

[Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit]

## II. Earliest Traces of Congregational Churches

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No Date<sup>1</sup>

John Brown tells us that "the earliest pioneers of independent thought that we came upon on English soil are thirty weavers in the diocese of Worcester who were summoned before the Council of Oxford as far back as A.D. 1165" (p. 17).<sup>2</sup> The chronicle tells us that

when these people were under examination, they answered that they were Christians, and revered the teachings of the Apostles. Inasmuch, however, as they made light of sacraments and priestly power, they were condemned, were scourged and branded as heretics, and then driven out of the city, to perish in the winter cold; and thus, says the chronicler, the pious firmness of this severity not only cleansed the realm of England from the pestilence which had now crept in, but also prevented it from creeping in again. (J. Brown, p. 17).

So you see the seed had been sowed as early as 1165, almost 350 years before the act of 1401 for the burning of heretics, which states that "divers false and perverse people of a certain new sect ... usurping the office of preaching, do perversely and maliciously, in divers places within the realm, preach and teach divers new doctrines and

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<sup>1</sup> Earl C. Davis wrote a good number of manuscripts concerning the history of the church. All are hand-written dating them before 1907—so Pittsfield or Harvard. Some, including this one, are pretty clearly part of a series provided to a congregation—so probably Pittsfield.

<sup>2</sup> John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, p. 17. The author, John Brown (1830-1922) was minister of the Bunyan Meeting in Bedford, England, and his historical works are still in print.

wicked erroneous opinions;”<sup>3</sup> Just what the nature of these “divers false and perverse people” was, and what they taught or preached, cannot be determined, but it points to the working of the leaven, which found its expression in the Reformation, and Post-Reformation reforms. The Bishop of London’s Register gives indication of this developing movement, and the thing to notice is that it is the same spirit, and takes the same forms before the Reformation in England, as we find in the Post-reformation Congregational Churches. That they were strictly Congregational Churches, cannot be asserted, but they show the germs of the Congregational spirit.

The Reformation in England was in many respects thoroughly disappointing. To be sure it was something of a relief to see the step taken, which would sever the connection between England and Rome. But after all the Anglican Church is not essentially different from the Catholic, speaking in general terms, and for my part, if I were so constituted that I felt the need of a church of authority, I should do as John Henry Newman<sup>4</sup> did a few centuries later. I would go the full length, and seek shelter in the Catholic Church. Calvinism was but a halfway reform, and substituted the Authority of the Bible for the authority of the Pope. There were many people that felt the need of this reform, but also felt that it had not been thorough enough. For hardly had the English Reformation been accomplished, when men filled with the spirit of freedom, of free inquiry, and universal priesthood, began once more to disturb the authorities.

In the Privy Council Register of Edward VI is recorded the examination concerning an assembly of some sixty persons who had met at a private house on Sunday at midday in 1551. Sixteen of these on “being examined, confessed the cause of their assembly to be for talk of scripture, not denying that they had refused communion (at the parish

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> John Henry Newman (1801-1890). English theologian and scholar, first an Anglican priest and later, after conversion, a Catholic priest and Cardinal.

church) above two years upon very superstitions and erroneous purposes.”<sup>5</sup> There are indications of other groups of people scattered pretty largely over England, who were meeting in the same way, and for the same purposes.

But we have very conclusive evidence of a Church in London in 1571, which was distinctly a Separatist Church. In a petition to the Queen, signed by members of this church, in which they plead for church reform, they say, “We a poor congregation whom God hath separated from the Church of England and from the mingled and false worshipping therein,”<sup>6</sup> etc. Richard Fitz is mentioned as minister of this church. Now this church can be traced back to 1568, and possibly to the reign of Mary. To this church the New England Congregationalists look back and Bradford refers to it.

But just at this point, we must turn aside from the church, and interest ourselves in Robert Browne. He is sometimes described as the Founder of Congregationalism, and Separatists were often called Brownists, although Bradford rather resents this name.

The date of Browne’s birth is not known, but in 1572 (one year after the Petition of the Separatist Church in London to Queen Elizabeth) Browne received a degree from Corpus Christi College Cambridge. After leaving Cambridge he went to London, where he says, “he wholly bent himself to search and find out the matters of the church, as to how it was to be guided and ordered, and what abuses there were in the ecclesiastical government then used.”<sup>7</sup> It is a mere conjecture, but at least possible, if not probable, that Robert Browne, during his three years in London came into relations with Richard Fitz’ Separatist Church, and one may

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, p. 31.

suppose that from them he absorbed many fruitful suggestions in his search after the truth.

After a period of unsettled activity, Browne and a college friend went to Norwich, where they gathered a congregation of believers into church fellowship. You remember that John Robinson came from Norwich to Scrooby. But Browne was not free from his troubles, for in 1581 the Bishop of Norwich appraised Lord Burleigh, a relative of Browne's, that Browne had been lately apprehended at Bury St. Edmund's for gathering people together in private houses for religious service. He and his friend Harrison escaped to Middleburgh,<sup>8</sup> and supposedly after the death of his friend Harrison in 1585, Brown returned to England, gave up the fight, and returned to the Anglican Church. He died in the Northampton jail sometime between 1631-33.

Now Browne's prominence in the history of Congregationalism is due to the fact that he first gave literary expression to the principles, and he himself appreciated and understood the problem in hand. The Puritans remained within the Church and attempted to work a reform from within. The Separatists were for coming out of the English Church, and leaving the old shell to itself. Browne expressed the essence of the Separatist's idea, in the title to one of his pamphlets, which he very happily calls, "Reformation Without Tarrying For Any."<sup>9</sup> His significance in this relation rests in the fact that he put into writing the ideas of the Separatist movement. He is not the founder of Congregationalism, as is sometimes held, but its first literary exponent.

There are two more men connected with this movement of whom we must learn something. At about the same time that Robert Browne was being tried and found wanting in that strength that will carry a man to death for his convictions, John Greenwood, a man of stronger type, was working his way out of the Established Church into the free Congregational type. Greenwood graduated from Cambridge in 1581, and was ordained by the Bishop. But the Cambridge influence was a work on him, and in 1585 he was deprived of

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<sup>8</sup> Middleburgh in Zeeland, part of the Netherlands.

<sup>9</sup> First published in Middleburgh, 1582.

his benefice "for the disliking he had to the order of the Book of Common Prayer."<sup>10</sup> He turned Puritan, and soon went the full length of reform and became a Separatist, and found his way to London. In 1587 he was arrested "for being at private conventicles."<sup>11</sup> After examination he was sent to Clink Prison.

While he was confined in prison he was visited by Henry Barrowe, of whom we must get some clear conception, for he was one of the great men of early Congregationalism.

Barrowe, a lawyer by training, was a wild dissolute youth, a man of aristocratic connections. Chancing one day as he was passing to hear a London Church, he overheard the preacher's voice and entered. The result was one of those remarkable conversions which transform a man's whole life. Among his new associates was John Greenwood of whom we have heard. Upon hearing of Greenwood's arrest, he went to visit him in prison, and was himself arrested. After a long series of examinations he finally landed in Fleet prison, to which Greenwood meanwhile had been transferred, and they were put into the same chamber. In this prison life of nearly 5 years, they devoted themselves to writing books in defense of their principles.

Finally Greenwood was released in 1592, but not long after he was re-arrested while worshipping with Separatists in a private house.

They were tried and condemned to death on March 23, 1593, the execution to take place the 24<sup>th</sup>, but strange as it may seem, just at the moment a reprieve came, and the hanging deferred. One week later Barrowe says "my brother Greenwood and I were very early and secretly conveyed to the place of execution, where being tied by the necks we were permitted to speak a few words."<sup>12</sup> Just at this moment came a

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<sup>10</sup> John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in John Brown, *Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895, p. 38.

reprieve. But on April 6<sup>th</sup> 1593 they were hanged for believing in the principles of Congregationalism.

Francis Johnson, who was arrested with Greenwood on the night of his last arrest, Dec. 5, 1593, became pastor of this London Separatist Church. The hanging of Greenwood and Barrowe came as a warning to the people of this church, and they left London and finally turned up in Amsterdam and founded what is known as the London Amsterdam Church, which we have seen was already at Amsterdam when the Pilgrims arrived there from Scrooby.

There is one more point that we ought to note. There seems to have been just a slight difference in the method of government of this London Church. They held, it would seem, that when the elders had once been elected to discharge their duties, that the Church thereby had given up their voice in deciding the affairs of the Church. The Scrooby people held that the final authority rested in the people of the church. You see that it is the same difference that is now bothering us in city governments and the agitation in favor of the referendum is a call for that policy that the Scrooby Church stood for, and which we find as the form of Government in all New England towns. This distinction is to be remembered for it is the source of some trouble in Amsterdam.

- I. But thus far we have noted the London Amsterdam Church, which had its origin as far back as Queen Mary's time, and certainly can be dated to 1568. With this one associated chiefly Greenwood + Barrowe, who were hanged April 6, 1593. After their death the Church went over to Amsterdam, and became the London Amsterdam Church.
- II. Then we have to notice the influence of Robert Browne, who possibly may be regarded as an offshoot of this church, and who founded the Church at Norwich. He is important for his literary work.
- III. From the Church at Norwich, we trace the connection to Scrooby, by John Robinson, who became teacher and preacher of the Scrooby Church, and went to Scrooby from Norwich.

But the Scrooby Church, which was founded in 1606, was an offshoot of the Gainsborough Church founded in 1602, and which went to Amsterdam shortly after the Scrooby Church was established in 1606. With it went John Smyth, who had become pastor of the Gainsborough Church in 1605. At Amsterdam, Smyth, who seems to have been a man always engaged in petty quarrels, came under the influence of Mennonite theologians, and founded what is now known as the Baptist Denomination. One interesting personal relationship. Francis Johnson, who as pastor of the London Amsterdam Church, had gone to Amsterdam in 1595, was tutor while at Cambridge to John Smyth, Pastor of the Gainsborough Church. This links all three of these churches together by possible ties.

Finally in 1608, the Scrooby Church went over to Amsterdam.