

# **Philip Doddridge**

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This year marks the bi-centenary of the death of this celebrated Nonconformist divine. To understand something of his outlook and the period in which he lived it is necessary to go back another century when the Dissenting movement was fully launched and organized amidst the persecution and suffering arising from the forcible expulsion from their livings in 1662 of nearly 2,000 ministers, whose consciences would not allow them to accept the new Prayer Book or to receive episcopal ordination. Most of these ministers were reduced to poverty and penury or dependent on charity, and their plight was cruelly worsened since they were also forbidden to act as schoolmasters. Similar treatment had been meted out to Anglican clergy during the Commonwealth period; but in any case the iniquitous penal legislation of the Clarendon Code was bound to leave a legacy of bitterness and resentment amongst Dissenters towards the Church for several generations. The iron had entered into their souls. Even after the passing of the Toleration Act (1689) Nonconformists could not easily forget the imprisonments, hardships and disabilities endured for conscience sake by their forebears. Amongst these was John Doddridge, the grandfather of Philip, the gifted and scholarly Vicar of Shepperton-on-Thames, who was ejected from his living early in 1663 and faced starvation with his wife and family of ten children. Adversity to the Dissenters proved to be, however, the father of courage, determination and constancy, so that, surprisingly, the restoration of religious liberty in 1689, although welcomed by them as a great relief, did little in the end to increase their numbers; and Daniel Defoe in 1712 wrote alarmingly about the serious decline "in the Dissenting interest". Their total numbers, including Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists and Unitarians, were less than one fifth of the population.

### I

It was amongst these mainly insignificant despised people that Philip Doddridge first saw the light on June 22, 1702. At this time Isaac Watts, an even more famous Dissenting divine and hymn writer, was twenty-seven. Of gentle birth, Doddridge was sprung from a staunch, stalwart and educated stock on both sides. His father, a tradesman, had married the daughter of a Bohemian Lutheran ordinand, who during the terrible Thirty Years War had been outlawed for his faith in 1626 and had managed to escape by stealth from Prague with only a hundred gold coins in his girdle and a copy of Luther's Bible. After a night at an Inn where accidentally he left his precious girdle behind, he returned next day in serious concern to recover it. By bribing the maidservant it was, to his great relief, discovered thrown aside with some rubbish under the stairs! His daughter, who married Daniel, one of John Doddridge's sons, was the mother of twenty children, of whom Philip was the youngest. It was not very surprising that this infant was so feeble at birth that at first he was cast aside as dead, and he never became really robust. His mother was a specially sensible and pious woman and she diligently trained young Philip in the knowledge of the Bible and of Scripture history. But he was early to experience the sorrows of bereavement. First his uncle, a lawyer, with whom Philip had spent his early holidays, died, and then his godly mother, and lastly in July, 1715 his father, while he was still only thirteen. He had received his early education at Kingston Grammar School, but when he was orphaned, a kindly friend came forward as his guardian

and sent him to a school at St. Albans, kept by the Rev. Samuel Clark, an eminent Presbyterian divine. Here through the influence of his pastor his spiritual life ripened (although without the experience of a sudden conversion), and he joined the church on January 1, 1718.

In this year a serious blow befell him as his kindly, but careless, guardian lost both his own and his ward's property through a rash speculation and was imprisoned for debt. Philip, by realising the family plate, was able to secure his release, but a further foolish investment by his guardian left Philip penniless. He went to live with a married sister on Hampstead Heath whose husband kept a school. It was at this time, in 1719, owing to his uncle's past employment as steward to the Duke of Bedford, that Philip received a very tempting offer from the Duchess to defray the cost of a University education if he would conform to the Church of England. Isaac Watts had as a young man declined a similar offer, and now young Doddridge followed his example. He had just been admitted to the Presbyterian Church, and although in no sense a narrow partisan, Doddridge felt that he could not conscientiously receive Anglican Orders and thus turn his back on his Nonconformist ancestry. He was anxious to preach the Gospel amongst his own despised body of Dissenters. He then sought the advice of the renowned Dr. Edmund Calamy who, to his great disappointment, advised him to turn his mind to a lay career, which the promising opening of a legal training seemed to support. Doddridge was most reluctant to forego what he believed was his distinct call to the Ministry, and in this crisis he accepted, as a divine answer to his fervent prayers, the unexpected offer from his friend Dr. Samuel Clark to live with him until he could arrange for him to enter a Dissenting Academy to study for the Ministry.

Consequently in October, 1719, Doddridge was sent to a small Academy at Kibworth Harcourt, kept by a Mr. John Jennings, an able and cultured Independent minister, and part of the expense of this course was defrayed by grants from a Presbyterian Fund. Here for the next three years he studied diligently the classics, the original Scriptures and other theological works. He then passed an examination test set him by three ministers and took the oaths and subscriptions required by the Toleration Act. He was now able to exercise a probationary ministry at Hinckley, to which place the Academy had migrated. A little later he accepted a lay pastorate at Kibworth to a plain, serious company of rural people, with a stipend of under £40 year. It was at this time that the Arian controversy was at its height, especially amongst the Presbyterians, and Doddridge was apparently for a time somewhat disturbed by it. But a little later he was well established in Evangelical truth and he never really doubted the divinity of Christ, although Stoughton says of him at this period that "the mode in which he conceived of the mystery of the Incarnation somewhat resembled the scheme of Sabellius".<sup>1</sup>

In 1725, while apparently still a layman, Doddridge was appointed assistant minister to a Mr. Some at Market Harborough, and he combined this charge with his work at Kibworth. In 1729 he was specially requested to open an Academy at Market Harborough, which later on he transferred to Northampton, because, after declining several more lucrative and tempting offers of pastorates, he was in 1730, after much pressure, persuaded to accept a call to a church in Northampton which was determined to secure him. So on March 19, after making his Confession of Faith and taking his Ordination Vows, he was solemnly set apart and ordained Presbyter, the sermon being preached from 1 Tim. iii. 1. His Ordination Certificate, signed by eight ministers, states that he was solemnly set apart "to the office of the Ministry and the pastoral care of the church of Northampton, by the laying on of hands with fasting and prayer . . . we being sufficiently assured of the unblameableness of his conversation and

proficiency in his studies". Doddridge always observed his Ordination day with special solemnity in his private devotions.

As a preacher he was earnest and moving and much appreciated. He realised that the mass of Dissenting congregations wanted an evangelical, experimental, plain and affectionate preacher, and his main aim was to secure convictions. Many modern preachers would do well to heed Doddridge's model for sermon preparation: "May I remember that I am not to compose an harangue, to acquire myself the reputation of an eloquent orator, but that I am preparing food for precious and immortal souls and dispensing the Gospel which my Redeemer brought from heaven and sealed with His blood".

Doddridge was no gloomy, kill-joy ascetic, and as a young man he enjoyed the cultured, youthful society of his day, including attractive young people of the opposite sex. His sister, warning him about one such designing female, received the facetious and almost frivolous reply, "Did you ever know me to marry foolishly in all my life?" But in December, 1730, he discovered his life-partner in Mercy Maris, a young lady of gentle birth, although this was not his first essay towards matrimony. His marriage was a venture of faith, for his stipend was only £70 a year and her dowry only £400. But we must remember that the value of money was vastly different from today. Then a "Vicar of Wakefield" was "passing rich on £40 a year"! Mrs Doddridge spent only 6/1 a year on 'pin money' and the wages of seven servants cost no more than £20 a year, while mutton was 2.5d a pound! Furniture was not expensive and ordinary houses had no carpets.

## II

Doddridge believed in a reverent and dignified service and conducted the worship in a white wig and dark blue Geneva gown. Holy Communion was administered once a month in the evening and there was a mid-week lecture every Thursday.

He was an enthusiastic advocate for Christian Unity and the aim of comprehending Dissenters within the Church was still present in many minds. The menace of Rome was very real in view of Jacobite plots which, if successful, would have meant papal domination. Bishop Burnet declared that "if only the whole body of protestants were united they might be an equal match for the Church of Rome" (*Own Times*, p. 913). Doddridge took an active part in repelling the 'Forty-five' Rebellion and earned the warm praise of the Earl of Halifax and of prominent churchmen. It seemed therefore a propitious time to revive efforts for Christian reunion. These were begun by Dr. Chandler's talks with Bishop Gooch of Norwich and Archbishop Herring thought that "the moderation of many Dissenters" was an encouraging sign in this attempt. Doddridge in August 1748 had a long and frank talk with the Archbishop at Lambeth on this subject and suggested that a beginning could be made by a moderate, occasional interchange of pulpits. Like many Christians today, he longed for a practical realisation of the vital union of all believers in Christ in His mystical body "which is the blessed company of all faithful people". The Archbishop thought his suggestion "well worthy of consideration", but unfortunately nothing definite was attempted.

Doddridge was also most keen on social service work. He founded a Charity School in 1738 for clothing and teaching twenty poor boys, and he helped in starting a County hospital. But his fame rested far more on his theological writings. He wrote fifty-three Works in his twenty-one years' ministry—a proof of his wonderful industry, combined with his regular

ministerial and tutorial labours and heavy correspondence. His style was very flowery and too verbose, but he was always practical. His life of Col. Gardner, an eminent soldier and saint, was the means of much blessing. His best known book was *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, which was most popular with anxious inquirers. It greatly influenced the spiritual life of William Wilberforce and many others in this and other lands. It was considered the best book of its kind in the 18th century, and was translated into the leading European languages. Doddridge expressed himself content if it was the means of saving 'one soul'. His *Family Expositor* is really his *magnum opus* and it shows evidence of his deeply devout spirit. It was in six volumes, the first of which appeared in 1739 while the last was published just after his death. It was written in a polished style and was the fruit of wide reading and acute reasoning. Bishop Warburton declared that "it surpasses everything of its kind", and it was equally extolled by Bishops Watson, Tomline and Barrington. No Expositor was more frequently quoted for the next sixty years, until Thomas Scott's Bible in a measure superseded it in the next century. But Bishop Maltby of Durham declared in the middle of the last century, "I know of no expositor who unites so many advantages as Doddridge".

Besides his literary work Doddridge managed also to carry on most successfully the arduous labours of a College Principal. For twenty-two years his Academy had an average number of thirty-four students and the curriculum was a very full one. He secured the help of a Tutor but he undertook the main burden of the work. He was widely read and in 1737 Aberdeen University conferred on him the D.D. degree, and Bishop Warburton told him, "the learned claim you". The subjects covered in the College course included civil law, mythology, logic, rhetoric, mathematics, and English history, as well as theology and literature. Special care was bestowed on Pastoralia and homiletics, and his Ordination candidates were given many opportunities of visiting and preaching. Doddridge was the much loved 'father' and adviser to all his students. He had some 200 in all, 120 of whom became ministers. Several went to the Church of Scotland and one to the Church of England ministry. His reputation as a teacher was so great that men of all ranks in England, Scotland and Holland sent their sons to be trained by him. He was never intolerantly dogmatic and always urged his students to listen to both sides and think for themselves. But, above all, Doddridge longed that each of his students might leave his College "with a heart sanctified by Divine Grace, quickened and warmed with love to a well known Jesus and tenderly concerned for the salvation of perishing souls".

His fame spread far beyond his own Independent denomination and he was widely esteemed and consulted by eminent churchmen and dissenters. We must remember that the 'Dissenting Interest' was still declining and its leaders, with conspicuous exceptions like Watts and Doddridge, were inferior to those of the previous century. Arian and deistic doctrines were rampant and they had adversely affected even some Independent congregations, and it was not until after Doddridge's death that the Methodist Revival added new life and numbers to the Nonconformists. When we recall the careless infidelity and the low spiritual life of this period it is not surprising that Doddridge was regarded by his contemporaries as "the chief support of vital, powerful Christianity in a degenerate land". Preaching at this time, both in Church and Dissenting circles, was largely lifeless and lacked the old evangelical message and appeal. Gospel truths were superseded by moral essays. Sir W. Blackstone, an eminent lawyer, declared of London sermons at this time that "it was impossible to discover whether the preacher was a follower of Confucius, Mahomet or of Christ". Doddridge greatly lamented this decline in religious life. Writing in 1747 he records that his church "is not so well attended as formerly, several places appear empty on a Lord's Day. We have few additions to our Church, only thirteen in all last year, and we lost twelve members. . . . Upon

the whole I think it is evident that our interest declines, notwithstanding a great deal I have certainly done to promote its increase”.

In 1741 he devised a Scheme for Advancing the Gospel both at home and abroad, which included sending forth missionaries and Bibles and helpful books. Not long before his death he said: “I am now intent upon having something done among the Dissenters in a more public manner for propagating the Gospel abroad, which lies near my heart”. For this purpose he started measures which led to the founding of Princeton College, N. J., to spread the Gospel in Maryland and Virginia. He was keenly interested in evangelism, far more so than most of his sleepy, complacent brother ministers who shared the 18th century dread of ‘enthusiasm’ and consequently denounced Whitefield as a ‘crazy fanatic’. Doddridge greatly displeased them by inviting him into his pulpit and by describing him as “a flaming servant of Christ”. His great friend, Isaac Watts, reprovved Doddridge in 1743 for helping in Whitefield’s services at the Tabernacle as he thought it was “sinking the character of a minister and especially of a Tutor, among the Dissenters, so low thereby”. When he actually allowed Whitefield to preach in his pulpit, Doddridge received burning letters of remonstrance from his brother ministers. In 1745 he also invited Wesley to address his students and was keenly sympathetic with the progress of the Methodist revival movement.

### III

Never strong physically, Doddridge’s multiple activities and labours were amazing. He certainly justified his family motto—*Dum vivimus vivamus*: “while we live let us live”. His piety and lovable character acted as a magnet and invited the friendship of men and women of widely different views, such as University professors, Lady Huntingdon and Bishop Warburton. His correspondence was consequently very extensive. He was most sympathetic and declared that “the chief thing he valued, next to the enjoyment and service of God, is the love and converse of my dear friends”. As his biographer says, “If ever there existed a heart fit for love to nestle in, ‘twas his” (Stanford, *Philip Doddridge*, p. 152). He was a convinced Dissenter and believed Nonconformist principles “to be the cause of truth, honour and liberty”. But although firmly but charitably attached to the Nonconformist position, he was on the closest terms of friendship with eminent Churchmen. He was a frequent visitor to his near neighbour, James Hervey, Vicar of Weston Favell, and was greatly esteemed by Archbishop Herring and Bishops Sherlock, Seeker and Maddox. Bishop Warburton was his close friend and admirer and regarded Doddridge as “a man of great parts and learning, and of a candid and communicative spirit”. In fact, the special friendliness displayed to eminent Dissenters at this time by prominent bishops and clergy may have contributed to the want of nonconformist progress!

Today, at least by Churchpeople, Doddridge is mainly remembered as a poet and hymn writer and several of his hymns are still most popular, like “O God of Bethel”, a favourite of David Livingstone’s, “My God and is Thy Table spread”, “Ye servants of the Lord”, and “Hark the glad sound”. “O happy day that fixed my choice”, which Doddridge entitled “Rejoicing in our Covenant Engagements”, was chosen by Queen Victoria to be sung at the Confirmation Service of one of the Princesses. An eminent Church historian says that while Doddridge “had not the poetic genius with which Isaac Watts was endowed, there is a sweetness and tenderness in his versification on devotional subjects, in admirable harmony with his amiable character, which has made him a favourite with all denominations and has given him a place in the hymnology of English Christendom which he is not likely to lose”.<sup>2</sup>

Doddridge's personal spiritual life was deep and real. In 1742 he writes to his wife: "He meets me in my study in secret, in family devotions. It is pleasant to visit those abroad—the poor, the sick, pleasant to go out and preach the gospel to poor souls who are athirst for it and to others dying without it, pleasant in the week day to think how near the Sabbath is; but oh, how much, much more pleasant to think how near eternity is—but a step from earth to heaven!" Doddridge grew in grace and in deeper piety and in a more fervent prayer life every year, and late in life he records: "Last Lord's Day was our Sacrament Sunday . . . my joy at that ordinance was so great that I could not well contain it. I had much ado to forbear telling all about me what a divine flame I felt in my soul". His last sermon was preached from the text, "Whether we live we live unto the Lord, and whether we die we die unto the Lord" (Romans xiv. 8). He caught a cold towards the end of 1751 and developed lung trouble, which persisted. His friends longed and prayed for his recovery but visits to Bath and Bristol for the waters were fruitless. A change of climate to Lisbon was suggested. His friends, Lady F. Shirley, Lady Chesterfield and Lady Huntingdon contributed £300 towards its expense, and through Bishop Warburton's influence the Captain's cabin was secured for him for the voyage. He told Lady Huntingdon, "I can as well go to heaven from Lisbon as from my study at Northampton". And so it happened, as he died there on October 26, 1751, leaving a devoted wife and four children. His widow lived on till 1790, and the last daughter died in 1811.

#### **REVD C. SYDNEY CARTER**

Endnotes:

- 1) *Religion in England*, I., 345.
- 2) Stoughton, *Religion in England*, I, p. 343.