THE MINISTRY OF ROBERT LEIGHTON, AN APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN UNITY

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Robert Leighton was a minister in the Scottish church who began his ministry as a Covenanter and ended it as the Archbishop of Glasgow in the Episcopal Church of the Restoration. His character and worth have been assessed from very different points of view. Butler cites Professor Flint who wrote of Leighton, 'A purer, humbler, holier spirit never tabernacled in Scottish clay.'[1] Hewison described him as, 'a miserable invertebrate, whom ill health, largely due to his habits, kept shivering on the boundary line between what he styled as "this weary, weary, wretched life" and death, a mere reed piping with every wind over the bog he could not purify'.[2] Cowan, in more moderate terms, speaks of his capacity for survival and self advancement and concludes, 'Whether his lack of worldliness to which many contemporaries attest can be deemed a sufficient excuse for his apparent lack of principle, must remain doubtful.'[3]

It is more than probable that Leighton was in fact a sincere minister of the gospel with a great burden for the healing of a torn and divided church in seventeenth-century Scotland. He was compelled, however, to exercise his ministry under enormous political pressure, and to function in any sense at all as a spiritual leader he had to try to walk a very fine line, not always successfully, between flexibility and submission. He had to respond to the claims of the gospel but he had to work out that response within limits set by his political masters. He tried and failed in his attempt to unite the church and so the value of his ministry lies more in his motivation and his vision than his achievements.

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1 D. Butler, *The Life and Letters of Robert Leighton* (London, 1903), Introduction.

2 J. Hewison, *The Covenanters, a History of Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution,* 2 (Glasgow, 1908), p. 139.

3 I. Cowan, *The Scottish Covenanters, 1660-1688* (London 1976), p. 74.

PARISH MINISTER AND UNIVERSITY PRINCIPAL

Robert Leighton was born in 1611 and spent his first sixteen years in London where the dominating influence in his life was that of his father, Alexander Leighton. Alexander was a Puritan minister who seemed to be incapable of expressing himself except in the most extreme terms. He outraged Archbishop Laud by the language he used to describe the reintroduction of episcopacy to the church. For Alexander Leighton, it was not simply an inappropriate form of church government. It was the judgement of an angry God permitting 'the stinking carkasse of the interred whore to be raked out of the grave, and the frogs of Aegipt to swarm in Goshen'.[4] His comments on the marriage of the future Charles I to a Roman Catholic princess amounted to a public and personal attack on the heir to the throne. At the age of 16 his son Robert left home to be educated at Edinburgh but by the time he had graduated in 1631 he had seen his father exiled more than once. Alexander had been arrested. He escaped and was re-arrested. He was tortured, branded, mutilated and imprisoned until he was released by the Long Parliament in 1641 as a sick old man.

Robert Leighton spent the period of his father's imprisonment studying and travelling on the Continent, but in the year of his father's release he returned to Scotland to be ordained as minister of the parish of Newbattle. He found the Scottish Covenanters divided into moderates and extremists. The moderates hoped an agreement with Charles I to recognise the Covenant might unite the Scottish Church and nation; but when the civil war in England took place and the king became the prisoner of the English parliamentarians, a Scots army which marched into England to rescue him was defeated by Cromwell and the execution of Charles left Scotland in the control of the more extreme Covenanters. The treatment of the moderates at the hands of the extremists in power led to further division, and the crowning of Charles II at Scone in 1651 amounted to a declaration of war against England. Cromwell's forces were victorious in that conflict and Scotland became a subject nation. There is no doubt that Cromwell's administration genuinely would have approved of a Scottish Church united in service to the Christian gospel but what he found was a spiritual body weakened by self-inflicted wounds. Attempts to find some way of compromise between the moderate Resolutioners and the extreme Protesters at the General Assembly of 1653 were unsuccessful and so that body was forcibly dissolved until further notice.

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[4] S. Foster, *Notes from the Caroline Underground* (Hamden, 1978), p. 25, citing A. Leighton, *Speculum Belli Sacri.*

All through this period, while Leighton was at Newbattle he tried to keep out of political controversy as much as possible, although there can be little doubt where his sympathies lay. He wanted to live at peace with all men and he could never be comfortable with quarrels in the church and revolution in the state. He preached and taught the Word of God faithfully. He wrote biblical commentaries. He exercised pastoral care over the flock. This, however, was not the common perception of a good Covenanter. He was publicly rebuked at Synod because his sermons were not political enough. When he was urged to spend more energy in preaching up the Covenant he replied that since everybody else seemed to be doing that, could he not be allowed to preach up Christ?[5] The historian Burnet said, 'He soon came to see into the follies of the presbyterians and to hate their covenant.'[6] However, this seems to be the prejudiced view of hindsight because Leighton administered the covenant to every new communicant and he emphasised covenant obligations especially at the celebration of the sacrament. There is no reason to suppose that he signed and swore the covenant insincerely.

What troubled him most was that it was forced on a number of people, many of whom, he was convinced, had very little understanding of it. It seems most likely that Leighton could live quite comfortably with The National Covenant as a statement of faith and order, but that what he objected to was what he called 'the illegal and violent ways of pressing and prosecuting it'[7] as a mark of political orthodoxy. His unease was expressed in a fairly lengthy speech made to the Presbytery of Dalkeith in which he sought to be excused from being a member of Commissions or General Assemblies. After the speech one of the older men present, whose deafness prevented him from following Leighton's words, asked the Moderator to repeat what Leighton had said. The Moderator replied that Leighton sought to be eased of his charge. 'Ease him! Ease him since he desires it,' said the old presbyter, 'for I am perswaded he will leave us and prove very troublesome to this poor church.'[8]

In 1653 Leighton's problems as a parish minister came to an end. It was part of Cromwell's policy to control the universities. Oxford and Cambridge had already been purged of men who were politically unsuitable and in 1652 four assessors arrived in Scotland to form a judgement about the Scottish scene. Cromwell was wise enough to avoid any harsh

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5 Butler, *Life and letters*, p. 147.

6 G. Burnet, *History of His Own Time*, 1 (London, 1724), p. 241.

7 J. Aikman, *Works of Archbishop Leighton* (London, 1868), p. 637.

8 R. Wodrow, *Analecta*, 3 (Edinburgh, 1842), p. 297.

measures, but when Edinburgh University was seeking a new principal the appointment required his approval. Leighton was chosen because of his moderate and tolerant approach to the controversial issues of the day. If he was a Covenanter, he was less of one than most of his colleagues, many of whom, in fact, disapproved of his appointment. As Principal of Edinburgh University, he found a liberty in dealing with students that he had not enjoyed as a parish minister. He was free to conduct worship daily and preach every Sabbath. He remained a presbyterian and he administered the covenant to his students but the emphasis of his lectures was on Christian character. He believed that ministers in training were being taught to dispute rather than to feed the flock of God. Henderson comments, 'Robert Leighton at Edinburgh University avoided the "dictats" and gave eloquent lectures of his own, calculated to stimulate thought and piety. He blamed the "disputations" for the sects and factions in the church.'[9] Leighton urged his students, 'Fly, if you have any regard to my advice, fly from that controversial contentious school divinity which in fact consists in fruitless disputes about words.'[10] It is possible that Leighton was more at ease as Principal of Edinburgh University than he was at any other time in his ministry. However, in 1660 the exiled Charles II returned to the throne. 1661 brought the undermining of a presbyterian church and 1662 the establishment in law of a church governed by crown-appointed bishops.

BISHOP OF DUNBLANE

Leighton had already been to the Court of Charles II as the agent of his friend the Earl of Lothian. He was marked as a moderate who had taken no part in the quarrel between the Resolutioners and Protesters. He also had a brother at court called Elisha who was a convert to Roman Catholicism, and for that reason, according to the historian Burnet, 'no man had more credit with the King'.[11] It was Elisha who introduced Robert Leighton to Charles II, at whose command a reluctant Leighton became the Bishop of Dunblane.

Many colleagues saw his acceptance of the bishop's office as being motivated by personal ambition and even some of his closest friends felt he had surrendered something important. He defended himself in a letter to the Earl of Lothian by saying he hoped 'to turn the zeal of men from all the

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[9] G. Henderson, *Religious Life in Seventeenth Century Scotland* (Cambridge, 1937), p. 122.

[10] Aikman, *Works*, p. 622.

[11] Burnet, *History of his Own Time*, 1, p. 242.

little questions about rites and disciplines to the great things of religion'.[12] He wrote to a disappointed friend that his intention was to 'reconcile the devout on different sides and enlarge those good souls from their little fetters'.[13]

The sincerity of his motives need not be questioned. Like the 'Aberdeen Doctors' he accepted that episcopacy and presbytery were both valid. He did not see either as being the only divinely ordained form of church government.[14] From the Reformation until Leighton's time there remained in Scotland a considerable number of ministers that would have conformed either to presbytery or to episcopacy. He accepted that there were times when one form might be more suitable for the church than the other, provided it was subject to the authority of God's word. However it is possible that what Leighton did not realise were the implications of being a servant of the crown as well as a servant of the church, nor did he appreciate how much his ministry would be shaped by politicians.

Leighton and three others were compelled to be reordained in Westminster Abbey. They were ordained as deacons, then as priests, then as bishops. To his credit James Sharp, who was one of the four and who became Archbishop of St Andrews, showed greater resistance than the others to reordination because the question of the validity of presbyterian orders had been settled in 1610 when James VI had restored episcopacy to the Scottish Church. At that time the question of reordination for new Scottish bishops had been raised, but the English bishops accepted their presbyterian ordination as valid. This was the precedent on which James Sharp based his objection to his own reordination in 1661. Leighton, on the other hand, said it was merely ordination to a different church, and that he would be willing to be ordained every year if necessary. This statement must seem to be, at best, naïve when the political significance of the event is considered. The service was conducted by the Bishop of London, rather than the Archbishop of Canterbury, to avoid the implication that the church in Scotland was subject to that in England, but the form of ordination could hardly have been more distant from the day in Newbattle when Leighton was first ordained as a minister of the Word of God. At Westminster, readings were from the Book of Common Prayer. The Oath

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[12] 'Letter to Lord Lothian, Dec. 23, 1661', cited in Butler's *Life and Letters*, p. 337.

[13] 'Letter to James Aird', cited in A. Knox, *Robert Leighton, Archbishop of Glasgow* (London, 1930), p. 178.

[14] D. Stewart, The Aberdeen Doctors and the Covenanters, RSCHS 22, p. 44.

of Supremacy acknowledging the royal authority was tendered to the Scots on their knees before the altar. Having kissed the Prayer Book they continued to kneel as the English bishops laid hands on their heads, one by one. After receiving communion the new Scots bishops went towards the altar, bowing as they went, and kneeling down, laid the offering upon it.[15]

It was April 1662, when the party returned to Scotland. Sharp intended their arrival to be an occasion of great ceremony and celebration and provided a new coach for this purpose, but Leighton had no appetite for it. He left the official party at Morpeth and travelled alone to Edinburgh, arriving quietly before the others. Shortly after his return he dined with Sir James Stewart who greeted him with the words, 'Welcome Robin! You have loved gauding about too much; you have the fate of Dinah, Jacob's daughter for now I may say the Schekamites have catched and defloured you.'[16] Coltness was less jocular about the matter. He noted, 'there is a wo pronounced against him by whom offences come and Mr Leighton could not but be aware that his taking priest's and deakon's orders at London as if he had none formerly, was a villifying his former ordination... all that was done had a tincture of perjury'.[17]

The first major problem to meet the new Scots bishops was a shortage of parish ministers mainly in the south-west of Scotland. By the new regulations, ministers were now required to have presentation from the patron of the charge and collation from the bishop. Many of them simply ignored this and by an Act of the Privy Council in Glasgow in October 1662 they were ejected from their churches. Leighton saw the ejection of these men as one of the main reasons for the failure of the Scottish Restoration Church. He said, 'Our desperate fall... that I fear we shall never recover was the fatal Act of Glasgow, laying so great a tract waste to make it quiet and stocking again that desert with a great many owls and Satyrs.'[18] He agreed with the general opinion that the men brought in to fill the vacancies were far from suitable as ministers of the gospel. His own diocese of Dunblane was not affected as badly as the area further southwest, but he did have to fill some of the charges made vacant by the Glasgow Act. We find him giving pretty stern warnings at Synod against

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[15] 'Excerpta ex adversaries Reverendi Jacobi Bruni', published in *Analecta* by R. Wodrow and cited in Knox, *Robert Leighton*, p. 176.

[16] J. Dennistoun (ed.), *The Coltness Collection, 1608-184* (Edinburgh, 1841), p. 22.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

[18] 'Historical MSS Commission, 11th Report, Appendix to Part VI', in Knox, *Archbishop Leighton*, p. 208.

men who enter the ministry because 'They are insufficient for all other employments', and who are less industrious for God than the agents of the Prince of Darkness are for their master.[19]

Leighton was Bishop of Dunblane for nine years, and it was a comparatively quiet and fruitful ministry. The prevailing form of worship was very similar to that of the pre-restoration church and the relative freedom from disputes about form and ritual allowed him to give greater attention to the training of ministers to be pastors to the flock. His concept of the Christian ministry was rooted in the convictions he had formed in his own earlier years. At Newbattle he had written,

> The calling of prophets and apostles and evangelists, and the ordinary ministry of the gospel by pastors and teachers, tend to that great design which God hath in building his Church, in making up that great assembly of all the elect, to enjoy and praise him for all eternity, Eph. iv. 11. For this end he sent his Son out of his bosom, and for this end he sends forth his messengers to divulge that salvation which his Son hath wrought, and sends down his Spirit upon them that they may be fitted for so high a service.[20]

There was an emphasis on personal holiness and prayer. Preaching had to be shaped to the 'enforming of the people's myndes'. Sermons had to be 'for the plaine and practical explacacion of the great principles of religion'.[21] Teaching of the Word of God on Sabbath days was reinforced by regular catechetical instruction at home. When it came to the supervision of the congregations, Leighton went out of his way to recognise the authority of Presbytery. He did not act as moderator. Ministers were elected to that office for a period of six months. At an ordination, candidates were ordained by the hands of bishop and presbytery together, and in at least one case of discipline Leighton insisted that an offending minister be dealt with by presbytery in his absence, and their decision in the matter was final.[22]

Leighton's attitude of moderation and respect for presbytery fitted in well with government policy of the time. Lauderdale, the Scottish

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[19] Butler, *Life and Letters*, p. 395.

[20] R. Leighton, *A Practical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Peter* (New York, 1995), p. 245.

[21] Butler, *Life and Letters*, p. 382.

[22] 'Minutes of Presbytery Meeting at Blackford', cited in Butler, *Life and Letters*, p. 391.

Secretary of State, tried to avoid repressive measures in dealing with the dissidents in an attempt to unite moderate presbyterians with the royalists and to marginalize the extremists in the south west. There was a series of indulgencies which were not without effect. There were over 900 parishes in Scotland and 274 of these had been made vacant by the Glasgow Act. However, the first two Acts of Indulgence brought 120 dissidents back into the fold, so the great majority of Scottish ministers before the Restoration continued in their ministry, and those ministers who were wooed back into their parishes by the Acts of Indulgence were allowed to function as presbyterians, as long as they kept the peace. They continued to refuse collation from a bishop and did not attend synods or presbyteries where the bishop was moderator but they were allowed to exercise their ministry. A number of restrictions had to be accepted by the restored men but it was nevertheless a real and substantial step towards the unification of the church. Understandably the tolerance of what was virtually a church outside of episcopal authority brought protests from the bishops. Sharp, the Archbishop of St Andrews, objected to the latest indulgence on the grounds that the 1662 Act required the king and the bishops to act jointly in matters of church government and this had not been done. Burnet, the Archbishop of Glasgow had been unsympathetic towards Lauderdale for some time and permitted a Remonstrance to be issued by the Glasgow Synod in September, 1669, which not only opposed the indulgence but also criticized the lack of progress towards church unity that had been achieved by Lauderdale. For Charles and Lauderdale, such criticism was not to be tolerated. Opposition to government policy, whether from presbyterian ministers or bishops, was equally unacceptable. Burnet narrowly escaped being accused of sedition, and his resignation was forced through in December. Lauderdale wanted to be sure that Burnet's successor would be a man who could help him control and unite the church and Leighton was the obvious choice, although the appointment has been described as that of an unwilling agent in a system of terrorism.[23]

ARCHBISHOP OF GLASGOW

For years the Bishop of Dunblane had been identified as someone who could be relied upon to follow government policy. He had appeared twice before at Court to plead for moderation and conciliation in solving the problem of the divided Church, so in 1670 Leighton became the new

[23] This is discussed by W. C. Mackenzie in *The Life and Times of John Maitland, Duke of Lauderdale* (London, 1923).

Archbishop of Glasgow. His primary task was to heal the wounds in the Scottish Church. Leighton had already been talking about retirement before he left Dunblane and how the burden of responsibility was crushing him, but he cannot be accused of not trying hard enough to succeed in his new role.

He became Archbishop of Glasgow with the firm promise that a scheme for unity on which he had been working for some time would become official government policy. His scheme, which came to be known as 'The Accommodation', built on the foundation of men like Richard Baxter and Archbishop Usher before him. There were two objectives. Leighton hoped to modify the office and function of a bishop to make it compatible with presbyterianism, and he further hoped to convince moderate presbyterians that his scheme was not inconsistent with loyalty to The National Covenant. As he saw it, three of the main problems which divided the presbyterians from the episcopalians were dealt with by his proposals. Firstly, ministers would be tested by presbytery and ordained jointly by presbytery and bishop. Secondly, decisions at church courts would be by majority vote, and the bishop would have no veto. And thirdly, no minister would be obliged, under law, to recognise bishops.

Even in 1661, at the feast to celebrate their consecration, Leighton had tried to discuss with Sharp the scheme for unity between presbyterians and episcopalians which Usher had formulated. Sharp however had nothing to say in its favour. Leighton was building his hopes on a return to the Pauline concept of a community of elders responsible for doctrine, sacrament and discipline in the church. The articles of The Accommodation are noticeably brief and were presented to a small group of five moderate presbyterian ministers at Holyrood House on 9 August 1670. The practical outcome would be that the dissenters could attend presbyteries and synods without denying their own convictions. While ministers entering a new charge would still be presented by the patron, they would be tried by presbytery and ordained jointly by presbytery and bishop. They would be established by law and free from prosecution. What Leighton proposed was virtually the pattern he had established at Dunblane, and Lauderdale's acceptance of it represented a fairly substantial concession on the part of the government. The Secretary of State hoped that it might succeed in uniting the church and remove his greatest political headache by silencing his critics.

The meeting at Holyrood House was only the opening gambit. There was a further conference in Paisley with a greater number of ministers, and a third in Edinburgh in January 1671. As the details of the scheme began to circulate, Leighton published separate pamphlets dealing with the nature

of a bishop's office and loyalty to the National Covenant. He argued that his proposals were acceptable both to Scripture and the primitive church. He appealed to tradition and argued that his bishops were no higher than the "Visitors" of the Reformation period. The scheme would command the largest support of Scottish Christians and involve no change in doctrine or worship. It was acceptable to their fellow-presbyterians in England, and made possible a harmony between Christian holiness and Christian discipline in the church. He took two further steps to gain the co-operation of the dissidents. He began to purge from his diocese those ministers who had some kind of moral or spiritual scandal attached to them, and he sent six preachers known as 'Leighton's Evangelists' round the parishes of the south-west to plead the cause of unity.

In spite of all the energy he put into the project, Leighton's scheme failed. Part of the reason for this was because he was battling against a resistance created by the severe measures urged by Sharp and Burnet against the dissidents. However, by far the greatest barrier to the scheme was the fact that the episcopal church was by this time hopelessly linked to the issue of Royal Supremacy, and this was a matter about which neither king nor government would compromise. Leighton's scheme simply ignored the subject. He could not justify it theologically and he could not oppose it legally, so he ignored it. Indeed Leighton seemed for some years to misunderstand it. His earlier public utterances on the matter are either the result of amazing naivety or a decision deliberately to misunderstand it in order to gain an objective. In May, 1662, Leighton had become, like the other bishops, one of the Lords of the Articles. However, he only attended Parliament to deal with ecclesiastical business, and in fact his first appearance was to defend nine ministers charged with preaching against episcopacy and thereby royal authority. They were required to take the Oath of Allegiance and Supremacy. This they agreed to do, but also demanded to be allowed to give their interpretation of the term 'supremacy'. In their defence, Leighton argued that they had acknowledged the king's lawful supremacy as civil governor, 'and in this sense, the king himself acknowledges the oath, for he must either be supreme civil or ecclesiastic governor, but this last he is not: ergo, only civil he must be'.[24] However, by the time Leighton was trying to persuade presbyterians to accept The Accommodation, Charles and Lauderdale had made it plain beyond doubt that the royal authority was not to be limited to civil rule.

[24] W. Row, *Autobiography and Life of Robert Blair* (Edinburgh, 1848), p. 409.

Lauderdale boasted to the King about how he had forced through the Act of Supremacy in 1669, and had frightened the opposition into surrender. He wrote to Charles, 'This Church can never trouble you more... unless you please. Never was King so absolute as you are in poor old Scotland.'[25] Lauderdale also provided for an army of 20,000 infantry and 2000 cavalry to reinforce the royal authority. The political aim was the union of Scotland and England, and for that to succeed the king had to be above both parliament and church.

It was this above all that the presbyterians could not accept, and so the scheme failed. The bishops disliked it because it undermined their authority. The presbyterians rejected it because they saw it as a trick to bring them under episcopal rule. From this point onwards Leighton had little more to offer. His letters show a willingness to accept that those who would not be persuaded would have to be punished. He began to look for a way out. He succeeded in retiring in 1674, but shortly before he did so produced a report which acknowledged his personal failure and the failure of the Restoration Church to achieve unity. He summarized the Acts of Parliament which had discharged Kirk Sessions, restored bishops, outlawed the covenants and ejected the dissidents, as unhappy mistakes. He even suggested to the king that episcopacy be abandoned altogether.[26]

CONCLUSION

It is possible that the failure of Leighton was not one of integrity but of judgement. He once told the clergy of Dunblane that in the ministry they had to become practised in the use of 'holy guile' and that their hearts had to be the dwelling place of both the dove and the serpent.[27] What he seems to have forgotten is that this council was given to martyrs, not to ministers trying to work inside a flawed system. One historian summed up his life in the following words, 'He made himself unpopular with his fellow bishops and with their presbyterian adversaries and this unpopularity is the best tribute that could be paid to the scrupulous fairness with which he endeavoured to deal justly with both sides.'[28] In part at least, his failure was in fact a victory of Christian character over the temptation to succeed at any cost.

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[25] O. Airy (ed.), *Lauderdale Papers*, 2 (London, 1884), p. 163.

[26] Butler, *Life and Letters*, p. 474.

[27] Aikman, *Works of Archbishop Leighton*, p. 678.

[28] Mackenzie, *Life and Times of John Maitland*, p. 372.

In November 1669, Leighton preached before the Scottish parliament, and conscious of the turmoil to be caused by the Act of Supremacy, he chose as his text the Gospel of John, chapter 21, verse 22: 'what is that to thee? Follow thou me!' He warned those politicians of the folly in allowing their zeal to 'run out from the excellent things in religion to the matters which have little or no connection with them'. He urged that it was more godly to be calmly and meekly wrong than to be 'stormy and furiously orthodox'. He pointed them towards heaven and threatened them with hell. He declared that if he had a voice like a trumpet, 'I would sound a retreat from our unnatural contentions and irreligious strivings for religion. Oh what are the things we fight for compared to the great things of God!' It was hardly the voice of a reed piping with every wind. In the times in which Leighton ministered, it is more than possible that his failure to unite the church speaks more commendably than any success his political masters might have wished him to achieve.