DENOMINATIONALISM AS A BASIS FOR ECUMENICITY: A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY CONCEPTION*

WINTHROP S. HUDSON, *Colgate-Rochester Divinity School*

The use of the word "denomination" to describe a religious group came into vogue during the early years of the Evangelical Revival. Typical of the mood which gave currency to the new term are John Wesley's oft-quoted words; "I . . . refuse to be distinguished from other men by any but the common principles of Christianity. . . . I renounce and detest all other marks of distinction. But from real Christians, *of whatever denomination,* I earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all. . . . Dost thou love and fear God? It is enough! I give thee the right hand of fellowship."[1] The word "denomination" was adopted by the leaders of the Evangelical Revival, both in England and America, because it was a neutral term which carried with it no implication of a negative value judgment.[2]

Denominationalism is the opposite of sectarianism. The word "denomination" implies that the group referred to is but one member of a larger group, called or denominated by a particular name. The basic contention of the denominational theory of the church is that the true church is not to be identified in any exclusive sense with any particular ecclesiastical institution. The outward forms of worship and organization are at best but differing attempts to give visible expression to the life of the church in the life of the world. No denomination claims to represent the whole church of Christ. No denomination claims that all other churches are false churches. No denomination claims that all members of society should be incorporated within its own membership. No denomination claims that the whole of society and the state should submit to its ecclesiastical regulations. Yet all denominations recognize their responsibility for the whole of society and they expect to cooperate in freedom and mutual respect with other denominations in discharging that responsibility.

The denominational theory of the church was popularized by the leaders of the eighteenth century awakening, but it was a theory which had been hammered out by a group of Puritan divines in the preceding century and which had won sufficiently widespread acceptance so that its theological justification could largely be taken for granted. As a consequence, the Evangelical leaders were not compelled to construct a systematic defense of the conception of the church which was common

*Read at a session of the American Society of Church History in New York City, December 29, 1954.

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to them all. To discover their fundamental presuppositions, which they betray only in incidental remarks and observations, one must go back to the seventeenth century divines who first formulated the denominational theory of the church.

Actually, the denominational theory of the church was implicit in the thinking of the Protestant Reformers. The true church, they affirmed, is not an institution, although in the life of the world it must assume institutional form. But the church must not and cannot be identified in any exclusive sense with any particular institution. There are many, John Calvin confessed, who "are not satisfied unless the church can always be pointed out with the finger." But, said he, that is something that cannot be done in any final sense. The whole question as to the dimensions, the boundaries, the limits of the church of Christ must be left to God, "since he alone 'knoweth them that are his.' "[3] Thus the Reformers recognized as true churches all churches which possessed an essentially common faith, whether they were Lutheran churches as in Germany and Scandinavia; Reformed churches as in Switzerland, Holland, and Scotland, or an Anglican church as in England. All these churches in their various geographical areas were different manifestations of the whole church of Christ which embraced them all.

The new element which was to be introduced into this type of thinking was the application of the basic convictions of the Reformers to a situation in which religious diversity existed within a particular geographical area rather than between different geographical areas. Formerly it had been a question as to whether or not a church in England could be and was in communion with a church in Holland. The answer of Protestantism in general had been that they both could be and were in communion with one another. In seventeenth century England, it was to be suggested that this was equally true of Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregational, and Baptist churches when they were located on opposite corners in the same city. Each could be and should be regarded as constituting a different "mode" of expressing in piety, thought, and organization that larger life of the church in which they all shared.

I.

The real architects of the denominational theory of the church were the seventeenth century Independent divines within the Church of England, whose most prominent representatives were the Dissenting Brethren in the Westminster Assembly. The initial concern of the Independents some decades before had been to carry out a liturgical reformation that would make the worship of the church express more adequately and convey more clearly the fundamental theological con-

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

victions they held concerning the nature and the implications of the Christian faith. Unfortunately an increasing pressure to secure liturgical conformity made it progressively more difficult for these men to maintain the liturgical reforms which they had introduced in their parishes and pushed them in the direction of Separatism. Yet, even when the force of circumstance compelled them to establish a separate worship, they were unwilling to adopt the Separatist contention that the conforming churches were to be disowned as false churches, and they continued to maintain communion, so far as they were able, with their former parish churches. Of one of their leaders, William Bradshaw, it was said: "He had learned Christ better than for difference of opinion in such points to make schisms and divisions, as their [the Separatists'] manner is, with all those that do not in all things concur with them and subscribe to what they say."[4] The worship and even the government of the conforming churches might be defective and corrupt to varying degrees, but to regard them as false churches without any valid ordinances and devoid of true Christians would be to divide the body of Christ, to unchurch the martyrs of former generations (such as Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer, and Hooper), and to run counter to one of the deepest convictions of the Independents concerning the economy of Christ in the life of the world.

During the early sessions of the Westminster Assembly, the Dissenting Brethren had objected to the establishment of a national church on a Presbyterian model. Charged with being obstructionists, they sought to justify their position by issuing *An Apologetical Narration.* There were two major principles, they asserted, upon which they had proceeded in their thinking concerning the outward arrangements of the church.

"The supreme rule," which they had followed, ". . . was the primitive pattern and example of the churches created by the Apostles."[5] They are willing to concede, as Henry Burton was later to acknowledge, that "no such model is left in the New Testament as was given to Moses in the Old;"[6] yet they could not "but imagine that Christ hath ever been as exact in setting forth the true bounds and limits of whatever portion of power he hath imparted unto any (if we of this age could attain rightly to discern it) as he hath been in ordering what kind of censures and for what sins, . . . which we find he hath been punctual in."[7]

When they had gone into exile abroad, they had been forced to inquire into the positive part of church government, and they believed that this circumstance of being completely on their own had served to free them from bias and thus had allowed them to search out the pattern of the primitive church impartially, being guided only by the "light and touch" of God's Spirit.

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> We had, of all men, the greatest reason to be true to our own consciences in what we should embrace, seeing it was for our conscience that we were deprived at once of whatever was dear to us. We had no new commonwealths to rear to frame church government unto . . . to cause the least variation by us from the primitive pattern. We had no state-ends or political interests to comply with; no kingdoms in our eye to subdue to our mold . . . ; no preferments or worldly respects to shape our opinion for. We had nothing else to do but simply and singly to consider how to worship God acceptably and so most accordingly to his Word.[8]

"Although we cannot profess that sufficiency of knowledge as to be able to lay forth all those rules therein . . . , yet we found principles enough, . . . to us clear and certain, and such as might well serve to preserve our churches in peace and from offense and would comfortably guide us to heaven in a safe way."[9]

The second principle upon which they had proceeded "was not to make our present judgment and practice a binding law unto ourselves for the future."

> We had too great an instance for our own frailty in the former way of our conformity, and therefore . . . we kept this reserve . . . to alter and retract (though not lightly) whatever should be discovered to be taken up out of a misunderstanding of the rule.[10]

The keeping of a "reserve to alter and retract" is reflected again and again in the writings of the Independents. The elders of the churches in New England in 1639, responding to an inquiry concerning their practice, had phrased it thus:

> We see as much cause to suspect the integrity of our own hearts as yours; and so much the more, as being more privy to the deceitfulness of our own hearts than to yours . . . , which causeth us with great reverence to accept and receive what further light God may be pleased to impart unto us by you. But as we have believed, so have we hitherto practiced. . . . If anything appear to be unsound, and dissonant from the Word, which we for our parts cannot discern, we shall willingly attend to what further light God may send unto us by you.[11]

In the same year, the anonymous author of *The Saints' Apology* had written in similar vein:

> I have in my plain way endeavored to express my judgment in these particulars, desiring to be always ready to open mine eyes to receive further light from whomsoever it shall be showed unto me. In the meantime, I must walk according to that I have. . . . If there be any begged principles or grounds wanting proof or anything inferred from grounds too weak to maintain the same . . . , make that appear unto me, and I shall either make them good . . . (at least to my apprehension or quit them.[12]

Thomas Hooker put it even more vividly when he wrote:

> My only aim . . . is to lay down . . . the grounds of our practice according to that measure of light I have received. . . . The sum is, we doubt not what we practice, but it's beyond all doubt that all men are

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> liars and we are in the number of those poor feeble men; either we do or may err, though we do not know it; what we have learned we do profess, and yet profess still to live that we may learn.

Hooker's hope was that he "might occasion men eminently gifted to make further search and to dig deeper that, if there be any vein of reason which lies yet lower, it might be brought to light." "We profess and promise," he continued, "not only a ready ear to hear it, but a heart willing to welcome it."[13]

It was this type of thinking which led the Independents to oppose the establishment of a national church on a Presbyterian model. They felt certain, as Henry Burton declared, that they could "prove our way with all our practices in every particular out of God's Word," and they also felt sure that this the others could not do.[14] Yet, knowing the deceit that lurked within their own hearts, they were aware that they might be wrong. Thus they objected not only to the Presbyterian claim that the system of church government which they proposed was *jure divino* but were equally unwilling to make such a claim for their own proposals.[15]

Beyond this fundamental disagreement as to the extent to which divine sanction could be claimed for a particular ecclesiastical structure, the difference between the two parties was not great. Charles Herle, a moderate Presbyterian, summarized the difference in this fashion:

> Our difference 'tis such as doth at most but ruffle a little the fringe, not any way rend the garment of Christ. 'Tis so far from being a *fundamental* that 'tis scarce a *material* one. Nay not so much as the *form*. 'Tis but the better or worse way for the exercise of the same form of discipline that is in question. *That it be* and *What it be* and *Which it be* is agreed on amongst us. 'Tis but the *Whose it be* we differ in, and herein not so much *Whose* neither, as *Where it be,* whether in every congregation apart or of the same men joined with the like of other congregations in a synod?[16]

The specific issue around which the controversy centered was where the power of the keys—the power to excommunicate and deliver unto Satan—was to reside. The one thing which their experience had taught the Independents was that the authority of the church could be utilized by men to hinder and obstruct God's people from yielding full obedience to God's will as it had been made known to them. This possibility they wished to reduce to a minimum.

One cannot escape the feeling, as one reads the literature of the time, that the Independents regarded the act of excommunication as involving, in the last analysis, an act of intolerable presumption on the part of those called upon to judge, but they could not deny its obvious Scriptural warrant. They could find in Scripture, however, no basis for a synod having the authority to deliver anyone to Satan, and they

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

were convinced that it was highly dangerous to grant such power to such a body. Consequently, they insisted that if a person was to receive that dreadful sentence, it should be pronounced by those who knew him, by the members of his own congregation, and not by a distant tribunal dependent solely upon second-hand reports of his character, conduct, and opinions. Even those threatened with the lesser penalties of civil tribunals, they pointed out, could claim the right to be judged in their own community by a jury of their peers.

As the discussions continued it became clear that the Independents would be content with an accommodation which would permit them to follow the leading of God's Spirit as it was disclosed to them in Scripture.

> I shall tell you in a word what will content all the Independents in England. 'Tis this: They desire neither more nor less than what the Puritans desired of Queen Elizabeth and King James; *viz.* an entire exemption from the jurisdiction of all prelates and ecclesiastical officers other than such as themselves shall choose; . . . to be as free to choose their own company, place, and time, with whom, where, and when to worship God as they are in the choice of their wives; for a forced marriage will not hold.[17]

Or, as the Dissenting Brethren phrased the demand: "If in a parish it happen there be a considerable number of such as cannot partake in the sacraments with the minister and people, they shall have liberty to dispose of themselves as a distinct church and to choose a minister or ministers at their own charge to be maintained, to be their pastor."[18] This, in essence, had been the Independent position from the beginning. Henry Jacob had written years before:

> We believe concerning mixtures of the open profane with some godly Christians in a visible church, though at once it doth not destroy essentially nor make void the holiness of that whole assembly, yet truly it putteth that whole assembly into a most dangerous and desperate estate . . . by such extreme peril of further infection. . . . Insomuch that what soul soever in such a church state desireth to be in safety ought with all diligence to leave that spiritual society . . . and join to a better, seeing under the gospel there are more free societies of Christians, more visible churches politic, than one in a country, and some more sincere than some. . . . We ought to leave the worse society and to enjoy one that is and may be sincere.[19]

This meant, as Jeremiah Burroughes readily acknowledged, that "we must grant that liberty to our brethren we would have ourselves."[20]

II

There were good theological reasons for the Independents to adopt the position that men should be as free in the choice of the forms of worship as they are in the choice of their wives.

Jeremiah Burroughes, the most influential spokesman of the Dis-

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

senting Brethren, pointed out that there always had been divisions in the church and that, "so long as we live here in this muddy world," there will continue to be divisions even among the godly. "If we consider things wisely," he suggested, "we have no cause to wonder that godly men in this their estate of imperfection should differ so much one from another as they do." There are several reasons for this:

> First, every godly man prizes and seeks after knowledge. Others mind little but their own profit and pleasure. They trouble not themselves about knowing the things of God, except ambition puts them upon it. They care not which way truths go. But the godly man prizes every truth at a high rate, worth the contending for to the uttermost. In the dark, all colors be alike; but in the light, they appear diverse. . . . When men discuss things and desire to see farther in them, it is impossible, considering the weakness of the best and the variety of men's apprehensions, but there must needs to be much difference in men's judgments. And then, considering [that] their consciences are engaged in it, that everything they apprehend to be a truth (at least thus far) that they must not deny it for a world, this puts men's spirits at a distance although both be godly, both love the truth equally.
>
> Secondly, godly men are free men. Christ made them so, and requires them not to suffer themselves to be brought under bondage. They must not, cannot submit their consciences to the opinions, determinations, decrees of any men living. They cannot submit to any as lords over their faith. This others can do. As for points of religion, say some, let the learned men judge of them; we will not be wiser than they; we will submit and others must submit to what they shall determine. This makes quick work of divisions, but this those who fear God cannot do. They must see everything they own as a truth with their own light . . . received from Jesus Christ. Though they reverence men of greater parts, deeper learning, yet they have the charge of Christ upon them not to acknowledge it as truth till they understand it to be so. This causes much contention among good men through their weakness and corruption of their hearts. . . . Thirdly, godly men give up themselves to the strictest rules of holiness. They walk in the narrow way of Christ. It is broad enough to the spiritual part, but in regard of our corruptions it is a narrow pent way. They dare not give way to themselves . . . to gratify others, . . . but must keep themselves to the straight rule. . . . Hence there is a clashing, everyone not having the same thoughts of the rule and way that others have. Those who walk by loose rules in ways that are broad . . . can suit themselves one to another easily. They can gratify their friends, yea, the corruptions of their friends, more than others can do. Godly men cannot yield for peace sake to such terms as other men can.
>
> Fourthly, the things that the Saints are conversant about are great things, things of a high nature, about their last end, their eternal estate. Hence everyone is very chary and careful and strongly set to maintain what he apprehends. Those who understand not the infinite consequence of those things, who have not had the fear of them fall upon their hearts, they wonder at the stiffness of men's spirits that they can be brought to yield no more in such things than they conceive they might yield in. Where there are different apprehensions of those things that concern men's eternal estates, even among godly men, they must needs stand out one against the other, till God causes one of them to see things otherwise than he now doth.

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Fifthly, the things of religion are hidden mysteries. They are the secrets of God. They are hard to be understood. God reveals them in a differing way. They are not ordinarily so clearly revealed but that the apprehensions of them are like to be different. . . .
>
> Sixthly, the Saints are bound to watch over one another. Each is his brother's keeper. They ought to advise, admonish, reprove one another. . . . Now this, through our corruption, is very displeasing. We do not love to be meddled with, to be crossed in what we have a mind to. Other men can better preserve their own quiet by letting their brethren alone. . . . Hence it is that they many times live more quietly with one another than godly men do. Yet this is a great evil, a shame to those who are godly, that it should be so upon any terms.
>
> Thus you see it is no wonder why there are dissentions among men that fear God.[21]

Several years earlier, William Bradshaw's editor had noted the lack of unanimity among the godly, pointing out that "it is well known that there is and hath been no small diversity of judgment between our nonconformists among themselves; some condemning some rites but allowing others, and some condemning those also which others allow; some esteeming the things simply evil in themselves, some only as inexpedient . . . ; some excepting against some passages in our liturgy which others of them stick not at; and the like." He then went on to observe that, "considering the wants and weaknesses that do ordinarily attend men's apprehensions . . . in such things as are not clearly evident of themselves, for a multitude of men of divers parts, abilities, dispositions, and endowments to concur and agree in every particular doubt or debate, question or controversy, . . . might justly be deemed rather a conspiracy than an uniformity of judgment."[22]

While Burroughes readily acknowledged that the divisions among Christians were due to human weakness and sin, he also insisted that God makes use of them for his own purposes. In these divisions, "God is working out ends above our reach for his glory and the good of his Saints." For one thing, God uses these divisions for "the discovery of men's spirits that they which are approved may be made manifest."

> The melting of the metal discovers the dross, for they divide the one from the other. These are melting times and thereby discovering times. If reformation had gone on without opposition, we had not seen what drossie spirits we had amongst us. Those who have kept upright without warping in these times are honorable before God.

God also uses these divisions to exercise the graces of his servants.

> A little skill in a mariner is enough to guide his ship in fair weather; but when storms arise, where the seas swell and grow troublesome, then his skill is put to it. In these stormy troublesome times, there had need be much wisdom, faith, love, humility, patience, self-denial, meekness. All graces are put to it now! They had need put forth all their strength; act with all their vigor. Our graces had need be stirring, full of life and quickness, now! God prizeth the exercise of the graces of his Saints at a very high rate. He thinks it worth their suffering much trouble.

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

But above all, Burroughes asserts,

> God hath a hand in these divisions to bring forth further light. Sparks are beaten out by the flints striking together. Many sparks of light, many truths, are beaten out by the beatings of men's spirits one against another. If light be let into a house, there must be some trouble to beat down [a place in the wall for] a window. A child thinks the house is beating down, but the father knows the light will be forth the cost and trouble. If you will have the cloth woven, the woof and the warp must be cast cross one to another. If you will have truths argued out, you must be content to bear with some opposition for the time. They who are not willing to bear some trouble, to be at some cost to find out truth, are unworthy of it. . . . We may well behold men's weakness in these divisions, but [we may] better admire God's strength and wisdom in ordering them to his glory and his children's good.[23]

John Goodwin, making use of a text which the Independents repeatedly cited, declared: "The Holy Ghost, speaking (doubtless) of these times, prophesied long ago that *many should run to and fro, and* (by this means) *knowledge shall be increased.*" Goodwin went on to point out that "in times of Popery men generally stood still, made no inquiries beyond the lips of their teachers, and knowledge then was at a stand and advanced not." On the other hand, it seemed equally obvious that "since God hath been pleased to put it into the hearts of men to conceive . . . that there may be tracts or regions of knowledge beyond the line of the . . . discoveries of their teachers, and have made many studious expeditions themselves to find them out, knowledge hath increased; yea, and will increase daily more and more, if we relapse not into the lethargie of Popish slothfulness and servility, and suffer our teachers to exercise dominion over our faith."[24]

This, quite obviously, is no doctrine of relativity so far as truth itself is concerned; the relativity is in terms of one's apprehension of truth. "Truth is a daughter of time was the saying of old," wrote Thomas Hooker, "and our daily experience gives in evidence and proof hereof. . . . Not that there is any change in truth, but the alteration grows according to men's apprehensions, to whom it is more or less discovered according to God's most just judgment and their own deservings."[25] Praisegod Barebones phrased it in this fashion: "About the measuring of which things ["the Temple, the Altar, and them that worship therein"], though the truth and true measure be one, yet the persons measuring are very various and much differing, not only concerning the right understanding of the measure, but also concerning the things measured. Hence it is that [there are] diversity of opinions and practices amongst persons concerning matters of religion and godliness."[26]

It was because of this uncertainty regarding men's apprehension of truth that John Cook insisted that assent must not be required

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

even to such propositions "as the greatest number of wise and learned men shall agree upon." The reason why such assent must not be required, he continued, is easily given. It is "because, in very many councils, Jesus Christ hath been out-voted by anti-Christ."

> Let the rigid Presbyterians in the Assembly but answer me this question: Whether two parts at least in three of all the ministers in this kingdom be not for a moderated episcopacy and the Common Prayer Book? If ever it come to a National Assembly, differences must be ended by a major vote.[27]

In similar vein, John Goodwin asked: "Can that in reason be thought to be the Way of God which seemeth so only in the eyes of a few inconsiderable and for the most part illiterate persons? . . . Do not wise men see more than those that are weak, and many more than a few?" The answer to such questions as these, said Goodwin, was given long ago by Solomon when he pointed out that the race is not always won by the swift nor the battle by the strong, for "time and chance" frequently determine the outcome. By which Solomon meant that "God still reserves a liberty to himself to interpose and to carry the issues and events against all advantages . . . , when and where and as oft as he pleaseth."

> Though God be at liberty to make the first discovery or communication of the light of his truth unto the world by greater numbers of men and those learned and in high esteem for wisdom . . . , as well as by one or fewer . . . , yet by the more frequent experience of all ages it appeareth that he taketh pleasure in this latter way rather than in the former.[28]

It is for this reason, Goodwin asserted, that any "reformation according to the Word of God must give leave to the wind to blow where it listeth and give liberty to the Spirit of God to do with his own what he pleaseth; to make what discovery of truth he pleaseth and to what persons and when and where he pleaseth; and must not confine him to his market or compel him to traffic only with councils and synods for his heavenly commodities."[29]

In the light of this fundamental contention, it would seem clear that the Independents did not plead for the right of people to differ and disagree and establish separate forms of worship simply because they themselves were a minority in the Assembly. Indeed, the only point at which they registered a fundamental dissent from the majority was precisely at the point of their unwillingness to agree to the establishment of any over-all instrument of coercion which could be utilized to secure conformity to opinions and practices which were in essential harmony with their own. They insisted that "no coactive violence" be "used against such men who carry themselves religiously and peaceably in their differences from others," because they remembered that "not

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

long since we were ourselves of another mind." "My sin" of conforming in an earlier time, said Burroughes,

> makes me to be of the more forebearing spirit towards those who now differ from me. I see now what I did not; . . . Why, then, should . . . I fly upon our brethren because they see not what we think we see? O how unbeseeming it is for . . . [men] to be harsh and bitter in the least degree against their brethren who differ from them, when they do differ so much from what they were themselves but a while since.[30]

"I profess," said Burroughes, ". . . that were my judgment presbyterial, yet I should preach and plead as much for the forebearance of brethren differing from me, not only in their judgment but in their practice."[31] The only alternative to such forebearance would be to require that men "put out their own eyes" and see only "by the spectacles of other men in point of God's service and worship."[32]

John Saltmarsh, who in a sense stood outside both camps, summarized "the whole difference" in point of view in these words.

> They of the presbytery would say to the state: We humbly petition you that heretics and schismatics (we believing all that differ from us to be so) may have your power inflicted upon them, whether to fines, imprisonment, or banishment. The Independents, on the contrary, would say: We humbly petition that you will not hazard nor endanger your civil power of the state to help our opinions against our brethren, for we are not *infallible* nor *apostolical; we see but in part;* and that you will not punish any of our brethren presbyterial or others for what they believe or differ from us in things of outward order in the gospel.[33]

III.

While the Dissenting Brethren were ready to defend diversity, it must not be supposed that these men who had been so reluctant to separate themselves from communion with their parish churches viewed the divisions among Christians with equanimity. They were, in fact, dismayed and distressed by the divisions and by the bitterness of the controversy which these divisions had aroused. As for themselves, they said that they had made little or no attempt, after their return from exile, "to make and increase a party." Books were written against them by men of "much worth, learning, and authority," but, said they,

> we knew and considered that it was the second blow that makes the quarrel, and that the beginning of strife would have been as the breaking in of the waters, and the sad and conscientious apprehension of the danger of rending and dividing the godly Protestant party in this kingdom that were desirous of reformation and [the danger] of making several interests among them in a time when there was an absolute necessity of their nearest union and conjunction . . . [have] prevailed with us to occasion the least disturbance among the people.[34]

This account of their irenic behaviour is somewhat idealized, but it is true that a major portion of their attention was directed to the problem of healing the breaches and making real the unity they all had in Christ.

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Perhaps the most complete statement of the Independent position as it related to the problem of sectarian conflict is to be found in a treatise by Jeremiah Burroughes with the rather formidable seventeenth century title, *Irenicum, to the Lovers of Truth and Peace Heart-Divisions Opened in the Causes of Evils of Them, with Cautions that We May Not Be Hurt by Them, and Endeavors to Heal Them.* Describing "heart-divisions" as the great "evil of our times," Burroughes proceeds to detail both the ill effects and the sinfulness of divisions among Christians. They destroy our peace and quiet, they hinder our sleep, they spoil our judgment, they absorb our time, they hinder our prayers, they hinder the use of our graces, they divert attention from more important matters. They are against the command of Christ, they are against the prayer of Christ, they are dishonorable to Christ, they grieve the Holy Spirit, they stir up corruption, they harden men in sin, they tend to void God's covenant of grace. In brief, he concludes, "our divisions are against the very character of Christianity." "We are wrangling, devising, plotting, working against one another, minding nothing but to get the day of one another," whereas "love and unity are Christ's badge, the arms of a Christian, whereby he shows of what house he is."[35]

It is an unhappy fact, says Burroughes, that

> we are divided notwithstanding we are all convinced of the evil of our divisions. We cry out exceedingly against them. We tell one another that of all the tokens of God's displeasure amongst us, these are the greatest. Yet scarce a man does anything . . . towards any help against divisions or furtherance of our union. Every man cries out at the thief, but who stops him? We all say we would have peace . . . , but where is the man who is willing to be at any cost for it.[36]

It would be easy enough, of course, to secure unity "if those who differ from others would give up their judgments and practices to them, to believe what they believe, and to do what they do." But how is this to be achieved? "Christ hath laid this charge upon [his followers] . . . that they must not believe or practice anything in matters of religion but what they shall first see ground for out of his Word." A Christian is "not to alter his judgment or practice till, in the use of [all the means he can], he should receive further light from Him." Consequently, says Burroughes, "you would not have them give up their judgments or practices . . . till they know they are right; and how can that be till they, by discussing, praying, reading, meditating, find that out? If some men had certainly found out the right, and other men knew certainly that they had done so, then the work were at an end."[37]

The problem was to find a way to unity when Christians do not all agree. "If we stay for peace and love till we come to the unity

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the faith in all things, we must stay, for ought I know, till we come to another world. . . . The unity of the faith and the perfect man will both be together."[38] The plain fact which must be faced, Thomas Goodwin reminded the members of Parliament, is that "providence hath disposed it so that they [the Saints] do and will differ in judgment. The Apostles, who were oracles infallible, could not in their times wholly prevent it. And differing thus in judgment, they will hardly ever of themselves agree." And yet, the great need of the kingdom is that animosities shall be allayed and that Christians shall be united and reconciled to one another. "It is your work and will be your honor," he informed the Commons, ". . . to find out ways whereby this may be done, notwithstanding these their differences."[39]

IV.

If Christians are to be united, "notwithstanding their differences," there are several fundamental truths which these seventeenth century divines insisted must be recognized and accepted.

First of all, it is necessary to recognize that diversity will continue and that "love and peace" among Christians, therefore, cannot be procured without "liberty of conscience."[40]

"When we complain of our divisions for making much against the cause of Christ," said Burroughes, "we do not complain against men because they cannot all understand all things alike." What we do complain of is "that they have not joined to study what ways and means may be found out to ease the consciences one of another, to bear with one another as far as Christ would have them." It is certain that Christ would not "be pleased with such a reformation wherein the lesser part should give up their consciences and practices to the judgments of the greater,"[41] and it is equally certain that such a procedure would not succeed in bringing about unity.

> It is a wonder of first magnitude how men come to have so much ground of hope . . . of composing differences and distractions . . . throughout the nation by exalting one way of discipline, of church government, for the treading down and trampling under foot of all others. . . . Undoubtedly that Way whose hand shall be against every [other] Way, will find the hand of every [other] Way will be against it, and then what manner of peace can reasonably be expected?[42]

"A peaceable, humble, and quiet discussing of things" will contribute to understanding and thus lead toward agreement, but the resort to coercion when differences exist will only serve to arouse antagonism and aggravate differences.[43]

It is necessary to recognize, in the second place, the unity that does exist among Christians.

> There hath been much ado to get us to agree. We labored to get our opinions into one, but they will not come together. It may be [that] in

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> our endeavors for agreement we have begun at the wrong end. Let us try what we can do at the other end. It may be that we shall have better success there. Let us labor to join our hearts, to engage our affections, one to another. If we cannot be of one mind that we may agree, let us agree to be of one heart.[44]

We must not forget that, while "godly people are divided in their opinions and ways, . . . they are united in Christ."

> Though our differences are sad enough, yet they come not up to this to make us men of different religions. We agree in the same end, though not in the same means. They are but different ways of opposing the common enemy. The agreeing in the same means, in the same way of opposing the common enemy, would be very comfortable. It would be our strength. But that cannot be expected in this world.[45]

The actual fact is that "our divisions have been and still are between good men," and it is equally true that "there are as many godly Presbyterians as Independents."[46] This means that, "though we are fully persuaded by God's Word and Spirit that this our Way is Christ's Way, yet we neither do nor dare judge others to be reprobates that walk not with us in it, but leave all judgment to God, and heartily pray for them."[47]

It should be recognized, in the third place, that the mere fact of separation does not of itself constitute schism. "Though they may be divided from such a particular society, yet they are not divided from the Church," for "the true nature of schism is . . . an uncharitable, unjust, rash, violent breaking from union with the church or members of it."[48]

To those who cried out against every separation, even when "loving and peaceable," as constituting schism, Burroughes made a lengthy and detailed reply.

> Suppose the Nonconformists or those of the Scottish nation who lived in the City in former times, who could not acknowledge the bishops' authority nor communicate in the sacraments in the parishes where they lived without sin to them, still acknowledging them to be true churches, yet if Parliament made an Act whereby they should have two or three places in the City appointed for them, wherein all that could not conform . . . should have . . . the sacraments and other church ordinances . . . by themselves, freed from the burden of ceremonies and episcopal authority, would they not have blessed God for this liberty?[49]

Would they have been guilty of schism to take advantage of this liberty? It is certain that "the allowance of the state" does not "alter the case." For, "if it be schism . . . without the allowance of the state, . . . it is schism when the state does allow it." In many instances, the state has granted such liberty. How are we to regard those who availed themselves of it?

> Where the Lutherans and Calvinists have liberty to live in one country together, and yet not communicating with one another, are all the Lutherans or all the Calvinists schismatics? . . . Many of the French and

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Dutch churches who live in our parishes, though they understand our language well enough, yet would not communicate in the parishes where they live because of the ceremonies and subjection to bishops, were they all schismatics too?[50]

Furthermore, it is perfectly lawful for a man, for "the enjoyment of the ordinances that he cannot have in the church he formerly liveth in," to move from that parish to another where he can enjoy those ordinances. In this instance, no cry of schism is raised. But, "what if his dwelling be not removed to the other side of the street, does that make it schism?" Yet there are those who will brand as a schismatic any man who "lives in a parish and does not join in church fellowship in that parish."[51] To defend the one practice and to condemn the other, Burroughes insisted, was not only illogical but unjust and unfair. It permits those who can afford it the liberty of choosing their church by choosing their dwelling, but it denies liberty to those who are in more restricted circumstances.[52] John Goodwin makes the point even more vividly:

> This liberty of choosing pastors only by choosing houses is so conditioned that it smiles only upon the rich (and that but somewhat faintly) but frowns upon the poor, and so is partial and therefore not Christian. He that hath enough of . . . all things may probably be able to accommodate himself within the precincts of what parish he pleaseth . . . by buying out some inhabitant or by purchasing ground and building upon it . . . , but the case of the poor man is many times such that he cannot tell where to find another hole in all the world to hide his head in besides that wherein it is hid already.[53]

It was difficult for the Independents to believe that these arguments which laid so much stress on the place of birth and place of residence were to be taken seriously. Much more defensible, it seemed to them, was the position which Burroughes outlined in a sentence which was distinguished by its careful qualifications. "When men, who give good testimony of their godliness and peaceableness, . . . cannot without sin to them (though it be through weakness) enjoy all the ordinances of Christ and partake in all the duties of worship as members of that congregation where their dwelling is, they therefore in all humility and meekness . . . join in another congregation, yet . . . not condemning those churches they join not with as false but still preserve all Christian communion with the Saints as members of the same body of Christ, of the Church Catholic, and join also with them in all duties of worship that belong to particular churches so far as they are able—if this be called schism, it is more than yet I have learned."[54]

Thus the Dissenting Brethren were pleading not only for "the peaceable practices of our consciences which the Reformed churches abroad allowed us," but for that which to them was much more important; namely, the establishment of the type of relationship among the churches in England which had existed between the Independents

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and the Reformed churches abroad, among whom they had been cast to live, where "we both mutually gave and received the right hand of fellowship," recognizing, as Henry Burton put it, that "the Catholic Church . . . includes all true churches throughout the world."[55]

Christians can live together in love and peace, "notwithstanding their differences," if they will grant liberty of conscience to those who disagree with them, if they will keep ever in mind the very real unity they have in Christ, and if they will cease to regard all other churches as false and schismatic. But beyond this, it should also be recognized that those of the various Ways can cooperate for common ends. All who "profess godliness" both can and must join together "in opposing that which they [all] believe cannot stand with godliness" and in promoting "those ways of godliness which they are convinced to be so." If this is done lack of agreement at other points need not be disastrous. After all, is it not true that "soldiers who march against a common enemy all under the same captain, who follow the same colors in their ensign and wear them upon their hats or arms, may get the day though they be not all clothed alike, though they differ in things of less concernment?" What must be done, then, is to "join with all our might in all we know, and with peaceable, quiet, humble spirits seek to know more and in the meantime carry ourselves humbly and peaceably toward those we differ from, and Christ will not charge us at the Great Day for retarding his cause."[56]

V.

The Restoration of the Stuarts marked the collapse of the attempt by the Independent divines to secure peace and unity among Christians by a frank recognition that no particular ecclesiastical structure could be identified in any exclusive sense with the whole Church of Christ. Nevertheless, the defeat was only temporary. The fundamental convictions of the Independents concerning the nature of the church penetrated the thinking even of members of the episcopate; and as a result of the Act of Toleration of 1689, the establishment was given the formal status only of the greatest of the denominations. So thoroughly was the victory won that the leaders of the Evangelical Revival in England and America could take the denominational conception of the church largely for granted. By the twentieth century, with the exception of the Eastern Orthodox churches and some Anglo-Catholics, no serious dissent would be registered by members of the World Council of Churches to the observation by a Roman Catholic that, "when they speak of 'the Church,' documents emanating from the World Council . . . see this Church alike in each and every one of the various Christian denominations of which the Church is, as it were, the soul and, we might say, the sum total."[57]

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1. John Wesley, *The Character of a Methodist;* reprinted in *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley,* 4th ed. (London, 1841), VIII, 332-33.
2. While the word "denomination" does not appear to have taken on a technical meaning to denote a religious body much before the 1740's, it was used occasionally as early as the 1640's by John Goodwin. See John Goodwin, *Theomachia* (London, 1644), p. 23, and *Hagiomastix* (London, 1646), preface, and p. 40. The earlier equivalent of the word "denomination," which was used by the seventeenth century divines, was the word "way." They would speak of those of the Episcopal Way, the Presbyterial Way, and the Congregational Way.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* trans. John Allen (Philadelphia, n. d.), I, 34.
4. William Bradshaw, *The Unreasonableness of the Separation* (n. p., 1640), pp. 12-13.
5. *An Apologetical Narration* (London, 1643), p. 9.
6. *Conformity's Deformity* (London, 1646), p. 9.
7. Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye in preface to John Cotton, *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* (London, 1644).
8. *An Apologetical Narration,* pp. 3-4. The elders of the churches in New England made much the same point with regard to their situation in the New World. "In these remote coasts of the earth whereunto the good hand of God hath brought us . . ., we have seen cause to look back to our former administrations . . . and to search and try our ways that wherein soever we have formerly gone astray, we might judge ourselves for it before the Lord. And that seeing now God hath set before us an open door of Liberty, we might neither abuse our liberty in the gospel to run out into any groundless unwarrantable courses nor neglect the present opportunity to administer (by the help of Christ) all the holy ordinances of God according to the pattern set before us in Scripture. In our native country . . . many of us . . . bare [some things] as burdens, that is, as things inexpedient though not utterly unlawful, [that] we have no cause to retain and practice . . . here, [where they] would have been not only inexpedient but unlawful. Such things as a man may tolerate when he cannot remove them, he cannot tolerate without sin when he may remove them." *A Letter of Many Ministers in Old England Requesting the Judgment of their Reverend Brethren in New England, together with their Answer thereunto* (London, 1643).
9. *An Apologetical Narration,* pp. 9-10.
10. *Ibid.,* pp. 10-11.
11. *Op. cit.*
12. *The Saints' Apology* (London, 1644), p. 14.
13. *A Survey of the Sum of Church Discipline* (London, 1648), preface. John Cook was to describe an Independent as "ever privy to his own infirmities, being far from dreaming of perfection in this life . . . He thinks himself the greatest sinner, being most privy to the deceitfulness of his own heart and is sure he hath more errors than he can discern." *What the Independents Would Have* (London, 1647), p. 4. The author of *A Moderate Answer to Mr. Prynne's Full Reply* (London, 1645), p. 38, affirmed: "As for our parts, we are far from such a thought that we know all things in the Word about church government but that more of it may still be revealed, and we daily search and wait for more knowledge in it."
14. "This we both have done and yet further are able to do, to prove our way with all our practices in every particular out of God's Word, which you are not able to do for any one of your practices, much less for the whole way of your classical presbytery." *Conformity's Deformity,* p. 9.
15. The Assembly complained of the Dissenting Brethren that they never endeavored "to prove that way of church government which they practice to be the only way *jure divino.*" *The Answer of the Assembly of Divines* (London, 1645), p. 4. Thomas Edwards also had complained that in the view of the Independents "the government and way of the church visible is so uncertain and doubtful as that little or none may be positively laid down and concluded as *jure divino.*" *Antapologia* (London, 1644), p. 85. The Dissenting Brethren freely acknowledged that this was true, saying that "the greatest difference . . . betwixt us being this, that the forms of government you pretend to (and we deny) are asserted to be *jure divino.*" *A Copy of a Remonstrance* (London, 1645), p. 5.
16. *The Independency on Scriptures of the Independency of Churches* (London, 1643), preface. The Independents pointed out again and again that this was the major point at issue.
17. John Cook, *What the Independents Would Have,* p. 2.
18. *The Answer of the Assembly of Divines,* p. 17.
19. *A Confession and Protestation of the Faith of Certain Christians* (n.p., 1616).
20. *Irenicum* (London, 1646), p. 97.
21. *Ibid.,* pp. 237-40.
22. *The Unreasonableness of the Separation,* pp. 9-10.

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 242-45. Some years before, Praisegod Barebones had made the same point. "Unity or oneness of mind among the godly is an excellent thing and greatly to be desired, so it be in the truth; but God, that of his infinite wisdom causeth good to come out of evil, causeth much profit to attend the variations of his servants. The truth is the more sought into and discovered and cometh to shine forth more fully afterward. . . . It were much to be desired that persons would not be so much offended about the differences and variation there are in matters of religion and the service of God, if they would consider that great darkness had for a long time attended the world . . ., so as men coming out into the light see men like trees, as the proverb is. And again would mind how great oneness and agreement there is in those that differ, agreeing in the main points. . . . And then, on the other side, would consider how that the differences among the godly are of inferior kind, being only for the most part about outward worship and the right way of serving God, wherein if any do err . . ., his error cannot reach another in way of prejudice or hurt. . . . I say, if persons did but mind such like things, it would greatly abate of the prejudice that many have in their minds touching this matter . . ., for, indeed, it must needs be a great weakness of mind and want of judgment to be so highly displeased as some are with variety of judgments among men in matters of religion. . . . It is most certain that it is better there should be differences among men than that crass ignorance should take its place." *A Discourse tending to Prove . . . that the Baptism of Infants or Children is Warrantable and Agreeable to the Word of God* (London, 1642), preface.
24. *Hagiomastix*, preface. Thomas Hooker in the preface to *A Survey of the Sum of Church Discipline* and Jeremiah Burroughes in his *Irenicum* (pp. 244-45) both make a similar application of Daniel 12:4.
25. *Op. cit.*, preface.
26. *Op. cit.*, preface.
27. *Redintegratio Amoris* (London, n. d.), pp. 40-41. Not even the members of the Westminster Assembly, godly as they are and seeking the guidance of God's Spirit as they do, make any claim that "they are privileged with the privilege of infallibility." *Ibid.*
28. *Theomachia*, pp. 43-44.
29. John Goodwin, *Twelve Considerable Serious Cautions Very Necessary to Be Observed in . . . a Reformation according to the Word of God* (London, 1646), p. 8.
30. *Irenicum*, p. 97. *A Vindication of Mr. Burroughes* (London, 1646), pp. 17, 30.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
32 John Cook, *Redintegratio Amoris*, p. 60.
33. John Saltmarsh, *Groans for Liberty* (London, 1646), p. 24.
34. *An Apologetical Narration*, pp. 24-27.
35. *Irenicum*, pp. 209, 242.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 92, 207. A sixteenth century Anglican divine had said: "It is not enough for you to say that you believe as the church of your heart what thing it is that the church believeth. Your faith must not be grounded upon any other man's faith." "Believe not the doctrine because I or any other preacher doth preach it unto you; but believe it to be true because your own faith doth assure you it to be true." W. S. Hudson, *John Ponet: Advocate of Limited Monarchy* (Chicago, 1942), p. 41. This conventional Protestant conviction was a point the Independents repeatedly emphasized. John Goodwin, for example, insisted: "Ministers ought not to require their people to believe anything (much less everything) which they teach, unless they have a reason and ground for it. . . . Neither ought men to receive or subscribe unto with the hand of their faith the determination or decretals of synods, councils, or assemblies of persons of what capacity or worth soever in matters of religion, unless they have a sufficient reason or ground from the Word of God for what they do receive in this kind. . . . [Therefore], men ought to make use of, yea, and engage to the uttermost, their reasons or their discursive abilities in all matters of faith and religion whatsoever, and not to swallow anything by a loose credulity but to look narrowly upon everything with the eye of reason before they receive it by the hand of faith." *Hagiomastix*, p. 108.
38. *Irenicum*, p. 256.
39. Thomas Goodwin, *The Great Interest of States and Kingdoms* (London, 1646), pp. 53, 56.
40. John Cook, *What the Independents Would Have*, p. 14.
41. *Irenicum*, p. 107.
42. John Goodwin, *Theomachia*, p. 30.
43. *Irenicum*, p. 107. "That Way which shall be able to *out-reason*, not that which shall *out-club*, all other Ways will at last exalt unity and be itself exalted by gathering in all other Ways unto it." *Theomachia*, p. 30.
44. *Irenicum*, p. 255.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 101, 102.
46. *Ibid.*, preface: *A Vindication of Mr. Burroughes*, p. 2. This is a consistent note throughout the Independent literature. Thus the New England ministers had written: "We separate from

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the corruptions which we conceive to be left in your churches . . ., [but] as for yourselves, we are as far from separating as from no visible Christians as that you are, under God, in our hearts . . . to live and die together. And we look at sundry of you as men of that eminent growth in Christianity that if there be any visible Christians under heaven, amongst you are the men." *A Letter of Many Ministers in Old England Requesting the Judgment of their Reverend Brethren in New England.*

47. Henry Burton, *A Vindication of those Churches Commonly Called Independent*, p. 56. The Congregational Way, John Goodwin affirmed, "seeketh not . . . the molestation, harm, or disturbance of any . . . that are contrary-minded to it. It thinketh no evil, it speaketh no evil of such. If it conceives them upright and faithful with God and Jesus Christ, it embraceth them with all love, tenderness, and honor as partakers of like precious faith with itself, and nothing doubts but that they serve and worship God with as much sincerity and singleness of heart, and are accordingly accepted by him in their Way as itself." *Theomachia*, p. 27.
48. *Irenicum*, pp. 102, 171. "All believers who live in a place together ought, so far as they can, to join into one church, though they be of differing judgments and tempers." Thus, "where men may communicate without sin," they "must not separate from a church, though there be corruption in it, to gather into a new church which may be more pure and in some respects more comfortable. . . . There would be no continuance in church fellowship if this were admitted, for what church is so pure . . ., but within a while another church will be more pure? . . . You are bound to give so much respect to the church as to continue with much long-suffering to seek the good of that church, to remove the sin that is upon it with all the means you can. You must bear much with a brother; much more with a church." On the other hand, "where a man cannot have his soul edified in some ordinances and truths of great moment, which that church whereof he now is shall deny and is in great danger of being seduced to evil, he may depart from the church to another, if he does it orderly, and not be guilty at all of schism. Love to God and his own soul is the cause of this; not want of love to his brethren." To hold otherwise would be to maintain that "the Christians gathering themselves out of the Jewish church were schismatics," as would also be true of many during the time of the Reformation. *Ibid.*, pp. 162-63, 173-76.
49. *A Vindication of Mr. Burroughes*, p. 14.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 15. This same point was made by the author of *The Saints' Apology*, "a year or two before this Parliament began." "Suppose a congregation in this land, some town or parish (to speak common road language) wherein a company of godly men (Saints all, so far as man can judge) had united themselves together by mutual covenant to walk in all the ordinances and ways of the Lord. . . . If, finding this society and their course fully to answer the persuasion of my heart concerning the way of God, I should change my habitation and take a house in that town that I might thereby join myself to this company in church fellowship . . ., there would be no complaining, no cry of separation, no whispering and muttering of forsaking mother church. . . . And yet, I should come out thereby from holding external communion with another. . . . And should I or others do any more but the same thing if in one street of a town we should join ourselves together in communion for spiritual ends and separate ourselves from the external communion which is held in another . . ., and all this without breaking off from internal communion with any Saint amongst them. . . . Whereunto, then, serveth the raising of so much noise and clamor of separation but to give up friends into the hands of enemies." *The Saints' Apology*, pp. 13-14.
52. *Irenicum*, pp. 164-65.
53. *Theomachia*, pp. 25-26.
54. *A Vindication of Mr. Burroughes*, p. 15.
55. *An Apologetical Narration*, pp. 7, 25. Henry Burton, *A Vindication of those Churches Commonly Called Independent*, p. 31. John Goodwin wrote of the Independents: "It is a main principle and maxim in this Way to hold terms of love and Christian correspondence with all persons of what judgment soever in point of [church] government, if they be godly, as well as with her own children." *Theomachia*, p. 31.
56. *Irenicum*, pp. 101, 107-08.
57. Editorial in *Istina*, commenting on the theme of the Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches, quoted in *Ecumenical Fellowship Notes* of the American Baptist Convention, October, 1954, p. 2.

https://doi.org/10.2307/3161508 Published online by Cambridge University Press