Matthew Burden

Let the Earth Rejoice

How a Revolution in Worship Launched a Global Mission Movement

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The Unlikeliest Heroes of All

How Nonconformists Led the Charge

To the historian, there's something curious about the story of the emergence of congregational hymns in the English-speaking world. If one were standing at the end of the seventeenth century and were told that a revolution in worship was soon to emerge in England, transforming and enriching the way Christians worshiped on a global scale, a few likely candidates might stand out.

Although Roman Catholic modes of worship were never quick to change or embrace new styles, they certainly had the furthest global reach, so one might think that they could be the locus for a new movement in Christian worship. This had happened before, with the old Ambrosian hymns in the patristic era and the development of Gregorian chant in the medieval world, and Roman Catholicism had recently benefited from a new richness in cross-cultural diversity by making inroads into the Americas. However, Catholicism's impact on English society had been seriously muted ever since the Reformation, and it would not regain a substantial voice there until the mid-nineteenth century.

Another possible candidate would be the Lutheran church, which already had a long history of congregational hymns by the eighteenth century, so one might expect the energizing spark to come from that quarter and illuminate the Anglophone world. But the Lutherans were

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separated from England by gulfs of language and culture that proved difficult to cross. Even when German-speaking hymn-singing groups emerged in England, their influence was fairly limited.

So one might look to the Anglican church, only recently emerging from the ups and downs of its long experience with the Reformation but possessing transformative potential in its life of liturgical prayer. Anglicans had the strengths of an elegant, beautifully composed prayer book and an insistence that the riches of the daily monastic prayer cycle should be available in every Christian's spiritual life. In the same vein, one might also look to the colonial world, to the forces that were establishing Anglican churches among English settlements on new continents, where the vigor of freshness and cross-cultural interactions might produce something new in the spiritual life of the global church.

But the revolution in worship didn't come from any of these places. In fact, it came from perhaps the least likely candidate of all: a network of tiny, struggling English denominations, just emerging from active persecution and still facing pervasive discrimination from their fellow citizens. They were called Nonconformists (or Dissenters), members of churches that refused to conform to the beliefs and practices of the Anglican state church. Rather than submit to the patterns of worship laid out in the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer*, they formed their own churches instead. Many of these Nonconformist groups still exist today: Congregationalists (then called Independents), Baptists, Presbyterians, Quakers, and a handful of smaller sects. The Methodists would also be added to the Nonconformists, though somewhat later in the story.[1]

English-speaking Protestantism in the eighteenth century was a dynamic and varied set of movements, but in England it was Anglicanism that still held sway. The Church of England was the dominant denomination by a wide margin, exercising the rights of the established parish system throughout the country. In other parts of the

1 See Richey, "Effects of Toleration," 350; Field, "Counting Religion," 700–704, 710.

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British dominions, the picture was a bit more diverse: Presbyterianism reigned in Scotland, and across the ocean in the colonies of New England, it was a dissenting denomination—the Congregationalists—who had seized a role as the dominant form of Christianity there. Adding to this diversity was the fact that there were different streams even within these groups. Cutting across the boundaries of these English denominations were movements defined by their emphases on various principles of piety and practice; among them were the late remnants of the Puritans, high-church and low-church proponents in the established churches, and the nascent evangelical movement.[2]

Within England itself, under the shadow of official state Anglicanism, Nonconformist denominations occupied a precarious role—small and marginalized, yet still present in many communities across the country. Some of their churches elsewhere showed potential for growth (especially in North America, where religious freedom was just beginning to emerge as a hallmark of that society), but in England, the Nonconformists remained partial outcasts in their own towns, and the growth of their churches would never seriously challenge the position of the Anglican state church.

Yet it was this very band of outcasts—and in particular, the Congregationalists and Baptists—who produced a revolution in worship that would transform not only their own churches but would eventually be adopted by the Anglican and Catholic worlds as well. These Nonconformists may have been the unlikeliest candidates of all, yet, in a pattern that has played out many times in the history of God's people, "God has chosen the weak things of this world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27 NIV).

The Emergence of the Nonconformist Churches

To understand the scope of the movements involved, we must first learn a little about where the Nonconformists came from. Their

2 Greaves, "Puritan-Nonconformist Tradition," 449–52; Tapsell, *Later Stuart Church*, 5.

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emergence as a movement has its roots in the English Reformation of the sixteenth century, so that is where our story begins.

When King Henry VIII famously severed the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church because he wanted to annul his marriage, he was unwittingly setting England on a pathway that, at least in some sectors, it had long been prepared to take. Henry's ego was the spark that lit the fuse, but England had seen gradual stirrings of Reformation ideas since well before the Protestant Reformation officially began. England's pre-Reformation roots stretched back two centuries, all the way to John Wycliffe's translation of the Bible in the 1300s and the proto-Protestant preaching of the Lollards that followed.[3]

Several of the most prominent early Reformers, like William Tyndale, were Englishmen active in the Protestant movement well before their country joined the Protestant ranks. Thanks to the new technology of the printing press and the tireless work of Reformation advocates, England was starting to receive Protestant pamphlets and even a few Scripture texts (now available in the people's own language), while Henry VIII—styling himself a champion of Catholicism—initially fought against these forces.[4]

But by the late 1520s, King Henry VIII had switched sides and aligned himself with the Reformation, driven in large part by political motivations. Not only did the break from the Roman Catholic Church allow him to remarry and sustain his hope for a male heir, but it also gave him an opportunity to appropriate an astonishing amount of church property for the crown. Despite the apparent shallowness of his motivations, however, Henry called on the leaders of the English church to shape the English Reformation rather than impose his own whims from the top down. In the clerics' hands, it became something far broader and deeper than mere political reactionism.

3 Shelley, *Church History*, 271–76.

4 See Walker, *History of the Christian Church*, 360–61.

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Clergymen like Thomas Cranmer took the reins of the English Reformation, guiding it forward even as it was tugged by changing royal policies over the subsequent decades. The clergy's vision was to reform the English Church so that it aligned with the New Testament and early Christian heritage in doctrine and with long-revered liturgical practices in worship. This was all bound together by a common set of service prayers based on ancient English liturgies and monastic daily offices, thus bringing forth the linchpin of the English Church, the *Book of Common Prayer*.[5]

This transition, however, was anything but smooth. The vast majority of the English were devoted Catholics before Henry VIII's about-face, and many remained so even afterward. Most of the common people, together with the clergy, found themselves caught in the middle. Of the clergy who were sympathetic to Protestant arguments, many simply saw the need for a restoration of balance, a shift back to the New Testament-oriented themes of the early church and the original Catholic witness. Thus two major parties developed in the reaction against medieval Catholicism: one party affirmed the sacramental and liturgical life of the Catholic Church as it had been handed down through tradition and the episcopal hierarchy (but which still saw dangers and errors in other features of medieval Catholic piety), and another party wanted to overturn the whole system and start again from scratch, doing nothing but what the New Testament specifically commanded Christians to do. Despite their differences, both camps generally agreed on one thing, even among the many who still considered themselves Catholic: that reform was needed in the church.

The pendulum of the English Reformation swung back and forth in the mid-1500s due to a few factors, not least of which was the succession crisis that brought Henry's Catholic daughter, Mary, to the throne, where she enacted a vengeful reign of terror against Protestant

5 Davies, *Worship and Theology*, 20.

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