

DECLARATION
OF THE

THE FIRST CONFERENCE

AT THE SAVOY,

1658

*A
Beautifully written
Well documented
conclusions well
taken
Excellent
work.*

A Paper Presented To

Dr. Edwin C. Deibler
Dallas Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements
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English Puritanism

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A
DECLARATION
OF THE
FAITH and ORDER
Owned and practised in the
Congregational Churches
IN
ENGLAND;

Agreed upon and consented unto

By their

ELDERS and MESSENGERS

IN

Their Meeting at the *SAVOY*,

Octob. 12. 1658.

L O N D O N

Printed for *D.L.* And are to be sold in *Paul's Church-yard, Fleet-Street,* and *Westminster-Hall,* 1659.]

THE FIRST CONFERENCE AT THE SAVOY, 1658

Introduction

In our times, we know a vast collection of creeds within the broad confines of Christendom. Some are in varying degrees divergent from orthodox theology, and some express different shades within orthodox theology. Of the second category, there is no shortage of diversity either, however. In the early days of the Reformation, there was not the selection of Protestant theologies that we know today. A Protestant in 1550, say, was either Lutheran, Zwinglian, continental Calvinist, or primitive Anglican.¹ The last expression would in time blossom into a grand array of diversified viewpoints, developing their own distinctives, but all having the same roots.

As the 17th century opened and the Elizabethan age closed, there multiplied in England those not content with the strict Anglican option. But there was no other church to turn to, so they began forming new bodies. They were called "dissenters," "schismatics," "non-conformists," and "puritans" by those in the now established National Church and with varying degrees would suffer national persecution until 1689. But with the Reformation spirit of liberty, these groups flourished nonetheless, and there came to be by 1700 many English expressions of non-conformity. It is the proposition of this paper that a major focal point of

¹We are assuming that in 1550 Anglican Theology was still basically Roman Catholic.

this new spirit of independency was the first Congregational Conference at the Savoy Palace, London, September 29th to October 12th, 1658.

The Setting

It is true that most Christians today have probably never heard of the first Savoy Conference, and that in itself might make the proposition before us somewhat suspect. It is our intention to show, however, that though the event seems a little obscure, it resulted at least implicitly in the spread of the Independent movement throughout England, to and across America, and influenced from 1658 up to today. Such a thesis, then, requires some description of the historical context which surrounds it.

When King Henry VIII broke with Rome in 1534, Roman Catholicism received its first blow on English soil. It would suffer recession, enjoy rejuvenation, back and forth for several decades, until during Elizabeth's long reign, Catholicism lost its official status. But that religion would not die, and still knew periods of revival and sympathy particularly under Charles I and II. In his English Church History (Four Lectures) (p. 85), Alfred Plummer gives an interesting historical interpretation.

Dissenters, by opposing the Church of England, were really supporting Romanists in their opposition. This was no new argument: Calvin and Beza had advised the Puritans not to separate from the Church of England, Cartwright had opposed the separation of

Browne and Harrison. And it had considerable effect. Not a few dissenters conformed rather than be supposed to be allies of Rome.

However, the English Civil Wars (1642-1649) brought social, political and economic groupings to blows, as well as religious. In an unprecedented act, Charles I was beheaded by the victorious Parliamentary forces in 1649. The country was left with a vacuum at its throne, but with a strong leader at its helm in the military leader Oliver Cromwell. He was appointed Lord Protectorate (in place of a king), and the nation almost took on the visage of a republic.

Now this was an age when religion and politics were pretty much indissoluble. Parliament in the 1630's and 1640's had become predominantly Puritan in its world-view, and was populated most noticeably by English Presbyterians. The desire was to devise a new creed, a new standard of faith for the nation, which would preserve the Church from Catholicism (and other considered heresies) and bring in a new national church, that being Presbyterian. The resultant Assembly at Westminster with its marvelous documents (the Confession [1647], the Longer and Shorter Catechisms, a Directory of Church Government and Discipline, and a Directory of Worship), was called together, and Puritan theologians of England worked with commissioners from the Church of Scotland in their production. Presbyterianism as a full-blown theological alternative had now reached maturity. But to say that Presbyterianism alone occupied the front of the stage would

be inaccurate. Presbyterianism was attended by a handmaiden, in the firm of the civil-war born² Independents.

The study of evangelical English Independency is a fascinating one. It is not unreasonable to trace the spirit of many American evangelical churches to that path first walked upon by Englishmen in the 1640's and 1650's. While the Puritan Presbyterian movement played an invaluable role in defying the dead worship of the traditionalists and in placing orthodox theology in the attention of the nation, it still seemed to some not quite completely scriptural. Today also, some look at the Presbyterians and are not quite theologically satisfied, and look over at the Baptist movement, and aren't quite theologically satisfied, and are compelled to strike for some middle ground.

The Reformation stresses both Word and Spirit; both the Scripture-model, and expectancy of more light; both the enlightened reason, and divine inspiration; both order and freedom; both office and gift; both the godly prince and the gathered church. By and large, the Presbyterians stress the former and the Baptists the latter, with the Congregationalists excitingly, or uneasily, in the middle, ideally stressing both equally but in practice oscillating between the two; to the Presbyterians seeming enthusiastic and sectarian; to the Baptists unconverted and ecclesiastical. This middle position is illustrated by the two-fold path by

²These were primarily the earliest Congregationalists. The Baptists also saw their beginnings during the Civil War. Cromwell enforced religious toleration in his "New Model" Army, thus providing an atmosphere in which these groups could grow. The study of the New Model Army is very much worthy of study itself--it was during the Civil War that great revival occurred in the camps of the New Model Army. The revivals in the Southern Army of the American Civil War have been likened to those here mentioned.

which men came to Congregational convictions; and by the fact that between 1662 and 1717, many Congregational churches included Presbyterians, while many other Congregational churches included Baptists (though rarely both Presbyterians and Baptists).³

Is this not the case today also with many of our evangelical Independent churches? The climate which we can see today, and the questions being asked were the same in the mid 17th century in England. Nuttall continues on with his description of the theological development:

The better education of the Presbyterians made them more open to the prevailing intellectual climate, from the latitudinarianism of late seventeenth-century Anglicanism to the deism and rationalism of eighteenth-century Anglicanism or the Arianism and Socinianism current in theological circles in the University of Glasgow and the universities in the Netherlands, to which the Presbyterians went in greater numbers than the Congregationalists. This, together with their lack of any genuinely Presbyterian system of government, and their own less well grounded or less whole-hearted Dissent, partly explains their gradual lapse into the heterodoxy of Arminianism, Arianism and Socinianism. The Baptists clung so firmly to High Calvinism as to hold it improper to offer salvation to any but the elect; while the Congregationalists, once again adopted a mediating position, nearer to that known as Baxterianism, which permitted the continuance of both orthodox doctrine and evangelical practice.⁴

As is often the case during troubled times, the presentation of non-conformists (to Anglicanism) after 1660 brought some activity towards attempted union between "right-wing" Congrega-

³Nuttall, Geoffrey F., Supplement to the Congregational Historical Society Transactions, Volume 19 (hereafter referred to as CHST XIX), pp. 1, 2.

⁴op. cit., p. 6.

tionalists⁵ and Presbyterians. Of the 1761 clergy known to have been ejected from their pulpits in 1660-1662, 131 were Congregationalists (and 8 Baptists).⁶ The rest were Presbyterians or Presbyterian episcopals. During 1669-1670, John Owen and Richard Baxter discussed non-conformist unity. After 1689 then, a "Happy Union" was tried between Presbyterians and Congregationalists, but fell apart due to recurring differences. Appendix A at the end relates some nine differences as they have developed.

All of this gives some idea of the contrast (though small when all Christendom is considered) that developed within non-conformity by 1700. But what of the specific setting in the 1650's which saw in 1658 the first⁷ Savoy Conference?

Under Oliver Cromwell's oversight, religious Independency in England gained a permanent foothold. In the short decade that he ruled, one positive result was the establishment of the notion at least of religious freedom, and liberty of conscience. Congregationalism greatly increased in importance and several Congregationalists were elevated to national prominence. John Owen,

⁵Nuttall distinguishes "right-wing" Congregationalists (closer to Presbyterian) from "left-wing" Congregationalists (closer to Baptist).

⁶op.cit., p. 4.

⁷We call this the First Conference to distinguish it from the Second in 1661, at which Richard Baxter petitioned the Anglicans, and at which the Independents were not included.

considered by some (including J. I. Packer) to be the greatest British Theologian of all time, was at least the profoundest theologian of the period. He was made dean of Christ's Church and vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford. Thomas Goodwin, who had been a Congregationalist member of the Westminster Assembly, became president of Magdalen College, Cambridge. Others included John Howe, Philip Nye and Joseph Caryl. During this period of liberty for Independents, there became evident the need for some kind of description, and theological collaboration for the new Congregationalist churches. So Cromwell and the Congregationalists around him summoned an assembly of Congregational elders to prepare a confession of faith.

The Occasion

Today in the forecourt of the Savoy Hotel in the Strand is part of the much larger site of the old Palace of the Savoy. Commemorative plates remind of its history (which for instance, hosted Geoffrey Chaucer on many occasions). But for us, the site remains as a profound focal point in the early stages of English evangelical independency, a harvest of which we partake today.

Oliver Cromwell died on September 3, 1658, just 26 days before the synod he called would convene. But with Richard Cromwell now Protectorate (though to last only two years), representatives of Congregational churches came for the synod anyway. The task was before them. The fear was in London that the synod

would not just be convened to discuss the finer points of theology, but that politico-religious matters would prevail, touching the lives of many Englishmen and Welshmen.⁸ The Westminster Assembly had been a Parliamentary affair. But this conference would not have quite the political ramifications as did that at Westminster. Apparently, proposals for this conference were made in July 1658. From the minister George Griffith, invitations went out broadly. About two hundred men, mostly "lay" elders, attended, representing over one hundred churches. Griffith was appointed clerk, and a committee of six; Goodwin, Nye, William Bridge, William Greenhill, Caryl (all of whom had been members of the Westminster Assembly) and John Owen, were appointed to prepare the draft of a declaration of faith and order.⁹ Sundays and between sessions were spent with fasting, prayer and hearing the Word of God. Then by October 12th, the final draft was approved. Most probably, John Owen assisted by Philip Nye penned the preface, and Thomas Goodwin made a speech on the occasion of the document's presentation to Richard Cromwell. In his speech, Goodwin relates the purpose behind the conference, "to clear ourselves of that scandal which not only some persons at home but

⁸Toon, Peter, God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen, The Paternoster Press, 1971, p. 103.

⁹Ibid.

of foreign parts have affixed on us, viz., that Independentism is the sink of all heresies and schisms."¹⁰

The Savoy Conference was one of the first synods of English-speaking evangelicalism to gather for Scriptural definition with a minimal of political confusion.

The Declaration

As to its doctrinal context, the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order puts forth orthodox Calvinistic teaching. Much of the Westminster Confession was agreed to and adopted as Congregational. Again, the proposition of this paper is that it was the event of the first Savoy Conference that was significant, before its Declaration. This initial gathering of Congregational Independents was a milestone. At the Conference's conclusion, the Preface to the Declaration tells us that the attendees "look upon it as a great and special work of the Holy Ghost, that so numerous a company of ministers, and other principal brethern, should so readily, speedily, and jointly, give up themselves to such a whole body of truths as is there collected."¹¹ The Savoy attendees must have been reacting in some way to what was happening in English religion. But it is entirely appropriate to note some of

¹⁰op. cit., p. 104.

¹¹From the Preface to the Declaration, quoted in Daniel Neal, The History of the Puritans, Vol. III, p. 691, Klock & Klock, 1979 (1837).

the particulars of the Declaration, since it is the document of the Conference.

While it is true that the Savoy Declaration usually stands in the shadow of the Westminster Confession, there are some differences which the Savoy Committee adopted. The three basic areas which differ concern the activity of the civil magistrate, the church and the Gospel. As to the matter of the magistrate, the Congregationalists held that he should not have power to actually bind men in the exercise of religious liberty. This was not done out of convenience for their own members (since this was the time of their prominence, politically), but a very early glimmer of the idea of separation of church and state. The Presbyterians were not thus minded at this point in time. The differences between Presbyterians and Independents on religious liberty are clear.¹²

In its section on the Church (XXVI), the Declaration espouses an optimistic millenarianism:

Part 5: As the Lord in His care and love toward His Church, hath in His infinite wise providence exercised it with greath variety in all ages, for the good of them that love him, and his glory; so according to his promise we expect that in the latter days, antichrist being destroyed, the Jews called, and the adversaries of the kingdom of his dear Son broken, the church of Christ being enlarged, and edified through a free and plentiful communication of light and grace, shall enjoy

¹²Toon, Peter, The Westminster and Savoy Confessions: A Brief Comparison, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, Summer 1972, p. 155.

in this world a more quiet, peaceable and glorious condition than they have enjoyed.¹³

Toon interprets this to mean that the Congregationalists were persuaded that the latter-day glory of the Church would entail congregational polity. This supposed connection between church polity and eschatology is unique, being absent from the Westminster Confession.¹⁴

Toon is also helpful in interpreting Part 2 of Section XXVI. The part reads:

The whole body of men throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel and obedience unto God by Christ according to it, not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are, and may be called the visible catholic church of Christ; although as such it is not entrusted with the administration of any ordinances, or have any officers to rule or govern in, or over the whole body.¹⁵

Toon says that this teaches that a man is "ordained" to a congregation alone, a local church, and not to the universal church, per se, as in Presbyterian and Anglican theology. This results in there being no ecclesiastical officers who have authority over the whole number of professing Christians in the world.¹⁶ The matter is intended to speak to the political expression of the Church. Also of interest in the matter of ordination of ministers--Geoffrey Nuttal notes in his instructive

¹³The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 1658, Evangelical Press, 1971, p. 37.

¹⁵Declaration, p. 36.

¹⁶Toon, God's Statesman . . ., p. 105, note.

ing in the minds of the Congregationalists, but is a matter of emphasis. Toon concludes that this is an imbalance, and "may be seen as one root of that hyper-Calvinism which infected both Congregational and Baptist churches in the early eighteenth century. In the minds of less able men than Goodwin and Owen, this great stress on federal theology became the basis of a gospel that had within it no missionary endeavor."¹⁹ Yet, perhaps the Congregational theologians were compelled to overstate their case, driven in 1658 by the need to establish legitimacy.

The Results

Recounting the particulars of the historical event is not the hard part. What is challenging, is to make an evaluation as to the later effects felt as a result of the event. In 1660, Charles II, son of Charles I was restored to the throne. There were some evangelical appeals (i.e., Baxter at the second Savoy Conference), but to no avail. Charles II, though not the papist that his father was, did bring great travail to the Independents and Presbyterians alike. The Ejection of 1660-1662 ended officially at least, what progress Toleration had made during the Protectorate. It was a time of purging, and of reflection on the close together theological events of the previous two decades.

¹⁹Ibid, pp. 159, 160.

The Baptist, Congregationalist and Presbyterian movements would solidify and mature during the next 29 years (up to the Act of Toleration, 1689). The persecution would serve as a medium for non-conformist growth and definition. Indeed, it would not be long after 1689 that English religion at large would begin to visibly manifest the latitudinarianism of the 18th century, and therefore leave the realm of orthodox theological discussion.

So what did the Savoy Conference in 1658 accomplish? We have stated that in most church historians it has been barely mentioned (and, in fact, ignored by almost all historical theologians). The significance, again, lies in the event. If we say that Biblical Congregationalism serves as a mediator between Baptist and Presbyterian emphases, than it must be a third alternative (and was the only alternative for years in New England). W. Gordon Robinson, former president of the Congregational Historical Society, published a delightful article in 1958 entitled "The Savoy Declaration of 1658 and To-Day." He interacts with Nuttall's writings, and relates several Congregational principles distinct after 1658. First is the delineation of what was the nature of a Congregational Church.²⁰ Generally, the church would be elder-minded, and populated by "visible saints," that is, those who give evidence of having experienced regenera-

²⁰The dichotomy developed as to "right-wing" and "left-wing" Congregational churches. The "right-wing" retained elder rule, whereas the "left-wing" gravitated towards rule by the body at large, not unlike the Baptist position.

tion. The congregations were autonomous, but constrained "to come together in consultation and fellowship."²¹ As each congregation should be guided and constrained by the Holy Spirit, so should a fellowship of congregations. This is the mature meaning of congregational independency--"to crave the helpe [in the case of difference] of other churches, toward the composing it, as the church of Antioch did in Acts 15:2, 3, which practise was not by way of appeal, but by craving advice and counsell."²² John Owen wrote, "There is a communion also to be observed between these churches, as such, which is sometimes, or may be exerted in their assemblies by their Delegates, for declaring the sense, and determining things of joynt concernment unto them."²³ So, there was to be communication, cooperation and strong fellowship between churches, but not the binding authority which a Presbytery might have--autonomy, though not isolation. From the Preface to the Declaration:

The Spirit of Christ is in himself too free, great and generous a Spirit, to suffer himself to be used by any humane arm, to whip men into belief; he drives not, but gently leads into all truth, and persuades men to dwell in the tents of like precious Faith; which lose of its preciousness and value, if that sparkle of freedom shone not in it.

²¹Robinson, W. Gordon, CHST, XVIII, p. 81.

²²Bartlet, William, quoted in Nuttall, Visible Saints, p. 99.

²³Owen, John, Of Schism, p. 216 (original edition, Oxford, 1657).

Second was the notion of a church covenant. It was practiced in the belief that Christ would lead His people into more and more truth as they are willing to walk with Him and with each other. It disallowed casual association with a church, a concept in too common since that time. The local church ministry is carried on in the Spirit, among those bound together and energized by the Spirit. This allowed for teaching ministry by those other than ministers, who were gifted and enabled by the Spirit. It also de-emphasizes clergy-laity distinctions. This sounds much like what we enjoy in America today.

Finally, there was out of the Conference the spirit of toleration and ecumenicity among those within the evangelical orthodoxy of the time (construed as different from the evangelicalism of today). While not tolerating "miscarriages, divisions, breaches, fallings off from Holy Ordinances of God," toleration was to be practiced within orthodoxy. Again, liberty of Christian conscience was at stake for them, a concept we almost take for granted today.

So, trends were being set in 1658 for much of what we treasure in American evangelical churches today. This is the beauty of the first Savoy Conference.

The Heritage

Today, one is hard pressed to find in this country an evangelical church which goes by the name "Congregational." The term

is used by many Baptists to espouse strict body-rule, but as we have shown, that is not the general historical idea of "Congregationalism."

But are there in fact no Congregational Independents today? Is there no remnant of the balance offered by Historical Congregationalism which was so absolutely profound in 1658? There is much evidence around us, if we recognize it, that tells us that we know a heritage which traces quietly back to the Savoy in 1658. The Bible Church movement in America today, grown out of the defection of liberal theology by the mainline denominations, calls out for historical under-pinning. The Plymouth Brethern Movement, transmitted from England to America in the last century and very popular in certain areas today, is interrogated by some for lack of respectable heritage. And nearly every other Independent but theologically orthodox movement struggles to attach itself to some legitimate Reformation, or Post-Reformation pillar. This paper has tried to show that the event of the First Savoy Conference was a major focal point in church history, from which Independent evangelicalism today derives. We do not know but that a bold endeavor with risks on the part of evangelical churchmen today, might be used of the Lord in future times to harvest greater ministry.

APPENDIX A

Differences Between Presbyterians and Congregationalists so far may be represented under nine heads:

1. The Presbyterians were in favour of an established Church if Reformed (as in Scotland); the right-wing Congregationalists of a freer established Church as under Cromwell; the left-wing Congregationalists (and the Baptists) of separation between Church and State.
2. All Congregationalists and Baptists were accustomed to draw up and sign a covenant when forming a Church (inchurching, embodying); the Presbyterians did not observe this practice.
3. The Presbyterians were in favour of government of the Church by synods, and internally by elders; the right-wing Congregationalists of internal government by elders but of no more than free association for mutual counsel externally; the left-wing Congregationalists (and Baptists) for internal government by all members assembled in church meeting. (This last system undoubtedly owed something to, and also fostered, the rise of the common man into political importance, as in turn lords spiritual and temporal were abolished and the Archbishop of Canterbury and the King executed.)
4. The Congregationalist (and Baptists) encouraged occasional preaching by unordained 'gifted brethern', and often delayed the ordination of a minister for a considerable period after the beginning of his pastorate; neither practice was customary among the Presbyterians.
5. The Presbyterians held that ordination of ministers was by other ministers, with the laying on of hands; the Congregationalists did not regard the laying on of hands as essential, or always practise it; and the left-wing Congregationalists held that ordination was by the church which called the minister, with other ministers present and approving.
6. The Congregational (and Baptist) practice was for ministers at ordination services (as also for candidates for church membership at church meeting) to declare their faith and experience; the Presbyterian practice was for ministers to declare their faith only.

7. The Presbyterians were agreeable to the use of a liturgy such as the Directory, though not to its imposition; the Congregationalists (and Baptists) were opposed to liturgy as such in the interests of free, or 'conceived', prayer as led by the Holy Spirit during worship by the coetus fidelis.
8. The Presbyterians were content to have the Lord's Table with axis North and South; the Congregationalists preferred to have its axis East and West (as in pre-Laudian seventeenth-century Anglicanism), to preclude any association of it with an alter.
9. A deep theological division between Presbyterians and Congregationalists between 1640 and 1660, affecting their general interpretation and application of scripture, was that the Presbyterians were unsympathetic to, the Congregationalists (and Baptists) heavily influenced by the prevailing millenarianism; and again after 1689 that the Congregationalists tended towards the Presbyterians away from, antinomianism.

--From Congregational Historical Society Transactions,
Supplement, December, 1964, Roger Thomas, pp. 4-6.

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