

SION'S SAINT: JOHN TURNER OF SUTTON VALENCE¹

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The origins of religious non-conformity, which developed following the fall of Archbishop Laud into what might be termed the 'institutionalized' dissent of the Interregnum period and thereafter, has, in recent years, been the object of close study by historians specializing in this area and, in this context, it has become clear that the county of Kent represents a profitable field for such research.² Much work, however, remains to be done on the precise nature of the evolution of religious separatism and, more especially, on the relationship between the non-conformist behaviour visible during the latter years of Elizabeth I's reign and the fully-fledged dissenting churches which emerged from the mid-1640s onwards. It has already been demonstrated with clarity by Dr. Nuttall that the dissenting churches of Kent had their foundations firmly laid well before the clerical ejections of 1662 and that their origins were separatist in nature, but the accurate identification of these beginnings has yet to be established.³

Of the separatist activity in the Diocese of Canterbury that troubled William Laud most there are, however, no such uncertainties. The conventicles in Ashford and the surrounding parishes were a continual thorn in his side, so much so that it has been suggested that the archbishop's misidentification of both the character and the extent of separatism in his own jurisdiction may have prompted him to adopt a more unequivocal position than in fact was necessary, and

¹ This article is based on a paper delivered at a Staff/Graduate Seminar at the University of Kent on November 24th, 1982. I am particularly grateful to Professor Patrick Collinson for his encouragement and invaluable advice.

² See especially P. Clark, *English Provincial Society from the Reformation to the Revolution*, Woking, 1977.

³ G.F. Nuttall, 'Dissenting Churches in Kent before 1700' in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 14 (1963), 175-89.

thereby to have been instrumental in his own downfall. If this is so, then the life of John Turner, a chandler of the parish of Sutton Valence, is of more than passing interest to a local historian.⁴

Gaps in the parish register make it impossible to determine the precise year of John Turner's birth, and, equally of his father, Thomas Turner, nothing is known. However, the same register reveals that the family name was well established in Sutton Valence, a parish on the edge of the Kentish Weald, itself an area with a strong non-conformist tradition going back to Lollardy. As Margaret Spufford has already noted, the concept of the importance in terms of influence of kinship ties as a determinant of dissent remains largely unexplored and, as far as Kent is concerned, the evidence is as yet diffuse.⁵

The last two decades of Elizabeth I's reign, certainly as far as Kent was concerned, witnessed the growth, especially in the parishes in and on the edge of the Weald, of opposition to the established church and its ceremonies of a non-separatist kind, but Sutton Valence appears to have witnessed little of this activity. There was a conventicle reported there in 1599, but the indications are that it was a specific gathering on one particular occasion with the aim of listening to the itinerant preacher George Dickenson, who was active in the diocese during that year.⁶ In fact, all the evidence concerning this period of Turner's life tends towards giving an impression of positive conformity. His marriage produced a series of children between 1610 and 1619, all of whom were baptised into the established church, and there is nothing in terms of their baptismal names to suggest any form

⁴ S. Foster, *Notes from the Caroline Underground*, Connecticut, 1978, 11-3; Lambeth Palace Library (hereafter LPL) Misc. MS943, f291.

⁵ Kent Archives Office (hereafter KAO) P/360/1/1; for evidence which may suggest that the Turner family itself may have held something of a tradition of independence in ecclesiastical matters, see Canterbury Cathedral Library (hereafter CCL) x-8-4, f4, and L.E. Whatmore (Ed.), *Archdeacon Harpsfield's Visitation*, Catholic Record Society, London, 1950, 203; CCL x-1-11 f93. The Nicholls family of Eastwell and Adisham provide an interesting example of family involvement in non-conformity over several generations. Josias Nicholls wrote the anti-prelatical *Plea of the Innocent* in 1602 and was deprived of his living for non-conformity in 1604, whilst his son, Surety-on-High, became the puritan headmaster of Wye Grammar School, his grandson, Charles, gained local notoriety as minister of the separatist congregations of Adisham, Nonington, Sandwich, and Womenswold after the Restoration, and his great-nephew, also Josias, was one of the original covenanters of John Durant's Independent church formed at Canterbury in 1645. See also P. Clark, 'Josias Nicholls and Religious Radicalism' in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 28 (1977), no. 2, 133-53. For the whole question of the role of the family in the development of dissent, see M. Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, Cambridge, 1974, 280.

⁶ CCL x-3-10 (ii) f144.

of notional apartness. More to the point, he was churchwarden between 1614 and 1620, and his bold, neat signature at the foot of the archdeacon's transcripts attests to his literacy, an impression confirmed more fully by the fact that he was called upon on at least one occasion to write the will of a fellow parishioner, and also by his later publications.⁷

Two years after relinquishing the position of churchwarden, John Turner was presented for stating that the Prayer Book Litany was 'unlawful and superstitious' and for absence from services for 'the space of two moneths at least.' What transformation had taken place in his mind between 1620 and 1622 can only be a matter for conjecture, but it is clear that he was not alone in his opinions. His brother, Thomas, was presented with him for walking out of the church as the minister entered, and both he and his wife, Margaret, were further cited for refusing to receive Holy Communion along with Daniel Medherst, who had been a churchwarden in 1614, his wife, and his brother-in-law, Giles Barrington, likewise a churchwarden in 1616 and 1617, all of whom were to become members of Turner's separatist group in the coming years.

Such behaviour was, of course, not unique. As elsewhere in England, dissatisfaction with the tardy progress of ecclesiastical reformation had led to the growth in Kent of conventicling, 'running to sermons', and other such related activities from the 1590s onwards. These exercises were predominantly non-separatist in intent, but there are also signs, fragmentary yet distinct, of the beginnings of the development of some form of alternative, rival ecclesiology.⁸ In 1602, for example, in the parish of Goudhurst, proceedings were instituted against William Champion for keeping a schoolmaster in his house, who preached twice on Sundays and Holy Days and who included in his teachings eclectic opinions concerning the existence of hell, and there is evidence of separatist conventicles operating in Cranbrook in 1604, and in Sandwich as early as 1609. However, it is impossible to demonstrate if any of these developments had a direct influence on Turner. He may well have come into contact with critical attitudes as a result of his peripatetic commercial activities as a chandler, but all

⁷ KAO P/360/1/1; CCL x-11-16 f103; CCL Archdeacons Transcripts 409/AC; for the significance of baptismal names, see N. Tyacke, 'Popular Puritan Mentality in Late Elizabethan England' in *The English Commonwealth 1547-1640*, (Eds.) P. Clark, A. Smith, and N. Tyacke, Leicester, 1979, 77-93.

⁸ CCL x-9-3 f226, x-3-10 (ii) f236. Evidence for the nature of these conventicles and their relationship to the whole question of separatism is presented in the first two chapters of my Ph.D. thesis entitled 'The Development of Religious Separatism in the Diocese of Canterbury, 1590-1660.'

that can be said with any degree of certainty is that by 1622 he had embarked upon a spiritual pilgrimage which was eventually, like that of many ordinary men and women of this period, to lead him to open separation, persecution and imprisonment.⁹

In 1624, the churchwardens of Sutton Valence reported the existence of a conventicle in the parish and stated that the sons of John Turner and Thomas Moreland were unbaptised adding that Turner and his colleagues

'are vehemently suspected to have preaching and baptizing in their private conventicles.'¹⁰

Such opposition does not seem to have been restricted to Sutton Valence, and there is further evidence to suggest that Turner was involved in the development of some kind of rudimentary non-conformist organisation. The exempt parish of Egerton is a case in point. In the same year a conventicle was meeting there under the leadership of John Fenner, a pailmaker, and the depositions of two parishioners who had been present at meetings of this group make it clear that John Turner was there in an influential capacity, one of them concluding

'that those three tymes when he was in their company he heard the said John Fenner at one tyme and Turner at another tyme make and conceyve prayers and read the scriptures and expound upon the same as pleased them and sing a psalme.'

The lines of communication between Egerton and Sutton Valence are not easy to distinguish although it is possible that, once again, kinship ties may have played a part.¹¹ What is certain is the fact that Egerton was not the only parish to which Turner's influence had stretched. Thomas Moreland, a member of the Sutton Valence conventicle,

⁹ CCL x-9-3 ff52, 226., x-2-5 f156, x-5-7 ff59, 152, x-6-4 f24; (Ed.) E. Arber, *The Story of the Pilgrim Fathers*, London, 1897, pp162-165. I owe the point concerning Turner's profession to Mr. Andrew Butcher.

¹⁰ CCL x-6-4 ff68-71, 76.

¹¹ Egerton held something of a non-conformist tradition in that the parish witnessed activities not dissimilar to those analysed in Cranbrook by Professor Collinson in his essay 'Cranbrook and the Fletchers' in *Reformation Principle and Practice*, (Ed.) P.N. Brooks, London, 1980, 173-202, and was served in 1621 by John Lathrop, who eventually went into open opposition to the Church of England first as minister of the semi-separatist Jacob church in London, and then into exile in the New World. For evidence of this, see CCL x-8-12, ff5-6, 12-13, 64, x-9-6 f5, z-4-2 f5, and M. Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints*, Cambridge, 1977, 15-16. The parishioner who deposed against Fenner and Turner was Urbanus Smith, servant to one Jacob Turner, the eldest son of John Turner, a clothier, who died in 1664, but since the parish registers for Egerton do not commence until 1684, it is impossible to establish concrete ties between these two families; CCL z-4-4 ff58-62, KAO PRC/32/53.

came originally from Headcorn, where he had been presented for refusing to receive communion, refusing to kneel

'but squatts downe in his seat most unreverently and it is to be feared he will seduce many others to his opinion, he is one of Turners consorts of Towne Sutton, who hath seduced manye, for excommunication they reck it not but make a mockery and rejoyce at it for they are glad to be excommunicated out of the church in regard they never had any zeale to it.'¹²

These presentments and depositions indicate fairly lucidly that the conventicles attended by these parishioners had little in common with the private exercises beloved of the Elizabethan or Jacobean puritan, and this is an important distinction. Conventicling in the county of Kent was, to be sure, no novel phenomenon by the 1620s, but apart from those exceptions already mentioned such assemblies were almost certainly non-separatist and conformed to the pattern of that discovered in 1591 in the parish of St. George's, Canterbury, in the house of the lawyer Henry Finch. The preacher present, Robert Jessup, who had already been cited for holding conventicles at Wye and Godmersham, defended his actions by stating

'that he hath not neither doth use any of them otherwise then any other privat christian may do'

and this desire to hold domestic exercises as a supplement to orthodox worship lay at the very core of puritanism, and was strongly defended in print by Josias Nicholls, the minister of Eastwell:

'And when the same Holy Scripture exhorteth men and weomen and commandeth them to talke of Gods word in their houses . . . shall honest men and weomen be therefore called Puritans and their godlie and Christian meetings bee tearmed conventicles.'¹³

Such gatherings as these were thus very different from the conventicles at Sutton Valence, Egerton, and Headcorn. Turner and his associates were offering explicitly what was not in evidence in the conventicles of the 1590s, an alternative ecclesiology in direct and open opposition to the established church, mirroring the parish

¹² CCL z-4-3 f73 and attached note, x-6-7 f148.

¹³ CCL x-8-14 f5; J. Nicholls, *The Plea of the Innocent*, London, 1602, 37. This point concerning the spiritual validity of such exercises as sermon repetition was a central one for Nicholls, and in 1596 he published *An Order of Household Instruction* to aid the godly householder in the pursuit of righteousness in which he specifically stated that 'After morning and evening prayer, when you have tried your people what they have learned at church by their pastour, and called to mind the chief heades of his teaching, then it is good to make it a drinke offering, upon the pastours lessons, to teach them a point or two of the principles of Religion.' (sig.B4.). For a similar line of defence as that taken by Jessup by a Dover parishioner, see CCL x-9-1 f5.

assemblies in using baptism, psalms, and sermons, but rejecting the Book of Common Prayer and rejoicing in exclusion from the parish congregation.

It is at this stage that evidence emerges which indicates that Turner's own thinking and attitudes may have been influenced and shaped by one of the leading figures of religious radicalism in Kent, Thomas Brewer of Boxley, although how these two men met is unknown. In 1625, Brewer had been presented for terming the power of the episcopacy 'unlawful' and for stating that he would 'spend five hundred pounds ere he would appear to their summons or citations', and there is also a suggestion that private baptism and even private marriage was a feature of the conventicle which he clearly led.¹⁴ In 1626, his activities were brought to the attention of the authorities by, amongst others, the Arminian minister of Maidstone, Robert Barrell. This report called Brewer 'the general patron of the Kentish Brownests' and claimed that he had written a book in which he foretold 'the destruction of England within three years by two Kings, one from the North and another from the South'. Of greater moment, however, is an additional statement concerning John Turner, who

'preacheth in houses, barns, and woods, That the Church of England is the whore of Babylon and the synagogue of Satan'

and the report concluded by terming Turner as Brewer's 'chaplain.'¹⁵ Under such a patron as Brewer, it is not surprising to see Turner moving away from the position of puritan malcontent towards that of an identifiable and influential radical immersed in the mainstream of separatist thought. Neither is it difficult to understand why the full weight of episcopal displeasure was about to descend upon both of them.

By 1627, Turner's activities appear to have taken him away from Sutton Valence to Egerton, and it was here that the authorities struck. Both Turner and Brewer were arrested, the former being taken to Maidstone Prison and from thence to the Gate-House Prison in Gardiner's Lane, Westminster. In his absence, the Sutton Valence gathering continued to function, probably under the leadership of Thomas Moreland, and held private baptisms, on one occasion receiving a minister from London for the purpose of baptizing the son of Giles Bishop. The judicial proceedings instituted against John

¹⁴ CCL x-6-4, ff84, 96-97, III. For Brewer's early career as a religious radical involved in the development of separatist thought overseas, see Arber, *op. cit.*, 175, 195-228, and D. Plooiij, *The Pilgrim Fathers from the Dutch point of view*, New York, 1932, 58-78.

¹⁵ Public Record Office (hereafter PRO) SP 16/35/110.

Turner by Archbishop Laud do not appear to have survived, but he clearly bulked large in the Primate's mind, for Laud referred to Turner in a letter to the King in 1635, in which he admitted that he had as yet failed to cure the 'hurt' caused by Turner and Brewer in the Maidstone and Ashford area. The following year he was forced to own

'neither do I see any remedy like to be, unless some of their seducers be driven to abjure the kingdom'

and a scribbled entry in Secretary Nicholas' private notebook suggests that this possibility was actually discussed by the Privy Council in January. However, as far as Laud was concerned, the situation remained unresolved as late as 1639.¹⁶

A glimpse of the conditions suffered by Turner in prison is afforded by the anonymous pamphlet from Kent entitled *No Age Like Unto This Age*, which was published in 1653, and which contains such a wealth of detail concerning Turner that it may be suspected that the author was either personally close to Turner or even Turner himself. He was evidently kept under close supervision, his head shaved on one side, legs in irons, hands manacled, and all contact with friends and relatives denied. Unlike his wealthier colleague, Thomas Brewer, who at one stage managed to escape and return to Kent to stir up parishioners in the Rochester area against Laud and episcopal government, Turner's movements were clearly restricted, although it is by no means certain that he was in prison continually from 1627 to 1641.¹⁷

At this point, it is worth establishing as accurately as possible the nature of the beliefs held by Turner and thus, by implication, by the Sutton Valence circle, and thereby to place them within the context of evolving dissenting theology and ecclesiology prior to the outbreak of the Civil War. It is possible to ascribe the authorship of at least three pamphlets to John Turner: *The Saintes Belief*, published in

¹⁶ LPL Tenison MS943 f291; PRO SP 16/343/21 British Library (hereafter BL) Harleian MS787 ff21-22. For an interesting allegation that Laud hoped that, by refusing to move Turner and Brewer away from London in 1636 during an outburst of plague, they would succumb, see W. Prynne, *The Unbishops of Timothy and Titus*, London, 1636, 160; CCL z-4-4 f208. By the 1630s Moreland and Fenner had managed to set up a tangible network of separatist groups in Ulcombe, Egerton, and Sutton Valence; the attractions of this group were such that William Bowling of Ashford, a dominant figure of separatism there, was prepared to travel over to Egerton to attend the Fennes/Moreland conventicle: see CCL x-6-4 ff146, 150-1, 171, z-3-16 f284, KAO U350 C2/54, CCL x-6-8 ff163, 185, 216, 229, LPL VG 4/15 f42 VG 4/22 f112.

¹⁷ *No Age Like Unto This Age*, London 1653, 9.

1641; *Tithes Proved Unlawfull*, published in 1645; and his major work, *A Heavenly Conference for Sion's Saintes*, also published in 1645. In addition, given the details already mentioned, and the constant emphasis on the evils of tithes with parochial examples drawn from the areas of Kent in which Turner is known to have been active, it is possible that he was the author of *No Age Like Unto This Age*, which was published in 1653. If this is so, then this would argue against the piece being an example of Digger literature as has been recently maintained by one notable authority.¹⁸

The acceptance of the efficacy of paedobaptism and the emphasis on the importance of the covenant, which is a recurring theme in his written works, indicate that Turner's own theological position was in fact that of early Congregationalism, and this is reinforced by the closeness of many of his beliefs concerning the organisation of a 'true' church.¹⁹ Covenant theology was not new to the seventeenth-century mind, but it was an integral part of the Congregational outlook. As with John Robinson, one of the founding fathers of Independency, there was for Turner no true church without a covenant made between 'a company of people called to beleeve and to professe obedience unto God', and he defines such a covenant as being

'when they together have vowed or agreed in a bodily or church estate to walke together obediently in all things to Christ's precepts.'

For John Fenner, it was precisely because there was no true covenant between God and the state Church in England that he felt separation to be justified.²⁰

Implicit in the acceptance of the covenant external to the parish assembly is the rejection of the established church *in toto*, ceremonial, theology, and all, hence the whole question of separation was of crucial importance to early Congregational writers. Bound up with the repudiation of the Church of England, however, was an important concept. It was not merely a question of the Church of England being in error but, rather, that it was positively the embodiment of Anti-Christ, belief in the existence of which, as

¹⁸ C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, London, 1972, 126. The case for ascribing these works to this particular John Turner rests on the information given in the prefaces of two of them allied to the fact that *Tithes Proved Unlawfull* was written in direct response to an appeal from an Ulcombe parishioner, the parish of Ulcombe being one of the identifiable parishes to which the Turner group had extended its activities by the 1630s.

¹⁹ J. Turner, *A Heavenly Conference for Sion's Saintes*, London, 1645, 39–41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31–32; KAO U350/C2/54; J. Robinson, *Justification of Separation from the Church of England*, Amsterdam, 1610, 221; G. Nuttall, *Visible Saints*, Oxford, 1957, 78.

Christopher Hill has ably demonstrated, was almost as essential a prerequisite for the Christian as belief in the existence of the Saviour himself. This attitude was summarised pithily by John Robinson:

'If on the contrary, ours be of God, and of his Christ, then theirs is of Anti-Christ, God's and Christ's adversary.'²¹

and the whole issue evokes from Turner one of his most colourful and visionary literary outbursts:

'And lest their evil should be espied, they have caused the four angels to hold the four winds of Christ's church, power, and government that they should not blow upon the earth, sea, or any trees, by which locusts doe rise out of the smoake of the bottomless pit, and with fire, smoake, and brimstone, which have proceeded out of their mouthes, they have darkened the third part of the Sun-light of the Gospell, the third part of the inferior moon-light of the Law and the third part of Christ's ministry, and thereby caused the powers of the earth to reele to and fro like a Drunkard, and quake, and say, alas, we know not what to do; hide us from the presence of the Lamb for his wrath (in his regall power and church government is to come) and we cannot stand for he will condemne (without respect of persons) all evil government and governours, worship and worshippers, and then you shall be so borne up on every side with earthen props that men shall not dare to speak against the Beast, neither teach Christ Jesus to be the saviour of the world (what gifts soever God indue them with) without a licence from these evil angells or patentees of the Gospell.'²²

Such language prompts the question as to what extent Turner was influenced by millenarian tendencies. The concept of millenarianism has been the subject of some controversy in terms of definition, but if we are prepared to accept it as 'the belief in a perfect society to be established through divine intervention' then it is clear that this concept was current in the thinking of the Turner separatists, although the ideological skirmish that sent an early tremor through John Durant's Canterbury Congregational Church is a timely reminder that not all Congregationalists were millenarian in outlook.²³ However, the evidence concerning William Bowling of Ashford, a member of the Egerton conventicle during the 1630s, suggests that

²¹ C. Hill, *Anti-Christ in Seventeenth Century England*, Oxford, 1971, 32; J. Robinson, *Of Religious Communion, Private and Publique*, Leyden, 1614, 17.

²² Turner, *op. cit.*, 3, 5.

²³ B.S. Capp, 'Godly Rule and English Millenarianism' in *Past and Present*, no. 52, 1971, 107; for the idea of 'gathering' as being implicitly millenarian, see Nuttall, *op. cit.*, 146-148, and J.F. Wilson, *Pulpit and Parliament*, Princeton, 1969, 223, 229. The controversy in Durant's church centred around the objections of William Buckhurst, one of the original covenanters, to his pastor's millenarian statements. Durant denied such views, although it is clear that he in fact did uphold such an approach; see B.S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men*, London, 1972, 20, J. Durant, *The Salvation of the Saints*, London, 1653, 184-187, and CCL U37, ff11-12, 20.

Turner was not alone in his apocalyptic expectations. Bowling's activities were brought to the attention of Thomas Edwards by means of a letter from one of the Presbyterian ministers of Dover, Nicholas North, in July 1646, in which North describes the 'errors and Heresies stoutly asserted' by Bowling during a voyage in a 'pair of oares' from Gravesend to London. It is an impressive catalogue, including the denial of the existence of Hell, and of Original Sin, as well as the assertion of the mortality of the soul and that the Devil was wholly responsible for the sin that was in every man. In addition, Bowling proposed that Christ's words to the penitent thief on the Cross referred to his coming 'one thousand year kingdom', a view he repeated in a later gloss of *Revelation*, xx, 6. Whilst it cannot be assumed that his attitudes were representative of the Egerton-Sutton Valence-Ashford conventiclers, there is confirmatory evidence from the 1620s that they did in fact form a distinct part of the thinking of this group, an interpretation reinforced by the fact that, as we have seen, Thomas Brewer was confidently predicting the collapse of earthly monarchy by 1629.²⁴

The Church of England was thus no true church, having no covenant with God and being synonymous with Anti-Christ. That being so, the logical step for Turner and others like him was separation. One of the crucial questions for godly conventiclers from the end of Elizabeth I's reign onwards was that of their relationship with the carnal multitude. Elements of 'shunning' can be observed in Kent as early as 1550 in the beliefs of the Free-Will group gathered around Henry Hart at Faversham, and it surfaces as an excuse for non-attendance at church during the 1570s and 1580s, albeit rarely.²⁵ However, it was in the seventeenth century that this problem was to become a significant issue. The iron logic of Turner's analysis of the state church led him inevitably to reject the 'wheat and tares' approach of the semi-separatist and he set out his position quite clearly in catechismal form:

- 'Question: May not a true church have personall communion with one that lives in visible sin?
 Answer: He may not, but must separate in all worship.
 Question: What is the church which is mingled with all sorts of people, profane and wicked?

²⁴ T. Edwards, *Gangraena*, London, 1646, pt. iii, 35–39. Further evidence that this group maintained millenarian views can be seen in a debate in the parish of Ash in 1625 between John Fenner and the ministers of Stourmouth, CCL z-4-4, ff67–74.

²⁵ BL Harleian MS421 f134; see also the cases of Paul Eaton of Kennington and Robert Pett of Lynsted, CCL x-2-2 f137, x-5-6 f235.

Answer: It is a church of confusion, where the Lord's people may not tarry.²⁶

In addition to the objections already considered, there was a further fundamental reason for rejection of the national church, one which Turner and those like him shared with dissenters of all shades of opinion before the outbreak of the Civil War; the established Church possessed no authority in Scripture. Such a view was not novel – it was certainly an element of the composite challenge to official church attitudes which comprised Lollardy – but it took on a meaning that became more vital as Elizabeth I's failure to institute any real reformation of the Church became apparent. When John Turner's nephew, Warham Turner, challenged the minister of Sutton Valence with the question 'Is the booke of comon praier subject to the Word or the Word to it?' he was not only encapsulating in a sentence the cornerstone of his uncle's beliefs but was reflecting one of the mainsprings of dissenting activity which had developed by the end of the sixteenth century, and which has been characterised as 'a passionate desire to recover the inner life of New Testament Christianity.'²⁷

The language Turner employs is, as always, unequivocal over this issue. If attendance at the parish church is out of the question because of the 'permixt' state of the congregation, then it is equally so since 'their best church actions are unholy' and that applies to the Presbyterian mode of worship as much as to the Laudian. Both the Prayer Book and the Directory are deemed worthless,

'Invented by man, contrary to the commandments of God, and besides filled with errors, untruths and blasphemies.'

consisting, in Thomas Brewer's vivid phrase, of 'world worship' as opposed to 'word worship'.²⁸

Having demonstrated the erroneous nature of the Babylonian church, the remainder of Turner's writings deal with the nature and organisation of 'true' worship, and it is here that the Congregational nature of his attitudes becomes clearest. He is adamant in his insistence that the choice of the minister must be made by each individual gathered church and that the minister's authority extended only over that church which had elected him, in essence reflecting the

²⁶ Turner, *op. cit.*, 47–49. For a recent discussion of the importance of the distinction between separatism and semi-separatism, see P. Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants*, Oxford, 1982, 273–283.

²⁷ J.A.F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards*, Oxford, 1965, 244; CCL x–6–4 f100; Nuttall, *op. cit.*, 3.

²⁸ Turner, *op. cit.*, 48, 63; T. Brewer, *Gospel Publique Worship*, London, 1656, 200.

very heart of Congregationalism. Equally, over the critical question of the correct attitude to be taken over 'a brother that falleth into sin', Turner displays that his views are in accord with other exponents of early Independency.²⁹

As far as the role and duties of the congregation are concerned, Turner states that their responsibility is to hear the minister preach, respond to the truths therein contained, pray both with him and for him, and show 'manifest love by furnishing him with all necessaries'.³⁰ This last point was one of fundamental value in his concept of a gathered church of visible saints, and he was drawn into a controversy over this which developed in the parish of Ulcombe during the 1640s. The Rector of Ulcombe from 1627 to 1643 was Daniel Horsmonden, who was eventually charged by some of his parishioners prior to his sequestration with saying that Strafford had been wrongfully executed and that to hear a sermon on a week-day was 'will-worship'. In fact, the main point of contention appears to have been the question of tithes. His successor, William Belcher, enjoyed a brief popularity with his new parishioners as a result of his 'Preaching down of Tythes as Jewish and Anti-Christian', but when the voluntary gifts of the congregation began to decline, he circulated a letter to the parishioners setting down the reasons why they should in fact pay their tithe-contributions to him. How this dispute came to Turner's ears is not known, but the result was a specific refutation of Belcher's arguments in print, where Turner insisted that the correct scriptural interpretation of the maintenance of ministers was 'a free gift of the people set before them and no other', and that tithes were Jewish and thus acceptance of them was tantamount to a denial of the existence of Christ, and that there was no mention of them in the Gospels.³¹ To Belcher's claim that

'experience teaches us that if men were left to their own liberty Ministers should not have wherewith to maintain themselves, families, and give to the poor as is required'

Turner's reply is characteristically unimpeachable:

'You say some people would give no thing through covetousness: I beleeve it is true if you needs must have a Babylonian Church of all good and bad together . . . But in Zion such people are not appointed of God to have their being. But carnall ministers must have carnall maintenance and carnall company. And whereas you

²⁹ Turner, *op. cit.*, 33, 35–6, 49.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

³¹ A.G. Matthews, (Ed.), *Walker Revised*, Oxford, 1948, 219. Turner's contact in Ulcombe may have been William Edmett, see *No Age Like Unto This Age*, 3, and CCL x-6-4 ff247, 255, x-6-11 (ii) ff10, 20, 43, 72, 90-91, 114, 135, z-3-16 f284.

say others would allow them nothing, Neither would they be of his Church if he were in Christ's Church.'

and he dismisses the Ulcombe minister's arguments with a withering description of tithes as being

'of no use but to blindfold people to satisfie the inordinate desire of covetous ministers, of Belly-Gods of this time who would be Christ's servants but like not his wages . . . they that like not Christ's wages need not meddle with his work.'

phraseology which is very similar to that employed by William Bowling in the Gravesend tilt-boat.³²

It is difficult to do justice to Turner's publications in a short paper such as this, but there is one further aspect that deserves attention, and that is his attitude towards the concept of religious tolerance. Freedom of worship was clearly important for Turner. He had, after all, suffered imprisonment over this very issue and he reserves some of his most acid rebukes for those 'wilful wicked men' who

'take away or adde anything in God's worship, imprison or put to death for not worshipping God as they would have them.'

It would seem that overriding the necessity of the saints to gather themselves into a pure and spotless state is the higher law of freedom of conscience, lack of which, like other early Independents, Turner identifies as a hallmark of Anti-Christ:

'Question: What are the markes whereby wee may knowe Babel or an Anti-Christian Church?

Answer: By altering of God's ordinances or order, and placing men's inventions in the stead thereof, compulsion to divine obedience by civil authority, forcing men against their conscience to say as they would have, and imprisoning those that cannot yield unto them.'

Such latitudinarianism spreads into Turner's concept of the righteous household, for he is equally adamant that ungodly servants are not to be dismissed, asserting that Christ will have his children permit wicked worshippers quietly, for in time they may be converted'.³³

John Turner served prison sentences under both Laud and Parliament. He was released in December 1640 following an Order from the House of Lords, but was back in prison by the end of 1643. Although there is no specific evidence to suggest on what charge, non-payment of tithes either out of recalcitrance or financial hardship

³² J. Turner, *Tithes Proved Unlawfull*, London, 1645, 1-5; Edwards, *op. cit.*, 39.

³³ *A Heavenly Conference* . . . 27-9, 51; W. Bartlet, 'Ἰχνογράφια or a Model of the Primitive Congregational Way, London 1647, 128-130.

caused by his earlier imprisonment would seem to be a possible reason. He was eventually released on January 24th, 1645.³⁴ Of the remainder of his life, little has so far been uncovered. There is, as yet, no evidence of a formally constituted Congregational assembly at Sutton Valence or Egerton during the Interregnum period, although there was one in the neighbouring parish of Staplehurst. Unfortunately, the earliest record of this church, a Memoranda Book belonging to one of its first ministers, possibly Daniel Poyntel, dates from 1668 and contains no mention of the Turner family.

It would appear that John Turner died in Sutton Valence during the early part of the winter of 1662, and was duly buried there, and there is evidence that he remained defiant to the last. He was presented, along with sixteen other parishioners, including the widow of his old colleague Thomas Moreland and several members of the Bishop family, in 1662 for refusing to pay his cesse – as late as 1682, Moreland's widow and sons were still being presented for non-attendance.³⁵

Turner stands as a transitional figure in the study of developing non-conformity in the county of Kent. His beliefs and behaviour seem to owe little to an identifiable underground dissenting tradition; nor would it appear that he left any tangible legacy within his own parish. There were no applications from Sutton Valence for a licence for non-conformist worship in 1672 following the Declaration of Indulgence, and the parish had to wait well on into the eighteenth century for its officially constituted Congregational Church. However, the Compton Census returns of 1676 for Sutton Valence do reveal a total of 30 non-conformists out of a grand total of 226 parishioners, and although the Act Books are silent as to the nature of such dissent it would seem that there was a Quaker conventicle operating there. The Episcopal returns of 1669 mention the Quakers meeting there at the house of James Wickens, James Spice, and John Barrington, the last of these being the son of one of Turner's erstwhile associates. In addition to this, both Wickens and Spice were presented along with 13 others in 1663 for non-attendance, and three of them are identifiable as members of Turner's church in 1626. It is thus possible that Turner's colleagues, like many of the dissenters of the late 1650s in England, completed their spiritual pilgrimage within the Quaker movement. This would certainly explain the lack of 'visible saints' at Sutton Valence in the years following the Restoration.³⁶

³⁴ *No Age Like Unto This Age*, 1.

³⁵ KAO P360/1/2; CCL x-6-11 ff161-165, x-7-6 f93.

³⁶ LPL Tenison MS639 ff152-163; G. Lyon Turner (Ed.), *Original Records of Early Nonconformity*, London, 1911, Vol. I, 19, 25; Vol. II., 991-1009; KAO N/FQZ pp. 25-34.

By the 1690s, all appears quiet again at Sutton Valence, and perhaps this is not inappropriate since, with the accession of William III and the passage of the first significant Parliamentary Act concerning religious toleration in 1689, what has been termed the 'heroic age of dissent' was drawing to a close. The part played by John Turner at a provincial level during this turbulent period was in a sense that of a representative individual, casting valuable light on how the gap between the non-separatist activities of the Elizabethan godly and the officially institutionalized Dissenting Churches of the post-Restoration period was, in one instance, spanned. It has been noted in a relatively recent publication that

'modern experience has taught us that at times of revolutionary dissolution, history is made by minorities,'³⁷

and, in the final analysis, it is perhaps within this context that the significance of John Turner of Sutton Valence is most readily understood.

³⁷ P. Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, California, 1967, 94.

Church of St Mary (en) Sutton Valence, Maidstone, Kent, ME17 (en); [ÙfÙ†ÙšØ³Ø© ÙÙš ØšÙ„Ù…Ù…Ù„ÙfØ© ØšÙ„Ù…Ù³ØØ`Ø©](#) (ar); Kirchengebäude im Vereinigten Königreich (de); kerkgebouw in Verenigd Koninkrijk (nl). Media in category "St Mary's church, Sutton Valence". The following 7 files are in this category, out of 7 total. St Mary's Church, Sutton Valence - geograph.org.uk - 1180999.jpg 640 × 481; 77 KB. For Turner, see Acheson, R.J., *St Sion's Saint: John Turner of Sutton Valence*, *Archaeologia Cantiana* 99 (1983) pp. 183–97. 72 The defensive phrase was used of meetings gathered in the Wealden town of Cranbrook in the mid-1570s by John Strowd. (Collinson, *Godly People* p. 418). 73 Remarkable Passages in the Life of William Kiffin Written by Himself ed William Orme (London 1823) pp. 11-14. Sutton Valence School "North St, ME17 3HL Sutton Valence" rated 4 based on 9 reviews "Great memories, amazing and supportive teachers" See more of Sutton Valence School on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of Sutton Valence School on Facebook. Log In. Forgotten account?