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# THE LIME STREET LECTURES (1730-31) AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

by PETER TOON

OUR readers who have already had a sample of Mr. Toon's specialist studies in English Nonconformity will appreciate this further account of an interesting phase of eighteenth-century Calvinism. Mr. Toon is now Lecturer in Divinity in Edge Hill College of Education, Liverpool.

FROM November 12th, 1730 to April 8th, 1731 a series of weekly lectures were given at the Congregational Meeting House in Lime Street, London. At the request of the congregations who heard them they were published in 1732 in two volumes octavo on 1,136 pages under the title, *A Defense of the Doctrines of Revelation*. They are important to students of the history of Christian doctrine because they reveal how one section of Nonconformity was thinking and presenting the Faith in an age which exalted man as a rational being, and in which rationalism and latitudinarianism had penetrated the understanding of Christian doctrine in all denominations.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this article is briefly to discuss the significance of the Lectures in relation to the theological climate in the early 1730's.

## I. INTRODUCTION

A small group of Nonconformists, mainly Congregationalists, one of whom was William Coward,<sup>2</sup> the philanthropist, began to meet in or about 1729 at the King's Head Tavern near the Royal Exchange to discuss the problems facing orthodox Puritan Calvinists in an age of theological declension. They decided to arrange and finance a course of Lectures to defend the revealed doctrines of Holy Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Also they were responsible for the foundation of the King's Head Society which financed an academy for the training of young men for the Nonconformist ministry.<sup>4</sup>

Nine ministers, seven Congregationalists and two Baptists, were asked to participate and each one was allotted a topic. The minister

<sup>1</sup> Cf. R. N. Stromberg, *Religious Liberalism in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1954).

<sup>2</sup> For details of his life and philanthropy see the *Dict. Nat. Biog.*

<sup>3</sup> Coward also instituted a course of lectures at Little St. Helens in 1726 and at Bury Street, St. Mary Axe, in 1733.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. H. McLachlan, *English Education under Test Acts* (Manchester, 1931), pp. 117ff. and 236ff. Also J. W. Ashley Smith, *The Birth of Modern Education* (London, 1955), pp. 192ff. The minutes of the King's Head Society from 1737 are in manuscript in New College Library, London. A microfilm of them may be borrowed from Dr. Williams's Library.

of the congregation that used the Lime Street Meeting House, Robert Bragge,<sup>5</sup> gave the introductory lecture from Isaiah 59: 19 and also defined the doctrine of justification. Abraham Taylor,<sup>6</sup> who became the tutor of the Academy kept by the King's Head Society, lectured on the insufficiency of natural religion, on the need for a practical Christianity, and on the contention that the doctrines of free grace do not produce licentiousness. John Sladen,<sup>7</sup> minister in Back Street, Horsleydown, dealt with the subject of particular election, whilst Peter Goodwin<sup>8</sup> of Aldermanbury Postern in the city of London spoke about original sin. The doctrine of particular redemption was considered by John Hurrion,<sup>9</sup> minister at Hare Court, also in the city. Thomas Bradbury,<sup>10</sup> minister at New Court, Carey Street, Westminster, expounded the Reformed doctrine of the Sufferings of Christ. The Baptist minister at Goodman's Fields, Samuel Wilson,<sup>11</sup> dealt with the subject of irresistible grace in conversion; Thomas Hall,<sup>12</sup> minister at Moorfields, expounded the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints, and John Gill,<sup>13</sup> Baptist minister at Goat Street, Southwark, explained the orthodox view of the resurrection of the dead.

## II. THE SIGNIFICANCE

The Lime Street Lectures give rise to five general considerations.

(a) *A study of the lectures reveals firstly what the orthodox Calvinists believed were the major evils of the day.* In their preface the lecturers stated that "error never raged with greater violence than . . . in our unhappy times." Opening the course of lectures, Robert Bragge gave a list of five evils which were, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "coming in like a flood". First, there was atheism. "I am credibly inform'd", wrote Bragge, "that there are several clubs (of free thinkers) in this great city".<sup>14</sup> Secondly, there was Deism "introduced by a set of men, who, taking no notice of the damage done by sin, assert the sufficiency of natural religion".<sup>15</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Cf. W. Wilson, *The History and Antiquities of Dissenting Churches . . . in London, Westminster and Southwark*, 4 vols. (London, 1808-1814), Vol. I, pp. 241-249.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 212; Vol. II, p. 530.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, pp. 265-268.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 545.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III, pp. 288-296.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III, pp. 450-452, 505-535.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 144, 212, 460.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 174, 212; III, p. 538.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, pp. 213-225.

<sup>14</sup> *Defense of the Doctrines of Revelation* (1732), Vol. I, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 31.

Abraham Taylor had the following to say about the Deists:

Our modern Deists are shy of saying, in their publick writings, that the Christian religion is forgery, and the founder of it an imposter; but they choose to magnify the perfection of reason, and to set up what they call natural religion, as a complete body of doctrine.<sup>16</sup>

Thirdly, there were errors concerning the doctrines of the Gospel "from that of the Arian to that of the Galatians".<sup>17</sup> In the 1720's and 1730's the most popular general scheme of salvation was a version of that which had been produced by Arminius.<sup>18</sup> Thus many divines both in the Church of England and in Nonconformity were Arminians<sup>19</sup> and of these not a few held the doctrine of the Trinity which had been popularized by Samuel Clarke, the Anglican theologian, and which definitely made the Son subordinate to the Father.<sup>20</sup> Others were Arians in a full sense (i.e. held the view of Arius), while some Socinians even denied that Christ was a divine being at all. Fourthly, there were the profaners.<sup>21</sup> The Sabbath was not kept by the general public, and it was common to hear jests made about public worship, private and family prayer, the Scriptures, and the Christian ministry. Finally, there was immorality and libertinism.<sup>22</sup> A few people taught that there was no difference between moral good and moral evil and behaved accordingly whilst others plainly abused the grace of God, becoming antinomians.

(b) *A study of the lectures reveals that the orthodox Calvinists held that the doctrines of the Christian Faith, though not anti-rational, were supra-rational, and had been revealed by God. The lecturers held the view that the doctrines of Christianity could be defended by rational and logical demonstration even though they could not be discovered independently by the best of human minds. In the preface they wrote:*

When doctrines of pure revelation are opposed, it is the duty of all who believe them, to appear in their defense; and this is really

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> One of the men who had popularized this Arminianism was Philip à Limborch, professor of theology at the University of Amsterdam from 1682 to 1712; his book *Theologia Christiana* (1700) was much read in England. By 1740, "Arminianism" was a *Schlagwort*, rather like "communism" in common usage in the U.S.A. It covered Socinians, Wesleyans, High Churchmen, etc.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Stromberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 110ff. The person whose writings on this subject the Lime Street lecturers seem to have feared the most was Daniel Whitby (1638-1726), the Arminian divine of the Church of England.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. Hay Colligan, *The Arian Movement in England* (Manchester, 1913).

<sup>21</sup> *Defense . . .*, Vol. I, pp. 32-33.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 33-34. Many people appealed to Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714), in justification of their licentious conduct.

engaging in a noble cause: It is standing up for the honour of the great God, against those who set their imperfect reason and proud conceits, above infinite wisdom: To strive for the faith once deliver'd to the saints, is most necessary when it meets with the contradiction of sinners.

By careful reasoning they sought to show that the doctrines produced by human reason (i.e. all the tenets of Deism, Arianism, Socinianism and Arminianism) were in fact inconsistent, illogical and irrational. Furthermore, they did their best to prove that the doctrines of orthodox Calvinism (particular election, limited atonement, etc.) were in fact the very doctrines taught by Jesus and His apostles and written down in Scripture.<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that they actually made use of apologetics and did not think that this was incompatible with the holding of a high view of the literal inspiration of the Bible.

Yet some of the lecturers were inconsistent. John Sladen, Peter Goodwin, Thomas Hall and Abraham Taylor referred, with approval, to the *Body of Divinity* (1731) by Thomas Ridgley, a theological tutor employed by the Congregational Fund Board. Though he was very orthodox on most points of Reformed teaching, Ridgley did not believe the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son to be either a reasonable or a Scriptural doctrine. John Gill, the Baptist lecturer, opposed this and wrote later:

It is a disgrace to that body of men of whose denomination the Doctor was, that none of his brethren attempted to refute him, though they in general disliked his opinion and dissented from him.<sup>24</sup>

This mention of theological differences introduces a third consideration.

(c) *A study of the lectures and of various tracts produced in the 1730's reveals that there were some important and basic theological differences amongst those who claimed to be orthodox Calvinists.* In discussing the time of the unregenerate sinner's justification before God, the Holy Judge, Robert Bragge, following the lead of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, denied the doctrine that a sinner is justified by God in eternity.

Though God actually purposed, and that from everlasting, to justify the whole election of his grace, yet they are not actually justified, but in time. Christ's righteousness was both designed and wrought out for us, whilst lying in the womb of God's decrees, but is not upon us until we believe.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> All the lecturers insisted that their teaching was simply that of the Bible. E.g. Thomas Bradbury spoke of the Reformed doctrine of Christ's satisfaction to divine justice as a doctrine which was "all Revelation from first to last" (Vol. II, p. 62).

<sup>24</sup> Gill, *Sermons and Tracts* (London, 1773), Vol. II, p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> *Defense . . .*, Vol. II, p. 164.

John Gill disagreed with this and, following in the footsteps of such divines as the English Puritan, William Twisse, and Johannes Maccovius (1588-1644), a professor at Franeker University, taught and defended the doctrine of eternal justification as an immanent act of God.<sup>26</sup> His friend, John Brine, Baptist minister at Curriers' Hall, Cripplegate, took immediate exception to Bragge's denial of eternal justification and published *A Defense of the Doctrine of Eternal Justification* (1732).

Again, in the first of his sermons, Abraham Taylor referred to certain "ignorant enthusiastick preachers"<sup>27</sup> of the seventeenth century who taught the doctrine of the eternal union of the elect to Christ as an immanent act of God. He had in mind the preaching and writings of the doctrinal antinomians, one of whom was Tobias Crisp.<sup>28</sup> Before the lectures were published, John Gill asked Abraham Taylor to remove this reference but the latter refused. When it actually appeared in print, Gill quickly retaliated with *The Doctrines of God's Everlasting Love to His Elect; and their Eternal Union with Christ together with some other truths in a Letter to Dr. Abraham Taylor* (1732). Also in 1755 he edited a volume of the sermons of Tobias Crisp.

A third, and most serious, divergence of opinion was also manifest. Several of the lecturers faced and accepted the fact that Scripture seems to teach both the doctrine of eternal election and that all men—elect and reprobate—have a duty to repent of sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ when they hear the Gospel. They realized that these two doctrines must be held "in tension" by a true theologian. John Sladen wrote:

God's commands do not tell us what God will do for us, but they inform us what we ought to do for him. As they are not the measure of our power so neither are they the rule of God's decrees; for if so, God's commands would not be directory to us, to show us what we ought to do; but they would rather be a law to God himself, telling him what he must do.<sup>29</sup>

Thus the orthodox Calvinist view was that all who hear the gospel have a duty to accept it even though the faith by which they must believe is a gift of God. John Gill did not believe this since to him it seemed illogical. He held that the unregenerate sinner only has

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Gill, *The Doctrine of Justification by the Righteousness of Christ, stated and vindicated* (London, 1730).

<sup>27</sup> *Defense . . .*, Vol. I, p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. P. Toon, "Tobias Crisp, 1600-1643", *Free Grace Record* (Strict and Particular Baptist Trust Corporation), Vol. IV, No. 3, Summer 1966, pp. 122ff.; and G. Huehns, *Antinomianism in English History* (London, 1951).

<sup>29</sup> *Defense . . .*, Vol. I, p. 216.

a duty to believe the gospel in a general way and to be sorry for the sins he has committed. He distinguished between "common faith" and "saving faith" and between "legal repentance" and "evangelical repentance" and asserted the duty of an unregenerate sinner was only to have common faith whilst the duty of a regenerate, elect sinner was to have through the help of the Holy Spirit, saving faith.<sup>30</sup> This denial of the duty of all hearers of the gospel to accept salvation was a logical development of the premise first asserted by Joseph Hussey that the grace of Christ is not to be offered to all men but only to the elect and the regenerate.<sup>31</sup>

It is because men like John Gill taught the doctrines of eternal union and justification as immanent acts of God, and denied that sinners have a duty to believe the gospel unto salvation, that they have earned for themselves the title of "hyper-Calvinists". These emphases are not to be found in any book written by Calvin or in any Reformed Confession of Faith. As they knew Gill's views on these matters it is quite possible that the sponsors of the Lectures deliberately gave him the topic of the resurrection of the dead on which he could hardly be expected to introduce the doctrines of hyper-Calvinism.

(d) *A study of the lectures shows that the orthodox Calvinists placed great emphasis on the importance of practical religion and reveals to what cause they traced its decay.* They felt that practical godliness (i.e. conformity to the requirements of the moral law, regular public and private prayer) at which the Puritans had aimed was spurned and disregarded by many of the Nonconformists in the eighteenth century. Abraham Taylor believed that this was due to several causes—the general contempt of the orthodox Reformed doctrines of salvation, the lack of true preaching of the Person and Work of Christ, the ascribing of too much power and glory to man in his salvation, the neglect of catechizing, and the general contempt cast upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life.<sup>32</sup> Yet he traced the origin of the decay to the years immediately after the passing of the Toleration Act of 1689, to that first abuse of freedom which was:

<sup>30</sup> For a description of the historical background surrounding the debate as to whether or not an unregenerate sinner has a duty to believe the gospel with his whole heart, see G. F. Nuttall, "Northamptonshire and 'The Modern Question': A Turning-Point in Eighteenth-Century Dissent", *Journ. Theol. Stud.*, Vol. XVI, Part 1, 1965.

<sup>31</sup> See Hussey, *God's Operations of Grace But No Offers of His Grace* (London, 1707). For a study of Hussey's theology see P. Toon, "Joseph Hussey", *Free Grace Record*, Vol. IV, No. 5, Winter 1967, pp. 221ff.

<sup>32</sup> *Defense . . .*, Vol. II, pp. 569ff.

to relinquish the ancient, as well as genuine Christian doctrine of justification by the righteousness of Christ, to deny the perfection of the moral law, and to substitute a pretended law of grace, which required sincere obedience, instead of a perfect righteousness.<sup>33</sup>

He referred to the moderate form of Calvinism which was taught by Richard Baxter in the seventeenth century and by many Presbyterian and Congregational divines in the eighteenth century.<sup>34</sup> Orthodox Calvinists did not like this moderate Calvinism since it seemed to them to be virtually the same as Arminianism.

(e) *A study of the lectures reveals that the orthodox Calvinists shared the tendency of many Christians in their day to be more concerned with the explication of doctrine than the evangelization of the world.* The intellectual and moral pressures of the early eighteenth century made many ministers of religion neglect the command of Christ to preach the gospel to every creature. They were too busy finding out what they themselves believed and then defending it against other forms of belief. A general desire by Non-conformists to evangelize only appeared in the latter part of the century, forty years after the beginning of the itinerant preaching of George Whitefield and John Wesley. The thought that the best way to defend orthodox Calvinism was to engage in a sustained and wide-reaching evangelism, does not seem to have arisen as a possible alternative to the holding of a series of lectures and the printing of books on similar topics. Thus we are not surprised to learn that the members of the King's Head Society decided on December 18, 1739, to demand that Joseph Humphries, a student at the Academy, stop the religious meeting which he had started after hearing the preaching of Whitefield, or leave the Academy.

The publication of the lectures seems to have served a definite need in the eighteenth century since a second edition was published at Glasgow in 1773 and portions of the whole were reprinted both in England and in America. Today such works are viewed as interesting memorials of the past by the majority of Christian ministers and laymen. Only a minority, who still believe that the revealed doctrines of Scripture are alone worth believing and that these are indeed the doctrine of orthodox Calvinism, see in the lectures a useful source of spiritual food and illumination.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 579.

<sup>34</sup> Moderate Calvinism was called "Neonomianism" by orthodox Calvinists since it spoke of the gospel as a "new law of grace". In the London Antinomian Controversy (1690-1700), Daniel Williams defended this moderate Calvinism against the attacks of the orthodox Calvinist, Isaac Chauncy.