

Robert Browne

Thinking the Unthinkable

Robert Browne, who then was in his early thirties, lodged in this city of Norwich for a few months during the years 1580-81. He was soon arrested and jailed, after which, in 1582, he emigrated to Middleburg in the Low Countries, where he published three books. Such are the salient facts about my subject this evening. Not much, is it? End of story? End of paper? Far from it.

In 1583 – remember the aforementioned dates, 1580-1582 – in 1583, Elias Thacker and John Coppin were hanged at Bury St Edmunds, hanged with Browne’s books tied about their necks. Their crime? They had read, and led others to read, Browne’s writings.

In 1584 – remember, yet again, the dates – in 1584, seven Norfolk clergymen wrote to the authorities asking for help, complaining that they were having great difficulty in keeping the people from going over to the Brownists.

At the opening of the 17th century – that is, within twenty years – William Shakespeare published his *Twelfth Night*, in which Sir Andrew Aguecheek is advised that if he wants to win the lady he will have to change tactics. Either he will have to venture all and speak openly, or else scheme his way into her affections. Sir Andrew is clear. He has no heart for scheming: ‘I’d had as lief be (that is, I’d hate it as much to be) a Brownist as a politician’. A politician? The lowest of the low! Not at any price! It would be as bad as being accused of being a Brownist!

In the USA, Browne has the reputation of being ‘The Father of the 1620 Pilgrims’ and ‘The Grandfather of the Nation’.

Speaking for myself, I can see how a man like Oliver Cromwell – a man of whom I cannot speak too highly – can be thought of as a spiritual great grandchild of Robert Browne.

These facts speak volumes. Whoever Robert Browne was, and whatever he did, it is clear that he was, by any standard, a man to be reckoned with. Clearly he had a tremendous influence, a widespread influence, in his day, and in a very short time. Take the first incident. Within a year of the publication of Browne's books, two men were hanged for reading them, and for leading and encouraging others to do the same and to adopt his teaching. They were hanged with Browne's books straddling their necks. I myself have written several volumes, but none of my works have caused such a disturbance or had such an influence as that! And I have had the advantage of the internet for distribution! So I say it again: Robert Browne must have been a man to be reckoned with.

Then again, it surely says something that within three or four years of his stay in Norwich seven Anglicans were sufficiently alarmed that they complained that they were unable to prevent his influence in Norfolk – he was proving to be more than a handful – and within twenty years, Shakespeare could refer to Browne knowing that everybody would grasp the allusion. These facts all tell a similar tale. Within twenty years, Robert Browne had national notoriety. Moreover, within forty years he had an international reputation, a reputation that has not gone away. When we bear in mind the difficulties of mass communication in the late 16th century, we can only conclude that my chosen subject was indeed a phenomenon in his own day.

I want to begin with an apology. Getting my defence in first, I have to confess that since I prefer to preach, and do so extempore, I am not really in my element in reading a paper. But in mitigation, let me remind you of the excellent dictum: 'If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing badly'. No, it's not a clever quip from Oscar Wilde – though it certainly sounds like it. Rather, it is an excellent sentiment from G.K.Chesterton. I would argue it is a biblical sentiment: tonight's speaker and his paper might not be up to much, but his subject is well worth thinking about.

On an even more serious note, when I speak of an apology, I do not mean to imply that I am sorry for what I say. I use the

word in a technical sense. That is, you may be here this evening under false pretences. The fact is, I do not belong to academe. For a start, I do not have sufficient grey cells for it. More important, I do not have the disposition for it. It seems to me, at least, members of the academy have to be neutral, disinterested, determined above all to be rigorously accurate and factual, all without expressing a personal opinion. In approaching my subject tonight, however, I am partisan – unashamedly and openly partisan. May I stress this? I admire and respect Robert Browne. For all his faults – and they were many, and they were big – I want to express my open admiration and gratitude for the stand that this thirty-year old man took in this city in 1580. He being dead speaks to me. He challenges me. He confronts me. He sets me an example that I want to emulate.

Since I do not come from the world of academe, I am sure that there will be people here this evening who know far more about Robert Browne, particularly his connection with Norwich, than I do. As a consequence, when we come to questions after my paper, it is almost certain that some of you will be far better at providing answers than I. Indeed, I shall be glad to listen to your contributions, and learn from what you have to say. The truth is, I have not made Robert Browne the great study of my life. I do not claim to be an expert on Robert Browne. I want my paper to be regarded merely as an appetiser to encourage you to look more deeply for yourself into the life of this remarkable man, particularly his teaching on the nature of the church. In my view, he – especially, his doctrine – is well worth the study. We all – all of us – owe him a tremendous debt.

It is essential to fit Robert Browne into his times. Unless we bear in mind the circumstances into which he was born, the culture in which he found himself, we shall never understand how great was the step that he took at Norwich in 1580-81.

During the 3rd century, the Roman Emperors Constantine and Theodosius had set in motion the linking of Church and State to form one Commonwealth, Christendom. From then on,

Western Europe – that is, the known world, the civilised world – was dominated by this all-encompassing organisation. So much so, the people of Europe were not primarily citizens of any particular country; rather, they were members of this Christendom, which they entered at birth through baptismal regeneration by sprinkling at the hands of a priest. Uniformity of religion in belief and practice, enforced by political power, was the watchword. Of course, dissident voices were heard – the Waldensians, the Albigenses, the Paulicans, the Lollards and such like – but the vast majority of men and women lived and died in Christendom – unless they were excommunicated or burnt or otherwise disposed of for ‘heresy’. This state of affairs continued with – with, not until – the Reformation. Luther, Zwingli, Tyndale, Calvin, the English Reformers were all committed to the power of the magistrate – supremely the power of the king – to rule the State Church. In the early 1520s in Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli, with his followers, wanted more and more reform according to Scripture – including the rejection of infant baptism. But whereas Zwingli would only act if granted permission by the authorities, his followers grew impatient with his reticence, and in 1525 George Blaurock, Conrad Grebel, Felix Mainz and others took the fateful step – in not a few cases, the fatal step – and were baptised as believers. They were dismissed outright as Anabaptists – re-baptisers. This they resolutely denied, dismissing their baby baptism as no baptism at all. In this act, they had stepped outside the State Church system, and they suffered accordingly. Mainz was drowned in the river Limmat, tied to a hurdle. Many others paid a high price, even the ultimate price. Even so, Anabaptism spread rapidly throughout Europe. Nevertheless, while this radical movement mushroomed, it remained only a tiny minority, and – to change the figure – it was crushed like a nut between Rome and the Reformed, both parties calling on the power of the State to do the dirty work.

By 1550, when Robert Browne was born, the uniformity of Christendom enforced by the magistrate was still the norm in England. True, there had been, still were exceptions to the rule: various secret churches (the churches at Bocking and

Faversham, the Plumber's Hall gathering, the Privye church under Richard Fitz, and so on), the Anabaptists and a whole range of other radicals. But when Elizabeth, the daughter of Henry VIII, came to the throne, and was firmly established as the supreme Governor of the Church of England, she soon showed that she was determined to have her way, crushing all dissent.

By the mid 1570s, the Church of England was in a very troubled and unsettled condition. In the eyes of many believers, it stood in desperate need of much reform if it was ever going to be a church in the sense of the New Testament. And these critics gave open voice to their convictions even though this was contrary to the law of the land. The State Church was under attack on two fronts; it had two main opponents. It was censured by the Anabaptists and various other scattered, hidden and separated churches from without; and it was criticised by the Puritans – both Episcopalian and Presbyterian – from within. But there was one great and constant obstacle to reform, one resolute defender of the Anglican system – Queen Elizabeth herself. She and her bishops weathered every storm, warded off every onslaught; or so it seemed. However, as if two fronts were not enough for Elizabeth to contend with, a third and far more penetrating assault upon the fabric of the Church of England was about to be launched. This attack would come from a new group of Puritans; which group, though very small in number to start with, would prove the most devastating in the long run.

This new category of antagonists arose as an unexpected result of Thomas Cartwright's Presbyterian short-lived lectures at Cambridge in 1569 as the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in the University. Robert Browne attended those lectures, and by 1573 he was taking an altogether more radical line than his former Professor. Browne was daring to think the unthinkable, and was prepared to act according to his understanding of Scripture, whatever men might say; he was prepared to do the undoable. He realised that the common or conforming Puritan approach was mistaken. The Puritans demanded reform of the Church of England, whether of

vestments, ceremonies or the system of church government, but they were prepared to wait until the authorities – the queen, the magistrates and the bishops – were willing to move and give it to them. Browne came to the opinion that this approach was wrong. It was misguided! The reforms were needed, but the waiting was wrong! He came to the conclusion that it was right to act without the consent of the authorities. He would later publish his views in the now-famous book *A Treatise of Reformation without Tarrying for Any*, the title of which became the catchword of the third group, who were nicknamed ‘The Separatists’. At this distance, and in the very different circumstances of today, it is almost impossible for us to appreciate how great a leap Browne took. Those who were prepared to take it with him certainly paid a high price, but being so devoted to the cause of Christ they willingly met the cost.

These Separatists, then, were determined upon reformation according to the New Testament without waiting for permission from the authorities. Indeed, they went further, and said that the State Church cannot be reformed, that it is pointless to try, and that separation from it is the only way forward. In any case, the State has no say, no right or power in religion, they declared. In these sentiments, there were unmistakable echoes of John Hooper, thirty years earlier. Now, this stance was in marked contrast to both the Anglicans and the Puritans who, while they disagreed on many things, did hold certain principles in common; one great unifying bond between them being their love of Constantine. Hence, they both believed in a State Church, in religious uniformity and its strict enforcement by the magistrate. They both rejected the idea of religious tolerance. It was anathema to them both. Consequently, over this issue of tolerance as opposed to an enforced uniformity, a bitter conflict was in the making. On the one hand there were the Anabaptists and the newly-arisen Separatists; on the other, the die-hard advocates of an imposed State religion.

Cartwright baldly stated that heretics should not be pardoned even if they repented. He went on to say that they

‘ought to be put to death now... If this be cruel or extreme I am content to be counted so with the Holy Ghost’. All that the Puritans lacked was the power, but if they could have got the chance they would have forced all men to conform to their point of view. Madly, Cartwright even insisted:

The magistrate ought to enforce the attendance of Papists and atheists on the services of the Church; to punish them if they did not profit by the preaching they might hear; to increase the punishment if they gave signs of contempt; and if at last they proved utterly impenitent, to cut them off.

How the magistrates were supposed to be competent to judge ‘who had not profited’ by preaching, what tests they could apply to read men’s hearts, is utterly beyond my comprehension. It was a ridiculous demand. Surely this prerogative is God’s alone.

In adamant opposition to the Anglicans and the Puritans, the Separatists argued that religion should be free of the State. More than that, they began to see that the New Testament knows nothing of State Churches with an all-embracing membership. They argued for the New Testament position of churches made up of believers only, churches whose members all give credible evidence of regeneration. The Anglicans accepted all who had a certificate of infant baptism. The Puritans demanded more. But not enough! It was the Separatists who argued for the New Testament order, and spoke of ‘gathered’ churches. In this there were echoes of Richard Fitz and others in the secret churches, as well as the Anabaptists.

The more numerous Puritans very strongly opposed the Separatists, denouncing them in no uncertain terms. Elizabeth also reacted with vigour against all her opponents. While she kept up her discipline measures to force the Puritans into line, that was far too good for the Separatists and the Anabaptists whom she lumped together. They were to be persecuted! Literally, to death!

It is time to trace how Puritanism developed into Separatism through the life and teaching of Robert Browne.

Robert Browne was a man who, in his day, provoked strong reactions. He still does. But, alas, many who are indebted to him and his stance have either never heard of him – or worse – they openly disown him. In truth, he made many enemies both in his own day and since. It must be borne in mind, however, that much of the information about Browne comes only through the writings of his opponents, and as such it must be treated with caution. In any case, on any reckoning it has to be admitted that God greatly used the man’s courage, discernment and faith to advance the cause of Christ. Browne recovered nothing less than the New Testament concept of the church, with its distinct, separate churches at Corinth, Philippi, Rome, Ephesus and the like, churches which have no central control or hierarchy. Episcopalianism is foreign to Scripture, but so is the Presbyterian notion of synods and other ecclesiastical courts ranked in order of importance. A treatise published by the Brownists when they were in Middleburg, entitled *Antichristian Abominations Yet Retained in England*, spoke against the notion of hierarchy, and said that ‘every particular church, with its pastor, stands immediately under Christ, the Arch-pastor, without any other ecclesiastical power intervening, whether it be of prelates, of synods, or any other invented by man’. Each church is separate from every other church and is answerable to Christ alone, they maintained. These churches ‘ought not to be governed by popish Canons, courts, classes, customs, or any human inventions, but by the laws and rules which Christ has appointed in his Testament’. For those who followed him, Browne got rid of words and notions like ‘parish’ and ‘diocese’. He stoutly resisted the view that the magistrate should exercise discipline in Christ’s church. He also asserted that discipline is essential in Christ’s church – so much so, without it the church ceases to exist – but it must be spiritual discipline, exercised by the church itself upon its own members:

The essence, substance, and life of the... church... [is] the keeping of the covenant by outward discipline and

government... Nothing can make a... church except... the power of Christ to separate the unworthy.

He further declared that the magistrates:

Have no ecclesiastical authority at all... They may do nothing concerning the church... To compel religion, to plant churches by power and to force a submission... by laws and penalties, belongs not to them.

For all that, there is some evidence that Browne was somewhat confused about the position of the magistrate. At times, he did allow a place for the enforcement of scriptural religion by the civil authorities. The full-blown doctrine of religious liberty and tolerance had a few more years to wait before it would be put forward with all its New Testament vigour and clarity by John Smyth, Roger Williams and the like.

On the qualification for the ministry, Browne asserted that it is not the magistrate who gives the right for a man to minister the gospel. It is the gift of God, 'by consent and ratifying of the church', which qualifies a man for the ministry, he said. The magistrate cannot make a minister; nor can he take a man's ministry away. He argued that churches are made up only of those who freely covenant together to walk in Christ's ordinances. When he said: 'Let them know that the Lord's true people is of the willing sort... It is the conscience and not the power of man that will drive us to seek the Lord's kingdom', he was simply echoing the New Testament. But this kind of teaching was hated by those who formed Churches on the basis of Constantine coercion.

How did Browne come to these earth-shattering views?

Robert Browne was born into a family of wealthy merchants near Stamford about 1550, went to Corpus Christi, Cambridge in 1570, probably drawn to his particular college because of his Puritan sympathies. There he attended Cartwright's epoch-making lectures on Acts. Graduating in 1572, he became a schoolmaster for about three years, probably at Southwark, during which time he engaged in open-air preaching at the Gravel Pits at Islington. Upon an outbreak of the plague in 1578, he returned to his father's house. Increasing scriptural

light was breaking in upon him all the while, and, as his understanding developed, so he sought to obey to the best of his ability.

Moving to Dry Drayton, five miles from Cambridge, he joined the household of a conforming Puritan minister, one Richard Greenham, who had been recently appointed rector. Greenham, one of the most underrated Puritans, was a ‘godly pastor, a good preaching minister’, most diligent, practical, kind and able, a very gentle man. Rising at four each week-day to preach to the farm labourers, he then followed them over the fields to bring home the truth to their hearts by spiritual conversation. He aimed ‘to deal wisely and comfortably with an affected conscience’. In which aim he succeeded, for ‘his masterpiece was in comforting wounded consciences... God used him... as an instrument of good to many, who came to him with weeping eyes and went from him with cheerful souls’. His house at Dry Drayton became a kind of Puritan academy with various Puritan ministers staying there from time to time on extended visits. Much profitable, spiritual discussion took place. Sadly, Greenham came to the end of his ministry at Dry Drayton – when he was nearly sixty – in a depressed and lonely condition. He thought he had accomplished no good at all, except to one family; the place had remained obstinate against the gospel. But Greenham was mistaken, for he did much good in his time and it lived on after him. He died of the plague in 1594.

Such was the godly man under whose roof Robert Browne took up lodgings in 1578. Greenham was a loyal Anglican, but though he was an Episcopalian, he was also earnestly resolute over simplicity in ministerial dress and in worship. Into his household came Browne, who was becoming more and more grieved over the lamentable state of the church. The young man studied and debated much to discover the proper scriptural order of the church; ‘night and day he did consult with himself and others’. Cartwright’s lectures were having their effect. Browne began to see that the trouble was not merely that the bishops were bad in their behaviour, that they were wicked, but that ‘their whole power and authority’ was

unbiblical. Greenham, too, had attended Cartwright's lectures, but he tried to defend Episcopalianism against the new-fangled Presbyterianism in his many discussions with Browne. Browne retorted that the bishops were a miserable failure, they were not calling the people from their sins, they did not preach the word of God.

Greenham must have been very impressed with the younger man for he invited him to expound the Scriptures at the family table after meat. Then he went much further; without the necessary licence from the bishop, he let Browne teach openly in the parish. So gifted was the young Puritan that the Mayor and Vice-Chancellor gave him leave to take the lectureship at Benet church in Cambridge for six months – still without a licence! Radical indeed! Browne's brother did take the trouble to obtain the necessary seals for him but he refused them. 'To be authorised... to be sworn, to subscribe, to be ordained, and to receive their licensing, he utterly disliked and kept himself clear in these matters'. Furthermore, he refused payment for his labours. He would allow no one to call him a hireling! 'I preach to satisfy duty and conscience', he said. During the course of his preaching, he declaimed against the power of bishops to license or silence preachers, going on to assert that 'the kingdom of God is not... whole parishes but rather of the worthiest be they never so few'. The bishop, naturally, resented this attack upon the very fabric of the Church of England, and deprived him of the pulpit.

This was an important period for the young man, and it had a lasting effect upon him and, especially, his later health, in mind as well as body. He passed through spiritual torments and anguish as he tried to maintain his high level of spiritual activity while, all the time, developing his arguments, both in public and in private, in the face of much hostility. What he was putting forward was all so new and revolutionary. And what about all those good men – the vast majority of them – the other Puritans, who saw things differently? What of Richard Greenham and the many godly ministers who stayed at Dry Drayton? Was it possible that he, Robert Browne, was the only man in step? Were all the others wrong? How many

perplexing doubts must have flooded the young man's mind. The strain under which he laboured smote him down, and he was compelled to rest for six months, probably suffering from what is commonly called a nervous breakdown. All the same, he distinctly felt that the Lord was leading him and trying him; indeed, that the Lord was preparing him 'to a further and more effectual message'. He wept much over the state of the church and his own lonely position. Where could he find anyone like-minded?

When Browne recovered his health, he went to Middleburg in the Low Countries, probably in 1579-80; perhaps he was influenced by the knowledge that Cartwright, his former Professor, was preaching in a Puritan congregation there. While we cannot be certain, it is most likely that Browne had conversations with the Dutch Anabaptists during his time in Middleburg. His views were moving all the time; from Episcopalianism to Presbyterianism to... to what? It is very likely, also, that the Dutch told him of the large Anabaptist settlement at Norwich, in East Anglia. At that time, there were nearly five thousand Dutch people in Norwich – a huge number for the period; indeed, it was a majority of the population. Besides which, Norwich was the centre of a fervent Puritanism, possibly made even more radical by the influence of the many Anabaptists in the locality. Robert Harrison, a fellow-student of Browne's at Cambridge, was by this time the master of a charity hospital in the city. Harrison had previously renewed his acquaintance with Browne, meeting him at Cambridge when he, Harrison, went there to get the bishop's licence to enable him to preach. Browne had dissuaded him, calling the licence 'trash and pollution'.

Browne now moved to Norwich from the Continent, lodged with his friend, and by powerful arguments won him over to the position he had come to adopt on the Separatist order of a church. Browne, being a very persuasive and dogmatic man, convinced Harrison that 'we are to forsake and deny all ungodliness and wicked fellowship, and to refuse all ungodly communion with wicked persons [for] God will receive none

to communion and covenant with him which as yet are one with the wicked’.

There was only one logical outcome of this kind of reasoning in which the two men were engaged, and they decided to take the momentous step. Accordingly, they formed the first Separatist church in England sometime during 1580-81. It was of the Congregational order. When I say ‘the *first* Separatist church’, it will be realised that this is not strictly true – secret separate churches had been formed in England years before, and the Anabaptists had been forming churches for more than half a century. But the one at Norwich is usually reckoned to be the first Separatist church. On a set day, a small group met together in Norwich, established various points from Scripture, made a covenant and gave their consent to join themselves to the Lord and to one another as a church under elected pastors. They also established principles of discipline and rule among themselves.

Browne maintained that each church should have the offices of pastor, teacher, elders, deacons and widows. He thought that churches should be independent, separate and distinct, but they ought to associate for common ends. He had in mind some kind of arrangement whereby the separate churches could meet to redress matters which concerned them all. It is clear that Browne did not follow the Anabaptists blindly; he did not accept their views on baptism, oath-taking and other matters. Yet it is true to say that this rise of the Separatists marks the decline of the Anabaptists in England – they were so similar in many respects that the one gradually replaced the other, especially after Baptist churches were being formed. Besides opposing Episcopalianism, Browne was decidedly against Presbyterianism on the other flank, saying that if it were to be established then there would be a thousand popes instead of one! Hence the Congregational order of the Norwich church; that is, the church governed itself by its church meeting; it did not submit to any outside rule. It would appear that John Milton, about a century later, must almost certainly have read Browne’s works.

Browne was an effective preacher, attracting a hundred or more in congregations gathered in conventicles and private houses in and around Norwich. He was also a fervent advocate of the despised Congregational system. On hearing that there were people at Bury St Edmunds, in the neighbouring county of Suffolk, who were interested, he went there and for his pains was imprisoned – the first of thirty-two similar sentences. The cells were often so dark he could not see his own hand, while he was kept in close confinement with the vilest of humanity. Because of sore persecution, the Norwich church members were minded to flee, but from prison, Browne, their pastor, staunchly urged them to stand and testify. However, in the end they all ‘were fully persuaded that the Lord did call them out of England’ in order to continue with their religious practices. Hence they emigrated, as a church, to Middleburg in 1581 – showing further evidence of sympathy with the Anabaptists.

On first arriving in Middleburg, the Separatist church from Norwich joined the Puritan congregation already established under Cartwright, but after a while – when Browne was released from prison and arrived – they separated. Browne quarrelled with his former teacher, Cartwright, over the status of the Church of England, which Browne was convinced was not a true church, that it could not be reformed and must be forsaken. Cartwright disagreed. This issue would prove to be a bone of contention between the Separatists and the Puritans for a long time to come. A vehement, excessive correspondence ensued between the two men. Browne, it has to be said, was the offender, pouring torrents of abuse on Cartwright, distorting the Presbyterian’s arguments beyond recognition. Browne suffered another nervous attack, and his letters reflected the instability of his mind at the time.

Regrettably, the Congregational church in Middleburg with Browne as pastor, began to quarrel among themselves, and they debated hotly over many issues – some most unedifying – and the church grew confused. In 1583, the disputes became so bad that Browne was censured by the church, whereupon he resigned and sailed for Scotland accompanied by a few

families. Harrison remained with the church, but after his death in 1594 it ceased to exist.

This period, for all the mistakes and troubles, was not unproductive, however. Browne published three works in these months in Middleburg, and one in particular proved to be of enormous influence and importance. I have already mentioned it – *A Treatise of Reformation without Tarrying for Any*. His writings were greatly feared by the authorities, so much so that in 1583 the aforesaid Elias Thacker and John Coppin were both hanged at Bury St Edmunds, just for distributing the works of Browne!

While in Scotland, Browne even tried to reform the Scottish Presbyterian system, launching attacks on John Knox himself! He was never one to avoid a fight, even against overwhelming odds. He met with no success in this attack but was put into prison for his pains. On his release he eventually returned to England, preaching where he could.

However, the years of struggle, torment, and many grievous imprisonments, by this stage had wrought havoc on his body and mind. There is no doubt that by this time the poor man was not always sane. He had in his earlier days dared to think the unthinkable; and what is more, to do it. Now he did the unthinkable again! He gave up his Separatism, conformed to the Church of England, and in 1591 became a rector in Northamptonshire, where he settled for forty years. But there is some evidence that, in his heart, he never truly conformed. One of his many enemies admitted that Browne never really recanted or altered his opinions. In the end he died tragically and sadly in 1633.

As only to be expected the Anglicans abused him and his followers terribly, Bishop Hall sneering that the Church of England and God matched Separatists with the vilest of humanity. And even the Separatists who followed Browne disowned him for his defection, and scathingly called him an Anglican! He was an apostate! He was no Separatist! Many lies were told about him, and some continue to be repeated.

Yet, in spite of Browne's defection, the seed of Separatism had been sown, and 'Reformation without Tarrying for Any'

became the watchword of this third group of Puritans. Browne denounced those who pleaded that ‘the time has not yet come to build the Lord’s house; they must tarry for the magistrates and for Parliament to do it... Can the Lord’s spiritual government be in no way executed but by the civil sword?’ he demanded. This may not seem a remarkable thing to ask nowadays, nevertheless in the late 16th century these and similar views cost men their lives in England! But the Separatists were convinced and committed men and women. They wanted full reform of the church – back to the New Testament – and they wanted it at once. Not only that. Nothing and nobody would stop them! Not Elizabeth, not all her bishops, nor all the magistrates in England.

The Separatists had feeble beginnings, but their spiritual influence far out-stripped their political power. Their political clout was nil. They never wanted it any in any case. They only desired to be scriptural. Like the New Testament churches, they had no access to the high officials of State; they had no influence at Court; nor did they seek any. For them there was only one king who counted in the church – King Jesus, ‘the Lord Christ’ (Col. 3:24).

Though small their numbers, though tiny and fragile in their beginning, the feeble origins of the early Separatists belied the importance of their contribution to the advance of reform in the church. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to them.

But many, today, have forgotten their Separatist origins. Forgotten or suppressed, which is it? And how does this forgetful – or worse – attitude reveal itself? The early Separatists were fugitives and rebels, treated as the off-scouring of society and the dregs of humanity. They rotted in dungeons; some died there; others were hanged. Who was responsible for it? The Church of England! The State Church, tacitly supported by the Puritans – they persecuted the Separatists. But what do we see these days? Many Separatists fawn on the very establishment which so tormented the saints, their forefathers. Separatism has become respectable, refined and genteel today. Christianity has become ‘sanitised’. Some Separatists, more than a little ashamed of their humble origins,

have even developed a fancy for the trappings of the establishment. Moderators of this and that Free Church like to attend State occasions, officiating here, there and everywhere dressed in all their finery, even alongside Papists.

It is nothing new. In Victorian times, many Separatist meeting-houses were built to look like massive parish churches, to out-do the Church of England, whereas in the preceding years, such meeting house were designedly plain, hidden away in back-alleys and the like. Again, today, in many Separatist services there is a kind of liturgy creeping back, little repeated phrases, set forms and rituals, various unwritten laws of the ‘Medes-and-Persian’ variety. Indeed, in a growing number of cases, a formal liturgy is becoming the norm, and it is not merely ‘creeping back’!

Furthermore, Separatists badger Parliament for its intervention to bolster a crumbling Christianity, they beg for grants, they play at being respectable. Away with it! The early Separatists would not recognise it. They would abhor it.

Browne and his friends died in ignominy. The vast majority of them are unknown today, unrecognised by most, and despised by some. But not, I am sure, by God. All honour to their memory. They have their reward.

Browne, above all, was a man under the authority of Christ in his word. Whatever he saw in Scripture, he would carry it out. It is this, above all, which speaks to me down the centuries. He rebukes me. He encourages me. He challenges me. I hope he has a like effect on you.