

A People Not To Be Forgotten

We are talking about England in the 1570's.¹

From the 3rd century, through the machinations of the Roman Emperor Constantine, the Church and the State had been forged into one organisation – Christendom. It did not take long for the Papacy to rise and take control of this monstrous conglomeration, and, by the 1570s, it had for more than a 1000 years exercised a cruel domination over Western Europe, enforcing its will on the people by means both political and physical, including sword and stake. Although opposition to papal claims had broken out from time to time down the centuries, Rome had crushed it all. But in 1517, Luther, by nailing his theses to the door at Wittenberg, had opened a front against Rome; the Reformation had begun. And in 1525, in Zurich, the Anabaptists had initiated a second front, this time against both Rome and the Reformed.

And what of England? Because of his determination to secure a divorce from Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII, in the 1530s, had broken with Rome to become his own pope and impose his will on the new-fangled Church of England. In the reign of Edward VI (1547-1553), this State Church had been moved closer to Geneva, but in the reign of Mary (1553-1558) it had been dragged back – with horrendous cruelty – to Rome. Now, in the 1570s, Elizabeth, who had begun her long reign in 1558, was exerting her all-dominant will, seeking to enforce a middle-of-the-road uniformity on the Church, but with a decided leaning towards Rome. However, she was being resisted on all sides – by Papists, Puritans and Anabaptists.

The result was that by the 1570s the Church of England was nothing less than a shambles. In a state of abysmal disorder, it was a corrupt and apostate Church, and it had become an atrocious monstrosity; grotesque, it bore little or no resemblance to the New Testament pattern.

¹ For this article, I have lightly edited 'The Secret Churches', taken from my *Battle for the Church* pp149-161.

It is fair to say that, in the fifty years since Luther had nailed his theses to the door at Wittenberg, much progress had been made in England, much ground had been fought over and conquered in the spiritual battle to recover New Testament church life. Though the gospel sun did not yet shine in its full glory, the long dark night of Popery had given way to the light of opening day. The cruel grip of the Papacy no longer held the people in its power. The Church of England, as well as the nation as a whole, was free of papal rule, and the government of England was in English hands. The effort had been costly, however, and the struggle long and bitter, with a terrible price exacted in blood.

Yet, despite the obvious gains, the Church of England was in a dreadful spiritual plight, locked into the doctrine of Constantine. Consequently, the Church and State persisted in their thoroughly mixed up condition, with diabolical results. For one thing, the combined civil and religious authorities remained deeply wedded to the long-loved idea of executing so-called heretics for their refusal to conform to the uniform Church. Another mark of the degenerate condition of the Church of England was evidenced by the way in which the people became its members. This was by means of infant baptism – just about universal in extent – a rite which amounted to baptismal regeneration at the hands of a priest who solemnly asserted that every infant he sprinkled was thereby ‘regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ’s Church’. After which appalling statement, the priest was obliged to thank God ‘that it hath pleased thee to regenerate this infant with thy Holy Spirit, to receive him for thine own child by adoption, and to incorporate him into thy holy Church’. This papist drivel was enforced in the Act of Uniformity of 1559, and every citizen was bound by law to go through with it. What is more, though the compulsion element has long since been removed, this remains the debased practice of the Church of England to this very day. Although changes are afoot, the trend is Romeward. The eternal consequences have been horrific for millions. They still are.

By this system, the Church of England had become a veritable mongrel by the 1570s. Some of its members were regenerate, but

the vast majority were not. It lumped together four disparate groups, joined into one State Church.

First, the profane, unbelieving, ungodly multitude, who were convinced that they were the children of God because some priest had apparently made them so in their infancy when he sprinkled them and had repeated the appropriate formula.

Secondly, the various denominations of Papists and associated semi-Papists, who wanted a return to full-blown Romanism.

Thirdly, the Anglicans, who loved showy ceremony, the ancient traditions, the customs and superstitions of the Fathers, but hated everything that was precisely built upon Scripture.

Fourthly, the Puritans, who demanded reform of the Church and its purification according to the New Testament but who, nevertheless, were prepared to give a grudging conformity to the Prayer Book, while trying to keep up a guerrilla warfare against its many corruptions.

How could this hotchpotch survive, with its jumble of belief and unbelief? After all, the opinions held by the various factions were mutually contradictory and should have blown the whole monstrosity apart. But hold together it did. Why? The Church of England managed to survive this abysmal state of affairs for one reason only – the rigid determination of Queen Elizabeth, its Supreme Governor. She simply imposed her will upon it.

Nevertheless, there were some people in England who were prepared to obey God as he has revealed himself in his word, and who dared to follow conscience. They would settle for nothing less than church life according to the New Testament. It meant, of course, that they had to separate themselves from the State Church, a step totally forbidden by the civil law. The rigours of that law ensured that they suffered blood-chilling punishments for their disobedience. In spite of this, some were prepared to defy the queen and her bishops, even though the authorities were armed to the teeth with the full range of Constantine powers. It was these little bands of stalwart believers who carried on the fight against corruption in the Church of England in order to get

back to the pattern of New Testament. Too often they have been passed over, despised and ridiculed.

Who were these people ‘of whom the world was not worthy’ (Heb. 11:38), men and women, who like the parents of Moses ‘were not afraid of the king’s command’ (Heb. 11:23) but defied the establishment to obey Christ? They acted as Moses himself, who ‘by faith... refused... choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God... esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing him who is invisible’ (Heb. 11:24-27). These determined men and women forsook the State Church, refusing to obey laws which contradicted Scripture, for they feared God and not Parliament. And God was with them.

Who were these brave believers?

First, there were the Anabaptists – mostly refugees from persecution on the Continent, but also those English men and women who had been persuaded to join them by the force of their arguments and sufferings. They would not conform to the Church of England, which was apostate in their judgment. For forty years, Anabaptists had been forming churches in England, ever since the days of Henry VIII. The fourteen Dutch Anabaptists burned at the stake as far back as 1535 were the first of a long line. Many more were put to death down the years under Henry, Edward and Mary. The same happened under Elizabeth. These four Sovereigns of England, aided and abetted by their bishops, hated the Anabaptists, and slaughtered them throughout the 16th century, sometimes in droves. Yet in spite of the horrors of prison, torture and death, and vicious laws framed against them, the ‘heretics’ survived. The measure of their influence and growth – as well as the hatred with which they were regarded – can be justly gauged by the fact that, out of the forty-two Articles drawn up by the Church of England in 1553, seventeen were specifically anti-Anabaptist. The Church authorities, as well as many Puritans, realised who their real and most dangerous adversaries were. This point must be emphasised if we are to get a proper understanding of events. Many of the conforming

Puritans – not only the Anglicans – hated the Anabaptists, regarding them as their enemies in battle. But it was not carnal weapons that the Anabaptists fought with – it was the force of their scriptural arguments which was so strong and so much feared. It has been justly said:

The Anabaptists were the most numerous, and for some time by far the most formidable, opponents of the Church. In the judgment of the Church party, and not a few of the Puritans, Anabaptists were heretics of the worst kind, and those who denied the necessity or validity of infant baptism, however orthodox on other points, [were] constantly classed... with... infidels and atheists.

Matthew Parker at one stage declined the invitation to become Archbishop of Canterbury, and in explaining himself he said that ‘the realm is full of Anabaptists’. Jewel wrote that ‘we found at the beginning of Elizabeth’s reign, large... crops of... Anabaptists, and other pests... As mushrooms spring up in the night and in darkness, so these sprang up in that darkness and unhappy night of Marian times’.

It is interesting to note that, according to these oblique testimonies from bitter opponents, the Anabaptists increased despite – or, perhaps, because of – severe persecution. And they were savagely dealt with. As an example of the sort of treatment they received under Elizabeth, think about the fate of the thirty Flemish Baptists who were discovered in 1575 at worship in Aldgate and arrested. At their trial and in their defence they said:

We are poor and despised strangers, who are persecuted for the testimony of Jesus... We seek no salvation in our works... but we hope to be saved alone through the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nor do we boast that we are without sin... They also say, we refuse to hear the word of God, because we do not go to hear the preaching of the Church... To this charge we would say, that why we do not hear the preacher, is, that the word of God constrains us so to do; because they are people not fit to attend to the sacred callings of a gospel preacher... if the preachers were such as the apostles required, we should cheerfully hear them – we would be the first and the last in the church. We are also accused... because we do not baptise our infants... We do it out

of fear to God, for Christ commands [only] believers to be baptised.

Five of the thirty recanted, and yet were still degraded in public; five were imprisoned and clamped in heavy irons, confined in a damp and dark dungeon which was infested with vermin; the rest were banished, simply thrown out of country, home and work, without a penny. The five prisoners were threatened with death. John Foxe, the martyrs' historian, wrote to the queen on their behalf. Two of them were released after much suffering, but another died in prison, while the remaining two were roasted alive at Smithfield at six in the morning, until their bodies were reduced to ashes. One of them had nine children. His first wife had been burned at the stake in Flanders. He had later married a widow whose husband had been burned likewise, and they had come to England in the hope that they might find liberty to worship in accordance with conscience. It proved a vain hope under Elizabeth. During his trial, the man promised the bishop that he and his family would quit the country if released; but to no avail. Blood was wanted. The other man who was burned to death was twenty-six years old, and had been married for only about two months when he was arrested.

Yet, despite the savage persecution, the Anabaptists would not give up their determination to serve Christ whatever the cost. Years later, the authorities deplored the fact that even after all the harsh measures which had been adopted to stamp out the 'heresy', still 'Dutch Anabaptists held private conventicles in London, and perverted a great many'. Thus it was admitted that the movement was growing as more and more Englishmen were joining their ranks. Things had got to such a pitch, the authorities had to complain that even 'some persons of these sentiments have been bred at our universities'. How shocking!

Furthermore, there is evidence that within the Church of England itself there were some who had adopted Anabaptist principles. For instance, as early as 1547, one John Bale, a Church of England minister, denied he was an Anabaptist but, in a book he did present arguments to the effect that Matthew 28:19-20 taught believer's baptism. He also wrote in defence of an Anabaptist who was burned at Colchester. Even more

remarkable, is the claim that a Baptist church had been formed in England as early as 1417.

In the early 1550s, in Mary's reign, two separated conventicles were discovered – one in Bocking in Essex, and the other at Faversham in Kent. The Essex church was formed by 'a sort of Anabaptists' from Kent, probably the Faversham people. The churches had at least four ministers along with more than sixty members, all of whom were earnest in the searching of the Scriptures to determine the right way to worship God. They concluded that for this 'the heart before God was required'. They met regularly for Christ's ordinances, the worship of God, and teaching; they contributed to the upkeep of the work of God; they were prepared to travel the eighty miles between the two churches to maintain their mutual fellowship in the gospel – a daunting journey in those days. Indeed, it was at Bocking where they were caught and arrested, after which they frankly admitted they had not taken the Lord's supper in the Church of England for two years, and that their purpose in gathering together was 'for talk of Scripture'.

The members of these secret and illegal meetings, it is true, were unorthodox in that they rejected Calvinism, being of a 'free-will' persuasion. But that was not the reason they left the Church. They practiced believer's baptism, and held that to have communion with the unregenerate is entirely unscriptural. They wanted separate churches made up of the godly only. They further explained that they refused to worship in the established Church because of its superstitions and corruptions. For all these reasons 'they were looked upon as dangerous to Church and State' and therefore they were persecuted, two being sent to the Marshalsea. It culminated in the execution of one of their leaders, Mr Middleton, who was burned at the stake in Canterbury on July 12th, 1555.

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But the Anabaptists were not the only Nonconformists, nor were the Faversham and Bocking conventicles the only detached groups during Mary's reign; there were others who were willing to disentangle themselves from the State Church. Without

question, several small and secret, separate churches existed in London and elsewhere. So much so, the New England settlers sixty years later referred back to them, claiming they were but carrying on the work of such. What is more, there is evidence that other independent churches existed in England even before Mary's time. But all these churches lived in a very dangerous, hostile world. They could not meet in stated buildings at regular hours, nor could they commit much to writing, for obvious reasons. However, at the great day they will form a noble part of the 'last who will be first' (Luke 13:30). Furthermore, despite the bitter treatment they received, the secret churches prospered. They thrived on the hostility.

One illegal London church in Mary's reign began with forty members but rose to about two hundred, and had a succession of pastors. Some of these, however, along with many members, were put to the stake during Mary's campaign of terror. This church was formed simply to be anti-papist, keeping itself clear of her popish measures, the members having no wish to be separate from the Church of England for any other reason. During their time of self-imposed separation, they used the more Protestant, Second Prayer Book of Edward in worship, as opposed to the form of service then employed in the State Church. When Elizabeth came to throne, this separate church dissolved itself in order to rejoin the State Church, now that it was no longer Papist.

In 1567, some one hundred Puritans separated themselves from the Church of England to form what they called a 'gathered church' meeting at Plumber's Hall in London. The members of this separate church comprised only those who were 'gathered' – gathered by their own desire, moved by the Holy Spirit, in contrast to the Church of England, whose members were coerced into that membership and who were forced to attend its services. It does not need to be said that this secret church was formed without Queen Elizabeth's permission. The Plumber's Hall church used John Knox's Genevan Service Book instead of the *Book of Common Prayer* in order to avoid Anglican corruptions.

Eventually, the church was discovered, and its members hauled before Archbishop Grindal to answer for their lawlessness. They explained that they had no intention of making a permanent separation from the Church of England; it was only a temporary measure until the obnoxious laws of Elizabeth were repealed. William Bonam, the pastor, along with twenty-four members, was willing to promise that they would not take the Lord's supper 'in any house, or other place, contrary to the state of religion now by public authority established, or contrary to the laws of this realm of England'. They also promised not to preach against the Church of England. Having said that, since the Church had silenced good preachers, and until they could hear lively preaching in a church free of Popery, they roundly declared that they were determined to remain apart, whatever the consequences. They justified their action, saying:

So long as we might have the word freely preached and [baptism and the Lord's supper] administered without the... idolatrous gear [that is, Anglican vestments] about it, we never assembled together in houses. But when it came to this, that all our preachers were displaced by your law, so that we could hear none of them in our church by seven or eight weeks, we were troubled and commanded by your courts from day to day for not coming to our parish churches, then we besought us what were best to do. And now if from the word of God, you can prove we are wrong, we will yield to you and do open penance at St Paul's Cross; if not, we will stand to it by the grace of God.

What a spirit! How different is this to the compromises of the conforming Puritans who remained within the Church of England. All that these staunch believers wanted was that their church life – the ordinances of Christ – should be free of idolatry and superstition. And, since the Church of England had silenced their true preachers, they had been driven to take steps to put this right. Even so, they had thought carefully about their actions, and they were willing to be proved wrong, but only by Scripture. Furthermore, if they were shown to be in error they would openly acknowledge it and repent. Otherwise, by God's help, they would continue.

Another secret or 'Privye church' was discovered in London in 1567 in Whitechapel Street. This church differed from the one in Plumber's Hall in several particulars – especially in that it was determined to separate, permanently, from the State Church. They called themselves nothing but 'a poor congregation whom God has separated from the Churches of England'. They condemned the established Church because of 'the mingled and false worshipping therein used, out of the which assemblies the Lord our only Saviour has called us'. This false worship, they argued, involved superstitions and idolatrous vestments, the works of Antichrist, such as 'forked caps... surplices, copes... and popish Holy Days'. They appealed to the authorities to abolish 'the manners, fashions, or customs of the Papists' which continued to be practiced in the State Church.

This Calvinistic, separated church was formed on the basis of a covenant in which it acknowledged a threefold ministry of pastor, elder and deacon. Richard Fitz, the pastor, listed three essential points as 'true marks of Christ's church':

First and foremost, the glorious word and gospel [must be] preached, not in bondage and subjection, but freely, and purely. Secondly, to have [baptism and the Lord's supper] ministered purely, only and altogether according to the institution and good word of the Lord Jesus, without any tradition or invention of man. And last of all, to have, not the filthy Canon Law, but discipline only, and altogether agreeable to the same heavenly and almighty word of our good Lord, Jesus Christ.

Reader, note the stress upon discipline. So strong was this emphasis upon mutual discipline that the church met every fourth day to carry it out. No doubt this was based on the principle that reformation of the church was – and always is – a necessity. How very different to the all-inclusive membership of the Church of England with its little or non-existent spiritual discipline; that is, apart from the slaughter of supposed heretics! How very like the Anabaptists the Privye church was, with their emphasis upon spiritual discipline of church members. Indeed, how very like the New Testament.

This secret church also regarded suffering as an inevitable mark of faithfulness. They went further. The authorities were not

only persecuting believers, they said, but the tormentors of the church ‘do persecute our Saviour Jesus Christ in his members. Also they reject and despise our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’. Fitz was right to say that suffering is a mark of a true church (2 Tim. 3:10-12). He was also right to note that when men persecute believers, they are, in fact, persecuting Christ himself (Acts 9:4-5).

They closed their church covenant with the prayer: ‘God give us strength still to strive in suffering under the cross, that the blessed word of our God may only rule, and have the highest place, to cast down strongholds, to destroy or overthrow policies or imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and to bring into captivity or subjection, every thought to the obedience of Christ... and that the name of the eternal Lord God, may be exalted or magnified above all things’.

The subsequent history of the church is unknown – unknown to man, that is – except that we read that it was severely punished for its audacity to dissent from the State Church. Richard Fitz, the pastor, and Thomas Bowlande, deacon, died of gaol fever in Bridewell, while the other members languished in at least six different prisons. Under this kind of onslaught, it is not surprising to learn that the church probably ceased to exist about 1570. But though the men and women might well be silenced in death, and cease to ‘groan and cry unto God... the very walls of the prisons about this city would testify God’s anger kindled against this land for such injustice and subtle persecution’. What is more, however brief its survival, the church greatly affected the course of the battle to recover New Testament church life in England. Indeed, all the secret churches – both Anabaptist and Puritan – struck tremendous blows in that struggle.

Perhaps the greatest contribution made by the secret churches in the prosecution of the battle to reform the church was that they were pioneers. They took the first step. And how important a step that is. How much easier it is for us who come after, when we can see someone else’s footprints! The believers who formed these secret churches showed that it was possible to worship God outside the State system and in defiance of its regulations. It

would not be long before a much greater separation from the Church of England would take place. Today, it is commonplace to worship in churches outside the State Church, but it was not always so. How much we owe to these courageous saints who established a kind of bridgehead for us. What a great wrong it is if we forget the price they paid for our freedom!

Another major contribution they made to the advance of the reform of the church was in their use of the covenant. This would be taken up in a widespread way as the battle for the church raged on into the next century. It was a concept which would be used with great effect. Indeed the covenant idea became a major aspect of all Puritanism in the years which followed.

There has been a resurgence of the use of the idea of a covenant in recent years, and it is a cause for thankfulness. With this proviso, however – as long as the covenant is carried out in practice! Merely to make it is useless. One great benefit of a church covenant is that it emphasises personal commitment of heart to Christ and his people within the local church; it is not good enough just to give a formal mental assent to a creed, to have a faith in intellectual propositions. That is the curse of Churches founded under the system of Constantine, National Churches where citizenship of a State is the same as membership of the Church. In a voluntary covenant, there is an emphasis upon the individual's engagement and his loyalty to the church, since a mutual contract is made between the members which cannot – must not, dare not – be broken in any but the most serious circumstances. Furthermore, the covenant concept is built upon a sense of equality in the church; it militates against the idea of a hierarchy. Again, by a covenant, church membership is shown to be a voluntary affair. It is far more than a mere nominal attachment by reason of association or birth or whatever. It is certainly something very different to compulsory membership of the State Church, coming about by the so-called baptism of every infant.

For those who may never have seen a church covenant, I include a copy of the covenant which was drawn up in 1978, when the Lowestoft Reformed Baptist church was formed. There are many other examples which could be given, of course. This

covenant was the basis upon which all members joined the church. (In addition, there was a doctrinal statement besides other documents, naturally). The covenant read:

Recognising our own unworthiness and inability, and in total dependence upon God, we covenant to keep our vows first to God and then to each other by the will of God.

First, we covenant to give ourselves to Christ as the head of the church; that is, to submit ourselves to him, to honour and keep all that he has appointed and commanded in his word for the well-being of his church.

Secondly, we covenant to give ourselves to one another; that is, to engage ourselves in all the mutual duties, responsibilities and privileges of members of a local church as appointed and commanded in the word of God – such as prayer for one another, love for one another, fellowship, mutual care and edification, in honour preferring one another, provoking one another to good works, assembling together for the exercise of Christ's ordinances, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit; and in any and every other responsibility of local church members as given in the Scriptures.

Thus, in all sorts of ways the secret churches made a most valuable contribution to the struggle to reform the church; they were pioneers; they were willing to suffer for their obedience to Christ; they used the covenant principle to form their churches; they emphasised church discipline. All these are large and very important concepts. To say the least, the little bands of believers, who dared to disobey evil and cruel laws in order to put into practice the teaching of Scripture, fought valiantly in the spiritual battle for the church. All honour to their memory. Nor did they fight in vain. They shall have their reward. Meanwhile, we with gratitude reap the benefit of their labours.

These several points need stressing today. Too often, the marks of present-day church life are a casual, frivolous attitude, a lack of spiritual commitment, practically no discipline, poor attendance at meetings for prayer, and an easy-come, easy-go mentality. The church and her ordinances are simply not prized as they ought to be. The church is taken for granted. How has this come about? One of the reasons for a low standard of spirituality in the churches is the lack of emphasis upon discipline, it being

non-existent in many assemblies. Or, where it is used, it comes far too late, so that it becomes only punishment and not correction. When churches do not discipline, or are only half-hearted about it, then a superficial, shallow Christianity results. The secret churches were strong on discipline. And so should we be. The New Testament churches were.

What does this mean in practical terms? Reader, I want to be down-to-earth and specific. To take just one commonplace, current example – poorly attended prayer meetings. Is this not a very frequent occurrence? Well, what is being done about it? What can be done about it? To do nothing, is a dereliction of duty, and will have to be answered for. Looking the other way is not the answer. Wringing of the hands will not suffice. Nor is it good enough for the church secretary to bully and cajole and plead with members to attend; is this not sometimes done in the ‘announcements’? Arm twisting is not the way forward. Nor is it good enough for the elders just to harangue and exhort from the pulpit.

The answer is *discipline*. Are the members spiritual people? Then they will want to come to the prayer meeting. Their lack of desire to come is symptomatic of something very seriously wrong with them. It is this which must be dealt with. Those who wish to join the church must be spiritually-minded people. Prospective members must know from the outset that a full participation in all the spiritual life of the church is expected of them, whatever the cost. And that is how it is; that is how it is going to be. If they do not like it, they should not be allowed to join. They should not even want to join. Spiritual people have spiritual desires and appetites, and they take steps to satisfy them. The psalmist said: ‘How lovely is your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God’ (Ps. 84:1-2). David addressed God saying: ‘LORD, I have loved the habitation of your house, and the place where your glory dwells’ (Ps. 26:8). He could declare: ‘I was glad when they said to me: “Let us go into the house of the LORD”’ (Ps. 122:1). Bearing in mind that ‘house’ in the new covenant speaks of the body of believers, not a building, do professing believers mean it when they sing the very words of

that psalm, or the rendering of it by Isaac Watts? How frequently these sentiments are expressed:

*How pleased and blessed was I,
To hear the people cry,
'Come, let us seek our God today!'
Yes, with a cheerful zeal
We haste to Zion's hill,
And there our vows and honours pay.*

I ask again: Are the words meant? Do those who profess them, make 'haste to' the prayer meeting? Do they do so 'with a cheerful zeal'? If not, why not? And if they do not want to come, why is something not done about it? If churches are so keen to increase their numbers that they tolerate low standards and an unspiritual (frankly, carnal) attitude in the members, they will have to account to God for it.

But what about actual church members – what if they grow slack, and prayer meeting attendance drops off? The answer is that action must be taken if members fail in their covenant vows. This can take various forms and there will be degrees of sanction. But action – not mere words – action must be taken. Richard Fitz was right. It is in the New Testament pattern. Discipline is a mark of a true church. Merely to deplore shallow spiritual life in church members is not good enough. Something must be done about it, especially in churches which claim to act on the gathered or voluntary church principle. The members are supposed to be regenerate and spiritually active. They are supposed to desire spiritual life. They have asked to join; they have not been asked, let alone forced!

If this sounds too hard, so be it. I realise it will be called narrow and strict. If my words are greeted with howls of protest that we shall lose members, or people will not join us, then I reply that we shall be getting somewhat closer to the New Testament churches again. Admitting that the discipline was extraordinary in Acts 5, nevertheless the effect of it is needed today. And needed badly. After the discipline of Ananias and Sapphira it is recorded 'so great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things... Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly' (Acts 5:11-13).

Do men fear the church today? Are they afraid to join the people of God? Very often the church goes out of its way to make itself attractive to pagans. It wants to be ‘user-friendly’. Why is it not like the church in Acts 5? Has the church discovered something the apostles did not know? Many churches think they have invented a system which makes the church comfortable for the ungodly, easy-going and tolerant of carnality in its members, and yet pleasing to God *at the same time*. Is it possible? Of course not!²

Too often, we want to be popular, and bigger numbers on the roll figure too highly in our calculations. We need to keep in mind Christ’s words: ‘Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets’ (Luke 6:26). Is it perhaps significant that in times of persecution, as when the secret churches were meeting, or later, when (a century later) the famous Broadmead records were written for the Baptist church in Bristol, discipline was being used with great effect in the churches? On the other hand, when apathy and a limp Christianity is in vogue, discipline becomes lax or non-existent. There is a close connection between low spirituality and lax discipline. One thing is certain, if churches and their elders merely deplore superficial spiritual life and thereby tolerate and condone it, they are a party to the offence in the eyes of God. They will have to answer for it.

What is more, church discipline is not designed to maintain church order in an arid, hard way. The idea is not that the church might just be ‘right’. We are talking about the souls of men and women who are in spiritual need. For believers to grow cold, spiritually slack and casual, is not only wrong in the sense of the purity of the church – it is exceedingly dangerous for the believers in question. It is a symptom of their spiritual disease. Church discipline is designed to recover them from their spiritual illnesses, to rescue them from their backsliding and decline, and to strengthen them at their weak points. It is not a mark of love to avoid church discipline. Laxity is no sign of kindness. The very opposite is the case. True love for our fellow-believers is best

² See the extended note, ‘Inclusivism’, in my *Baptist Sacramentalism: A Warning to Baptists*.

shown by the whole church being engaged in mutual discipline and care. Christ designed church life for that very purpose. After all, 1 Corinthians 5 leads to 2 Corinthians 2:1-11 and 7:8-12. See also Galatians 6:1-2; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15. One great aim of church discipline is that the offending brother might be ‘gained’ (Matt. 18:15). Of course it is true that ‘no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it’ (Heb. 12:11). A lawless child is a ruined child. An undisciplined Christian is a walking contradiction.

Reader, while they did not completely recover the New Testament pattern, and further progress in that direction would have to be made those who followed them, let us never forget the saints who formed the secret churches four hundred years ago. Let us remember those godly men and women who paid so dearly for doing what they considered to be their privilege; their privilege, not merely their duty, mind you. If they could see the light-hearted, flippant attitude to church life which is so common today, surely they would be horrified, they would be saddened. Of far greater moment, what does Christ think of it? How much we owe those saints of long ago. One thing we may be assured of – if we let the heritage they left us slip out of our grasp, then they will arise in the judgment and rightly condemn us!

Reader, how much do you treasure the church? How precious are her ordinances to you? How much difficulty are you prepared to put up with so that you can worship God, assembling with his people in the mutual exercise of the priesthood of all believers, according to your understanding of the New Testament? Or what excuses are you making for yourself in order that you can settle for something less? Is it not a privilege to be a member of the church of Christ? Whatever the cost, is it not worth paying?