Alan P.F. Sell (ed.)


The ejectment being addressed in this commemorative volume celebrating its 350th anniversary is the historic response to a piece of English legislation—the Act of Uniformity in 1662—which mandated a strict and public acceptance and affirmation of the Church of England, in its theology and polity as recorded in the _Book of Common Prayer_. The response was a mass exodus (approximately one fifth of the clergy at that time) of Puritans from their ecclesial posts. This event, then, had a major impact on the nonconformist religious community in seventeenth-century England. And, for this reason, Sell’s work is much applauded. The book contains three historical chapters dealing with the details of the event, one lengthy essay (by Sell himself) dealing with the theological implications, and two helpful indices.

Beginning with chapter 1, John Gwynfor Jones establishes a helpful historical context for the topic of this book. Jones reviews the development of Puritanism between the years of 1559 and 1662, i.e. the century preceding the Great Ejectment. The Puritans in this period represented varying degrees of dissent. And over time, explains Jones, Puritanism became a kind of “sub-culture” within the Church of England.

In chapter 2, David J. Appleby provides a historical examination of the Act of Uniformity and the Great Ejectment, along with its repercussions in England. Essentially, the Puritan sub-culture of dissent would now no longer be tolerated within English professional religious life. All clergy, if they wished to remain employed, would be forced to publicly affirm and conform to the revised and highly ritualistic _Book of Common Prayer_. Moreover, this public declaration, without the slightest room for dissent, would need to be expressed in writing and dated by August 24—St. Bartholomew’s Day. Leaving the professional ministry was in no way an indication that many of these non-conformists would cease to worship according to their convictions. Although, because of the dissenting laws on the English books, many non-conformist ministers would endure a considerable amount of time imprisoned as a result of their convictions.

The effects of the Great Ejectment in Wales are considered in chapter 3 by Eryn M. White. White examines several ministers who remained active for the Puritan cause in Wales. For example, Vavasor Powell was an outspoken activist who appeared in court numerous times—viewing these occasions as opportunities to debate the conformist Protestants. Also, the Puritan cause in
Wales was fostered through the means of print. In fact, White insists that the ejected ministers in Wales had a disproportionate impact on Welsh society due largely to Stephen Hughes’s and Charles Edwards’s achievements in the area of printed media. This is particularly impressive given the fact that printing in Wales was in its infancy.

Sell concludes this anthology with a theological analysis. Sell describes Christians to be saints that “are called by the Holy Spirit through the word of the gospel of God’s prevenient grace” (247). Now, Sell argues that the previous commemorations of the ejectment lacked this pneumatological dimension, and that this understanding was the impetus which necessitated that the ejected ministers reject the impositions placed upon them. Moreover, in this pneumatological assertion, Sell apprehends and fervently promotes a kind of organic unity model, it seems, for ecumenism in the Church today—a unity that does not prevent fellowship among professing Christians whatsoever.

The historical chapters of this book are well written and will no doubt provide students with a thorough and scholarly secondary source for their studies. Furthermore, Sell’s theological deductions are articulate and extensively examined. His passion for ecumenism in the Church and the inspiration he draws from the seventeenth-century dissenters are clearly observed and appreciated. Nevertheless, there are several points of concern. To begin, Sell insists that the separatists and the later ejected dissenters had a view of catholicity (i.e., that true Christians are positioned under the lordship of Christ as a result of the Holy Spirit’s work) which caused them to reject the strictures of the established church. However, appealing to these dissenters as inspiration for organic unity, rather than spiritual unity, is less than compelling—considering the fact that the seventeenth-century dissenters and those that followed would simply not be able to approve of a modern ecumenist agenda. Quite certainly, these separatists would have affirmed Sell’s pneumatological core principle, but this would have surely been fleshed out through a number of specific and foundational doctrinal beliefs—beliefs that necessarily exclude some from full fellowship. For example, William Kiffin (1616–1701) was a major proponent for closed communion and was certainly in the mainstream among his Baptist brethren. This common sentiment was still present in the next century in the Baptist dissenter Andrew Fuller (1754–1815), who argued that confessing Christians should be prevented from coming to the communion table if they were characterized by immorality, adherents of dangerous heresies, or guilty of an “essential corruption of instituted worship.” In fact without all three of these strictures, Fuller concluded that one could not justify their “dissent from the Church of England, or even the Church of Rome ..."