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GREAT ANGLICAN DIVINES – JOHN DAVENANT (1572-1641)

By Brian Felce

Like most of the theologians of his time, John Davenant had strong Calvinistic leanings and loved the doctrines of grace. In him sound learning and piety were united to a degree rarely excelled: he refused to ride on the Lord's Day even when commanded to preach at Court.

Members of the Reformed Churches on the Continent held Davenant in high respect. Even the Roman Catholic theologian, Bellarmine, kept a portrait of Davenant in his study at Rome, because he regarded him so highly.

Davenant was born on 20th May, 1572, in London, and admitted to Queens' College, Cambridge, in July 1587. His career at Cambridge was a distinguished one. He was ordained about 1597, gained his B.D. in 1601 and became Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in 1609. He was elected President of Queens' College in 1614. He was Rector of Leyke (Leake) in Nottinghamshire and then for a few months Vicar of Hockington (Oakington), Cambridgeshire.

Synod of Dort

In 1618 Davenant was elected by James I with three other theologians to represent the Church of England and assist in the work of the Calvinistic Synod of Dort in Holland. He took a leading part in the deliberations, and the most conspicuous part among the Anglican delegation. For nearly seven months in 1618 and 1619 the Dutch Protestant theologians assembled at Dort. Deputies from England and Scotland, Germany and Switzerland were invited to assist.

Arminius, pastor of the great church of Amsterdam and then Professor of Leyden University, had adopted another system of theology to that prevailing in the Reformed Churches on the continent and in our own Reformed Church of England. Arminius believed that God from all eternity determined to bestow Salvation on those whom He foresaw would persevere to the end their faith in Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ by His death and sufferings made an atonement for the sins of all mankind in general, and of every individual in particular.

Five Points

Although Arminius died in 1609, the controversy became sharper between his followers, who were more extreme than Arminius, and the Calvinist, so that the Synod was called to discuss and pronounce upon the theological differences. The Synod pronounced on the five main disputed points, namely, predestination and election, the limited extent of the atonement, the broken power of man's freewill, the irresistible nature of grace and the final perseverance of the saints, Davenant wrote to Bishop Hall:

I know that no man can embrace Arminianism in the doctrines of predestination and grace, but he must desert the Articles agreed upon by the Church of England; nor in the point of perseverance, but he must vary from the received opinions of the best approved doctors in the English Church (p. 18, *English Church in Seventeenth Century*, C. Sydney Carter, London 1909).

In 1621 Davenant became Bishop of Salisbury until his death on 20th April 1641. His greatest influence was in his writings. Charles Bridges who wrote *The Christian Ministry* said of Davenant's *Commentary on Colossians* published in 1726, 'I know no exposition upon a detached portion of Scripture (with, perhaps the single exception of Owen, on the Hebrews) that will compare with it on all points' (p. 168, *Life of Bishop Davenant*, Morris Fuller, London 1897).

Justification

In 1631 Davenant wrote his most important book, *A Treatise on Justification*, which would have been one of our standard theological works, if it had not been composed in Latin. The English translation was not published until 1844-6. At this juncture when the ARCIC II statement on Salvation and the Church is being discussed it is very instructive to read what Davenant wrote about Justification:

We openly affirm that the righteous God justifies no one, that is, absolves him from guilt, declares him just, and accepts him to life eternal, which is the reward of righteousness, unless by the intervention of a true and perfect righteousness, which also becomes truly the righteousness of the justified person himself. . . no one is justified, but he upon whom God has bestowed a righteousness so complete and perfect, that God in beholding him cannot but regard as righteous the person upon whom the same is bestowed (p. 159, *Treatise of Justification*. London 1844).

Again:

God, from regard to the obedience performed by Christ, even to the death on the cross, has delivered us from the punishment due to the transgressors of the law, by imputing to us the satisfaction of another, as if it had been our own: therefore, from regard to the obedience performed by Christ, even unto the fulfilling of the law, He will bestow upon us those benefits which are promised to observers of the law, namely, by imputing to us this righteousness of another, even as if it were our own . . . we teach, that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, and that we are dealt with as if we were inherently just: even as also the passion of Christ is imputed to us and in respect of it we are so dealt with, as if we ourselves had paid the penalty due to our sins (pp. 239-240, *op. cit.*)

Evangelical Unity

In 1641, Davenant restated his views on predestination in agreement with Article XVII in *Animadversions upon a Treatise entitled: 'God's Love to Mankind'*. He defended the unconditional decree of election and maintained that reprobation is of necessity involved in election. He also wrote *An Exhortation to Brotherly Love* with the purpose of uniting Evangelical Churches. He stated the principles of Church unity, and discussed the question of whom we must admit to the communion of Christ's Church and whom we ought to exclude.

A Dissertation on the Death of Christ was published in 1650 after Davenant's death. It contains a short history of Pelagianism and shows the agreement of the Church of England on general redemption, election and predestination with the primitive fathers of the Christian Church and above all with the Bible.

How much healthier the Church of England would be today if her bishops were faithful, as Davenant was, to the Reformed Faith of the Bible and *The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*.

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