

“REFORMATION WITHOUT TARRYING FOR ANY”



Of all the Puritan preachers in Tudor Norwich it is Browne whose name has found its way into countless books on church history and even into the writings of Shakespeare. Having said this, few readers probably realise that he had any connection with our city and even fewer will have read his revolutionary book, the title of which is printed above.⁸³

The Rev. Robert Browne was a very volatile character, born around 1550 into a wealthy land owning family in Rutland and related to Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth's chief minister. He was educated at Cambridge where he became friendly with John Harrison a Norfolk man probably from Aylsham. Early in 1580, when Harrison became master of the Great Hospital in Bishopgate, Browne arrived in Norwich. In addition to his friendship with Harrison he was probably attracted by what he had heard of the opportunities for Puritan preachers.

The two men spent many hours together in the master's parlour discussing the Reformation and especially church government. Both men were of the opinion that a minister should consult his congregation about the management of church activities and forms of service. Later that year they decided to implement their ideas at St. Helen's, the hospital chapel, and thus became one of the growing number of separatist congregations around the land. They were now to all intents and purposes functioning quite independently of the national church, all matters of doctrine and practice being decided by Browne and Harrison in consultation with their congregation. However, the big difference between Browne and all the other separatists was that in one sense he had not separated, since he was functioning publicly, in a parish church setting.

Such a highly illegal situation could not last for long and by 1581 both men, together with many of their congregation, were exiles in Holland. Browne had been travelling around the region encouraging other little gatherings of like-minded people and was arrested whilst attempting to establish a separatist congregation in Great Yarmouth. Harrison then led their congregation across the sea to Middleburg and Browne joined them on his release from prison. This was the first of 32 imprisonments he was to experience! It was whilst they were in Holland that Browne published 'Reformation Without Tarrying for Any', the contents of which must have been formulated during his time in Norwich.

In his book Browne presents the case for church independency. If men in government, or holding office as magistrates, are Christians then they should be members of churches and hence under the authority of the church leadership, so how can they have authority over their church leaders to impose doctrine and conduct on them. If such men are not Christians then they should not be in the churches nor have any authority over them. This was very radical stuff, since Browne was suggesting that some men in secular authority might not even be Christians. He

stopped short of saying that the monarch should not exercise any authority over the Church, but the implication was surely there. The book became notorious. It was widely read and discussed throughout English speaking circles at home and abroad and there were incidents of Browne's followers being executed for distributing it. Browne soon returned from Holland and went to Scotland for a while before recanting and submitting to the Church of England and the episcopal system. Harrison died in Middleburg in 1585 and some of the congregation returned to England.

Browne's ideas found a ready response in the hearts of many men and women, with various clandestine attempts to set up churches according to these principles. However, most of those who sympathised with him were rather more cautious and tried to function more discreetly. One separatist congregation had been meeting at the Plumber's Hall in the City of London as early as 1567 when Browne was still a student at Cambridge, and the Steelyard, the great warehouse of the Hanseatic League, standing where Cannon Street Station stands today, was often used by clandestine congregations as a secret venue.

In 1586 a separatist church known as The Ancient Church was meeting near to St. Paul's in London. John Greenwood, a Puritan clergyman who had been deprived of his living in Norfolk, and Henry Barrow were the leaders. We know that some of Browne's followers found their way to this church. Greenwood and Barrow were to spend long periods in the appalling conditions of the Fleet and Clink prisons, and in 1596 both men were hung. At this point the Ancient Church relocated to Amsterdam and it is recorded that people from 29 English counties, including Norfolk, passed through this church during the next forty years.

Perhaps it is worthwhile just to emphasise once more that most of these men saw their separation as a temporary expedient. They were awaiting the day when the Anglican Church would be purified according to their reformist understanding and they could return to a national church that would impose their principles onto the entire nation. For the vast majority of people in Tudor England there was no concept of freedom of religion or of a pluralistic society. Religion was not just about salvation and worship but was also the means by which the whole of society should be held together and controlled. Another hundred years were to pass before circumstances made total separation inevitable and the Church was able to return to its New Testament roots. This Brownist movement was the beginning of our Independent Church tradition, developing into the Independent or Congregational Church. Although most have now merged with the Presbyterians to form the United Reformed Church we still find Congregational Churches today, such as the Old Meeting House in Colegate. The movement further developed to produce the Baptists and all the various free churches, house churches and Christian fellowships worldwide. Such forms of church structure take us back through the confusion of Christendom to the simplicity of the original church, with its separation from the machinery of the state, allowing every citizen to follow their own conscience and make their own response to God. Browne and Harrison were considered to be heretics in their own time but today probably half of all the Christians throughout the world function within some such framework, and it constitutes the fastest growing section of the Christian community worldwide.

Having said this we must not get silly about Browne and see him as a super hero. The sad truth is that he was a quite unpleasant character, falling out with everyone including Harrison, and trying to control every situation in spite of his seemingly democratic approach. After a few years spent as a schoolmaster he went back into the Anglican ministry but was subsequently fined for non-attendance, so presumably he had become a Separatist once again. The last heard of him was in the Bedford area around 1630 when he was arrested after a drunken brawl with a watchman and died in prison soon afterwards. We might wonder how a man involved in such revolutionary activities could have survived, since many others who did similar things were imprisoned and sometimes lost their lives. As we mentioned above, Browne was related to Lord Burghley, who we saw earlier coming to the aid of reformers, and it was Burghley who rescued him on more than one occasion. Several of Browne's descendants were later to be found amongst the early Puritan settlers in New England.

Browne's influence was obviously very strong in our region and in 1584 a group of Norfolk clergymen wrote to the government asking for help. Whitgift, the Arch-bishop of Canterbury, was pressing them to tone down their Puritanism and they were concerned in case a less reformist stance would result in members of their congregations moving off to other more strongly Puritan churches. "We have struggled to keep our church members from Brownism with great difficulty", they wrote. So wide was Browne's influence that these early Congregationalists or Dissenters were referred to as Brownists⁸⁵. We read of some ministers with independent leanings objecting to being labelled in this way, saying, "We are followers of the Bible not Browne". Generally speaking this was an underground or fringe movement, facing persecution from the established church and government and not emerging as a major player in religious matters for another half century. An interesting sidelight is found in Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night*, Act III Scene II, where Sir Andrew Aguecheek, having been told that he will need to adopt either valour or politics to win his lady love, replies that he will have to use valour because he hates politics. "I'd had as lief be a Brownist as a politician", he says. The play was written within twenty years of Browne setting up the church in Norwich and yet the playwright could be confident that the audience for a popular entertainment would know what a Brownist was. They might not have known of any connection with Norwich, Shakespeare himself might not have known that, but they were all able to share the joke.

Notes:

⁸³ The collected writings of Browne and Harrison (ed. Peel and Carlson) can be found in Norwich Cathedral Library.

⁸⁵ It was a few years ago, after a tour of the Great Hospital during which the guide said that she had never realised that the early Separatists were popularly known as Brownists, that I resolved to write this book.