

Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century

The Didsbury Lectures 2006

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Alan P.F. Sell

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W 8th Ave, Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century
By Sell, Alan P.F.
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ISBN 13: 978-1-62032-422-6
Publication date 7/31/2012
Previously published by Paternoster, 2006



To Jon

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xi
Lecture 1	
Surveying the Landscape	1
Lecture 2	
Doctrinal Peaks	41
Lecture 3	
Ecclesiological Thickets	91
Lecture 4	
Rivers, Rivulets – and Encroaching Desert?	147
Biographical References	195
Bibliography	201
Index of Persons	230
Index of Subjects	236

Preface

I count it a great honour to join the ranks of those who have given the Didsbury Lectures. I thank the former Principal of the Nazarene College, Manchester, the Revd Dr. Herbert McGonigle and the Revd Dr. Kent Brower for their kind invitation to undertake this enjoyable task. I very much look forward to delivering the lectures in October of this year, and to meeting the present Principal, the Revd Dr. David McCulloch, Dr. Brower, and members of the audience.

I have attempted the subject of these lectures not only because the time is ripe for a review of the theological contributions made by Nonconformists during the twentieth century, but also because the tradition of theological scholarship which they represent is not well known in some quarters either at home or abroad. Nothing but good could accrue from a fresh appreciation of their insights on the part of theologians and ecumenists near and far.

I dedicate this volume to our latest grandson, Jon, who will be raised in an environment far removed from that of English Nonconformity, but who may one day turn to these pages for a glimpse of his father's religious roots.

As ever, Karen has supported me in this venture, which, for me, has been not simply one more piece of scholarly research, but an act of pious remembrance.

*Alan P.F. Sell
Milton Keynes
2 March 2006*

Lecture 1

Surveying the Landscape

‘Vote for the man who promises least; he’ll be the least disappointing.’ These words of Bernard Baruch have haunted me ever since I agreed to write a paper on ‘The theological contribution of Protestant Nonconformists in the Twentieth Century’ for the Millennium Conference of the Association of Denominational Historical Societies and Cognate Libraries.¹ The task was to produce some ten thousand words. By the time I had written thirty thousand words, I embarked on a pruning endeavour; I removed twenty thousand words and realistically and modestly added ‘Some soundings’ to my title as given. The honour of giving these Didsbury Lectures has afforded me the opportunity of expanding my text to more than eighty thousand words (including the original ten thousand), though I shall not be able to utter them all in your hearing. Even with this expansion, I cannot fail to disappoint. Almost certainly I shall omit somebody’s favourite theologian, somebody else’s pet doctrinal skirmish. Rigorous selection has been the only way of avoiding the creation of a mere bibliographical list.

I intend no disrespect to other Nonconformists in restricting my attention, passing references apart, to those of the Congregational, Baptist, Presbyterian, Unitarian, Methodist and United Reformed traditions. These were theologically active throughout the twentieth century, and they are more than enough to handle. My omission of theologians who have concentrated upon biblical, moral, pastoral, and liturgical theology implies no lack of interest in those fields, but my focus here is upon doctrinal, systematic, constructive and, to a very limited extent, philosophical theology.² I recognize that these classifications are not

¹ For the papers of this conference see Alan P.F. Sell and Anthony R. Cross, eds., *Protestant Nonconformity in the Twentieth Century*.

² See further, Alan P.F. Sell, *The Philosophy of Religion 1875–1980*; and ‘Friends and Philosophy’, 72–82, 111–122.

unproblematic, for disciplinary boundaries are blurred, and more poly-mathic (or omniscient) theologians tend to respect them less than others. I am relieved of the necessity of plunging into the whirlpool of evangelical pamphlets and magazine articles, not a little of it associated with the polarities represented by devotees of Keswick on the one hand and Martyn Lloyd-Jones and his acolytes on the other, because Keswick has found a scholar of sufficient courage and insight in Ian M. Randall,³ while John Brencher has run the gauntlet with a fair-minded study of Lloyd-Jones which, if it does not revel in 'warts and all', at least draws attention, with good reason, to some disturbingly disfiguring pimples.⁴

Although I am concerned with *Protestant*, not Roman Catholic, Nonconformity, my preference is to think of myself and of the groups about whom I shall speak as Free Churchpeople. By this freedom I understand that liberty under the gospel whereby the saints can order their worship and practise their polity without state interference. The problem is, however, that to others 'Free' in 'Free Church' has a different connotation: in Scotland it refers to Presbyterians who, though apart from the national Church, uphold the principle of a national church possessing spiritual independence; in the United States it is used as an umbrella term covering a diversity of groups, but excluding mainline denominations whose sister churches in England are, in the English sense, Free Churches. Where Wales is concerned both terms, 'Nonconformist' and 'Free Church', denote those who continue in the non-Anglican Protestant traditions, notwithstanding that the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Wales, which took effect in 1920, gives the terms a somewhat anachronistic flavour.

I am also aware of the fact that some Methodists sit uneasily under the umbrella term 'Nonconformist'. 'It cannot be said too plainly, or too often,' declared Rupert Davies, 'that Methodists are not Dissenters, or even Nonconformists';⁵ and certainly it is true that John

³ See Ian M. Randall, *Evangelical Experiences: A Study in the Spirituality of English Evangelicalism 1918–1939*. To this may be added his *Educating Evangelicalism: The Origins, Development and Impact of London Bible College*, which, far from being an alumni brochure, is a careful study showing the bearing of disparate inner-evangelical tendencies and tensions upon a particular institution. For a brief account of 'The Keswick tradition' see David Bebbington's Didsbury Lectures, *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England*, Lecture 4.

⁴ J. Brencher, *Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) and Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism*.

⁵ R.E. Davies, *Methodists and Unity*, 23.

Wesley had no desire to break from the Church of England, the friction some of his actions caused notwithstanding, and that he intended his people to be a society within the established Church. However, Davies proceeds to qualify his assertion by claiming that 'Methodism did more than any other denomination to give meaning to the phrase "the nonconformist conscience"',⁶ and he grants that a number of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Methodist strands which later flowed into present-day Methodism, 'were much more "nonconformist" and "dissenting" than the Wesleyan Methodist Church ever was.'⁷ Dr. Henry Rack goes further with respect to the Wesleyan Church: 'the Wesleyanism of 1900,' he writes, 'was much more obviously a part of the nonconformist world and antagonistic to Anglicanism than it had been in 1800. It was, in short, less Wesleyan.'⁸ It would seem, therefore, that in terms of their attitudes, Methodists may be reluctant, or partial, or committed Nonconformists. But there is no denying that they, no less than the Roman Catholics in England, are technically Nonconformists. I therefore judge that it would be more difficult to explain their exclusion from these lectures than to defend their inclusion.

Having completed my work, I am faintly embarrassed to find that so many of my references are to those of the Congregational Way. As one who resumed contact with that tradition out of conviction, I insist that this does not indicate partisanship. Having reviewed as much of the twentieth-century Nonconformist theological *corpus* as possible, it really does appear that the Congregationalists made the largest contribution to the fields with which I am concerned. Statistically, this is not surprising given that for much of the twentieth century they were second only to the totality of Methodists in size, and considerably more numerous than the Unitarians and the English Presbyterians. But it also appears that whereas the Methodists spawned a number of church historians and not a few biblical scholars, and the Baptists all but cornered the market in Old Testament studies in the middle decades of the twentieth century, the Congregationalists, though not lacking biblical scholars and historians, were more prone than other Nonconformists to produce theologians. This may have something to do with the fact that at the beginning of the twentieth century their prominent theological teachers included A.M. Fairbairn and Robert Mackintosh, who received their theological

⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁸ H.D. Rack, 'Wesleyanism and "the world" in the later nineteenth century', 36.

education in Scotland where the tradition of systematic, dogmatic and apologetic theology was strong, and P.T. Forsyth and A.E. Garvie, who read Arts at Aberdeen and Glasgow respectively, and the latter of whom studied under Fairbairn in Oxford. All of these Scots thoroughly identified themselves with the English Nonconformity into which they came and, in turn, they trained a number of English and Welsh Congregational theological college principals and professors including the theologians W.B. Selbie, Robert Franks, Thomas Rees, D. Miall Edwards, J.D. Vernon Lewis, Sydney Cave, H.F. Lovell Cocks, and George Phillips.⁹

While I shall concentrate upon published works, it should not be forgotten that most theologizing has been done in quite other ways. When A.J. Grieve prepared a bibliography of Congregational theology he inserted the following footnote, which applies to other denominations as well:

While one is naturally expected and obliged to keep to literary contributions, it is imperative to remember that these, so far from exhausting the subject, are probably but a small part of it. The teachers in our Academies and Colleges have not always reduced their instruction to the printed page;¹⁰ our preachers for 350 years have delivered more sermons than they have published; and perhaps as effective contributions

⁹ There was a long-standing link between Scotland and Old Dissent. Excluded from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century divines received some of their theological education in Scotland. Some of these, together with others – the Independent Philip Doddridge, the Baptist John Gill and the Presbyterian Arian John Taylor among them – were awarded the degree of Doctor of Divinity by Scottish universities. See further, Alan P.F. Sell, *Philosophy, Dissent and Nonconformity 1689–1920*. We should also note that a number of Nonconformist theologians studied abroad, among them Fairbairn, Mackintosh and Garvie; the Baptists Arthur Dakin and Leonard G. Champion in Germany, and W. Morris S. West in Switzerland; the Congregationalist/United Reformed John Heywood-Thomas, and the Welsh Presbyterian Stephen N. Williams in the United States.

¹⁰ In this category should be placed the greatly respected and fondly remembered George Phillips of Lancashire Independent College. A few fugitive articles, from one of which I shall make a point of quoting in due course, may be tracked down by the diligent; but his self-effacing nature and his characteristic mode of expression are epitomized in his reply to my youthful query concerning his literary output. In deep, fruity, tones he cheerfully expostulated: 'Bless my soul, Alan! Who on earth would wish to read anything I might write?'

to theology as any, if theology is a knowledge of God, have been those made one to another by members of the household of faith, the fellowship of the saints, in one generation after another.¹¹

To all of which, we shall not be surprised to discover, the Welsh Presbyterian J. Young Evans added hymns: 'Modern Welsh theology is no less the product of Welsh hymnody than of catechisms and sermons . . .'¹²

I

What was the general state of theology in the declining years of the nineteenth century? It is possible to detect a spirit of hopefulness among commentators of the period. With reference to the assimilation of modern biblical criticism, for example, Thomas Lewis, in the year in which he became Principal of Memorial [Congregational] College, Brecon, declared, 'The breeze of Biblical Criticism only blows away the chaff. The grain remains.'¹³ In 1929, as he looked back over the previous half century, A.E. Garvie testified,

Brought up as I had been in strict Presbyterian Calvinistic orthodoxy, including the belief in verbal inspiration, it can be understood how great was the shock, and how much need there was for adjustment between the new view and the old. . . . [W]hatever modification of views about the Bible itself the subsequent study of this progressive Biblical scholarship may have involved, my evangelicalism remained unshaken; and . . . it remains unshaken . . .¹⁴

Again, J.D. Vernon Lewis of the Congregational Memorial College, Brecon, who succeeded D. Miall Edwards as Professor of Christian Doctrine and Ethics, and was subsequently Professor of Old Testament and, for two years, Principal, wrote on biblical and devotional themes, but published no purely theological work. Yet he did as much as any to introduce Barth to Wales.

¹¹ A.J. Grieve, 'Congregationalism's contribution to theology. Some material for a bibliography', 359 n. 1.

¹² J. Young Evans, 'The new theology in Wales', 30.

¹³ Thomas Lewis, 'Higher Criticism and Welsh preaching', 25. See further on the rise and reception of modern Biblical criticism, Willis B. Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century*; Alan P.F. Sell, *Theology in Turmoil: The Roots, Course and Significance of the Conservative-Liberal Debate in Modern Theology*, ch. 2.

¹⁴ A.E. Garvie, 'Fifty years' retrospect', 19.

By 1932 the Baptist T.R. Glover felt entitled to be jubilantly bullish: 'Today if you want a real old obscurantist college, you have to found one.'¹⁵ In achieving this result, the part played by such believing biblical scholars as the Primitive Methodist A.S. Peake and the Congregationalist W.H. Bennett, should not be under-estimated. Similarly, there was a widespread feeling that the horror with which some had greeted the theory of evolution had by now been dissipated by the realization that, as the Unitarian James Martineau put it, 'neither of these two modern discoveries, namely, the immense extension of the universe in space, and its unlimited development in time has any effect on the theistic faith, except to glorify it.'¹⁶ In a word, evolution came to be understood by most theologians not as an account of origins, but of the method by which God went to work.¹⁷

In some Congregational and Baptist circles there was a certain exhilaration deriving from the loosening of the fetters of a Calvinism deemed far too restrictive.¹⁸ At first the relief was tempered, as in such writers as the Congregationalists E.R. Conder and R.W. Dale. Speaking for himself, Conder confessed to the Congregational Union Assembly of 1873 that 'Few, perhaps, inhaled with more satisfaction the freer air before whose breath a store of dry old phrases vanished like withered leaves, and the sacred Assembly's Catechism itself melted from off our children's minds like snow in spring time.' But while much had been gained, Conder felt it necessary to utter a cautionary word:

Grant that our forefathers were too apt to substitute anatomical preparations of truth for its living presence. They loved to dangle before you the skeleton of the Gospel till all its joints rattled, when what you needed was the tone of her comforting voice, a Divine smile on her countenance, the warm grasp of her helping hand. But let us not forget that the anatomist's knife lays bare nothing but what is essential to life, health, and beauty. And the higher the life, the more complex the system in which it is embodied. Creatures which can be cut to bits or turned inside out, and live on all the same, are of a very low type. To the highest, the loss of a single vertebra would be death. The 'plan of salvation' is not the

¹⁵ Quoted by E.J. Poole-Connor, *Evangelicalism in England*, 251.

¹⁶ James Martineau, *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, 17.

¹⁷ For biblical criticism and evolutionary thought see further Alan P.F. Sell, *Theology in Turmoil*, chs. 2, 3.

¹⁸ For this story as it concerns Congregationalism, see Alan P.F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel: Theological Themes and Thinkers 1550–2000*, ch. 5.

‘Glad Tidings’; the philosophy of religion is not religion; the most logical scheme of doctrine which Theology will ever frame will not take the place of the living word, by which souls are born again, and purified in obeying the truth. No! But nevertheless, a religious life strong in feeling and action, but intellectually feeble; a faith which is firm and simple as Trust, but as Belief is unintelligent, hazy, unable to distinguish doctrine from doctrine or truth from error – these are not worthy of the disciples of [Christ] . . . Nor is it in such characteristics that we can trace the features of the Church of the Future.¹⁹

Conder went on to point out that

The old Theology was not overthrown by argument. Calvinism is an iron ring of logic, which the hammer has not yet been forged that can break. It was burst asunder by the expansive force of love. The breaking point of the strain was the restriction it laid on an honest offer of salvation to all . . . [Possibly, Calvinists] were taking hold of the wrong end of the great problem of human salvation, in beginning with the eternal decrees of God, and the eternal covenant between the Father and the Son, instead of busying themselves with the end put into their hands by their Saviour’s command – ‘Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature.’²⁰

John Angell James and R.W. Dale between them occupied the pulpit at Carrs Lane Congregational Church for most of the nineteenth century. The former served from 1805 until his death in 1859; the latter came as James’s assistant in 1853, and continued until his death in 1895. In 1877 Dale recorded his opinion that many Congregationalists, James among them, thought that they were Calvinists:

[James] said to me once – raising his arm and clenching his hand as he said it – ‘I hold the doctrines of Calvinism with a firm grasp!’

‘But,’ said I, ‘you never preach about them.’

‘Well,’ he replied – with the *naïveté* which was one of the chief charms of his character – ‘you know that there is not much about them in the Bible.’²¹

¹⁹ E.R. Conder, ‘The decay of theology’, 70–71.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

²¹ R.W. Dale, ‘On some present aspects of theological thought among Congregationalists’, 5.

Construing Calvinism (tendentiously) as wedded to determinist philosophy,²² whereas in fact it is a religious doctrine arising from gratitude at the way one has been divinely called and led, Dale argued that once the freedom of the will had been asserted, Calvinism could not but fall. At the same time he noted, and regretted, the fact that 'our faith has lost a certain grandeur, solemnity, and majesty, which belonged to the Augustinian and Calvinistic theology . . . If we could have the Calvinistic spirit, without the Calvinistic creed, it would be the regeneration of the Church and the salvation of the world.'²³ He is concerned that God's authority no longer impresses as it should, and that it is so hard 'to make men feel – whatever they may say – that sin is an awful offence, because committed against Him.'²⁴ Above all, he repudiates the sentimentality which surrounds the idea of 'an easy, good-natured God.'²⁵

The personal turmoil which some who had been nurtured in scholastic Calvinism endured is epitomized by Robert Mackintosh, who regarded himself as a 'refugee' from the Free Church of Scotland, who 'fled to Congregationalism as a means of escape from outworn dogmas and creeds; but I resolved with God's help to be loyal still – or to be more loyal than ever – to the central faith of the Gospel . . .'²⁶

In 1901 W.F. Adeney, Principal of Lancashire Independent College and Mackintosh's colleague, felt able to report that 'the Nonconformists have largely abandoned Calvinism, the Congregationalists almost entirely, the Baptists still clinging to some remnants of the system under the spell of Mr. Spurgeon.'²⁷ He thinks it to the credit of Calvin's 'merciless intellect' that 'Moderate Calvinism' has failed. P. T. Forsyth, likewise, was not slow to compose his obituary of Calvinistic scholasticism, and he did it, characteristically, in a too disjunctive way.

The old orthodoxy laid on men's believing power more than it could carry. That orthodoxy, that Protestant scholasticism, was in its way

²² See further Alan P.F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, 325–38.

²³ R.W. Dale, 'On some present aspects of theological thought among Congregationalists,' 6, 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶ Robert Mackintosh, 'The genius of Congregationalism', 105. For Mackintosh see further Alan P.F. Sell, *Robert Mackintosh: Theologian of Integrity*.

²⁷ Walter F. Adeney, *A Century's Progress in Religious Life and Thought*, 116.

thorough. . . . It moved altogether if it moved at all. It attracted all-or-nothing spirits, whose tendency was to move like a prairie fire, covering the whole area but spreading only in one plane. It was comprehensive and acute rather than profound and subtle. . . . It had no atmosphere, no flexibility. And, great as it could be,²⁸ it came at last to be more vast than great. It brought to men more to carry than power to carry it. And like its predecessor, the medieval scholasticism, it was disintegrated by its own subtlety; it crumbled through its own acuteness; it died of its own insatiable dialectic; and fell of its own thin and ambitious imperialism.²⁹

If Forsyth sees scholastic Calvinism collapsing under its own weight, as it were, Adeney attributes its demise to the new humanitarian temper of the age flowing down from Rousseau and the French Revolution.³⁰ In contrast to this, Calvinism, 'While prostrating itself before the awful Majesty of God . . . had no pity for man'³¹ a statement, surely, which requires some qualification. In general, Adeney continues, Calvinism as well as feudalism went out with the cry, 'Liberty, equality, fraternity,' while in Scotland the poetry of Robert Burns gave it an added push, as did the theological writings of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen and John McLeod Campbell. Erskine 'broke the spell of Calvinism' by 'dwelling on the spiritual nature of redemption as a restoration to God and the true life of the soul, rather than mere deliverance from punishment.'³² With the contributions of F.D. Maurice, Robertson of Brighton, the Congregationalist Baldwin Brown and others, the doctrine of God's Fatherhood has been made central in theology, displacing that of his sovereignty. Utterly repudiated is any idea that God's sovereignty is independent of morality, as if he were 'a sort of Sultan acting with pure caprice in choosing one for everlasting bliss, and relegating another to everlasting torment, on the Turk's plea that he "has a right to do as he will with his own."³³

²⁸ Forsyth did, after all, regard Thomas Goodwin as 'the apostle and high priest of our confession'. See his *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, 118.

²⁹ P.T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 84–85.

³⁰ My own preferred option is to think of the elevation of conscience and the right of private judgment flowing down from the Enlightenment as being that which prompted a much needed moral critique of *some expressions of* Calvinism. See Alan P.F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, ch. 3.

³¹ W.F. Adeney, *A Century's Progress in Religious Life and Thought*, 122.

³² *Ibid.*, 125.

³³ *Ibid.*, 130.

In the declining years of the nineteenth century few did more to establish the idea of God's fatherhood than the Methodist John Scott Lidgett. In his view this development amounted to nothing less than *The Victorian Transformation of Theology* – the title of his book of 1934; and his own major endorsement of the change was his work of 1902, *The Fatherhood of God in Christian Truth and Life*. The thesis of the latter is that 'on the one hand, the Fatherhood of God towards [Jesus Christ] is unique; and, on the other, the Fatherhood of God towards all men is determined in various ways by their relationship to Christ.'³⁴ Scott Lidgett's contemporary, the Unitarian scholar and Principal of Manchester College, Oxford, James Drummond, was among many others who elevated the concept of the divine Fatherhood:

The doctrine of the fatherly character of God lies at the centre of the Christian revelation. Around this the other great doctrines of Christianity cluster, and from it they draw their vitality. Clearly to apprehend this doctrine is to hold the master-key which unlocks the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, and admits the worshipper to the richest treasures of the Spirit. To explain it away, or to see it obscurely, or to thrust it into a subordinate position, is to miss the guiding light and vivifying power of our religion.³⁵

Sailing still closer to the Trinitarian wind – at least terminologically – Drummond elsewhere declared that 'We can know the Father only through the spirit of the Son dwelling in our hearts by faith.'³⁶ Earlier still, with reference to 'the blessedness of a Father's presence,' Drummond declared that 'Not only through creation and through the voice of the Spirit in our conscience, but also through his Son God will still reveal himself to those who wait for his salvation . . .'³⁷

Optimistic though many felt in the closing quarter of the nineteenth century, there were some who expressed grave disquiet –

³⁴ J.S. Lidgett, *The Fatherhood of God*, 2.

³⁵ J. Drummond, unreferenced quotation in the leaflet *Drummond* (Eminent Unitarian Teachers. 15), (London: The Lindsey Press, n.d.), 3 (but unpaginated); cf. his Hibbert Lectures, *Via, Veritas, Vita: Lectures on 'Christianity in its most simple and intelligible form'*, 170: 'the fundamental and characteristic idea of Christianity on [the doctrine of God] is that God is our Father.'

³⁶ Idem, *Some Thoughts on Christology*, London: Philip Green, 1902, 30.

³⁷ Idem, *Sermons on Christian Faith and Life*, London: Longmans, Green, 1879, 113–114.

especially concerning the state of systematic theology as such. In his address of 1873 Conder asked, 'is it not true that whatever place systematic Theology may maintain in the studies of our pastors, it has been for many years in steady course of disappearance from our pulpits; and that the number has been continually increasing among our hearers who account this disappearance a blessed riddance?'³⁸ Again, 'We have iconoclasts in plenty, but where are our architects? Good and solid work is being done in Bible interpretation . . .; but where are the Theologians at whose feet teachers of others will sit thirty years hence?'³⁹

Twenty years on, in an address to the first meeting of the International Congregational Council, D.W. Simon, Principal of the Scottish Congregational College, referred ruefully to 'prominent ministers' who 'refer in tones of mock humility to their ignorance of Systematic Theology, or earn cheap applause by denouncing dogma and contrasting it with life;' and to 'leading laymen' who exclaim, 'We want practical preaching, not doctrine.' He noted that during the past 35 years, British Congregationalists had published only one systematic theology; that during the past 25 years only about 50 out of 600 Congregational publications were 'scientifically theological; and that out of upwards of 450 discourses by Congregational ministers printed during the last five years or thereabouts in *The Christian World Pulpit*, scarcely 30 were properly doctrinal.'⁴⁰

In the year of Simon's lament, James Drummond sought reasons for the lack of interest in theology. He suggests that the exaggerated importance attached to it in the past is one cause of its decline. Another is that theology by itself is seen to be incapable of producing

³⁸ E.R. Conder, 'The decay of theology', 68.

³⁹ Ibid., 76. One hundred and twenty years on I found myself making the same point in my Aberystwyth Inaugural Lecture. See Alan P.F. Sell, *Testimony and Tradition: Studies in Reformed and Dissenting Thought*, 10. I return to the point in Lecture 4 below.

⁴⁰ D.W. Simon, 'The present direction of theological thought in the Congregational churches of Great Britain', 78. I suspect that part of the explanation for the dearth of systematics is that those theologians most capable of producing it were devoting themselves to apologetic tasks in relation to biblical criticism and evolutionary thought, and to such 'isms' as materialism, naturalism, positivism and neo-Hegelian immanentism – all of them in various ways deemed to be enemies at the gates. Most of the Nonconformist traditions were busy with apologetics in the second half of the nineteenth century. See further Alan P.F. Sell, *Philosophy, Dissent and Nonconformity*, ch. 5.

the religious life: 'The keenest theologian is not always the best Christian . . .'⁴¹ Again, the fact of theology-inspired persecution has alienated the sympathies of many, and interest has been transferred to other matters, compared with which theological controversies 'present to us only the dismal barrenness of extinct volcanoes.'⁴² Finally, new knowledge is undermining old theological foundations. In the light of all this some say, let us forsake theology and settle for religion. But, cautions Drummond, 'Religion always involves some kind of belief, and this belief is logically prior to the feeling of love or devotion which is associated with it.'⁴³ Thus, for example, Schleiermacher's positing of the feeling of absolute dependence as the ground of religion presupposes belief in that on which one depends. This is by no means to say that religion is founded upon dogma, for dogma is ratified and imposed by a constituted authority. Doctrines are formal and exact statements of what is believed and 'Theology is a system of doctrines, arranged in their due connection and subordination, and established by rational proof.'⁴⁴ Although religion cannot dispense with doctrine, for doctrines are accounts of what is believed, it can survive the fall of particular theologies. Drummond therefore feels able to end on a hopeful note.

The final result of this present upheaval of thought will be, I cannot doubt, a fresh outpouring of the Spirit, not in signs and wonders, but in faith and love, and another onward step towards the realisation of the kingdom of God upon earth, and the establishment of that human brotherhood which Christianity has proclaimed, and Christendom denied. Well may we bear the temporary strife and anguish, if at the end we are to see the heralds of peace bringing glad tidings to the world.'⁴⁵

Conder, Simon and Drummond could not have known that they were on the verge of a relative explosion of Nonconformist theology; for there was more Nonconformist activity in this field during the first 20 years of the twentieth century than at any period since that of the Puritans. In the three following lectures I shall adduce evidence to support this contention, but first it will be useful to

⁴¹ J. Drummond, 'Religion and theology', 9.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

view the Nonconformist theological landscape of the century as a whole.

II

Our brief glimpse of the nineteenth-century theological hinterland has sufficed to remind us that theology never arises from a vacuum. There is always a historical, intellectual and ecclesial context. Sometimes the events of history provide the stimulus to theological reflection; sometimes there is the need to come to terms with apparently or actually alien thought forms; sometimes there are doctrinal squabbles within or between the churches. There may be theologians who so live in the past that they wish only to reproduce Augustine, Luther, Calvin or whomsoever it may be; but close scrutiny of their work always reveals that they do not, because they cannot, exactly share the presuppositions of their chosen mentors; and to the extent that they embrace theological restorationism they may be denying the prompting of that very Holy Spirit in whom they otherwise profess to believe. None of which is to say that theology must be 'instant' in the sense that we have to re-invent it each waking morning. We are, inescapably, heirs of a tradition, and the balance between anchorage in the Gospel and openness to the times must ever be struck – always remembering that we can hear the gospel only in our time.⁴⁶

The twentieth century provided Nonconformist theologians with both inner-family and external stimuli to theological endeavour. As to the former, in 1907 R.J. Campbell, minister of London's City Temple, caused a fluttering in Congregational dovecotes, and ripples elsewhere, with the publication of his book, *The New Theology* (how risky the terms 'new' and even 'recent' are in book titles). Repudiating both bibliolatry and ecclesiolatry, Campbell understands his New Theology to represent 'an untrammelled return to the Christian sources in the light of modern thought. But since its starting-point is a re-emphasis of the Christian belief in the Divine immanence in the universe and in mankind,'⁴⁷ modern thought – especially in its post-Hegelian immanentist form – seems to be the controlling factor. By 'God' Campbell means 'the one reality I cannot get away from, for whatever else it may be, it is myself.'⁴⁸ In a variety of other ways he

⁴⁶ See further, Alan P.F. Sell, *Testimony and Tradition*, ch. 1.

⁴⁷ R.J. Campbell, *The New Theology*, 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

blurs the Creator-creature distinction which is so prominent in 'the Christian sources' and, notwithstanding the tradition that Jesus Christ is our Saviour from sin, he declares that Jesus 'came to show us what we potentially are.'⁴⁹ Indeed, when his spirit becomes ours, 'we, like Him, become saviours of the race.'⁵⁰ All of this is laid against the background of God's Fatherhood: 'God is not a fiend, but a Father . . . Why should we be required to be saved from Him?'⁵¹ I had the impression that according to Christian tradition, it was sin from which we needed to be saved.

Many took up their pens against Campbell – Bishop Charles Gore among them.⁵² From within the ranks of Congregationalism C.H. Vine gathered a collection of essays under the title *The Old Faith and the New Theology* (1907). Among the theologians who contributed papers were W.F. Adeney, D.W. Simon, R. Vaughan Pryce, and P.T. Forsyth, Principal of Hackney College. Of these the last, himself an erstwhile theological liberal, is the most pungent. He argues that the concept of immanence, on which the New Theology turns, is an inheritance from Greek and pagan thought, and that it has little to do with evangelical Christianity: it is monistic and evolutionary, and 'It does not go to the depths. It speculates about a Christ made flesh, but it never gauges the true seat of Incarnation – a Christ made sin. It is not a theology of Incarnation.'⁵³ In the same year the Scottish Congregationalist W.L. Walker, who had sojourned among the Unitarians between 1886 and 1893, published *What about the New Theology?* This temperate, judicious, work ran to two editions in 1907, and contained some incisive criticisms. Opinion in Wales, as represented by T. Charles Williams of Menai Bridge and J. Young Evans, was mutually contradictory. The former, explaining that Wales was intensely theological and tolerant, agrees with one in 'high authority'

⁴⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 174.

⁵¹ Ibid., 175. See also Campbell's *New Theology Sermons*. After returning to the Church of England, whence he had originally come, Campbell became Canon and Canon-Teacher of Chichester. In that capacity he published *Christian Faith in Modern Light*, a book which in places is astonishingly weak in argument – for example, on p. 35.

⁵² See C. Gore, *The Old Religion and the New Theology*. For more on the intellectual context see Alan P.F. Sell, *Theology in Turmoil*, ch. 1; idem, *Philosophical Idealism and Christian Belief*, chs. 1, 2; and the Methodist Frederick W. Platt, *Immanence and Christian Thought: Implications and Questions*.

⁵³ P.T. Forsyth, 'Immanence and Incarnation', 48.