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GREAT ANGLICAN DIVINES – (4) JOHN TILLOTSON (1630-1694)

By Alan Clifford

John Tillotson has been described as ‘the wisest and best man that ever sat in the primatial chair of Canterbury’. More recently, Dr. Edward Carpenter has written that ‘If character in itself qualified for office, no man could have had greater claims to Canterbury than John Tillotson. He was intelligent, liberal and warm hearted.’ Whilst his primacy was brief and uneventful, it may be added that probably no post-Reformation archbishop has ever upheld the Protestant character of the Church of England more than John Tillotson.

Puritan Upbringing

Born at Sowerby, near Halifax in 1630, Tillotson lived through the religious and civil upheavals of the 17th century. His parents being convinced puritans, John embraced decided presbyterian views. He entered Clare Hall, Cambridge in 1647, where he came under the influence of some of the leading puritans of the day. His tutor was the presbyterian David Clarkson. He admired the writings of Dr. William Twisse, prolocutor of the Westminster Assembly, and Dr. Thomas Goodwin, one of the independent members of the assembly. However, Tillotson was also attracted by the rational outlook of Ralph Cudworth, Master of Clare, and William Chillingworth’s *Religion of Protestants* also influenced him.

Tillotson’s conservative, presbyterian puritanism distanced him from some of the more radical puritans of the day. He became disenchanted with Goodwin and others when, a week after the death of Oliver Cromwell in 1658, Tillotson heard these divines call God’s providence into question for allowing the Protector’s death. His views and personal attachments beginning to change, Tillotson received episcopal ordination at the hands of the Bishop of Galloway, Dr. Thomas Sydserf, who was then in London. Notwithstanding these developments, Tillotson was an auditor with the Presbyterian Commissioners at the Savoy Conference in 1661. With the passing of the Act of Uniformity of 1662, Tillotson conformed to the Church of England, thus severing his formal links with the Presbyterians.

Tillotson’s abilities guaranteed his recognition. In 1672, he was made Dean of Canterbury and, three years later, Prebendary of St. Paul’s. He became Dean of St. Paul’s in 1689 and Archbishop of Canterbury in 1691. When Tillotson died, after a primacy of only three years, King William declared “I have lost the best friend that I ever had, and the best man I ever knew.”

Comprehension

Tillotson was an able preacher as well as a godly man. In an age weary of religious controversy and beginning to feel the cold wind of secularism, he believed that good preaching and holy living would be powerful influences for good. Richard Baxter and the young Matthew Henry spoke highly of Tillotson’s preaching. Whilst his manner was less dramatic and emotional than many of the Puritans, it was appealingly Scriptural and remarkably lucid. In this respect, Tillotson never forsook his puritanism completely. In 1664, he had married a niece of Oliver Cromwell, and he maintained close friendships with the leading Nonconformists. In 1674, Tillotson joined with Baxter in drafting a Bill to comprehend the more moderate Nonconformists within the Church of England. With the passing of the Act of Toleration in 1689, he urged the King to summon Convocation with a view to making concession to the Dissenters. These included alterations to the Prayer Book of 1662. Alas, such ideas were rejected by the majority ‘high Church’ party. A more Protestant Anglicanism was not to be.

Despite his impeccable orthodoxy, Archbishop Tillotson was unjustly accused of favouring heretical views of the person of Christ—Socinianism. His timely stress on the need for practical godliness was construed as moralistic. His willingness to tolerate an Arminian interpretation of the 39 Articles, along the lines of Bishop Gilbert Burnet's *Exposition*, made him the focal point of much criticism. In the next century, the Methodists George Whitefield and John Wesley failed to grasp the true significance of Tillotson's theological contribution, although Wesley eventually published two of the Archbishop's sermons in his *Christian Library*. There can be no doubt that Tillotson's theology was essentially evangelical. His personal stress on the gospel of salvation by grace is clear for all to see. His sermons reveal an equal intolerance of the kind of fatalistic conception of grace popular with some (Hypercalvinism) and the almost humanistic view of salvation espoused by others (Pelagianism).

Protestant Apologist

If Tillotson's Calvinism was all but smothered by his Latitudinarianism, there was no concealing the Archbishop's Protestantism. The only formal treatise he ever wrote, *The Rule of Faith* was a defence of the Protestant doctrine of Holy Scripture against the Roman Catholic doctrine of tradition. For this work, Tillotson was created D.D. in 1666. Many of his sermons were directed against the errors of Rome. *The Hazard of Being Saved in the Church of Rome*, preached at Whitehall in 1672 resulted in the permanent absence of the Duke of York—the future James II, from the Chapel Royal thereafter. Other sermons were preached against transubstantiation and the worship of dead saints. *The Protestant Religion Vindicated* was preached in 1682, and *Christ Jesus the Only Mediator between God and Men* in 1691. Following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, Tillotson gave warm support to the French Protestant refugees.

It is plain that Archbishop Tillotson would never have favoured ecumenical dialogue. Union with Rome was unthinkable. He categorically affirmed 'They cannot come over to us, because they think they are infallible; and we cannot pass over to them, because we know they are deceived.' It is equally plain that too many of Archbishop Tillotson's successors no longer think Rome is deceived, while she continues to think she is infallible. Many Anglicans today have forsaken the theological ground once occupied by Archbishop Tillotson.

If the Archbishop's views, policies and emphases cannot command universal support, his clear, Biblical Protestantism will continue to earn a place in the affectionate regard of all true Evangelicals.

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