



INDEPENDENT CHURCH

Biblically Shaped
and Gospel Driven

Compiled by: **John Stevens**

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Author Biographies

John Stevens has been the National Director of FIEC since 2010. He was born and brought up in a non-Christian home in Birmingham, and became a Christian while studying law at the University of Cambridge in 1988. After completing a post-graduate degree at Oxford University he worked for a year at an Anglican church in the city, and was accepted for ordination training in the Church of England. Having realised he wasn't an Anglican, he then spent several years teaching Property Law whilst helping to lead Independent churches. He served as deputy head of the Law School at the University of Birmingham, and in 1999 helped to plant City Evangelical Church Birmingham. After 11 years as pastor he moved to take up his current role with FIEC. He now lives in Market Harborough with his wife Ursula and their four children. In 2010 he helped to plant Christchurch Market Harborough, where he serves as an elder. He was instrumental in establishing the Midlands Gospel Partnership and served as the national co-chair of the A Passion for Life missions in 2010 and 2014. He has recently published *How Can I Be Sure?* (The Good Book Company), a short book to help Christians struggling with doubt.

Robert Strivens is the principal of the London Theological Seminary, which trains men for pastoral and preaching ministry. Robert teaches Church History, Greek and New Testament at LTS. In 2012 he successfully completed his doctoral research on Philip Doddridge, a prominent Dissenting minister in England in the early 18th century.

Before coming to work full-time at LTS in 2007, Robert was pastor of Banbury Evangelical Free Church (1999-2007), having trained for the pastorate at LTS (1997-99). Prior to that, he was a solicitor,

working in the legal profession in the City of London and in Brussels for about 15 years.

Robert is married to Sarah and they have three sons.

Ken Brownell is the senior minister at East London Tabernacle. As well as his ministry there, he is involved in training pastors in Myanmar and Madagascar with Pastor Training International and teaching church history at the London Theological Seminary. Most recently he has helped to establish Christian Heritage London as a ministry that uses London's historical and cultural heritage in making disciples of Jesus Christ. He is married to Alison, a hospital physician and they have two grown up children.

Peter Comont has been a pastor for more than twenty years in Cambridge and Oxford. He is presently the pastor of Trinity Church, a church plant in the heart of Oxford.

Bill James has a degree in Chemical Engineering, and worked for Glaxo Pharmaceuticals (now GSK) before training for ministry at Toronto Baptist Seminary. He has been pastor of Emmanuel Evangelical Church, Leamington Spa since 1991. Bill serves on the Trust Board of FIEC, and teaches Pastoral Studies at the London Theological Seminary. He is chairman of the organising committee for the annual Carey Conference, for those involved in Christian ministry. Bill and his wife, Sharon, have two grown-up children.

Adrian Reynolds is part of the leadership team of The Proclamation Trust, a non-denominational group which aims to equip and encourage expository preachers, both in the UK and internationally. He also serves as Associate Minister at East London Tabernacle Baptist Church, an FIEC church in Mile End, London. He previously served as pastor of Yateley Baptist Church, a Grace Baptist Church in Hampshire. Adrian is married to Celia and they have three daughters.

Andy Hunter is Scotland Director for the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches. He previously worked in local government before training for full-time ministry at Oak Hill Theological College in London. Up until 2013 he spent nine years in local church ministry serving as the full-time teaching elder in Greenview Evangelical Church in Glasgow. Andy writes and blogs for various outlets and is involved in a number of gospel initiatives including the West of Scotland Gospel Partnership and the Tilsley College, Joshua course. He is married to Jessica, with three children, and enjoys history and hill-walking in his spare time.

Trevor Archer became a Christian in his late teens at Chessington Evangelical Church which he ended up pastoring for 25 years before becoming the Training Director for FIEC in 2011. He was involved in establishing Project Timothy, The King's Centre, The London Men's Convention and Insight Schools Ministry in his time at Chessington. He is married to Val, they have four grown-up children and three delightful grandsons.

Richard Underwood coordinates FIEC's pastoral activities, seeking the spiritual health of churches and church leaders. He previously served as General Secretary of FIEC from 2004 to 2010. Before that he was the pastor of Soham Baptist Church for 11 years, a ministry which included providing pastoral support to the local community in the wake of the highly publicised child murders. A native of Suffolk, Richard came to faith in Christ in 1967. He is married to Pippa and they have two grown-up children, David and Anna. He loves (watching) sport, walking and 'extreme reading' (that's an extremely good book in an extremely comfortable chair!).

Mark and Rachel Lawrence serve at Christ Church Dunstable, where Mark has been the senior pastor for the past 15 years. Rachel works part-time as a specialist health visitor and runs

Women@ChristChurch, a weekly, small-group Bible study morning for around seventy women. Mark currently serves as chairman of the FIEC Trust Board, and Rachel serves on the FIEC Women's Ministry Team.

Graham Beynon is pastor of Grace Church, Cambridge, and also director of Free Church Training at Oak Hill Theological College.

Dr Ray Evans is pastor of Grace Community Church, Bedford where he has served for over thirty years. He recently authored *Ready Steady Grow* (IVP) and jointly wrote *Learn to Lead* (FIEC). He is a regular speaker at UK conferences, theological colleges and church weekends. He is married to Jenny and they have four grown-up children.

Before becoming FIEC Mission Director in 2012, **Andy Paterson** had been pastor of Kensington Baptist Church, Bristol for 24 years, during which time they planted four new churches.

Preface

Whilst the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches has been in existence for more than ninety years, it has not published a substantial explanation of its ecclesiological convictions since its founder, E.J. Poole-Connor, published *Evangelical Unity* in 1941. This collection is an initial attempt to address this deficiency.

The authors are convinced that the most biblical model for the church is that of autonomous local congregations, with close relationships of mutual interdependence, partnering together in the work of the gospel. We believe that such churches are best placed to serve and advance the gospel in contemporary Britain, which is so evidently a post-Christian and secular country.

Our aim in this book is to explain the theology, history and practice of the churches that are affiliated to FIEC, and to set out our vision for the future of the Fellowship. We have undergone a significant renewal over the past five years, seeking to become a more effective gospel movement, and this is beginning to bring significant benefits. We hope that this book will encourage and strengthen the convictions of those who are part of FIEC already, persuade others who could be part of FIEC to consider joining us, and help those who hold to a different ecclesiology to understand us better. We are thankful to God for faithful evangelical Anglicans, Presbyterians and others who share our gospel heart and convictions, for all that we have learned from them over the years, and for the unity and partnership that we enjoy with them.

As Independents we stand on the shoulders of the giants who have gone before us, especially those of the great English Independent theologian John Owen, one of the leading divines who drew up the Savoy Declaration in 1658 and authored the treatise *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*. Today Independent evangelicalism draws from many parallel streams, including Congregationalism, General and Particular Baptists, the Brethren and the Pentecostal

and charismatic movements. Its great strength is that it is able to foster unity around core gospel doctrines, whilst rejoicing in tremendous diversity in everything else. It requires vigilance to maintain these twin poles of its identity with equal vigour.

I am grateful to the members of the FIEC Trust Board for their prayerful support of this project, and to all the authors who have contributed. They have patiently endured very tight deadlines as we sought to publish in time for the FIEC Leaders' Conference in November 2014. As is appropriate for Independents, they have been entirely free to express their own opinions, and at times they may differ from each other.

I want to thank all the FIEC staff who have helped to make this book a reality, especially Rebecca Panting and Janice Bowman but also Jonathan Bennett, Andrew Nicholson and Sarah Simpkin. Without their help it would not have been possible.

Finally it would be difficult to express the degree of thanks we owe to our publishers and editor. I am deeply grateful to Jonathan Carswell and 10Publishing for accepting what seems to be a rather niche book. Sheila Jacobs has been an outstanding copy editor, spotting and correcting the errors of thirteen different authors, and exercising great grace and patience with me.

One of the core values of FIEC is that:

Everything we do is for the glory of God and honour of the name of Jesus, not for the glory or honour of the FIEC.

We pray that by God's grace that would be true for this book as for everything else that we do.

John Stevens

National Director FIEC, September 2014

Chapter 1:

What is Independency?

John Stevens

Independency is an ecclesiology

For many evangelicals in the UK, ecclesiology, in other words the theology of the church, is regarded as a near irrelevance. It is perceived as dangerously divisive, causing unnecessary arguments and divisions amongst those who hold the same core gospel doctrines in common, or unnecessarily distracting from the immense challenge we face to bring the gospel to the nation. All these responses are to some extent understandable. The history of the church in the UK after the Reformation all too clearly demonstrates how easily both of these problems emerge and take hold. Some seek to create the perfect church, whereas others tire of the attempt, whether out of frustration or disillusionment, and adopt a purely pragmatic approach instead.

Some of the contemporary reluctance of evangelicals to consider ecclesiology may be a result of the pressures of ecumenism, which seeks to set aside differences in the pursuit of structural unity. Somewhat ironically it is differences in ecclesiology that have ultimately frustrated attempts to bring about structural union between different denominations, such as the Methodist and the Anglican churches, and remains an apparently insurmountable stumbling block to reunification of the Church of England with the Roman Catholic Church. More significantly many evangelicals belonging to denominations have a tendency to work around the

ecclesiology of their church. They operate with an ecclesiology that is functionally different to that to which they formally subscribe. Given the opportunity they would seek to reform their church and modify its ecclesiology and practice, but given that this is not practicable they choose to marginalise the importance of ecclesiology instead, and focus on gospel ministry at a local church level. They may take the view that the New Testament fails to provide any clear instructions for the organisation of the church, allowing for the adoption of many different approaches, none of which is any more legitimate, or illegitimate, than others.²

Primarily, however, ecclesiology has been marginalised because evangelicals have tended to adopt an unduly individualistic understanding of salvation. Whilst it is certainly true that people can only be saved as individuals, through new birth by the Holy Spirit resulting in repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,³ those who are saved are saved into the church, the people of God. They are united with the Lord Jesus Christ by faith personally and individually,⁴ and are thereby also baptised into his body by the Holy Spirit.⁵ They become brothers and sisters of all those who are also united to him. They become a 'living stone' that is added to the new temple that Jesus is building.⁶

However, it is impossible in practice to escape ecclesiology. Every church, whether a long established denomination or a brand new house church, has to ask important organisational questions. Where is authority in the church located? Who has the right to make decisions in the life of the church? Who decides whether a person can become a member of the church or not? Who decides what the doctrinal position of the church should be, and how it should practise the administration of the sacraments? Who appoints the leaders, and who removes them if they become heretical, immoral or ineffective? How is church discipline exercised over members of the congregation? Churches ignore

these vital questions at their peril, and most will have to answer them eventually. Ecclesiology may not be prominent, but it is never absent.

Given the nature of the questions addressed by ecclesiology, it should be obvious that it cannot be divorced from gospel ministry. The ecclesiology adopted by a church ought to reflect and embody the truth of the gospel that has brought it into existence. A church that treats everyone living within a defined geographical area as entitled to be a member, and to participate in the sacraments, is making a statement about what it means to be a Christian. A church that requires that a person be baptised in a specified manner, for example as an adult by full immersion, before being admitted as a member, is doing likewise. The ecclesiology that a church adopts may either hinder or help the proclamation of the gospel, either reinforcing the truth or undermining the truth by its structure and actions.

This book is unashamedly about ecclesiology. It is about Independency, a particular ecclesiology that has a long established pedigree. Independency takes its place alongside Episcopacy, Presbyterianism and Apostolic Networks⁷ as the main ecclesiological options adopted by Christians. It is adopted by a significant, and growing, proportion of UK evangelical churches, and on a global level is probably the majority ecclesiological position adopted by evangelicals.

However, it is about much more than just ecclesiology. It is supremely about gospel ministry and the need to make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ in our nation. Although the various authors will set out the biblical basis for Independency and chart its history, they will also seek to demonstrate how this ecclesiology serves the cause of the gospel. It is our contention that Independent churches are best able to serve the advance of the gospel because they most fully reflect the commands of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church,⁸ as to how his

body should be organised and operate as it seeks to fulfil the mission he has given it.

Inevitably this will require critiquing alternative ecclesiological positions, but we do not do this out of a desire to be divisive, still less to fracture gospel unity with those who share core evangelical beliefs. It is all too easy to critique alternative ecclesiological positions from examples drawn from their worst practitioners, or to create straw men and exaggerated stereotypes. We will try not to do this. All ecclesiological alternatives can be corrupted and misused by sinful people, and no church will ever be truly perfect in its obedience to Christ. However, we believe that Independency, at its best, is most faithful to the teaching of the New Testament about the church, and therefore most effective for advancing the mission of the church.

The essence of Independency: The autonomy of the local church

It is inevitable that Independency has to be defined by way of contrast to the other major ecclesiological alternatives. This does not, however, mean that it is simply a reaction against the failings of other approaches to church organisation. All Protestant ecclesiologies have to some extent had to be defined in reaction to that of the Roman Catholic Church, which they set out to reform and conform to a more biblical pattern. If Independency seems a latecomer to the scene this is not because it lacks biblical credibility, as chapter 2 will demonstrate, but rather because the process of ecclesiological reform proceeded more slowly than that of soteriology. The Lutheran and Anglican reformations largely left the structure of the church intact. Calvin was able to reshape ecclesiology more radically. The progress and acceptance of Independency was not helped by the revolutionary radicalism of the early Anabaptists.

Whilst at times Independency has been misused as justification

for isolation, idiosyncrasy and the unwillingness to submit to any authority, this is not what it is meant to be, nor where it began. Those who draw their ecclesiology from the magisterial reformers are bound to be suspicious of Independency, since it seems an antiauthoritarian free-for-all that imperils the maintenance of sound doctrine, preaching and worship. However, as chapter 3 will argue, it had its origins in a desire to fully reform the church and return to the pattern of the New Testament.

The concern of Independency is not to escape from authority, but rather to fully submit to the authority of Jesus as the head of the church. The first Independents to emerge in England were Congregationalists. R.C. Dale, the great Victorian Congregational minister in Birmingham, writes powerfully about the convictions that impelled these ecclesiological pioneers, often at the cost of their own lives. His comments are applicable to all Independents, and not just Congregationalists:

They believed that, according to the will of Christ and the precedent of the apostolic Churches, every separate society of such persons should be free from all control except that of Christ Himself, who is present whenever two or three are gathered together in His name. They believed that in receiving or rejecting members, or excommunicating those who had proved themselves unworthy, and in the election of its officers, it is the duty of each separate Church to learn for itself the will of Christ and to do it.

The Church, according to their conception of it, is not a voluntary club for the regulation of which the members may make what rules they please, the rights and powers of individual members being based upon free contract between them; it is a Society of which Christ is the Founder, the Head and the Lord. Its members have no right to admit whom they like or to exclude whom they like; they have no right to elect men to office according to their private tastes and preferences.

Nor are they at liberty to please themselves in the conduct of public worship. In the whole life of the Church they have simply to give effect to the will of Christ, who is present whenever the Church meets, and apart from whose concurrence and sanction all the decisions of the Church are without validity.⁹

The essence of Independency is therefore the Bible-derived conviction that each and every local church is autonomous and self-governing. This means that it is not subject to any authority from outside the gathering of Christians that comprise the congregation. The local church is free to appoint its own leaders, determine its own confession, decide its own worship practices and exercise discipline against its members without the need for consent, approval or ratification by any external person or body. It is within the competence of the local church to decide, therefore, whether it wishes to adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Baptist Confession of Faith, Evangelical Alliance Statement of Faith or the Gospel Coalition Foundation Documents as its doctrinal standards. It can decide for itself whether to appoint a particular man as a pastor, and has the right to remove him from office. It has the right to decide which Bible version to use, which liturgy, if any, to adopt, and how and how often to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

The convictions regarding the competence of the local congregation to govern itself were well expressed in the *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order* of 1659. Although this is a Congregationalist document, in this regard it expresses the position of all Independents.

The Institution of Churches, and the Order Appointed in Them by Jesus Christ

1. By the appointment of the Father all power for the calling, institution, order, or government of the Church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner in the Lord Jesus Christ, as King and Head thereof.