

# Dissent and Non-Conformism

## Introduction

Christianity is essentially non-conformist. It has to be because it is the enemy of the world. The world is opposed to God and Christianity is the testimony of God. All churches must therefore be non-conformist if they wish to maintain a true witness to God.

The origins of many denominations were pioneered by dissenters; people who dissented from the prevailing restrictive laws, legalistic institutions, religious hierarchy or social customs to maintain a true witness to Biblical truth.

In the beginning of the Protestant Church in Britain a dissenter (or nonconformist) was a believer who did not conform to the disciplines and rites of the Anglican Church. We could list such groups as follows:

- The Puritans wished to purify the church from within.
- The separatists, under Robert Browne, left the Anglican Church entirely.<sup>1</sup>
- The Presbyterians argued for the replacement of bishops by a system of elected elders.
- The Congregationalists sought a decentralised, autonomous, independent local church emphasising the equality of members.
- The Baptists focused upon baptism by immersion as opposed to pouring or sprinkling as performed by others, as well as independence.
- The Pilgrim Fathers emigrated to the 13 Colonies (America) to escape persecution.
- In 1681 Pennsylvania was founded as a refuge for Quakers by William Penn who emigrated to America from southern England to escape persecution.

All nonconformists were subject to penalties. During the Civil War nonconformists (especially Congregationalists and Baptists) fought for Parliament. With the Restoration Settlement of 1660 harsh measures were enacted against all nonconformist groups. The 1662 Act of Uniformity deprived dissenters of freedom of worship and persecution led to a further exodus to North America. The Toleration Act (1689) brought some improvements in England, but until the 19<sup>th</sup> century nonconformists were debarred from holding political office.

In later, more peaceful, times dissenters include the Methodists who eventually seceded from the Anglican Church (after the death of John Wesley). The Countess of Huntingdon Connexion was a series of dissenting chapels built to house the Calvinist Methodists connected to the countess.<sup>2</sup> The Calvinistic Methodists<sup>3</sup> were a strong separatist movement in Wales who built large numbers of chapels throughout the principality.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Browne [c.1550–1633] was an English Protestant Nonconformist, founder of a religious sect, the 'Brownists'. His followers were the first to separate from the Anglican Church after the Reformation. His treatise *Reformation without Tarrying for Any* (1582) called for immediate separatism and doctrinal reform. Mental instability undermined his leadership, and by 1591 he was reconciled to the Anglican Church. He is seen by English and American congregationalists as the founder of their principles of church government.

<sup>2</sup> Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon [1707–91], (born Selina Shirley) was a British religious leader. On her husband's death in 1746 she devoted herself to religious and social work and was instrumental in introducing Methodism to the upper classes. Following the expulsion of six theological students from Oxford University on allegations of Methodism, she established Trevecca House in mid Wales as a college for the

In modern times many of the once-outlawed separatist church movements are now considered as mainstream, such as Pentecostalism or the Baptists. Some have more or less vanished, such as the Brethren.<sup>4</sup> Smaller separatist groups tend to be viewed as sects, such as Christadelphians or Seventh Day Adventists, or even cults, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Unity, Mormons and Christian Science.

What is interesting about evangelical dissenters is that when they had everything to lose and were persecuted, their faith was far purer than when they became established and grew in numbers. Congregationalists were very pure in their expression and produced such fine men as the Puritan Thomas Goodwin [1600-1680], leader of the Dissenters in the Westminster Assembly.<sup>5</sup> Yet Congregationalism is virtually extinct in Britain today. There are a few isolated independent churches but most formally allied with other denominations and lost their purpose. The Congregational Church in England and Wales merged with the Presbyterian Church of England in 1972 to form the United Reformed Church, which became utterly liberal. In the USA the Congregational Christian Churches merged with the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1957 to form the United Church of Christ. In 300 years the Congregationalists went from a powerhouse of truth to oblivion. This is what happens when a church movement fails to have great leadership.

So dissent has a rich and varied testimony that is well worth studying. In this paper I wish to examine the principles of dissent and understand why being a maverick<sup>6</sup> is so important to centring on the truth.

## Dissent within the churches

Nonconformists are awkward and irritating. They are like a grain of sand in the oyster, always causing trouble. Needless to say, I am a nonconformist and I have continually been accused of being unsettling. But I will not change for any man. Yet other people have told me how much they appreciate me and how much they esteem my writing and counsel.

This is the point with dissenters; they kick against the establishment and cause trouble to it, but they are loved for their focus upon truth as they see it (not all dissenters were Biblical). Dissenters are radical; they centre upon the important deep-rooted facts and care nothing for man's authority. No matter how gifted they are, church leaders will not promote them because they are a threat to authority. They will never be 'Yes-men'. Hence mavericks tend to independent ministry. They love the church but operate outside any formal system. Mavericks are ideal leaders for a local house church.

The main danger that any church faces is worldliness. This need not be a gross expression, such as obvious sinful practices, but more often than not is falling in line with human means of doing things. For example, as soon as a church registers for tax-exempt status it

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training of evangelical clergymen in 1768. She was a follower of the English evangelical preacher George Whitefield [1714–70] and made him her chaplain. The Calvinistic Methodist chapels which she helped to establish are still known as 'Countess of Huntingdon chapels'.

<sup>3</sup> Calvinistic Methodists predated Wesleyanism.

<sup>4</sup> Many Brethren folk merged into the House Church Movement, which had a similar ecclesiology but a more liberal polity. In time, the House Churches were absorbed into the Charismatic Restoration Movement. Thus the Brethren folk eventually became the opposite of what they started out to be. Some Brethren churches held on until the membership died out. There may be some operating in Britain, but I don't know of any.

<sup>5</sup> Not the Arminian John Goodwin.

<sup>6</sup> An unorthodox or independent-minded person. It derives from the North American word for an unbranded calf or yearling. The origin is the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century word from the name of Samuel A. Maverick [1803–70], a Texas engineer and rancher who did not brand his cattle.

has become worldly and falls within the remit of the secular establishment. It must follow certain regulatory codes. This is selling spiritual independence for money.

Hierarchical leadership, common to most churches, is another example of worldliness. In fact it stems from demonic structures that are mirrored in worldly systems of governance. Churches just copy that system automatically and ignore clear Biblical principles. This then leads to other problems, such as a clergy / laity split, which is completely unbiblical – yet is virtually universal.

Evangelical dissenters refuse to comply with all this because they are unbiblical. The non-conformist becomes closer to God's will than mainstream churches.

The Puritan movement is a good example of this. It was grateful that the Elizabethan church was Protestant and not Catholic but it was unhappy that many expressions of the Anglican Church were still very Catholic in practice. Thus the Puritans sought purity and wanted reforms, opposed by Elizabeth who wanted peace and uniformity. The Puritan could never be satisfied with a church that was one thing in name but something else in reality. Strong-minded Puritans became Separatists.

Thus all the aspects of church life must be aligned with Scripture. The radical dissenter wants everything in church to be Biblical. In simple terms, this means:

- A Biblical leadership: that is rule by elders and no one else. There is a team of equal elders with no senior pastor.
- Elders must be male.
- Meeting in a home and nowhere else.
- A congregation of small numbers.
- Focus upon fellowship and one-anothering. Mutual edification and encouragement.
- Focus upon Christ as Lord of the church.
- Didactic Biblical teaching, supervised by elders. This implies discussion and dialogue.
- Breaking bread every Sunday.
- Establishing the local church as a family of brethren.
- Giving to be centred upon poor relief and administered by deacons.
- Separation from the world.

## **Dissent against the world**

It is vital that churches are nonconformists with regard to the world. This is a very big topic.

### **God's will**

Firstly, the church must never comply with human laws that are contrary to God's will. The classic example of this is the demand of the government to close places of worship for months during the fake Covid pandemic.

God's word supersedes man's laws and statutes. No church must break God's law. If necessary a church must face persecution in order to fulfil God's word. However, if the church is a small meeting in a house it should be easy to meet in secret and avoid any detection. That is one reason God instituted this pattern (not the only reason).

## **Worldly practices**

Secondly, the church must never take on the characteristics of the world in the way that it performs its duty. The modern churches are riddled with examples of failing in such things.

For example, having a large public meeting, that is advertised in various places and newspapers, that attracts outsiders by utilising entertaining features (bands, lights, dancing, drama, free coffee etc.) and then dumbing-down the Gospel to un-offending rudiments – is all utterly wrong. This is taking on the world instead of dissenting from it.

Many churches use worldly marketing techniques in order to develop programmes to attract new members. Polls are taken around the local area to identify the proclivities of people and the age range of the population. Advertising and meetings are then designed around the majority interests to attract outsiders.

Instrumental music is another form of worldliness that has no place in the apostolic NT church (try and find any NT reference to it). Not only is worship rendered entertainment by the addition and centring upon rock bands, but even teaching (more usually preaching; also unbiblical) is underscored by music playing softly in the background to add emotional weight in some churches.

## **The church becomes the world**

We could list a multitude of ways in which the church becomes the world. These fall into various strata.

### *Social centres*

Many churches have become glorified social centres; a sort of social club with religious overtones. Members feel that the church is their social life and they would be lost without it. This especially affects families that have been there a long time. The church occupies most of their week with various unbiblical clubs and meetings. These often have a specific unbiblical leader assigned to oversee them.

Members of such churches find that they are completely divorced from the world; they live in a holy huddle that entirely focuses on the social life organised by the leadership, which occupies all their free time. This is why they have a poor evangelistic record – they don't meet people from the world and witness to them. This then leads to holding unbiblical Gospel meetings with all manner of things to attract outsiders.

[ASIDE: SEPARATION AND REALITY: the church must be separate from the world. It is a hidden thing; a mystery to men. It is not a public meeting but an association of brethren meeting in a home. Christians must take care not to be worldly in their affections and attitudes. That is fundamental. HOWEVER, Christians are still in the world in practice with responsibilities in it. This includes giving Caesar his due, honouring rulers, and doing good to all. Christians, therefore, do not shut themselves off from the world in practical matters. They have friends in the world and converse with them for good.]

### *Occultism*

This is where the church takes on worldly spirituality that is focused on witchcraft, magic, divination and spiritualism. This is absolutely worldliness but the demonic spiritual side of worldliness.

Sadly, the Charismatic Movement proved to be a Trojan Horse for the importation of occult practices and ideas. These include: channelling, imagineering, inner healing, sacramentalism, exorcisms, trances, falling backwards, the word of knowledge as

prescience, false healings, necromancy, divination, and much more. This was following a history of multiple church movements that incorporated occultism in various ways. These include: Wesleyanism, the Holiness Movement, Christian Science, Unity, the Pentecostal Movement, the Latter Rain Movement, the Healing Movement and so on.

For example, imagineering (as per Yonggi Cho) is actually magic but it calls this 'faith'. Giving up to extreme emotionalism and passivity and expressing this release as screaming, shouting, dancing, writhing, falling over, etc. is equivalent to kundalini yoga. Lying on the grave of a dead saint in order to absorb their power ('grave sucking') is necromancy. Speaking gibberish in tongues has a long and varied occult base. Leaders that lay suggestible people on their backs by blowing, speaking, or gesturing, is shamanism. Speaking with dead saints is spiritualism.

### *Management*

Where the church takes on human way of managing the membership that has large numbers. This requires administrative roles of various sorts and a multitude of office departments. Usually there is a general manager of some description. This is worldliness in organisation.

### *Leadership*

Usually by a hierarchy (see earlier). Very often the leadership structure is pyramidal in large movements. This is where there is a central authority figure (archbishops, patriarch, apostles, prophet), with a coterie under him (apostolic team, clergy) who supervise local senior pastors (vicars) who lead local congregations.

The whole point of God's church is to avoid such organised strata of leadership and centre upon the church as a family led by a father or shepherd (pastor / elder).

### *Money*

Where the church demands that members give to the church, or the church leadership primarily. This money is then used for fleshly things like salaries of leaders, rents of buildings, capital finance for buying buildings, renovations and such like.

### *Philosophy*

Where the church takes on the various passing philosophies of men as the basis for their teaching and practice. Today many churches (e.g. the Emerging Church) takes on board Postmodernism with all its evils. In the past churches have centred their doctrine on Neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, Rationalism, Liberalism, Modernism, Mechanism, Existentialism, Evolutionary Theory, Humanism, Transcendentalism, and many more human ideas.

## **Dissent in practice**

Church members do not seem to realise that God holds them responsible for the way that they are led. In recent decades, church leaders in large churches, have fallen into apostasy and sin for some considerable time before they left of their own accord. During that time all that they preached, usually as a result of hidden gross sin, was useless. Yet their fame enabled them to continue being lauded. I have personally seen this with my own eyes. When I expressed misgivings because something was wrong, I was chastised – only for the pastor to leave in ignominy months later.

But it is the responsibility of the members to hold the leaders to account before God. They need to exercise discernment about what they are being taught and evaluate what the

character of the leader is. A good church requires the membership to hold the leadership accountable.

This is very rarely done. I have done this on my own and it is a dauntless task. I have held very famous leaders to account because they were in error and leading a church down a wrong path. In one case, multiple members agreed with me but all were too afraid to confront the leader. It was left to me to do so, and it was not pleasant. Needless to say, all the secret dissenting voices backed down and left me stranded. I resigned my ministry immediately and left the church some time later. Time has proved me right but the judgment for all this is in the hands of God alone.

In one case I confronted a pastor of a church I was visiting because the problems were obvious. He said nothing and those around me were shocked. A matter of weeks later I learned that he abandoned the ministry and ran off with a woman member.

In one church I was a member of the 70s I called the eldership together to evaluate my concerns about the senior pastor. The eldership very quietly disciplined the pastor (more of advice really) and we patched things up. Soon after I peacefully left that church to plant a house church nearer my home, which grew very quickly. A few years later the original church disbanded because that senior pastor had committed adultery with many women in the church over a long period of time.

In another famous church that I occasionally visited, because of friends that were members, I expressed concerns about the pastor in a quiet way to friends trying to get some peace about the matter. I had actually even socialised with this pastor and his outward actions were very good but something was wrong. I was roundly condemned for even thinking such things. My concerns grew and I started writing a paper examining his ministry; not for publication but to gather my thoughts. Before I could finish this paper it turned out that he had been committing adultery for years (despite a beautiful wife and two brilliant children). He left the ministry and the area to start a new life. No one apologised to me.

A very famous pastor in East Anglia, some time ago, left his family and abandoned the ministry to run off with another man. I once sat under his ministry and it left me stone cold. Yet his congregation continued to laud his previous ministry and his books remained on sale. This is delusion.

The point is that congregations are meant to evaluate their leadership and hold them accountable. When a church collapses through leadership failure, it is not just the leaders who are at fault but also the undiscerning congregation. In practice the sheep fail to do this but it is left to the dissenters.

## Conclusion

Dissenters are radical – they get to the root of things and hold on to them.

It is a Biblical dissenter that fixes on to Scriptural truth above all else and cares nothing about the authority of men but seeks to honour God. As such dissenters are a threat to human leadership; yet they should be celebrated and honoured for keeping to the straight and narrow.

Here is a short list of notable Christian dissenters:

- John Bunyan.
- Thomas Goodwin.

- John Owen.
- Thomas Brooks.
- Thomas Watson.
- John Flavel.
- Martin Luther.
- John Calvin.
- William Twisse.
- Robert Browne.
- The Pilgrim Fathers.
- Gottschalk.
- The Scots Worthies.
- The victims of the Marian persecution.
- Perpetua.
- Jan Hus.
- Jerome of Prague.
- Savonarola.
- John Wycliffe.
- George Muller.
- GH Lang.
- AW Pink.
- Martyn Lloyd-Jones.
- Herman Hoeksema.

We need more people of this calibre in these very dark days.

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