

C O N C E R N I N G  
A R C H B I S H O P     R O B E R T     L E I G H T O N

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(by the late Dr Alexander Whyte)

edited by

PETER DAVIDSON

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ARCHBISHOP LEIGHTON

"Whose Faith Follow" (Hebrews 13:7)

Introducing a fine biographical sermon on Richard Baxter, Dr Jowett says, "The lives of great and good men are the best sermons we ever read or hear." And a preacher may do well, sometimes, to shield himself behind such men, and in that way to speak with much greater authority than his own utterances could fairly claim.

It is this feeling that has led me to speak to this audience of University men this afternoon, on the life and character and services of one of the best men that Scotland has ever seen, namely Robert Leighton, Parish Minister of Newbattle, Principal of Edinburgh University, Bishop of Dunblane, Archbishop of Glasgow and author of the classical commentary on the First Epistle of Peter. It would take up far more time than I have at my disposal today; and it would demand a far more profound knowledge of the seventeenth century in Scotland than I possess, in order to trace Robert Leighton's career through all the stages of his changeful life, and adequately to exhibit him to you in all the high offices that he successively filled. My whole endeavour would be to see a sympathetically drawn portrait of this saintly man before you; the same saintly man amid all the changes and vacillations of his ecclesiastical life.

The perfectly atrocious treatment that Leighton's father received at

the hand of Archbishop Laud, spreads a dark background behind the whole of Leighton's own life. Alexander Leighton belonged to a well-to-do family in Forfarshire (Angus). He was excellently educated, an intellectually able and a most earnest minded minister. Like his son after him, Alexander Leighton was extraordinarily well read. "His two books", says one scholar, "are literally crammed with choice morsals from all literature." He was a man of strong principles and of warm feelings. He threw himself into the ecclesiastical and religious controversies of the day with a great intensity of conviction and with a bitterness, it must be admitted, that was far too common both with prelatist and puritan. "Zion's Plea Against Prelacy" was a fierce enough book; but all the fierce books of that fierce day would not have justified one hundredth part of the diabolical treatment that Alexander Leighton received at the hands of Archbishop Laud. No wonder that Leighton's petition for release from prison, when it was read before the Long Parliament, drew tears from many eyes ! The petition of the Puritan minister who had lain in the Fleet dungeon for ten years ran thus:

*"The humble prayer of Alexander Leighton, prisoned in Fleet prison sheweth, that on February 17th, 1630, he was apprehended when coming from Sermon, and was dragged along the streets with bills and staves to London-house. That the jailer of Newgate clapped him in irons and cast him into a loathsome and ruinous dog-hole, full of rats and mice, that had no light but a little grating, and the roof being uncovered the snow and rain beat in upon him, having no bedding nor place on which to make a fire. And, after fifteen weeks, and when he was sick, he received thirty-six stripes on his naked back with a three-fold cord, his hands being tied to a stake, and then stood two hours in the pillory in the frost and snow. He was then branded with a red hot iron on his face; his nose was slit with a knife; and his ear cut off, after which he was turned for ten years into the common jail."*

You will not believe that one Christian man could perpetrate an atrocity like that to another. But to show that Leighton did not exaggerate his case in his petition, here is an entry from Laud's private diary:-

*"Leighton was severely whipped before he was put in the pillory."*

*Being set in the pillory he had one of his ears cut off, and one side of his nose split and was branded on the cheek with the letters "S.S." (Sower of sedition). That day week, his sores upon his back not being healed, he was whipped again in the pillory in Cheapside, and then the other ear was cut off; the other side of his nose split: and his other cheek branded with a hot iron".*

We do not wonder to read in a Tract of that time, that when the Long Parliament released Alexander Leighton, "He could hardly walk, see or hear."

While his brave old father was undergoing this unspeakable ill usage in London, young Leighton was a student in the University of Edinburgh. And if anything could have consoled the old Puritan, as he lay in Laud's Slaughter House, dismembered and torn to pieces, it would have been the testimony that one of young Leighton's professors bore to him in a letter in which he congratulated the old martyr on, "having a son in whom Providence had made him abundant compensation for all his sufferings."

After young Leighton had finished his classical and theological studies in Edinburgh, he spent some years in France, among surroundings that took a deep hold of his mind and heart, and that coloured the whole of his subsequent life. The Calvinistic theology on which his father had all along taken the firmest stand, was the same theology that the son took his firm stand upon, in the Divinity Hall of Edinburgh. It was the theology of Paul, and Augustine, and Luther and Calvin and Knox, and nothing ever shook Leighton one inch from these strong foundations. But, all his days, he had great happiness of having an open eye, a hospitable mind, and a meek and teachable heart; and the newly-awakened France of that day was full of intellectual life and a spiritual religion, to which Robert Leighton's whole soul responded.

The name of Port-Royal covers and contains one of the most remarkable movements in the whole history of the Christian Church. And the men with whom the great movement originated, and with whose name it will be forever indented, are second to none in the high admiration and reverential regard of all the intelligent people in all the churches: Pascal, Jansen, Arnauld, Nicole, and many others. These men, and some women worthy of the best of these men, all taken together, form a galaxy of genius and scholarship, intellectual and spiritual life, such as there is none like it in the history



of the Church of Christ. And then, in the whole of Christendom there was, perhaps, not another young theologian who was so prepared to drink in the new intellectual life as Leighton. The new religious, and all-out evangelical life with which Port-Royal was in that day overflowing, flooded the soul of the young man. Those ten years spent in such surroundings, enlarged and enriched Leighton's mind immensely; and he never ceased making thankful acknowledgement. But, fascinating and captivating as those surroundings were, they in now way weakened or relaxed the hold that the Reformation and Protestant and Puritan doctrines of his birth and his upbringing, held over Leighton all his days. He came home a more convinced and confirmed evangelical than he was when he first crossed the Channel. And the doctrine of grace only grew the more necessary, and the more dear to Leighton the longer he lived. He made repeated visits to old friends in France in after years. We find him often saying such things as this:

*"There is a peculiar advantage in foreign travel not to be understood but by those who have the opportunity of enjoying it."*

Shortly after his return to Scotland in 1641, he was ordained minister of Newbattle in the Presbytery of Dalkeith. "At the ripe age of thirty," says one of his biographers, "his powers and their freshness and vigour, his mind thoroughly disciplined, liberalised and widened by culture and experience: his heart having long found its centre and true balance in the cardinal verities of the Gospel, and the whole man breathing the air of habitual fellowship with God, Leighton's ministry begins."

Every Church has its own special and peculiar genius in doctrine, discipline and in its pulpit work. And, of all the churches, Scotland has always had the pulpit genius. Her people have always had good preaching, and her ministers have always been trained to provide good preaching for their people. England has had some incomparable preachers such as Hooker, Taylor, John Donne and John Henry Newman; and such great Puritans as Owen, Goodwin, Howe, Baxter and Bunyan. But, take the pulpit of Scotland first and last, and all over the land it has a very noble record of its own. In his splendid defence of the Puritan pulpit even against such an antagonist as Hooker himself, Coleridge demands, "Whose parishes were the best disciplined, whose flocks the best fed, the soberest livers, and the most awakened and best informed Christians; those of the zealous divines, or those of the prelatial clergy with their readers?" Now, if that was

simply indisputable in the case of England, it was much more so in the case of Scotland. But, powerful and far-reaching as the Reformation and PostReformation preaching had been, it is no exaggeration to say that a new and far better era of preaching began in Scotland when Robert Leighton came home from France and entered the pulpit of Newbattle Kirk. The English pulpit itself at its very best, has never had anything better than Leighton's preaching. His English style not seldom reminds us of Newman's perfect English: and then, his message to his people is always a far more Scriptural and an evangelic message than Newman's ever is. Speaking of Leighton's style of English, a fine critic of our day says: "It is but a lax prose, not ordered into periods and paragraphs, but ebbing and flowing comment-wise, as the exigencies of the text require it. The phrase is strong and sweet: a little careless perhaps, as of one disregarding the conventions of deliberate art. But, at is best, it rises into passages of extraordinary height, glowing with the rich fire of jewels, ringing with the harmonies of restrained music. Nor do such passages affect us as conscious rhetoric: they are not merely purple patches; every elevation of style corresponds directly to some moment of intensity, or of ecstasy, in the course of the preacher's thought."

But what of Leighton the preacher ? Here is how an acute observer of his own days writes of him in the pulpit. "Having a somewhat feeble voice, and shrinking manner, he was not fitted to be very popular. But with all that, his preaching had a great sublimity to it, both of thought and expression. The grace and the gravity of his pronounciation were such that few heard him without a very sensible emotion. 'I am sure', writes Burnet, 'I never did'. His style was rather too fine; but there was a majesty of beauty in it that left so deep an impression, that I cannot to this day forget the sermons I heard him preach thirty years ago. And yet, with all that he looked on himself as so ordinary a preacher, that he was ready to employ all others: and when he was a bishop he chose to preach to small audiences and would never give notice beforehand." But a still better testimony, so far as the true ends and the real value of preaching are concerned, is given in a letter from the Earl of Lothian to the Countess. "You have amazed me by what you write concerning Mr Leighton. I will write to him this very night. But I pray you, do you again speak to him; and entreat him that he would not this winter quit us: or, at least, not so suddenly and abruptly. And if he will not stay in his ministry and preach more to us, it will be a great grief to me, for never did I get so much good by any that stood in the pulpit. I pray deal with him to stay with us this winter; if not in the congregation, at least in our house."

But happily for us we do not need to depend on such high testimonials as to the extraordinary excellencies of Leighton's preaching. Though he never intended it, we have whole volumes preserved to us of his Newbattle sermons. We are able, Sabbath after Sabbath, to take our seat in Newbattle Kirk, and receive into our hearts the rich stream of truth, beauty and spiritual sweetness that flows from Leighton's seraphic lips. I open the volume of his sermons, and I read and read again his tender and upbiding sermon on "The Broken and Contrite Heart". There is one passage especially in that fine sermon, which always recalls to me John Bunyan's matchless description of the Valley of Humiliation in the second part of "Pilgrim's Progress". And, that Robert Leighton's sermon should remain in the mind alongside of that perfect gem of John Bunyan's, what praise could go higher ? "Happy parishioners of Newbattle !" we exclaim as we lay down that sweet heart-consoling sermon. It is of the two sermons on "The Nature and the Properties of Heavenly Wisdom", that Coleridge says that Leighton is "Plato fortified by Paul". Leighton's Douay and Port-Royal years speak out nobly in those two years: as they do in many of his pulpit discourses and University Lectures and Episcopal Charges. Heavenly wisdom herself surely descended and occupied the pulpit of Newbattle when those two sermons on that subject were preached. It is from the fine sermon on David and Solomon, that Mr Chambers selects his specimen passage, which he entitles, "Experience of Life" in the IInd volume of Sir Henry Craik's "English Prose". He selects that passage in order to give those who have never read Leighton a taste of the feast that awaits them. Only, as I read Mr Chambers' seven or eight selections from Leighton, I am reminded of the fine saying of Hazlitt to the effect that the only true and adequate expression of Burke is all that he ever wrote. "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." This was the text of one of Leighton's Action sermons. And though it is our confessional and catechetical doctrine that the Lord's Supper is less a converting - than a sealing, and a refreshing and an uplifting ordinance: I never read that sermon without feeling convinced that when the Books are opened and the record of that Newbattle Communion is read out, it will be seen that it had its converted sinners that day, as well as its sealed and edified saints. I have read that priceless sermon again and again till my mind has been fertilised for my own pulpit, as well as my heart fortified against all my own personal fightings and fears. I would stake Leighton's great name as a preacher on that one incomparable Communion Sermon alone. The immediately succeeding sermon on "Fellowship with God" would have enthralled Pascal himself. And, yet, this lofty subject is handled with such divine



simplicity, that the ploughboys and milkmaids of Newbattle followed it, and were exalted and sanctified under it. The two profound sermons on "What the Law could not do," could only have been preached by a profoundly taught and a profoundly exercised Calvinistic divine. I find among my notes these words, which I must have set down in long past days, after I read these two Pauline sermons: "Two notable sermons, ennobled with all the nobility of redeeming love". "The Sealing of the Spirit" is the theme of a sermon which constantly recalls to me an Ephesian lecture of Thomas Goodwin's that I first read when I was a student in Aberdeen, nearly half a century ago, and which has never wholly departed out of my mind from that day to this. "The Sealing of the Spirit" is one of the most mystical of all spiritual subjects; but this deep and inward subject is made as plain as day by those two great spiritual preachers. That precious fragment of a sermon on "Praying Always", must, both heard and read, have won many to that universally neglected privilege. The most lofty, the most profound, the most neglected of our spiritual duties always becomes attractive and inviting, and practicable in Leighton's captivating hands. And, then, that other exquisite fragment on "The Beauty of the Inward Man", whose true adornment is the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is - in the sight of God - of great price.

As we have seen, Leighton preached, not seldom, from single and separate texts. But expository preaching was his favourite method. This pulpit suited him in every way; it let out the riches of his reading, and the welling-up of his heart, in a most free and delightful way. We still possess a fine series of "Expository Lectures" on the 29th Psalm; one lecture of great beauty and suggestiveness on the 8th Psalm; another on the Call of Isaiah; then a rare series on the first nine chapters of Matthew; all culminating in the pulpit masterpiece of his "The Commentary on the First Epistle of Peter". I shall stand aside and let more authoritative judges than I tell you what they think about Leighton's masterpiece; and which is the masterpiece, perhaps, of the whole Scottish pulpit. There is nothing more enjoyable than to hear a first-rate piece of work, properly appreciated, by the proper judges. And I know then, that you will greatly enjoy what I am now about to repeat to you. Coleridge is the prince of Shakespearean critics. But, for my part, I like him best in his "Notes on English Divines". And on Leighton's "First Peter" - I shall confine myself to Coleridge - for who can come after the King? "Surely," says Coleridge, "if ever work, not in the sacred canon might suggest inspiration, this is it. I bless the hour that introduced me to the evangelical and apostolical Archbishop Leighton. Next to the inspired Scriptures stand Leighton's commentary on First Peter".

And, again, after quoting a passage out of that book - "Bless God, O my soul, for this sweet and strong comforter. This is the honey in the lion." And, again, "In the whole course of my studies I do not remember to have seen so beautiful an allegory as this: so various, and detailed and yet so just, and so natural". And again: "This divine writer ! O how divine! Surely nothing less than the Spirit of Christ could have inspired such thoughts in such language. Other divines - Donne, Jeremy Taylor, for instance, have converted their worldly gifts and have applied them to holy ends : but here the gifts themselves seem unearthly". And, again, after quoting a passage on our lack of true holiness, Coleridge exclaims, "Father in Heaven, have mercy on me ! Christ, Lamb of God, have mercy on me ! Save me, Lord, or I perish ! Alas ! I am perishing !" Need I quote more? Could more be said about a book outside the Bible ? All this leads us to believe Burnet's strong language about Leighton, when he says that his friend, "Had the highest and noblest sense of Divine things that any man could have".

Many questions rise in connection with the successive steps of Leighton's public life: and many of them, questions that are not easily answered. And one of those questions is this: Why did such an incomparable preacher and expositor ever leave the pulpit: and why did he leave the pulpit so soon ? I doubt if the reasons he gave to his Presbytery again and again, were the true reasons. For myself, I feel sure they were not. I do not think it was the weakness of his voice or even the weakness of his health, that made him so desirous to escape from Newbattle. He had no worse health than John Knox or Richard Baxter, both of whom laboured on for a long lifetime, till they had finished the work given them to do. The truth is, that to men of Leighton's intense temperament and keen sensibility, there is no kind of life so disheartening, so disenchanting and so despairing, as the preacher's life. All other men see the fruit of their works - more or less - and have more or less satisfaction in it. The farmers of Newbattle, even in their worst years, saw some harvest sheaves gathered in. The shepherds on the surrounding hills, saw their flocks multiplied and safely folded. The masons and carpenters in his congregation saw their houses finished, and the copestones laid on them with feasting and singing. The fullers of Dalkeith saw their linen washed and bleached as white as the surrounding snow. And the parish schoolmaster saw some of his scholars, if not all, take prizes on the examination day. But not Leighton ! Not that preacher of such holiness, and such heavenly-mindedness. Had Leighton been a less holy man himself and a less heavenly-minded man, he would perhaps



have been more patient and more content, and more at ease in his mind. But he demanded to see a holiness, and a heavenly-mindedness in Newbattle, that will not be seen on this side of New Jerusalem. Knox saw the Reformation. Baxter saw Kidderminster change from a Pandemonium to a Bethel. But we read of no such finish to Leighton's seraphic labours in Newbattle. We read indeed of his 900 communicants; but we see how this great number only the more distressed him. He knew so many of them to be utterly unworthy of their name and their place at The Table. We look for, but nowhere read of, such times of reviving and refreshing as came to Rutherford, and to the two Guthries, to David Dickson and to John Livingstone, and to many such, who were far below Leighton in their pulpit power. What was it? Was it the transcendent holiness and the outshining spirituality of his message, that made his ministry almost too much for the common men? Whatever, human or divine, was the cause of it, and the explanation of it, Leighton's labours did not bear the immediate and the abundant fruit that might have been looked for from them. His frequent, and far too long absences from his pulpit as the years ran on, and other things, all combined to convince me that a great weariness of spirit had overtaken Leighton, and a despair of doing the good he had designed for himself and for his people. At last the Principalship of the University of Edinburgh was opened to him, and then, a door was opened out of his pulpit, and into the sphere in which he might hope to raise a race of future preachers and pastors after his own heart. If this offer and opportunity had not come to him when it did, Leighton would have been lost to Scotland altogether. Already his heart was set on some holy solitude of searching, meditation and prayer. But this call to Edinburgh came, just in time, to arrest his flight into England or perhaps France.

Twenty two years previously Leighton had left the University of Edinburgh, a student of the first rank in scholarship, and a Christian gentleman of rare purity of life and devotion of heart. He now returned to his Alma Mater simply loaded with the intellectual and spiritual treasures he had gathered and laid up during those fruitful years. His happy experiences and attainments abroad. His experience of a Scottish pulpit and a Scottish pastorate, taken along with his exact scholarship and his insatiable reading, and his intense interest in young candidates for the Ministry - all pointed him out for the great post he was now called to hold. It should always be kept in mind that Leighton was, ex officio, Chief Divinity Professor as well as Principal. "He continued", says Bishop Burnet, "ten years in that two-fold post, and was a great blessing in it: for he talked so to all the youth of any capacity or distinction, that it had a

great effect on many of them. He preached often to them in Latin, and with a purity and a life that charmed all who understood it. He had the greatest command of the purest Latin that I ever knew in any man. He was master both of Greek and Hebrew, and of the whole compass of theological learning, chiefly in the study of the Scriptures. And he laid together in his memory the greatest treasures of the best and the wisest of all the ancient sayings of the heathen, as well as Christian, that I have ever known any man master of, and he made use of them in the aptest manner possible. But that which excelled all the rest, was, that he was possessed with the highest and noblest sense of divine things I ever saw in any man". A splendid certificate to Leighton, from one who knew him well !

Almost all Leighton's Principalship and professorial lectures and addresses were delivered in Latin. And of his Latin lectures, Mr West, his latest translator and editor has this estimate. "Leighton's Latin Lectures have ever been esteemed among the choicest of his works. They have an exceeding beauty and richness, as well as a great practical value. Coleridge, Jebb and Knox, amongst others, speak of Leighton's Latin Lectures with the warmest admiration, and Newton calls them 'diamonds set in gold' for they unite the simplicity of the Gospel with the most captivating beauties of style and language".

At the Sabbath services, the Principal took the students through the 4th Psalm, the 32nd Psalm and the 130th Psalm in Latin; but otherwise very much as he had dealt with these and some other Psalms in his Newbattle pulpit. We have 24 of his purely theological lectures preserved to us, in which he leads his students through the great chapters of Protestant and Evangelical Divinity; and always in the most edifying and interesting and impressive way. Even to read them in translation, and without the tone and look and presence of Leighton to press them home, his University Lectures are intellectually fascinating and spiritually edifying in the highest degree. His 8 Exhortations to the candidates for the Mastership of Arts might well be reprinted and put into the hands of all such students today. They are as fresh as if they had been written yesterday. Teaching and preaching like Leighton's never becomes old and stale.

My fast shortening time will not permit me to accompany Leighton from his Principalship in Edinburgh to his Bishopric in Dunblane, and his Archbishopric in Glasgow. I am not sorry for that. All Leighton's best friends were grieved to the heart that he ever left Edinburgh for Dunblane.

And why he took that step in that day: and why the son of Alexander Leighton took that step is a much disputed problem of his life and his character. It does not lie to my mind, or on my heart, to enter upon that insoluble and unprofitable problem. But, if my time had permitted I would have taken great delight in showing you how truly Leighton remained the same meek, holy, heavenly-minded saint of God through all the errors, snares and temptations, and the distressing and discreditable companionship into which this extraordinary step took him. All his Episcopal Charges and Synodical Addresses are just what we would have expected from the old parish minister of Newbattle and the old Principal of Edinburgh University. And no minister, Episcopal, Presbyterian or Congregational can read those Charges and Addresses without his love and reverence for Leighton being revived and deepened, as well as his soul being kindled into renewed devotion to his office, and to all his work. Dr Walter Smith's "Bishop's Walk" will always remain a most charming picture of Leighton in his Episcopal Palace in Dunblane. The poem, taken along with the prose preface, are the best things you will read anywhere about Leighton in his Episcopal days. "To me," says Dr Smith, "Leighton appears indeed about as beautiful a spirit as ever lighted on the earth. And yet, I do not defend all his later conduct, nor do I think it were well if all the world were like him." Dr Smith means like him in his relation to the time in which he lived; and especially in the step he took from Edinburgh to Dunblane.

It has for a long time been a lament of mine, that Leighton was not led to leave an autobiography behind him, an Apologia Pro Vita Sua. And if that had been possible, with this motto and text: "Commit thy way unto the Lord, and trust in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth thy judgement as the light, and thy justice as the noonday." A book of Retractions, like those of Augustine, retractions in life, if not in doctrine: a confession of errors and mistakes, if such Leighton felt he had made, like that confession which has made Richard Baxter's Autobiography one of the noblest books in the whole world. We could not have expected another "Grace Abounding" from Leighton, nor another "Halyburton", nor another "Brodie", nor another "Brea". He had not come through their awful experience. Boston was a far homelier man than Leighton; but his Autobiography is a book of high distinction; and had Leighton opened up his whole heart and life to the ministers of Scotland, as Boston has done - what a cherished possession it would have been ! How it would have helped all its readers to attain to the holy and heavenly-minded life of its author. And, who can tell, but it might have dispersed some, if not all, of the suspicions that hang around



the dear name of Robert Leighton in so many minds. But, in the absence of such an apology and explanation, let us dwell more and more on the fine, the indisputable and unchallengeable features of Leighton's life and character. His sleepless industry at his books - and they always of the very best kind; his noble openness and hospitality of mind; his toleration and liberality toward all other men; his intense dislike of controversy; his meekness; his humility; his extraordinary attainments in heavenly-mindedness. In one word, his wonderful likeness in so many things, to his Divine Master. And, let Leighton's golden books be more and more in the hands of every student of divinity - according to the counsel of our present text:

"Remember them that have the rule over you, and who have spoken unto you the Word of God; whose faith follow: considering the end of their conversation: Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and for ever."

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[NOTE: Peter Davidson edited the above text from the original manuscript 30+ years ago. As far as he is aware, it has no previous publication.  
If any reader knows of previous publication of "Archbishop Leighton by Dr Alexander Whyte" we should be glad to receive the details.]

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