

A 'HAPPY UNION': PIETY IN THE MARRIAGE OF PHILIP AND MERCY DODDRIDGE¹

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Philip and Mercy Doddridge enjoyed a happy and fruitful marriage during the eighteenth century. Engaged in Nonconformist ministry, their correspondence reveals an attractive, prayerful piety and humble trust in God's sovereign, wise providence.

My dearest [Mercy], If there be any consideration in the world, next to the honour of God, and the edification of the church, which could make me wish to see many future years, it is that I may enjoy your delightful friendship, and repay it by every act of gratitude, and expression of tenderness.²

Philip Doddridge's wish did not come to pass as he had hoped. Almost exactly four months after he mailed this final letter to his wife, he succumbed to a respiratory illness and was buried on a foreign shore far from his children, his church, and his country. Yet he did not die alone. His dearest wife Mercy was beside him as he was 'removed from [this] world of sin and sorrow to the regions of immortal life and glory,' ministering grace and tenderness to her beloved till the end.³ Such was the conclusion of their marriage but only the beginning of the story of their spirituality, a story which is the focus of this article. While this article includes a brief biography of Philip (1702–1751) and Mercy (1709–1790) Doddridge, its primary focus is on the lived piety of this remarkable couple as expressed in selections from their private correspondence. What did they understand the purpose of Christian marriage to be? How did this understanding shape their spirituality and how did their spirituality shape their marriage?

¹ Henry Cotton, Letter to Philip Doddridge, April 29, 1749 in *The Correspondence and Diary of Philip Doddridge, D.D. Illustrative of Various Particulars in his Life hitherto Unknown: with Many Notices of his Contemporaries; and a Sketch of the Ecclesiastical History of the Times in which he Lived* (ed. John Doddridge Humphreys; London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), vol. 5, p. 118. This source will henceforth be cited as *Correspondence and Diary*.

² Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, June 29, 1751 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 5, p. 205.

³ Mercy Doddridge, Letter to her children, October, 1751 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 5, pp. 239-40.

In what follows I intend to show that the Doddridges' marriage provides an attractive example of a distinctively biblical spirituality.

The Doddridges' Life and Marriage

Philip Doddridge was born into a family with a strong Nonconformist history on June 26, 1702.⁴ His grandfathers on both sides of the family had suffered for their religious convictions.⁵ When he was eighteen, Doddridge began ministerial training under the tutelage of John Jennings at the academy Jennings had founded in Kibworth, Leicestershire.⁶ While Jennings influenced Philip's early ministry and Isaac Watts (1674–1748), a lifelong friend, helped guide his studies, it was Samuel Clarke (1684–1750), minister at St Albans, who encouraged Doddridge, supported him financially, received him into his own home, and directed his ministry.⁷ When Jennings left Kibworth in 1723, Doddridge took on the pastoral responsibilities of his former tutor. In 1729 he accepted the invitation to

⁴ This biographical sketch draws from the following sources: D.L. Jeffrey, 'Doddridge, Philip,' in *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (ed. Timothy Larsen; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), pp. 187–88; Alexander Gordon, 'Doddridge, Philip, D.D. (1702–1751),' in *The Dictionary of National Biography: From the Earliest Times to 1900* (ed. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee; London: Oxford University Press, 1937), vol. 5, pp. 1063–69; Charles Stanford, *Philip Doddridge, D.D.* (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1880), pp. 55–66; Malcom Deacon, *Philip Doddridge of Northampton 1702–51* (Northampton: Northamptonshire Libraries, 1980), pp. 64–71; Geoffrey F. Nuttall, 'Doddridge's Life and Times,' in his ed. *Philip Doddridge 1702–1751: His Contribution to English Religion* (London: Independent Press, 1951), pp. 13–31; and John Stoughton, *Philip Doddridge: His Life and Labours: A Centenary Memorial* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1852), pp. 168–82.

⁵ Doddridge's paternal grandfather, John, was a former Anglican clergyman who, following the Act of Uniformity, preached to a congregation in his own home. Philip's mother's father, John Bauman, fled religious persecution in Prague during the Thirty Years War, settling in London as a school keeper. See Nuttall, 'Doddridge's Life and Times,' pp. 11–12.

⁶ Jeffrey, 'Doddridge, Philip,' p. 187, and Nuttall, 'Doddridge's Life and Times,' p. 13.

⁷ Nuttall, 'Doddridge's Life and Times,' p. 13. See also Robert Strivens, 'Evangelical Spiritualities in Early Eighteenth-Century Dissent: Philip Doddridge and John Gill' (paper presented at the Andrew Fuller Conference, Louisville, KY, 24 August 2009), p. 1–2; Jeffrey, 'Doddridge, Philip,' p. 187.

minister at the Independent (Congregationalist) Church on Castle Hill, Northampton, where he served for the remainder of his life.⁸

Philip Doddridge has been described as ‘something of a polymath.’⁹ In addition to Theology, he lectured on ‘Algebra, Geometry, Natural Philosophy, Civil Law, Jewish Antiquities, and Astronomy.’¹⁰ Doddridge was an able teacher who founded and ran a successful academy at Northampton. He was an early adopter of the practice of lecturing in English rather than Latin.¹¹ His influence in this field was such that in 1748, President Aaron Burr of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) wrote Doddridge for advice.¹² He was also a prolific hymn writer whose poetry often developed and applied the texts of his sermons.¹³

When but a toddler, Doddridge’s mother taught him the stories of the Bible by way of the illustrated blue Dutch tiles that lined their chimney.¹⁴ Though Doddridge allowed for small errors among biblical authors, he held a high view of Scripture.¹⁵ As a minister he adopted a moderate form of Calvinism and favoured fellowship over doctrinal precision.¹⁶ He most often preached ‘general gospel truths’ such as faith, conversion, and the dangers of sin.¹⁷ His theological charity and pedagogical style has left Doddridge open to accusations of heresy.

The Nonconformist tradition rejected the imposition of religious tests. The Test Act of 1673 imposed such examinations (the renunciation of transubstantiation and participation in Anglican Communion) upon

⁸ Nuttall, ‘Doddridge’s Life and Times,’ pp. 13, 16. See also Michael A.G. Haykin, ed., *The Christian Lover: The Sweetness of Love and Marriage in the Letters of Believers*, with Victoria J. Haykin (Orlando: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), p. 19.

⁹ Haykin, *The Christian Lover*, p. 19, citing Jeffrey, ‘Doddridge, Philip,’ p. 187.

¹⁰ F.H. Durnford, ‘Philip Doddridge (1702–1751),’ *Expository Times* 62 (1951): p. 121.

¹¹ Jeffrey, ‘Doddridge, Philip,’ p. 187; Gordon, ‘Doddridge, Philip, D.D. (1702–1751),’ p. 1066.

¹² Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 363, n. 15.

¹³ Nuttall, ‘Doddridge’s Life and Times,’ p. 20. See also Leslie F. Church, ‘Philip Doddridge: Poet, Preacher and Pedagogue,’ *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 176 (1951): p. 289.

¹⁴ Stoughton, *Philip Doddridge*, p. 32.

¹⁵ Jeffrey, ‘Doddridge, Philip,’ p. 187.

¹⁶ Nuttall, ‘Doddridge’s Life and Times,’ p. 15; Haykin, *The Christian Lover*, p.19; Gordon, ‘Doddridge, Philip, D.D. (1702–1751),’ p. 1066; and Strivens, ‘Evangelical Spiritualities,’ pp. 3–4.

¹⁷ Strivens, ‘Evangelical Spiritualities,’ p. 17.

those who would hold public offices. The Act was clearly designed to limit the participation of Catholics and Nonconformists in civil affairs and heightened Dissenting rejection of theological investigations and creeds. Doddridge consistently rejected subscription to creeds because he believed them foreign and inferior to Scripture, because they tended to bring division, because they would deter men of tender conscience, and because they were ultimately unable to guarantee belief.¹⁸ Doddridge has been labelled an Arian, primarily because of his close association with Isaac Watts, whose departure from orthodox Trinitarianism seems more certain.¹⁹ Alexander Gordon, not an unbiased observer, claimed that most of Doddridge's students held to a form of Arianism and that the teacher himself had flirted with this idea during his younger years. Yet biographer John Stoughton declared him orthodox in 'his opinions upon the redeeming work of Christ, and the regenerating operations of the Spirit' and wrote that 'he fully believed in the incarnation of a Divine nature in Jesus Christ,' noting however, that his Trinitarian theology 'somewhat resembled the scheme of Sabellius.'²⁰ While Donald Macleod is suspicious of Doddridge's orthodoxy, he concedes that when Doddridge directly addressed key texts regarding Christ's divinity, he provided sound teaching.²¹ It seems that Doddridge's teaching style may have lent itself to these charges. Doddridge's lecturing pattern was notoriously non-committal. He would list for his students all of the various views on a matter, direct them to the literature, and then give them the notes to copy down.²² Robert Strivens notes that Doddridge was inclined to give too little attention to the significance of certain doctrines and to too quickly pass over controversial topics in the name of unity.²³ Had Doddridge been willing to subscribe to the ancient creeds of the Church, had he been more concerned with doctrinal precision, and had he been more inclined to theological investigation, one wonders if the charges of heresy would have been as frequent as they were and are today.

Doddridge is perhaps best remembered as an author. In 1739 he issued his first volume of the *Family Expositor*, a didactic commentary on the

¹⁸ Donald Macleod, 'God or god?: Arianism, Ancient and Modern,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 68 (1996): pp. 134–35.

¹⁹ See Macleod, 'God or god?' pp.127–29.

²⁰ See Gordon, 'Doddridge, Philip, D.D. (1702–1751),' pp. 1066–67; Stoughton, *Philip Doddridge*, p. 110.

²¹ Macleod, 'God or god?' pp. 131–32.

²² A. Victor Murray, 'Doddridge and Education,' in *Philip Doddridge 1702–1751: His Contribution to English Religion*, p. 103.

²³ Strivens, 'Evangelical Spiritualities,' p. 17.

New Testament designed to facilitate family worship. His *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, written in 1745, offered a ‘plain account of what a Christian life is’ and spiritual direction on the ordering of one’s day to pursue godliness.²⁴ It was this work that played a key role in the conversion of William Wilberforce (1759–1833) and countless others.²⁵

Doddridge’s wife, Mercy Maris, was born on September 4, 1709 in Worcester.²⁶ Later orphaned, she was entrusted to the care of her uncle, Ebenezer Hankins, where her great-aunt, a Mrs Owen, raised her.²⁷ Mercy considered ‘dear Uncle Hankins’ to be ‘a father and a friend.’²⁸ It was to Mrs Owen that Doddridge wrote on August 6, 1730, requesting permission to pursue this ‘bright jewel’ that he had met while on holiday in Worcester earlier that summer.²⁹ In this letter, Doddridge confessed that he put quill to paper quickly after returning home lest ‘repeated interviews...put me entirely in the power of that lovely creature.’³⁰ Doddridge explained that he was a man of humble means and offered a detailed accounting of his estate. This passage provides a helpful starting point and overview of Doddridge’s views on the nature of Christian marriage that will be explored further below:

As it is my desire to be devoted to the service of my God, so I humbly defer this dear affair to the determination of his wise and gracious Providence. Agreeable and lovely as she is in all other respects, I hope I should never have thought of her as a wife, if I had not found reason to believe that she was truly religious. And as the hope of our being companions and helpmates in the way to heaven, would add the greatest relish to my union with her, so the prospect of meeting her at the end of our pilgrimage, and spending an eternity with her, in a nobler state of existence, would, I trust, be one means of composing my mind, if God should deny me so desirable a blessing.³¹

²⁴ A.T.S. James, ‘Philip Doddridge: His Influence on Personal Religion,’ in *Philip Doddridge 1702–1751: His Contribution to English Religion*, pp. 36–38.

²⁵ Haykin, *The Christian Lover*, p. 19.

²⁶ Deacon, *Philip Doddridge of Northampton 1702–51*, p. 64. Haykin, *The Christian Lover*, lists the birth year as 1708.

²⁷ Deacon, *Philip Doddridge of Northampton 1702–51*, p. 64.

²⁸ Mercy Doddridge, personal notes in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 72.

²⁹ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mrs Owen, August 6, 1730 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, pp. 28–33.

³⁰ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, p. 28.

³¹ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, p. 33. Deacon describes Mercy as ‘a raven haired, fresh complexioned, good humoured girl,’ *Philip Doddridge of*

This letter began a series of events that changed the lives of two young adults forever.

Piety in the Correspondence of Philip and Mercy Doddridge

The Doddridge's great-grandson, John Doddridge Humphreys, collected and transcribed their family correspondence in the mid-1800s. The Humphreys edition of Doddridge's correspondence contains 140 letters that Philip and Mercy Doddridge exchanged between 1730 and 1751. Nearly every letter contains some expression of Christian piety be it in the form of a report of answered prayer, a request for prayer, an encouragement to holy living, a meditation on divine things, or something similar. The significance of this fact should not be overlooked: God was part of their everyday experiences of life, be it as mundane as a travel narrative or as dangerous as the threat of illness to their children. Piety was part of the warp and woof of their daily lives. What follows is a sampling of letters ranging from the Doddridge's courtship in 1730 through to Philip's death in 1751 and concludes with a synthesis of the Doddridge's spirituality found therein.³²

Courtship: August–December, 1730

Phillip Doddridge had asked sixteen-year-old Jenny Jennings to marry him once already before he asked a second time in late May, 1730.³³ When she declined him (for the second time) he took the hint and moved on, literally.³⁴ During the summer of 1730, during a vacation in Worcester, Doddridge fell in love with twenty-two year old Mercy Maris and in early August wrote to her great-aunt asking permission to court her. It is clear

Northampton, 1702–51, p. 64.

³² Obviously this approach has its limits. A more complete picture of the Doddridge's spirituality would emerge if one were to include Doddridge's sermons, hymns, tracts, and books. Doddridge's private diary, found in Volume 5 of *Correspondence and Diary*, is especially significant as it contains a 'general Model for devotion' built around a morning, afternoon, and evening time of prayer and meditation and it contains several dozen meditations upon the 'Sacrament' services of his congregation. These entries provide a more robust picture of the centrality of the Supper in Doddridge's piety.

³³ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Jenny Jennings, May 31, 1730 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, pp. 20–23.

³⁴ As recounted in Deacon, *Philip Doddridge of Northampton, 1702–51*, p. 64.

that Mercy was on Doddridge's mind during these days. On August 30 he wrote to his friend Hannah Clark and recounted Mercy's virtues:

In her...the domestic virtues of modesty, prudence, industry, and tenderness, guarded and consecrated by serious piety, are joined; with a degree of wit, beauty, and politeness, which, I fear, would have ensnared me, if it had appeared alone, and on so impressive a heart have made a speedy, if not a lasting conquest.³⁵

Judging from the flurry of letters Doddridge would soon exchange with Miss Maris, it appears his heart was already more 'ensnared' than perhaps he realised. Between October 2 and December 6, 1730, Doddridge wrote to Maris ten times, at least once every week.³⁶ He was smitten. On October 2 he wrote, 'My absence from Northampton at the beginning of the week prevented my indulging myself in the pleasure of writing you sooner; yet though I have been absent from home, I have hardly in thought been absent from you.'³⁷ One week later he added the following postscript to a hastily written note, 'I pray for you every day, and hope that God will direct a heart in which I persuade myself he has the supreme seat: may he ever maintain it as his own!'³⁸ The following week he noted that, 'I hope...to see you once next week, if possible! and words cannot express the impatience with which I expect this delightful interview.'³⁹ In this same letter, Doddridge expressed his hopes that 'we may live moderately upon our income; and if we cannot lay up much, which indeed I believe we cannot, yet I hope we shall have a treasure in the Divine Love, and in the Friendship of those about us.'⁴⁰ The two did meet, for Doddridge noted that his letter of October 26 was sent 'after a visit, during which she declared her acceptance of my address.'⁴¹ He

³⁵ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Hannah Clark, August 30, 1730 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 35.

³⁶ October 2, 9, 16, 23, 26, November 1, 8, 22, 29, and December 6, 1730. No letters from Mercy to Philip during this period are included in Humphreys' collection.

³⁷ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Maris, October 2, 1730 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, pp. 37-38.

³⁸ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Maris, October 9, 1730 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 42.

³⁹ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Maris, October 16, 1730 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 44.

⁴⁰ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 44.

⁴¹ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Maris, October 26, 1730 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 46.

also added, 'Had I the most ample time, all I could say would be utterly insufficient to express the sense I entertain of your worth, and the warmth of my gratitude for the obliging reception you gave me. Words cannot express it; but my heart feels it so tenderly, that it often throbs with joy and fondness.'⁴²

Doddridge worried that he might love his betrothed too much, rising to idolatry, which would surely lead to divine affliction, 'as we must be in every thing which we suffer to usurp the place of God in our hearts.'⁴³ Yet he held out a different wish:

But I hope you will rather lead me to Him [God]. I am sure it ought to be so; for I am fully conscious that it was He, that gave you that lovely form, that intelligence, that wisdom, generosity, and goodness...it was He, that opened to me a heart which the greatest and best of men could hardly have deserved; and kindly disposed events, by His Providence, in a manner favourable to my dearest wishes. And is He to be forgotten and neglected in, and for this? No, my dearest, it shall not be.⁴⁴

On November 1, after celebrating the Lord's Supper, Doddridge penned the following letter:

[My conscience] would rather reproach me, if I had fixed my affections upon a lady with whom I could not correspond in a strain agreeably to the solemnity of such an hour. I am remembering a dying Redeemer, and I have been remembering you, who, I can truly say, hold the next place in my heart. May it ever be only the next!...I rejoice to think, as you will make my own house and table more delightful to me, so you will add a new pleasure to the house and table of my God. While I am thus near him, it rejoices my soul to think that he is giving me a companion in life, who, instead of separating me from him, will lead me nearer to him.⁴⁵

The two were married in late December that year. No details of their wedding have survived, but in a January 1743 letter, Philip showed no evidence that their love had waned: 'I hope if any memoirs of my life be ever written, the world will be informed of that most happy part of my

⁴² Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 46.

⁴³ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 47.

⁴⁴ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 47.

⁴⁵ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Maris, November 1, 1730 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 50–51.

history which relates to your character and affection, and takes its date from December 22, 1730.⁴⁶

Illness: August–September, 1740

Life in the eighteenth century was not safe. Today's fever could be tomorrow's funeral. The fragility of life is especially poignant to parents, as a series of letters between Philip and Mercy Doddridge written in late summer of 1740 indicate. The intervening decade had seen many changes to their life. The Doddridges were married in late December, 1730, and in early October, 1731, their first child, Elisabeth (known also as 'Betsy' or 'Tetsy') arrived. Little Tetsy fell ill in June 1736 of a consumption and died a few days before her fifth birthday.⁴⁷ Her parents were overwhelmed with grief. In 1733 Mary (also called 'Polly') was born (1733–1799), followed by Mercy (1734–1809), Philip (1735–1785), and Anna Cecilia ('Caecilia') (1737–1811). From 1739–1748, the Doddridges mourned the deaths of at least four more children: Samuel (1739–1740), twin daughters Sarah and Jane (1746, they lived two days), and William (1748, he lived six days).⁴⁸ The Doddridges knew first-hand how fragile life could be. In 1740 they had already buried two children. When several of the other children took ill during August and September, 1740, Mercy was away in London, and one should not be surprised that fervent prayers attended their letters during these difficult days.

On Friday, August 15, 1740, Philip Doddridge wrote to his wife with news that their 'dear little lamb,' Cecilia's illness was worse than previously expected: 'I know you are praying for them; and I hope, my dearest, you will do it continually, with as much earnestness as is consistent with the submission we owe to the allwise providence of our Heavenly Father; for I fear His rod hangs over us in a very awful manner'(sic).⁴⁹ On Saturday he added a few lines to the letter, indicating that their son Philip was also ill. On Sunday morning, he appended the following update: 'Dear Caecilia is, through the Divine goodness, vastly better...Philly is not bad at present,

⁴⁶ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, January 7, 1743 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 171.

⁴⁷ See Deacon, *Philip Doddridge of Northampton, 1702–51*, pp. 67–69. I am indebted to his overview of the Doddridges' children. Philip Doddridge preached his daughter's funeral sermon, later published as *Submission to Divine Providence* the following year.

⁴⁸ Deacon, *Doddridge*, p. 69. Deacon notes that the Doddridges also suffered several miscarriages and early births during these years.

⁴⁹ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, August 15, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 490. Cecilia had just turned three in July.

and I hope well of him. On the whole, I verily believe a gracious God has heard our prayers, and that all will be well.⁵⁰ At the same time Philip was asking his wife for more earnest prayers, Mercy was writing him on the matter: 'Dear Caecilia's illness gives me concern; but I have great confidence from that late experience of the Divine goodness that it will go well with her also.'⁵¹

Several days later, Philip expressed confidence in God's responsiveness to prayer:

The children are recovering...But none of our earthly joys are unmixed: this morning, just before prayer, I received an account of dear Caecilia's being much worse, and in considerable danger! She is yet within the reach of prayer, and I am not without hope; but the symptoms are undoubtedly dangerous; and if she lives she is, as I greatly hope she will be, given to prayer. I bless God amidst this surprise, I am calm—confident in his care, and rejoicing exceedingly in his love. I know he will be with you and bless you!⁵²

Such trying times as the illness of her youngest daughter led Mercy Doddridge to question God's will in this circumstance:

I confess this evening I find my mind so uncertain how it may have pleased an all-wise and good God, to have determined with regard to dear Caecilia, and so impressed with the extremity of her case, that I scarcely know what to write, nor how to pray for her; to-morrow I expect will determine it—and I desire to be brought to an entire submission to the Divine will; however the event may be, I know it is wise and good.⁵³

Philip Doddridge, ever the teacher, saw in his daughter's brush with death a divine lesson: 'Our Heavenly Father is wisely training us up in a sensible dependence on him; and I hope we cordially consent to it.'⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 491.

⁵¹ Mercy Doddridge, Letter to Philip Doddridge, August 15, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, pp. 492–93. The specific 'late experience' Mercy mentioned is not described.

⁵² Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, August 24, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 496.

⁵³ Mercy Doddridge, Letter to Philip Doddridge, August 25, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, pp. 497–98.

⁵⁴ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, August 26, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 498.

Reflecting back to when he first learned of his daughter's sudden turn for the worse, Philip recalled that he had experienced 'a most lively sense of the love and care of God, and a calm sweet resignation to his will.'⁵⁵ Doddridge rejoiced that his own students, upon hearing the news of Cecilia's condition, 'were disposed to join with me' in prayer.⁵⁶ In fact, as events unfolded, that very day he was to teach upon a catena of Scriptural passages on prayer from Matthew and John's Gospels and from the Epistle of James. The sudden realisation of the connection between the need for prayer and these precious promises regarding prayer strengthened Doddridge: 'I felt great encouragement earnestly to plead them in prayer.'⁵⁷ Later, in his closet, Doddridge 'was then enabled to pray with that penetrating sense of God's almighty power, and with that confidence in his love, which I think I never had before in an equal degree.'⁵⁸

The news that little Cecilia had survived her illness was an indescribable pleasure to her mother. Mercy wrote her husband to express her 'united thanks to the Divine Author of all our mercies, for his great goodness to our dear children.'⁵⁹ In an expression of her piety, she asked, 'May we remember by whose power it is that "our mountain stands strong;" and may our hearts be duly disposed to render to Him the daily tributes of praise, love, and obedience, for all his mercies to us and ours.'⁶⁰

Sanctification: August, 1740

The Doddridges delighted to pray for each other, and especially to pray for their spiritual growth. While staying in London, Mercy wrote to Philip, the 'dearest and best of men,' thanking him for a recent letter: 'Indeed, I should esteem those exalted heights of piety, which you before complimented me with, as the most invaluable blessing.' Yet Mercy was wont to own up to her husband's high praise: 'I have great reason to be deeply humbled; and here, pray for me, my dear, that I may attain more and more of them, and that I may be daily growing in grace, and in the

⁵⁵ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 499.

⁵⁶ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 499.

⁵⁷ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 500.

⁵⁸ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 501.

⁵⁹ Mercy Doddridge, Letter to Philip Doddridge, September 2, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 507. Cecilia Doddridge lived well into her seventies, never married, and died in 1811.

⁶⁰ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 507. Mercy alludes to Psalm 30:7.

practical knowledge of my Lord and Saviour, whom to know aright is eternal life.⁶¹

Absence: October-December, 1742

For a period during the fall of 1742 and the spring of 1743, Mercy Doddridge was staying at Bath, separated from her family due to her ill health. Several letters from this period show how this deeply affectionate couple turned to God to sustain them in their absences. In late October, Philip Doddridge reminded his wife of his prayers offered on her behalf and expressed a feeling of contentment, even in her absence, which he believed to be miraculous. 'I have more of the presence of God with me than I remember ever to have enjoyed in any one month of my life.'⁶² Philip articulated for his wife the nature of his experience: 'He enables me to live for him, and to live with him. When I awake in the morning...I address myself to him, and converse with him, speak to him while I am lighting my candle and putting on my clothes...He meets me in my study, in secret, in family devotions.'⁶³ This experience of God's nearness made the routine tasks of life and ministry such as reading, composing [sermons], conversing, visiting the poor and the sick, writing 'letters of necessary business,' preaching the gospel, and enjoying the Sabbath 'pleasant.'⁶⁴

In December that same year, Philip was still apart from his beloved Mercy, yet he continued to experience God's close presence in a vital way: 'God graciously continues to visit me with such condescensions and endearments of his love, as often fill me with wonder as well as pleasure.'⁶⁵ Doddridge admitted that he was ready for his wife to return, but hoped that 'God will teach us both some very valuable lessons by this absence which we have so much dreaded.'⁶⁶

Throughout his ministry, the Lord's Day was a special time for Philip Doddridge, especially those days in which his congregation celebrated communion. His Northampton congregation had celebrated their hundred and twentieth sacrament together in January, 1740, and that was when Doddridge stopped counting (yet his meditations on the Supper,

⁶¹ Mercy Doddridge, Letter to Philip Doddridge, August 15, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 492.

⁶² Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, October 31, 1742 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 124.

⁶³ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 124.

⁶⁴ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, pp. 124–25.

⁶⁵ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, December 12, 1742 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 156.

⁶⁶ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 156.

recorded in his diary, continue through 1751). An observance in early March, 1743, was especially noteworthy for Doddridge, as he informed Mercy that, ‘My joy at that ordinance was so great that I could not well contain it...what a Divine flame I felt in my soul.’⁶⁷ Philip attributed this supernatural joy to his wife’s prayers: ‘I doubt not, my dearest earthly friend, that it was, in a considerable measure, in answer to your prayers.’⁶⁸ Although he eagerly awaited his wife’s return, ‘God was pleased to give me so much, that he left me no room to complain of what he withheld.’⁶⁹

Mercy Doddridge, writing from Bath on March 12, rejoiced at her husband’s powerful experiences of God’s presence. ‘It is daily the joy and pleasure of my life to recollect how greatly I am obliged to you, and above all, to the Fountain of all my mercies, for giving me such a friend.’⁷⁰ She expressed gratitude to God for his ‘extraordinary manifestations of His presence and grace.’⁷¹ Mercy missed Philip: ‘Much do I long to be with you, especially in such happy seasons as these; in the humble hope to catch a little of that sacred flame.’⁷²

Encouragement: July 30, 1749

Genuine prayer is an expression of faith, a trusting that an unseen God will hear and act. Christians can pray with greater certainty because this unseen God has drawn near and draws his adopted children into his presence. Writing from London on the Lord’s Day in late July, 1749, Philip Doddridge described the encouragement to pray that such a theology brings. His statement is worth quoting at length:

In how many instances does a gracious God hear our prayers, and what an encouragement is it to us to continue our correspondence with him—because he hath heard the voice of our supplications—to call upon him as long as we live. And what an unalterable delight is it to think of our interest in him as our God and Father and as a friend of whom no evil

⁶⁷ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, March 8, 1743 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 211.

⁶⁸ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 211.

⁶⁹ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, pp. 211–12.

⁷⁰ Mercy Doddridge, Letter to Philip Doddridge, March 12, 1743 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 215.

⁷¹ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 215.

⁷² Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 215.

accident can deprive us, but who will live and stand by us, and comfort us, and whoever may drop and die, and when we are dying ourselves.⁷³

For Doddridge, Sunday was a day set apart for meeting God. This day among all the others had been hallowed by Christ's resurrection from the dead, and his rising should serve as a reminder to all believers of the coming awakening of those who sleep in Christ. Because God has sanctified this day, believers ought to use it as a means to pursue godliness: 'I hope, therefore, we shall learn to begin all our Lord's days with joy; and as the daily burnt offering was on the sabbath day to be doubled or trebled, in the temple, that so we shall double and treble those grateful acknowledgments which we owe to God every day.'^(sic)⁷⁴ The world's business and hurries tend to dissipate the good thoughts of believers and to stagnate the affections. By observing a Sabbath day, Christians can overcome this worldliness and rightly reorder their affections.

Fatherhood: July 31, 1749

By exploring the ways in which Philip Doddridge encouraged his children, one can gain additional insight into his understanding of marriage and the piety that he and Mercy shared. His July 31, 1749 letter addressed to 'my lovely girl' provides a wonderful entry point into this area of the Doddridges' marriage.⁷⁵ Polly had recently recovered from a serious illness. Doddridge wanted to protect his beloved child: 'Indeed, you are so dear to me that every thing that looks like danger to you afflicts me sensibly in its most distant approach.'⁷⁶ He valued his children 'more than the treasures of a kingdom,' a prioritising which he attributed to God's heart-shaping work.⁷⁷

Doddridge wanted his family to outlive him and to bless the world. He asked Polly to reflect on God's mercies in her life. She had recently

⁷³ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, July 30, 1749 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 5, p. 140.

⁷⁴ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, pp. 140-41.

⁷⁵ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Miss Doddridge, July 31, 1749 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 5, pp. 142-44. Doddridge does not specify which daughter he is addressing in this letter, however, in a letter from May 7, 1748, Doddridge wrote to his daughter on her birthday and noted that 'I have given you to God: I hope that you have given yourself to him, and that you will quickly do it at his table.' Philip Doddridge, Letter to Miss Doddridge, May 7, 1748 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 5, pp. 63-64. Polly was born on May 7, 1733 and would have been fifteen years old at the time of writing.

⁷⁶ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 142.

⁷⁷ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 142.

professed faith in Christ and been admitted to church fellowship. He prayed that these signs of faith would persist, yet recognised that she still lacked several qualities that God would require of her in any station of her life, which she could learn best by watching Mercy: ‘You have daily before you a most amiable and edifying example in your dear mama, from whom all who are about her may learn every thing that can, in private life, adorn religion, and make those around us happy.’⁷⁸

Synthesis

What did the Doddridges see as the purpose of Christian marriage? Philip’s letter requesting permission to court Mercy reveals two major purposes that he saw for marriage. He wrote in the ‘hope of our being companions and helpmates in the way to heaven.’⁷⁹ The first major purpose for marriage, then, was friendship (‘our being companions’) and the second was godliness (‘helpmates in the way to heaven’). Implicit in these two purposes is the rejection of a medieval Catholic understanding that marriage hindered one’s spirituality and a positive biblical emphasis on companionship and mutuality.⁸⁰ The Doddridges’ view of marriage stands squarely in the Puritan tradition. For the Puritans, marriage was part of God’s good creation and was to be celebrated, and companionship and maturation were essential elements of God’s good design.⁸¹ In the Doddridges’ case, the role of mutual assistance in marriage is very interesting. Philip seems to have had on his mind Genesis 2:18-20 and God’s promise to Adam to ‘make a help meet suitable for him.’ He wrote, however, in the plural of being ‘helpmates,’ implying that as the woman is to help the man, so the man is to help the woman: they have a mutual ministry to one another and that ministry is to help one another on the way to heaven. Doddridge did not explain what this help is, but one need only to look at the marriage of the Doddridges to gain several pictures of mutual spiritual help. For one, spiritual help and companionship was expressed in a deep affection towards one another and this affection was

⁷⁸ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, pp. 142–44.

⁷⁹ Phillip Doddridge, Letter to Mrs Owen, August 6, 1730 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 33.

⁸⁰ See Haykin, *The Christian Lover*, pp. xiv–xvi and Gordon J. Wenham, ‘Family in the Pentateuch,’ in *Family in the Bible: Exploring Customs, Culture, and Context* (Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll R. eds.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 26.

⁸¹ J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), p. 261.

by no means limited to their courtship; it was a consistent pattern in their life. Next, after almost eighteen years of marriage, Philip could call Mercy 'the best of wives and friends.'⁸² Mercy thanked God, the 'Fountain of all mercies,' for giving her a friend as close as Philip.⁸³ These twin emphases of friendship and mutual spiritual help are a common thread that binds their correspondence. In addition to these general themes regarding the place of marriage in the Christian life, the Doddridges' submission to God's providence and their rich prayer life are two particular expressions of piety which shaped their marriage.⁸⁴

Submission to God's Providence

One hallmark of the Doddridges' piety observed in their letters is an awareness of and submission to God's providence. When Doddridge sought permission to court Mercy, he left matters in God's hand: 'I humbly defer this dear affair to the determination of his wise and gracious Providence.'⁸⁵ When their children were terribly ill, Doddridge wrote his wife: 'I know you are praying for them; and I hope, my dearest, you will do it continually, with as much earnestness as is consistent with the submission we owe to the allwise providence of our Heavenly Father.'^(sic)⁸⁶ This same event led Mercy Doddridge to question God's purposes in this illness, yet she could say that, 'I desire to be brought to an entire submission to the Divine will; however the event may be, I know it is wise and good.'⁸⁷ Mercy's statement shows her determination to trust God's providence even when his will was hidden. The common events of life were under God's sovereign direction, and this couple's response was not so much to seek God's will as to submit to it. Because God is omniscient ('allwise'), believers can trust that his sovereign direction of

⁸² Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, July 30, 1748 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 5, p. 72.

⁸³ Mercy Doddridge, Letter to Philip Doddridge, March 12, 1743 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 215.

⁸⁴ In addition to these two emphases, one could highlight the role of the Lord's Day and the Lord's Supper in the Doddridges' piety, but to do so would require significant interface with other works outside their correspondence. These themes are mentioned occasionally, but are not developed in their letters.

⁸⁵ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mrs Owen, August 6, 1730 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 33.

⁸⁶ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, August 15, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 490.

⁸⁷ Mercy Doddridge, Letter to Philip Doddridge, August 25, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, pp. 497–98.

life will always be the wisest course and that he will use life's events to 'train them up in a sensible dependence on him.'⁸⁸

Communion and Transformation through Prayer

The most visible expression of the Doddridges' piety was their prayers. Nearly all of the Doddridges' correspondence includes some reference to prayer and every area of life could ascend as a fragrant offering. For them, there was no conflict between a sovereign God directing his world providentially and the effectiveness of petitionary prayer. Before they were ever married, Philip Doddridge prayed for Mercy, asking that God would direct her life and maintain his rule in her heart.⁸⁹ The Doddridges prayed for their children's physical and spiritual health.⁹⁰ Mercy believed that her husband's prayers could help her grow in humility and in godliness.⁹¹ Their prayers were shaped by Scriptural promises that God would hear and answer the prayers of his adopted children.⁹² Prayers were the believer's daily 'tributes' and 'grateful acknowledgments' offered to God.⁹³ Prayer sustained separated lovers.⁹⁴ One wonders if Mercy, when she found herself unable to pray because of her daughter's illness, called to mind Romans 8:26–27 and the promise of the Spirit's intercession. At other times, prayer provided the context for intimate experiences of God's presence.⁹⁵ The Doddridges were transparent with one another of their need for spiritual renewal, increasing faith, and spiritual submission and prayer proved to be the formative discipline in their marriage that

⁸⁸ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, August 26, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 498.

⁸⁹ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Maris, October 9, 1730 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 42.

⁹⁰ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, August 15, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 490 and Philip Doddridge, Letter to Miss Doddridge, July 31, 1749 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 5, pp. 142–44.

⁹¹ Mercy Doddridge, Letter to Philip Doddridge, August 15, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 492.

⁹² Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, August 26, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 500.

⁹³ Mercy Doddridge, Letter to Philip Doddridge, September 2, 1740 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 3, p. 507 and Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, July 30, 1749 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 141.

⁹⁴ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, October 31, 1742 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 124.

⁹⁵ Philip Doddridge, Letter to Mercy Doddridge, October 31, 1742 in *Correspondence and Diary*, vol. 4, p. 124.

addressed these needs. However far apart they might be, the Doddridges were never closer than when they prayed for one another.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to introduce a winsome eighteenth-century couple, Philip and Mercy Doddridge, and to describe the spirituality found in their marriage as it has been preserved in their private letters. That the essential elements of their piety are found in correspondence intended for no one else's eyes lends credibility to its genuineness: they simply lived their life day in and day out in light of the Bible's pattern of marriage and godliness. It is hoped that the same spirituality that shaped their marriage would be richly known in our own generation.

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