

CHAPTER 2

The first congregation

The historian Robert Robinson established that a congregation constituted itself and settled in Chishill (jointly with Melbourn) in 1694, and that alternate Services of Worship were held in the two places until the congregations were strong enough to separate and stand on their own feet.

For this, he based himself upon the tradition of the congregation, but he records his regret that 'neither church-book nor any written documents are to be found except the title-deeds of the meeting-house'. In fact, there is a suggestion of an earlier gathering from a return of independent churches in 1690 which refers to 'Mr. Allen at Barley or thereabouts a Scotchman' and again 'Mr. Allen at Chishill'.

Among those greatly influenced by Rev. Nathaniel Ball was a Mr. John Nicholls. He was born in Hatfield Regis in Essex, on an estate which his parents owned and he later inherited. In his later treatise 'Method of Divine Grace with fallen mankind' which he dedicated to both congregations, Mr. Nicholls vividly describes his conversion.

'I was accidentally cast to be at a meeting where a private Christian began by prayer, and he was much helped by God, and prayed in a very humble manner. I thought it pierced my soul like a sword.

'I did not commonly attend at meetings, but was at that time convinced that these were God's people. Thought I, where have I been in the dark all this Conviction? I then concluded that I was one that was to be hardened under the Means, and all would rise up in judgment against me.

'Under this sore temptation I resolved to hear no more, and was going out of the meeting, but as I was going alone, the man prayed the more earnestly that God would be pleased to show mercy in some one soul here, repeating it over again.

'Upon this, pausing on it awhile, thought I, surely God hath laid this on his heart to pray for me There is none here in a bad condition but myself, so this stayed me from going out.

'I then turned again to a table on the side of the room, and leaning on it with a heavy burden on my heart, thought I was heavy enough to break down that table. But immediately these words sounded in my heart 'Is there no balm in Gilead ?'

'I knew it was God's Word, and as His voice it came home to my stony heart and arose there as the Day Star, which guided me to the Babe Jesus. No balm would heal my wound but His precious blood applied.

'Then was my heavy burden removed, and my heart of stone kindly melted into a flood of tears of joy ... I was then at the Gate of Heaven. I was filled with joy unspeakable and full of glory. Then I thought I was as sure of Heaven as if I had been in it.'

This overwhelming experience caused Mr. John Nicholls (like the rich man in the parable) to be concerned for the salvation of his close family, for in his words 'I viewed them in mind as dead in a spiritual sense .. Thought I, if my relatives had ever known that which I now see, they could not have seen me go on in such gross darkness and ignorance, and not have told me the sad condition I was in'.

Deeply moved, he returned home and related what God had done for his soul. Touched by his words, his elder sister was also converted.