

## MATTHEW HENRY: A PRINCE OF COMMENTATORS.

BY THE REV. C. SYDNEY CARTER, M.A.

ALTHOUGH just over two centuries have elapsed since the death of Matthew Henry, his name is still a household word in Evangelical circles, and even though his Commentary may not be as extensively used as it was only a short time back, it is still highly valued. It is well, therefore, that the present generation should not be allowed altogether to forget the name and career of one whose chief work has won him such a well-merited and enduring fame. When we recall some of the remarkable and outstanding achievements of the fathers of English Nonconformity—Baxter's *Saints' Rest*, Owen on the *Hebrews*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Matthew Henry's *Expositions*, Watts' Hymns, Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, we may safely affirm that their descendants have no cause to blush for their spiritual lineage. Truly they possess a "goodly heritage."

Matthew Henry's life (1662-1714) forms a connecting link between the Puritans of the Commonwealth days and the later Nonconformists of the next century. He was born early enough to remember the hard times of bitter persecution, and then to rejoice for a generation in the priceless boon of religious liberty. His birth took place in the fateful year of the St. Bartholomew ejection in which his own father had been "outed." In his youth he witnessed the sufferings of his brethren under the relentless enforcement of the iniquitous "Clarendon Code," and in 1685 he chronicles a visit which he paid to the aged Richard Baxter, then a prisoner for conscience sake in London, undergoing an infamous sentence passed on him by the brutal Judge Jeffreys. Again in his young manhood he must have hailed with almost as much joy the passing of the Toleration Act as he did the deliverance of the Nation from a perilous and arbitrary Popish domination with which it synchronized; while his death occurred on the very threshold of the Georgian era, with its policy of "*Quieta non movere*," which removed all further apprehension of a recrudescence of religious persecution. As regards his parentage Matthew Henry certainly had a good

start, for his father, Philip Henry, a learned Presbyterian divine was a most lovable Christian character and renowned for his tolerant opinions and his deep piety. Ejected from his living of Worthenbury by the Act of Uniformity, because, most reluctantly, he felt unable to accept re-ordination, he retired to Broad Oak near Chester, where he kept almost open house, and as Dr. Stoughton declares, "exemplified the virtues of a Bishop," "sitting like Abraham at his tent door in quest of opportunities to do good." Young Henry fully appreciated the great privilege of such a home training and solemnly recorded the debt he owed to his godly upbringing, "I desire while I live and I hope to eternity, to be blessing God for my good parents and good education."

As we read the lives of celebrated men of past generations we cannot but feel that a little more scientific knowledge, added to their parents' most praiseworthy zeal for their education, might often have served to prevent a premature death or a life of physical weakness and suffering in later years. Is it very surprising that Isaac Watts was a lifelong invalid when we learn that his father taught him Latin at four, and Greek at nine? And might not Matthew Henry's life have been considerably prolonged if his early education had been less forced? We should not consider it a desirable achievement to-day for a child to be able "to read the Bible with distinctness and observation at the age of three!" Young Matthew received his early tuition from a Church clergyman, and he was so assiduous in his studies that his mother feared for his health, and that such fears were well founded was soon apparent when at the age of ten the future Commentator nearly lost his life from a lingering attack of fever. Nurtured in a home of exceeding piety and taught from his infancy to lisp the praises of God, the prayers and devotion of his parents bore fruit when at the age of eleven young Matthew received a definite spiritual awakening. After listening to one of his father's sermons he was led to enter into full covenant relationship with God through Christ, "I take God in Christ to be mine," he records, "I give myself up to be His in a bond of an everlasting covenant never to be forgotten." As he had early decided to follow his father's footsteps in the Ministry, at the age of eighteen Matthew was sent to an Academy at Islington kept by Mr. Thomas Doolittle, a prominent London Dissenting Minister, whose wife and daughter the young student described as

“very fine and gallant.” Apparently this theological Seminary contained at the time some thirty students, but with the penal laws still in force against the Dissenters it is not surprising to learn that not long after young Henry joined the Society, active persecution drove the Principal from Islington and the pupils were scattered. Matthew returned home and continued his studies under his father’s roof at Broad Oak. On his twentieth birthday young Henry wrote a lengthy Memorial, under twenty-six heads, of “Mercies Received,” which affords convincing evidence not only of his considerable ability but also of his entire devotion and earnest consecration to God’s service.

In 1685, on the recommendation of an honoured friend, his father urged him to take up a study of law as an additional help and preparation for the work of the Ministry, and he was accordingly entered as a student at Gray’s Inn. During his residence in London he attended the parish churches in his neighbourhood and profited greatly by the sermons of Drs. Tillotson and Stillingfleet. A great impetus was given at this time to Nonconformity through the temporary suspension of the penal laws in 1687 by James II’s illegal “Declaration of Indulgence.” Special preaching licences were granted to Dissenters, and Henry chose this time to retire from his law studies and give himself to serious self-examination in preparation for Ordination. He had already been requested to become assistant pastor of a secret conventicle at Chester. It was at this time that he composed a comprehensive paper, divided into six distinct heads or questions, which he entitled “Serious Self-examination before Ordination.” A more solemn or heart-searching test could scarcely have been devised, and it is a striking proof not only of the young ordinand’s absolute sincerity of purpose but also of his opinion of the exalted nature of the sacred calling of the Christian Ministry. We should not have to lament worldly ministers or those who have mistaken their calling if all ordinands sincerely put themselves through such a solemn and searching inquiry. One example of this serious introspection may perhaps be included. “How unprofitable have I been in my converse with others ; how few have been the better for me, how many the worse : how little good have I done ; how little have I been concerned for the souls of others ; and how little useful have I been to them.”

On May 9, 1687, after a due examination and a full confession

of his Faith, Henry was solemnly, but privately, ordained in London by six of the leading Presbyterian divines, "by imposition of hands with fasting and prayer," and a testimonial of this act was given him. For some time he assisted Mr. Harvey, an aged minister at Chester, whose congregation, owing to the persecuting statutes, met secretly at a tradesman's house and later in an outbuilding hastily erected for sufficient accommodation. Henry was not only an earnest but evidently also a powerful and attractive preacher, for he soon had a growing and devoted congregation around him at Chester. In 1699 it was found necessary to build a new meeting house, and in 1707 his communicants numbered over 350. In 1687 Matthew Henry married a daughter of a Mr. Hardware of Moldsworth, an affluent and earnest Puritan ; but for the next ten years he had his full share of domestic sorrows and afflictions. His young wife died in 1689 from small pox just after the birth of their first child. In 1690, on the advice of his mother-in-law, Henry married a daughter of Robert Warburton, of Grange, another godly Nonconformist, but three of his children by this marriage died in their infancy.

We are perhaps apt to think that the multiplication of meetings and ministerial activities is a modern development, but the record of Henry's abundant labours in the Gospel proves that devoted pastors of his day were not content to restrain their zeal and energies to the conventional Sunday worship with which we usually circumscribe the religion of our forefathers. In addition to a very exacting Sunday and to pastoral visits, in which he was most assiduous, Henry had a weekly Catechetical service for young people on Saturdays, of the nature of a Confirmation class, in which by a searching examination he discovered those who were fit to be admitted to the Lord's Table. For twenty years he also voluntarily undertook a weekly lecture to the neglected prisoners in Chester gaol, while with his weekly and monthly lectures to neighbouring towns and villages, he acted as a sort of Presbyterian "bishop" of the district. He was also a zealous member of the "Union of Dissenting Ministers" for Cheshire, while he was frequently in request as a most acceptable preacher to the Dissenting congregations in the Metropolis. In fact his fame and popularity as a preacher soon became so great that he received repeated and urgent invitations to the pastorates of the most distinguished Nonconformist

churches, but partly from his natural humility and also from his ardent attachment to his own flock he refused to leave Chester until 1712, when he was at length most reluctantly persuaded to accept a call to minister to Dr. Bates' old congregation at Hackney.

It is not remarkable that a naturally delicate constitution should not long stand the strain of Henry's incessant labours, and for the last ten years of his life he was subject to frequent and alarming attacks of illness, but in spite of these he continued his apostolic labours till within a day of his death, which resulted from an apoplectic stroke. "A life," he declared, to a friend shortly before, "spent in the service of God and communion with Him is the most comfortable life any one can live in the world."

Even though so fully occupied with evangelistic and literary work Henry found time to cultivate lasting friendships with many distinguished people such as the Earl of Willoughby, Lord Chief Baron Ward and Lord James Russell. But although he lived in familiar intercourse with so many influential and notable people of his day, he was inspired with a true sense of Christian brotherhood. "Honour," he once wisely observed, "learning and learned men, especially piety and pious men, though poor in the world; honour true devotion wherever you may meet it. Think what a poor despised Christian who fears God will *be* shortly. But be not evellers. The wise God has not levelled the world any more than the surface of the earth."

In his ecclesiastical views Henry was broad and tolerant beyond many of his contemporaries. Although by tradition and conviction an English Presbyterian, at the time of his Ordination, on the suggestion of a friend, he seriously considered the advisability of seeking Episcopal Orders, in spite of the fact that, like his father, he considered "the laying on of hands of the presbytery the most regular way of ordination and most agreeable to Scripture." He was greatly influenced in making this inquiry by the fact that at this time all other Orders were actually illegal. Henry could not, however, reconcile with Scripture the two distinct Orders of deacon and priest since the New Testament deacon was not ordained to preach the Word but merely to "serve tables." But like the great majority of his present day descendants Henry strongly objected to the requirement for reordination laid down in 1662. He regarded it, as most Nonconformists of his day did, not only

as a virtual denial of the validity of any other form of ordination, but also as an unfair position ; “ The Presbyterians,” he declared, “ allow episcopal ordination, but the episcopal party disown the validity of presbyterian ordination.” Although it was natural that Henry and others should interpret this new requirement as a condemnation of Presbyterian Orders, especially as his own father’s difficulty about conforming had been increased by Bishop George Hall’s (of Chester) illegal demand for an express repudiation of his previous “ Orders,” yet there is good evidence to show that this was far too hasty and extravagant a construction to place on it. For when Archbishop Bramhall was asked in 1661 by the Presbyterian ministers in Ireland, whom he was re-ordaining, “ Are we not ministers of the Gospel ? ” he replied, “ I dispute not the validity of your ordination, nor those acts you have exercised in virtue of it, what you are or might be here, *when there was no law*, or in other Churches abroad ; but we are now to consider ourselves a National Church, *limited by law*, which takes chief care to prescribe about ordination.” In other words, since episcopacy was exclusively the sole national form of Church government, it was a question of the *illegality* rather than the *invalidity* of other Orders. Had this new rule committed the Anglican Church to a wholesale condemnation of non-episcopal ministries, the Comprehension Scheme of 1689 would not have contained the proposal to revive the custom of admitting foreign presbyterian clergy to cures of souls *without* reordination.

It is probable that both Presbyterians and Independents were stricter in their rules for Church discipline at this time than at the present day. Isaac Watts in his “ Articles of Faith ” for his ordination, will not admit the right of a “ Society of saints ” to “ administer all ordinances ” until they have solemnly set apart an ordained pastor, while Matthew Henry regarded the ministers as the exclusive stewards of the Sacraments. “ In admission to special ordinances,” he instructed some ordinands, “ *they* were entrusted with the keys.” It is also interesting to notice how slowly the traditional belief, fully accepted by the earlier Presbyterians, in the propriety of only one form of religion for a Nation died out. It was not till 1700 that Henry at length consented to take part in public Ordinations. “ I have formerly declined,” he declared, “ that work, but now I see it is a service which must be done, I am satisfied on the validity

of ordination by the laying on of hands of the presbytery, and though we want a national establishment, yet that cannot be essential." Not only did Presbyterians of that day fully believe in the principle of a National Church but Henry with his passion for Christian Unity, like his father, deplored the fatal blunder committed by the Bartholomew ejection, and had for long cherished the hope of some means of reconciliation with the Church. The failure of the Comprehension Bill and the bitter persecuting spirit still evidenced by the intemperate ravings of such men as Dr. Sacheverell, as well as by the attempts to pass the Occasional Conformity Bill had apparently at length convinced Henry that their separation from the Church was likely to be permanent. We can form a little idea of the feeling of intolerance and hatred which still inspired too many people, even after the passing of the Toleration Act, when we read that on one occasion a Chester alderman actually declared to Henry, who was widely esteemed for his tolerant and charitable views by numbers of Conformists, "If the Queen would give him leave he would cut his throat and the throats of all his congregation." We can imagine how such vindictive sentiments must have pained one who was considerably in advance of his age in his conceptions of true Christian love and fellowship. "I hate to see religion and the Church monopolized as if Christ took His measures from our little fancies and opinions. Those I call Christian, not who are of this or that party, but who call upon the name of Jesus Christ Our Lord, those, whatever dividing name they are known by, who live soberly, righteously and godly in this world. The question by and by will not be in what place or in what posture we worshipped God, but did we worship in the spirit? multitudes lose the power of godliness and with it no doubt lose their own souls, while they are eagerly contesting about the forms—forms of words, the form of worship, the form of government." If all Christians to-day only realized these truths we should not be long, with all our passionate yearnings for complete Christian Fellowship, in solving the Reunion problem.

As a writer, Matthew Henry's fame was by no means confined to his well known Commentary. He had published numerous tracts and sermons which were widely read, even before he commenced that great task. In 1690 appeared a valuable tract on "Schism," which he defined as an uncharitable alienation of affections amongst

Christians and very wisely pointed out that such true schism can take place where there is no separation, whereas there may well be separation without any real schism. Henry had evidently grasped the all important truth, which we are even yet "slow of heart" to understand, that it is the superior, censorious and exclusive attitude which is essentially sectarian, uncatholic and schismatic, since it at once destroys the love which is, and should always be, the distinguishing mark of Christ's true disciples.

In 1698 he wrote a popular and valuable life of his father, Philip Henry, who had died in 1696. Besides compiling a very useful "Catechism for Children," in 1704 Henry published "The Communicants' Companion" or "Helps for the right receiving of the Lord's Supper," which was warmly received and passed through many editions during the century. He began his *Exposition of Holy Scripture* in 1704, and before his death, ten years later, he had completed all the Old Testament and gone through the New as far as the Acts of the Apostles; the remaining books were subsequently finished by various ministers who attempted, not too successfully, to imitate his style. The Commentary had a great and immediate popularity, and a century later its reputation was still well maintained, while even to-day, in spite of the numerous more critical, learned and scholarly commentaries which abound, Matthew Henry's Expositions, with their quaint but forceful old-fashioned style, are still in circulation and very highly prized for their deeply spiritual value. Even Scott's Bible, published a century later, which was for several generations a household treasure, especially amongst Evangelicals, is seldom used to-day; Matthew Henry's Commentary, however, seems likely to fulfil the bold prophecy of his earliest biographer who declared that "as long as the Bible continues in England, Mr. Henry's admirable *Expositions* will be prized by all serious Christians. In them his clear head, his warm heart, his life, his soul appears." They were eulogized and strongly recommended by the famous Nonconformist and Evangelical divines of the eighteenth century, like Dr. Watts, Dr. Doddridge, George Whitfield, who read them through four times "on his knees," and William Romaine, who declared that "there is no comment upon the Bible, either ancient or modern, in all respects equal to Mr. Henry's."

Very early in life Henry adopted his father's maxim that "all



who would go to heaven when they die must *begin* their heaven while they live," and from the insight we get into his life and character he certainly seemed to attain to this blissful condition. In these strenuous days with our full and varied existence, the contemplative life, the pursuit of personal holiness through long hours of meditation and communion is increasingly difficult of attainment, and we are often too apt to be satisfied that *laborare est orare*, but with Matthew Henry it was always "*orare est laborare*." He was always in his study by 5 a.m. where, with an intermission for family worship, and meals, he usually remained till 4 p.m., when he went out for a round of sick visiting. After evening prayers he frequently repaired again to his study. Macaulay says of the saintly Bishop Ken that "his character approached as near as human infirmity permitted to the ideal perfection of Christian virtue," and as we read of Henry's extraordinary piety and zeal, we feel that the same could with equal truth be said of his life. We are told that when celebrating the monthly sacrament with his flock "the emotions of love and praise which actuated his soul, were commonly so predominant, as to infuse into the whole service a character of sanctity and elevation well adapted to beget corresponding affections in his fellow communicants. The table of the Lord was often to them the mount of transfiguration—they saw the King in His beauty, and beheld the land that was far off." "We have now," Henry once remarked, "the pleasure of ordinances, drops of joy, but in heaven we shall bathe ourselves in the ocean of delights; the joy will be spiritual, pure and unmixed." It is of course easy to discover in his meditations and aspirations a distinct "other worldliness" and a certain gloomy, austere and unnatural outlook on life, characteristic of the Puritan age and mind with which he was so closely associated. Professor Drummond in one of his sermons, stated two antithetical views of life which are widely held. One that "life is everything and eternity nothing, and the other that life is nothing and eternity everything," and the Puritan certainly approximated to the latter theory. A statement therefore which met with Matthew Henry's approval, and largely summed up his attitude, that "We live to learn to die" seems somewhat out of harmony with modern Christian thought, but we can readily see that such a conviction would be the most powerful incentive to personal holiness and earnest evangelistic effort. As we leave,

therefore, the study of the life, the writings and the character of a man of such apostolic zeal and fervour we feel we must fully re-echo the valedictory words of one of his friends on reading his Memoir. "Farewell, dear saint! Thy memory is fragrant upon earth. Thy works will perpetuate thy fame; thy spirit is retired to those that are perfect: I follow, though sinning, tired and sighing. One motive more I have to quicken me in my way, that I may meet the loving, holy, happy Henry there."

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## STUDIES IN TEXTS.

Suggestions for Sermons from Current Literature.

BY THE REV. HARRINGTON C. LEES, M.A.

### VIII. THE FAMILY OF GOD.

*Texts.*—"A spirit which gives you the status of sons." "If we are His children, it must follow that we are His heirs." "We thus receive at His hands the charter of our sonship." (Rom. viii. 15, 17; Gal. iv. 5, A. S. Way.)

[Book of the Month: McNEILE'S ST. PAUL<sup>1</sup>=M. Other reffs. *Hastings' Dictionaries of Bible, and Apostolic Church* = HDB., DAC. Deissmann's *Bible Studies* = D. Ramsay's *Galatians* = RG. Ramsay's *Teaching of St. Paul* = RTP. *Historical Sidelights* = HS. Denney's "Romans" in *Expos. Greek Test.* = EGT. David Smith's *St. Paul* = DS.]

Our position as children of God is full of spiritual suggestiveness, and offers a very wide field for illustration as well as doctrine. St. Paul speaks of it as a spiritual begetting, (Gal. iv. 28) or regeneration, (Titus. iii. 5) or resurrection, (Eph. ii. 1) or adoption.

"This special term occurs in five places in the Epistles of St. Paul (Gal. iv. 5; Rom. viii. 15, 23; ix. 4; Eph. i. 5). It seems to express a distinct and definite idea in that apostle's mind; and since adoption was, in Roman law, a technical term for an act that had specific legal and social effects, there is much probability that he had some reference to that in his use of the word" (HDB. I. 40).

<sup>1</sup> *St. Paul: His Life, Letters, and Christian Doctrine*, by A. H. McNeile, D.D., Regius Professor in the University of Dublin; pub. by Cambridge University Press, 10s.; a concise, conservative, scholarly book, packed almost too tightly for the general reader: it is full of learning, judiciously arranged, and a mine of orderly information on facts and doctrines.