

Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury.

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GILBERT BURNET, the courageous, broad-minded, but highly conscientious Bishop of Salisbury, was probably the greatest of the "latitude men" of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In politics he was a Whig or Low Churchman—the two were almost interchangeable terms. We cannot too carefully remember that the expression Low Churchman was at least as much a definition of political views in those days as of religious views. It is now really an obsolete term, and most misleading in its loose application to the Evangelical School of to-day.

He was of Scottish birth on both sides; his father was an Episcopalian of liberal views, and belonged to a family of importance in Aberdeenshire; his mother was a highly connected lady and a Presbyterian. Their son was a true child of his parents, and his religious views showed a wide and Christian sympathy with the religious systems favoured by both his father and mother. The result was not entirely happy, for he was never really trusted by either party. He was quick to see the wrong in each, and his courageous Scottish nature never hesitated to express with blunt truth his opinion. "He supported their" (the Episcopalian) "measures when he approved of them, and was duly thanked; he reproved them, not even sparing the monarch for his sins, and in return was hated." In days when all men were party men and clung to the party whether it were right or wrong, he was out of place and was never really appreciated by his generation as he deserved.

Gilbert Burnet was born in 1643, and died in 1715, thus living through a period when the pendulums of religious and political thought were violently oscillating. He was most conscientious, especially in matters of religion. At the age of

eighteen he was offered a valuable family living, and was urged by all his relatives, except his parents, who remained silent, to accept. But he knew he was not yet equipped for such a high calling and firmly refused the offer. He set out upon travels instead, and, like his greatest friend Leighton, for whom he had the most intense love and respect, he owed to this period of his life much of that toleration and broad sympathy for the views of others, which was the most prominent characteristic in his temperament and coloured all his policy.

In London he made friendships which were lifelong with the most eminent prelates and statesmen of the day. On the Continent he enlarged his mind by his insight into the views of Arminians, Lutherans, Brownists, Anabaptists, and Roman Catholics. He came home imbued with an almost universal charity and a disposition to always think the best of those who differed from him, with one exception. He had a dislike for High Church principles, which almost amounted to hatred. But this can be explained from the fact that his association with High Churchmen was mainly with the bigoted politicians at the Court, and not so much with men of the type of Ken and Kettlewell. Every High Churchman in his eyes was a "Sacheverell," who stood in the way of those principles he cherished. Ralph Thoresby could pass from the company of his High Church friends and yet appraise the qualities of Burnet. "Notwithstanding the censures of a malignant world, he is doubtless an admirable, holy, and good man, and has one of the best regulated houses in the world."¹

In 1665 he was offered the benefice of Saltoun, but withheld his consent till he knew whether he would be acceptable to the parishioners. They unanimously elected him, and he was ordained by the Bishop of Edinburgh in the same year.

We must briefly note the way in which he fulfilled his duty in this office. Twice a Sunday he preached and once in the week. He visited his flock from house to house, and the sick folks twice a day. The Holy Communion was administered four

¹ "Diary," ii. 67.

times a year. To rightly appreciate this fidelity we must remember the degenerate state into which his brother clergy had sunk. They were many of them of evil life, absentees from their parishes, and performing the few duties they were compelled to discharge in a cold and perfunctory way. In the biography written by his son, the writer says his father was the only man in Scotland who used the prayers in the English Church Liturgy at this time, and yet so good and liberal and faithful was he that even the Presbyterians respected him.

In 1669 he became Professor of Divinity at Glasgow University, greatly to the delight of Archbishop Leighton, who found in him a friend and champion in his futile attempts to reconcile the Covenanters to Episcopacy. He attended the conferences arranged by the Archbishop between the two opposing forces, and, so clear was his knowledge of all the questions at issue, that when an objector rose to protest that in no way did the Bishops of that time resemble those of the primitive Church, Burnet in his reply absolutely silenced him, and none could answer him a word.

He was married three times, and though outwardly he appeared cold, as a husband, father, and friend, he was loving and tender.

Burnet feared no man. During his life in London he did not hesitate to write a long private letter to Charles II. rebuking him for his scandalous life and warning him of God's sure judgments. This might well have cost him his head, but when duty pointed the way Gilbert Burnet never drew back. This letter is still preserved, and is a most striking document, combining, in a beautifully balanced way, the respect of a subject for his sovereign and the independence of the preacher of righteousness.

About the same time he argued, supported by his friend Stillingfleet, with the Duke of York (afterwards James II.) on the errors of Rome.

Charles II. never really forgave him for writing the letter referred to. He was waiting his chance. Burnet was Thurs-

day lecturer at St. Clement's Church. The King ordered his dismissal. But a more dangerous trap was set, and one that, though he perceived it, he was too courageous to avoid. He was required to preach on November 5, 1684, at the Rolls Chapel, by the Master of the Rolls. Burnet begged to be excused, but, when the Master insisted, he determined not to avoid the topic naturally in all minds on such a day. The King had strong leanings to Romanism; indeed, it was generally believed he was secretly a Romanist, and Burnet knew trouble was bound to follow if he rebuked Popish errors. He chose as his text, "Save me from the lion's mouth, Thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorn." Although, as he quaintly says, he avoided all reference to these as "the two supporters of the King's 'Scutcheon,'" for which his hearers were eagerly listening, yet he did not shrink from denouncing the Roman Church. For this he was ejected from his position, and suspecting that more trouble was in store when James came to the throne, he quietly withdrew to the Continent.

He journeyed to Paris, Rome, and then to the Hague, where he stayed some time and was well received by the Prince of Orange. Scarcely was he out of the King's hands than the latter regretted he had allowed him to go abroad and sought to get him back into his power. For this, as well as for private reasons, Burnet became naturalized. James was furious with wrath, and unable to seize the man he hated, he even offered £5,000 to any rascal who would murder him. But his life was not to end thus or yet.

We must here note a very interesting point to which Burnet made reference later on in the debate in Parliament on the Occasional Conformity Bill. During his enforced stay abroad he was not cut off from all spiritual privileges. "I ventured to say" (in the debate in the House) "that a man might lawfully communicate with a Church that he thought had a worship and a doctrine uncorrupted, and yet communicate more frequently with a Church that he thought more perfect; I myself had communicated with the Churches of Geneva and Holland, and

yet at the same time communicated with the Church of England." This is most instructive. Obviously in his mind there was no idea of repudiating the ministry of non-Episcopal Churches. His conduct in this respect is paralleled by many of the best divines about that time who, under similar circumstances, had no hesitation in attending communion with the Continental Protestants.

The offer of the Crown to William of Orange and his acceptance of it meant the change of the fortunes of Burnet. He became one of the new King's advisers in Church matters, and admirably he used his influence. Some of the names he mentioned for preferment were men of the greatest eminence, and through him the Episcopal bench was graced by great divines—*e.g.*, Patrick, Stillingfleet, Sharp, Cumberland, Tillotson. He never sought any advancement for himself. In a place-hunting age this was most singular, but all his influence was on behalf of others. He had been offered the choice of four Scotch Bishoprics, but had refused them all. In 1689 the See of Salisbury became vacant. Burnet earnestly besought the King to give it to his old friend, Dr. Lloyd, Bishop of St. Asaph. William coldly replied: "I have another person in view." The next day it was offered to Burnet himself. So great was his unpopularity, that Archbishop Sancroft refused to consecrate him, although he did authorize his suffragan to do so in his name.¹

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the admirable way in which the new Bishop did his work. He struck at the many abuses at the time. Non-residence and pluralities were not only sternly reprovèd and held up to contempt, but by his own example he showed the right way. He was even bold enough to introduce a bill into the House of Lords to correct the latter evil. In order to remove the excuse of many incumbents, who held more benefices than one, that poverty compelled them to do so, he supplemented many poor livings in his Diocese out of his own purse. Nothing but urgent duty ever called him

¹ Grew, "Court of William III.," p. 123.

from his Diocese, and then he hastened to return. "There was hardly a corner of the Diocese which was not well acquainted with the burly form and loud voice of its bustling bishop."¹

Two of his practices deserve more than passing notice.

Confirmation was administered by the Bishops generally, only very occasionally, and then rushed through in a cold and formal way. Burnet felt the solemnity of the rite intensely; he regarded it as the great crisis in the lives of young people, and he was determined that the tone of the service should be raised. He drew up a short directory on Confirmation which he issued to all his clergy, in which he set out the lines upon which instruction should proceed. Every summer he toured through part of his Diocese for six weeks or two months, preaching and confirming in the parish churches. Latterly he went to five or six market towns annually, and making each in turn his headquarters for a week, went out every morning to the surrounding country churches preaching and confirming. In the evening he returned, and assembling the children in church, catechized them in person. On Sunday he confirmed those he had thus prepared, and gave to each a present of some suitable books. So punctilious was he in this work that once he was nearly drowned in a flood when trying to keep an appointment for a Confirmation Service.

Candidates for Holy Orders received searching scrutiny in every way from the Bishop. He never turned them over for examination to chaplains, but conducted this personally. First he tested their knowledge of, and soundness in, divinity. If they failed, they were at once rejected. If they passed, he engaged them in long and searching conversation as to their high calling, pointing out the lofty requirements of the sacred office and beseeching them to withdraw if not fully persuaded they were divinely called.

Burnet's idea was to correct abuses by slowly raising the tone of the clergy, but though his care in ordaining was a great

¹ Overton, "Life in the English Church," 1660-1714, p. 69.

safeguard, it could not protect him from unsuitable presentees to benefices in his Diocese. Here he was almost powerless, but a splendid instance of his courage in even this direction is told us by his son. The young son of a noble family was preferred to a living in Oxfordshire by the Lord Chancellor. Burnet sent for the incumbent elect, and found him so ignorant that he refused absolutely to admit him to the benefice. The Lord Chancellor instituted legal proceedings, but the Bishop stood fast. For some reason these fell through, and then Burnet did a most Christianlike thing. He sent for the young man and told him he did not wish to injure him, and if the benefice were kept vacant for a while he would himself instruct him and prepare him for his duties. This the Bishop did, and eventually the young man passed the examination creditably.

Nothing was so dear to the heart of Burnet as the cause of toleration and comprehension. It was with the greatest joy he saw the passing of the Toleration Act in 1689. He supported it enthusiastically in Parliament. "I showed so much zeal for this Act, as very much sunk my credit," so he writes in his history of this incident. But comprehension he was not to see. The scheme to bring this about in 1689 was a complete failure, but Burnet appears not to have altogether regretted it, for the times were not ripe for any scheme to include Dissenters and authoritatively recognize their ministry.

There is one permanent blessing which the Church enjoys with which our Bishop's name is closely identified. He had long sought the abolition of the dues payable by the clergy to the sovereign. Queen Anne fell in with the proposal, and if Burnet was not the sole person responsible for "Queen Anne's Bounty," no one had a larger share in bringing it about than he had.

Of all Burnet's writings none is so well known as his "History of his own Time"; and not the least value of this book is the insight it gives into its author's character. Fond of gossip, and somewhat egotistical, he was yet a shrewd observer of character and far-sighted in his outlook. The "conclusion "

of the history is a grand piece of reading, and some of his statements have the most remarkable bearing upon present-day problems. We cannot refrain from noting a few :

“The capital error in men’s preparing themselves for that function (Holy Orders) is that they study books more than themselves, and that they read divinity more in other books than in the Scriptures.”

“I see a spirit rising among us too like that of the Church of Rome, of advancing the clergy beyond their due authority to an unjust pitch.”

“And let me say this freely to you, now that I am out of the reach of envy and censure, unless a better spirit possesses the clergy, arguments (and which is more), laws, and authority will not prove strong enough to preserve the Church, especially if the nation observes a progress in that bias which makes many so favourable to Popery and so severe towards the Dissenters.”

Burnet is rather hard on Archdeacons, unless the following is inspired by his dry Scottish humour :

“Archdeacons’ Visitations were an invention of the latter ages in which the Bishops, neglecting their duty, cast a great part of their care upon them ; now their Visitations are only for form and for fees, and they are a charge on the clergy ; so when this matter is well looked into I hope Archdeacons with many other burdens that lay heavy on the clergy shall be taken away.” (!)

But Burnet’s favourite work was his “Pastoral Care,” and here we get an inner view of that holiness of life which was so often overlooked by his many enemies, and obscured by his overbearing manner. He was the chief instrument in the conversion of the Earl of Rochester, and thought nothing of the long journey from London to Woodstock to visit the penitent nobleman. He was a close friend of King William and Queen Mary, and it was to him alone that the bereaved King unburdened himself on the Queen’s death. “He called me into his closet,” wrote Burnet, “and gave vent to a most tender passion ; he burst into tears and cried out that there was no hope of the Queen, and that from being the most happy, he was now going to be the most miserable creature upon the earth. He said that during the whole course of their marriage he had never known a single fault in her ; there was a worth in her that nobody knew besides himself, though he added that I might know as much of her as any other person did.”

Burnet was a popular preacher, although the few surviving

specimens of his sermons would not lead one to this conclusion. Macaulay tells us, "he was often interrupted by the deep hum of his audience ; and when, after preaching out the hour-glass, he held it up in his hand, the congregation clamorously encouraged him to go on till the sand had run out once more."¹

We cannot better conclude this sketch of this great man's life than with a quotation from his will which discloses much of his character, and still more of his hopes and fears :

"I die, as I all along lived and professed myself to be, full of charity and tenderness for those among us who yet dissent from us, and heartily pray that God would heal our breaches, and make us like-minded in all things, that so we might unite our zeal and join our endeavours against atheism and infidelity, that have prevailed much ; and against Popery, the greatest enemy to our Church, more to be dreaded than all other parties !"

¹ "History of England," ed. Dent, vol. i., p. 641.

