

GILES FIRMIN : A PURITAN DIVINE.

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IT is much to be regretted that Anglican and even Evangelical circles know so little of the Puritans. Either they are indiscriminately condemned, being judged by their extreme type ; or else indiscriminately and unreservedly praised. Good work was done in setting forth their history and position by older Evangelicals — J. B. Marsden and Bishop J. C. Ryle ; but I know of little since. We should distinguish as far as possible Puritan ideas of Church Government from Puritan doctrine and practice. This last has lain at the root of current English religion ever since, coming up especially in the Evangelical Revival ; and any future revival will probably be in part a further revival of the best elements of Puritanism. A very good specimen of Puritan theology is found in Giles Firmin's work : *The Real Christian*.

Giles Firmin, son of Giles Firmin, apothecary, of Sudbury, entered Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in 1629, but did not complete his course there as his family went to New England. There he studied and afterwards practised medicine. He married Susanna, daughter of Nathaniel Ward, who had been deprived by Laud of the rectory of Stondon, Essex ; through him and other sources, besides his own experience, he shows great knowledge of older Puritans. The value of his books for this was recognized by Cotton Mather. Like Ward (who got the living of Shenfield) he returned to England under the Long Parliament, and was ordained about 1648 by Stephen Marshall and others to the living of Shalford, near Braintree. This is probably the one instance of the strict Presbyterian system ever getting beyond paper in Essex. He was ejected in 1662 and resumed the practice of medicine, but in 1672 took out a license to preach in his house at Ridgwell. His skill as a physician seems to have preserved him from troubles under the Conventicle Act. He died in 1697.

He has occasional notices of his own life. "When I was a boy I never cared to play at cudgels with him who was left-handed, and looked asquint with his eyes ; I could not tell where to have him, I might receive a blow where I was not aware of him ; for others I did not much care, unless too big for me, to beat my cudgels to my head." He mentions a voyage to the Mediterranean, where he was in danger from Turkish pirates, and up the river to Seville. He uses this as an illustration of the two kinds of knowledge, that from books and that from personal experience. "If a geographer who has never travelled beyond the smoke of his own chimney writes of the river that goeth up to Seville in Spain, and tells me when you get over the bar which lieth at the mouth of the river, on the starboard side as you sail up there stands a castle, higher

stands the town of Saint Lucar, higher another castle and a monastery by it, higher the Chapel of Bonance, and still on the starboard side ; this man saith true. But doth he know those as I, who have been in the Town, in the Castle, in the Chapel, and seen them ? ”

Firmin wrote a fair number of works. In one of them he defends the memory of his friend Stephen Marshall. But his best known work is *The Real Christian : a Treatise on Effectual Calling* (1670). He was led to write this because of some extravagant positions maintained by some writers of repute, which had caused much trouble to some serious Christians. He speaks with the greatest respect of these writers as faithful and holy men, but “ brings their teaching to the Balance of the Sanctuary,” judging it by Scripture as well as by reason. But his work is far from being merely negative ; it is a full account of Conversion. The subjects of the chapters are (1) Preparation of the soul for Christ, in general. (2) The first work of the Spirit, Illumination. (3) Conviction. (4) Compunction. (5) The Spirit’s work in taking off the soul from Self-righteousness and Self-confidence. (6) Faith in Christ ; how the Spirit draws the soul to Him. This is followed by an application.

Firmin is very far from asserting that all must go through exactly the same process ; he regards the requirement or expectation of this as a great mistake. “ Have we not very often known children grow up, and being under the nurturing of godly parents,—especially when a wise, prudent and godly mother, that knows how to keep her place in government, joins with a godly father—have given evident signs of grace from their childhood ? I have known such families where all the children have been godly ; and that began in their childhood for ought I could learn. . . . Some who lived in a course of sin can tell the time, the day, the text, the sermon, the minister, when God put a stop to their course, opening their eyes, awakening their conscience. But others cannot tell the time when God began to work ; and this hath been to some a long time an objection against the truth of their regeneration, because they cannot tell the time of their new birth ; as if there were any ground in Scripture for such a position, ‘ All that are new born know the time of their new birth.’ Doth not God many times in infancy, in childhood, cast in the immortal seed, which being nurtured by the instruction and care of godly parents at home, and by the lively word preached, springeth and groweth up ? Some Christians finding at some time more stirrings and higher workings or new convictions of some sin, than they did before, will from thence reckon the time of their new birth ; when they are much mistaken, God had begun it before. This is a mere vanity and devil’s delusion, to trouble thyself about the *time* ; look to the work, that it be soundly wrought.”

He gives an account of the younger days of John Rogers, the famous lecturer of Dedham (predecessor of Matthew Newcomen) to illustrate his position that “ Great sinners, and men of great parts, great spirits, whom God intends to make of great use, these are the men, the persons, who usually, if not always, meet with great bruis-

ings, terrors, fears and sorrows." "An old man that used in his young time to frequent the house of Mr. Richard Rogers of Wethersfield, would tell me this story of him oftentimes, which my grandmother, who was wife to Mr. Rogers, told him several times. Mr. Richard Rogers did send and help to maintain Mr. John Rogers, being his kinsman, in Cambridge; it seems he proved so bad that he sold his books and spent the money; my grandmother moved her husband to buy him some books and send him to Cambridge again; she being a prudent woman prevailed; Mr. John Rogers spent his books again; Mr. Richard Rogers then would cast him off utterly; but my grandmother renews her request once more and at last prevails, to send him again; then he held. That he was wild enough I conclude by a speech of Mr. Richard Rogers, which he often used, when he saw what God had done for his kinsman, 'I will never despair of a man for John Rogers' sake'; it seems then he was bad enough. God intended this man to make him of great use, and a chosen vessel he was of God for conversion of many souls, few men like him; but God handled him accordingly, bruised him to purpose; he would get under bushes in fields, pray and cry; he became an experimental preacher of legal workings, making good what Bishop (then Master) Brownrig said of him to my father Ward, which was this: 'John Rogers will do more good with his wild note than we shall do with our set music.' Those that knew his manner of preaching and actings in preaching, well knew what the bishop meant by the *wild note*; but it was very true, though such actions and speeches in other men would have been ridiculous, yet in him, being a man so holy, grave and reverend, they went off with as much awe, upon a very great and reverent auditory."

The three main points on which Firmin disagrees with some predecessors are:

I. They made *preparedness* for faith in Christ to include contentment to be disposed of as God pleases; content and quiet through God will never work Grace, never manifest Grace, never pity or help the soul, never give it His love. In fact, if the soul be rightly humbled, it is content to bear the state of damnation. They quoted Scripture for this, but Firmin asks: "How shall we interpret texts? Must we not consider the coherency, observe what the Spirit is treating about, and interpret it accordingly?" and shows that their texts do not really suit. Among other arguments he urges, "That condition which neither Christ Himself nor any of the apostles in their preaching and calling home of souls to Christ did ever require, is not requisite and true preparation for Christ"; and "The condition that is cross to the nature of man *as man*, to a Christian as a Christian, cannot possibly be requisite to faith and right preparation for Christ. In all God's Bible there is not one duty that God requires of His creatures which is contrary or cross to His creatures' happiness."

II. "We must not," they said, "lay hold on Christ to seek our own salvation, which is a form of self-love; but simply for the

honour of Christ and the glory of God's grace." Firmin lays down, "Never did God declare against self, or call a man to deny himself, in such a way as to hinder his own salvation and happiness, lying in union and communion with God by Christ. I know he has given me commands to deny myself, but in those commands obeyed myself (that is, my happiness and salvation) is preserved safe and sound. Do not all the promises in the Bible regard a man's self? Self-love doth never prove destructive to a soul till it cross a commandment of God."

III. Their definition of saving faith identified it with personal assurance, "a particular persuasion and assurance, that Christ with all his redemption is mine, that I shall have life and salvation by his means"; or "assurance of God's favour to me in particular and forgiveness of my sins." Firmin among other objections urges that they make Saving Faith to consist simply in an act of the understanding, not of the will. His own definition is that it is "That grace whereby we receive Christ as he is offered to us in the Gospel (in all his offices) and so, resting upon him, salvation." He is strong on Faith being quite as much an act of the Will as of the Understanding. (It may be noticed here that Dr. Tennant in his recent book distinguishes 'Belief' from 'Faith'; 'Belief' serves to emphasize the cognitive, and 'Faith' the conative side of experience involving *venture*.)

Firmin is far from undervaluing Historical or Dogmatic Faith; he condemns those who when they hear what books Stillingfleet and Baxter have written in defence of the Christian religion have said that they wonder they should busy their heads about such needless subjects. "Lay by these principles, that we have been in possession of these truths for sixteen hundred years; this was our grandfathers' and fathers' religion; it is the religion of our nation, all men are of this faith—our King, our rulers, our ministers who teach us; what other reasons of their faith can the greatest part of those who call themselves Christians, and do assent to these truths, give you?"

He speaks elsewhere of the ignorance of many nominal Christians. "When a man hath a child born, he prepares a barrel of strong beer, if he be but a poor man; others prepare some bottles of wine; withal they prepare good meat and good junkets; the child is then christened, made a member of Christ in its baptism; then home they go, and eat up their good meat and drink up their liquor before prepared, it is well if none be drunk; and this is the preparation and union with Christ which many thousands of those who are called Christians know, and they know no other preparation for Christ or receiving of Christ but this. When they grow up to years they go to church as neighbours do, they must be Christians because they know not what to be else, they must go whither the crowd carries them; if you will call them Christians you may, but they know no more of Christ, saving the name which they hear a minister talk of, than a heathen. As their parents made them Christians, so because it is the fashion of the country, they will do as

their fathers did by them, and their neighbours do by theirs, if they have children. I have given instance of one in Essex, a county famous for the Gospel, who of late years coming to my father Ward to baptize his child, my father asked him, 'Why will you have your child baptized?' He answered, Because others had their children baptized. Then he asked him, How many Gods there were? He answered, Ten. Then he asked him, How many Commandments there were? (supposing his mistake). He answered, Two. Which is the First? He answered, Salvation; the Second I know not, but he gave him a Second. My father asked him if he gave him these answers to cross him? The man answered, 'No, truly, Mr. Ward, if I knew better how to answer you I would.' If ministers did but inquire into the knowledge of all their parishioners in England, they would soon find I have spoken but the truth. Thus for want of catechizing and Gospel discipline, abundance of Christians, so called, differ but little from heathens."

Firmin is a man of considerable theological reading. He has a quotation from Ignatius on his title-page, and occasionally quotes the Fathers, especially Augustine, and the Schoolmen, especially Bradwardine, besides more recent writers, including Alvarez and Jansenius, besides English divines. He has but one poetic quotation, from "that divine poet, Herbert." In his Introduction and towards the end of the work answers the Socinians, whose doctrine he fears to be spreading in England; naturally he most objects to the Socinian doctrine of Christ's death (which is so popular at present).

He occasionally speaks of his experience as a physician, and once speaks of the changes in his own day. "In physick we find that those things which have gone for principles for above a thousand years, none so much as questioning them, within less than thirty years are turned out of doors, very few of the ancient principles standing."

He insists on the duty of showing diligence and conscience in one's particular calling. "Do you lay your Lord's rule to your buying and selling, to your commerce and dealings with men? Alas, these are low things, say you; then, say I, they are easily observed of you, I hope, if they be so low in your esteem. . . . Diligence in our callings is a thing that light of Nature as well as light of Scripture, doth teach. Some think it a high attainment in religion that they can go up and down to duties, to meetings, though through their laziness and idleness in their particular callings their families at home do suffer. . . . An honourable and virtuous lady was once commending of her gardener to Mr. Dod, what a good man he was, how much good discourse he had, how helpful to others in the family, to teach them to read, etc. 'But, Madam,' said Mr. Dod, 'What is this man in his particular calling?' for God looks on us as we are in our particular callings.' Here the good lady could not give any answer, being new come; but was forced soon after to turn him away, being an idle Jack. I do not speak of any poor Christian that may be abused by their own darkness and

Satan's subtilty ; as one good woman, because the text saith ' Pray continually,' she could never be satisfied, but must be in secret at prayer and reading, and the family neglected, her children not dressed, but went forlorn. Christians could not take her off, till at last Mr. Richardson hearing of it, and having occasion to go that way, went into the house and seeing the children how they went, spake with a loud voice and very terribly, ' Is there no fear of God in this house ? ' and other words to the purpose, that there could be no true grace, when there was such negligence in the particular place where the woman was set. The poor woman hearing this language, comes out of her private room from her duties, with trembling, and now was taught another lesson—if she would prove her grace, to show her diligence and care in her particular place where God had set her, and carry on that with her duties in secret."

He urges tenderness to poor and tempted Christians. " Ministers and other Christians may think that such or such corruptions and temptations are strong (yet I observe some have not so much judgment) ; but no man knows what they are as those who lie under them, those who feel them and are combating with them." This in particular holds good in preaching contentment. " Another minister inviting me to dinner, we had a dry pudding and salt fish (not like your London fish), only we had mustard ; ' and here,' said the good man, ' we are better on it than Christ was, for though we read he ate fish, yet we read not of any sauce he had, and we have mustard to our dry fish ' ; our drink was good Adam's Ale, spring water, and well content. Now though ministers must preach of contentment in all conditions, yet I had rather hear *those* ministers preach and read their books about contentment, than those who know nothing of these temptations. It was a good speech of a gracious woman to an eminent Christian who told me of it ; she was under a hedge picking up sticks in a cold morning : the man passing by and speaking to her, calling him by his name said she, ' O pray that God would save you out of straits.' "

Firmin has much to say in answer to the old charge that religion makes men " melancholy, mopish and sad, if not mad." His attitude is not that popularly associated with Puritans, but is well supported by their biographies.

" That sadness and fears should seize upon a person when he comes to see himself under that woeful state of sin and misery, is this such a wonder ? Is this irrational ? Wouldst thou not have rational mirth ? What, were you never sad in all your life ? Were you ever upon the merry pin ? To meet with the man who was never in his dumps, as you phrase it, is a strange sight ; if ever sad, it was upon some *evil* apprehension. Was it rational for you to be sad under an evil infinitely less, and is it irrational to be sad under this ?

" You are mistaken very much in thinking that Religion, or the power of it, only serves to make men mopish and sad, though you do see Christians sometimes dejected. It is not Conversion or the power of Religion that makes them sad, but the want of Religion

and fuller Conversion ; they do *not* put Religion in sour faces. It were to be wished indeed that others might not see the dejected countenance of Christians ; hide them always they cannot. If any worldling or irreligious person have his countenance dejected for being crossed in something he desires, as it is their lot oftentimes, this is nothing ; but if one that is set for God and Religion do at any time show such a countenance, by and by the fault is laid upon religion. It is far from my thought to plead for levity, frothiness, among Christians ; I am afraid some take too much liberty ; but yet I think a cheerful, affable, courteous behaviour in Christians, avoiding that mopishness, austerity, morosity, which some Christians express, especially towards carnal men, would better become the Gospel and convince men of the goodness and content that is to be found in the ways of God. None rejoice more heartily than those who rejoice in the Lord, to which Christians are so much exhorted ; this joy is spiritual, heavenly. Yet there is another joy lawful, as we are rational animals, have bodies as well as souls ; these bodies call for many things, and whilst we do enjoy things that support and comfort them, we may rejoice in the goodness God conveyeth by them. Some Christians, that think we should rejoice only in the Lord, and are persons of a more sour melancholy temper, how offended are they if they see others laugh ! As if risibility were an evil quality, that befell us after our fall from God ; but surely being an essential property, having its emanation from the rational soul even in our creation, it belongs to us as rational animals ; and so Christians may laugh upon other causes, provided no sin be mixed, besides that joy they have in God. Grave deportments, especially of ministers and men in places, I honour ; but that a minister must always be so grave that he must speak nothing to make others laugh (according to his monkish divinity), as if gravity and cheerfulness ordered with prudence were inconsistent, receive this who will.

“ That gentleman I mentioned before, at whom his companions took such great offence when he was under the workings of God in conversion, being then sad, who before in time of his vanity was as vainly merry ; after God had settled him in good hope of his love, he proved an excellent Christian, and now returned to his cheerfulness again, but purged from his former sin and froth ; he grew so merry that he feared he was too merry ; so he and I rode to old Mr. John Rogers of Dedham, and after the Lecture he puts his case to Mr. Rogers, and relates what God had done for him, and now he was afraid he was too merry ; to whom Mr. Rogers gave this answer : ‘ Take heed you mix nothing that is unsavoury with your mirth, do not break in upon the Word of God, or on His line, and be as merry as you will ; for it is the cheerful Christian that glorifieth God and commendeth His ways unto men.’ The nature of man as man cannot but incline to cheerfulness unless some predominant melancholy humour or cold distemper of body or other accidental evils, keep him under ; both as risibility is proper to man, flowing from the rational soul, in its purest state, and as cheerfulness, especi-

ally when not defiled with sin, is the sunshine of a man's life, 'A merry heart doth good like medicine,' (Prov. 17, 22), and more good many times than many medicines, which sometimes do little good, through 'Heaviness in the heart of man which maketh it stoop' (Prov. 12, 25)."

DISESTABLISHMENT. By Herbert Hensley Henson, Bishop of Durham. *Macmillan. 4s. 6d.*

This book has much that is valuable in the practical directions given to the Clergy for the exercise of their Parochial ministry and in its reflexions on contemporary morality. But most readers will be attracted by the *Apologia pro sua Vita* put forward with fervid eloquence by a Bishop who maintains that he is most consistent when he appears inconsistent. His principles have not altered—the expression of them has taken another form and this form has been forced on them by the pressure of contemporary events. A changed environment means new adaptations. What did well under one set of circumstances will work evil under another, therefore what was to him in the past a bulwark of the faith, becomes now a crazy edifice. We have all been misled in our ignorance by the forceful one-sidedness of expression, for if we had looked a little deeper we should have found that when we were most in agreement with the Bishop, we had really misunderstood him. It may be so, but really the defeat of the Deposited Book with the approval of the great mass of English Churchmen does not warrant the *volte face* made by Dr. Henson.

We have re-read his book and have failed to find it convincing, for the old arguments he brought forward in defence of the Establishment seem to us to have gained strength rather than lost force by reason of what has happened. Take Dr. Henson on his own showing. The Bishops had been brought face to face with a situation very largely of their own creation. The Report of the Royal Commission was before them, and like other distinguished people they selected what seemed to warrant a certain course of action and closed their eyes to what they did not like in the Report. By this one-sided policy they intensified an evil and precipitated an inevitable conflict. Now Dr. Henson advocates burning the crazy edifice of the Establishment in order that what he describes as an unrepresentative Assembly may have its own way, in prescribing the worship of the unrepresented, by reverting to a type of worship, which the Representatives had in many cases followed when they had sworn not to do so. It was easier to legalize the notoriously illegal than to repress it. And because the plan failed the Church is to be disestablished and disendowed. We do not follow the argument.