

# 6 The development of faith in England after the Reformation

The Protestant reformers in Germany developed their theology from a re-examination of the Bible and came up with five fundamental principles with regard to salvation – that it was by faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone, according to Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone. Some felt that the reformation of the English church did not go far enough and formed their own dissenting churches of which Guildford had early examples. Others emigrated, but the remnant of the Reformation provided the seedbed for the English revival in the 18th century which had wide repercussions on society.

## Beliefs crucial to Protestantism

Martin Luther's principal objection, when he wrote to the Archbishop in October 1517, was to the sale of indulgences. These were supposed to remit time in purgatory after death and the money from the sale went to build St Peter's Basilica in Rome. However, when he looked at church teaching he found many doctrines that simply could not be justified by anything written in the Bible. The Reformers reduced the essence of belief to five phrases which summed up the essential teachings. These were:

**In Christ alone** – as our saviour and mediator, Christ has accomplished the necessary work for our salvation completely on the cross. Nothing else is needful, no-one else, especially no priest, can contribute anything. **By grace alone** – we are all sinners, who cannot contribute anything to our salvation. Our salvation is accomplished by the sovereign unmerited favour of God, who freely chooses to save sinners. **Through faith alone** – receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness is the only means by which we can receive justification, that is right standing before God. No works can accomplish anything towards our salvation. **By Scripture alone** – the Scriptures are our supreme authority. They contain, and are sufficiently clear in teaching, all things necessary for salvation and the life of faith. **To the glory of God alone** – God alone is due all glory for salvation as it was appointed by him, accomplished by him and ultimately has his glory as its goal.



*John Owen, by John Greenhill. Although this shows him in austere Puritan dress he was usually a snappy dresser around town. Commons.wikimedia.org*

## The Puritans and dissenting churches

Some Protestants felt that the changes in the Church of England after the Reformation did not go far enough to eliminate unbiblical practice. Called Puritans in mockery, they took the name as a badge of honour, and in 1563 they petitioned the Queen and Parliament to abolish rituals and traditions which they identified as unbiblical. Both Elizabeth and the church were unsympathetic and some ministers were suspended when they refused to affirm that the prayer book was compatible with biblical teaching. Nonetheless, some Puritans were popular preachers and held high office. John Owen, probably the greatest English theologian of the time, was appointed Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University. Crowds numbering thousands flocked to hear him preaching and he was chosen to preach to Parliament on the day after Charles was executed, which he managed to do without mentioning the event!

After the restoration of the monarchy there was a reaction to the perceived excesses of the Commonwealth under Cromwell, when all sorts of sects flourished, and a renewed emphasis on church order. Adherence to the 1662 Prayer Book was enforced by law and thousands of ministers were disenfranchised when they refused to submit. Further submission to the authority of the church was a condition for public office and even for studying at university, so for centuries thereafter dissenting ministers had to study outside the established universities. Nonetheless, dissenting

congregations continued to meet and worship as best they could. After both this and the Elizabethan crackdown on dissent, many felt they could no longer live in the country and left for the continent or for America, exporting Protestantism to the New World.

## Dissenting congregations in Guildford

There is some evidence from a deed executed in 1597 that Baptists were established in Guildford by that date. Reports in 1612 show that non-conformists were numerous in Guildford, and the earliest clear reference is to a meeting in 1645 during the civil war which was addressed by a Baptist pastor, Thomas Lamb. Later in that century, a church was established in a converted charcoal barn and so became known as the Charcoal Barn Chapel. It was situated in South Street, now known as Castle Street, and was demolished to make way for the Tunsgate development, when the congregation moved to its current site in a former Methodist church in Chertsey Street in 1953. The minute books of the Old Baptist Chapel church go back to 1745, and are available for public inspection in the Surrey History Centre.



*The Old Baptist Chapel, 1860. Photo courtesy of Matthew Alexander*

## The English revival

In the 18th century, two men arose who had immense influence on the religious life of the nation, John Wesley (1703-91) and George Whitefield (also spelled Whitfield) (1714-70); both went to Oxford and were ordained as Anglican clergymen. Wesley went to Savannah, Georgia for two years as a minister, but returned to England. After spending some time with Moravian Christians, he found he was barred from preaching in parish churches and tentatively accepted the challenge of preaching in the open air which is what Whitefield had done to acclaim in America. The evangelical revivals that marked the 18th century were intense and radical, as ordinary men and women were imbued with a confidence and enthusiasm for sharing the gospel and converting others outside of the control of established churches. Evangelical preachers emphasised personal salvation and piety, and encouraged a commitment to a new standard of personal morality. These two men preached to thousands in the open air and took their message to many in the working-class areas of the country. The effect of conversions was a new emphasis on faith which filled churches on Sundays and personal morality which affected peoples discourse on the working days of the week. The Christian conscience of the evangelicals led those who had influence towards action in government to improve the lot of their fellow men. Such figures included William Wilberforce who successfully campaigned for the abolition of slavery and Lord Shaftesbury who campaigned for better conditions in asylums, for improvement in working conditions for children and factory reform amongst many other social and educational reforms.



*William Wilberforce (after John Rising). Wikipedia Creative Commons*