

The Godly Dr. Doddridge (1702-1751)

by Ian Densham



Philip Doddridge has had bad press over the years. Even C. H. Spurgeon, who heartily recommended his *Family Expositor*, did not consider that Doddridge was as bold and orthodox as he should have been. Consequently, he has been under a cloud in the minds of many evangelicals. His name has been associated with error, while his years of faithful work have been ignored. He was a child of his times, yet he reacted and responded to events in his lifetime with a spirituality and zeal that would put many of us to shame. The *Zondervan New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* says of him (p 306), “. . . his alleged heresies are probably due to lack of necessary mental equipment to articulate his thoughts clearly.” This is grossly unfair. He was a multi-talented, multi-competent man, whose exploits and achievements leave me breathless – and I have been accused of being a workaholic! He has suffered additionally in recent years from some who have tried to redefine his theology and his orthodoxy. However I believe that he should be regarded as one of the great intellectual Congregational worthies; not on the same level as John Owen, but certainly up among the historically great Congregationalists.

Orthodox

Although he has been much criticised, the facts of his life and the evidence of his writings reveal one who was far more orthodox than many would credit. He was a man of many skills and interests. He had a world view which was unusual for his day. He was a tireless worker and a godly pastor and principal. He was involved in scientific research and wrote and gave papers to the Royal Society. He experimented and even tried a new smallpox drug on himself to further research. He was so concerned about the march south of Bonnie Prince Charlie in November 1745, with his 6,000 claymore-swinging Jacobites, that he organised troops to exercise in Northampton to protect the crown. On hearing that two thousand troops were ready at Northampton, the Young Pretender, who had already reached Derby, turned tail and fled back to Scotland! Doddridge knew that if the House of Hanover was defeated, England would be ruled by the Roman Catholics again.

Northampton Pastorate

Doddridge was minister of Castle Street Congregational Church, Northampton, from 1729 to his early death in 1751. While he was there he was also the Principal of the Doddridge Academy which trained more than 200 men for the ministry. This grew out of John Jennings' Academy at Kibworth in Leicestershire. While Jennings was a godly man, he was not as careful in his theological understanding as Doddridge. Doddridge refined and improved the teaching methods of Jennings and many profited from his wise theological instruction.

Unfair Criticism

In recent times, Doddridge has been called a “moderate Calvinist.” This does not do justice to his strongly held theology and has arisen because of a misunderstanding of his methods. I fear that is partly because some have unfairly criticised him for his desire to teach his students to think and not to spoon-feed them. They have assumed that because one or two of his students did not retain their orthodoxy and fell into Arianism that this was Doddridge’s fault. But I hope that I am not held accountable on the Great Day for the theology of everyone who sat under my preaching for any length of time! I trust that many have been well-grounded in the faith, but I am realistic enough to know that some have gone back from the teaching that they once enjoyed. The grounding in the truth that he gave his students was biblical, theological, heartfelt, warm and practical. Geoffrey Nuttall notes that only three of his students lapsed into Arianism. The repeated charge that Doddridge himself had Arian tendencies has been comprehensively and conclusively answered by Dr Alan Clifford. His influence on a generation of students and pastors during the days leading up to the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century was considerable. He was one of the few who kept alight the light of evangelical religion through days of darkness and religious indifference. He never lived to see the full light of the Evangelical Awakening, but he was foresighted enough to realise that George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers were men of God who were destined to be greatly used. His Academy was one that remained true to the gospel in days when many others were already drifting dangerously. Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, considered him to be a man of great spirituality and her assessment should not be lightly dismissed.

“Baxterian Calvinist?”

His system of lectures was unusual for the time in which he lived. He began by dealing with the philosophical and intellectual theories of his day. These had been largely shaped by the philosophy of John Locke, and Doddridge goes out of his way to demonstrate that this foundation is false. He spends many lectures dealing with these matters before turning to the Scriptures to state most emphatically a thoroughly orthodox view of man, the triune God and the gospel through the Lord Jesus Christ. Here I would dissent strongly from Dr Clifford’s view that Doddridge was a “Baxterian Calvinist.” Doddridge did not regard Baxter uncritically, as the following comment on Baxter in his Lectures on Preaching reveal: “He is inaccurate, because he had no regular education, and always wrote in haste, as in the views of eternity; but generally judicious, nervous, spiritual and evangelical; though often charged with the contrary.” Also, John Stoughton, one of Doddridge’s biographers doubted whether Baxter was a “Baxterian” in the normal definition that has grown up around him. These are dangers that apply to any man. I have met many so-called Calvinists who would never be owned by John Calvin, just as there are many so-called Wesleyans whom John Wesley would not recognise if he met them!

Secondary Matters

The genius of Doddridge was that although he had a strong grasp of true theology, he was not prepared to separate from good and godly men with whom he disagreed on secondary matters. One of the things that has impressed me so much over the years is that among the EFCC constituency there are many who have a similar strong grasp of theology, yet regard Christian fellowship more important than dotting every “i” and crossing every “t.” If a man truly loves Christ and desires to live a godly life, then he is my brother in Christ. I rejoice to sit down at the Lord’s Table with him. He may be in error about the doctrine of election – but then he probably thinks that I am in error about the doctrine of the second coming! But on gospel

truths we are united. Holiness is our joint desire. O for more men and women with that same spirit of Philip Doddridge in these days! What power it would give to our witness before a godless world!

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