

Foreword

Within the diverse mosaic of Evangelical Nonconformity, Independent Methodists have been particularly marked by internal variety. Their chapels had different origins, often through schism from other denominations, and held contrasting attitudes on a range of issues. Displaying much of the sturdy individualism of the North of England, where most of their congregations were planted, they were often few in number but strong in conviction. The members of the Bolton church, formed early in 1820, reported to the annual meeting later the same year that they were already making solid progress. 'Our beginning was but small, only ten in number, but we are now increased threefold; may we be like a threefold cord, not to be easily broken by either men or devils.'¹ The Independent Methodists of Bolton were certainly not broken, creating one of the most flourishing causes in the connexion. Their comment, however, has an application to the whole body, for Independent Methodism was woven from three strands.

First, it was intensely Methodist. The movement was ablaze with the evangelistic fire of the Wesleyans. Its doctrines were those taught by John Wesley and expressed in the hymnody of his brother Charles. Independent Methodists were Arminian in theology, believing that all might be saved, and long upheld the possibility of attaining entire sanctification on earth. They possessed the distinctive features of Methodist organisation. There were class meetings, lovefeasts and preachers' plans; there were circuits, districts and a conference, usually called the annual meeting. Developments during the nineteenth century generally reflected those in the larger Methodist denominations whose ethos they shared – a broadening of theology, an endorsement of temperance and an identification with political Liberalism.

Secondly, however, members of the connexion differed from other Methodists in their system of church government. They were resolutely independent, insisting that each congregation was solely in charge of its

own affairs. Adhesion to a circuit was a voluntary act; no external authority might interfere in the internal life of a congregation. In 1815 they declared that each church was 'independent of any canon laws, or of any Conference, or any other Church whatever of the same persuasion'.² This characteristic made them close to the Congregationalists and Baptists, who both maintained the same principle of local ecclesiastical autonomy. It was towards the Baptists that they gravitated when, at the opening of the twenty-first century, they decided to forge a fresh denominational identity. They were called 'Independent' for good reason.

In the third place, Independent Methodists repudiated any payment for preachers. This practice was often the fruit of acute poverty, for the movement originally recruited heavily among the dispossessed. The policy of giving no salaries, however, was part of a broader principle that, since every believer was called to ministry, there should be no clerical distinction among them. The rejection of a 'hireling ministry' aligned them with the Brethren and Churches of Christ, but it was also associated with convictions that approximated to those of the Quakers. Since nobody was excluded from ministry, women as well as men had access to all church offices. Other Quaker-like features such as a strong strain of pacifism made for easy co-operation with the Society of Friends, particularly in overseas missions. The earliest society, which arose at Warrington in about 1796, was at first known as the Quaker Methodists.

For over two centuries Independent Methodists have maintained their distinctive threefold standpoint. John Dolan, one of their number, has written a comprehensive study of the movement, bringing the story down to the present day. It has entailed tracking down the primary sources, published and unpublished, for a host of autonomous chapels, many of them extinct, and making a sustained analysis of the developing trends in their corporate life. The task has been pursued with an acute awareness of the changing social and religious climate they inhabited. The resulting account is thorough, persuasive and illuminating. One of the most fascinating pieces in the Evangelical Nonconformist mosaic has now received its due.

David Bebbington

April 2005

University of Stirling

1. Stephen Rothwell, *Memorials of the Independent Methodist Chapel, Folds Road, Bolton* (Bolton: G. Winterburn, 1887), 10.
2. 'An Address to the Independent Methodist Churches', 1815, see Appendix 1, 273.