
Congregationalists and Confessions

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How did I end up as an evangelical Congregational minister? I was brought up by Christian parents, who attended an evangelical Anglican church. I was converted at that church and when I left home, to go to college, I attended another evangelical Anglican church. I remain deeply influenced by, and deeply grateful for, those churches and their contribution to my life. Some things however happened to change the obvious course that I was on and to lead me into contact and ministry with churches I knew nothing of until I was well into my twenties.

- 1 *I was exposed to non-conformist worship.* Many may now feel that the long minister's prayer is boring and has no place in modern worship. However my experience was of a man of God praying in the Spirit and there is nothing like that. This made a commitment to liturgical worship unattractive.
- 2 *I was exposed to Reformed Theology.* The ministry that I was experiencing in Student Conferences and locally was often Calvinistic. I encountered something thrilling and mind expanding that I had not come across before.
- 3 *I began to examine what the Bible taught about the church.* I had a very clear sense of call to the ministry and had to sort out where I should train and where I might minister. Even apart from any reservations I might have about mixed denominations and the direction of evangelical Anglicanism, and these were not unimportant factors, I could not see a complex denominational structure, such as would be essential in Anglicanism or Presbyterianism, anywhere in Scripture.

So here I was, and incidentally I was also a convinced believer in infant baptism, and I believed I had a new grasp of Biblical truth but I didn't know if there had ever been anybody who believed the same as me. Then somehow I came across a copy of the 1658 *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*, as then in print from Evangelical Press, and realised that I was not all alone in the world and that the position I now held had been believed down the years by many other people. So my attraction to ministry with the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches came about through a confessional document. Subsequently I managed to get hold of a copy of the 1833 *Declaration of Faith* and that, in my opinion, is broadly in line with Savoy but, being far less complex and detailed, is better adapted to be of value as a contemporary statement of faith.

However, the next stage in my discoveries was that in the EFCC, *Savoy* might have some relevance as a historic and foundational statement of faith but is not used in the sense that subscription to it, or any adherence to it, is asked of ministers or member churches. So the *Savoy Declaration* was reprinted in *Evangelical and Congregational*, but only as a guide to what Congregationalists historically believed, and not as something to be subscribed to. The church to which I was called, and which I have been pleased to serve for over nineteen years, has six very basic doctrinal points in its statement of faith, which is in its Trust Deeds and which the minister must preach in accord with. These Trust Deeds also refer to the need for the minister to be a Congregationalist and a Paedo-Baptist. Clearly, while many evangelical Presbyterians give the *Westminster Confession*

a central place in their thinking, and many Reformed Baptists feel the same about the *1689 Confession*, the majority of Congregationalists are not giving, and historically have not given, such a central place to their confessions of faith.

What are the reasons for this different viewpoint? It is not the belief, characteristic of Liberal Theology, that truth cannot be defined in objective propositions. Doubtless this belief has fuelled anti-creedalism but not on the part of evangelical Congregationalists. Nor is it the truth that Congregationalists are essentially non-creedal even if evangelical—they would hardly have produced the above named declarations if this was their position. Indeed it could be argued that Congregationalists have been particularly active in formulating new creeds on a regular basis. This could certainly be argued from the proliferation of creedal statements in Congregational church covenants; a strong case could be made for this. Nor do I conclude that this simply means that modern Congregationalists suffer from pernicious doctrinal anaemia and that this means we have radically departed from the attitudes to creeds that earlier generations of Congregationalists held. Rather I believe that there may be a thought out and Biblical rationale for this stance. If we are not conscious of this rationale then, if we belong to the modern Reformed movement, we will simply make the mistake as Independents, and the same problem would apply to Baptists, of being David trying to fight in Saul's armour or rather Independents trying to fight in Presbyterian armour. It may be that, even were it possible to stimulate such a change, a renewed emphasis on Confessions and subscription to them would not be a good way forward for us.

In order to properly explore this question today what we will be doing in this paper is examining a number of questions:—

1. Why do the 1658 Savoy Declaration and the 1833 Declaration of the Faith of the Congregational or Independent Dissenters simply seem to disappear from view in our church history? If the declarations pass so swiftly from prominence what was their original purpose?

That the declarations play a far more minor part in Congregational church history than does the *Westminster Confession* in Presbyterian church history is inescapable. In churches which date back to the 17th and 18th Centuries, you will not find that the Trust Deeds involve the *Savoy Declaration* although in the 19th Century some churches did have the *1833 Declaration* attached to their trust deeds—this is the case at Eston and Staithes Congregational Churches. The general practice in the 17th and 18th Centuries would be to have a Statement of Faith, which might resemble but would probably be far less complex than the *Savoy*. The Statement of Faith would be part of a church covenant and was often drawn up by the minister. One common practice was that the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* would form the doctrinal basis for a Congregational Church as is the case at Bridgenorth and at Reeth. I don't know of Congregational churches to which this applied but some of the Calvinistic Independent churches used the doctrinal articles in the Anglican *39 Articles* as their basis of faith. Our own church, which was founded within fifty years of the publication of the *1833 Declaration of Faith*, has six very basic articles of faith:

- 1 The divine and special inspiration of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and their sole authority and entire sufficiency as the rule of faith and practice.

- 2 The unity of God with the proper deity of Father, Son and of the Holy Spirit.
- 3 The depravity of man and the absolute necessity of the Holy Spirit's agency for man's regeneration and restoration.
- 4 The incarnation of the Son of God in the person of Jesus Christ and the universal sufficiency of the atonement by his death and free justification of sinners by faith alone in him.
- 5 Salvation by grace and the duty of all men to believe in Christ.
- 6 The resurrection of the dead and the final judgment when the wicked shall go away into everlasting punishment but the righteous unto life eternal.

There is a statement in our trust deeds, which states that the minister is to be a Congregationalist and a Paedo-Baptist although no such restrictions are stated as applying either to members or church officers. I assume, but it is nowhere stated in the trust deeds, that the general definition of a Congregationalist would have been intended to be taken as that given in the *1833 Declaration*.

The reasons for the ephemeral nature of Congregational declarations of faith may relate to the purpose of creeds amongst Congregationalists—that is that they were never intended to be for subscription but as a vehicle for the declaration of the faith of churches of the Congregational way. This may be inferred from the fact that the term 'declaration' rather than 'confession' is used. I wrote to a distinguished Congregational historian to ask whether there is intended to be clear distinction between the two terms and he replied 'that there is all the difference between confessions and declarations. Confessions are given, authoritative, orthodox, conceived as ideally timeless truth, declarations are worked out anew as what is believed to be the truth as understood now by a particular group—the more, the better, as proceeding from a living community.'¹

With respect to this opinion, it does need to be noted that the preface to the *Savoy Declaration*, said to be written by John Owen, happily uses the term 'confession' to refer to the *Savoy Declaration* and does so consistently and not as an isolated instance. Having said that, the preface also states:

And accordingly such a transaction is to be looked upon as a fit *medium* or *means* whereby to express *that their common faith and salvation*, and no way to be made use of as an *imposition* upon any: Whatever is of force or constraint in matters of this nature causeth them to degenerate from the *name* and *nature* of *Confessions*, and turns them from being *Confessions of Faith*, into *exactions* and *impositions of Faith*.²

Again,

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 would lose of its preciousness and value, if that sparkle of freeness shone not in it.³

I conclude here that the general point about a distinction being intended is correct but that there was not, at least at the time of the *Savoy Declaration* being produced, the sharp distinction between the two terms that is inferred. The distinction that exists, I think, is between *expressions of faith* and *impositions upon faith* rather than between timeless statements of truth and the current consensus of a particular community. However, as I shall demonstrate later, the Congregational Way often seems to involve framing new statements of faith in which to express eternal truths when it is faced with

deviations from the Faith. One reason that the *Savoy* and other later declarations of faith were made was actually to safeguard the eternal truths contained in the faith once delivered to the saints. The reason for producing the *Savoy Declaration* was due to attacks on ‘The great and fixed truths of the gospel’⁴ and for it to act as a doctrinal marker for the churches which previously were ‘like ships launched singly, and sailing apart and alone in the vast ocean of tumultuating times’ by holding out to them: ‘common lights ... Whereby to show where we were.’⁵

Following in the same footsteps as the *Savoy Declaration*, the preliminary notes to the *1833 Declaration of Faith* read: ‘It is not intended that the following statement be put forward with any authority, or as a standard to which assent should be required’, rather it is ‘designed to state the leading doctrines of faith and order maintained by Congregational Churches in general.’ In each case the declaration is made to show where we stand, so that others may stand with us, rather than to be a standard to be imposed on others.

Before proceeding further, I want to raise with those who would tend to favour subscription and are not at home with the viewpoint I am outlining, a general point about the nature of subscription and the difficulty of defining what is required from those subscribing to a confession. A reluctance to insist on subscription is very understandable when the creeds in question are complex and detailed in many areas. Must someone who is subscribing to the *Westminster Confession* agree that the pope is the Man of Sin and that not only adultery but also desertion is a biblical ground of divorce? While those who advocate subscription may say that you can fully subscribe to a confession without absolute commitment to the wording and that if you ‘scruple over a statement here and there’ you can ‘still remain true to the doctrinal intent of the confession’ they are still left with the fact that there is actually no objective way that these distinctions can be defined and upheld. Once you admit the viewpoint that the wording isn’t binding it is possible to disbelieve virtually any detail of the confession, and yet claim that you ‘still remain true to the doctrinal intent of the confession’. For example, could you hold to the Amyraldian position, of election of individuals to salvation but of a universal atonement rather than an atonement limited to the elect, and still subscribe to the *Westminster Confession*? People’s understanding of the idea of limited atonement, even amongst those who claim to hold to it, vary considerably and there is a spectrum of possible views rather than two stark alternatives. Where on the spectrum will the line be drawn? A paper I have at home, which actually originates from amongst Reformed Baptists, lists three varieties of subscription—absolute subscription: ‘every word as it is written’—historical subscription: ‘agreeing with the author’s intention’—or full subscription which I have defined above, where you can reject details provided you are generally in agreement. I think that the above points about subscription are worth making because if you are to dismiss the case that I make and insist, against the intention of the writers, that subscription to documents like the *Savoy* and the *1833* declarations is desirable, then you will need to think through what you mean by subscription and how closely agreement is to be insisted on. It is not the simple matter some may assume.

In EFCC where we annually affirm our oneness and our shared belief, it seems common-sense to say that where we are going to insist on agreement of a meaningful

kind we are best to keep the statements simple and basic, such as any evangelical holding to a congregational polity would agree.

A reason for this distinct perspective against subscriptionism amongst Congregationalists, which we should not be unaware of, is the historical background to the production of the *Savoy Declaration* and *1833 Declaration*. Prior to *Savoy* the value of creeds was partly in the fact that they formed a useful tool of persecution and that this was an experience and danger all too real to the early Congregationalists. Nor should we doubt that the *Westminster Confession*, which was intended to form the basis of a national church settlement, was seen as a tool of persecution against those who did not conform. This is one reason why *Savoy* and the *1689 Baptist Confession* both stress their indebtedness to the Westminster standards and largely adopt their wording. Peter Toon wrote: 'the Congregational way was in 1658 a cause under both attack and siege. It was being described as a "sink of all heresies and schisms"; it wanted legal recognition under the rule of Richard Cromwell or whoever succeeded him; and it wanted to affirm its Reformed Theological basis'.⁶ As regards the *1833 Declaration*, all Congregationalists still suffered the loss of most normal civic rights until 1828, and of some rights until 1871, as a punishment for refusal to subscribe to Anglican doctrines or the liturgy which expresses them. Geoffrey Nuttall writes: 'Historically there is much justification for associating creeds with persecution.'⁷

It should also be pointed out that at no stage did *Savoy* necessarily reflect the views of all, or even of a majority of, the English Congregationalists. The *Declaration* was drawn up very speedily in response to the urgent need for legal recognition. The whole proceedings of the conference took just eleven days and the wording of the doctrinal portion of the *Declaration* was delegated to a sub-committee, consisting of Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, Philip Nye, William Bridge, Joseph Caryl and William Greenhill. This explains the reasons for, and was enabled by, the almost wholesale adoption of the *Westminster Confession* as a doctrinal standard. Richard Baxter, who is an unfriendly critic, wrote 'They once met at the Savoy, and drew up an agreement of many Pastors. But in this they differ from many other churches called Independants.'⁸ The *Declaration* was at no stage circulated for approval by the churches, although publication was delayed until some other pastors had the opportunity to state their agreement or disagreement with them. Some disagreed because they were more open to recognising and fellowshiping with parish churches where a godly ministry existed and others might disagree with the distinction made in the 'Platform of Order' between 'pastors' and 'doctors' or 'teachers'.⁹

By the 18th century *Savoy* was already a dead letter. However, another possible reason for the failure of strong and defined creedalism in Congregationalism may be the influence of the Great Awakening and the Missionary Movement. The London Missionary Society was largely Congregationalist in composition, with people like David Bogue and Philip Doddridge amongst its founders, and became increasingly Congregationalist over the years. Generally the missionaries were Calvinists but some held views of church polity which were not Congregationalist. The policy of the Society was that the missionaries would plant churches, which reflected the ecclesiastical polity held to by their founders: 'The Society's purpose is not to send Presbyterianism, Independency, Episcopacy, or any other form of Church Order and Government ... but

the glorious Gospel of the blessed God.' As the missionary movement developed and as the Spirit was poured out during the Great Awakening, the eyes of 18th century Evangelicals were moved from the perspective of being a denomination in 'Christendom' to being Christians in 'Heathendom'. Suddenly the world was bigger than Christianised Europe. This perspective on the gospel and the missionary task was a sea change in British evangelicalism and resulted in a cast of mind that was not as friendly to the magisterial and complex confessions of the 17th Century. When you consider the importance of the emphasis on mission and evangelism in the New Testament all the 17th Century Confessions are notably deficient in this area of thought.

2. How did Congregationalists continue to declare their faith without having a nationally recognised and binding confession?

I would suggest that there are many ways the faith of a church is affirmed and declared which do not require subscription to a nationally recognised confession of faith. One prominent way in the early centuries of Congregationalism was by the use of church covenants. Congregational churches covenanted together at their inception and on occasions would renew their covenant or make a fresh covenant with the Lord. I will give you the wording of the covenant entered into, and frequently renewed by the Independent Church at Axminster in Devon:

The Lord having called us into fellowship with His Son, and convinced us of the necessity of church fellowship we do solemnly profess in the strength of Christ, the accepting of the Lord for our God, and the giving up of ourselves to Him to walk, through the strength of Christ, together in all His holy commandments and ordinances according to the rule of His word. And we do likewise give up ourselves to one another in the Lord, to walk together in all those graces and discharging all those duties which are required of us as a church of Christ.¹⁰

On one occasion the covenant was renewed in a fresh form:

O Thou most holy God, and Searcher of all hearts; we, Thy poor people, unworthy to be called Thy children by reason of our manifold backslidings and violations of Thy holy covenant, are emboldened through Thy goodness, promise and covenant mercy in Thy Son, to prostrate ourselves our souls at the feet of grace, confessing from our hearts all our transgressions against Thy holy law and gospel, with our breaches of covenant with Thee and our great unfaithfulness, desiring to be ashamed in Thy sight, to abhor ourselves in dust and ashes for them, humbly begging Thy pardon in the blood of Thy dear Son, and desiring and professing from our hearts our willingness to return unto Thee, and to walk more closely with Thee in Thy covenant for the time to come. And therefore do we this day re-give up our souls, bodies and all that is ours to Thee, to be more entirely Thine for ever; and do, in the strength of Christ, resolve and bind our souls by solemn vow and covenant to Thee and one another in Thee, to walk with Thee in all Thy holy will, and with one another in the fellowship of the gospel, as Thou hast required of us in Thy Word, solemnly covenanting in Thy presence and through Thy Son, to take Thy Word for our rule and to endeavour the ordering of our conversations according to it, and to be more careful in attending on Thy holy ordinances and keeping up our communion in the duties of Thy worship according to our capacity; to love and watch over one another; to endeavour the building up and saving each other's souls; to be governed in all things by Thy holy will and to persevere with Thee too through good report and bad report, through life and death, through Thy grace strengthening us. So help us, O God.¹¹

William Gordon Robinson distinguishes several periods in the making of church covenants:—

- 1 The Separatist period when they majored on separation from the world and from the apostate church.
- 2 The period of early Congregationalism when they were characteristically concerned with walking together in the gospel way.
- 3 A later period when the gospel was perceived to be under threat from Arianism, which later deteriorated into Unitarianism.¹²

In this third period the statements of faith would characteristically be detailed and sometimes greater flexibility in covenanting together was allowed. In the Bury St Edmunds Church in 1655 the statement of faith, which is integral to the church covenant, has 11 principal heads and 29 subordinate divisions. John Browne describes it as: ‘a masterly performance’ which is ‘comprehensive judicious and scriptural.’¹³ It was ‘signed by all the brethren and sisters, but not as a mere matter of form. Those who dissented from any article or statement in it carefully noted their dissent at the time of subscription.’ It is recorded that two women added after their signatures the words ‘being clear in all but that of infant baptism’.¹⁴

I have had the opportunity to examine in detail the doctrinal statement, which is contained in the 1770 Church Covenant of the Blanket Row Church in Hull. The group had left Dagger Lane Presbyterian Church in 1769 due to doubts as to the orthodoxy of the minister. The reasons for the drafting of the Statement of Faith are also given: ‘in every church of Christ, formed on a gospel-plan, there should be a regular, methodical and scriptural Confession of the Faith of that Society, because it is impossible there should be a united Contention for the Faith, if there is not a united profession of it.’¹⁵ The statement here has some 20 sections, each with scriptural proofs and the phrasing is reminiscent of earlier declarations without being directly copied from them. The theology is the High-Calvinism of the *Savoy Declaration*, and the presentation of it cannot be said to have been improved, but it is significant that the way in which Congregationalists often responded to an attack on ‘the faith once delivered’ is not by appealing to bygone statements of faith but by framing new ones. However, some churches might declare their orthodoxy by referring to some of the *39 Articles* or to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* in their church covenants.

Preaching is another obvious way of declaring the faith of a congregation. Our church doesn’t have a detailed statement of faith but the preaching embodies a statement of faith, albeit not in a systematic form. Nonetheless none of us would want to say that a statement of faith has the power that preaching has to form and to hold together the people of God. There is a richness, a variety and a distinctive ethos to the Word of God that no statement of faith can equal. This is something vital which we need to take on board in our consideration of how a congregation is to achieve a doctrinal and ecclesiastical identity. It does so chiefly through the preached Word, and the failure to see this makes the church to be viewed as too much an organisation governed by a rule book and too little as the community of faith indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Another obvious area in which our faith is declared is that of hymn-writing and singing. This is an area in which Watts and Doddridge spring to mind as great and gifted exponents. How helpful hymns like ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’ and ‘O

God of Bethel' are to Christian faith and devotion. In *Christian Hymns* Isaac Watts has hymns in almost every section, and I am sure that you could construct his systematic theology and certainly a confession of his faith from his hymns alone. Other less known ministers did the same. Richard Davis of Rothwell in Northamptonshire composed many hymns and the one I am quoting is actually chosen because it is not very wonderful in terms of poetry and writing style. It can be misleading to concentrate our studies on the greatly gifted and exceptional, and it is helpful to see that many practitioners of the art of hymn-writing were not very gifted but served their own times and congregations. In common with most hymn-writers of his generation none of Davis's work has survived in modern hymn-books. The hymn reads:

Our Father from eternity
did see us in our sin,
His boundless grace did move him so
he called his Son to him.

Come my delight, my Glory bright
my wrath thou must remove,
there is a company of men
Whom I do dearly love.

Now for exchange thou needs must change
and take their sin on thee;
Thy righteousness, thy merits shall
to them imputed be.

The practice of many ministers, Philip Doddridge among them, was to preach and then use the hymn after the sermon, often written specially for the occasion, to enforce and apply and further elucidate the doctrine. So the hymn-writing was virtually a memory aid for use with the sermon. This may imply much about our choice of hymns because it is those your people will remember and carry with them into their everyday lives. The value of this hymnody is not its enduring quality, for even the greatest of hymn-writers will only have a small fraction of their output used by future generations, but its utility as a means of teaching Christian truth and causing it to be remembered.

I want to make a further point, which has great relevance to our current situation as the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches. Stan Guest points out, in his book *Wandering Pilgrims—What happened to the Congregational Churches?*,¹⁶ that it was probably not just reasons of economy that meant that from 1918 the *1833 Declaration* was no longer printed in the *Congregational Year Book*. Liberalism had swept through the denomination prior to the beginning of the 20th Century. Two obvious areas of contention were over eternal punishment and over the appearance of a hymnal called *The Rivulet*. Though deviations in both areas were strongly attacked, notably by Dr John Campbell, editor of the *British Banner* and several Congregational Union publications, the tide of the times meant that once the furore died down deviations from the evangelical faith could be quietly assimilated and accepted. Despite the resolution of 1878 affirming the evangelicalism of the Union, which stated 'That the Congregational Union was established on the basis of these facts and doctrines [of the evangelical faith as revealed in Scripture] is, on the judgement of the Assembly, made evident by the *Declaration of Faith and Order* adopted at the Annual Meeting, 1833, and the Assembly believes that the churches represented in the Union hold these

Facts and Doctrines in their integrity to this day',¹⁷ Liberalism was triumphant and the Congregational Union was probably the worst affected of all the major denominations.

We now move on to a period of church history in which some who are still alive and with us were involved—that is the founding of the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches. If people in EFCC wish to deplore the departure from the *1833 Declaration* on the part of others as a sign of their unfaithfulness to evangelical truth, it is somewhat strange that we ourselves never bothered to return to it and indeed I am assured that 'it was never on the agenda' that we do so.¹⁸ The founders of EFCC chose not to return to the 1833 Declaration but to draw up and adopt another statement of faith, which is briefer, less clearly Reformed and totally silent on infant baptism. I would contend that those who founded and initially led EFCC were simply making a contemporary declaration of their faith, which was less detailed doctrinally, less Calvinistic and was strongly influenced by the fact that evangelicalism as a whole was Baptist, having become increasingly Arminian during the latter end of the 19th Century and during the 20th Century. The EFCC statement of faith, then, declares the faith held by the founders of EFCC, whom I honour and admire, but honesty should compel the admission that the faith they held is not identical with the vigorous Calvinistic and Paedo-Baptist faith which the *Savoy* and *1833 Declarations* set forth. It is of course far closer to that faith than the formularies of the Congregational Church in England and Wales and of the United Reformed Church.

3. Has there been a strong objection to subscription to creeds amongst Congregationalists, and if so, what were the reasons given for this?

We will see that there has been, and that this is not a question of the strength of the evangelicalism of the persons concerned, although clearly the success of Liberalism amongst Congregationalists, especially ministers, did influence attitudes towards any form of creedalism. Rightly understood at least some of the problem comes from the very concept of the Church held by Congregationalists when they are most faithful to their own principles.

In the early 18th Century we find that Isaac Watts, who is clearly evangelical, declined to subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity during the Salters' Hall controversy. He writes in a foreword to a sermon by Matthew Henry on 'Religious contentions':

I confess, if the Matter of Debate at London were the glorious Doctrine of the Trinity, whether Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God, there would be more occasion for some Fervour of Spirit: The Scripture seems to me to be sufficiently expressive of this great Truth, and the more important Doctrines of our Religion appear to rest firmly on such a Divine Foundation. Yet even then the mere manner of Subsistence of Three Persons in One Godhead, ought never to become a warm controversy (because of its deep mystery). But while the Subject of the Contest in this City is reduced to this one point, (*viz*) Which is the best way to preserve truth and peace? Whether by subscribing the Words of Scripture or humane forms? I think a happy medium might be found out to secure Liberty and the Gospel together, by every one's declaring his own sense of Scripture in his own Words, at all proper Times, Places and Occasions, and particularly to the Satisfaction of all persons who have any just concern therein.¹⁹

Now I would not want to comment on whether Watts was correctly discerning his times because that is irrelevant to my argument. Indeed I readily confess that the subsequent

doctrinal downgrade does throw that judgement into question. What is important for our present study is that he does reveal several significant convictions:—

- 1 The Doctrine of the Trinity is vital to the preservation of the Faith once delivered to the saints.
- 2 Because of the mysterious nature of the Doctrine of the Trinity we would be wrong to fall out over the precise details of this doctrine.
- 3 To insist on particular wording of someone else's statement of belief is wrong.
- 4 Those concerned as to the content of a Christian preacher's preaching and teaching are entirely right to seek clarification.

This seems to me to preserve a balance. There is a historic, biblical Christian Faith, which we must hold to and which we are to be concerned that others hold to. Much dispute doctrinally is simply about the words in which we try to express mysteries. We are to recognise the historically conditioned nature and hence the limitations of creedal statements. Gerald Bray writes:

Historically speaking, Christian Theology has developed in the context of ancient Greek Philosophy and Roman Law. These influences have produced traditions of thought which have been used to explain the teaching of the Bible. From them two different (though often complementary) traditions have emerged, each with its own strengths and weaknesses.²⁰

How then can we force someone to state detailed doctrinal convictions in language they may find unhelpful and misleading and which by its very nature is unbiblical? By 'unbiblical' I do not mean 'anti-biblical' (*i.e.* teaching what the Bible does not teach) but simply that Biblical truths are expressed in non-Biblical words and categories.

Behind what may seem to be an extreme example of refusing to subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity lies a conviction that is very important and which relates to the nature of the church. For the Congregationalist the church is primarily to be regarded as 'the fellowship of believers' and not, as in classic Presbyterian expositions, 'the company of those who hold and profess saving doctrine'. As someone of Presbyterian convictions, who used to worship at our church, said to me, 'The only point of church membership is to uphold the church's statement of faith'. The same man couldn't understand why I gave him a copy of the *Savoy Declaration* when asked what I believed but wasn't worried by the fact that neither I nor my church officers had to subscribe to it. Because of their understanding of the nature of the church, Congregationalists historically laid great stress on the emotional, spiritual and volitional aspects of faith as well as the intellectual understanding and assent to the truth. An area where this understanding is fundamentally important is that of church membership. James Bannerman asserts that the difference between Presbyterians and Congregationalists is, broad and fundamental. With Independents, a saving belief in Christ is the only title to admission to the Christian society; and the candidate for admission is bound to bring with him at least credible evidence such a title belongs to him, and that he has been effectually called unto salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus. With Presbyterians, on the other hand, an intelligent profession of belief in the Gospel is the title for admission to Church membership; and the candidate for admission is only required to show that his conduct and life are in accordance with and accredit his profession.²¹

Let me give you three examples of the outworking of the Congregational view of the church and its membership; one is from the period of Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate,

one from the period of the Glorious Revolution and one from the 19th Century. The examples I am using therefore span three centuries and three dramatically changing contexts in which the Congregational Way was being followed. The first which I want to look at involves Richard Davis of Rothwell, Northamptonshire.

An indication of Davis's gentleness as regards doctrinal exactness in a prospective church member comes in his letter to John Beart, the pastor of a church founded from Rothwell, about an applicant for church membership who holds to eternal justification. [Eternal justification is the belief that the elect are justified from eternity and that faith recognises an already existent justification rather than receiving justification at the moment of belief.] Davis carefully refutes this error and then writes,

I do hope our brother daily knows experimentally that he comes as a perishing sinner to Christ and his righteousness in every prayer to God for present pardon and justification. And when he is helped to receive this present declaration, he can then reflect with comfort upon the eternal thoughts of God his Father toward him. And if he witnesses this experience to the church, they may be certain he holds faith to be somewhat else than the manifestation of his being eternally justified, however he may express himself.²²

The second involves Thomas Goodwin, who was content to allow Zachary Mayne, a fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford to partake of the Lord's Supper despite his avowed Socinianism.²³ The final example is RW Dale, who wrote: 'Can a man have faith in Christ—the faith which saves—and yet deny the Divinity of his person ...? I say Yes.'²⁴ He also comments 'What seems to be a fundamental principle of Congregationalism requires that the gates of the church should be open to a Unitarian.'²⁵ Putting it more thoughtfully he writes in his *Manual of Congregational Principles*

personal faith in Christ ... may exist, and there may be decisive evidence of its existence, in persons who have no clear intellectual apprehension of many of the great truths of the Gospel; ... in persons by whom some of these truths are rejected.²⁶

Probably few of us would wish to identify ourselves with all the sentiments expressed above but to say this is to miss the point. We may all feel that we would draw the line in different places from Davies, Goodwin and Dale, but the principle that genuine Christian experience, whether inadequately or inaccurately expressed, is the paramount consideration as regarding church membership clearly underlies these varied situations and responses and is a correct and biblical principle. We might ask what relevance the text (Romans 15:7): 'Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God' has for our receiving people into the membership of our churches. The text does not after all read: 'Accept one another just as they accept your Statement of Faith'! My understanding is that we accept all who belong to the Lord Jesus regardless of the level of understanding and expression of their faith. If we regard the church as primarily the community of believers then I find it hard to see how we could work in any other way. If a church will willingly exclude those who belong to Christ from its membership then my view is that it has become a theological club (most people would say a sect) rather than a church, which is professedly part of the Universal Church. RW Dale states:

A Christian society which imposes any other conditions of membership other than faith in Christ is a sect, and not, in the highest sense of the term, a Christian church. It is a private Christian club. It receives persons into membership, not because they are brethren

in Christ, but because they are brethren in Christ professing certain religious opinions or observing certain religious practices.²⁷

4. A modern question, which may have some well established answers. Is subscription to detailed confessions the way forward in Christian unity?

The original idea for this article originated in a discussion on local church unity which took place during a ministers' fraternal meeting at my home. Everyone else present, and they were reformed Baptists to a man, insisted that the unity of their congregations was based around the congregation's adherence to a full statement of faith, in nearly every case the *1689 Baptist Confession*. I found myself in a vocal minority of one, although I did manage to convince some that perhaps their own congregation's unity had not come about in this way at all.

My own questions about this have really touched on two areas in which I am involved. Firstly my own pastorate; and I entered the pastorate with the conviction that it would be most desirable that our church adopt, as explaining its commitment to Congregational faith and order, the *Savoy Declaration of Faith*. Later, when I came across the *1833 Declaration* I would have favoured that as shorter and more practicable for my congregation. In fact, nearly twenty years into the ministry in the same church, we still haven't adopted either declaration, nor have I ever proposed that we should. The reason is not that there would be such strong opposition to this move as would make life difficult, but that I have come to doubt the benefits of such a move. However, a need to respond to changing circumstances and attacks on the Faith might change my mind.

The other area is that of the fellowship of churches, the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches to which we belong. For many years I would have seriously held the view that subscription to the *Savoy Declaration*, or at the least the *1833 Declaration*, would be strongly desirable, if not actually practicable, for our churches as a means to enhance our unity. I have now decided that I was completely wrong about that. There are a number of reasons for this change in conviction that I want to share with you. Firstly, and not in order of importance, church history has made me believe that uniformity in doctrine and practice enforced by strong creeds is not the way to ensure and encourage unity in denominations or congregations. In fact the greater the uniformity and detail insisted upon, the greater the brittleness of the union, seems to be the rule. Secondly, I have become convinced and have seen in my own experience that real unity can be developed without such a method of subscription to creeds. Thirdly, I have come to see that the New Testament, which is passionately concerned about the problems of unity in the fellowship of God's people and devotes much space to the problem, adopts an entirely different strategy in order to promote that unity. It is this third and most important area of thought to which we now turn.

The point I want to make is that the Congregational Way, as regards creeds and creedalism, has actually captured the essence of a significant area of the thought within the New Testament. It may be helpful for us to consider two areas of life that had the potential to become strongly divisive for the New Testament Churches. Those are the division between Jew and Gentile, including matters of food laws, and the problem of eating meat that had been offered to idols (which may have been a greater problem to new Gentile believers, with long established belief in idols, than to strongly monotheistic Jewish converts to Christianity). Paul devotes 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1 and

Romans 14:1–15:13 to these problems. It is not sarcastic to suggest that if he felt strong creedalism was the answer to incipient disunity he could have done a far quicker and neater job. After all the whole matter can be reduced to a few propositions, which must be assented to so that unity may be achieved. There is still today a mindset abroad, which is intolerant and impatient with slow understanding and would like to legislate unity through confessions. As a method of approach it is neither Biblical nor workable.

Let us look at the possible propositions and then at Paul's handling of the matters involved.

Propositions

- 1 Romans 14:14 'No food is unclean of itself'; that on its own tells you all you need to know to be correct doctrinally in the situation Paul addresses in Romans 14:1–15:13.
- 2 1 Corinthians 8:4 'We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and there is no God but one.'
- 3 1 Corinthians 10:21 'You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in the Lord's table and the table of demons.' You can eat food offered to idols, as virtually all meat would have been, but not in the context of heathen worship.

The problem is that these creedal statements, which are completely correct, have to be understood, and their implications lived out, in a context where not everybody is able, as yet, to understand and to fully accept them. Weak Christians may defile their consciences eating meat offered to idols because they are still so accustomed to idols (1 Corinthians 8:7). Non-Christians may have hang-ups about Biblically permitted behaviour (see 1 Corinthians 10:27–29 where the non-Christian's conscience, about a Christian eating meat offered to idols, is to be respected). Conscience is precious and to go against conscience, however weak and wrongly informed, is sinful because (Romans 14:23): 'everything that does not come from faith is sin.'

So Paul must teach them that (1 Corinthians 8:1) 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.' That it is right to give up our rights (see 1 Corinthians 9) and that (Romans 15:1) 'We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves' and we should (Romans 14:19) 'make every effort do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.' Paul exhorts us (Romans 14:20): 'Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food'—nor, I would exhort us, for doctrinal shibboleths.

The overall point that I want to make is this: in any congregation there will be different levels of understanding, and of misunderstanding also, of the gospel. What is the way forward to unity when we are faced with such barriers? There are several propositions I would want to make which are relevant to the matter of creeds and subscription to them:

- 1 Truth and affirming truth is not unimportant within the local congregation; indeed they are vital activities if the church is to function as (1 Timothy 3:15): 'the pillar and the ground of the truth'. We are not saying that strong creedal statements cannot be made or that they should not be made. It is hard to imagine a creedal statement much stronger than the *Savoy Declaration*. Paul's creedal stance on clean and unclean foods and foods offered to idols is crystal clear. I am not suggesting that

doctrinally weak and indecisive preaching or hymnody is something that would be at all desirable in our churches.

- 2 However the presentation of such statements of truth must bear in mind that often those who are confronted with them have stumbling blocks in their minds concerning the statements. For example: the converted Jew to whom pork will never be a clean food; the converted animist for whom sacrifices offered to the spirits still have an objective reality; and the converted Nazarene in my congregation for whom Calvinism is a 'heresy'.
- 3 Hence to preserve unity we need to recognise that not only does the gospel mean that I can clearly state what I believe and that my statement of faith must be formed by Scripture, but also that I must have gospel-formed attitudes to those who also believe. As there were those in the early church whose attitudes showed that they were quite ready to destroy the work of God for the sake of food, or to act so that (1 Corinthians 11:11) '(a) weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by (their) knowledge', so such have their successors in the modern church. They are prepared to destroy the work of God for the sake of a particular phraseology as to the extent of the atonement, or a particular way of stating what the believer may expect in his experience of the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead we must (Romans 14:1) 'Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgement on disputable matters.'
- 4 How do we do this? Two points are worth noting:
 - We are to see that the gospel sets a pattern for our relationships and that following this pattern is what brings glory to God. Romans 15:7 'Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.'
 - We are to remember the things that are most important. Romans 14:17 'For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.' Most church troubles and disunity come about when something else becomes more important.

Conclusion

Many years ago, early in my ministry, I read a book at the recommendation of the Rev. Alan Tovey; whether this was intended mainly for my education or my encouragement I do not know. The book was very interesting and informative but its greatest value to me was in helping me develop my understanding of church life and ministry. The book is by Murray Tolmie and is called *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London 1616–1649*.²⁸ It is about the early Congregational churches in London and what I found helpful is the way it explodes romantic myths about church history. We may think that it would have been wonderful to be in the early Congregational churches where the members were of one mind and were not the rag-bag of denominational backgrounds that we so often accumulate. What Tolmie shows decisively, by painstaking research and documentation, is that they were not of one mind in their ecclesiology and attitudes and each congregation consisted of several groups. In each congregation some were Congregationalists, but some were the Brownists and Separatists, from which roots Congregationalism had sprung, and some were Baptists, not necessarily at that stage 'dippers'. When I thought about that situation I had exactly the same emotions that I was having when I looked at my own congregation: 'What a mess and what a mixture!' What I found helpful was this: there is no golden age of church life in which unity could be

achieved by promoting rigid formularies and tight doctrinal agreement, nor are we in such a situation today. Unity never comes about by seeking uniformity. Churches are preserved in unity and thrive and grow by the application of Christian love and the teaching of Christian truth in unpromising and difficult circumstances.

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