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The Priest and the Con Man

JOHN DEARING

In *The Goodness of God*, John Wenham argues very persuasively that capital punishment is not necessarily a less humane means of punishment than long-term imprisonment for murderers and others who would previously have faced the gallows. Apart from the psychological effects of incarceration, he cites the possibility of repentance in the face of imminent and certain death:

It is hard to find adequate rational grounds for [the death penalty's] total rejection except on the quasi-religious belief that death is final and absolute and that to take a man's life is to rob him of all. But the Christian knows that death is not the end. To him sudden death is indeed a solemn prospect, yet to one who loves God it is not in itself something to be dreaded. To face death is to face a merciful Judge, knowing that, if a man repents of his sin, he may with the penitent thief, have the certainty and joy of being with Christ in Paradise.¹

When I read these words twenty years ago, they halted me in my abolitionist tracks and while many Christians will point to recent examples of miscarriages of justice as arguments against hanging, I cannot help thinking that the self-righteous anger with which many of those victims of faulty verdicts have greeted their release is hardly likely to have benefited their immortal souls. Nor (echoing Wenham's argument above) can one be convinced, in considering such cases of current concern as that of Myra Hindley, that incarceration for life is a more compassionate penalty than capital punishment.

Wenham's viewpoint is corroborated by other writers, including, quite recently, the American R P Martin who argues persuasively from the Scriptures that the death penalty is a divine institution. In regard to the possible salvation of the criminal he writes:

The sentence of death does not equate, however, with the absolute forfeiture of all opportunity to make peace with God through his Son Jesus Christ. Ordinarily there is a lengthy period of time between arrest and execution in capital cases. In the weeks and months and years usually required for the trial and the appeals which follow conviction, there is more than adequate time for a man to lay hold of Christ as his Savior . . .

What set of circumstances (humanly speaking) can possibly conspire to impress a man more concerning his need of salvation than those circum-

stances in which a guilty and condemned criminal finds himself? If anything, far from foreclosing on a man's opportunity to be saved, the circumstances in which a condemned man finds himself are as fortuitous as can be conceived of for a man to recognize his need of Christ.²

It is only fair to point out that other writers take a different view, also arguing from Scripture, including in the last century John MacMaster whose volume *The Divine Purpose of Capital Punishment* was designed to prove 'that the necessity for capital punishment was swept away by the atonement of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' and 'that the continuance of the death penalty is not merely inconsistent with, but antagonistic to, the express teaching of Christ and his Apostles'.³

However, it has been my study of the Evangelical Revival in Reading and, in particular my investigation of the relationship of the Revd William Talbot and the forger, Jonathan Britain, a man who faced the gallows in 1772, that has brought this subject chiefly to mind. Talbot was an important leader in the Evangelical Revival within the established church, though less well remembered today than such men as Newton, Romaine, Simeon and the Venns. Britain was described towards the end of his life as 'one of the greatest impostors that this kingdom has ever seen' but he too is largely forgotten even in criminological circles. To record their story will, I trust, be of interest equally to students of ecclesiastical history, doctrine and the criminal mind.

William Talbot was a person of aristocratic background, and it seems likely that initially he entered the church because it was the thing that younger sons of the nobility did rather than through any sense of vocation. As with many of his class, he owed his spiritual rebirth to the ministry of the Countess of Huntingdon and from that point on he was, in the words of James Hervey of Weston Favell, a man 'baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire—fervent in spirit and setting' his face 'as a flint'. Having held the livings successively of Kington, Warwickshire and All Hallows, Upper Thames Street, London, Talbot came to Reading in 1768 as Vicar of St Giles, one of the three ancient parishes in that town. Here Talbot's preaching of the Gospel was especially effective and it was estimated that 200 to 300 souls were converted to Christ during the six years of his ministry.⁴ He was also much given to good works and, as well as tending to the needs of the sick and the poor, this included prison visiting.

Jonathan Britain was a Yorkshireman, born in Thirsk, to respectable parents of limited means who, in the words of the Newgate Calendar, could not afford 'to give him a liberal education'. Instead, he was sent to work as an errand-boy at the office of an attorney in York. The latter recognised in young Jonathan 'marks of genius and ability' and promoted him to the position of articled clerk. Britain, however, was a restless youth afflicted by 'an impatience of restraint' who found it difficult to settle into any position for long. From the lawyer's office, he proceeded to a public

academy where he was employed initially as a teacher of mathematics. Once again his talents achieved recognition and he was promoted to be the principal usher in the school.

It was not long, however, before the previous pattern of events repeated themselves and his next career move was destined to be his undoing, for he enlisted as a soldier in the 10th Dragoons. Here it was his striking physical appearance rather than his intellect which brought him to the attention of his officers. Such attention 'very much flattered his vanity' and led him into an extravagant lifestyle through a vain attempt to emulate his superiors. As a result, he found himself in reduced circumstances and was tempted to dishonesty. As the *Newgate Calendar*⁵ puts it:

He committed a variety of frauds, most of them of such artful contrivance as to elude all possibility of detection.

He had a custom of introducing himself into the company of persons who had no suspicion of deceit, and then he would so far insinuate himself into their good opinion as to take undue advantage of their unsuspecting honesty.

Modern man would class him as a con man par excellence.

His career as a fully-fledged criminal commenced in Bristol where he passed a number of bank drafts which he had forged. From there, fearing detection, he proceeded to the capital where he wrote a series of letters to King George III, claiming that he had been implicated in a plot to set fire to the naval dockyard at Portsmouth. These were apparently disregarded, whereupon Britain addressed the Lord Mayor of London, offering to surrender himself and effectively turn King's Evidence. The promise of a pardon he requested was advertised in the *London Gazette* and on the strength of this Britain proceeded to Reading to meet his wife who had been very sick. However, his continuing reduced circumstances induced him to offer further forged drafts totalling £45 and on this occasion he was apprehended and found himself in the Compter, one of Reading's several gaols. This was on Tuesday, 30 July 1771.

Shortly afterwards, while awaiting examination, Britain took a hefty dose of arsenic, evidently wishing to end his life rather than face a lengthy incarceration, awaiting trial at the next assizes. However, 'when his pains grew torturing, he submitted to the use of proper medicines, and listened to the advice of sending for some clergyman to talk to him'.⁶ Mr Blisset, a grocer and one of the victims of Britain's forgeries, was concerned for the state of his soul and asked William Talbot to visit him. Talbot was at first reluctant to undertake this duty, as the Compter was 'not within the limits of my parish' but St Laurence's. However, the urgency of the case persuaded him to ignore Anglican protocol in this instance. He found Britain 'not in the least degree sensible of the evil of what he had done' in attempting to take his life:

I began to talk to him faithfully and roundly, and yet at the same time tenderly, of the extreme wickedness of the act he had been guilty of, and the perilous situation in every respect, in which I conspicuously discerned his soul to be; and to do the utmost in my power to bring him to a sight and a conviction of better things. By degrees, I obtained from him some seeming attention to me; and much conversation together, during the space of four or five hours, we had 'till every thing that I thought needful to be said had been, repeatedly and in the plainest manner, spoken to him.⁷

Talbot visited Britain again the following day and resumed his visits in mid-September after a period of convalescence on the South Coast. Britain continually affirmed his innocence of the charges of forgery, both in Reading and (as these began to come to light) in Bristol. While in prison Britain also returned to his allegations concerning the arson plot and wrote letters to several newspapers, claiming that Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice, the Earl of Halifax, Secretary of State, the Earl of Faulconbridge and other prominent persons had been bribed by the French to 'encourage the setting fire to the dockyard at Portsmouth'. He himself, together with a Captain Kelly of the Irish Brigades in France, were the arsonists. Britain claimed to have a large quantity of incriminating evidence contained in a portmanteau sent on by him from Bristol to London.

Although at no time does Talbot appear to have doubted that Britain was guilty of deception in the matter of money, for a time he was at least prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt over the veracity of his claims concerning the dockyard fire:

The steadiness of his assertions; the readiness with which he told his story; his being under no confinement when he originally made his offers of discovery; the certainty he had, tho' in gaol at present, of soon being at liberty again, added to the reasonable, and only request he had made, of being brought to a trial; together with his willingness to suffer death, if he should, upon that trial, be found an impostor: all these things together, did, for a little season, and 'till I had time to reflect, hold me in suspence; and there were moments, in the beginning of my enquiries, in which I was strongly inclined to believe, that there was truth, in some, at least of his pretensions; but the scale soon turned; daily discoveries of his falsehoods weakened his credit with me more and more; 'till I was satisfactorily and perfectly convinced, that he was as errant a deceiver as DUDLEY himself.⁸

An extended stay at Bath from late October, while his wife Sarah received the benefits of the waters, enabled Talbot to make a trip over to Bristol to make enquiries. In regard to the alleged dockyard plot, he was able to satisfy himself that the portmanteau was a non-existent figment of Britain's vivid imagination and 'that not a paper of consequence was he possessor of, any where; and that the whole of the correspondences he talked of was a scandalous fiction'.⁹ He also succeeded in making the acquaintance of several people whom Britain had defrauded in Bristol, most of them, like their coun-

terparts in Reading, honest tradespeople who had been taken in by Britain's plausible ways, which included the practice of 'diabolical deceptions, under the mask of religion'. One of these, a barber named Arthur Sandall, was clearly a man of strong religious convictions who had written to Britain, warning him of the terrors of hell that awaited him, of 'being confined in everlasting chains of darkness, there to be tormented with Devils and damned spirits, night and day forever'. This letter had evoked a response in Britain in which he described himself as 'the miserablest man upon earth' but the note of remorse was all part of his dissembling. The villain's activities in Bristol had not been confined to forgery but also encompassed drunkenness and riotings, together with sexual debauchery. He had also employed a number of aliases including that of William Johnson.

It was by now clear that the charges that had been made against him in Reading were unlikely to result in conviction, because material evidence had been inadvertently destroyed by his victims. Talbot, therefore, came to the view that it was his duty to encourage Britain's Bristol victims to combine together to bring him to justice:

I returned in the evening, to Bath; where I had leisure to ruminate upon all that I had discovered; and I was penetrated with the thought of the danger to society from such a man. So extensive a capacity and disposition to do mischief; such deep dissimulation and unsuspectable art; such unfeelingness of soul at the miseries he was creating; such treachery and baseness; and finally, so bold and daring, and . . . malicious a spirit; all these pernicious endowments made him too dangerous to set at liberty again. I saw him also in the still more horrible light of a diabolical incendiary, scattering, through the nation, firebrands and death; forging in his inventive brain, crimes of the deepest die; and charging them upon obnoxious names, without a shadow of their existence; poisoning thereby the people's minds, and inflaming their discontents; exciting them, so far as he could, to seditious, murderous insurrections; and throwing us all into the utmost confusion; and this, only to provide a chance of his own escape from the punishment due to the villainies of which he had been guilty. Having therefore regard enough for the public, and spirit enough for the undertaking, I resolved without delay, to stop him in his career.¹⁰

Talbot carried out his intentions and also terminated his visits to Britain who apparently remained in ignorance of his part in the proceedings against him until he was brought to trial. Following the collapse of the case against him in Reading, Britain remained in prison, a warrant of detainer having been served against him as a result of Talbot's efforts. Eventually, he was removed to Bristol by a writ of habeas corpus and there stood trial for his several acts of forgery. At this point, however, the case took another unusual twist:

. . . being put to the bar, he refused to plead, and held in his hand the Gazette which contained the offer of pardon, insisting that he had given information against his accomplices who had set fire to the dockyard at Portsmouth.

On this he was informed by the recorder that he could take no notice of the proclamation inserted in the Gazette. But Britain, instead of paying attention to this declaration, threw the Gazette upon the table where the clerk sat, and declared that a scheme was formed to deprive him of life, contrary to the due course of the law.¹¹

Britain was warned that under a recent Act of Parliament he would be judged guilty if he continued to refuse to plead to the indictment. The trial was held up for two days while a special messenger was dispatched to London to obtain a copy of the statute. When this had been procured, Britain was at last persuaded to plead not guilty and proceeded to conduct his own defence:

He cross-examined the witnesses in a manner that gave sufficient testimony of his abilities; but the evidence against him was such as not to admit of a doubt of his guilt, and in consequence he was capitally convicted, and sentenced to die.¹²

Talbot's wisdom in breaking off his relations with Britain was vindicated by the prisoner's conduct, subsequent to his conviction. He put out a story that Talbot had deceived him into making a confession of his crimes and had then betrayed his confidence. In its most extreme version Britain alleged that 'hearing I was a Roman Catholic' Talbot 'came to me and told me he was a Romish priest, and then I confessed to him, and that is the way by which all these prosecutions have been set on foot'. In spite of the preposterous nature of these allegations, they were believed by a section of the public in both Bristol and Reading. As a result Talbot was obliged to rush into print with his *Narrative of the Whole of his Proceedings relative to Jonathan Britain*, designed to 'remove every blackening charge against me'. Even this does not seem to have satisfied all Talbot's accusers. One writer in the *Berkshire Chronicle*, using the pseudonym Impartial (anything but!), was even moved to verse:

A priest of late got Britain hanged.
Ye sufferers! Cease to mock:
Who knows? When first he has harangued,
Perhaps he'll hang his flock.

Talbot's primary aim in bringing Britain to justice was to rid the public of one whom he had concluded to be a dangerous criminal. However, initially his concern had been for the security of Britain's soul, threatened as it then was by his suicide attempt. Although Britain exhibited, in the course of his relations with Talbot, a shameless lack of concern for his victims and no evidence of a repentant heart, the latter, nevertheless, retained a hope that when faced with the gallows he might still be saved from damnation. This is expressed in a letter to one of Britain's victims, Daniel Wait, written while he was awaiting trial in Bristol:

I heartily wish something may be done for the good of his soul; but this, in his present state of mind and action, cannot be. If ever there will be an opening for this purpose, it will be when he is condemned, and has lost every hope of rescue.¹³

Alas! there is no evidence, in Britain's case, that the prescription was effective. He was executed on 15 May 1772 and, although he left 'a direct and full confession', withdrawing all his allegations relating to the Portsmouth fire, there was seemingly no indication of any softening of the hardness of heart that had afflicted him from the time of his arrest.

As for Talbot, he was determined to return to his parochial duties:

I now gladly withdraw from the public stage, and go back to my parish; there to attend to the more pleasing, as well as more special and immediate duties of my calling; and, particularly, to the preaching of that *precious Name*, so deservedly *exalted above every Name*, JESUS; whose servant I am; to whom thankfully I ascribe whatever, upon this occasion, has been right in my spirit, principle, or conduct; from whom I derive all my supports and consolations here, and in whom I am looking for all my salvation hereafter.¹⁴

He was permitted a further two years of useful ministry until the attendance at the sickbed of a parishioner led to his contracting the same contagious fever, leading to the conclusion of his earthly career on 2 March 1774. His work in Reading was built upon by his successor, William Bromley Cadogan (1751-97), and eventually resulted in the foundation of Reading's proprietary chapel, St Mary's, Castle Street.¹⁵

In conclusion, how are we to judge Talbot's actions in this matter? There are those today who would take a similar view to that of his eighteenth century detractors. One local Reading historian, Leslie North,¹⁶ argues that he should have confined himself to seeking to bring Britain to sincere repentance and that in taking the measures he did to bring him to justice 'he went sadly astray—halter in one hand, crucifix in the other'. This, however, is to bring a modern, liberal Christian perspective to the issue. The 1770s seem a remote era to a society that can scarcely conceive that hanging criminals for forgery and theft was ever condoned, and when the restoration of the death penalty even for murder seems an unlikely eventuality. The very cheapness of life in that age served, however, only to render the gift of salvation to eternal life even more precious to men. Talbot wanted both to save society from Britain and to save Britain from eternal punishment. At times, he may have accorded greater priority to the first than to the second motive but that appears to have been a question on which he exercised thoughtful, spiritual judgment rather than acting wilfully.

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NOTES

- 1 J W Wenham *The Goodness of God* (IVP 1974) p 115
- 2 R P Martin *The Death Penalty* (Simpson 1992) pp 55–6
- 3 J MacMaster *The Divine Purpose of Capital Punishment* (Kegan Paul 1892) p xv
- 4 See A C H Seymour *Life and Times of Selina Countess of Huntingdon* (1840) ‘two or three hundred seals, such as shall be his crown in that day when the chief shepherd shall appear’.
- 5 *The Complete Newgate Calendar* (1926) p 87
- 6 Rev W Talbot *Narrative of the Whole of his Proceedings relative to Jonathan Britain* (1772) p 25
- 7 Talbot p 26
- 8 Talbot pp 54–5
- 9 Talbot p 70
- 10 Talbot pp 73–4
- 11 *The Complete Newgate Calendar* p 88
- 12 *The Complete Newgate Calendar* pp 88–9
- 13 Talbot p 23. Quoted from a letter dated 11 April 1772.
- 14 Talbot p 93. The italics are Talbot’s own.
- 15 The story of Cadogan’s ministry and the subsequent foundation of the Castle Street Chapel is detailed in the writer’s book ‘The Church that would not Die’ (Baron Birch 1993).
- 16 The writer wishes to acknowledge the considerable assistance rendered to him by Mr North in tracking down the story of William Talbot and Jonathan Britain.