

# 5. Leaving and Remaining

## A Brief History of Secession

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In this chapter, I want to try and give a little bit of historical perspective on the issue of secession from the Church of England. This has been the elephant in the room in many Anglican conversations over the last two decades: when are we leaving? Or to mix up all the metaphors: what will be the red line in the sand that breaks the camel's back and tips us all over the edge into secession?

In recent times, this debate has become as fraught as the debate over Europe, with Remainers and Leavers arguing over the timing and the terms of Brexit, or as we might call it in our ecclesiastical context, Chexit. And just as with Brexit, there is a variety of options for a hard Chexit or a soft Chexit.

We must be clear and acknowledge the growing anxieties which are pushing us towards a consideration of this subject:

**1. We feel instinctively the displeasure of God at our society and our church.** The evangelical conscience is deeply disturbed by the moral climate of the nation and the doctrinal and disciplinary chaos in the established church, such that it is not right to simply “keep our heads

down in the parishes” as many of our forefathers once did (perhaps to our cost).

**2. We also feel keenly the displeasure of the hierarchy, given the obstacles we face within the Church of England as complementarian and conservative evangelicals.** Our lack of representation amongst the bishops and senior clergy, the hindrances faced by our ordinands and curates as they try to find a place to serve, and the increasing emptiness of the rhetoric of “flourishing” are upsetting to many.

**3. We sense the uselessness of the Church of England system to combat rampant secular atheism and the widespread ignorance and misrepresentation of our common faith.** General Synod panders to anecdotal emotionalism, archbishops dismissively denounce those who stand firm on God’s “word word word”, and there seems more energy given to virtue signalling the rich, liberal provinces of the Communion than in standing shoulder to shoulder with gospel partners in the Global South.

**4. Finally, the apparent direction of travel on issues of gender and sexuality gives rise to intense discomfort not just for Anglican evangelicals here but for gospel partners in other denominations and orthodox brothers and sisters around the world.** We may not buy the Marxist doctrine of historical inevitability so beloved of revisionists, who say we are “on the wrong side of history” and that their final victory is assured; but the trajectory at the moment gives little cause for optimism.

I know there is a counter-narrative on all these points. The Church of England’s discipline has held in some high profile cases recently. We do have Rod Thomas as Bishop of Maidstone, and some other generally orthodox bishops. Many local parish churches and parachurch ministries are standing firm, even if national institutions are wobbling or worse. And the official position of the Church of England remains the traditional one on sex and marriage. For now.

All the same, the pressure points are there, and the displeasure of God, the displeasure of the hierarchy, the frustrating impotence of the national church, and the seeming direction of travel are all reasons why secession has again become a hot topic. Something must be done. Secession is something. So perhaps we should do it?

I think that's faulty logic. Doing the wrong thing can be worse than doing nothing. What we must try to do is the right thing. But as Grayson Carter says in his study of Protestant secessions in the early nineteenth century: because of tensions in the Anglican Communion, "at no time in the history of the church have such secessions occurred as frequently, or the study of them become more relevant, as during the past decade." [\[25\]](#)

So how did evangelicals navigate this tension in days gone by? And is there anything we can learn from the past? I want to look at some key moments in the last 500 years to see what we can find. We will look at the Brownists of the 16th century, the ejected puritans of 1662, the Non-Jurors, and briefly at the Methodists, some nineteenth-century seceders, and a quick glance at the last century too.

So, to kick off, let me take you back to the days of the Reformation, as we consider first the Brownists.

## The Brownists

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the words puritan and nonconformist meant someone *within* the Church of England who objected to various practices. They didn't like wearing surplices or wedding rings or signing babies with the sign of the cross after baptism. But they remained within the Church of England as a force for change.

As Patrick Collinson has shown in his book on *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, the Puritans were a reforming movement *within* the Church of England. Although they formed something of a church within a church, with alternative networks of fellowship behind the official structures, and sometimes regarded bishops simply as civil magistrates rather than their spiritual leaders, their primary aim under Elizabeth I was not political restructuring.<sup>[26]</sup>

There were a few, however, who went so far as to advocate for separation of the truly godly from the national church. These were called separatists or Brownists, after Robert Browne (1550-1633) one of the earliest and most influential of this group. Around 1580, Browne rejected the offer of a church in Cambridge and decided to pursue “Reformation without tarrying for any”, in a congregational style outside the established system. As Michael Watts puts it in his history of dissenters, “The bishops, he came to believe, had so polluted the church that a new beginning had to be made.”<sup>[27]</sup> So he tried to implement purer forms of church governance, at St Helen’s, Bishopgate (in Norwich) and other places in East Anglia.

Browne’s idea was that authority in the church should come from a mutual contract (or membership agreement) between members and elders. He was, however, arrested and twice imprisoned for preaching at illegal conventicles, and decided in the end that to pursue his goal of purity he would have to leave the country and go to the Netherlands. There was trouble within the congregation, however, and fights about whether the children of believers could be considered members of the church or not. Internal dissension broke up the new experimental church.

Things didn’t go very well for Browne, so he left and went to Scotland, but found the Presbyterians there were worse than English bishops. So he returned to England, pretty disillusioned. He eventually came back into the Church of England. He taught in a school for a few years and was then instituted as Rector of a village church in Northamptonshire, and wrote against some of those “schismatical persons” who had carried through his

earlier ideas more consistently. All was fine then for about a quarter of a century, until his nonconformity within the Church saw him suspended and eventually excommunicated. After he punched a policeman (!), he was imprisoned, and died in 1633.[\[28\]](#)

We might contrast Browne with Arthur Hildersham (1563-1632), who was also a Puritan around the same time, but not a separatist. He had some sympathy with Browne. The Brownists were right about “the general increase of all filthy and abominable sins in the land”, he said, which made it right to fear that the candlestick (i.e. God’s presence) was being taken away from England.[\[29\]](#) He thought a different system of government for the church might be better, but he was prepared to live within what he saw as a flawed organisation so that he could continue to preach the gospel. In her excellent recent biography of Hildersham, Lesley Rowe puts it well:

*Hildersham faced the difficult choice of whether to leave the Church of England or to remain within it. He recognized its flaws and corruptions but reckoned that as long as gospel preaching continued, this was a sign that God was still present in the church. His decision brought criticism from both sides: from the separatists, who argued that he lacked the courage to follow his convictions to their logical conclusion and leave an unbiblical organization, and from conformists, who regarded him as a troublemaker refusing to submit to lawful authority. Deciding to stay within the Church of England was not an easy option for Hildersham, for it brought years of suspension from ministry and suffering. Although some of the issues may be different now, evangelicals within the Church of England face a similar dilemma today. [\[30\]](#)*

Puritans continued to have a rocky time in the Church of England at some points, and they had to work hard to maintain their position. Elsewhere, I have looked in some detail at how St Antholin’s church in London, and

others like it, promoted the cause of gospel preaching which Hildersham had espoused in his day.<sup>[31]</sup> The real crunch point came, however, after the Puritan successes of the civil war and Commonwealth period evaporated with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. So we come, now to the tragedy of 1662.

## The Tragedy of 1662

Actually, the so-called “Great Ejection” of ministers, many of them puritans, began in 1660. The 1660 Act for Confirming and Restoring of Ministers saw the ejection of 695 clergy from their posts, which were restored to their previous incumbents, if they were still alive. This undid some of the ejections that had taken place under Cromwell and earlier. It also ejected Baptists. Many of those ejected in 1660, however, managed to find other livings fairly quickly, and it was not intended to permanently remove most of them, just to restore and rearrange a few things.

However, in 1662, the Act of Uniformity led to the more substantial removal of 936 ministers.<sup>[32]</sup> The Act of Uniformity laid down that to be a minister, one must:

1. Be episcopally ordained, or re-ordained. This was unacceptable to many ordained during the previous two decades when there had not been any bishops legally operating in the country.
2. Give “unfeigned assent and consent to all and everything contained and prescribed” in the Book of Common Prayer. This was a much more egregious form of subscription than had previously been demanded, giving the BCP an aura of infallibility. And some of the changes in the new book seemed like a slap in the face to the

Puritans. What's more, many of them could not have even seen the newly revised BCP before the date when their subscription was required.

3. They must renounce oaths taken during the Civil War and Commonwealth period, and promise never to try and change anything in the government of church or state. This, obviously, was unacceptable to many who had taken those oaths, such as the Solemn League and Covenant, and to those who might not feel the new settlement was unerringly perfect.

4. Declare that it was never lawful *to take up arms against the king, and that anyone who did so in the past was wrong.*

So it was not simply a matter of "Do you believe the gospel, or not?"—those who did, left, and those who rejected it stayed in a compromised church. It was much more complex and contextual than that, though of course there were gospel issues bound up in some of these things.[\[33\]](#)

1662 was widely seen as a defeat for Puritanism, which was seriously persecuted in various ways for the next 25 years. However, the Reformed faith itself, in the sense of the church's underlying doctrine, was not defeated; the *Thirty-nine Articles* were not tampered with, and there were many solidly Reformed men serving the church and the academy under Charles II, as Stephen Hampton has shown in his book *Anti-Arminians*.[\[34\]](#)

About 10% of those ejected by the Acts of 1660 and 1662 did in fact later conform and find a way back into the Church of England. One of those was Dr. Thomas Horton, a notable Puritan theologian who had been Vice Chancellor of Cambridge when John Owen was Vice Chancellor of Oxford. He was removed as President of Queens' College, Cambridge in 1660, when his predecessor returned to the country, and silenced in 1662. Yet in 1666 he returned to the Church of England to fill a three-year interregnum

at a place called St Helen's, Bishopsgate in the City of London. A contemporary account describes this as a large and wealthy congregation of half-conformists.[\[35\]](#)

Horton served St Helen's from that summer where almost all the other churches in the City burned down, until his death in 1673. Many of his sermons were published, and in them we can clearly see that Dr. Horton was a theologian of impeccable Reformed credentials who clearly preached predestination, penal substitution, particular atonement, promiscuous gospel preaching to all, and the necessity of the new birth.[\[36\]](#) And yet, he happily served in the Church of England.

The point is, many left in 1662 because they could not sign up for the new terms and conditions required for ministers in the Church of England. But not everyone did—William Gurnall, author of *The Christian in Complete Armour* was another who did not leave.[\[37\]](#) And some who were forced out, managed to come back in various ways later. Most of those ejected in 1662 did not leave the country. Only about 30 or 40 did so. Nonconformity from this point on means “not in the Church of England”, whereas before it was possible to not conform on some things and still be within the Church.

Ten years after the ejection, there was a chance to see how the dissenters were doing. In 1672, there was a royal Indulgence which allowed nonconformists to meet openly if they registered their ministers and places of worship. About 850 were licensed as Presbyterians, 375 as Congregationalists, and 200 as Baptists. Now, there had been other ejections in the reigns of Mary, Elizabeth, James I, and during the Commonwealth. But none bore such permanent fruit as this one in 1660-1662, which as A. G. Matthew's puts it, “resulted in the rise of organised Dissent, which has been and still is a notable actor in English religious life.”[\[38\]](#)

The ejection was not in some ways a secession, a voluntary leaving of the established church on a point of principle or theology. Technically, it was a legally enforced removal by way of a change of subscription standards. The impetus to divide did not come from the leavers, but from the remainers, so to speak. Yet its effect was more structurally disruptive and permanent than any voluntary secession.

Everything changed with the Toleration Act of 1689, which permitted legal toleration of non-Anglican churches on the basis that their ministers subscribe to most of the Thirty-nine Articles.<sup>[39]</sup> This is essentially what the Puritans had tried to achieve in Parliament in 1571 with An Act to Reform Certain Disorders touching Ministers of the Church, which prescribed assent “to all the articles of religion, which only concern the confession of the true Christian faith and the doctrine of the sacraments.”

Where you draw the boundaries and how you set subscription can have a huge impact. If the Puritans had been successful in 1571, the civil war may never have happened.

## The Non-Jurors

A significant group of Anglicans left the established church because of the accession of William and Mary in 1688, which they thought was illegal. They were known as the Non-Jurors, because they could not swear an oath to the new monarchs. This was a serious institutional split. The non-jurors counted among their number the Archbishop of Canterbury himself, and 8 other diocesan bishops, several of whom had also stood up to James II when he had declared toleration for Roman Catholics.<sup>[40]</sup> There were also about 400 clergy. In 1690 they were deprived and deposed. The

Episcopal Church of Scotland was almost entirely nonjuring as well, since it sided with the Jacobite cause politically.

It didn't take long before there was a split in 1717 over the proposed introduction of the mixed chalice, prayers of epiclesis and eucharistic oblation or "offering to God", prayers for the dead and so on, which some wanted to include in the Non-Jurors' new Book of Common Prayer. Non-juring clergy and congregations declined throughout the eighteenth century, especially as the cause of the Stuart dynasty to which it had become attached also declined. It practically died out when Cardinal Henry Benedict Stuart became the Stuart heir in 1788—though not before the non-juring Scottish Episcopal Church had consecrated the first American bishop, Samuel Seabury in 1784. The story of how the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America became TEC, is for another day. But note the connection.[\[41\]](#)

Around 1720, some Non-Jurors were seeking to affiliate with the Orthodox churches of the East, in an interesting attempt to provide international back-up to what you could say was their principled movement against pragmatic politics in the church. Some Non-Jurors such as Thomas Ken and William Law were quite influential, through their writings.[\[42\]](#) William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728) was extremely influential among early Methodists and evangelicals, as well as Cardinal Newman.

## Methodists and Evangelicals

There isn't space to consider the Methodist schism in any great detail. Needless to say that the vast majority of English evangelicals in the 18th century were firmly and decidedly Church of England. As I have shown

elsewhere, George Whitefield was keen to demonstrate how Anglican his doctrine was,[\[43\]](#) and others such as Augustus Toplady, William Romaine, and James Hervey were also solidly Reformed and positively Anglican.[\[44\]](#)

John Wesley was not Reformed in his theological convictions at all, as I have recently demonstrated.[\[45\]](#) But he rejected the idea and tactic of secession because, he said, “the experiment has been so frequently tried already, and the success has never lived up to the expectation.”[\[46\]](#) In this he was no doubt correct. Nevertheless, he decided to break from the Church of England by ordaining ministers himself, for America in 1784. This irregular act eventually led to an entirely separate denomination of Methodists. At the time of Wesley’s death there were over 500 Methodist preachers in the British colonies and the United States.[\[47\]](#) Total membership of the Methodist societies in Britain was recorded as 56,000 in 1791, rising to 360,000 in 1836 and 1,463,000 by the national census of 1851. Today it is a worldwide denomination, although declining in the UK and USA.

Secession doesn’t always grow that way. In the 17th century many who left the Church of England ended up as Unitarians, especially those who were decidedly against systematic theology, creeds, and confessions and wanted to only talk about and study the Bible. They soon dwindled in number. In the 18th century, the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion was also detached, along with some Methodists.[\[48\]](#)

In the 19th century, various individuals left the Church of England because they didn’t like infant baptism. The Free Church of England people began to leave, to try and secure a purified and free “true Anglicanism”, in the middle of the nineteenth century.[\[49\]](#) In the 20th century, with the influence of Martyn Lloyd-Jones and others, some left the Church of England for Congregationalism and other nonconformist groups in the 1960s and 1970s.[\[50\]](#) When John Stott addressed the Church Society conference in 1965 he said,

*Some evangelicals of the Free Churches are talking of seceding from their different Churches in order to form a United Evangelical Church. I, for one, ardently hope they will not do so. I believe that history as well as Scripture is against them, and I am quite sure that they would not carry more than a small handful of Anglican Evangelicals with them.*[\[51\]](#)

Part of Stott's biblical argument was that "the remnant was within the Church not outside it."[\[52\]](#)

His prediction was right: there was never more than a gentle drip of evangelicals leaving the Church of England for nonconformity (about 20 between 1964-1974),[\[53\]](#) though some of them were influential.[\[54\]](#) Some years later, after the ordination of women was passed in 1992, the Church of England (Continuing) was formed. This attempted a structural solution to secession, though again, it did not attract many to leave.

Where are they now? Thinking of those who left in the 18th century, about 1000 people meet each week still in the Countess of Huntingdon's churches. From the 19th century secessions, the Free Church of England is still around, though it is still small, and generally much more high church than many evangelicals would be comfortable with; indeed, two bishops and ten evangelical congregations within it formed an internally dissenting Evangelical Connexion in 2003. Of those who left the established church in the 20th century, the Church of England (Continuing) may not continue for very much longer. It has less than a handful of congregations faithfully soldiering on with the King James Version and the 1662 Prayer Book. There are also a few ministers still going of the 20 or so who left the Church of England after Martyn Lloyd-Jones called for more evangelical unity in the 1960s. I met one recently who had once been a curate at our church in Cambridge, and he was still pleased that he had made that move. God seemed to have blessed his later ministry.

Much good gospel work was done by seceders, and some felt liberated by their uncoupling from the established church. They took a stand as their consciences dictated, and because of how they saw things going in the national church. It is neither right nor safe to act against conscience, as Martin Luther once famously said! God alone is Lord of the conscience, as the Westminster Confession declares (chapter 20). The fact that not many joined the later secessionists, in comparison to Methodism or the Non-Juror group for example, does not mean their work was a “failure” or insignificant in the eyes of God, whose “power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).<sup>[55]</sup> Yet it does indicate that for something to last beyond the lifetime of charismatic and energetic leaders, an institutional structure and a critical mass of individuals (including bishops) seems to be necessary. I say this as a historical observation, and a recommendation for those who would secede well, not as a command against it or any kind of value judgment. Whether it is a wise course of action or not in any particular circumstance, lasting secession seems to require planned institutional succession.

I’m not sure anyone can blame those wanting to start out from scratch away from the Church of England, when we can all see a lamentable credibility gap between the rhetoric of careful synodical statements and the incessant official frowns (and worse) which many of us have had to endure. Sensitive and insecure critics within the establishment may like to keep that in mind when they struggle to tolerate these enterprising souls, some of whom are labouring in places where less than 1% of people currently go to church. The most important thing is that Christ is proclaimed, and in that we rejoice!

However, the “Chexit dividend” may not be as great as some imagine. I still think there is wisdom in what J. C. Ryle said, after a spate of secessions in his day:

*It is not so sure as it seems that we mend matters by leaving the Church of England. Every man knows the faults of his own house,*

*but he never knows the faults of another till he moves into it, and then perhaps he finds he is worse off than he was before his move. There are often smoky chimneys, and bad drains, and draughts, and doors that will not shut, and windows that will not open, in No. 2 as well as in No. 1. All is not perfect among Dissenters and Plymouth Brethren. We may find to our cost, if we join them in disgust with the Church of England, that we have only changed one sort of evil for another, and that the chimney smokes in chapel as well as in church... So long as we have truth, liberty, and an unaltered Confession of faith in the Church of England, so long I am convinced that the way of patience is much better than the way of secession.”* [\[56\]](#)

The case for remaining is still strong. [\[57\]](#)

## Conclusions

Briefly, then, as I close, here are 12 conclusions we may draw from the history of Anglican secessions:

1. There have always been some who leave, for reasons of conscience, theology, or strategy.
2. There have always been good people who stayed.
3. Infant baptism was often an issue, or other issues such as Arminianism.
4. So were alternative ecclesiologies (Presbyterian, Congregationalist) which suggested secession.

5. Leavers can accuse remainers of a lack of courage.
6. Remaining is not an easy life, and remainers often agree with leavers about the parlous state of the C of E.
7. Leaving is not easy, especially in terms of succession, unity, and long-term institution building.
8. The cause of leaving will not always be straightforward, but may separate friends and allies.
9. Conscience and strategic judgment may lead people with similar theology to do different things.
10. We must be wary of any changes to de facto or de jure standards of subscription.
11. There's a cost to secession.
12. Secession can undermine the stand of those who stay.

Should we stay or should we go? Well, this chapter is only about the history. The future is something else and, unlike some, I claim no prophetic gift or special spiritual insight about that!

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