Robert Leighton, Archbishop of Glasgow

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ROBERT LEIGHTON, ARCHBISHOP OF GLASGOW.

I.

ROBERT LEIGHTON lived altogether within the limits of the seventeenth century, having been born, as it is generally accepted, in 1611, and dying in his 74th year in 1684. When we remember that he was a Scotsman, and that the period covered by his career embraced the eventful times of Charles I. and Charles II., we shall realize what stirring history he witnessed. And when we further study his life and character we shall see what an unwilling witness Leighton must have been in most respects. For his temperament did not fit him to be a great reformer either in church or state, or to be an eminent man of affairs. He was, as we shall see, wholly out of sympathy with the methods which were being used to deal with the complicated ecclesiastical situation in his native country, a situation which was largely due to the meddling policy of the first three Stuart Kings of England. His eminence lay in his scholarship, which was as deep as his outlook upon life was broad and human, and, still more, in his piety, which was as sincere as his peace-making and conciliatory disposition was consistent and unshaken to the end. The son of one who was scourged, mutilated and imprisoned under the stern rule of Laud, for writing against prelacy, Leighton was never betrayed into any bitterness or any reactionary attitude. The circumstances of his life continually brought him into conflict with fanatical extremists of all parties. As Presbyterian parish minister, Principal of Edinburgh University, Bishop of Dunblane, and Archbishop of Glasgow, he never seems to have relinquished his attitude of considered moderation and tolerance. "Spiritual realities were to him everything, and ques-

tions relating to church government of secondary importance, to be judged by expediency and effectiveness in relationship to the circumstances of the time.”¹

To men living upon a lower plane than himself, such views were apt to be misunderstood, or at least to be unwelcome. On the whole, the partizan is popular, and he who strives for comprehension and reconciliation is liable to the scorn of both sides. Some minds are constituted so as to be able to see one side of a question with such clearness and conviction that no other aspect of it is possible for them. Others again, whether from a less logical grasp of facts, or from a naturally more sympathetic disposition, see too much of both sides, and so much of truth in both sides that they shrink from clear-cut definitions, and, above all, from repressive action, and are most happy in endeavouring to harmonize conflicting elements. To the latter, Leighton undoubtedly belonged. His ecclesiastical sympathies were wide. For example, he had affinities with the Jansenists, with whom he came into contact in a residence abroad, and many of his views were tinged with that type of Romanism. On the other hand, he was not a good Episcopalian, if that means that Episcopacy is to be considered the only possible method by which a church can be governed. In a time when Episcopacy and Presbytery were struggling for the mastery, Leighton saw in Episcopacy the larger and more comprehensive way. Because the greater includes the less, he knew that Episcopacy more easily than Presbytery would include and reconcile both Episcopalians and Presbyterians. And that was the theory which he strove earnestly to carry out in fact. But these were by no means the views of the Laudian party. Nor are they the views of its successors: with them these things are matters, not of expediency, but of principle.

¹ D. Butler, *Leighton's Practice of the Presence of God*, p. 17.

Again, if he did not satisfy the extreme Episcopalians, neither certainly did he satisfy the extreme Presbyterians as represented by the Covenanters. He had signed the Covenant in 1643. He did so believing it to be a means towards the strengthening of national religion and a path towards unity. But he was disappointed, and in 1661 he declared it to have been rashly entered into, and now to be repented of.

If one dwells upon what was really most noticeable in his character—his broad and tolerant sympathies, his generous eye for the good in all schools of thought, besides his fully stored mind, one finds in him a genuine catholicity. In Romanism he was attracted to the ordered and disciplined religious life, and he regretted, e.g., that a modified form of monasticism had not been retained in Reformed Christendom. According to Bishop Burnet, his friend and contemporary, "He thought the great and fatal error of the Reformation was that more of those houses and of that course of life, free from the entanglements of vows and other mixtures, was not preserved: so that the Protestant Churches had neither places of education nor retreat for men of mortified tempers." He never married, and the simple and unaffected asceticism of his own personal life was in part, it may be believed, due to the influence of the Jansenists. And yet with the opportunities he had of studying popery in its most favourable light, and of studying protestantism in all the horror of its internecine quarrelling and its fissiparous tendencies, he lived and died a consistent upholder of the reformed faith.

II.

Before attempting some slight acquaintance with Leighton's writings, which, for importance, far outweigh all the rest of what he did, let us glance at some of the outward facts of his life. He was born and educated in Scotland, graduating at Edinburgh University in 1631. His father, then in prison, sent him to travel abroad, and

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he lived for some ten years at Douay. It was at this time that the Jansenists won his hearty admiration for their piety and the primitive Christian flavour of their lives. He learned to read Thomas à Kempis too, and soon saw what holy men there were in many of the cloisters of France and Italy. No wonder that some of his opponents in after years accused him of leanings towards popery and Jesuitism. But he remained faithful to the Church of Scotland, and having been presented to the parish of Newbattle, near Edinburgh, he was ordained after the Presbyterian fashion in 1641, remaining there as parish minister until Cromwell, to his credit, appointed him Principal of Edinburgh University in 1653. There he became famous for his lectures and theological addresses. Though delivered in Latin, crowds came to hear his discourses. It may have been that even if he could not be entirely understood, his manner and earnestness impressed people: for it was remarked that there was a sincere exaltation both of style and subject in his public utterances. He seemed to create a heavenly atmosphere, and for the time to have the power of transporting his hearers thither.

Before touching upon the more stirring part of Leighton's career, it will be necessary to glance briefly at the ecclesiastical situation in Scotland during the preceding period.

To the circumstances of the Scottish Reformation some allusion must be made. They were wholly different from the circumstances of the English Reformation—a fact never fairly appreciated by James VI., or his son or his grandson. There is not space to dwell upon the historical causes which brought it about, that in the northern kingdom the breach with the past was much greater than in England. Of actual necessity, the reformed faith in Scotland had to be organized without the historic episcopate; and the representatives of the historic episcopate were certainly not all such as to commend the utility, or to suggest the Divine origin of such a

polity. Most of the reformers were old priests. These, under the pressure of necessity, perpetuated the Scottish ministry by presbyterial ordination. But at first there was no sign that a rigid Presbyterianism was a matter of principle. Knox himself had no objection to Episcopacy. Chief amongst the causes which led to the exaltation of Presbyterianism to a divine-right system was the meddling ecclesiasticism of that royal amateur, James VI. Neither he on the one hand, nor the people at large on the other, distinguished clearly enough between prelacy and primitive episcopacy. The radical and democratic spirit of Andrew Melville, who belonged to the second generation of Scottish reformers, unhappily found the times ready for him, and events tended more and more towards the fixing of the Presbyterian form of the ministry of the national Church. But James never gave up his scheme of restoring Episcopacy, and in 1610 brought it to a head by the consecration of a number of Presbyterian titular bishops, the great Bishop Andrewes being one of the consecrators. And be it noted, they were consecrated without previous ordination as deacons and priests.

This by no means brought about either unity or peace; and when later on Charles I. attempted to bring the Scottish Church more into line with the English Church, by endeavouring to suppress the liturgy then in use, known as Knox's *Book of Common Order*, and by substituting for it a Prayer Book on similar lines to the English Book of Common Prayer, division and discord became still more acute, and at last resulted in the abolition of Episcopacy by the General Assembly held in Glasgow, and a storm of public indignation which led to the restoration of Presbytery and the signing of the National Covenant.

This brings us to Leighton's time—to the period of his Newbattle ministry. The country was in the throes of civil and religious strife. Soon Scotland was under the heel of the English army, and its Church suffering from

quite another kind of foe; for Cromwell suppressed the General Assembly, which from the beginning of the Reformation, and through the episcopal period, had been a feature of the polity of the Scottish Church. At last a reaction came, and at the Restoration the Scottish Parliament declared for Episcopacy and made the Solemn League and Covenant to be no longer of force.

But by this time (1661) there was only one Scottish bishop left, and he was insufficient to perpetuate his order. Therefore, as in the case of the Romish episcopal succession in Ireland, the breach in the national episcopate had to be repaired from the outside, i.e., again English consecrators had to be found. But the prevailing church theories were different from those which obtained when Presbyterian ministers were consecrated bishops for Scotland fifty years earlier. Now it was demanded that any of the candidate bishops who had not been episcopally ordained must be unconditionally re-ordained.

Amongst those chosen to be bishops was the saintly President of Edinburgh University. Much against his will did he accept the honour, and he regarded it as a cross to be borne for his Master's sake. Another Presbyterian minister was Sharpe, who was to be the new Scottish primate. He was despised and regarded as a traitor by the Covenanters and afterwards assassinated. Both Sharpe and Leighton hesitated about the re-ordination. Neither was willing to admit the invalidity of his Presbyterian ordination. Leighton, however, saw a characteristic way out of the difficulty. "I will yield," he said, "although I am persuaded I was in orders before, and my ministrations were valid, and they do it cumulative and not privitive: though I should be ordained every year I will submit." In other words, he regarded re-ordination as simply a confirmation of the orders he had already received and as a deference to the rules of the church represented by his consecrators. So after having been privately admitted

deacon and ordained priest, he was consecrated Bishop of Dunblane, in Westminster Abbey, December 15, 1661. He chose Dunblane because it was the poorest of the bishoprics; and it was entirely in harmony with his character, that when he found his brother bishops intended to enter Edinburgh in state, he broke off from them in the journey northward and entered the city privately and unnoticed. He refused too, and in this offended his brother bishops, to be called "My Lord."

At Dunblane he was popularly known as "the good bishop." Upon the vexed problems of the Church he consistently brought to bear his conciliatory principles; and yet he was accused by one writer of the period of being void of any doctrinal principles, and by others of speaking "from a popish principle." He re-ordained no one, nor did he attempt to interfere with the system of Kirk sessions and presbyteries, which, as in the case of the first Episcopacy and the succeeding Presbyterian period, went on as usual. But he, of course, presided at the meetings of Synod. In fact he did his utmost—the opportunity being given him—to carry into practice the theory of a "moderate episcopacy," which apparently had the sanction of our own Archbishop Ussher; and above all he strove earnestly to raise the moral and spiritual tone of the clergy. Had the times been different, he had succeeded better. But his wise Christian statesmanship was continually being thwarted by the crude and impatient action of his episcopal brethren, and by the Crown behind them. Leighton attempted even to bring the Covenanters to a reasonable frame of mind, but he found himself unable to cope with either their fanaticism or the folly of their persecutors. Had only the principles of Robert Leighton prevailed, and had not episcopacy been applied to Scotland in a thoroughly Erastian dress, the Church of Scotland would to-day, in all probability, be in communion with us.

In 1671, again with great unwillingness and under royal pressure, Leighton accepted the Archbishopric of

Glasgow, and for a few years tried to pursue his policy of conciliation. But, although the Covenanters and other extremists believed in him and respected his goodness, they judged that he was alone in his peace-making policy, and they refused his advances. At last, in 1674, he resigned his see—he had attempted to do so before—and retired to live in seclusion with a sister in Sussex, and ten years after he died in the Bell Inn, Warwick Lane, London, and was buried in the parish church of Horsted Keynes, Sussex, in the neighbourhood where his closing years were spent.

III.

And now something must be said about the writings of him who has been justly called the rarest flower that has grown out of Scottish theology. Their importance may be conceded when we hear that Döllinger read them, and pronounced his piety to be so striking that he could not think Leighton had ever been a real Calvinist; and that Coleridge, speaking of his sermons, said:

“Surely if ever work not in the sacred Canon might suggest a belief of inspiration—of something more than human—this it is. . . . Next to the inspired . . . Scripture stands Leighton's Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Peter.”

This last was his chief work. It belongs to the Newbattle or Presbyterian period. It is detailed and almost minute exposition which fills two respectable octavo volumes. Some of it may seem wordy and of little permanent value: but take up any well-known passage and see if Leighton has not had some flash of insight and some beauty of interpretation that will throw light upon a common-place idea, or at least bring an obvious reflection home to one's heart in a convincing way. There was an intellectual strength combined with Leighton's mysticism, as well as a shrewd power of observation of existing human conditions. One discovers cause for the enthusiasm of Coleridge, who indeed based his *Aids*

to *Reflection* largely upon aphorisms culled from Leighton's writings.

Listen to this extract from twenty closely printed pages which are devoted to an exposition of one verse—1 Peter iii. 8: "Finally be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous." He is speaking of what he calls unanimity.

"Beware," he says, "of two extremes which often cause divisions—*captivity to custom* on the one hand, and *affectation of novelty* on the other. . . . In unclear and doubtful things be not pertinacious, as the weakest minds are readiest to be upon seeming reason, which, when tried, will possibly fall to nothing. . . . There is naturally this *Popeness* in every man's mind, and most I say in the shallowest; a kind of fancied *infallibility* in themselves which makes them contentious. . . . There is in the hearts of all the saints ONE SPIRIT; how then can they be but one? Since they have the same purpose and journey, and tend to the same HOME, why should they not walk together in that way? When they shall arrive there, they shall be fully one, and of one mind, not a jar nor difference, all their harps perfectly in tune to that one New Song."

Besides the commentary, he left many sermons, lectures, meditations, charges to the clergy of the diocese of Dunblane, and letters. It was characteristic of him that he saw little of value in anything that he wrote, and like Robertson of Brighton, published nothing during his lifetime, and left orders for his manuscripts to be destroyed. He left his library to Dunblane, where some 1,200 volumes still remain as a memento of the saintly bishop; and there to the present is still shown the Bishop's Walk under the west window of the Cathedral and along the bank of Allan Water.

Of Leighton, the preacher and his preaching, Burnet, his friend for twenty-three years, has left on record this testimony:

"He had the greatest elevation of soul, the largest compass of knowledge, the most mortified and heavenly disposition that I ever saw in mortal; he had the greatest parts, as well as virtues,

with the perfectest humility that I ever saw in man, and had a sublime strain in preaching, with so grave a gesture and such a majesty both of thought, of language and of pronunciation, that I never saw a wandering eye when he preached. . . . I never saw him in any temper, but that which I wished to be in, in the last moments of my life. For that pattern which I saw in him I know how much I have to answer to God."

Such was the opinion of a contemporary, and upon the whole, one may fairly say that the life and writings of Robert Leighton are a refutation of the notion that breadth of view and Christian charity are the outcome of a slovenly mind and a shallow good nature. Let us seek the explanation in a higher sphere. Leighton habitually lived in the heavenly places. He practised the presence of God. He loved and he lived in the Spirit of Christ, and though measured by "the world's coarse thumb and finger," his life seemed in many respects a failure, we know—and perhaps we shall increasingly know—that his labour was not in vain in the Lord.

T. W. E. DRURY.

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