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JOHN WILLIAMS: A STATESMAN BISHOP

THOMAS FULLER records of Archbishop Williams that he fully carried out St. Paul's advice of approving himself a minister of God " by honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report " (1 Cor. vi. 7), and certainly his remarkable career of sharply alternating prosperity and adversity, high honour and sudden disgrace, is a good illustration of this. He was, with his contemporary, Archbishop Laud, the last of the prominent ecclesiastical statesmen so common in the Middle Ages.

I. EARLY YEARS

John was the youngest son of Edmund Williams of Conway, a family of good standing and ancient lineage, and he was born on March 25, 1583. He received a godly and learned upbringing and possessed more than ordinary ability, and so he made special progress in his studies at Ruthven Grammar School, till, at the age of sixteen, he went up to St. John's College, Cambridge. Here he was a most diligent student and also a very unusual one since he only needed three hours' sleep to keep him in good health. Consequently he often started the day's studies at 6 a.m. and did not finish till 3 a.m. the next day! He also had a remarkable memory and soon became an outstanding scholar and he was well read not only in the writings of the Reformers but also in the Schoolmen and in the Fathers. In fact he often quoted the 1571 Canon admonishing Preachers to preach nothing " but that which is agreeable to the doctrine of the Old and New Testaments and that which the Catholic Fathers and ancient Bishops have gathered out of that Doctrine ". He was also fully conversant with the history of the Early British and Saxon Churches. His biographer even affirms that " there was not a corner of a History sacred or secular in any Kingdom or State in Europe which he had not pried into ". He secured his B.A. in 1602 and a Fellowship the next year. He took his M.A. in 1605, his B.D. in 1613 and his D.D. in 1617.

II. RAPID PROMOTION

He was ordained in 1603 and his Church preferments were numerous and very rapid. In 1605 he was instituted to the Living

of Hornington in Suffolk and soon became known as an outstanding preacher, so much so that in 1610 he was invited to preach before the King and was appointed Chaplain to Lord Chancellor Ellesmere who loaded him with honours, while Archbishop Bancroft made him Archdeacon of Cardigan in 1613. In 1612 James I had presented him to the Living of Grafton Underwood and also as prebendary of Hereford. Next year he was made prebendary of Lincoln. In 1614 he was appointed Rector of Wargrave and in 1616 Prebendary of Peterborough, and next year he became Chaplain to the King and went to Scotland with him in 1618. Next year he obtained the Deanery of Sarum and it is not surprising, since he retained all his other preferments, that he resided very little at Salisbury. Such a record of "pluralism", unusual even for that age, would be regarded as scandalous to-day, but at that time it was a common practice and most of the Livings then were of small value.

III. THE STATESMAN

Williams made friends with the influential favourite, the Duke of Buckingham, and so in 1620 he received the coveted post of the Deanery of Westminster, and on the fall of Lord Keeper Bacon in that year he was appointed to succeed to that important State office, while in the following year he was advanced to the See of Lincoln at the early age of thirty-eight, so that his ambition for position and influence did not lack success. He was greatly appreciated by James I and ministered to him in his last illness "in reading, praying and talking to him about repentance, faith, Remission of sins, Resurrection and Eternal life". He also preached the funeral sermon for the King. But the death of James I was virtually the end of Williams' period of political power and influence and the beginning of his days of serious adversity and ill-treatment. For the favourite Buckingham now turned against him, in spite of the friendly warning which Williams gave him of his great unpopularity with the Parliament. Buckingham was fickle and inconstant with his friends and he was specially influenced against Williams by the jealousy of Laud, who envied his success as militating against his own rise to power and high office. This hostile action of Laud's was flagrantly ungrateful, since Williams had pleaded with James I to appoint Laud to a bishopric and to overlook his previous offence of

marrying an adulterous woman to her paramour—a rash act of which Williams assured the King that Laud had truly repented. But James bluntly told the Lord Keeper: “the plain truth is I keep Laud back from all place of rule and authority, because I find he hath a restless spirit and cannot see when things are well, but loves to toss and change and to bring things to a pitch of reformation floating in his own brain, which may endanger the steadfastness of that which is in a good pass”. But on Williams protesting that Laud was of “a great and tractable wit” James reluctantly yielded, saying, “Then take him to you but on my soul you will repent it”, a prophecy which was soon fulfilled, for Laud ill repaid Williams for his disinterested importunity which gained for him the See of St. David’s.

IV. HIS FALL

Williams had rendered himself unpopular with Charles I by courageously opposing some of his arbitrary methods of government and especially his claim to imprison without cause. Plots and false accusations were hatched against Williams, and without any definite charges he was summarily deprived of his high office of Lord Keeper of the Great Seal in October, 1625. Like Wolsey before him, Williams was advised to retire to his spiritual cure of the See of Lincoln, and Charles never called on him for further advice in State affairs. This sudden disgrace was a bitter blow to the pride of Williams, who was very ambitious of prestige, place and power. But, as Hacket declares, he only desired wealth “to do works of piety and bravery or of splendour and bounty, which was all the use he knew to be made of wealth”. But this abrupt divorce from all State offices and influence probably “saved his soul” and arrested his inordinate self-seeking aims. For while politics are rightly the concern of the earnest Christian, a Minister of the Gospel’s primary duty is to “preach the Word of God” and to “feed the flock of God committed to his charge”; and Williams’s many secular employments must have sadly curtailed his opportunities for fulfilling this obligation.

But in spite of his immersion in State affairs Williams was not unmindful of his sacred office and he preached twice a Sunday at Wargrave and diligently read prayers and the Litany on Wednesdays. He believed the way to get credit from the non-conformists was “to outpreach them”. He took great care over

his sermons and his aim was, as his biographer says, "to draw the consciences of his hearers into his drag net, not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. ii. 4). His church was full each Sunday even with people from neighbouring parishes.

As one of James I's chief advisers, Williams was for long closely associated with important State business and acted wisely and diplomatically, especially in the difficult question of the proposed Spanish Marriage for Prince Charles. He also joined with Bishop Laud in the public debate with the Jesuit Fisher who had succeeded in perverting the Duke of Buckingham's mother to the Romish faith. But not even their convincing arguments could reclaim her. When the French ambassadors were in England to arrange for the marriage of the Prince with Henrietta Maria of France, they attended a Christmas Day service in Westminster Abbey at which Williams, as Dean of Westminster, officiated and preached. A certain Abbot of the party was greatly impressed with the reverence and dignity of the service and especially with the prayer book which was given him. Williams said to him "My brother Abbot, I hope you will think better of the Religion". The Abbot construing this remark to refer to the Huguenot religion, replied, "I will lose my head if you and the Huguenots are of one religion". Williams immediately emphasised the solidarity of the Reformed Churches by saying "I protest, Sir, you divide us without cause". Then, as Andrewes had reminded Cardinal Bellarmine, Williams added: "For the *Harmony of Protestant Confessions*, divulged to all the World, doth manifest our consonancy in Faith and Doctrine. And for diversity in outward administrations it is a Note as old as Irenaeus, which will justify us from a rupture, that variety of Ceremonies in several Churches, the foundation being preserved, doth commend the Unity of Faith." A fact that the new South India Church has well demonstrated. The Abbot admitted this plea but asked why the Huguenots did not follow their example of maintaining bishops. Williams replied aptly, "Because every part of France was under a diocesan bishop and they would not permit another bishop to be set up there. And so as they have no episcopal control the people (Huguenots) take a greater share in government; so that in many things you must excuse them, because the hand of restraint is upon them". Then, referring to James I's marriage with Anne of Denmark,

Williams declared, "The diversity between us and the Lutherans is as little as between scarlet and crimson, the colours are almost the same dip".

Williams did much to advance learning by founding scholarships and Fellowships at Cambridge as well as endowing a good library there, and in exercising his influence he was most careful in preferring the best learned and true churchmen to livings. He even opposed a petition of some persecuted Bohemian to settle in England, as dangerous to the established form of Church government. From 1621 to 1625 Williams had administered his diocese from London. It is therefore small wonder that after he was forced to retire to Lincoln his biographer declares that "his light shined clearer and the influence of it was stronger when he was fixed and resident in his own orb", because "having no more to do with Civil distractions he be-thought him instantly of the duty of his Pastoral Staff", "Here he had a quiet mind and a good conscience".

V. PASTORAL WORK

Williams very soon got busy in his diocese. He restored and beautified the bishop's seat at Bugden, as well as the Chapel; and the daily services were diligently observed with music and organ in such a becoming manner that the chapel was thronged with visitors, and the Bishop entertained hospitably both learned and simple. Bishop Hacket, whose full and careful narration of the life and times of Archbishop Williams is the main source of our knowledge of his career,¹ records: "Except Bishop Andrewes, who was sublime in all virtues, there was not of his Order so great a Giver to the supply of the learned gentlemen of hard fortune, whom he gratified with no small sums." He expended the substantial amount of £1,000 a year on charitable objects. He frequently preached in adjacent towns and "he spake as one that delivered the oracles of God". He began writing a Commentary on the whole Bible in Latin and was prepared to spend £20,000 to complete this great project. He was scrupulously careful in admitting men to Holy Orders and demanded a degree from all candidates. Therefore a modern assertion "that it was a strange doctrine to Williams that a bishop

¹ All the quotations in this Article, unless otherwise stated, are taken from Hacket's *Life of Williams* (1693).

had any sacred mission or was a responsible agent ”¹ is a serious libel. Unlike Laud with his sinister partisan register of “O & P”, Williams took no definite position on the burning predestinarian question and so he preferred to benefit the Calvinist and Arminian equally. He held broad and tolerant views and had no use for methods of force or violence, preferring to treat the Puritan ministers with friendly argument and moderation, and he was prepared to administer the Holy Communion to those who refused to receive at the rails, since he trusted persuasion to win men to uniformity in worship. But such tolerance and charity does not justify the statement that Williams “ behaved throughout his career as if no difference in religious principles existed ”.²

Williams greatly approved of the unique Little Gidding Community started by the zealous ascetic, Nicholas Ferrar. He preached in their chapel, but he reproved two of their enthusiasts for their desire to take the veil, reminding them of St. Paul’s advice, “ Let the younger women marry ”, advice which one of them shortly after followed. The advent of the Civil War soon saw the end of this “ Protestant Nunnery ”.

In a long searching Visitation Charge to his clergy in 1634 Williams exhorts them, above all other duties, “ to bring your people so much as you can, to delight in praying . . . You shall find it the only duty whereby a Christian doth most resemble an angel on earth . . . And of all prayers none are so fit for devotion as the prayers of the Liturgy—understood by all and known of all and therefore putting the poor people to no straining of their understanding ”. This statement could scarcely be affirmed to-day when the masses are out of touch so largely with the Church of England worship. At his own expense Williams got the English Prayer Book translated into Spanish to prove to them that the English Church had its own liturgy. Although over 300 years old, this learned, yet practical and deeply spiritual “ Charge ”, compares favourably with many delivered to-day. “ It is not enough ”, said Williams, “ to say the Creed in Confession if you act it not in life and conversation.”

¹ Roper, *Archbishop Laud* (1940), p. 280.

² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

VI. PERSECUTION AND IMPRISONMENT

The record of his protracted and scandalous persecution makes sad reading. Two guests at his table, old friends who owed him both protection from their just offences and also preferment, most basely reported to Laud that Williams had revealed in conversation to them the King's intention to deal more leniently with the Puritans—information which Williams had learned as a Privy Councillor. At once action was taken against the Bishop for disclosing State secrets. The Privy Council was willing to overlook this indiscretion, but Laud would not let the matter rest. And so Charles I in the end remitted the case to the Star Chamber. Here justice was outraged and Williams's witnesses imprisoned, while false friends basely turned against him. Hacket affirms that Laud "thought not himself absolute till this man was unprelated and cared not what he cast at him so he might hit him home".

Laud pressed for Williams' degradation and deportation to an obscure Irish See, but the Bishop managed to escape this solution. But in 1635 he was fined £8,000 and in July, 1637, he was sentenced by the Star Chamber to a fine of £10,000 and imprisoned in the Tower and suspended from all jurisdiction and all his goods were seized and plundered. Laud, who concurred in this harsh sentence, refused Williams's plea that he might pay this heavy fine in instalments. Consequently his goods and furniture were seized and sold. Mr. Trevor Roper in his recent able and scholarly biography of Archbishop Laud goes out of his way to make unjust attacks on Williams and he often attributes the basest motives for his actions. But Mr. Roper has to admit that Laud's relentless persecution of Williams was based on an obsession for revenge and on his determination to ruin one whom he regarded as his rival. It is therefore difficult to see on what grounds Canon Perry can maintain that "Laud cannot fairly be charged with vindictiveness".¹ His friend and biographer, Bishop Hacket, declares that "Of all men Bishop Laud was most spiteful against his great benefactor" and he calls it a tragical persecution of fifteen years and suggests it was due to Laud's fear that Williams might succeed to the chief place in the Church instead of him.

Malicious accusations were made against Williams to Charles

¹ Perry, *Church History* ii. 424.

I and the King arbitrarily refused to allow him to take his due place at the Coronation as Dean of Westminster, and actually forbade him to attend either Parliament or Convocation—an unconstitutional prohibition. He even revoked his membership of the Privy Council because he had favoured the Petition of Right. In 1637 a further shameful charge was made against Williams for divulging scandalous libels against the King's Privy Councillors, on the ground of some supposed cryptic reflections on Laud in some letter which had been written to Williams by Osbaldiston, a Westminster schoolmaster. This charge the Bishop altogether denied, but he was fined £5,000 to the King and £3,000 to Archbishop Laud. Laud had specially warned Charles "not to let loose that fierce mastiff, or his most faithful ministers would have little heart to continue in his service".¹ As Hacket says, "There were very good things to be found in Laud, but his implacable spite against Williams, his raiser, and now become a spectacle of pity, was unpardonable". Williams languished a close prisoner in the Tower for the next three-and-a-half years till he was at length released on petition to the Long Parliament, which restored him to his seat in the House of Lords and cancelled all the sentences against him. The King then thought it politic to do the same and so restored him to favour. In 1641 he translated him to York where the greatly injured bishop vainly hoped to carry out his office in much splendour.

VII. RETURN TO PUBLIC LIFE

Williams never retaliated on his persecutors for their cruel treatment. His one desire was to allay the existing civil discontents and to save Episcopacy, of which he was a staunch upholder, although like the Caroline divines he was not prepared to unchurch those who had another discipline. But "he wished them a better mind". Williams's sudden recovery of liberty and return to public life was not of long duration. In 1641 he was appointed with four other bishops—Usher, Morton, Hall and Sanderson—Chairman of a Committee to consider "Innovations in Religion". Shortly after Williams brought in a Bill for the stricter regulation of bishops and their pastoral duties. He proposed that in a vacancy of a See, the bishops should present three names to the King who should choose one. He spoke

¹ *Works* vii. 370.

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fearlessly in the Lords against the Bill to exclude the bishops from that House, and after he was "mobbed" and prevented from attending Parliament, he unwisely joined in a "Protest" declaring that all Acts passed in the forced absence of the bishops were null and void. As a result he and eleven other bishops were impeached for treason by the Commons and sent to the Tower. But in May, 1642, he managed to escape by breaking bail, and he went at once to his diocese of York and was enthroned. He then so assiduously championed the royal Cause that he was forced to escape to his native land of Wales. He was deprived of his revenues of most of his books and papers, but his private patrimony enabled him to live fairly comfortably in Wales where he had many friends. He exerted a considerable influence on the royalist side and did much to fortify Conway Castle. He exhorted his neighbours to piety and brotherly love and to frequent prayers and fastings. He often preached and administered the sacrament. He was summoned to Oxford in December by the King but he soon returned to his home town where trouble again befell him. For in May, 1645, Sir. J. Owen, acting under orders from Prince Rupert, forcibly broke into and seized Conway Castle and all the stores without any warrant from Charles. Williams petitioned the King in vain to reinstate him and greatly resented the King's ingratitude in thus displacing him in this summary manner. Consequently some fifteen months later, when the royal Cause was hopeless, Williams negotiated with Milton, the parliamentary general, and assisted him to secure the Castle with the promise of saving the personal possessions of himself and his friends. This prudential action was harshly construed as "treachery", although Williams was entirely loyal to Charles till the last. In fact the execution of the King was a blow from which the Archbishop never recovered. After this he ceased to take interest in public affairs and his constant prayer was "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly and put an end to these days of sin and misery". He died of a quinsy on his sixty-eighth birthday, the 25th of March, 1651.

VII. CHARACTER

ALTHOUGH he had a weakness for entertaining his friends sumptuously, in his own personal habits and appetite Williams was most temperate and practically a vegetarian. Fuller specially

praises his charity and numerous costly benefactions. "Withersoever he went he might be traced by the footsteps of his benefactions." The library of Westminster was the result of his bounty as well as Lincoln College Chapel, Oxford. Fuller also, like Collier, pays a tribute to his great learning: "his head was a well-filled treasury and his tongue a fair key to unlock it".¹ His upright character and personal piety were generally acknowledged. "His private life", Collier declares, "was exceptionally regular."² Hacket speaks of him "as a punctual observer of the ancient Church Orders and a great decliner of Innovations, holding that what was long in use was fittest for the people". Certainly in his chequered career Williams learned "both how to be abased and how to abound". Hacket rightly says he "tasted equally of prosperity and adversity and was a rare example of both, not elevated with honour, nor in the contrary state, cast down". He adds that "choler and a high stomach were his faults and the only defects in him. It had been better for him if he had known a meek temper". But he calls him "the most complete bishop that the age afforded", and he declares that "there did not live that Christian that hated revenge more than he, or that would forgive an injury sooner. Munificent, liberal and charitable above his means, he loved to do praiseworthy things. Justice, charity, temperance, tender bowels of compassion enshamed all his life". He concludes: "When I remember him I cannot but praise him."

Williams's statement to a young minister in instituting him to a benefice is a sufficient testimony to his sincere evangelical zeal. "I have passed", he said, "through many places of honour and trust, both in Church and State, more than any of my Order in England these 70 years before. But were I but assured that by my preaching I had converted but one soul unto God I should take therein more spiritual joy and comfort than in all the honours and offices which have been bestowed upon me."³ As Bishop of Lincoln, he was surely in many ways not an unworthy predecessor of the learned Christopher Wordsworth and the saintly Edward King.

¹ *Church History* iii. 488-9. ² *Eccles. Hist.* viii. 377. ³ *Church History* iii. 489.

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