

Nonconformity

By Malcolm H. Watts

Oliver Cromwell died in 1658. His son, Richard tried to continue as Lord Protector, but, after some months of contentions between republicans and royalists, General Monk, commander of the army, influenced parliament to vote for the return of the king. Charles II entered the capital in May, 1660, having promised, in the Declaration of Breda, that "no man shall be disquieted or called in question for differences of opinion in matters of religion, which do not disturb the peace of the kingdom."

Yet, contrary to his promise, and very soon after taking royal authority, Charles II introduced a series of Repressive Acts, most notable among them being the Act

of Uniformity in 1662. This Act required that every minister officiating in the Church of England should declare on or before St, Bartholomew's Day, the 24th August, 1662, "unfeigned assent and consent to all and every thing contained and prescribed in and by the Book (the Book of Common Prayer)...".

Many of the Puritans felt unable to this and consequently on that black Bartholomew's Day nearly 2,000 ministers were deprived of their livings and prohibited from preaching. This has become known as "The Great Ejection" and those Puritans who, on conscience grounds, refused to conform were thereafter known as "Non-Conformists."

Other Acts swiftly followed: in 1664, the Conventicle Act, which forbade

Nonconformists to hold any meeting with more than five people present; in 1665, the Five Mile Act, which prohibited Nonconformist ministers from ministering within five miles of any given town; in 1670, the Extension of the Conventicle Act, which encouraged "informers" and increased the "penalties" for infringement; and in 1673, the Test Act, which denied all civil, naval, and military employment to Nonconformists.

Here, it is the 1662 Act of Uniformity that concerns us, demanding of all clergy, as it did, to abjure the Solemn League and Covenant, to affirm the illegality of resisting the monarch on any ground, and to give "unfeigned assent and consent to all and everything contained and prescribed in and by the Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments." Ministers failing to comply with the terms of this Act were deprived of their livings and, in the event of their preaching thereafter, they were liable, for each offence, to three months' imprisonment. As already noted, nearly 2,000 Puritan Ministers were forced to withdraw from the Church of England, and many of them, in consequence, were reduced to extreme poverty.

On Farewell Sunday, 17th August, 1662, many faithful Pastors addressed their churches for the last time. Typical of these Puritans was Dr. William Bates, who preached to his people that day at St. Dunstan's Church, and towards the close

of his sermon he spoke movingly and as follows: "I know you expect I should say something as to my Nonconformity. I shall only say thus much – it is neither fancy, faction, nor humour (i.e. state of mind) that makes me not to comply, but merely for fear of offending God."

Along with our forefathers, we today are compelled to state our strong objections to the Book of Common Prayer:

We object to the acknowledgment in the Articles of the reigning monarch as "Supreme Governor of the Church within these Our Dominions."

We object to the recognition of Tradition as an authority equal to Scripture, as in the Preface to the Form and Manner of Ordaining Bishops, Priests, and Deacons: "It is evident unto all men diligently reading the holy Scripture and ancient Authors, that from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church..."

We object to the inclusion of the Apocryphal books in the Lessons to be read in church services, alongside the Inspired and Canonical books of the Old and New Testaments.

We object to the Calendar which mentions ecclesiastical Holy Days, including the "Annunciation of the blessed Virgin Mary" and various "Saints' Days."

We object to the use of the words "priest"

and "order of the priesthood" used throughout, and especially in The Form and Manner of Ordering of Priests, since such terms are used in the Scriptures for those who stand between man and God, and who "offer sacrifice".

We object to Priestly Absolution, as in the Rubric for the Sick: "By his (Christ's) authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins..."

We object to the reference in the Publick Baptism of Infants to "God-fathers" and "God-mothers" (Sponsors), "the sign of the cross", and the words supportive of "Baptismal Regeneration": "Seeing now, dearly beloved brethren, that this child is regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ's church..."

We object to the taking of the elements in the Holy Communion while kneeling at the feet of the "priest", since it indicates something akin to the "adoration" of the bread and wine, "The shall this General Confession be made, in the name of all those that are minded to receive the holy Communion, by one of the Ministers: both he and all the people kneeling humbly upon their knees..."

We object in the same service to expressions savouring of the doctrine of Transubstantiation: "Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood that our sinful bodies may be made clean by His body..."

We object, in the Litany, to the encouragement of Prayers for the Dead: "Remember not, Lord, our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers..."

We object to the Burial Service, which pronounces over the grave of profligates and drunkards alike the words of Christian assurance and hope: "in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ..."

These objections are resolute and deep. We believe that the above-mentioned doctrines and practices are irreconcilable with the written Word of God, and therefore, with the strongest of convictions, we stand with our faithful, ejected brethren of 1662, unashamed in our own day and generation to be known as "Nonconformists".