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OLIVER CROMWELL—THE MAN, HIS CHARACTER AND BELIEFS

Perhaps none of the great heroes of the faith in England has been called upon to walk before the public eye more than Oliver Cromwell, the foremost Englishman of his day. His beliefs, profession, character and actions have been minutely scrutinized. Yet, on close enquiry, his honesty and integrity shine forth and we conclude that he walked worthy of the high calling of God, wherewith he professed to have been called.

I

He was a man who deeply revered the Scriptures; his speeches and letters reveal an amazingly detailed knowledge and gracious understanding of the Bible. Moreover, he was a firm believer in the doctrines of grace like the majority of his Puritan contemporaries. But above all, he appears to us as one deeply taught by the Holy Spirit both his own sinfulness and unworthiness and the love of God in Christ. On this his convictions were based.

We know little of the circumstances of how he was led into the truth. His own testimony, writing to his cousin at the age of thirty-nine, is:

Blessed be His Name for shining on so dark a heart as mine! You know what my manner of life hath been. Oh, I lived in and loved darkness, and hated light; I was a chief, the chief of sinners. This is true: I hated godliness, yet God had mercy on me.¹

He felt deeply both the majesty and holiness of God and his own unworthiness; he describes himself in comparison with God as “a poor creeping ant”,² “not worthy of the name of a worm”,³ and mourns that his corruptions do not decrease in accordance with the decay of his bodily strength. Yet he rejoiced in the love and mercy of God. His great theme was the Covenant of Grace, “ordered in all things and sure”, in which Christ as the Mediator has obtained every blessing for all His people. How beautifully he writes of this to his son-in-law!

¹ Letter to Mrs. St. John, October 13, 1638.

² Speech on Dissolution of the Second Protectorate Parliament, February 4, 1658.

³ Letter to Mr. Cotton, Pastor of the Church at Boston, New England, October 2, 1651.

God is bound in faithfulness to Christ, and in Him to us: the Covenant is without us; a Transaction between God and Christ We, under all our sins and infirmities, can daily offer a perfect Christ; and thus we have peace and safety, and apprehension of love, from a Father in Covenant.¹

Again and again, when writing to his dearest friends, his heart seems drawn out in love to Christ; he exults in a salvation entirely of grace "wherein Christ undertakes all, and the poor soul nothing".² The shining of God's countenance towards him, he confesses, is "better than life".³ "Oh how good it is to close with Christ betimes; there is nothing else worth the looking after." In the world, there is nothing "to be accounted of"; all is "lighter than vanity".⁴ Like the great apostle, he glories in nothing but Christ and Him crucified.

The sincerity and genuineness of his religion is apparent; he does not speak in the stock phrases of Calvinism, but reveals deep heart-searchings and exercises. He confesses: "I find abundant cause every day to exalt the Lord, and abase flesh".⁵ At the same time, he is deeply concerned about the eternal welfare of his family. He continually tells them of the vanity of the world, and of his own experience of the love of God; he tenderly inquires if they have any spiritual concern; his one wish is that they may seek Christ; he humbly tells how his own "weak prayers" are offered up on their behalf; and his great joy is to hear that the soul of his wife prospers. Moreover, he continually seeks the welfare of all God's people, those "looking for salvation only by faith in the blood of Christ and walking in a profession answerable to that faith". His influence is exerted to seek their protection for they are to him God's own family, however poor or despised.

II

Cromwell's life was a faithful witness to the God of his salvation. At the same time, it is well known that he has been bitterly assailed for occasional shortcomings; these have, however, been grossly exaggerated. Let us therefore consider some of these criticisms which have been made against him. His

¹ To Lord Fleetwood, Lord Deputy of Ireland, June 22, 1655.

² To Lt.-Gen. Fleetwood, 1652.

³ To his wife, April 12, 1651.

⁴ To Sir Thomas Fairfax, March 7, 1647.

⁵ To Col. Robert Hammond, November 25, 1648.

chief weakness, according to his steward, seems to have been a naturally hasty temper, usually kept under subjection by the sanctifying power of God, but at times in evidence to his own regret. The old criticism of Cromwell, as a hypocrite and self-seeker, has no foundation, and even his chief critics have not seriously advanced these points since insight into his character was made possible by the publication of his letters and speeches. The execution of Charles I in 1649, for which he has been attacked and for which he was largely responsible, he felt to be the only solution to the problem. Charles had refused to accept moderate terms, he continually intrigued against Parliament; if exiled, he would stir up an invasion; if imprisoned at home, he would be the rallying point for Royalist rebellion. Cromwell felt that Charles's execution was the only possibility; he told the House of Commons, "since the providence of God hath cast this upon us, I cannot but submit to providence."¹ He had not been antagonistic to the monarchy, and reveals no trace of desire to usurp the King's position himself.

The point on which Cromwell's character has been chiefly assailed is his command, during his Irish Campaign of 1649, that every soldier in the defending garrison at Drogheda should be put to the sword. It must be confessed that this is a blot on his career. We may not exonerate him, but some brief attempt may be made to explain the action. Cromwell himself states that he gave the command "in the heat of action". He was at this time in a bad state of health, the excitement of the past year having told on him. He believed that the men of Drogheda had been responsible for the murder of many Protestants eight years before. These factors explain his state of mind. Moreover, according to the laws of war at the time, an attacking commander was allowed to wipe out a defending garrison which refused to surrender. A right understanding of these points, if not fully exonerating him, does help to lessen the enormity of the action. Cromwell himself honestly believed it was "a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood". He further defended himself as the action "would prevent the effusion of blood for the future".² The most recent history of

¹ Speech to Parliament, 1649; quoted in John Buchan's *Oliver Cromwell*.

² These quotations are from his Letter to William Lenthall, Speaker of Parliament, September 17, 1649.

the seventeenth century¹ makes the interesting point that a "supposedly more humane generation" accepted this defence for the atomic bombs dropped on the Japanese in 1945.

III

God's people are described as "living epistles seen and read of men". How then did this man of action appear to his contemporaries? The most striking thing which all seem to have noticed was the kindliness which he radiated, even though a man of such majestic appearance. Andrew Marvell noted in his eyes "a piercing sweetness", and states that "his tenderness extended unto all".² His steward said of him: "He was naturally compassionate towards objects in distress even to an effeminate measure".³ He gained a reputation during his career (despite Drogheda) as the most merciful of soldiers; his enemy, Hyde, admitted "he was not a man of blood". His tenderness is apparent throughout his letters. What could be more beautiful or touching than his letter to a fellow-officer on the death of his son? Part of it runs:

Sir, God hath taken away your eldest son by a cannon shot. It brake his leg. We were necessitated to have it cut off, whereof he died. Sir, you know my own trials this way; but the Lord supported me with this, That the Lord took him into the happiness we all pant for and live for. There is your precious child full of glory, never to know sin or sorrow any more. He was a gallant young man, exceeding gracious. God give you His comfort.⁴

This tenderness extended to his enemies. For instance, after the battle of Marston Moor, he came across Lady Towneley, widow of a fallen Royalist, seeking her husband's body. Warning her of her danger, he sympathized with her, helped her in her search, and provided her with a trooper to escort her home.⁵

Contemporaries also remarked on his humility. He was the most approachable of men, and would listen to those who spoke of his spiritual or political weaknesses.⁶ He was known to be a man of prayer, and his speeches to Parliament clearly reveal

¹ M. Ashley, *England in the Seventeenth Century* (Pelican Series, 1952).

² Andrew Marvell, *Lines on Cromwell's Death*.

³ John Maidston, quoted by Buchan, *op. cit.*

⁴ Letter to Col. Valentine Walton, July 5, 1644.

⁵ Quoted in Guide to Townley Hall, Burnley.

⁶ See Biographies for interviews with Harrington, Fox, etc.

that his chief desire was that God should be glorified in the nation and His people protected. He was not an ambitious man, but loved to spend his time with his family. His love went out to all God's people, and two of the deepest, most devout and godly of all English divines, Thomas Goodwin and John Owen, highly esteemed him and were counted by him as friends.

IV

His end was peace. Though many rejected him during his life, his God accepted him in death. His was not a presumptuous, self-manufactured contentment. Whilst on his death-bed, several days before the end, he was deeply exercised as he considered his life and all his failings. He was heard several times to groan, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God". But God broke through his doubts and fears four days before the end, showed him the stability of the Covenant, and assured him of his acceptance in Christ. The dying man murmured, "The Lord hath filled me with as much assurance of His pardon and His love as my soul can hold", and, "I am the poorest wretch that lived, but I love God or rather am beloved of God I am more than conqueror through Christ that strengtheneth me". Among his last words were, "God is good, indeed He is."¹

So died one of the greatest Englishmen of all time. Never has England had a man who combined military brilliance and statesmanship with such fine personal qualities. But whilst in the political sphere he may be admired, and as a great soldier respected, he may be loved as a humble, tender-hearted child of God. And this was always his chief desire, to love and be loved by God and God's people. Of him it may truly be said that under most trying circumstances, he fought a good fight, finished his course, and kept the faith; and having laboured, he entered into that rest which remains for the people of God.

Rossendale, Lancs.

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¹ All the quotations in this paragraph appear in Buchan, *op. cit.*