

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO? THE ANGLICAN DILEMMA OF ARTHUR HILDERSHAM AND FRANCIS JOHNSON¹

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This study of two ministers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth Centuries explores differing responses to residual ‘corruptions’ in the Church of England: neither minister would fully conform, but while Johnson ended up promoting separation, Hildersham soldiered on under various forms of ecclesiastical persecution to do the best he could to pastor his flock.

Introduction: a Shared Background

In the late 1570s and early 1580s, two young men, Arthur Hildersham and Francis Johnson, were fellow students at Christ’s College, Cambridge.² Born within a year of each other, they had much in common. Both were excellent students, who loved the Bible and pure doctrine. Both favoured reform of the church and Cartwrightian church polity.³ Both became ministers of the Church of England and Cambridge fellows. It is very likely that the two became friends at Cambridge, but, in any case, they would certainly have been well-acquainted.

After 1587, when Hildersham left Cambridge, their paths separated, but ran parallel. Both men soon found themselves in trouble with the authorities for their reformist views. Hildersham was convened before the High Commission for ‘subversive preaching without orders or licence,’ and a formal submission, dated 10 January 1588, was prepared for his signature.⁴ As a result of his failure to sign this inculpatory document,

¹ Much of the material for this article is drawn from my PhD thesis, ‘The Worlds of Arthur Hildersham (1563–1632),’ (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2009), pp. 204–210 and pp. 246–252. It also appears in my book, *The Life and Times of Arthur Hildersham: Prince Among Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013).

² Details of Francis Johnson’s life can be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004–2008) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/printable/14877>, accessed 29/01/2014].

³ Thomas Cartwright, author of the *Second Admonition to the Parliament*, was the leading Elizabethan advocate of church reform, and had been Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge until his dismissal in 1570.

⁴ For the text of Hildersham’s ‘recantation,’ see Albert Peel, ed., *The Seconde Part of a Register* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), Vol. II, pp. 259–260. Obviously at some point Hildersham must have submitted himself to episcopal ordination: he explains his reasons for so doing to Mrs N (see below), and discusses

Hildersham was suspended and banned from preaching from June 1590 to January 1591. Johnson, who had remained in Cambridge, delivered a sermon in Great St Mary's in January 1589 advocating presbyterian church government and discipline, which attracted the wrath of the ecclesiastical authorities. When Johnson refused the controversial *ex officio* oath (dreaded by puritans because it was used to make them incriminate themselves), he was imprisoned. His continued non-compliance led to his expulsion from the university in 1590.⁵

Subsequent to their respective brushes with the authorities, Hildersham pursued his ministry in the Leicestershire market town of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, under the godly patronage of the Third Earl of Huntingdon, and Johnson served a spell as minister to the English church of the Merchant Adventurers in Middelburg, the Netherlands. Geographical distance in Johnson's case, and a powerful patron in Hildersham's, afforded some measure of protection. However, at this stage both men were firmly committed to the Church of England and strong opponents of separatism.

What is a True Church?

Puritan hopes of church reform had suffered setbacks in the 1580s when Archbishop Whitgift headed a drive for greater uniformity. In the early 1590s, therefore, the debate intensified on what constituted a true church and if it was right to separate from the Church of England. Those seeking a biblical answer to their dissatisfaction with the state of the church conferred with each other, and circulated manuscripts setting out their views. Johnson summed up the situation: 'Great desire is there in this day, about the ministry of the Church of England, whether it be the same that Christ hath ordained in his Testament, or another. And many by conference, some also by writing, have controverted this question.'⁶ A key text for interpretation in this debate was Matthew 18:17 ('Tell it unto the Church'—*Dic ecclesiae*), which focused on the location of authority in the church. Was an episcopal system biblically legitimate, or should authority reside in presbyteries or local congregations? Henry Barrow, one of the leading separatists, outlined his views in *A Plaine Refutation* (Dort, 1591).⁷ Johnson was responsible for the confiscation and burning

the wording of his licence with fellow nonconformist Humphrey Fenn, see British Library Add. MS 4275 f. 223 (undated).

⁵ For more on this episode, see Peter Lake, 'The Dilemma of the Establishment Puritan: the Cambridge Heads and the Case of Francis Johnson and Cuthbert Bainbrigg,' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 29:1 (1978), pp. 23–35.

⁶ Francis Johnson, 'The Preface,' in *A Treatise of the Ministry of the Church of England* (Low Countries?, 1595), hereafter, *Treatise*.

⁷ Reprinted in Leland H. Carlson, ed., *The Writings of Henry Barrow 1590–1591* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), p. 140. Francis Johnson also later wrote

of all but two copies of the first edition of this work (and one on the same theme by John Greenwood) in Holland in 1591. But a reading of one of the surviving copies engaged his interest, and he returned to London to confer with the separatist leaders. As a result of these discussions, Johnson embraced the Barrowist position in April 1592, and in September was elected as the pastor of the newly-formed London separatist church. By early December, Johnson had been arrested and sent to the Fleet prison, where he remained for more than four years. Separatism was an illegal and dangerous course to take. In 1593, the separatist leaders Barrow, Greenwood and Penry were executed.

During the years of Johnson's imprisonment in London, Hildersham was ostensibly treading a more conventional road. In 1593, after six years as lecturer, he had been presented to the vacant vicarage at Ashby-de-la-Zouch, on the death of the incumbent, Thomas Widdowes. His ministry was uncompromisingly evangelical in tone, and there were many conversions. But shortly the paths of Johnson and Hildersham were to cross directly once more.

A Correspondence Debating Separatism

Hildersham received a letter, in 1594 or 1595, from a lady calling herself 'Mrs N,' a gentlewoman imprisoned for her separatist convictions.⁸ The lady appealed to Hildersham for his views on the validity of the Church of England's ministry, and explained her own 'faith and practice.'⁹ Mrs N may have had genuine doubts about her own position, in which case Hildersham would have been an obvious person from whom to seek spiritual advice. The only reason given for his selection is that he was 'a minister and very learned,' which could equally have applied to many others. Nevertheless, Hildersham's reputation as a 'peaceable' man, renowned in godly circles for settling 'cases of conscience,' may have influenced the lady into thinking that she would receive a sympathetic

a book on the same text: *A Short Treatise concerning the Words of Christ, 'Tell the Church'* (Amsterdam?, 1611).

⁸ A group of Johnson's congregation had been arrested in March 1593. A list of fifty-two separatists, who were examined in March and April 1593, is given in Leland H. Carlson, ed., *The Writings of John Greenwood and Henry Barrow 1591–1593* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970), pp. 293–294. Only one of those listed is a woman, Katherine Unwin (or Onyon, Onnyon, Owin, Unyon or Unwen), a thirty-five year old widow from Allgate, who may or may not be 'Mrs N.' Another version of Unwin's story can be found in Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research (1550–1641)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), Vol. I, p. 128 and Vol. II, pp. 30–31.

⁹ Hildersham's response to Mrs N (and Johnson's response to Hildersham), is reproduced in Johnson, *Treatise*.

hearing. It is possible, too, that Mrs N may have had an earlier connection with Christ Church, Newgate, where Hildersham's mentor, Richard Greenham, was minister from 1591.

However, it is also possible that Mrs N's approach to Hildersham was a tactical gambit: Hildersham may well have been targeted by the separatists as a potential recruit. He was, after all, one of the so-called 'forward preachers' to whom many of the separatists attributed their initial interest in further reformation, and his own recent trouble with the High Commissioners could have encouraged them to think that he might be feeling some disaffection for the establishment.¹⁰ Johnson, who had hopes 'more specially' of Hildersham, based on 'the good things I know to be in him,' might conceivably have prompted Mrs N to write her letter.¹¹

If the lady's letter itself was not sufficient to convince Hildersham of the veracity of separatism, then Johnson's ensuing learned arguments were designed to clinch the case. As we have seen, Johnson himself, until recently resolutely opposed to separatism, had been persuaded by the ratiocinations of Barrow and Greenwood. By similar means, then, of reasoned, written, scriptural debate, Johnson hoped to win over Hildersham, a man he professed 'howsoever in these controversies of religion we do in judgment or practice differ one from another, yet for the knowledge I have of him, and the good gifts God hath given him, I do and shall always love him in the Lord,' and who, he believed, 'erreth of ignorance and not of malice.'¹²

Johnson's central syllogism of the treatise is:

Whosoever he be that dealeth with the holy things of God and worketh upon the consciences of men, by virtue of an Antichristian power office and calling, him the people of God ought not to receive and join themselves unto. But all the ministers that stand over the Church-assemblies in England, deal with the holy things of God and work upon men's consciences, by virtue of an Antichristian power office and calling: Therefore the people of God ought not to receive them, or join themselves unto them.¹³

In other words, the unscriptural nature of the office and calling of the Church of England's ministry necessitated a separation from it. The

¹⁰ For details of the 'forward preaching' cited by the separatists in their examinations, see Carlson, ed., *Writings of Greenwood*, pp. 317, 320, 333, 337, 349, 355, 359, 376, 379, 384. Although Hildersham is not named specifically, many of these preachers were his close friends.

¹¹ Johnson, *Treatise*, p. 2.

¹² Johnson, *Treatise*, pp. 2, 4.

¹³ Johnson, 'The Preface' to *Treatise*.

separatists required a true church to have a proper polity or discipline to make it valid.

In Hildersham's reply to Mrs N, we find Hildersham espousing what Webster has called 'the pre-Bucerian doctrine of the church,' which required only two defining marks of a true church, right doctrine and proper administration of the sacraments.¹⁴ Proper discipline, while desirable, was not foundational. While Hildersham admitted that 'divers corruptions remain in our church which were derived to us from the Papists,' yet he argued that they were 'not of that nature that can make it an Antichristian church.'¹⁵ He distinguished between doctrine and discipline, stressing that if the former was sound, then a church could not be condemned as false. Later, he emphasised the point even more strongly: 'those assemblies that enjoy the Word and Doctrine of salvation, though they have many corruptions remaining in them are to be acknowledged the true Churches of God, and such as none of the faithful may make separation from.'¹⁶ Evangelical preaching, then, which expounded biblical doctrine, was the real key to assessing the status of any church. As Hildersham rebuked Mrs N, 'If our pastors offer to lead you unto salvation through no other door than Christ, how dare you that say you are Christ's refuse to be guided by them.'¹⁷ For Hildersham, the gift of gospel preaching was a sign that God was gracing an assembly with his presence, and 'till God has forsaken a Church, no man may forsake it.'¹⁸ The Word was never granted merely to harden or bring people to judgment, but 'to work the salvation of some.'¹⁹ For this reason, Hildersham argued, the so-called 'Brownists' (named after Robert Browne, an early separatist leader) were wrong to separate from the Church of England. If the candlestick of God's presence, represented by preaching, was withdrawn, it would be another matter. Johnson, for his part, refuted this position, arguing that the absence of a proper scriptural church order in the English church prevented the transmission of true doctrine. In fact, said Johnson, it was specious to make a distinction between teaching and governance.

Hildersham also defended other aspects of the Church of England's constitution and ministry to Mrs N. In response to her contention that 'all the ministers in England work upon the consciences of men by virtue of an Antichristian office and calling,' Hildersham's fundamental premise was that the office of priesthood in the English church, despite the popish connotations of the title 'priest,' was 'the very same in substance with

¹⁴ Tom Webster, *Godly Clergy in Early Stuart England: The Caroline Puritan Movement c. 1620-1643* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 294.

¹⁵ Johnson, *Treatise*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁶ Arthur Hildersham, *Lectures upon the Fourth of John* (2d ed.; 1632), p. 165.

¹⁷ Johnson, *Treatise*, p. 17.

¹⁸ Hildersham, *Lectures upon John*, p. 166.

¹⁹ Hildersham, *Lectures upon John*, p. 170.

the Pastor's office described in the Word.' It differed from the Roman priesthood 'as much...as light from darkness.'²⁰ He pointed to the biblical functions of preaching, teaching, admonishing, and administering the sacraments that the English priesthood exercised and were established by law in England. For Hildersham, then, this was a mere problem of nomenclature, which could be avoided by using the biblical terms pastor or minister (as was his own practice). Johnson disagreed, and set out a lengthy comparison of the English priestly office with both the Roman Catholic priesthood and the scriptural pastorship. His conclusion was that the English and the Roman priesthoods were essentially the same.

Another issue raised by Mrs N was the manner in which ministers were called to office. With reference to the *Ordinal*, Hildersham endeavoured to show her that 'our Law agreeth with the law of God,' in that candidates had to demonstrate their ability to teach, be approved of by 'the people and flock,' and be admitted before a 'solemn assembly.' He does concede, however, that 'there is great want in our Church in the execution of these things: but that is the fault of the men, not the calling.'²¹ Hildersham did not seek to defend the office of bishop, but instead offered a personal account of 'what perswadeth me to think that the calling I have received from them is not wicked and unlawful.'²² His reasoning, which is complex and involved, was based on parliament (representing people throughout the kingdom) committing the power to ordain ministers to the bishops. Thus, although the bishops often let the side down by being incapable of exercising the power committed to them, this did not negate the authority vested in the church itself. Clearly, for Hildersham, it was better to live within a flawed system, for the sake of preaching the gospel.

The Letters go Viral

Johnson, who obviously thought he had won the doctrinal argument, published Hildersham's letter and his response to it in 1595, without Hildersham's knowledge or permission. However, Hildersham's supporters felt that Johnson had made a great mistake in so doing; John Cotton claimed that Hildersham had dealt the separatist 'cause such a deadly wound in open view, as neither himself [Johnson] nor all his associates can be able to heal.'²³ On the basis of this publication, Andrew Willet, a conformist puritan, dubbed Hildersham 'the hammer of the

²⁰ Johnson, *Treatise*, pp. 79, 94.

²¹ Johnson, *Treatise*, p. 106.

²² Johnson, *Treatise*, p. 117.

²³ John Cotton, 'To the Godly Reader,' in Hildersham, *Lectures upon John*.

schismatics.²⁴ These judgments are, of course, polemical, for neither side was unbiased.

By 1595, Hildersham and Johnson had adopted positions regarding the Church of England which they were to hold for the rest of their lives. There was no easy answer for people of conscience to the problem of a national church with remaining corruptions and a hierarchy that demanded uniformity, and the different routes chosen by the two men brought their own difficulties. It is important to remember that at this stage there was much fluidity, and movement both ways. Separatism and nonseparatism were not watertight compartments, and confessional positions had not yet hardened. Those concerned continued to recognise each other as fellow believers (Hildersham addressed Mrs N as one 'whom I take to be a sister'), and there was ongoing dialogue, despite profound disagreements.²⁵

Johnson's Path after 1595

Both Johnson and Hildersham suffered persecution, hardship and misunderstanding as a result of their ecclesiastical choices. After his release from prison in 1597, Johnson and his brother George sailed for the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St Lawrence but this venture proved unsuccessful, and by September they had arrived in Amsterdam to join the rest of their exiled congregation. The Ancient Separatist church of Amsterdam was formed. However, quarrels and disagreements dogged the church. Some of these were of a personal and family nature, involving the two brothers and criticism of Francis's wife. Others were over church practice. No doubt the contentious personality of Johnson himself was a contributory factor, but the stress of being exiles and outside the law should also not be underestimated. These people were in uncharted waters. In 1603, Johnson and some of the brethren returned to England to petition the new king for toleration and requesting conference with the bishops, but James refused.

Johnson continued to write controversial and polemical works defending the separatist cause and attacking the Church of England: *An Answer to Maister H[enry] Jacob* was published in 1600, *An Apology or Defence* in 1604, *Certayne reasons and arguments proving that it is not lawfull to heare or have any spirituall communion with the present ministerie of the Church of England* in 1608. In 1610 a correspondence with the Church of England minister John Carpenter, in which Johnson

²⁴ Cotton, 'To the Godly Reader.' Willet coined this epithet in his Dedicatory Epistle to his *An Harmonie Upon the First [and Second] Book of Samuel* (Cambridge, 1614).

²⁵ Johnson, *Treatise*, p. 1.

condemned the use of set prayers in the liturgy, was issued as *Quaestrio de precibus et leiturgiis*.

Recurrent factionalism disturbed the Amsterdam congregation, and in 1608 a breakaway took place, led by John Smyth (another graduate of Christ's College, Cambridge), who had espoused Baptist principles. As Smyth recognised no other church or ministry as valid, he consequently re-baptised himself and his followers. Interestingly, in 1606, before he left England, but after he had accepted separatism, Smyth had participated with Hildersham and others in a conference at the Coventry home of Isabel, Lady Bowes, where the matter for discussion was 'about withdrawing from true churches, Ministers, and Worship corrupted.'²⁶ Despite the differences of opinion, relationships between the participants appear to have remained cordial, with Smyth later recording, 'I praised God for the quiet and peaceable conference.'²⁷

Shaken by Smyth's schism, Johnson turned his pen to denouncing anabaptism. He also now avowed that ultimate authority in a church should be exercised by the elders, rather than the congregation, as he had previously taught. This in turn caused further bitter division within his church, and Henry Ainsworth led another secession in 1610. The Johnsonians lost a lawsuit over ownership of the congregation's meeting-house, and subsequently moved to Emden in Germany, returning to Amsterdam in 1617, where Johnson died, and was buried on 10 January 1618.

Hildersham's Path after 1595

If choosing separatism had been fraught with difficulties for Johnson, preferring nonseparatism led to another set of problems for Hildersham. Despite being dubbed the 'hammer of the schismatics,' he was denounced by the High Commission in 1616 as 'a schismatical person, and a Schismatic...the prime Ring-leader of all the schismatical persons in that country, both of the Clergy and Laity.'²⁸ Obviously by this stage, Hildersham was regarded with severe disapprobation by the ecclesiastical authorities; indeed, in that same court pronouncement, he was excommunicated, heavily fined, degraded from the ministry and sentenced

²⁶ John Smyth, cited in Leslie Stephen, ed., *Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1889), Vol. xviii, p. 476. For more details of the conference, see Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, p. 229. For more on Lady Isabel Bowes, see Christine M. Newman, "'An Honourable and Elect Lady': the Faith of Isabel, Lady Bowes," in *Life and Thought in the Northern Church* (ed. Diana Wood; Studies in Church History, Subsidia 12, Woodbridge, 1999), p. 414.

²⁷ John Smyth, *Paralleles, Censures, Observations* (Middelburg, 1609), p. 129.

²⁸ Samuel Clarke, 'The Life of Master Arthur Hildersam,' in his *A Generall Martyrologie* (1660), p. 380.

to imprisonment. He only avoided the latter by going into hiding. How could someone who regarded himself as a loyal servant of the Church of England get to this point?

From the outset of his ministry Hildersham had been a ceremonial nonconformist, his conscience not permitting him to accept anything for which he could not find scriptural warrant: 'the written word of God only is to be the rule of our life and religion,' he affirmed.²⁹ In his Will, he declared, 'I do continue and end my days in the very same faith and judgement, touching all points of Religion, as I have ever been known to hold and profess, and which I have both by my doctrine and practice, and by my sufferings also given testimony unto.'³⁰ Samuel Clarke calls him a 'constant Non-conformist.'³¹ At the beginning of James I's reign, the requirements to subscribe and conform were renewed in the canons of 1604, and leading nonconformists like Hildersham became targets for the ensuing episcopal campaign. He was deprived of his vicarage in 1605 by the Bishop of Lincoln, William Chaderton. By this juncture, the puritans had powerful opponents in the church and there is little doubt that Hildersham was singled out for their attentions. He had also attracted the king's displeasure: 'he is a person, whom his highness hath particularly in observation,' Archbishop Abbot, a personal friend of Hildersham, wrote in February 1613.³²

The reasons for this can be traced as far back as Hildersham's involvement with the puritan exorcism movement of the 1590s and his friendship with John Darrell. Anti-puritans, led by Bishop (later Archbishop) Richard Bancroft and Samuel Harsnett had used this episode to discredit the participants and outlaw the practice of unlicensed exorcism.³³ Hildersham's leadership in 1603 of the puritan Millenary Petition had drawn him to James's notice, and although its requests were moderately framed, his very involvement was sufficient for the king to object to his participation in the Hampton Court Conference. In the celebrated case of Edward Wightman, the last person to be burned for heresy in England in 1612, the principle of guilt by association was applied, in what turned out to be a polemical field-day for the enemies

²⁹ Hildersham, in Johnson, *Treatise*, p. 1

³⁰ Leicestershire Record Office, Leicestershire Wills, Ashby no. 77.

³¹ Clarke, 'Life of Hildersham,' p. 381.

³² Microfiche: Hastings Collection of Manuscripts from the Huntington Library, Part One: Correspondence 1477-1701, Letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury to Henry, Earl of Huntingdon, dated 2 February 1613.

³³ For more on puritan exorcism, see Thomas Freeman, 'Demons, Deviance and Defiance: John Darrell and the Politics of Exorcism in late Elizabethan England,' in *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church c. 1560-1660* (eds. Peter Lake and Michael Questier; Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), pp. 129-156, and Marion Gibson, *Possession, Puritanism and Print: Darrell, Harsnett, Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Exorcism Controversy* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006).

of puritanism, notably Bishop Richard Neile and the young William Laud.³⁴ Hildersham was accused of being the source of Wightman's soul-sleeping heresy: Wightman claimed at one point that he had learned the unorthodox doctrine from Hildersham's lectures at Burton-on-Trent. At Wightman's trial in Lichfield Cathedral, Hildersham denied the charges and was clearly exonerated of any blame, but the polemical mud thrown by his enemies stuck. In 1613, he was banned from preaching, and the exercises at Repton and Burton (of which he was a leading light) were proscribed. In the following year, despite being ill with a fever at the time, Hildersham was accused of leading a protest of about a hundred parishioners who refused to kneel to receive the Lord's Supper.³⁵ This led to an enquiry by the High Commissioners, resulting in Hildersham's severe sentence. Twelve years of complete silencing for Hildersham only ended on the death of James I in 1625. Within months, Hildersham was reinstated, and allowed to preach again in Ashby, when he delivered eight Fast sermons, and his great series of 152 Lectures on Psalm 51. This final seven years of ministry was interrupted by an eighteen-month suspension for refusal to wear the cap and surplice when lecturing. Hildersham died in March 1632, and was buried in the chancel of the parish church. The entry in the parish register records that Hildersham was 'a worthy and faithful servant of God—a famous Divine and a painful preacher, the comfort of God's people in his time.' Beside the entry is written simply 'Minister of Ashby.'³⁶

Committed to the Church of England

Hildersham would not have chosen to be marginalised or controversial. It was the church that forced him into that position, by moving the ecclesiastical goalposts. If he had felt able to conform, even partially or occasionally, as some puritans did, things would undoubtedly have been easier for him. Nevertheless, he was firmly committed to the Church of England, telling an assembly in Ashby in December 1628 that,

³⁴ For the case of Wightman, see Ian Atherton and David Como, 'The Burning of Edward Wightman: Puritanism, Prelacy and the Politics of Heresy in Early Modern England,' *English Historical Review*, 120:489 (2005), pp. 1215–1250, and Rowe, 'The Worlds of Arthur Hildersham,' pp. 256–280, and Rowe, *The Life and Times of Arthur Hildersham: Prince among Puritans*, pp. 93–100.

³⁵ See Christopher Haigh, 'The Troubles of Thomas Pestell: Parish Squabbles and Ecclesiastical Politics in Caroline England,' *Journal of British Studies*, 41 (Oct. 2002), pp. 403–428.

³⁶ Leicestershire Record Office, DE 1013/1 (Parish Register for St Helen's, Ashby, Burials 1561–1671).

I testify, and confidently avouch and protest unto you, that Doctrine and religion which hath (through the marvellous goodness of God) been taught in this famous and orthodox Church of England, now by the space of these seventy years, and in the profession whereof we all now stand, is the only true doctrine and religion of Christ. Because it only giveth the whole glory of man's salvation unto God's free grace in Christ, but it abaseth man, and giveth him no matter of boasting or glorying at all.³⁷

The Church of England had rejected him, but he had not rejected it. However, its actions caused him to suffer greatly, as he wrote despairingly to his relative Lady Barrington during his final suspension in 1628, four years before his death: 'Now is the time come wherein not myself only but all of my judgment are cast out as men utterly unprofitable and unfit to [give] God any further service in his church.'³⁸

Even his firm commitment to the English church appeared to waver at times, or at least he seemed open to other possibilities. In 1616, elders from the English church in Leiden, Holland, approached him with an invitation to serve as their pastor. This was at a time when he was suspended, already silenced for three years with no foreseeable prospect of reinstatement. Clarke says that he would have accepted, 'had not his wife's unwillingness to go over the seas, retained him here.'³⁹ When many nonconformists were considering emigration to the New World in the 1620s as an escape from their difficulties with the church authorities, some appealed to Hildersham (by now an elder statesman of puritanism) for advice. Francis Higginson was reportedly told by Hildersham that 'Were I a younger man and under your case and call, I would think I had a plain invitation of Heaven unto the voyage.'⁴⁰ The implication was that Hildersham only ruled out this option for himself because of his age. As it was, Hildersham made the most of any gospel opportunities that remained open to him, so that what was said of a later ejected nonconformist minister could equally well be applied to Hildersham: he continued to live among his people to his dying day, 'doing what he could when he might not do what he would.'⁴¹

³⁷ Arthur Hildersham, *CLII Lectures upon Psalm LI* (1635), p. 525. See also p. 110.

³⁸ British Library Egerton MS 2645, f. 156.

³⁹ Clarke, 'Life of Hildersham,' p. 381.

⁴⁰ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, cited in Sidney Perley, *The History of Salem Massachusetts* (Salem, 1924), Vol. 1, p. 108.

⁴¹ Cited in J.B. Williams, *The Lives of Philip and Matthew Henry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), p. 271. This was written of Rowland Nevet of Oswestry.

Conclusion

The stories of Francis Johnson and Arthur Hildersham show that in Elizabethan and early Stuart England there was no single or easy trajectory of response to the problems of a church but ‘halfly reformed.’ These two men demonstrate that fellow believers who continued to recognise each other as such, could have differing opinions on matters of judgment and could take different courses. Some chose conformity, while others, like Henry Jacob, preferred the half-way house of semi-separatism. Some removed themselves geographically to the Continent or the New World in order to worship according to their consciences. The danger of bitter division amongst true Christians was very real, so that Hildersham felt the need to stress that ‘Howsoever we cannot agree in judgment, yet should we love one another, and be glad to embrace one another’s acquaintance.’⁴² As Hildersham’s seventeenth century biographer put it, ‘Such was his ingenuity and Christian charity, that he respected, esteemed, and was very familiar with those he knew to be religious and learned, though of another judgment.’⁴³ Ironically, this very spirit of gracious irenicism which led to his association with separatists and semi-separatists, and his readiness to accept them as brethren, allowed his enemies within the Church of England wilfully to misconstrue his actions and to label him as a dangerous radical. Separatists, for their part, felt that men like Hildersham should follow their convictions to their logical conclusion and leave the church. Jacobethan nonseparating nonconformity was a fine line to tread, attacked from both sides. Perhaps it could be considered the real *via media*?

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⁴² Hildersham, *Lectures upon John*, p. 302.

⁴³ Clarke, ‘Life of Hildersham,’ p. 381.