

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The Aphorisms of Benjamin Whichcote.

FEW writers have had more influence in shaping the course of theological thought in England than the Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century. They were great pioneers who paid the penalty of being in advance of their times. Their teaching, which was scorned and derided by the majority in their own lifetime, has only gradually won its way into general acceptance, and even to-day is scarcely appreciated at its true worth.

The central theme of their doctrine was the supremacy of the "inner light" of reason and conscience in the individual soul as the authority for religious belief and practice. One of their favourite texts was Proverbs xx, 27: "The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord." Standing in the Platonic tradition, which exalts the sovereignty and divinity of reason in human nature, and holding fast, as the central pillar of their system, the Logos doctrine, which likewise asserts that reason is the divine element in the human soul, "the Light that lighteth every man," they found the final authority for their belief not in ecclesiastical dogma nor in the decisions of the Church Councils, but in the conviction of their own minds, enlightened by Holy Scripture and by the interior testimony of the Holy Spirit. Their doctrine therefore aimed at showing the reasonableness of the Christian faith, and its essential harmony with the spiritual teaching of Platonism and Neo-platonism. They quoted from Plato, Plotinus and Proclus as often as from the Bible; but passages from the Platonic writers were quoted, not as the authority for their beliefs, but as indicating the spirit and method of their enquiries, and as affording illustration and confirmation of their conclusions. Like Plato and his followers, they stressed the close relation between right thinking and right action. The "light within" declares that moral goodness is the highest and best thing in life.

Benjamin Whichcote, the founder of the school of Cambridge Platonists, became a student at Emmanuel College in 1626, Fellow of the same College in 1633, and Provost of King's College in 1644. In this position of authority he exerted a profound influence in the university by the eloquence and freshness of his preaching, and by the kindliness and saintliness of his character. All that remains to us of his work consists of four volumes of

his Discourses, and a volume containing (i) a series of moral and religious aphorisms, collected from his MSS, and (ii) his controversial correspondence with his friend and former tutor, Anthony Tuckney. The printed Discourses give a very inadequate idea of the power of the preached sermons. They seem to have been printed merely from notes, for in the pulpit he used "no other than very short notes, not very legible" (*Letters*, p. 108). It is in the collected aphorisms, with their pungent and epigrammatic wit, that we can best sample the force of Whichcote's teaching.

Many of these aphorisms illustrate Whichcote's emphasis upon the importance of reason: "Reason is the candle of the Lord, lighted by God and lighting us to God." "God hath set up two lights to enlighten us on our way; the light of reason which is the light of His creation, and the light of Scripture, which is after-revelation from Him. Let us make use of these two lights and suffer neither to be put out." "The reason of our mind is the best instrument we have to work withal. Reason is not a shallow thing: it is the first participation from God; therefore, he that observes reason, observes God." "I have always found that such preaching of others hath most commanded my heart which hath most illuminated my head."

Other aphorisms stress the important truth that religion is a spirit and a way of life. "Heaven is first a temper, then a place." "It is impossible to make a man happy by putting him in a happy place, unless he be first in a happy state." "Heaven present is our resemblance to God . . . men deceive themselves grossly when they flatter themselves with hopes of a future heaven, and yet by wickedness of heart and life do contradict heaven present." "No man reverenceth a wicked man, no, not a wicked man himself."

Whichcote vigorously upholds religious liberty, as all the Cambridge Platonists do. "I will not make a religion for God nor suffer any to make a religion for me." He pleads the right of private judgment: "No man can command his judgment; therefore every man must obey it." He abhors religious persecution: "That must not be done in defence of religion which is contrary to religion."

He shows up the folly of pride and self-conceit: "He that is full of himself goes out of company as wise as he came in." "Where there is most of God, there is least of self." "He that takes himself out of God's hands into his own, by and by will not know what to do with himself." He exalts the forgiving spirit: "He that repents is angry with himself: I need not be angry with him."

He deplored the worldliness and cynicism of his age. "Among politicians the esteem of religion is profitable, the

principles of it are troublesome." Certainly the moral earnestness of Whichcote and his followers are thrown into relief by the frivolity and hypocrisy of many of their contemporaries. The Cambridge Platonists, almost alone amongst the Church of England clergy of their day, insisted upon sincere spirituality and consistency between Christian profession and practice. These philosophical divines, with their intense spiritual fervour and their reverence for reason and divine knowledge, afford a welcome contrast to the slothful lethargy and dead formalism of the Restoration clergy, who suspected their rationalism and called them "latitudinarians."

The central idea in Whichcote's teaching was that there is in the human spirit a "seminal principle," a "seed of God." "God's image is in us, and we belong to Him." "Reason is the Divine Governor of man's life; it is the very voice of God." "I oppose not rational to spiritual, for spiritual is most rational." Reason is not divorced from piety and morality, for Reason at its highest is that communion with God which purifies the soul, and educates the will no less than the mind.

The Restoration put an end to Benjamin Whichcote's happy activity at Cambridge. He was removed from the provostship by special order of the King in 1660. The views and general standpoint of the Cambridge school did not win any general acceptance for two centuries. But the lamp which they lit was never put out, and to-day many of their doctrines, which were regarded as dangerous innovations in their own time, such as the right of private judgment, and the supreme authority of the "Voice of God" within the individual soul, have now become the treasured convictions of innumerable Christians.

A. W. ARGYLE.