. See Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions Evangelical and Theological*, vol. 1 (Banner of Truth reprint, 1967), ‘God’s Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy, as Related to His Power, Wisdom and Sincerity’ p. 282.

Covenant Theology as a way of expressing the Gospel

The basic pattern of Gospel Truth as expressed in the Savoy Declaration is expressed in strongly covenantal terms. It can be summed up:—

1. Covenants are Essential to God's Dealings with Man

God deals with his rational creatures by means of covenants and without the existence of a covenant man could not attain to eternal life. (Chapter 7 section 1 and chapter twenty section two)

2. The First Covenant was with Mankind in Adam

Quoting chapter seven section two in full: ‘The first covenant made with mankind was a covenant of works, in which life was promised to Adam, and in him to his descendants, upon the condition of perfect and personal obedience.’

3. The Two Covenant Scheme

The understanding of scripture of the Declaration is a two covenant scheme in which the covenant of works is superseded by the covenant of grace. Chapter seven section three: ‘In it, God freely offers life and salvation by Jesus Christ to sinners, requiring them to have faith in him so that they might be saved, and promising to give his Holy Spirit to everyone ordained to eternal life, to make them willing and able to believe.’ Regarding terminology, I agree with John Murray that we would be better referring to ‘gracious covenants’ rather than ‘a covenant of grace’—it is unhelpful when a theological term is found in scripture but is used differently to the scriptural pattern of use. Covenants in scripture are historical, successive and cumulative and it is generally more helpful to use terminology scripturally.

4. The Gospel is Found in Promise in the Old Testament

There is an essential unity of the gospel between old and new testaments. Chapter seven section 5: ‘Although this covenant (of grace) has been administered in various different ways in respect to its ordinances and institutions in the time of the law and since the coming of Christ in the flesh, yet in the substance and effectiveness of it, to all its saving spiritual ends, it is the same one covenant.’ Hence in the Old Testament period following the fall (chapter twenty section one):

‘it pleased God to give the promise to send Christ, the offspring of the woman. By this promise the elect would be called, and faith and repentance formed in their hearts. In this promise the very substance of the gospel was revealed and was the effectual means of the conversion and salvation of sinners.’

Throughout the need for regeneration by the Holy Spirit to enable faith is stressed.

The Work of Christ as Covenant Mediator

The Savoy Declaration affirms the orthodox biblical position on the subject of the person of Christ (chapter eight section two):

The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, being truly and eternally God, of one substance and equal with the Father, when the fullness of time had come, took upon himself man’s nature, with all its essential properties and common frailties, yet without sin. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary and conceived of her substance. In this way, two whole natures, the divine and the human, perfect and distinct were inseparably joined together in one person without being changed, mixed, or confused. This person is truly God and truly man, yet one Christ, the only mediator between God and mankind.

The next section deals with his equipping by the Holy Spirit and his being commissioned to act as mediator by the Father. In chapter eight sections 4 and 5 the Declaration elaborates the work of the mediator:

This office the Lord Jesus most willingly undertook, and in order to discharge its obligations he was born under the law and perfectly fulfilled it. He underwent the punishment due to us, which we should have experienced and suffered. He was made sin and a curse for us, and he endured most grievous torments in his soul and painful sufferings in his body; he was crucified, died, and was buried; he remained under the power of death, yet his body did not undergo any decay; and he arose from the dead on the third day with the same body in which he suffered. In this body he ascended into heaven, where he sits at the right hand of his Father, making intercession, and he shall return to judge people and angels at the end of the world.

By his perfect obedience to God’s law and by his once for all offering up of himself as a sacrifice through the eternal Spirit, the Lord Jesus has

fully satisfied all the claims of divine justice. He has not only brought about reconciliation but has also purchased an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven for everyone given to him by the Father.

If I wanted to be critical I think I would draw attention to the failure to draw attention to the fact that (1 Corinthians 15:20): ‘Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep’ and so is our covenant head in his resurrection as well as his death. However the substance of the Declaration is that salvation is found in Christ alone (Chapter twenty section 2):

This promise of Christ and of salvation by him is only revealed in the Word of God. Neither the works of creation and providence, nor the light of nature, reveal Christ and his grace to people, not even in a general or obscure way; and there is no way people using these means are able to attain saving faith and repentance, without the revelation of Christ in the promise or the gospel.

And with this emphasis and the Christ-centred gospel that is proclaimed we rejoice.

Thirdly and finally: Gospel Truth as characteristic of the fellowship we enjoy

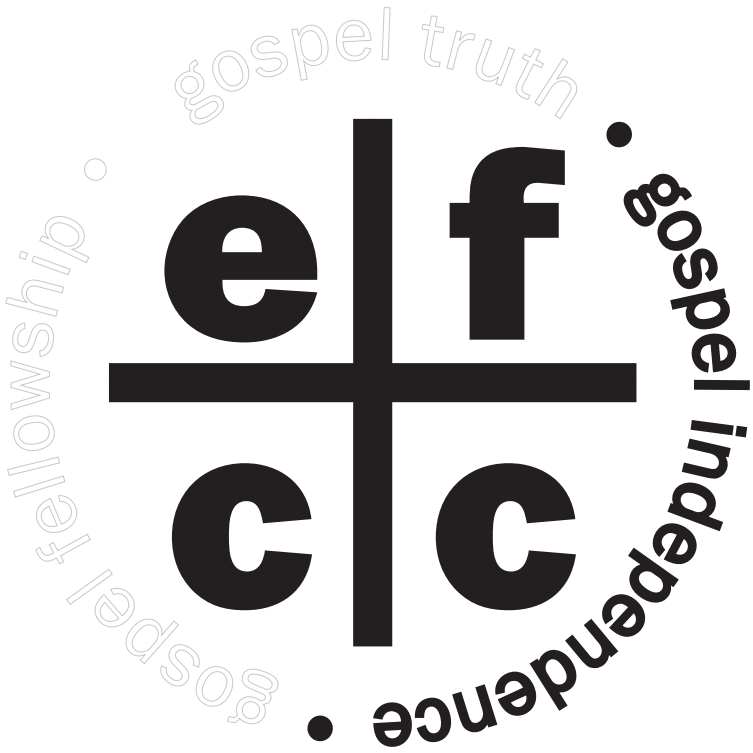
I will simply note these as otherwise I will find myself intruding into the subject matter of our next two speakers:

Obvious barriers to unity are removed through the gospel

Galatians 3:28 ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ The most fundamental divisions of the society of the 1st Century are abolished—not in terms of role and norms for behaviour but in terms of having a significance in the matter of our relationship to God.

Unity is Based on the Gospel not on Detailed Statements of Faith

Romans 15:7 ‘Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.’ Christ’s welcome is free and gracious and doesn’t not assume a high degree of understanding or 100% agreement on the whole teaching of Scripture—our own welcome of others is to reflect Christ’s generosity and kindness to us.



Gospel Independence

Jonathan Hunt

‘Congregationalists were known as Independents. Why did they, and EFCC today, decide to have each church autonomous of all others? Where does power and authority lie within a Congregational church?’

During the warmer months, I have for the last two years manned a book stall for the purposes of outreach, on Thornbury Market. We’re due to start again in a week or so and your prayers are most welcome! On the market, when it was discovered that I was the minister of a church, it only took about a year to educate one trader to stop calling me vicar! But one question popped up, and I am sure that it will do so again. When confronted with an independent church, the average British person with a little knowledge of the established church will always have a question along these lines, put with simplicity and gusto by a trader who is now a friend of me, “So, who’s your boss then?” Even for some Christians, the lack of some sort of structure of authority is baffling, and answering the question about bishops by telling them that you are one just makes things worse!

I am to speak on ‘Gospel Independence’. In the earliest days of the emergence of nonconformity in Britain, after the Reformation, the term ‘Independent’ became synonymous with Congregationalism. But why am I, a Baptist, speaking about Congregationalism? Because I believe that history shows that in those early days, when the Baptists emerged from and became separate to the Congregational Independents, the only difference of note between them was on the subject of Baptism itself. Of course, I am not speaking about Baptism today as I would very much like to live to preach tomorrow!

So as I speak about Gospel Independence, Congregationalism, I do have a secondary title, perhaps borrowing from the style of John MacArthur’s recent controversial comments on millennialism—‘*Why every self-respecting Baptist ought to be a Congregationalist*’. This is a contentious issue, because many Baptists are not Congregational when it comes to the government of the church. They will be fiercely independent, but not Congregational. Many work along the lines of Independent Presbyterianism, which is a contradiction in terms anyway! I believe that Baptists should be Congregational. I certainly did not

used to be. I would have shared the view among some reformed Baptists that whilst ‘Independence’ was good, ‘Congregationalism’ was a dirty word, a dangerous teaching to be dismissed with the throwaway line: ‘*Well, It is just democracy*’. But that is a gross oversimplification and a misunderstanding. It is throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Among a relatively large constituency of independent Baptists in the UK, the writings of Dr Poh Boon Sing are promoted and set forth as they apparently demonstrate that there is a ‘fourth way’ of Church Government, which is confusingly called Independency. It is distinguished from Congregationalism at the very beginning of Dr Poh’s book (called ‘The Keys of the Kingdom’) by defining Congregationalism thus: ‘*Congregationalism is that form of government which maintains that each congregation is ruled by the people*’.¹ This is quite simply wrong.

Of course, it is not just Baptists who have mischaracterized true Congregationalism this way, as a pamphlet issued by the former Congregational Union of England and Wales stated: ‘*Our system of church government is democratic*’.² There are other books written in the early 20th century that say similar things. I think we could say fairly accurately if not very confusingly that many Congregationalists are not Congregational either! So what has happened? I would contend that Congregationalism has been perverted, subverted, diluted, at various times and in various ways, and sometimes conflated with aspects of the other two systems, Presbyterian and Episcopal. But authentic Congregationalism stands. If many churches using the name ‘Congregational’ or ‘Baptist’ have descended into a form of pure democracy, what of it? Does this mean that we should become ashamed of our heritage and run away from the true meaning of historical theological terms? I don’t think so!

I am aware that I am among friends, at least I hope so, and, I trust, ‘preaching to the converted’ on this issue. So I don’t want to waste time with deconstructing false views of Congregationalism, but rather to assert what I believe is the robust biblical and historic basis for authentic Congregationalism. I know that I am giving a paper and not preaching, but my aim is to glorify God, and I want to begin with God’s Word as it is found in Matthew 18 (NKJV):

15 “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault

1. Poh, B.S., *The Keys of the Kingdom* (Good News Enterprise, 1995), p.9.

2. Quoted in *Evangelical and Congregational* (Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 2010), p.28.

between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' 17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

18 "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

19 "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.

20 For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

I know this is one of the most-quoted, overused and perhaps misapplied passages in these days when many churches are small and discouraged. I also know that the context of this passage is Church Discipline, not prayer meetings etc., but the inescapable reality that our Saviour presents us is this: 'When the Church meets—I am there, in the midst'. Why is each local church autonomous? Where does power and authority lie? When we begin with the scriptures, our sure and certain guide, I am confident that you will have your answer, and I hope that if you don't already, that you will begin to see the sheer beauty, and God-glorifying divine genius, of authentic congregationalism.

Let us go back now to the early 1600s, when, from the Reformation were emerging the strands of protestant identity in Britain. On the wall of my living-room at home is a large print of a famous painting of the Westminster Assembly by John Rogers Herbert, much beloved by devotees of the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646. I do not share their Presbyterian convictions, but I love the painting. Why? Because the man who is standing to speak is Philip Nye, an Independent, and the title of it is 'The Assertion of Liberty of Conscience by the Independents at the Westminster Assembly of Divines'. He was in a minority, but he was not alone there, being joined by Thomas Goodwin, Jeremiah Burroughs, William Bridges and Sidrach Simpson, Known as 'The Five Dissenting Brethren'. He might also have been joined by John Cotton, whose books *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1644, published by Goodwin and Nye) and *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared* (1648) were early standard reference works for the movement. But he did not make the 3,000-mile journey back, and

perhaps his decision was justified, as the Independents were allowed their say, but not their way.

When we speak about ‘big names’ having an early influence on the doctrine of the Church, many turn to John Owen. It is my opinion that far too great a weight is placed upon what he says or does not say, because whilst he was converted from Presbyterianism by reading Cotton’s works, these other men were Congregational, and knew what they believed, for some time before the revered and rather prolix Owen weighed in. Further, some believe that Owen eventually reverted to Presbyterianism anyway.³

Going back to our five ‘Westminster Assembly’ men, and their colleagues, we remind ourselves that they were Paedobaptist Congregationalists, who in those early days had close relationships with Baptist Congregationalists. In their ecclesiology they were almost indistinguishable. In 1640 (before Cotton’s books) a sermon was published anonymously, on the doctrine of the church. It was entitled ‘A glimpse of Sion’s glory’, and the foreword is believed to have been penned by the famous early Baptist William Kiffin. The foreword contains these striking words:

it is a sad thing of consequence to consider how we have been kept under blindness and darkness, although not totally, yet in great measure, in regard of such truths as do immediately strike at antichrist and his false power: as namely this great truth, CHRIST THE KING OF HIS CHURCH; and that Christ hath given this power to his church, not to a hierarchy, neither to a national presbytery, but to a company of saints in a congregational way.⁴

One of the first known printed references to the expression ‘*congregational way*’ is in the foreword to a *Baptist* sermon in 1640! This should not surprise us, given the emergence of the Baptists from the same Independent assemblies as their Congregational brethren.

It will not be news to many who are interested in this topic that the Westminster Confession of 1646 was followed by the Savoy Declaration of 1658, and then the Second London Baptist Confession of 1677, published in 1689, but it is worth mentioning, because each document

3. Lee, F.N., *Rev. Dr John Owen Re-Presbyteri-anized*, accessed at <http://www.dr-fnlce.org/docs5/owenpres/owenpres.pdf>, summary at <http://www.swrb.com/Puritan/presbyterian-independents.htm> accessed 7 April 2018.

4. Goodwin, *Works*, 12:63, emphasis his, quoted in Renihan, *Edification and Beauty*, p.11 (Paternoster, 2008)

builds upon the previous one, and, with some diplomacy in mind, I would dare to suggest that the latter two are vast improvements upon the original. Of course, each set of writers were keen to demonstrate their wholehearted agreement upon the fundamental truths of the gospel set out in the previous documents, and did not waste time reinventing the wheel where good work had already been done. The biggest jump in content, of course, is between the Westminster and Savoy documents, whereas the London Confession differs only marginally from Savoy.

Here I will quote the first four paragraphs of the Savoy Confession's *'The Institution of Churches, and the Order Appointed in them by Jesus Christ'*:

1 By the appointment of the Father all power for the calling, institution, order, or government of the Church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner in the Lord Jesus Christ, as King and Head thereof.

2 In the execution of this power wherewith he is so entrusted, the Lord Jesus calleth out of the world unto communion with himself, those that are given unto him by his Father, that they may walk before him in all the ways of obedience, which he prescribeth to them in his Word.

3 Those thus called (through the ministry of the Word by his Spirit) he commandeth to walk together in particular societies or churches, for their mutual edification, and the due performance of that public worship, which he requireth of them in this world.

4 To each of these churches thus gathered, according to his mind declared in his Word, he hath given all that power and authority, which is any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe, with commands and rules for the due and right exerting and executing of that power.

I want to revisit one expression in the quote I gave from Kiffin's words in 1640—'Christ the King of His Church'. Of course, everyone would agree that He *is* the King, but when we actually apply it as a theological fact, not just as an abstract concept, it has real *consequences* when it comes to our understanding of what the local church is and how it is to operate.

Why do we hold to the independence and autonomy of the local church? Because we believe that it is the pattern of Scripture. In the

Savoy Declaration, there are two parts, a statement of faith, and then a platform of church polity—recognizing that there must be flexibility on the second point, but agreement on the first. There was still much debate, and surely this kind of sensible division would have helped to reduce some tensions in the wider church. It is worth noting as we pass that the Baptists went and put their church polity *into* the statement of faith. We have always been an awkward bunch!

Authentic congregationalism understands from the scripture that there are two meanings for the Greek word translated ‘Church’. These are for the Universal Church, and the Local Church, or Assembly. Christ says that he will build his Church in the well-known text of Matthew 16. He speaks in the universal sense. The same Greek word is used throughout the New Testament to refer to local gatherings of believers, for example in Galatians 1:2, where Paul writes to the churches, plural, in the region. There is no third use allowed for denominations or national churches. We contend that they simply do not exist in the Scriptures.

So Christ is the King of his church, whether that be universally, or locally, and he promises his presence to every gathering of believers, every local church. It is worth noting, although we do not have time to flesh this out, that much of the early momentum that drove the Independents to come out of the Church of England was the conviction that the true Church is made up of converted people, not just names on a roll, but those who have been born again. Christ promises his presence, and his guidance by the Holy Spirit, to his people.

The gravest misrepresentation of congregationalism (and we must confront this one head-on!) is the assertion that Congregational churches are ruled by their Congregation. That congregationalism is democracy. Well, no true democracy has a Sovereign King ruling over it, does it? Christ rules the Church, not the congregation. The question of course is *how* does Christ rule the Church? Put simply, it is by his revealed will in his Word, and through his giving of his power to the assembly to order themselves as he has commanded, with elders and deacons, with order and structure. Of course, the strict order and hierarchy of other systems of church government can be appealing when we have had bitter experience of the disorganized church, the church with unbelievers as members, the church with Diotrefes-like characters in it, throwing their weight around. But our concern should not be ‘what gives me a quiet life?’ or even ‘what seems to work in

our western society today?', but rather 'what does the Bible say?' and ultimately—'what brings glory to God?'

So we start with Christ as the King, the Head of the Church:

He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.—Colossians 1.18 (NKJV)

All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.—Matthew 28:18–20 (NKJV)

And the Head, the King, says '*I am with you always*'. Let that be as significant as it truly is and let it colour our thinking—that the King is *always* present! The throne is occupied! Let them ask on the market 'who's your boss then?', and let the answer be—The King! He rules, he reigns. Where does power and authority lie within the local church? It lies with those to whom the King has given it. Who is that? The elders and deacons? Not primarily! He entrusts it to all. Because all choose those who will serve as Pastors or Teachers, or Deacons, in the church. And they who have this function of rule within the local church stand as representatives of all the members. When there is a church discipline case, the Elders do not excommunicate someone—the church does, in line with Scripture—but the Elders have the sad and solemn duty of announcing it.

If Christ is the King of the Church and is present when she gathers, then the local church needs no outside body to guide or rule it. When the Church is organised according to God's Word, she has all she needs. What if the Church goes liberal or denies the faith? It will eventually die off. Unless, of course, there is some denomination to prop it up and keep it going. I quite agree with those who say that Independency is the best defence against error, not the propagator of it. Where does error come from? Recent history shows it has come from denominational seminaries filling churches with false teachers. It is not generally the case that error has bubbled up 'from the pews', and is not generally in the power of any local church to rise up and pollute all the others with error!

Let us give Jesus Christ his proper place as King over the Church, and let us accept his rule. Some congregational writers shy away from

the word ‘rule’ when it comes to the work of Elders. But I don’t think we can ignore it, it is what the Bible says, most plainly in Hebrews 13:17:

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (NKJV)

The word ‘rule’ speaks of command, with authority. The King has set a structure in place among his servants, and they set apart those who are gifted to be Elders and Deacons. This action by the consent of the church of course has its roots in scripture, and what is most plain is that the King gives gifts, and it is his church that must recognise them and give scope for their use. The church never conveyed any powers by making anyone an elder or deacon—the powers, or gifts, have already been given to an individual by Christ himself! He is the giver of all good gifts.

Some will read a verse like Hebrews 13:17 and see only oppression and minority tyranny. But there is a balanced beauty to it. The local church is unlike anything the world has ever seen. Men are called to positions of authority and then voluntarily supported and obeyed, out of love, because they lead the Church in the same way—out of love. Yes, sin corrupts this sometimes, but that does not alter the balance and beauty of God’s plan for the local church. Here is a pastor who is responsible to God for your soul—he must give an account for it. You love him because of the duties he willingly performs and the responsibility he carries. You obey the reasonable, scriptural instructions of church leaders. Does this sound to authoritative, too dictatorial? It isn’t, because of the fact that these men represent the King! If they cease to do so, then you don’t have to follow them. Elders lead or rule the church by the Word of God, within the instructions God has given. When they don’t, the Church’s obligations to them are different, and men who fail to rule well and to represent Christ may be removed just as surely as they were appointed.

I have recently seen a colouring sheet given to the children in a mega-church in the USA. Using the verse from Romans 10 about submitting to the governing authorities (which in context has nothing to do with the local church at all) it says: ‘*UNITY: We are united under the visionary. Our Church is built upon the vision God gave to Pastor X. We will protect our unity in supporting his vision.*’

Here is an independent church, that has taken congregationalism and trampled it underfoot. Everyone submit to the pastor! Where has the King gone? Who sits on the throne? We are reminded that even the Apostle Paul said 'follow me, even as I also follow Christ'. The example given may be extreme, but what alarms me is that among some of our Baptist and Congregational churches this kind of unaccountable and dictatorial behaviour goes on, perhaps with more comfortable 'reformed' labels on the concepts involved. Brothers in ministry, have you ever been told 'no' by a church meeting? It can be a good thing! A very good thing! (If it is done in the right way!) It hurts your pride perhaps, but would you model to every member submission to Christ? We cannot baulk at the very checks and balances God has given. If something does not seem good to the local church, if there is not the mutual love and harmony in moving forward, then the alarm bells should be ringing. We're not to be held to ransom by one awkward person, but neither do we crush and dismiss them. If Christ is the King of his church then things will proceed as he wills! If the Holy Spirit is at work in his people then all will be well. There is a rationalism, an earth-bound lack of faith, that surrounds so much church polity today. Our God reigns—do you trust him?

Just as there are those (usually leaders) who seem to mistrust Christ's rule through the church, and try to turn Independency into a mini dictatorship, there are equally those who take things the other way and try to twist Independency into an absolute democracy where, suddenly, they become just as important as the Pope-like pastor-figures at the other extreme. If you want to live in a true democracy, then don't join a true congregational church! Because Christ is the King there, and your word will never trump his inspired and infallible Word. Because Christ is the King there, and he has promised to be in the midst of his people, to sanctify and bless them as they give common consent to Elders and Deacons to fulfill functions of leadership, and teaching, and service, and you'll not be able to undermine the pastor with your carping demands because your fellow Christians will soon shut you down! They have recognised, and called, the men that Christ has gifted for the gospel tasks at hand.

Of course, things go wrong. We're all sinners. But no pragmatic reasoning gives us the right to tamper with Christ's Kingship. How, precisely, do we run church meetings? How, precisely, do we elect elders and deacons? Do we give them terms of office? How do we ensure that each member has both the right to express their opinion on something,

and the opportunity to do so in love, without fear? None of these things are truly within my scope today, and none of them are things that I will get very excited about any longer. But what I will get excited about, and I trust that this is true for you also, is any system of man's devising which would seem to subvert the crown rights of King Jesus!

I pastor a relatively small church. Some folks fear I might 'take a better offer' and go to a bigger, more prominent cause, just like that. For one thing, I rather doubt the existence of such offers, and for another, what on earth gives me the right to behave so? When Christ is the King, the Head of the Church, and through his people he has called me, and set me to serve, as an elder, yes, but as a member of the congregation first and foremost, am I not subject, in Christ, to my brothers and sisters who called me? Am I somehow a different class of person? I think the Scriptures say that we are all one in Christ Jesus! This is only personal testimony—but I can say that if, one day, some great opportunity appeared to open up, and the King of the Church wanted to move me to take it, then the church would willingly send me on my way, because they would be led to do so by our King! Perhaps with sadness (or joy, who knows?), but 'all authority has been given' to Jesus Christ. If you cannot have confidence in him, or you will not have confidence in him, then you make a mockery of everything you've ever said about knowing him, trusting him, or seeking his guidance.

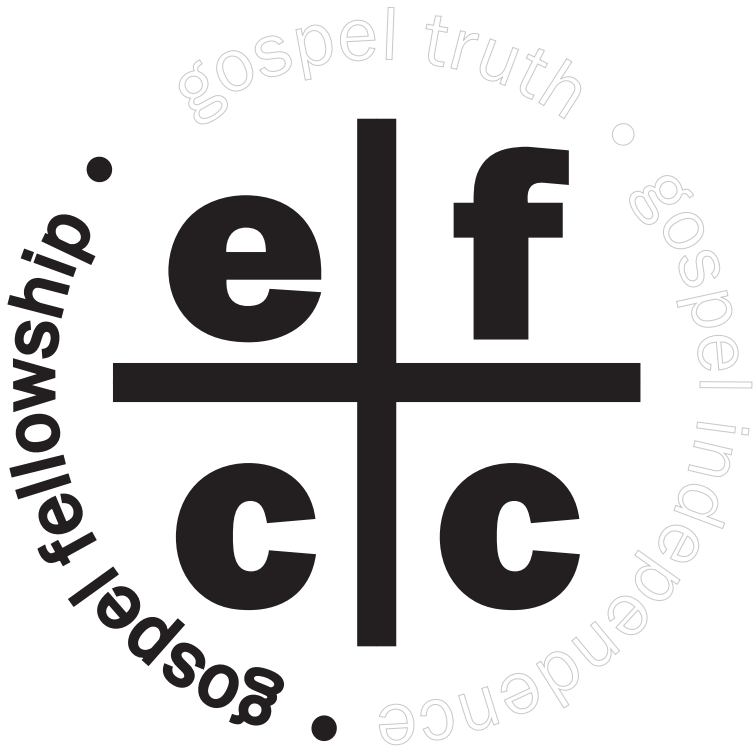
His mind will be known through the local church. His glory will be seen in the local church. The potential matter on this topic is vast and could occupy a week-long conference, let alone a half hour. To be simple without being at all simplistic then, is to conclude that the answer to each question posed in preparation for this message is the same. Why are Congregational churches autonomous? Because Christ is King. Where does power and authority lie within a Congregational church? With Christ the King.

Hold fast to this bedrock biblical principle, and you will not go so far wrong. And yes, if you're really a Baptist, then you ought to be a Congregationalist as well, not a closet Presbyterian. We respect and love Bible-believing brothers and sisters who follow the Presbyterian or Episcopalian systems of church government, certainly. We believe that they are wrong, of course. But I would appeal to those who, because of misrepresentation and unbiblical practice, have become terrified of Congregationalism, to discover what it really is, and I trust that you will discover, as R.W. Dale said, that

GOSPEL INDEPENDENCE

‘the Congregational polity is at once the highest and the most natural organisation of the life of the Christian Church’.⁵

5. Dale, R.W., *Manual of Congregational Principles* (Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 1996), p.24.



Gospel Fellowship

Bill Calder

As a younger man, I had the privilege of going to a B.E.C. conference held in Westminster Chapel. Dr Francis Schaeffer was the key note speaker, and he spoke about the truth and its vital importance. The Reverend Herbert Carson gave the concluding address which began with a survey on the book of Romans before he expounded his text Romans 8:31. The Lord was with him, in the unction and the power of the Holy Spirit. As we sang our final hymn, 'How Firm a Foundation', the final verse "The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes; that soul though all hell should endeavour to shake, I'll never, no never, no never forsake!"

The presence of the Lord was tangible, we left the service with a deep sense that God had spoken to us. I was filled with optimism for the future, that the Lord was going to do something exceptional, what sweet fellowship. I have not lost my optimism though over the years it has been tried and tested, hence my reason for reminiscing.

The gospel is, and always will be, the power of God to salvation (Romans 1:16) for all who believe, both Jew and Gentile. God saves and the Lord transforms lives. Those lives become a testimony to God's grace in Christ, living in fellowship and harmony to God's glory. This is the reason why gospel fellowship is so important, it is a testimony to a watching world that is divided and fragmented by sin. Sadly, the church does not always live up to expectations, often, we as the Lord's people fail. This does not mean however, that we are to become apathetic or give up, the honour of God is at stake. Gospel fellowship is the outward expression of a unity that already exists in the body of Christ. Therefore, gospel fellowship is not an option to take or to leave, it is a necessity.

As we turn to our subject, I would like to consider firstly:

The Biblical Basis for Christian or Gospel Fellowship

Essential to gospel fellowship is gospel truth. The faith, the biblical body of truth contained in the Old and New Testament, determines all that we believe and practise. Scripture is our final authority. Gospel independence in regards to ecclesiastical polity and government, but

also who we associate or do not associate with (not isolationism however), which brings us to gospel fellowship, expressing and sharing our oneness with those in Christ who also believe the truth. Fellowship and unity go hand in hand, Amos 3:3 “*Do two walk together unless they are agreed to meet?*” All I think would agree, that gospel fellowship is essential, but we have to ask, what is its nature or character? We are helped when we turn to our Lord’s words in John 17:21. It is not within the scope of this paper to expound this beautiful verse. However, it is necessary for us to ask, how do we interpret it? We do so by looking at its context and setting, *a text without a context is a pretext for a proof text.*¹ Looking at John 17 in verse 1–5, the Lord prays chiefly for himself. In verse 6–10, Jesus gives a description of the people He is praying for, and offers a general prayer for them. In verse 11–12, the Lord prays for their oneness. Verse 13–16, that His people may be one, that they may be kept as one and protected from the subtle attacks of the evil one who works to disrupt their essential unity. Verse 17–19, Jesus prays in these verses for their sanctification in order that they may maintain the truth and unity that exists amongst them. Verse 20–23, the Lord takes up the theme that He has already prayed in verse 11, to elaborate and define the nature of unity. Finally, in verse 24–26, Jesus expresses His ultimate desire for His people: for them to be with Him in glory and that they may know His continual presence with them in the world.²

It is, I hope, self-evident, that Jesus is praying to His Father to preserve a unity that already exists. That the people Jesus is praying for are true Christians. The nature of Christian unity, asks us to define, what a true Christian is: those who have been called out of the world by God, saved by grace through faith in Christ, regenerated, born again and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

In Ephesians 4:1–5, a chapter that speaks of unity and fellowship in the body of Christ, they belong (verse 4) to one body, they are indwelt by one spirit and are called to one hope in Christ. In verse 5, Jesus is their one Lord, all believers share in one faith, justifying saving faith and the body of truth contained in scripture. One baptism, not mode, but incorporation, supernaturally into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit, expressed in outward obedience, Romans 6:1–4 and 1 Corinthians 12:13. One God and Father who lives within us and we live in Him, John 14:15–21. This definition is not exhaustive, but it

1. D. A. Carson.

2. A fuller treatment of this outline is found in *Knowing the Times*, D. M. Lloyd-Jones.

makes a distinction between those who are the Lord's, and those who are not. The biblical reason for this is obvious, for light cannot have fellowship with darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14). This is crystal clear when you read 1 John, a letter to the churches which positively promotes fellowship with light and negatively prohibits (or excludes) fellowship with darkness. Related to the question what is a Christian, is another question that needs to be asked: what is the church?

It is the body of Christ of which He is the head and we are the members (1 Corinthians 12). John 15: He is the vine, we are the branches, the church is not an organisation, it is a living organism with life from God. What are the marks of the true church? From his book, *I believe in the church*, by the Anglican David Watson, he highlights two outstanding or essential marks. The first is faithfulness to the gospel of Christ (1 Timothy 3:15–16; Acts 2:42), the second, the faithful administration of the sacraments (communion and baptism). To this I would add church discipline. He cites the Augsburg confession of 1530, Article VII, which states: "The church is the community of saints in which the pure gospel is preached and the sacraments properly administered". Article XIX of the Church of England says much the same as do other orthodox creedal statements. A concise and comprehensive definition comes from Dr J Owen, "A society of persons called out of the world, or their natural state, by the administration of the word and spirit unto obedience of the faith, or the worship and knowledge of God in Christ, for the exercise and communion of the saints in the due observation of all the ordinances of the gospel."³ This, I believe, covers the criteria of the basis of fellowship found in the EFCC directory of churches and in our constitution. Turning from the biblical basis for gospel fellowship, I would like to consider secondly:

2. Gospel Fellowship in Practise

All one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). It cannot be otherwise. Our oneness reflects the unity within the God head. One at the foot of the cross, one because of the Holy Spirit. As we make a distinction between positional sanctification and progressive sanctification, the same holds

3. John Owen, *Brief Instruction in the Worship of God and Discipline of the Churches in the New Testament* "Question: What is an instituted Church of the Gospel? Answer: A society of persons called out of the world, or their natural worldly state, by the administration of the word and Spirit, unto the obedience of the faith, or the knowledge and worship of God in Christ, joined together in a holy band, or by special agreement, for the exercise of the communion of saints, in the due observation of all the ordinances of the gospel."

true with our oneness in Christ (Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 2:9; 1 Peter 1:15). Gospel fellowship is the outward expression of a unity that exists which we are to work at and work through individually and in the corporate life of the church, locally and universally. In John 17:21, the Lord's prayer expresses a desire for a visible unity in fellowship and love. It is a prayer, not a plan and His prayer is not just a high or noble ideal, it expresses the Lord's desire for something tangible and concrete that is genuine and sincere. As in a marriage between a man and a woman in a loving relationship, for their union to succeed, they must continually work at loving each other or fail, and failure is not an option. If we love the Lord we will love His people and work at loving them (1 John 3:10). Christian fellowship is fundamentally about love and some people are easier to love than others, which means that the task before us is difficult, but not impossible. What are we talking about here? Christian fellowship with those who would call themselves Christians, but are not evident from the things that they believe and sadly teach being contrary to the truth. Not always the things that they say, but the things they omit to say. The failure of Churches Together and the doctrinal indifferentism with childlike slogans such as 'doctrine divides' and 'grass roots Christianity' is as a BEC pamphlet expressed some years ago, 'Holding hands in the dark'. At this point, I want to qualify something. I am not speaking about individuals one meets from time to time who are Christians, but are badly instructed or deficient in their understanding of the truth. If they are in Christ, they are our brothers and sisters in Christ and we are to love them. We are to make the distinction between groups of people and individuals, between those who are saved, but have defective views and those who are deliberately opposed to the truth. Gospel fellowship is evangelical fellowship and being a Bible-believing Christian creates its difficulties and tensions because the truth is important and all of us want to be faithful. Mark Johnston expresses this difficulty in the title of his book, taken from the words of a chorus, *'You in Your Small Corner: The Elusive Dream of Evangelical Unity'*.

Division and schism are sin (1 Corinthians 1:10). If we have differences, we are to meet and talk. As Priscilla and Aquila spoke to Apollos in Acts 18, they had grace to talk and he had grace to listen. There is a greater biblical mandate for unity and fellowship than there is for separation.

Helps toward fellowship: the bible makes a distinction between primary, essential truths and secondary truths e.g. the Lordship of

Christ, inerrancy and infallibility of the scriptures, the atonement are essential, whereas Church government, if we are Congregationalists, Presbyterians or Episcopalians. It is important, but not as important. Our beliefs about baptism should not be the elephant that walks into the room or a cause for division.

We have to recognise that gospel unity and fellowship is a unity in diversity, and this does not impoverish fellowship, it enhances it. We are to conduct ourselves in a spirit of love and understanding. An old adage says, "In all things essential unity, in things indifferent liberty, in all things charity".⁴

Hindrances to fellowship:

Culture, all of us are shaped by it. Every church group denomination has its own sub-culture. Then there is national and ethnic diversity, deeply held opinions and beliefs that may or may not be biblical, but affect the way we view and put our faith into practise. These are all issues that are faced in the New Testament letters and were worked out in the life of the churches (Acts 15). The church in heaven is perfect, the church on earth is an imperfect work in progress. Things that place a strain on fellowship in the gospel are elitism and snobbery, the mindset that our group is the best of the bunch, an attitude that promotes an esprit de corps in the armed forces, but is totally unacceptable in the church as it promotes pride. I once met a man who addressed me as 'dear brother' and then asked which church I was from. It was a Baptist church, but not the same as his. The next time I met him, he called me 'brother'. The next year it was 'Hello Friend'. Even amongst the young this attitude can emerge. I spoke to my youngest son who has just graduated. When he was at university he was heavily involved in the local church and Christian union. When asked what sort of church he went to, he was aware that he was being judged by the attitude of the person asking him the question. He calls it 'compartmentalism', putting people in boxes. Some Christians are too closed for fellowship in the gospel because they fence everything. Others are far too open with no fences at all. Let us be careful not to grieve the Holy Spirit by going to either extreme. Biblical wisdom and balance are called for. Other debatable areas include: bible translations, new-Calvinism or old-Calvinism, contemporary or traditional worship, the charismata and the

4. D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times*.

work of the Holy Spirit, eschatology to name but a few. Like the tip of an iceberg waiting to sink the gospel ship.

Human sinfulness, empire builders and the spirit of Diotrophes (3 John 9), which still walks the corridors of many churches. My way or the highway, usually legalistic, lacking in love, the congregation if it survives replicates the character of its leader or leaders and does not resemble the true church where there is unity in diversity, but a total conformity that would make Scientologists or Moonies proud. Christians are not minions, God's word has set us free to read, think, talk and have fellowship in love. I have met Christians who are so frightened to express an opinion and experience real problems with others who do, it is all part of an evangelical sub-culture that is enshrined in their belief and practise which is legalistic and closed to fellowship with other Christians. Yes, they will speak to you, but you are not one of them, you are an outsider. It's called the cold shoulder. 'You in your small corner, me in mine'. These things hinder. We need a positive attitude. Not to judge or be judgemental. What is it that binds us together? We are one in Christ, saved by grace. For the apostles and those who build their faith upon all that they taught and preached, there are implications for all time. Truth revealed by the Holy Spirit in God's word is to bind us together in love. True doctrine does not divide, it unites. Fellowship in the gospel is like sewing multiple stitches to bind a seam together. Let us not concentrate on things that divide or on our own particular presuppositions or biases, let us fulfil (John 15:12) the law of love. Psalm 133:1–3 provides us with a beautiful picture of peace, harmony, love and joy. We do not just worship in truth or in spirit, but in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). There is the letter of the law, but also the spirit of the law which makes the law a law of love and a delight. From gospel fellowship in practise we turn lastly to gospel fellowship and its promotion.

3. Gospel Fellowship and its Promotion

How we are to achieve it: As the men of Issachar (1 Chronicles 12:32), we are to have an understanding of the times and know what we are to do. We are to read and learn from history, but we are the Lord's people living at a particular time and place that has been chosen by God in His providence. We live in the 21st Century, not the 16th. Ours is a post-modern, post-Christian era in Western Europe, therefore we are to be culturally aware, we are to understand how people think, not

everything is negative there are many positives which provide gospel opportunities. As in New Testament days, it was the gospel that turned the world upside down. The truth of scripture transformed culture. Culture should never change the truth or be allowed to do so. Our spiritual warfare, Ephesians 6, is as severe as it has always been. We are to oppose liberalism and error, but we must also promote the truth. We must not be known only for what we are against, though there is a need at times to be negative, we must also be very positive in telling people what we are for as gospel men and women, we have good news to proclaim. Gospel fellowship begins in the individual life of every believer. Our fellowship and love is to be expressed in the body of Christ. Growth in grace and living a new life is always in the context of the church family (Ephesians 4 & 5, walking in love). One of Rev. John Marshal's sayings about ministers and their work, "any idiot can destroy a church, but it takes great skill to build a church." I know of a church that was deeply divided, but that congregation has overcome its hurts and is now unified. This is a testimony to gospel fellowship: people praying together, staying together and resolving their differences in love. Fellowship within a local church is fragile, only the gospel and an appreciation of sin and grace can bind it together. Love, humility, a Christ-like example (Philippians 2), on the basis of this, in Chapter 4, Paul entreats Euodia and Syntyche to agree in the Lord.⁵ Walking in the Spirit, living the Christian life (Galatians 5), exercising the fruit of the Spirit, putting these things into practise in our homes amongst our families and our friends, in school, the workplace and in the church. We can promote gospel fellowship amongst local churches that share the same core beliefs, but may differ on secondary issues by working together, which I believe is the ethos, the *raison d'être* for EFCC. Promoting fellowship and encouraging prayer, cooperation and mutual support for the churches as they witness for the gospel as found in our mission statement. To me, gospel fellowship means involvement, not isolation. It expresses nationally and internationally what the church family should be locally. John Donne expressed the view 'No man is an island'. This is particularly true of Christians: we have been saved for fellowship on earth, to enjoy fellowship in heaven. As Romans 15:1-7 exhorts us to emulate the sacrificial love of Christ, this means putting ourselves out to serve others in the local and wider body of Christ. We cannot with integrity join a false ecumenism,

5. Another example can be found in Colossians 3:14.

but we are to join with others who share a desire for true biblical ecumenism. One in Christ expressed locally in the Croydon gospel partnership composed of FIEC churches, Grace Baptist orientated, Anglican Proclamation Trust and EFCC working together, organising men and women's prayer breakfasts, praying together, cooperation in evangelism, joining together on moral and ethical issues, to present a united front to the glory of God before a watching world. Graham Harrison once spoke about 'Evangelical Unity: a Reality or the Doctor's Pipedream' at a meeting in Hinckley. I may not have the correct title, but I remember his text, Philippians 1:27: Contending as One Man for the Faith of the Gospel. Evangelical unity and fellowship, it expresses, is not a pipedream or an elusive chimera, it is to be an integral part of EFCC both locally and nationally as we reach out to others who are like-minded. It displays the love of God, a oneness that the world can only dream of. It is like a diamond whose lustre is untainted and undiminished. Doctrinal orthodoxy is insufficient, we need the Spirit of God to leads us and to guide us in all things so that the earth may be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.⁶ I close with a quotation from the Collected Writings of John Murray "The purpose stated in Jesus' prayer –'that the world may believe that thou hast sent me'—implies a manifestation observable by the world. Jesus prays for a visible unity that will bear witness to the world. The mysterious unity of believers with one another must come to visible expression so as to be instrumental in bringing conviction to the world".

6. Habakkuk 2:14 [ESV].

Past Congregational Studies Conference Papers

1981

- Alan Tovey* Robert Browne: The Morning Star of Congregationalism
Derek O. Swann The Church Meeting
Peter Seccombe John Angell James

1982

- John Legg* Children of the Covenant (available as a booklet)
Alan C. Clifford The Christian Mind of Philip Doddridge
David Boorman The Origins of the London Missionary Society

1983

- Hefion Elias* PT Forsyth—Prophet of the 20th Century
Michael Boland Oliver Cromwell
Neville Rees Prayer Life of the Local Church

1984

- Gordon T. Booth* The Hymn Writers of English Congregationalism
E. S. Guest John Robinson (1575–1625)
Geraint Fielder RW Dale and the Non-Conformist Conscience.

1985

- R. Tudur Jones* Walter Craddock (1606–1659)
R. Tudur Jones John Penry (1563–1593)
Peter Golding Owen on the Mortification of Sin

1986

- Peter J. Beale* Jonathan Edwards and the Phenomena of Revival
Derek O. Swann An Earnest Ministry
Peter Collins Thomas Wilson

1987

- Digby L. James* John Cotton's Doctrine of the Church
Michael Plant Richard Davis and God's Day of Grace
Bryan Jones Lionel Fletcher—Evangelist

1988

- Gwynne Evans* Richard Mather—The True Use of Synods
Alan Tovey That Proud Independency
Gilbert Kirby The Countess of Huntingdon

1989

- Gordon T. Booth* Josiah Conder—Hymn-writer and Compiler
John Legg The Use and Abuse of Church History
George Hemming Savoy, 1833 and All That

1990

- John Semper* David Bogue—A Man for All Seasons
Leighton James Griffith John—The Founder of the Hankow Mission
Ian Rees Jonathan Edwards on the Work of the Holy Spirit

1991

- A. Kelly* What Makes Churches Grow
E. S. Guest Joseph Parker—The Immortal Thor of Pulpitdom
Peter Seccombe RW Dale—Standing Firm or Drifting Dangerously

1992

- Arthur Fraser* When Evolutionary Thought and Congregational Thinkers Meet
David Saunders Living Stones—Our Heritage, Our Future
John Little John Cennick—Conflict and Conciliation in the Evangelical Awakening.

1993 Some Separatists

- Alan Tovey* A Reforming Pair—Henry Barrow and John Greenwood
R. Tudur Jones John Penry

1994 Perseverance and Assurance

- Ian Densham* Sherwood, Selina and Salubrious Place
Norman Bonnett John Eliot—Son of Nazeing
Guy Davies Thomas Goodwin and the Quest for Assurance

1995 Ministers and Missionaries

- Peter J. Beale* The Rise and Development of the London Missionary Society
Derek O. Swann Thomas Haweis 1734–1820
Brian Higham David Jones—The Angel of Llangan

1996 Freedom and Faithfulness

- E. S. Guest* From CERF to EFCC
Digby L. James Heroes and Villains—The Controversy between John Cotton and Roger Williams
John Semper Edward Parsons—Influence from a Local Church

1997 From Shropshire to Madagascar via Bath

- Robert Pickles* The Rise and Fall of the Shropshire Congregational Union
Philip Swann William Jay—Pastor and Preacher
Noel Gibbard Madagascar

1998 Eternal Light, Adoption and Livingstone

- Gordon T. Booth* Thomas Binney, 1798–1874
Gordon Cooke The Doctrine of Adoption & the Preaching of Jeremiah Burroughs
Arthur Fraser David Livingstone

1999 JD Jones, Lloyd-Jones and 1662

- Peter Williams* J. D. Jones of Bournemouth
John Legg God's Own Testimony: Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones' Doctrine of Assurance
Mervyn Neal The Great Ejection of 1662

2000 Origins, Theology and Unity

- Ian Harrison* John Wycliffe, Father of Congregationalism?
Bryan Jones John Owen's Evangelical Theology
Kenneth Brownell Robert and James Haldane and the Quest for Evangelical Union

2001 Grace 'tis a Charming Sound

- Gordon Cooke* At One? A History of Congregational Thinking on the Atonement
John Hancock Philip Doddridge 1702–1751: Missionary Visionary
Neil Stewart Baptism in the Congregational Tradition

2002 Lovers of the Truth of God

- Michael Plant* Congregationalists and Confessions
E. S. Guest The Geneva Bible
John Semper William Huntington

2003 Jonathan Edwards

- Robert E. Davis* 'What Must I do to Be Saved?' Jonathan Edwards and the Nature of True Conversion
Robert E. Davis A Father of the Modern Mission Movement
Robert E. Davis Jonathan Edwards and Britain: 18th Century Trans-Atlantic Networking

2004 Revival!

- Derek Swann* Congregationalism and the Welsh Revival 1904–05
Cyril Aston James Montgomery—Sheffield's Sacred Psalmist
Eric Alldritt The Greater Excellence of the New Covenant

2005 Missionaries and Martyrs

- Peter Taylor* John Williams, Apostle to Polynesia (1796–1839)
Brian Higham David Picton Jones
Neil Richards The faith and courage of the Marian Martyrs

2006 Challenge, Memories and Adventure

- Peter Robinson* Congregationalism's Boom Years
Peter J. Beale The Doctor—25 Years On
David Gregson The Adventure of the English Bible

2007 Courage, Covenants and the Countess

- Peter Seccombe* Gilmour of Mongolia
David Legg Bringing up Children for God
Lucy Beale Selina Countess of Huntingdon 1707–1791

2008 Independency in Practice and Theory

- Arthur Fraser* Congregationalism and Spiritual Renewal in the Scottish Highlands
Joseph Greenald Congregational Independency 1689–1735: Standing Firm in an Age of Decline
John Semper The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 1658

2009 The Fruit of Faith

- Ian Shaw* Andrew Reed (1768–1862): Preaching, Pastoral Work, and Social Concern
Gordon Cooke The Cambridge Platform (1649)
Tony Lambert Robert Morrison (1782–1834), first Protestant missionary to China

2010 Growing in Grace

- George Speers* History of Congregationalism in Ireland
Robert Oliver Cornelius Winter of Marlborough (1741–1808)

2011 Truth, faithfulness and zeal

- Michael Plant* John Owen on the Attestation and Interpretation of the Bible
Neil Stewart History of Latimer Memorial Congregational Church, Beverley
Digby L. James Thomas Barnes

2012 Faithfulness to the end

Neville Rees The life of Alan Tovey
Garry Williams The Great Ejection of 1662

2013 Revive Thy Work, Oh Lord

Andrew Charles Revival and revolution in Rotherham
Frank Wroe The Origin and History of the Unaffiliated Congregational Churches Charity
Bill Dyer The experience of ministerial training, then and now

2014 The Gospel: Preached and Practised

Digby L. James George Whitefield and the influence of his preaching on Congregationalism
Mike Plant Gospel Truth
Jonathan Hunt Gospel Independence
Bill Calder Gospel Fellowship

2015 With Broken Heart and Contrite Sigh

Geruase Charmley Richard Henry Smith: The Gospel, Art and the People
Thomas Brand Christ's Cry of Dereliction: The Trinity and the Cross
Bob Cotton A Suffolk Worthy—Cornelius Elven 1797–1873

2016 A Wondrous Gospel to proclaim

Michael Haykin Asahel Nettleton: Calvinist evangelist in the Second Great Awakening
Michael Haykin John Owen & spiritual experience—A tercentennial appreciation
Michael Haykin Isaac Watts & his cross-centred piety

2017 Living with heart and mind

Gary Brady The value of Libraries
Paul Lusk Living in a Pluralist Society
Nathan Munday William Williams, Pantycelyn 300

Recordings of papers from 1989 onwards (except 1999) can be found at www.efcc.co.uk

EFCC publications

Telling Another Generation

This book contains a symposium of papers originally written to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of EFCC, and as a tribute to Stan Guest, who has been closely involved in the work of EFCC ever since its formation, and retired as secretary of the Fellowship in 1989.

Serving as a Deacon by John Legg

‘Diaconates might find it useful to supply each member with a copy of this work’—*Evangelicals Now*.

Evangelical & Congregational

A brief survey of Congregational history, church order, confessions of faith, the ministry, worship and sacraments. Includes *The Savoy Declaration of Faith*.

After Conversion—What? by Lionel Fletcher

A reprint of the forthright and biblical advice to new Christians by Lionel Fletcher, one of Congregationalism’s foremost pastors and evangelists.

Children of the Covenant by John Legg

The biblical basis for infant baptism.

Signs and Seals of the Covenant by CG Kirkby

A biblical review of the doctrine of Christian baptism.

*EFCC also has available these books about
Congregational church government*

Wandering Pilgrims by ES Guest

A review of the history of Congregationalism from its formative years to the present day. The author was involved in the negotiations between those churches which joined the United Reformed Church in 1972 and those who did not.

Manual of Congregational Principles by RW Dale

The definitive work of Congregational church government.

Christian Fellowship or The Church Member’s Guide by John Angell James

A practical manual for church members to learn their duties and responsibilities.

Visible Saints: The Congregational Way by GF Nuttall

An historical study of the growth of Congregationalism in the years 1640–1660 by a highly respected scholar of church history.

All these items are available from the Operations Manager. The Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches, Latimer Congregational Church, Beverley, HU17 0JD

Typeset by Quinta Press,
Meadow View, Weston Rhyn, Oswestry, Shropshire, SY10 7RN
Tel: 01691 778659
E-mail: info@quintapress; Web-site: www.quintapress.com