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## **The Nonconformist clergy and the London plague of 1665**

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## The Nonconformist clergy and the London plague of 1665

The Nonconformist ministers ejected from London parish churches in 1662 gained a reputation three years later, during the plague, for being heroes, whereas the clergy of the Church of England were accused of deserting the city. Nonconformists took over the parish churches to preach to the population but were poorly rewarded afterwards for their pains when the Parliament passed the Five-Mile Act. This article takes a fresh look at the Nonconformist plague literature. It contends that the Nonconformists' reputation for heroism rested on the activities of a handful of preachers whose sermons were publicised by clerical figures such as Richard Baxter, eclipsing a more nuanced discourse of pastoral responsibility as ministers debated the political implications of their actions. The article argues that an appraisal of the religious context of the mid-1660s can supplement current plague studies, which tend to be dominated by social history and the history of medicine.

Keywords: Nonconformity; London plague; pastoral; preaching; Five-mile Act; Richard Baxter

### Introduction

In the winter of 1664, the astrologer John Gadbury was unwell but nevertheless hard at work in his study. Like many others throughout Europe, he was enthralled by the appearance of a comet. He compiled letters on the matter from his correspondents and scoured newsbooks for relevant information from abroad. When other sightings occurred between 24 December and 12 January, Gadbury concluded that this was not the same comet but *another* one. The two comets were all the more sinister for being 'retrograde', that is to say, they moved in the opposite direction to the zodiacal signs; even to the careless observer, the red colour of the first one evoked Mars, the planet of war, and therefore prefigured bloodshed, while the paleness of the second called to mind Saturn, bringing '*Famine, the Plague, Exile*'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gadbury, *De Cometis*, 47. For astrologers and plague predictions, see Pfeffer, 'Astrology.'

Since Gadbury was seized by ‘an unhappy lameness in [his] most useful Arm’, later interpreted as a symptom of the plague that would not reach epidemic proportions for another six months,<sup>2</sup> he knew from his own experience what these comets meant. So did the Presbyterian ministers Thomas Vincent, Richard Baxter and John Allin who dabbled in alchemy and astrology.<sup>3</sup> They were a presage of calamities to come, for the stars and divine providence were plainly telling the English nation that something had gone badly wrong. There was no shortage of religious publications to explain why this was so. Whether one was poor and could spare only a few pennies, or indeed nothing at all, there were broadsides, some of them printed or distributed freely, packed to the very edges with godly advice how to repent and live a better life. Polemical pamphlets, often in the form of addresses to the city of London or the nation, provided a lengthier, if still affordable, repository of exhortations. Sermons were printed, and for those who could afford them, thick quartos offered the opportunity to meditate on Biblical episodes, reflect on one’s sins, to confess and to make amends.<sup>4</sup>

Many thought they knew the cause of such terrible punishment. Three years before on 24th August 1662, Saint Bartholomew’s day, some 2,000 Presbyterian and Congregational ministers had been ejected from their pulpits for their failure to accept the terms of a new Act of Uniformity. In London, Middlesex and Surrey, all badly affected by the epidemic when it came, there were more than 200 of them.<sup>5</sup> The plague of 1665 was therefore distinguished

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent, *God’s Terrible Voice*, 29; Baxter, *Reliquiæ Baxterianæ*, 2: 290; Allin, ‘Letters’.

<sup>4</sup> It is impossible here to give a comprehensive overview of plague studies since Paul Slack’s *The Impact of Plague*. For the present purposes, see in particular Gilman, *Plague Writings*; Grell and Cunningham, *Religio Medici*; Killeen ‘Hezekiah’; Miller, *The Literary Culture*; Moote and Moote, *The Great Plague*; Totaro and Gilman, *Representing the Plague*; and Wear, *Knowledge and Practice*, 275-349.

<sup>5</sup> Matthews, *Calamy Revised*. On 1662, see Keeble, *Settling the Peace of the Church*.

from its predecessors by the fact that these Nonconformist ministers were forbidden to preach in their former churches. Neither could they urge their flocks to repentance or offer much needed comfort. Nevertheless, some of them decided to stay in the city, showing a resolve that was swiftly interpreted by some, but denied by others, to be a show of courage that most clergy of the Church of England had not shown. Throughout the epidemic the people were exposed to both points of view in broadsides such as *A Pulpit To be Let* (1665), which intimated that the incumbents' cowardly flight from London had justified the appropriation of their pulpits, and the anonymous rejoinder *The Pulpit vindicated from, and against a sacrilegious Pamphlet*. In 1924, Walter George Bell, focusing on the parish of St Giles Cripplegate one of the worst affected by the plague, took a firm position on this issue and declared that that the Nonconformists were 'real heroes [...] men whose golden example ennoble their great profession, and condemns the political Churchmen who made them outcasts'.<sup>6</sup> Here, not long after the end of World War I, is the opinion of a London historian who viewed the events of 1665 in terms of conflict between diametrically opposed parties and heroic sacrifice: on one hand, the clergy of the Church of England who had supposedly abandoned their parishioners by fleeing from London, and on the other hand, the Nonconformist ministers who stayed in the capital and risked their lives.

But how much do we actually know about what happened in the London churches in 1665 or indeed within the Nonconformist community? Were the Nonconformists really ready to risk their lives for the spiritual benefit of those Londoners who had neither the will nor the means to leave the city before it was too late?

## **Early historians**

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<sup>6</sup> Bell, *The Great Plague*, 149.

In 1720, another major European outburst of plague, this time in Marseille, generated a new wave of anxiety throughout Europe.<sup>7</sup> The English Nonconformists monitored the news with no less sense of urgency than they had done in 1665. The Congregational Library in London holds a transcript of the records of the Altham Church in Lancashire which includes a catalogue of the Church's library. In the duodecimo section, we find 'The Plague of Marseillus' alongside 'a London Dispensatory', 'Fullers Pharmacopeia' and 'Keils anatomy', all medical titles that remind us that fear was spreading miles away from major ports.<sup>8</sup> It was the Marseille outburst that generated the best-known accounts of the 1665 'great' plague, albeit fictional: Daniel Defoe's *Due Preparations for the Plague* and its more famous sequel, *A Journal of the Plague Year*.<sup>9</sup>

Defoe seems to have known that London parish churches were highly contested places: the scenes of many struggles between Church of England ministers and ejected Nonconformists. Unlike most of his contemporaries, however, he was not ready to condone what was beginning to pass for historical truth, namely the claim that the city had been entirely deserted by the established clergy:

It is true, some of the Dissenting turn'd out Ministers staid, and their Courage is to be commended, and highly valued, but these were not abundance; it cannot be said that they all staid, and that none retir'd into the Country, any more than it can be said of the Church Clergy, that they all went away; neither did all those that went away, go without substituting Curates, and others in their Places, to do the Offices needful, and to visit the Sick, as far as it was practicable; so that

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<sup>7</sup> Buti, *Colère de Dieu*.

<sup>8</sup> Altham, n. fol.

<sup>9</sup> On Defoe, see Healy, 'Defoe's *Journal*'; Peraldo, 'Telling Figures'; and Seager, 'Lies, Damned Lies.'

upon the whole, an Allowance of Charity might have been made on both Sides[...]<sup>10</sup>

If Nonconformists were not in ‘abundance’, many could have named the Church of England clergy who had remained in London, from the highest to the lowest ranks: the Archbishop of Canterbury, Gilbert Sheldon, and the bishop of London, Humphrey Henchman, Symon Patrick in Covent Garden, Thomas Meriton in St Nicholas Cole Abbey, Anthony Walker in St Mary’s Aldermansbury (the parish from which the Presbyterian Edmund Calamy had been ejected), Jeremiah Dobson, in St Katherine Coleman – to cite only a few examples, and the many more who were preaching the regulatory fast sermons.<sup>11</sup> Defoe laments the ‘incompatibility’ between such men and the Nonconformists that even the plague was not able to overcome:

[...] the Quarel remain’d, the Church [of England] and the Presbyterians were incompatible; as soon as the Plague was remov’d, the dissenting outed Ministers who had supplied the Pulpits, which were deserted by the Incumbents, retir’d, they cou’d expect no other; but that they should immediately fall upon them, and harrass them, with their penal Laws, accept their preaching while they were sick, and persecute them as soon as they were recover’d again, this even we that were of the Church thought was very hard, and cou’d by no means approve of it.<sup>12</sup>

This is a reference to the ‘Act for restraining Non-Conformists from inhabiting in Corporations’, known as the ‘Five-mile Act’. If the Nonconformists failed to swear that they

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<sup>10</sup> Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 226.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Patrick, *Works*, vol. 9, Vincent’s *God Terrible Voice*, 1722 edn; and Dobson, *The Preachers*.

<sup>12</sup> Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 225.

would not 'at any time endeavour any Alteration of Government either in Church or State', they would be banned from living, preaching or teaching within five miles of any corporation or place where they had previously served. Before Defoe, Nonconformists such as Richard Baxter, Roger Morrice and Thomas Vincent had long made a correlation between the heroic deportment of the Nonconformist ministers during the epidemic and the passing of the Five-mile Act as a punishment for their success. For Vincent, the former rector of St Mary Magdalen in Milk Street writing with hindsight in 1667, the Nonconformists' enemies would soon be punished again in a cycle of providential violence: the ejection of 1662 had brought about the plague and the Five-mile Act the fire of London.<sup>13</sup>

That connexion was even made on the other side of the religious divide, by Gilbert Burnet, bishop of Salisbury. Burnet described the situation in the first volume of *Bishop Burnet's History of his Own Time*, published only in 1724, but possibly composed as much as twenty years earlier:

A great many of the Ministers of *London* were driven away by the Plague; tho' some few staid. Many Churches being shut up, when the inhabitants were in a more than ordinary disposition to profit by good sermons, some of the Nonconformists upon that went into the empty pulpits, and preached; and, it was given out, with very good success: And in many other places they began to preach openly, not without reflecting on the sins of the Court, and on the ill usage that they themselves had met with. This was represented very odiously at *Oxford*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Vincent, 24; Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, 2:307 ; and Goldie, *Roger Morrice*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Burnet, *History*, 1: 259.



For Burnet, who was no admirer of the Restoration's treatment of the Nonconformists, the preachers had not competed with anybody but had simply filled vacant places.<sup>15</sup> However, they were 'represented' differently in Oxford. Burnet uses a double negative that softens the implication that their sermons were politically dangerous: they preached, 'not without reflecting on the sins of the court'. So they preached above all, but they also blamed the court. This could hardly be contradicted, but what could perhaps be denied was that criticism of the court was their main intention. However, such legal and political *faux pas* from those claiming that they wished to be comprehended within a national Church was precisely what their opponents were waiting for. Plague preaching had unwisely strayed into politics.

How could Burnet have known that the Nonconformist had been successful in the London pulpits. How was this 'given out'? Once again, by testimonies coming both from within and without the Nonconformist community. In the judgement of Thomas Vincent, larger crowds had never been seen in London:

Now there is such a vast concourse of people in the Churches, where these Ministers are to be found, that they cannot many times come neer the Pulpit door for the press, but are forced to climb over the pews to them: And such a face is now seen in the Assemblies, as seldome was seen before in *London*; such eager looks; such open ears, such greedy attention, as if every word would be eaten, which dropt from the mouths of the Ministers<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Claydon, 'Latitudinarianism.'

<sup>16</sup> Vincent, *God's Terrible Voice*, 50.

The assessment of the situation was substantiated by Church of England ministers, such as the vitriolic Jeremiah Dobson who even admitted that incumbents, like himself, preached only to ‘stone pillars’ when:

information and notice be given that some *Stentorean* fam’d Non-Conformist, some popular and newly cryed-up Preacher, that seems to pray without premeditation, and preacheth without book, never looking upon Notes nor Bible [...] Let it, I say, be but noysed, nay whispered abroad that such a one is to *teach* in this or that place, either Morning or Afternoon; and then though the Church were as large as *St. Pauls*, yet it will scarcely find room enough to receive and contain the disorderly Rabble of his sequacious eager followers.<sup>17</sup>

Both parties, of course, had a vested interest presenting things in this way. Dobson writing *before* the Five-mile Act, evokes swarms of pulpit snatchers all bent on seducing the vulnerable away from King and Church. This might have been one of the ‘representations’ that eventually came to the ears of the Oxford Parliament. Vincent, writing *after* the Act, has to show that the Nonconformists’ decision to preach illegally had saved numerous souls. By the early eighteenth century, therefore, competing interpretations of Nonconformist activities in London during the plague had begun to coalesce. Some believed these men had taken over London churches illegally and by storm, thereby giving yet another proof of their factious and mutinous spirit; as long as they were tolerated near their former churches, England would never be safe. Others, however, believed that the Nonconformists had simply occupied pulpits which would otherwise have remained empty throughout the epidemic. They were to be praised and admired for their courageous behaviour which was free from the taint

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<sup>17</sup> Dobson, *The Preachers*, 34.

of political activism. All commentators, however, concurred in interpreting the political reaction of the Oxford parliament as a consequence of the plague sermons; in other words, all concurred in presenting these sermons as highly successful, and yet we have few names and no idea of what the motivations of the preachers might have been. It is already difficult to picture preachers having to reach their pulpits by wading through a sea of listeners, but where, when and how often exactly did such things happen? Above all, and assuming they did indeed muster thousands of listeners, were these men seen within their own community, and at the time, as the plague heroes, even the plague martyrs, that the Five-mile Act would subsequently turn them into?

### **The figures: Richard Baxter and Edmund Calamy**

One of the most important texts for understanding the 1665 situation is Richard Baxter's *Reliquiæ Baxterianæ*. Baxter is able to cite by name only three clerical victims of the plague, and two of those were already out of London when they died. They are a certain 'Grunman', apparently a 'German', too poor to leave the capital, George Crosse, and a Welsh minister, Timothy Roberts. Crosse and Roberts had managed to leave the city although they died shortly afterwards in the countryside. These were indeed ministers and victims of the plague, but Baxter gives no indication that they had caught the disease in the exercise of the ministry, let alone in preaching to the London crowds.<sup>18</sup>

Baxter then identifies what he calls, rather surprisingly in the circumstances, 'one Great Benefit the Plague brought to the City'. It is worth quoting this passage at length:

[...] it occasioned the Silenc'd Ministers more openly and labouriously to  
Preach the Gospel to the exceeding comfort and profit of the People; insomuch,

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<sup>18</sup> Baxter, *Reliquiæ Baxterianæ*, 2: 305.

that to this Day the freedom of Preaching which this occasioned, cannot, by the daily Guards of Soldiers, nor by the Imprisonments of Multitudes, be restrained [...] The Ministers that were Silenced for Nonconformity, had ever since 1662 done their Work very privately, and to a few [...] It was the Plague that brought them out of their secret narrow Meetings into publick. And when the Plague grew hot, most of the Conformable Ministers fled and left their Flocks in the time of their Extremity whereupon divers Non-conformists [...] pitying the dying and distressed People that had none to call the impenitent to Repentance, nor to help Men to prepare for another World; nor to comfort them in their Terrors when about Ten Thousand dyed in a Week, resolved that no obedience to the Laws of any mortal Men whosoever, could justifie them for neglecting of Men's Souls and Bodies in such extremities [...] Therefore they resolved to stay with the People, and to go in to the forsaken Pulpits, though prohibited, and to preach to the poor People before they dyed; and also to visit the Sick, and get what relief they could for the Poor, especially those that were shut up. Those that set upon this work, were Mr. *Thomas Vincent*, late Minister in *Milk-street*; with some Strangers that came thither, since they were Silenced, as Mr. *Chester*, Mr. *Janeway*, Mr. *Turner*, Mr. *Grimes*, Mr. *Franklin*, and some others.<sup>19</sup>

There is no indication here that the Nonconformists were allowed to preach in the parish churches, or that they had forcefully displaced any competitors. The churches had been abandoned, 'forsaken'. What emerges from Baxter's lines, however, is a picture of the London population being spiritually and physically cared for by six named men: Thomas Vincent, John Chester, James Janeway, John Turner, Robert Chambers (who had changed his name to Grimes) and Robert Franklyn.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 2: 306.

Furthermore, of these six men, only Thomas Vincent had been ejected from a London parish. Chester was ejected from Witherley (Leicestershire), John Turner from Sunbury (Middlesex), Robert Franklyn from Westhall (Suffolk). It is unclear whether James Janeway had been preaching at all before 1665 and Robert Chambers had not been ejected but had fled Ireland in 1663.<sup>20</sup> These men did not therefore exactly ‘stay’ to care for their former congregations, people to whom they were spiritually attached, nor did they preach in their former parish churches. They were ‘strangers’ who had come to London only after 1662. This made their sacrifice, in a way, all the more commendable, but above all it substantiated the claim that the Nonconformists were not attempting to repossess their old parishes but only churches left vacant by others.

Baxter was writing with the benefit of hindsight, but his task was nevertheless difficult. He was trying to paint a picture for posterity which showed Nonconformist preaching and pastoral care to have been more compassionate than anything offered by the Church of England. On the other hand, the actions of those Nonconformists would have seemed the less heroic the more such ministers there were. There cannot be too many heroes in a crisis. But perhaps more importantly, Baxter could not be seen to condone illegal actions unreservedly, a step that he himself was certainly reluctant to take during the plague, as we shall see. So instead, he reveals how a few Nonconformists, for reasons that were almost personal, *resolved* – supposedly after much deliberation and rational argument – to take an unprecedented course of action. It was both a politically and a physically dangerous course, and only they only adopted because the seriousness of a temporary situation, and the empty churches going to waste for the time being, seemed to warrant it.<sup>21</sup> Finally, Baxter carefully replaced the public sermons within the broader context of Nonconformist pastoral, with

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<sup>20</sup> On Franklyn, see Camden, *Franklin Family Papers*, 14-16,

<sup>21</sup> De Krey, *London*, 90.

ministers entering the infected houses to provide spiritual and material comfort to the sick, this time in a private capacity and behind closed doors.

Edmund Calamy's biographies of the ejected clergy repeat the names of the plague preachers mentioned by Baxter, then yield 'some others': William Carslake and John Mortimer, both ejected from Devon, Samuel Dyer, the only Londoner, who left a printed sermon, Stephen Ford, from Chipping Norton and John Knowles, from Bristol.<sup>22</sup> There are also a few more names, victims of the plague who had evidently stayed in the city although without preaching there, such as George Beck, Abraham Janeway and George Pitt.<sup>23</sup>

Calamy's biographies also chronicle other kinds of suffering. Zachary Crofton, for instance, the ejected minister of St Botolph Aldgate, lost his daughter and son-in-law almost at his door when they were prevented from entering the town where he had retired in Bedfordshire and had to be quarantined 'in little Hutts at a distance'. Crofton employed an unnamed man to look after them, but all three of them died. After the plague, Crofton looked after the man's own children. The story does not appear in Calamy's edition of 1702 but is added in the editions of 1713 and 1727, apparently thanks to information supplied by Crofton's grand-daughter.<sup>24</sup> And so the list goes on.

By putting the testimonies of Calamy and Baxter together, we can gather a dozen examples of named preachers who ventured out in the London churches. Out of about 200 who had worked in London or nearby before 1662. Defoe would indeed spot that they were not in 'abundance', but this is nonetheless how the memory of Nonconformist plague heroes probably began to take shape: not as a sudden upsurge of Nonconformist preachers, but as the

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<sup>22</sup> Dyer, *Christ's Voice*. See Calamy, *Account*, 2: 605; Calamy, *Continuation*, 1: 147, 338-9, 349; and *Calamy Revised*.

<sup>23</sup> Calamy, *Continuation*, 2: 605, 705.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 19.

sacrifice of a handful of extremely successful ministers who, according to Baxter, lit such a candle as would never be put out. As we shall see, some disagreed.

### **The call**

Of course, Baxter's emphasis on public preaching gives only a selective picture of what must have been a robust network of solidarity with people helping in a private, indeed a secret capacity, with ministers holding conventicles, not to mention the Quakers who were permanently harassed.<sup>25</sup>

Some ministers testified to their private activities. Samuel Shaw, for instance, preached what he called 'private sermons' to his family that he published later, in 1666, as an act of thanksgiving, under the title, *The Voice of One Crying in a Wilderness*. Shaw was not in London, but in Cotes, near Loughborough, in a house of eight members, when the disease struck. Two children and a servant died, together with Shaw's sister and the child of George Crosse, who tragically thought that he had found a safe refuge at Shaw's house. For three months, as he was forced to stay indoors, Shaw describes a daily routine of private, even mundane activities: 'ordinary study, repast, devotions, or my necessary attendance upon my several infected rooms, and administring to the necessities of my sick. These ensuing Discourses were then composed [...]'<sup>26</sup> He insisted on the way his private experience had a broad relevance that deserved to be put into print for the public good.

Another example is Baxter himself, who wrote so passionately about the six preachers but had no qualms about revealing where he himself was during the plague: he had left his family surrounded by the plague at Acton and had retired for several months to the house of a

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<sup>25</sup> Quakers paid a heavy tribute to the plague. Among the many publications lamenting their plight, see [Crane], *A Lamentation; Coale, Englands Sad Estate*; Salthouse, *A Brief Discovery*; and Whitehead *No Remission*.

<sup>26</sup> Shaw, *The Voice*, sig. [a]2v-a3r.

friend in Buckinghamshire from where he dated the second part of the *Reliquiæ Baxterianæ* on 28 September 1665:

Leaving most of my Family at *Acton* compassed about with the Plague,  
at the writing of this through the mercy of my dear God and Father in Christ, I  
am hitherto in Safety and Comfort, in the House of my dearly beloved and  
honoured Friend Mr. *Richard Hampden* of *Hampden* in *Buckinghamshire*.<sup>27</sup>

Should we be surprised by Baxter's attitude and candid admission that he was seeking 'Safety and Comfort' away from his family, especially since he lists the plague as one of the events who had particularly terrified his wife Margaret?<sup>28</sup> Baxter was in fact following a simple ministerial principle, that of truthfulness to one's 'call'. And Baxter's call, at that particular juncture at least, was not to preach or to visit the sick; it was to write books that would reach the most vulnerable, and particularly those who were isolated during the much-dreaded quarantine and could not go out to hear sermons.<sup>29</sup>

In a *Breviate* of the life of his wife, Baxter copied a letter addressed to her from Hampden, as he sojourned there: 'And yet I must confess, I find that it is easier to be oft speaking to God, when I have no body else to speak to, than when there are other Competitors, Expectants, or Interpellators'.<sup>30</sup> Plague times were times to reflect and to write. Irrespective of denominational affiliations people, and poor people in particular, were encouraged to 'improve' their time by reading, writing, praying and meditating if they could,

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<sup>27</sup> Baxter, *Reliquiæ Baxterianæ*, 2: 290-91.

<sup>28</sup> Baxter, *Breviate*, 76. On the reasons that were put forward to justify leaving an infected town, see Grell, 'Conflicting Duties.' On Baxter and medicine, see Cooper, 'Richard Baxter.'

<sup>29</sup> On confined houses, see *The Shutting Up*; and Newman 'Shutt up'. On visiting the sick, see Daniel, 'Preached.'

<sup>30</sup> Baxter, *Breviate*, 87.



whether they were at liberty or in confined houses.<sup>31</sup> Symon Patrick admitted to ‘study[ing] very hard’ and ‘read[ing] many good authors’, as he had little company in his Covent Garden parish, and he made sure to ask his listeners ‘within doors’ to examine themselves carefully.<sup>32</sup>

Publishing, at that time, was no easy matter, for Baxter who had been warned by Thomas Grigg, chaplain to Humphrey Henchman, bishop of London, that licences would be refused him.<sup>33</sup> But plague times were exceptional and he did publish in 1665:

Yet after, when the Plague began I sent three single Sheets to the Archbishop of *Canterbury*’s Chaplain (without any Name that they might have past unknown, but accidentally they knew them to be mine) and they were Licensed: The one was *Directions for the Sick*: The second was *Directions for the Conversion of the Ungodly*: and the third was *Instructions for a Holy Life*: for the use of poor Families that cannot buy greater Books, or will not read them.<sup>34</sup>

The last two made up *Two Sheets for Poor Families*. To those we might add *The Character of a Sound Confirmed Christian*, published in 1669, but composed in 1665. Baxter had clearly identified that the poor, but also their carers, were the ones in need of immediate help:

I printed a halfe sheet (to sticke on a wall) for the use of the ignorant & ungodly, who were sick or in danger of the sicknes: (For the Godly I thought had lesse need, & would read those larger bookes, *which* are plentifully among

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<sup>31</sup> Clarke, *Meditations*, 17; Willis, *A Help for the Poor*, 21; Vincent, *God’s Terrible Voice* A3r; and Defoe, *Due Preparations*, 82.

<sup>32</sup> Patrick, *Works*, 9: 445; 3: 648.

<sup>33</sup> Baxter, *Reliquiæ Baxterianæ*, 1: 496.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 441.

us). And I the rather did it because many well minded people that are about the sicke, that are ignorant & unprepared, & know not *what* to say to them, may not only read so short a *paper* to them, but see there in *what* method such persons are to be dealt with in such a case of extreimity, that they may themselues enlarge as they see cause.<sup>35</sup>

Baxter shows how both the sick, and their attendants, could use his broadside.

Indirectly, he confirms that there were very few clerical visits such as the ones the six London preachers were performing, so such publications were meant as pastoral crash courses for laymen and women, presumably nurses, who could enter shut-up houses.<sup>36</sup>

My third example is provided by ministerial letters, either in manuscript or print.<sup>37</sup> The well-known correspondence of John Allin, ejected from Rye, with his friends Phillip Fryth and Samuel Jeake the elder, offers one of best documented contemporary accounts of daily suffering. Allin was not only writing letters he was also practising irregular medicine in Southwark; his correspondence contains references to prophylactic and curative medicines though he seems to have been chiefly concerned that summer with finding what he calls *prima materia* for his secret alchemical experiments.<sup>38</sup> There is little in Allin's letters about the exact details of what he calls his 'business', by which we can only assume he meant visiting the sick in a medical and presumably in a ministerial capacity to offer comfort and godly exhortations. When he does mention his 'call', however, he refers to himself as an

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 1: 492.

<sup>36</sup> On plague nurses and female 'searchers' of the dead, see Pelling 'Nurses and nursekeepers'; Munkhoff, 'Searchers of the Dead'; and Thorpe, 'At the mercy.'

<sup>37</sup> For epistolary pastoral, see Busfield, 'Protestant Epistolary Counselling'; Searle 'Writing authority'; and Searle and Vine, 'We have sick souls.' For the association of cure and conversion in early-modern literature, see Smith 'Metaphor.'

<sup>38</sup> 7 September 1665; 'Allin's Letters.'

intermediary between London and Rye whom the lord called ‘to stay for newes’, which is precisely what he was doing, sending letters, but also newspapers, books and almanacs to Rye.<sup>39</sup>

Some printed books also took the form of letters sent to friends or former parishioners. The Congregationalist Samuel Slater, for instance, published a letter under the title *The Plague Checkt* and opted for two different formats: a longer version, of about eighty pages, and a much shorter one, of sixteen, with a different title, *Some Wholesome Counsells*. ‘The Author of this *Letter*’, he wrote, ‘hath expressed in one part of it, that that which doth more specially concern the *Families and Persons under the Pestilential stroke* might be extracted, and by one means or other transmitted to them’.<sup>40</sup>

Slater was a plague veteran who had already stayed in London in 1625.<sup>41</sup> In 1665, too old to preach, he chose the epistolary mode as an appropriate form of pastoral and used an abridged style specifically designed to imitate Baxter’s example in what he regarded as printed equivalents of the perfumes and pomanders routinely advised as good preventatives against the plague: ‘those sweet and savory Papers of his, which like so many Boxes of Precious Ointment broken open, have filled the City and Country with such an Odoriferous and Fragrant smell, as hath much refresht the nostrills of many’.<sup>42</sup>

We find also such a ‘spiritual antidote’ offered in the letters of the Presbyterian minister Thomas Doolittle, a Kidderminster acquaintance of Baxter. Doolittle had letters printed under three separate titles: *A Spiritual Antidote Against Sinful Contagion in Dying Times*, *A Cordial for Believers in Dying Times* and *A Corrosive for Wicked Men, in these*

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<sup>39</sup> 5 August 1665; Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> [Slater], *Plague Checkt*, sig. A3v.

<sup>41</sup> Calamy, *Continuation*, 39-40.

<sup>42</sup> [Slater], *Plague Checkt*, 55.

*Dying Times*. Following Baxter's example, Doolittle had moved out of London to Woodford Bridge, by Epping Forest, although unlike Baxter he took his family with him. He presents his departure as an example of God's providence and flatly denies that physical distance was an impediment to a pastoral ministry. Indeed, he conjures up a chilling vision of London's situation as if he were present:

And though in his Providence, God hath removed me and my Family from the hearing of your *Passing-Bells*, and the doleful *Lamentations* that the ears of the *there present*, are filled with: Yet *methinks* I see the living laboring day and night, to Bury their Dead, while the other half, as yet remain, *partly lamenting* the Death of them departed, and *partly looking* for their own. *Methinks* I see many oftentimes viewing of their own Bodies, to see when the *Tokens* will appear. *Methinks* I see one sick and dying in one Room, and another in another; and those that yet are well, tread every step they take upon the *Brink* and *Border* of another World.<sup>43</sup>

For Doolittle, to imagine suffering had the same potency as bearing witness to it, and once again his call was clearly not to preach but to send words of warning and comfort, especially to those who were quarantined, but had 'a Bible to read, and a God to go unto'.<sup>44</sup>

Doolittle was particularly concerned with the useful role that ministers might play. By the mid-1660s, for example, he ran a school in Bunhill Fields where he employed Thomas Vincent as his assistant.<sup>45</sup> Unlike Doolittle, Vincent refused to leave London. The Congregational minister John Evans, who republished Vincent's *God's Terrible Voice* in

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<sup>43</sup> Doolittle, *A Spiritual Antidote*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>45</sup> Burden, *A Biographical Dictionary*, 140-152.

1722, in the context of the Marseille plague, recounts what had happened in 1665. Vincent was known among his colleagues for being ‘useful’ and ‘qualified’ for the education of youth, so when he decided to cease teaching, in order to concentrate on preaching, he needed the approval of Doolittle, whose response was uncompromising. Not only did he consider Vincent’s decision to be dangerous he also thought ‘he had no call’ to preach during the plague; he should therefore ‘reserve himself for farther service to the rising age, in that station where he was then so usefully fixed’.<sup>46</sup> Since Vincent was not to be moved, it was decided that the matter should be put to ‘their brethren in and about the city’. Vincent’s ‘case’ was examined by a Presbyterian ministerial committee, whose composition is unknown, before which Vincent had to plead his cause. He had ‘carefully examined the state of his own soul’, he had ‘often committed the case and himself to God in prayer’, and as a result he had found it ‘absolutely necessary’ to give assistance to the Londoners. His colleagues, this time, were convinced: ‘When the Ministers present had heard him out, they unanimously declared their satisfaction and joy, that they apprehended the matter was of God [...]’<sup>47</sup>

The decision to remain faithful to one’s call was therefore not always an easy one to take in the summer of 1665. Quite apart from considerations of personal safety, advice had to be sought, and in that process it sometimes emerged that ministers thought some of their colleagues were making the wrong choices and not interpreting God’s will properly. Decisions to preach had to be made collectively. They did not involve the preacher only but the entire Nonconformist community.

### **‘No excuses’**

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<sup>46</sup> Vincent, *God’s Terrible Voice*, 1722 edn, sig. A3r. Evans is best known today for his list of Nonconformist congregation, DWL MS 38.4.

<sup>47</sup> Vincent, *God’s Terrible Voice*, 1722 edn, sig [A]3v.

Perhaps the most comprehensive defence of private, rather than public, endeavours in plague time is to be found in *Solomon's Prescription for the Removal of the Pestilence*, a treatise published during the plague by Matthew Meade, the ejected Stepney lecturer, and arguably one of the most famous Congregational ministers of his time.<sup>48</sup> Meade's text is quite remarkable for its criticism of those who considered that public preaching was the only way to make one's voice heard after the Ejection: 'if they are not to be excused who have deprived you of your publick Libertie, no more are you, if you have not improved that private Libertie they left you for doing your Masters work'.<sup>49</sup> Meade, citing Paul to support his argument, considered that the preaching Presbyterians, such as those that Baxter would later praise so much but not imitate, should not have risked it:

And since Christianity it self is not forbid to be Preach't, only I must not do it, *viz.* not Publickly; but yet others will, and in many places do: And I foresee that by rushing upon the Publick Preaching, more hurt would come of my disobedience, than good; and I should be more out of a capacity for future Service, either by Imprisonment, Banishment, or the like; [...] I will then see what private opportunities are afforded me for those ends [...] And this is no other than the course *Paul* himself took, *Gal. 2. 2.* when he communicated the Gospel privately, to them that were of Reputation (and why? for fear, or shame? no, but) lest he should run in vain [...] And hence many may see, how guilty they have been, in not laying out themselves for the good of souls, so far as they might, without breaking any Law, or running any hazard [...]<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Greaves, 'Meade [Meade], Matthew'.

<sup>49</sup> Meade, *Solomon's Prescription*, 70.

<sup>50</sup> Meade, *Solomon's Prescription*, 70.

In other words, Matthew Meade blames at least some of the Nonconformist ministers for placing too much emphasis on preaching and too little on the private pastoral which, during plague time, should have been their chief duty:

You that live amongst your former people, cannot you go to their Houses, and take all occasion of converse with them, and be inculcating on them the great Truths and Duties of the Gospel? If you never formerly took this course of private dealing with your people, set upon it now, and you know not but it may be more effectual than all your former labours were. Some that have tried, have had good success. [...] Though 'tis amongst Strangers you are cast, yet acquaint your selves with them, and do them all the good you can, as knowing every man's your Neighbour that needs your help. Put then upon reading good Books, and take account of them, and learn what their knowledge in Religion is, and accordingly instruct and advise them [...] oh follow then the example of *Paul*, who went about from house to house, night and day, warning and beseeching every one with tears. What do you think this is not preaching the Gospel? Do you think that's only, whilst you stand on a high place in the midst of an Assembly? Did not Christ preach the Gospel to a Woman alone, and *Philip* to the Eunuch? In some respect 'tis evident personal discourse hath much the advantage of publick Preaching; and why may we not expect Gods blessing hereupon, as well as on the other?<sup>51</sup>

Illegal public preaching was not only vain but dangerous for the future of Nonconformity, as indeed it turned out to be. Meade might have harboured some

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 71-4.

denominational grudges against the Presbyterians, for according to him they were guilty of emphasizing preaching above ‘personal discourse’, potentially because they were too proud, or too mercenary, to carry on less visible – and unpaid – work without tithes:

What moved you to Preach to your people before? I know you will not joyn with the Quakers in accusing your selves, and say it was for your Tythes. What then, was it a desire to save the Souls of your people? Why I hope their Salvation is as precious in your eyes now, as then; and do not they as much need your assistance? Why then do not you continue it?<sup>52</sup>

His final advice therefore was:

*Afford your Neighbours then all the helps you can for their precious souls. Go to their Houses, and lend them good Books, and discourse of those matters that you may easily perceive do most concern Dying men: And let that be your direction for the future in this work.*<sup>53</sup>

It might well be that Baxter’s hero-making and praise of illegal parish preaching has led us to overlook voices such as Meade’s.

## **Conclusion**

This article has suggested at least some of the reasons why the Nonconformists acquired a reputation as plague heroes. I believe it is difficult to maintain the idea that Nonconformist ministers singlehandedly cared for a population entirely deprived of other means of pastoral

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 85.



sustenance, if only because the Nonconformists themselves never saw it that way. On the contrary, they emphasized that only a few preachers had taken that course because many of them, in good faith or not, not only considered they were not called to do so but also knew that illegal public preaching would expose them to a reprisal, which was not long in coming in the form of the Five-mile Act. That a few ventured to risk their lives and liberties in a time of national crisis is indisputable. So, however, is the fact that some believed that (i) they were not well advised to have done so and that (ii) if their sole objective really had been the spiritual good of the London population there were other courses of action available to them. Exhorting sinners to repentance and offering them compassionate advice at death's door could be equally well achieved through private pastoral, letter writing and book publishing. In the end, we should perhaps heed the more balanced views of early eighteenth-century commentators such as Gilbert Burnet, Daniel Defoe and John Evans, who reminded their readers that, in a sense, everybody lost: the Nonconformists for failing to stay quiet about the providential interpretation of the plague as divine punishment for the sins of the Court and the cruelty of the Church in their illegal sermons, and the State for failing to realise that the Five-mile Act would turn them into heroes and martyrs, a view that has indeed remained largely unchallenged for some 350 years.

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