

# Foreword

In 1848 Baptist Wriothsley Noel published an *Essay on the Union of Church and State*. The book gained immediate notoriety as a sustained critique of the established status of the Church of England. Noel, himself a distinguished Anglican minister, had reached the conclusion that it was wrong to bind church and state together. The Bible, he held, condemned the principle of the blending of the spiritual with the secular in the financial and constitutional arrangements of the land. Christians should support their pastors voluntarily, and so for acts of parliament to enforce the payment of the clergy was wrong. The influence of the union of church and state was damaging because pastors could live negligent lives in security. The subject of his book, Noel explained at the outset, was ‘Whether it is the will of Christ, as deducible from the word of God, that the Christian congregations of this country should receive the salaries of their pastors from the State, and be consequently placed under its superintendence?’<sup>1</sup> His answer was a sustained and resounding no: established churches were wrong.

Noel had come to this position after agonising reflection on the practical arrangements of the day. Mission to the people of England was inhibited by the structures of its national church. In 1835 he had prepared the ground for the creation of the London City Mission, an interdenominational society designed to support door-to-door visitation of the homes of the poor in the capital. Far from welcoming the new venture, however, almost all the Anglican clergy resisted it, fearing its disregard for ‘Church principles’. The Mission employed laymen, ignored parish boundaries and entailed joint efforts with Dissenters from the Church. Noel had to defend the Mission against the scepticism of the

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<sup>1</sup>. Baptist Wriothsley Noel, *Essay on the Union of Church and State* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1848), p. 11.

Bishop of London and many others, arguing that its supporters could be loyal to the Church while employing this means of reaching the mass of the people. Noel found it dispiriting to have to vindicate an obviously effective method of evangelism against his fellows in the ministry. After another decade or so he had decided that the relations of church and state were to blame for their opposition.

Noel began his analysis from the premise that ‘there was a clear distinction between evangelical and unevangelical clergymen; between those who preach the Gospel and those who do not preach it’.<sup>2</sup> He was a major figure in the Evangelical movement within the Church of England, a rising tide during the period from the 1820s to the 1840s when he occupied one of the leading pulpits of his party in central London. He worked amicably with his Evangelical colleagues but found that even they did not generally share his enthusiasm for co-operation with other denominations in the spread of the gospel. So he came to the parting of the ways in 1848. Having published his condemnation of the establishment principle, he became a Dissenter himself. In the following year he was baptised as a believer, issued a tract and two substantial books on baptism and received a call to the pastorate of John Street Baptist Chapel, close by his former Anglican place of worship. He remained dedicated to co-operative Christian work, helping Anglicans as well as other Nonconformists in ministry, but he had taken a decisive step in seceding from the Church of England.

That was possible, as Philip Hill shows in this thorough biographical study, because he was an independent-minded man. He came from an aristocratic family and his father conducted his personal life in idiosyncratic ways. Baptist Noel himself was given to thinking out his own point of view on a vast array of issues—social, political and educational as well as religious—and frequently made his views public in books and pamphlets. He was responsible for about ninety of them during his lifetime. Towards the end of his career, for example, he published two substantial books in favour of the North in the American Civil War because he abhorred the pro-slavery stance of the South. As a gifted orator, one of the ablest preachers of his day, Noel was used to expressing himself in persuasive ways. He was also a distinctly spiritual man who, while holding strong opinions, resolutely believed in maintaining respect for opponents. ‘No religious cause’, he wrote at the end of the *Essay on the Union of Church and State*, ‘requires irreligious means for

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<sup>2</sup>. Noel, *Church and State*, p. vii.

its advancement.<sup>3</sup> By examining family papers as well as a wide range of printed sources, Philip Hill has revealed something of the temper of the man alongside his achievements. Baptist Noel was a resolute Evangelical who believed in conducting himself ‘in a Christian spirit’.<sup>4</sup>

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Stirling, January 2022

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<sup>3</sup>. Noel, *Church and State*, p. 630.

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