

Matthew Parker (1504-1575)

Cleaning Up After Mary

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A GOLDEN AGE

Matthew Parker was the first Reformed Archbishop of Canterbury after the Marian persecutions ended. His task was far from easy as Mary's tyranny and popish superstitions had left a dirty stain on the entire country. Parker's person, work, testimony and deep learning, under Providence, enabled England to sweep away the past and embark on a veritable Golden Age for the Church which lasted throughout Elizabeth's and James' reigns until brought to a halt in the middle of the following century. I have chosen the term 'Golden Age' carefully, not so as to deny the many problems both theological and political that faced England throughout this period but to affirm that hardly any other age since then, including even the Great Awakenings of the 18th century, has been so blessed under such a powerful, widespread ministry of gracious, humble, Christians such as Parker, Coverdale, Whitaker, Jewel, Grindal, Hall, Davenant, Carleton, Ward, Abbot and many more.

WOLSEY'S INVITATION HAPPILY REJECTED

Our subject was born on 6 August, 1504 in the city of Norwich. His father died before Matthew had reached his teens, leaving the burden of his upbringing and education on his mother's shoulders. Alice Parker carried that burden well. Matthew was admitted to Bennet College Cambridge at the age of sixteen and quickly gained a scholarship, becoming Bible-Clerk a few months later. He took his BA in 1523 and became such a noted scholar that Cardinal Wolsey asked him to join other men of learned and Reformed persuasions to teach at his newly founded Christ's Church College, Oxford. Parker declined the invitation and well he did as many of the young scholars under Wolsey's 'care' were mercilessly persecuted by the Cardinal when his more reforming mood changed.

PARKER BECOMES PRINCESS ELIZABETH'S MENTOR

Though early called to the ministry, Parker wished to perfect his studies and knowledge of the Scriptures and church history before entering into that work and he first applied to be ordained as Deacon in 1527 and was made priest (presbyter) soon after. In the same year Parker became Master of Arts and obtained a special licence to preach at court and at the popular preaching places such as St. Paul's Cross. Around 1534, Parker was made Chaplain to Anne Boleyn who chose him for his Reforming zeal. When the Queen realised that her vile husband was plotting to have her murdered,

Anne committed their daughter Elizabeth to Parker's care, a task Parker fulfilled with meticulous attention. The deep faith which this monarch later showed, her love for the Word of God and her skill at translating Scripture and her delight in scholarly, sound literature in general can be traced back to her tutelage under Parker.

A SURPRISE MOVE BY HENRY VIII

In 1534, Parker gained his BD and became Dean of Stoke College. Seeing the lack of education provided for the youngsters of Stoke, Parker immediately raised money to build a grammar school. Anne Boleyn, ever a supporter of the Reformation, was brutally beheaded and many people thought Parker's head would follow her's. However, Henry was always a man of surprises and he made Parker, now Doctor of Divinity, his own Chaplain before installing him as Prebendary to Ely Cathedral. From now on, preferments came thick and fast and Parker grew tired of the way honours were heaped upon him and wished only to continue his duties at Stoke. This position, however, was taken from him due to Henry's dissolution campaign but Parker was given a pension of forty pounds a year. Parker, now forty-three years of age, married Margaret Harlestone, a gentleman's daughter from Norfolk.

THE SHY MAN OF COURAGE

C. Schoell, writing in Schaff's famous Encyclopaedia of Religion, maintains that Parker was so timid that he could not stand up to argue with anyone face to face. Parker showed pluck, he argues, only when he hid behind his pen. The opposite is the case. Though Parker was a very shy, retiring man, his courage was all the more supreme. Parker stood up for Anne Boleyn and Lady Jane Grey when it seemed that all their friends had fled. He campaigned openly for the arrest, trial and possible execution of Mary, Queen of Scots when such a daring piece of outspokenness could have easily cost him his head. When Robert Ket the Tanner's 1549 rebellion occurred in Norfolk, without thinking of his own safety, Parker walked into the 20,000 strong enemy camp, and preached before Ket informing him of his duty to God, his king and his country. Whilst preaching, several arrows were fired at him yet he preached on. Eventually, the Earl of Warwick with less than a third of Ket's forces, attacked the camp and defeated the foe. Parker, however, had stormed the rebel camp single handed with the Word of God before Warwick decided to attack. A year later, Parker was made a member of a commission to judge how to act against the Pelagian Anabaptist Arians who were now infiltrating the country from the Continent. This was the year in which the great Martin Bucer Reformer and Professor of Divinity at Cambridge died and Parker was chosen to conduct the funeral service and preach to the crowds of mourners. All these acts in such turbulent times were feats of outspoken and out-acted courage.

A LONGING FOR PEACE

Under Edward, Parker once again received preferment after preferment but

he was unhappy in the limelight and longed for peace. That peace was brought about in a most unexpected way. When Mary came to the throne she quickly sought out her hated sister's mentor. One thing that Mary could not stand was married clergymen. So, not bothering to challenge Parker on his doctrines, the new Queen removed him immediately from all church and university offices on the grounds that he was a married man. This actually saved Parker's life because, once deposed, he went into hiding and though the Queen harassed him from place to place, this was usually from one place of learning to another, so Parker did not grumble. Indeed, his own words express his new situation of absolute poverty but also of peace he had not enjoyed for years:

I lived as a private individual; so happy before God in my conscience; and so far from being either ashamed or dejected, that the delightful literary leisure to which the good providence of God recalled me, yielded me much greater and more solid enjoyments, than my former busy and dangerous kind of life had ever afforded me. What shall befall me hereafter I know not: but to God, who cares for all men, who will one day reveal the secrets of the hearts, I commit myself holy, and my good and virtuous wife, with my two very dear children. And I beseech the same most merciful and almighty God that for the time to come we may so bear the reproach of Christ with unbroken courage as ever to remember that here we have no continuing city, but may seek one to come by the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ; to whom with the Father and the Holy Ghost be all honour and dominion. Amen¹

These cheerful words disguise the fact that Parker and his family had often to flee for their lives when warnings came at dead of night. During one midnight gallop to safety, Parker fell from his horse and injured himself so severely that he was lamed for life. During this time of danger yet peace of heart, Parker translated the Psalms and wrote a treatise on the Scriptural right of ministers to marry and have families. Convinced that Roman errors were modern novelties, Parker began to collect manuscripts from the early Saxon church and studied the first three centuries of the church history of the world diligently. He came to the conclusion that the early British and Western churches were essentially what his generation called 'Reformed' and wrote a history of the Reformed Church in England.

AN UNEXPECTED AND UNWANTED TURN OF EVENTS

With the accession of Elizabeth in 1559, it appeared that both the exiled and underground Church of England wished with one voice to have Parker at their head. Only the Marian church dignitaries disagreed but Elizabeth was in no mood to take any notice of those whom she felt had betrayed her father, her brother, her God and her country. Parker was still in hiding but Lord Keeper Bacon and Sir William Cecil, after sending letters to the wrong addresses,² eventually rooted him out and sent him the mysterious sounding words:

Where before this time we directed our letters unto you, declaring thereby that for certain causes wherein the Queen's Majesty intendeth to use your service, you should repair hither with all convenient speed, whereof we have as yet received none answer: and therefore, doubting lest by the default of the messenger, the letter be not come to your hands, we have thought good again to write to you, to the intent you should understand her highness' pleasure is, that you should make your repair hither with all speed possible. Thus right heartily farewell.

From the Court, the 28th day of May, 1559.³

Parker, fearing the rumours that he had heard were true and his peace was at an end, was dumfounded and wrote in his diary:

Alas! Alas! O Lord God, for what times hast thou kept me? Now am I come into deep waters, and the floods hath overwhelmed me. O Lord, I am oppressed, answer for me, and strengthen me with thy free Spirit.

THE NEW BROOM SWEEPS COURT AND CHURCH

The answer was that Parker was confirmed Archbishop of Canterbury on 9 December 1559, at St. Mary le Bow Church, and consecrated at Lambeth Chapel on 17 December. One of the chief officiating ministers was Miles Coverdale of whom the Reformers always used to say, 'He was in Christ before us all'. Others were William Barlow, John Scory and John Hodgkin. As soon as Parker became Archbishop, he became very active in cleaning out the Marian stables. The first person he turned to with advice was his former ward, Queen Elizabeth. Parker outlined the duties of a Queen to her and in what manner these were related to a true Christian testimony. He also asked the Queen to set an example to the nation by banning all vestiges of popery such as crucifixes, images and lighted tapers from her own chapel. He also counselled Elizabeth to marry as quickly as possible! The Queen was not at all pleased by the advice! The new Archbishop then reduced his own salary by a substantial amount but was still enabled to finance an almost unbelievable amount of charitable works. The ex-popish ministers, some of them with pensions higher than Parker's wages, accused him of being a miser as he did not live in the luxury in which they had waded. Parker, however, was a doer of good not a boaster of pomp. Very early, Parker set about filling the bishoprics of the Kingdom with truly Reformed men such as Grindal and Jewel and founding schools throughout the kingdom and scholarships for poor students. He insisted that the Reformed Church of England should once more return to its Biblical roots and made sure that sound men were given a good exegetical and pastoral education before being placed in the ministry. This fact has caused historians to imagine that there were grave differences between Parker and his friend Grindal. Differences between the men, however, were few and quickly overcome. Grindal, in thorough agreement with Parker, embarked on a system of ridding the churches of pluralities by filling them with men sound in the faith. However, a number of churches complained to Parker

that they had untrained hempen homespuns thrust upon them and that it was spiritually more profitable for them to share a good pastor with other churches rather than have a bad one all to themselves. Parker's letters to Grindal on the subject are extant and show a high degree of tact and sound advice on choosing people for the ministry. Grindal only made one major protest against Parker's actions. The Archbishop suggested having a commemorative thanksgiving communion service at St. Paul's to celebrate the end of the plague. Grindal thought this smacked too much of a High Mass. In turn, Parker thought Grindal too 'over-didactic' in his prayers and recommended to him the greater simplicity of the Prayer Book. These, however, were discussions between close brethren and Grindal naturally followed Parker as Archbishop.

PARKER THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR

The Archbishop wanted the church of the Elizabethan Settlement to be founded squarely on God's Word. But at the time, Bibles in English were very scarce and most expensive. Mary had systematically rooted out and destroyed the great bulk of Bibles, especially the so-called Cranmer's Bible and most of the work of Coverdale and the exiled translators. Furthermore, though there had been numerous Bibles translated and printed since Henry's days, few pleased all sides. There were many sound reasons for this. The authors of these translations still living such as Coverdale and Whittingham, always urged for better and newer translations and more independence from the Latin versions. Reprinting old versions was a most difficult task indeed as most of them had been printed abroad, to a great extent in secret and the antiquated type had either been lost, confiscated or melted down for other use. These early Bibles had also been of immense size. The last portable version to have been printed was Matthew's Bible in 1540 but this was in five volumes and Parker wanted every man to have a Bible that he could place in his pocket.⁴

Thus Parker developed a two-fold strategy. The exiles had returned with the almost completed text of the Geneva Bible. This work the translators dedicated 'To the most virtuous and noble Lady Elizabeth, Queen of England, France, and Ireland, &c. grace and peace from God the Father, through Christ Jesus our Lord.' This version was based on Tyndale's and Coverdale's work, the Great Bible, Matthew's Bible and Beza's Latin translation. Parker introduced the Geneva Bible for church use as the best solution at the time. It is said that fifty editions and portions were printed from 1560 to 1590. Those editions used in the Church of England were bound up with Prefaces on the Testaments, the Book of Common Prayer, Prayers on Sundry Occasions, a Confession of Faith, a poem on the value of the Word of God and articles on such matters as predestination.

The Geneva Bible did not satisfy all, least of all its authors, as the Hebrew, Greek and Latin texts followed were quickly being superseded by more reliable sources and the work suffered stylistically in a number of places. Misprints in all the old Continental versions abounded due to many printers

not even understanding the English language. A myth has grown that the Geneva Bible was the Bible of the more 'Nonconformist' and 'Puritan' section of the Church of England and the following two versions (Bishops' Bible and the AV), which were really only revisions based on better texts, were more 'High Anglican' in their doctrines. This is not true in any way. James I is often cited as an 'Anglican!' critic of the Geneva Bible and Dr J. Reynolds (also spelt Rainolds and even Reginaldus) is cited as the version's defender. Actually, James never attacked the text of the Geneva Bible but questioned the suitability of the notes which applied Scripture very narrowly to contemporary affairs, often neglecting the true context. On the other hand, it was Reynolds who campaigned for the so-called King James' version on the grounds that the previous versions contained errors. Both James and Reynolds were equally enthusiastic about making a new translation and historians cannot decide which of the two were the originators of the idea.

Parker's more long term strategy was his Bishop's Bible. The previous versions had been translated by individuals or small teams working under enormous difficulties. Parker now strove to create a new version aided by the learning of all the major Reformed scholars available at the time and the united resources of the great libraries of the nation. The work was to be a revision, not a new translation. The vast majority, if not all, of the scholars Parker chose held to the doctrines of grace. Most of the translators had suffered persecution under Mary; some like William Alley and Parker going into hiding, others like Edmund Grindal and Richard Davies (also a translator of the Welsh Bible) had chosen exile. Davies' fellow-Welshman and co-translator, William Morgan, had already translated the entire Bible before joining Parker's staff. Another translator, T. Bentham⁵ first joined the English exiles in Switzerland but quickly returned to England to lead the underground church.

Actually, the term Bishops' Bible is quite inaccurate as many a skilled vicar, dean and university lecturer was commissioned to help with the work. Nor was it an old man's version as the Reformed Church of England, after massive resignations from those who had bowed their knees to Mary's idols, now had many young enthusiastic men of God in the ministry. They were fine linguists and had continued their studies in the Reformed universities and colleges of the Continent. All in all, the Bishops' Bible was certainly a Puritan Bible if by that term a Bible written by those who loved the doctrines of grace is meant. Indeed, on this count, the Bishops' Bible was more Puritan than the great version that followed it as none of its translators were anywhere near as Pelagian as John Overall and Richard Thompson who worked on the Authorised Version. Nor was the Bishops' Bible authorised by either the monarch or Parliament as was the AV, but was solely produced on the authority of the Church. It was never called Queen Elizabeth's Bible as the Queen never endorsed it, though she supported the forty editions produced during her reign.

ORGANISATION VERSUS DOCTRINE AND CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

Parker's last years were troubled by a growing number of militant nonconformists in the church who wished for an entirely new organisational structure. Parker sincerely believed that external organisation was purely secondary to experimental Christian living but his critics looked upon a particular form of church organisation as being necessary to salvation. Sadly, documents were passed to Parker, indicating that the ultra-conformists to other principles of discipline and order were about to stage a military revolution. Happily, these documents were proved to be forgeries, but not until they had caused much unnecessary strife amongst once united brethren. It was the old story. In times of trial the Christians had united themselves, only to fall out when peace brought the leisure to let Old Adam have his sway! Parker, however, kept to his two private rules the first being 'Of all the sentences pronounced by our Saviour Christ in his whole doctrine, none is more serious or more worthy to be borne in remembrance, than that which he spake openly in his Gospel, saying, "Search ye the Scriptures; for in them ye think to have eternal life, and those they be which bear witness of me."' 6 Parker's second rule was 'In a good cause, fear nobody.' Thus Parker's last days were spent informing his hearers that 'the only surety to our faith and conscience is to stick to the Scriptures' and to live under their instruction, their patience with us and their comfort to us. Parker could say this because he believed sincerely that the Word of God never returned to Him without accomplishing its task because it was the Spirit-filled voice of God Himself.

THE DEATH OF THE REFORMER AND WHAT HIS MEMORY TEACHES US

In 1575, Archbishop Parker died of the 'stone and strangury' (so contemporary documents). He was in his seventy-second year. He was buried in his own chapel at Lambeth. Sadly, the revolution that he had so feared became a reality in 1640 and one of the first acts of malicious brutality against this brave man of peace was that Colonel Scott of the Cromwellian forces, pulled down Parker's chapel, dug up his bones and scattered them on a rubbish dump. Parker was a pioneer and few pioneers have an easy life. Those who seek Scripture first and seem oblivious to externals that are ever so important to others, often make enemies. Oddly enough, most of Parker's enemies were products of later times and Parker is perhaps more unpopular today than he ever was. Parker's doctrines are also less believed today than at any other time. The Archbishop was a simple, family man who had two passions, to shepherd his flock and to study church history. In such a short essay, it is impossible to show how eminently successful Parker was in this calling. He was so used of God in preaching and so successful in tracing God's ways in English church history, that we have every reason to thank God for these two blessings which have made the post-Parker Christian era all the brighter and better informed. Few have proved so well from Scripture and history how false it is of the Roman Church to usurp the titles of 'Catholic' and 'Apostolic' in the fond self-deceit that they are the veritable Bride of Christ.

Those who might now be tempted to learn more about this man who did so much to fill ancient, dilapidated church buildings with those who had truly Christ in their midst might consult John Strype's *The Life and Acts of Matthew Parker*, London, 1711. Sadly, nowadays, you will have to sell your shirt, suit and boots to be able to buy this treasure. Erasmus Middleton's biography in vol. 2 of his *Biographia Evangelica* is more readily available as also Legh Richmond's reprint of Parker's Prefaces in his *Fathers of the English Church*. Parker's own autobiography and letters often come up on the second hand market for around seventeen to twenty pounds. If money and catalogues fail, the inter-library loans department of your local library will be able to supply you with works on and by Parker. Whether one, as a lover of the doctrines of grace, is an Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregationalist or Baptist, all these denominations trace their doctrinal roots back through the Reformation to the Apostolic Church. This route is clearly depicted in Parker's works.

- i. See Parker's Autobiography in *The Correspondence of Matthew Parker*, Parker Society, p. viii.
- ii. It does appear that Parker had received some knowledge of the letters but had not reacted.
- iii. *The Correspondence of Matthew Parker*, p. 69.
- iv. See Heaton's work *The Puritan Bible* (vol. iii of his *Our Own English Bible*) and Canton's *The Bible and the Anglo-Saxon People* for readable and informative histories of the English Bible.
- v. Others believe that the initials T.B. as the translator of the Psalms refers to Thomas Becon. It is very difficult to trace the work of many of the exiles as they moved under pseudonyms during the Marian persecutions. Becon was known as Theodore Basil when in exile. Some suggest that the translator was Thomas Bickley.
- vi. The opening words to Parker's Preface to the Bible.

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