

Eminent English Churchmen By the Reverend Canon Arthur Middleton

William Beveridge (1637-1708)

WILLIAM BEVERIDGE was born into a clerical family in 1637 and baptised at Barrow in Leicestershire where his grandfather and elder brother John, were successively vicar. After tuition from his father he went to Oakham School in Rutland for two years before going to St. John's College, Cambridge. A gifted linguist, he published a learned treatise on Oriental languages at twenty and in 1660 was ordained deacon by Bishop Sanderson of Lincoln. Like George Herbert, he compiled the principles by which he would live the pastoral office, in *Private Thoughts upon Religion*, emphasizing truth of doctrine and innocency of life as essential for the proper exercising of the pastoral office and the power of example over precept. He was concerned to make his own calling and election sure, lest that by any means, when he had preached to others, he himself should be a castaway. In these articles he established his principles in matters of Faith and formed resolutions upon them to regulate his actions. It is his best-known work and though sound in principle and spirit it suffers from an immaturity in a glib settling of difficult questions that is characteristic of youth.

The Preface to his *Works* states, that 'the confusion and disputes of those troubled times' turned him, for direction and guidance, to the study of Ecclesiastical Antiquity for the elucidation of fundamental truth and the promotion of practical piety.' He was a model parish priest for twenty years, in Ealing and St Peter's Cornhill, greatly influencing young men so that people thronged his weekly Eucharist and formed religious societies under his direction. Denis Granville, ordained with him, 'laboured to imitate the pietie and indefatigable diligence of the renowned Dr. Beveridge'. He told his friend Comber, that 'the devout practice and order in his church doth exceedingly edifie the city, and his congregation encreases every week.' His only ambition was for his flock and the Church of God, not for himself. Unlike today, such a successful priest could not be overlooked and he became Archdeacon of Colchester in 1681, Prebendary of Canterbury in 1684, and Bishop of St. Asaph in 1704, having refused to take any vacant nonjuror's see. His disposition is pastoral not purely academic and this found expression in all these spheres of ministry.

Daily Services

After the Restoration, vigorous efforts were made around the country to obey the rubric about daily prayer and the tolling of the bell. The contemporary practical and devotional works insist upon this duty indicating that there must have been opportunities for daily worship. Beveridge, in his work on *The Great Necessity of Public Prayer and Frequent Communion*, contemplated this and determined 'to conform the Church of England to that model'. This earned for him the title of 'the great reviver and restorer of primitive piety'. 'He speaks of the Church of England in high and glowing language; but he speaks of her, be it remembered, as one of those watchmen who should never hold their peace day nor night, and should give the Lord no rest till He " establish, and make Jerusalem a praise in the earth." He contemplated her as a true branch of the Church Catholic and as such, cannot bear it should be said of her, in any sense,' neglectful, 'but would fain see her evincing her Primitive and Catholic character, by acting up to the acknowledged rules, by supplying a constant round of Daily Services and Frequent Communion, exercising more vigorous discipline, and awakening her members to a higher and livelier estimation of the ministration and ordinances of the Church. He saw, what has been well called, an " intrinsic excellence" as yet undeveloped, which he did his best, first by deep piety and learning, and afterwards by active zeal and constant watchfulness as a parish priest, and as a bishop, to develop, and exemplify, and improve into "practical influence." (*Works*, Vol. I, p. vii.)

This made him resolve to maintain things as he found them, and act to give life and vigour to her whole existing system, opposing the "Scheme of Comprehension," as it was called, and the projected alterations in the Liturgy.

Public Catechesis

Efforts were made to obey the fifty-ninth canon requiring public catechising that had the support of all bishops, high and low. The Puritan exaltation of the sermon prevented them from being persuaded that catechising was often the best and most useful sort of preaching. Also, despite opposition from people who refused to send their children or servants, progress was made so that we read of a lover of sermons being forced to go and hear 'the town minister catechise' because there were no sermons after dinner throughout the country. In 1704 Bishop Beveridge, in the *Dedication of his Church Catechism*, encouraged his clergy to catechise, 'not as if I thought this duty had been neglected among you; for I have heard that it is generally practised throughout the diocese every

Lord's day.' Catechising in Lent had become general practice but it became common practice every Sunday afternoon.

Anglicans saw catechesis as part of the Ministry of the Word with doctrine and devotion central to it and for the Caroline divines they were inseparable. Expositions of the Catechism were published at a time when outwardly all seemed lost. These works, including Beveridge's, had a cumulative effect on building up Anglicans in their faith through instruction in the apostolic doctrine, through the breaking of bread and the prayers, and through character-building by grace.

Beveridge's concern for the proper instruction of the people was a reason for him opposing a *New Version of the Psalms*. He fought to retain the old *Version*, reasoning that it *was* old and more intelligible to the people, but also because it had been conferred with the Hebrew as the new had not been.

The Religious Societies

Religious societies became an important feature of church life. They were a lay initiative among middle class young men who in 1678 had been impressed by the preaching of Dr. Horneck at the Savoy Chapel and Mr Smythies at St. Michael's Cornhill. Clubs for Atheists, Deists and Socinians, gave them the idea of banding together in 'Societies', conducted strictly on the lines of the Church's teaching. Their membership consisted of male communicants over sixteen years, with a priest to direct them in practical divinity and devotion in which only the Church's prayers were used. Their rule of life was simple and consisted of prayer, mutual love, proportionate giving and the obligation to bring in a new member.

Typically, Church dignitaries were suspicious of what they imagined, 'the setting up of a Church within a Church', but after winning the support of the Archbishop, the Bishop of London and the Queen, the membership of these societies prospered. The credit for guiding them rested with their clerical leaders, including Dr. Beveridge Dr. Horneck. Mr Smythies and Dr. Bray. In 1710 there were forty-two religious societies in London with numerous others in the larger towns. In an address to 'Persons of Quality' Robert Nelson argued that if these few unknown people, of no great standing, could do so much to promote the life and spirit of Christianity, people of greater standing might do so much more.

These zealous young men were responsible for giving new life to the celebration of the Eucharist, public prayers, the singing of the psalms and family religion. Dr. Bray established one hundred charity schools in London, as well as others around the country and all was subservient to the extension and improvement of public worship. It was said that prayers

were set up in so many places and hours in London that the greater numbers and a greater appearance of devotion and sacraments was more evident than hitherto.

The Preacher

In his preaching, Beveridge, wrote Robert Nelson, 'had a way of touching the consciences of his hearers that seemed to revive the spirit of the Apostolic Age', and Hartwell Horne said of his sermons, 'Their great beauty is a tender and pathetic earnestness, a strong and affectionate appeal to the heart and conscience; ... it is not every reader who can reason and investigate with Barrow, but all can feel with Beveridge.' His sermons not only combined a simplicity and earnestness but, set out in full and due proportion, evangelical doctrine and apostolical order and while they have in them much more of the gospel than many of his day there is a distinctive Church tone. If the reader would catch the spirit of the English Church then read and inwardly digest Beveridge's sermons.

Responsible Discipleship

A distinctive character dominates the Caroline understanding of responsible discipleship that must be centred in, 'if any man be in Christ he is a new creature'. Unlike today, moral theology cannot be separated from ascetical theology, which means that morality cannot be separated from the interior life because it deals with our life as it is lived in union with Christ. Christian behaviour and the ascesis of prayer belong together and when separated lead to distortions in Christian living. For Beveridge and his Caroline school, the primary concern was with the re-creation through grace of the human person where the aim is to make man a 'new creature' 'sincere in his obedience'. Absolution does not require perfection in this life. Such a state requires grace, which does not infuse into us an 'unsinning obedience', but makes us a 'new creature' whereby we discover a sincere obedience to the whole Gospel. This is regeneration in perfection in which sincerity is central, that God accepts in Christ, assisting and promoting it by the grace of the Holy Spirit. It is not our own life but the life Christ lives in us through the means of grace within the eucharistic fellowship of the baptized who share in the apostolic faith.

Catholicity

Beveridge elaborates his understanding of catholicity, these fixed and common principles of the *Catholic Church* in seven points. First, Holy Scripture is fundamental because from it the rest arises, and all Christians everywhere have agreed that it contains doctrine necessary for salvation.

Scriptural interpretation is not a matter of private opinion and conjecture so we need to follow the ancient church's interpretation. Secondly, many things not explicitly stated in Scripture are drawn out from it, with the common consent of all Christians. These include the Trinity, infant baptism, Sunday as the first day of the week, Passiontide, Eastertide, Ascensiontide and Pentecost, the government of the Church by Bishops distinguished from presbyters. Thirdly, confidence is to be placed in the whole body than in individual Christians, and more in the universal Church than in any particular churches, because there are many points in which the Universal Church, during many ages after that of the Apostles, agreed. This consent of the universal Church is the surest interpretation of Holy Scripture on those points on which it has agreed. Fourthly, this *consent* in matters of faith and order is not confined to a minority of writers, or passages in a particular writer apart from the rest. It must comprise the greater part of those 'who in all ages of the Church, (and especially the earlier), were the authors of any written works in which they treated on these subjects'. Fifthly, *the right use of the Fathers*, does not mean that because some have disagreed we must dismiss them, because we are thinking of the Fathers not as individuals taken separately, but taken together conjointly. Sixthly, the Reformers avoided extremes by embracing 'whatsoever things had been at all times, believed and observed, by all Churches, in all places ... For they well knew, that all particular Churches are to be formed on the model of the Universal Church'. As a result, though the Church of England at this time is out of communion with the Roman church and other particular churches, 'yet have we abiding communion with the universal and catholic Church' Finally, the primitive church is special because it is universally agreed to be the more pure and genuine part. For Beveridge, 'new institutions ... devised by the wanton imaginations of men's minds, which very fault is above all other to be eschewed in religion'. The Apostolic successors in those primitive ages kept the Church uncorrupted, and though harassed by new heresies she was in no way corrupted because they were immediately rejected by the Catholic Church as she appealed to the *primitive church* as the rule of other churches.