

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 Churchman* can be found here:

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

Archbishop Usher.

BY THE REV. SYDNEY CARTER, M.A., D.D., F.R.HIST.S.

BISHOP BURNET, a junior contemporary, pays the highest possible tribute to Archbishop Usher when he declares that "he was one of the greatest and best men that the age or perhaps the world has produced."

James Usher, who was born in Dublin on January 4, 1581, was descended from an English family of Neville's who settled in Ireland at the time of King John. One of his ancestors, in accordance with a common custom of the day, on becoming a gentleman-usher to the Court, changed his name accordingly. James's father was one of the Six Clerks in the Court of Chancery, and as his Mother was a Roman Catholic, James received his early instruction from two blind Aunts who gave him the best possible foundation by steeping him in the knowledge of Holy Scripture. Neal asserts that he was the first student to enter the newly founded Trinity College, Dublin. But in any case, as a boy of 13, he was one of the first scholars to be received there. At the age of 14 he received his first Communion and was always a strict observer of the Lord's Day. He spent considerable time in studying the Roman controversy, but was unable to convert his Mother to the Reformed Faith.

He graduated B.A. in 1597 and M.A. in 1600. His father sent him to London to study law, for which he had a great dislike, and so on his father's death in 1598 he forsook it and concentrated on Divinity. He became 'Catechist' and Fellow of Trinity College in 1600 and joined in the appointment of Henry Alvey as Provost to succeed the well known Walter Travers. Both these men were contentious Puritans and disloyal to the discipline of the English Church and so, with several others who made themselves too troublesome in England, they were 'shipped' to Ireland to contaminate and disturb the Irish Church. Usher soon demonstrated his vocation, and even as a layman he was chosen to preach before the Government. Shortly after he obtained a dispensation and was ordained deacon by his uncle the Archbishop of Armagh, in 1601, before he had reached the then canonical age of 21. In 1603 he was appointed Chancellor of St. Patrick's Cathedral in which post he preached most zealously and faithfully. Already a diligent student, he frequently visited Oxford and Cambridge in order to consult the famous libraries there. In 1607 Usher took his B. D. and was appointed Professor of Divinity in Dublin University, where he lectured regularly for 14 years. He was then engaged in studying and arranging the Canons of the early Church Councils. In these visits to England he became acquainted with the learned men of the day like Bishop Davenant, Sir H. Savile and the celebrated jurist and writer, John Selden, whom, at his death, Usher declared to be "so great a scholar, that himself was scarce worthy to carry his books after him."

In 1609 Usher was offered the provostship of Trinity College, but declined it for fear it might 'hinder his studies.' In 1612 at the age of 31, after submitting two learned Latin treatises, he was awarded

his D. D. degree. In 1614 he married the daughter of Dr. Chaloner and the one child of this marriage - a daughter - survived him.

In 1615 the Irish Convocations met and issued 104 Articles of Religion. Usher took a leading part in drawing them up and they passed the Irish Parliament and were approved by the English Privy Council and were ratified in the King's name by the Lord Deputy Chichester. Some of these Articles were more like Homilies and they included the rejected 'Lambeth Articles' of 1595 and were strongly Calvinistic. One of them also definitely denounces the Pope as Antichrist. A cleavage was thus introduced in their respective Confessions of Faith between the Churches of England and Ireland. In 1610 Usher was chosen Vice-Chancellor of Dublin University and again in 1617. It was at this time that he was slandered as a 'Puritan' to James I. But after several interviews with the King, combined with the strong recommendation of the Lord Deputy and the Council, James was soon able to correct this false report, and he was so pleased with him that in 1620 the King appointed Usher Bishop of Meath, and in the same year he was asked to preach before the English Parliament at Westminster. With the King's special permission, Usher spent much time away from his diocese in order to do research work in England for his "Antiquities of the British Church". He wrote learned and powerful treatises in defence of the English Church and engaged in public disputations with prominent Romanists and especially with W. Malone, an Irish Jesuit. In one of these he succeeded in converting the Earl of Peterboro', a blessing which earned the enduring gratitude of his widow. James I., just before his death, in January 1625, appointed Usher Primate of Ireland and Charles I. rewarded him for his great services with a gift of £400. The Irish Church was at this time in a decaying and lamentable condition of poverty and also in very great danger from the ceaseless hostile activities of the Roman priests, many of whom were plotting to restore their religion by means of a Spanish invasion. This anti-Protestant feeling was fostered and fanned by the recent forcible 'Plantation of Ulster' with Scots Presbyterians. The accompanying expropriation of the Irish landholders had naturally caused great discontent. The Papists were very active and evaded the penal laws and expected a full toleration for their worship. The Acts against this worship had been suspended and the Papists had even begun to interfere with and interrupt the Church Services. The Church party were alarmed and the Irish Archbishops and Bishops drew up a solemn Protest against granting any specific Indulgence to the Roman Catholics as involving them in the "grievous sin of Popery" by abetting the "idolatry" and "abominations of Popery". This was signed by Usher and 11 other Bishops in 1627. They were prepared to connive at the Romish worship by recusants but not to legalize it. The Romanists however continued boldly and defiantly establishing their own worship, seizing churches, erecting new monasteries and exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction. This open defiance of the law led Charles I. to send a letter reproving the Irish Bishops for their self-seeking and negligence. It was probably at this time, when Usher was in England, that the King said to him of his own accord, in the presence of the Duke of Buckingham, that "he had never loved Popery in all his life, but that he never detested it before his going to Spain." Usher himself, was,

however, ceaseless in his efforts to convert the Popish recusants on the one hand and to win over the Sectaries on the other.

During the period of 'Absolute Rule' 1628-40 Usher carried on a long correspondence with Archbishop Laud and tried to secure him as Chancellor of Dublin University, regarding him as a staunch Protestant, while Laud certainly did not class Usher with the Puritans whom he was then doing his best to silence and proscribe. It was during this tyrannical dictatorship of 'Thorough' in Church and State, that Lord Strafford, as Lord Deputy, reported to Laud the deplorable plight of the Irish Church and urged that its doctrine and discipline should be exactly conformed to that of the English Church. Consequently in 1634 the Irish Convocation was forced to accept the English 39 Articles and this change, in effect, negatived the Irish Articles of 1615 and they were no longer imposed on the clergy; although the attempt at the same time to supersede the Irish Canons by the English, was unsuccessful. Although this reform was achieved against, at that time, the real wishes of Usher and the Irish bishops, by an Absolutist 'Hitlerite' method of intimidation, there is little doubt that it was beneficial to the Irish Church that its official doctrines should not be compromised by extreme Calvinistic teaching.

In 1640 Usher went with his family to England in order to continue his literary labours and, owing to the horrors of the ensuing Irish massacre of Protestants and the resultant Civil War, he was never able to return to his native land. He was thus in England through the critical and stormy period of the Long Parliament which culminated in the outbreak of the Civil War. He remained faithful to his friend Strafford and refused to advise Charles to sign his death warrant, and in fact courageously reproached the King for doing so. He was the bearer of Lord Strafford's last message to the imprisoned Archbishop Laud and he attended Strafford on the scaffold and was greatly impressed with the Earl's pious and Christian demeanour throughout this terrible ordeal. As a result of the Irish Rebellion Usher lost his Irish homes and nearly all his property and his cattle were confiscated. He was reduced to great straits and even forced to sell his plate and jewels. By way of compensation, in 1642 Charles nominated him to the See of Carlisle, but the Parliament soon seized all the episcopal lands, and Usher went to Oxford to pursue his studies in that congenial centre of learning, and while there he frequently preached before the King. In July 1643 the Parliament invited him to attend the Westminster Assembly of Divines, but the Archbishop, unlike his friend John Selden, refused to attend, because this Synod had been prohibited by royal Proclamation. In retaliation the Parliament confiscated his valuable Library at Chelsea. It was during this time of national distress that Usher formed a strong friendship with Dr. Henry Hammond and corresponded much with him on theological subjects. By 1645 Oxford was no longer a 'haven of refuge' for the Royalists and so Usher migrated to Cardiff where he was able to remain for nearly a year quietly carrying on his studies. But the tide of War again overtook him and in his escape from Cardiff he was captured by a band of the Parliamentary forces and roughly treated, while his valuable books and manuscripts, which he had been collecting for 20 years, were seized. He was able to obtain shelter with Sir John Aubrey at St. Donat's and later, to his great joy, most of his

books were recovered. On the final defeat of the Royalists he was compelled to leave Wales and take refuge in London with the Countess of Peterborough, whose husband Usher had reclaimed from Popery over 20 years earlier. The Parliament severely questioned him, but at length suffered him to retire to Rygate with the Countess, and he frequently preached there in the parish church. In 1647 he was allowed by Parliament to minister as Preacher at Lincoln's Inn, a post to which he had been appointed, and which he occupied for nearly 8 years. It was here that he enjoyed the friendship of the future Lord Chief Justice, Sir Matthew Hale. On March 25th, 1649, Evelyn records "I heard the Common Prayer (a rare thing in these days)—in the morning the Archbishop of Armagh that pious and learned person Usher, in Lincoln's Inn chapel." Usher took a prominent part in the negotiations in 1648 between the Parliament and the King at Newport, I. W. and even persuaded the King to suspend episcopacy for 3 years and then to limit the Bishops' sole power of ordination by requiring the consent of the presbyters. But this proposed compromise was abortive since the Parliament insisted on the complete abrogation of episcopacy.

In 1646 the Roman hierarchy had sent 100 priests, as soldiers, mostly in the Parliament's Army and others in the King's, to disseminate their doctrines and so overthrow the Church of England and the Protestant monarchy. These priests, as Evelyn records, in his Diary, were "to conform themselves to all sectaries and conditions for the more easily dispersing their doctrine among us".¹ The Romanists however realised the sincerity of Charles' attachment to the Protestant Faith and they were undoubtedly well aware of the solemn Protestation which Charles had made 3 years before when Usher preached before him in Christ church, Oxford. Charles had suddenly interrupted the service just as he was about to receive the Holy Communion, by declaring "My lord, I espy here many resolved Protestants, who may declare to the world the resolution I do now make. I have to the utmost of my power prepared my soul to become a worthy receiver, and may I so comfortably receive the blessed sacrament, as I do intend the establishment of the true Protestant religion as it stood in its beauty in the happy days of Queen Elizabeth without any connivance of Popery."

Usher would never in any way acknowledge Cromwell's usurped government and it was only with great reluctance that he obeyed the Protector's summons to visit him, when Cromwell discussed with him the prospects of the Protestant Cause in England and abroad. The Protector also at this time granted the Archbishop a 21 years' lease of the lands belonging to his See of Armagh, which Usher accepted as rightly his. But this grant never materialised and it was later refused to his daughter on grounds of 'malignancy.' Later on Usher paid another visit to Cromwell to solicit some small liberty of conscience for the deprived episcopal clergy. He found the Protector having a boil on his chest dressed, and Cromwell is reported to have remarked "If this core were once removed I should soon be well." "I doubt," replied the Archbishop, "the core lies deeper, there is a core in the heart which must be taken out or else it will not be well." Cromwell answered, "Ah, so there is indeed." Usher's special mission to the Protector ended in failure and he remarked soon after that "some men had guts, but no bowels." It was on this occasion that Usher made

1. 'Diary' April 18th, 1686.

a singularly accurate prophecy. "This false man" he said, "hath broken his word with me; he will have little cause to glory in his wickedness, for he will not continue long. The King will return though I shall not live to see it." But in his prevision regarding the ecclesiastical future, Usher was not so accurate. Shortly before this, he had told his friend, John Evelyn, who visited him at Rygate in August, 1655, that "the Church would be destroyed by the sectaries, who would in all likelihood bring in Popery."²

Usher was now nearing his 75th birthday and he realised that his earthly pilgrimage was closing and set his mind entirely on the "things which are above." On the night before his death he visited and comforted a dying lady, and then on March 21st, 1656, he died suddenly of pleurisy. His last words were "O Lord forgive me, especially my sins of omission." So generally revered and respected was he, that Cromwell ordered his burial in Westminster Abbey with a public funeral which was attended by a vast concourse of people. Even the use of the proscribed Church of England Burial Service was permitted. It was a remarkable testimony to the conspicuously upright and consistent Christian character of Usher that in a turbulent period of such marked and acute religious and political divisions, he should in so signal a manner have won the esteem of all the bitterly contending parties.

Usher was a life-long student and his munerous learned treatises and his great scholarship made him celebrated throughout all Europe. He was specially keen on the revival of patristic studies about which he wrote to Oxford University in 1626. He was a great believer in the appeal to antiquity as the surest way of refuting Roman errors and corruptions. His magnificent library was bought by public subscription and presented to Trinity College Dublin. He published his first book in 1613 to prove that there had always been a Visible Church of true Christians untainted by Romish errors. It was a sort of continuation of Bishop Jewel's 'Apology' to bring down the evidence to the Reformation period, although Usher went no further than the close of the 13th century. He defended the Albigenses and Waldenses from the slanders of Roman Catholic writers. In 1631 he wrote a Life of the unfortunate 9th century French monk, Gotteschaleus who was condemned for heresy on account of his extravagant predestinarian views and was at last refused Christian burial. But this revival of the predestinarian controversy found no favour with Charles I. The next year Usher published his learned research work on the "Religion of the Ancient British and Irish Churches" in order to show that their doctrines differed from those of the Church of Rome as set forth in the Council of Trent. In particular he denies that they upheld the doctrine of purgatory and he proves that the Irish Church did not teach transubstantiation since its clergy, as late as 1384, affirmed that "the body of Christ in the sacrament of the Altar was only a looking glass to the body of Christ in heaven." Usher shows that a married clergy was the rule in the Irish Church till the 13th century and that these early Irish priests regarded Christ, and not St. Peter or the Pope, as Head of the Church, and that the Irish clergy were prepared to resist papal decisions, and that the Archbishop of Armagh did not receive the pall from Rome. Usher thus proved that the ancient historic Church

2. Evelyn's Memoirs 1. 294.

of Ireland was not Roman in origin or teaching and he asserted that up to the 12th century Ireland enjoyed a greater reputation for learning than any other country. Usher followed up this treatise seven years later with what was probably his magnum opus—"The Antiquities of the British Churches," which he had commenced 20 years earlier at the request of James I. Bishop Burnet speaks of Usher's "great and vast learning" and his biographer describes this work as a "monument of human learning." In it he begins with the first introduction of Christianity into the British Isles and carries it on to the close of the 7th century, dwelling fully on the Pelagian heresy.

During the Commonwealth period Usher employed his leisure in completing his famous "Annals of the Old Testament" which was published in 1650, but he did not live to finish his "Ecclesiastical Chronicle" from the destruction of the Temple to the 4th century. The 'Annals' furnished the supposed dates of the World's history which are still printed in our Authorised Version.

In his theological position Usher displayed the open and teachable mind of a careful student and thinker. In early life his support of the Lambeth Articles marked him as an extreme Calvinist, but further study and association with different minds greatly modified these rigid views and led him practically into a middle charitable position between Calvinism and Arminianism. His strong friendship for Archbishop Laud and his efforts to get him appointed Chancellor of Dublin University, prove that he had forsaken his narrower earlier opinions. His sermons also show that he held "Universal redemption" most strongly and clearly, and repudiated the doctrine of absolute reprobation and 'irresistible grace.' In fact not only Richard Baxter, but strong Arminians like Hammond, Gunning and Herbert Thorndike, all testify to Usher's rejection of extreme Calvinistic views of divine grace. His views on the Sacraments followed the teaching of our English Reformers. His statement on baptismal regeneration has been often quoted, when he declares that "baptism is not actually effectual to justify and sanctify until the party do believe and embrace the promises." It is "a seal of the righteousness of Christ to be apprehended by faith if the infant live to years of discretion. . . we can make no comfortable use of our baptism administered in our infancy until we believe." 3 Usher regarded the Sacraments as 'signs and pledges' and he stressed the fact that in the Holy Communion the 'real presence' was not to be found in the outward symbols but in "the mind of the worthy recipient." The oppressive use of episcopal power by Archbishop Laud during the period of 'Absolute Rule' had rendered episcopacy odious to many and it led to a popular clamour for its abolition. Usher was appointed by the House of Lords on a Committee to consider 'innovations' in religion and he submitted a compromise by advocating the appointment of a suffragan bishop for each rural deanery who should be guided in his actions by a monthly synod of his clergy, while an annual Synod of suffragan bishops and specially chosen parochial clergy was to advise the diocesan bishop. This solution of course practically reduces the bishops to the level of mere presidents of ecclesiastical Synods. It was designed as a substantial concession to allay the animosity which had been stimulated by 12 years of tyrannical episcopal rule. It agrees however with Usher's tract "The reduction

3. Cf. Moule "Outlines of Christian Doctrine", p. 246.

of episcopacy to its ancient model," published in 1641—it is asserted without the Archbishop's consent. The four propositions concerning ecclesiastical discipline in this Tract agree in the main with the Church government laid down by John Knox and the Presbyterians. But at the same time, as an answer to the 'Root and Branch' Bill then before Parliament, Usher published a tract maintaining the apostolical origin and establishment of bishops. But in this period of sharp adversity Anglicans were apparently ready to make considerable sacrifices if only episcopacy were maintained. Thus Baxter declared that "it was very easy for moderate men to come to an agreement and that the Reverend Primate of Ireland and myself had agreed in half an hour."⁴

A few years later during the negotiations over the abortive 'Treaty of Newport,' Usher made his oft-quoted declaration—that "a bishop differed in degree but not in order" from the presbyter and that consequently in places where "bishops cannot be had, the ordination of presbyters stands valid," although he considered such Churches without bishops to be "much defective in their government, except the Churches of France being under a popish power are more excusable in that defect than the Low Countries which live under a free State". But Usher adds "for testifying his communion with those Churches which I love and honour as true members of the Church Universal I do profess that with like affection I should receive the Blessed Sacrament at the hands of the Dutch ministers if I were in Holland as I should at the hands of the French ministers if I were at Charenton."⁵ Usher declared that the "intrinsic power of ordaining proceedeth not from jurisdiction but only from order, the Bishop having no higher character of order, though he hath a higher degree, i.e., a more eminent place in respect of authority and jurisdiction in spiritual regiment." "Ordination" Usher declares, "in case of necessity might be devolved to Presbyters." But, he added "yet on the other side, holding as I do, that a bishop hath superiority in degree above presbyters you may easily judge that the ordination made by such presbyters as have severed themselves from their bishops cannot possibly be excused from being schismatical." And, like other prominent Caroline divines, notably Bishop Joseph Hall, Usher clearly distinguished between the foreign Reformed divines and the English, Irish or Scottish presbyterians who had deliberately rejected episcopacy where it was practised in a pure form. He was not prepared to condone or countenance such unnecessary and culpable schism. Even so, he charitably concludes "for the agreement or disagreement in radical or fundamental doctrines not the consonancy or dissonancy in particular points of ecclesiastical government is with me (and I hope with every man that mindeth peace) the rule of adhering to or receding from the Communion of any Church."⁶

Usher was blessed with a strong constitution, which enabled him to devote many hours a day to study. He rose at 5 a.m. in the summer and 6 a.m. in the winter and his living was very simple, although he was "given to hospitality". In his devotional life Usher was most strict and regular. Prayers were at 6 a.m. and there was a full service in his Chapel before dinner and supper and prayers concluded the day at 8 p.m. He had the greatest reverence and esteem for the

4. "Life and Times" 2. 217-8. 5. "Life and Times" 2. 206.

6. Elrington "Life of Usher", p. C. I. iii.

Prayer Book. He was evidently of a very sweet and gentle temper, and the two words 'meekness and longsuffering' would probably best sum up his general disposition. "If", he declared, "good people would but make goodness agreeable, and smile instead of frowning in their virtue, how many they would win to the good cause"—wise advice which Christians of all generations would do well to follow. Certainly Usher himself was never a sour faced 'miserable' Christian. "If" he said, "you have entirely devoted yourselves to the service of God, what reason have you to be melancholy, when none have more cause to be cheerful than those who lead a holy and virtuous life", "sincere Christians may and ought to rejoice and show themselves cheerful." Burnet gives a most attractive picture of Usher as a truly consecrated man and a most lovable personality. "No man," he says, "had a better soul or a more apostolical mind, for passion, pride, self will or love of the world seemed not to be so much as in his nature. He had all the innocence of a dove in him and he had a way of gaining people's hearts and touching their consciences that looked like somewhat of the apostolical age revived. He spent most of his time in these two best exercises, secret prayer and dealing with other people's consciences." But he adds in all frankness, that "he was not made for the governing part of his function. His soul was too gentle to manage the rough work of reforming abuses, therefore he left things as he found them and suffered long standing abuses and corruptions in the Church to continue unreformed." ⁷ Such testimony is general. Collier, who disliked Usher's affection for the foreign Reformed Churches and his opinion that bishops and priests are only different degrees of the same order, confesses that "he was a genius, a person of indefatigable industry and in his life altogether regular and unblemished." ⁸ The Puritan historian, Neal, also calls Usher "one of the most learned men of his age," and says "he had a penetrating judgment, a tenacious memory and above all he was a most pious humble exemplary Christian." ⁹

Throughout his life Usher was a most diligent preacher and his episcopal motto was "*Vae mihi, si non evangelizavero.*" He had an impressive and persuasive style of delivery and preached extemporaneously relying merely on a few headings, but with frequent Scripture proofs and references. Although most zealous to defend Church teaching against Papists and Puritans he had no love for controversy, especially in the pulpit. His rules to his ordinands are most practical and valuable and equally as appropriate to-day as they were three centuries ago. His final warning to these young men that a minister's 'walk' is far more important than his 'talk' will never be out of date—"Above all," urged the Archbishop, "you must never forget to order your own conversation as becomes the Gospel, that so you may teach by example as well as by precept, for a minister's life and conversation is more heeded than his doctrine." ¹⁰

After his death there was a most discreditable attempt by Dr. Peter Heylyn to slander the Archbishop as being unfaithful to Church of England teaching, but this libel was very ably and convincingly exposed and refuted in a 'Vindication' written by his grandson.

7. "Life of Bishop Bedell," p. 86-7.

9. "Hist. of Puritans," 2. 88.

8. Eccles. Hist. viii. 395.

10. Elrington, "Life of Usher", p. 287.