

[extract taken from]
THE
CHRISTIAN LEADERS
OF
The Last Century;
OR,
ENGLAND A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

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"Enquire, I pray thee, of the former age, and prepare thyself to the search of their fathers."—JOB viii. 8.

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XII.

Toplady and his Ministry.

Born at Farnham, 1740—Ordained, 1762—Vicar of Broad Hembury, Devonshire, 1768—
Removes to London, 1775—Dies, 1778—Conversion, 1756—His Preaching—His Writings
as a Controversialist—His Hymns.

A PERFECT orchestra contains many various instruments of music. Each of these instruments has its own merit and value; but some of them are curiously unlike others. Some of them are dependent on a player's breath, and some on his skill of hand. Some of them are large, and some of them are small. Some of them produce very gentle sounds, and some of them very loud. But all of them are useful in their place and way. Composers like Handel, and Mozart, and Mendelssohn, find work for all. There is work for the flageolet as well as for the trumpet, and work for the violoncello as well as for the organ. Separately and alone, some of the instruments may appear harsh and unpleasant. Combined together and properly played, they fill the ear with one mighty volume of harmonious sounds.

Thoughts such as these come across my mind when I survey the spiritual champions of England a hundred years ago. I see among the leaders of religious revival in that day men of singularly varied characteristics. They were each in their way eminent instruments for good in the hands of the Holy Ghost. From each of them sounded forth the word of God throughout the land with no uncertain sound. Yet some of these good men were strangely compounded, peculiarly constituted and oddly framed. And to none, perhaps, does the remark apply more thoroughly than to the subject of these remarks, the well-known hymn-writer, Augustus Toplady.

I should think no account of English religion in the last century complete which did not supply some information about this remarkable man. In some respects, I am bold to say, not one of his contemporaries surpassed him, and hardly any equalled him. He was a man of rare grace and gifts, and one who left his mark very deeply on his own generation. For soundness in the faith, singleness of eye, and devotedness of life, he deserves to be ranked with Whitefield, or Grimshaw, or Romaine. Yet with all this, he was a man in whom there was a most extraordinary mixture of grace and infirmity. Hundreds, unhappily, know much of his infirmities who know little of his graces. I shall endeavour in the following pages to supply a few materials for forming a just estimate of his character.

Augustus Montague Toplady was born at Farnham, in Surrey, on the 4th of November 1740. He was the only son of Major Richard Toplady, who died at the siege of Carthage shortly after his birth, so that he never saw his father. His mother's maiden name was Catherine Bates, of whom nothing is known except that she had a brother who was rector of St. Paul's, Deptford. About the history of his family I can discover nothing. I only conjecture that some of them must have been natives of Ireland. Who his parents were, and what they were doing at

Farnham, when he was born, and what kind of people they were, are all matters about which no record seems to exist.

Few spiritual heroes of the last century, I must freely confess, have suffered more from the want of a good biographer than Toplady. Be the cause what it may, a real life of the man was never written. The only memoir of him is as meagre a production as can possibly be conceived. It is perhaps only fair to remember that he was an only child, and that he died unmarried; so that he had neither brother, sister, son or daughter, to gather up his remains. Moreover, he was one who lived much in his study and among his books, spent much time in private communion with God, and went very little into society. Like Romaine, he was not what the world would call a *genial* man—had very few intimate friends—and was, probably, more feared and admired than loved. But be the reasons what they may, the fact is undeniable that there is no good biography of Toplady. The result is, that there is hardly any man of his calibre in the last century of whom so very little is known.

The principal facts of Toplady's life are few, and soon told. He was brought up by his widowed mother with the utmost care and tenderness, and retained throughout life a deep and grateful sense of his obligations to her. For some reason, which we do not know now, she appears to have settled at Exeter after her husband's death; and to this circumstance we may probably trace her son's subsequent appointment to cures of souls in Devonshire. Young Toplady was sent at an early age to Westminster School, and showed considerable ability there. After passing through Westminster, he was entered as a student of Trinity College, Dublin, and took his degree there as Bachelor of Arts. He was ordained a clergyman in the year 1762; but I am unable to ascertain where, or by what bishop he was ordained. Shortly after his ordination he was appointed to the living of Blagdon, in Somersetshire, but did not hold it long. He was then appointed to Venn-Ottery, with Harpford, in Devonshire, a small parish near Sidmouth. This post he finally exchanged, in 1768, for the rural parish of Broad Hembury, near Honiton, in Devonshire, a cure which he retained until his death. In the year 1775 he was compelled, by the state of his health, to remove from Devonshire to London, and became for a short time preacher at a Chapel in Orange Street, Leicester Square. He seems, however, to have derived no material benefit from the change of climate; and at last died of decline, like Walker and Hervey, in the year 1778, at the early age of thirty-eight.

The story of Toplady's inner life and religious history is simple and short; but it presents some features of great interest. The work of God seems to have begun in his heart, when he was only sixteen years old, under the following circumstances. He was staying at a place called Codymain, in Ireland, and was there led by God's providence to hear a layman named Morris preach in a barn. The text—Ephesians ii. 13, "Ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ"—and the address founded on it, came home to young Toplady's conscience with such power, that from that time he became a new man, and a thorough-going professor of vital Christianity. This was in August 1756.

He himself in after-life referred frequently to the circumstance of his conversion with special thankfulness. He says in 1768: "Strange that I, who had

so long sat under the means of grace in England, should be brought nigh to God in an obscure part of Ireland, amidst a handful of God's people met together in a barn, and under the ministry of one who could hardly spell his name! Surely it was the Lord's doing, and is marvellous! The excellency of such power must be of God, and cannot be of man. The regenerating Spirit breathes not only on whom, but likewise when, where, and as he listeth."

Although converted and made a new creature in Christ Jesus, Toplady does not seem to have come to a full knowledge of the gospel in all its perfection for at least two years. Like most of God's children, he had to fight his way into full light through many defective opinions, and was only by slow degrees brought to complete establishment in the faith. His experience in this matter, be it remembered, is only that of the vast majority of true Christians. Like infants, when they are born into the world, God's children are not born again in the full possession of all their spiritual faculties; and it is well and wisely ordered that it is so. What we win easily, we seldom value sufficiently. The very fact that believers have to struggle and fight hard before they get hold of real soundness in the faith, helps to make them prize it more when they have attained it. The truths that cost us a battle are precisely those which we grasp most firmly, and never let go.

Toplady's own account of his early experience on this point is distinct and explicit. He says: "Though awakened in 1756, I was not led into a clear and full view of all the doctrines of grace till the year 1758, when, through the great goodness of God, my Arminian prejudices received an effectual shock in reading Dr. Manton's sermons on the seventeenth chapter of St. John. I shall remember the years 1756 and 1758 with gratitude and joy in the heaven of heavens to all eternity."

In the year 1774, Toplady gave the following curious account of his experience at this period of his life:—"It pleased God to deliver me from the Arminian snare before I was quite eighteen. Up to that period there was not (I confess it with abasement) a more haughty and violent free-willer within the compass of the four seas. One instance of my warm and ignorant zeal occurs now to my memory. About a year before divine goodness gave me eyes to discern and a heart to embrace the truth, I was haranguing one day in company on the universality of grace and the power of free agency. A good old gentleman, now with God, rose from his chair, and coming to me, held me by one of my coat-buttons, while he mildly said:—"My dear sir, there are marks of spirituality in your conversation, though tinged with an unhappy mixture of pride and self-righteousness. You have been speaking largely in favour of free-will; but from arguments let us come to experience. Do let me ask you one question, How was it with you when the Lord laid hold on you in effectual calling? Had you any hand in obtaining that God's Spirit had left you alone in the hand of your own counsel?"—I felt the conclusiveness of these simple but forcible interrogations more strongly than I was then willing to acknowledge. But, blessed be God, I have since been enabled to acknowledge the freeness of his grace, and to sing, what I trust will be my everlasting song, *'Not unto me, Lord, not unto me; but unto thy name give the glory.'*"

From this time to the end of his life, a period of twenty years, Toplady held right onward in his Christian course, and never seems to have swerved or turned aside for a single day. His attachment to Calvinistic views of theology grew with his growth, and strengthened with his strength, and undoubtedly made him think too hardly of all who favoured Arminianism. It is more than probable, too, that it gave him the reputation of being a narrow-minded and sour divine, and made many keep aloof from him, and depreciate him. But no one ever pretended to doubt his extraordinary devotedness and singleness of eye, or to question his purity and holiness of life. From one cause or another, however, he appears always to have stood alone, and to have had little intercourse with his fellow-men. The result was, that throughout life he appears to have been little known and little understood, but most loved where he was most known.

One would like much to hear what young Toplady was doing between the date of his conversion in 1756, and his ordination in 1762. We can only guess, from the fact that he studied Manton on the seventeenth of John before he was eighteen, that he was probably reading hard, and storing his mind with knowledge, which he turned to good account in after-life. But there is an utter dearth of all information about our hero at this period of his life. We only know that he took upon himself the office of a minister, not only as scholar, and as an outward professor of religion, but as an honest man. He says himself, that “he subscribed the articles and liturgy from principle; and that he did not believe them merely because he subscribed them, but subscribed them because he believed them.”

One would like, furthermore, to know exactly where he began his ministry, and in what parish he was first heard as a preacher of the gospel. But I can find out nothing about these points. One interesting fact about his early preaching I gather from a curious letter which he wrote to Lady Huntingdon in 1774. In that letter he says: “As to the doctrines of special and discriminating grace, I have thus much to observe. For the first four years after I was in orders, I dwelt chiefly on the general outlines of the gospel in this remote corner of my public ministry. I preached of little else but of justification by faith only, in the righteousness and atonement of Christ, and of that personal holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. My reasons for thus narrowing the truths of God were these two (I speak it with humiliation and repentance):—1. I thought these points were sufficient to convey as clear an idea as was absolutely necessary of salvation; 2. And secondly, I was partly afraid to go any further.

“God himself (for none but he could do it) gradually freed me from that fear. And as he never at any time permitted me to deliver, or even to insinuate anything contradictory to his truth, so has he been graciously pleased, for seven or eight years past, to open my mouth to make known the entire mystery of the gospel, as far as his Spirit has enlightened me into it. The consequence of my first plan of operations was, that the generality of my hearers were pleased, but only few were converted. The result of my latter deliverance from worldly wisdom and worldly fear is, that multitudes have been very angry; but the conversions which God has given me reason to hope he has wrought, have been at least three for one before. Thus I can testify, so far as I have been concerned, the usefulness of preaching

predestination; or, in other words, of tracing salvation and redemption to their first source.”

An anecdote related by Toplady himself deserves repetition, as a curious illustration of the habits of clergymen at the time when he was ordained, and his superiority to the habits of his contemporaries. He says: “I was buying some books in the spring of 1762, a month or two before I was ordained, from a very respectable London bookseller. After the business was over, he took me to the furthest end of his long shop, and said in a low voice, ‘Sir, you will soon be ordained, and I suppose you have not laid in a very great stock of sermons. I can supply you with as many sets as you please, all original, very excellent ones, and they will come for a trifle.’ My answer was: ‘I certainly shall never be a customer to you in that way; for I am of opinion that the man who cannot, or will not make his own sermons, is quite unfit to wear the gown. How could you think of my buying ready-made sermons? I would much sooner buy ready-made clothes.’” His answer shocked me. ‘Nay, young gentleman, do not be surprised at my offering you ready-made sermons, for I assure you I have sold ready-made sermons to many a bishop in my time.’ My reply was ‘My good sir, if you have any concern for the credit of the Church of England, never tell that news to anybody else henceforward for ever.’”

The manner of Toplady’s life, during the fifteen or sixteen years of his short ministry may be gathered from a diary which he wrote in 1768, and kept up for about a year. This diary is a far more interesting record of a good man’s life than such documents ordinarily are, and gives a very favourable impression of the writer’s character and habits. It leaves the impression that he was eminently a man of one thing, and entirely engrossed with his Master’s business—much alone, keeping little company, and always either preaching, visiting his people, reading, writing, or praying. If it had been kept up for a few years longer, it would have thrown immense light on many things in Toplady’s ministerial history. But even in its present state it is the most valuable record we possess about him, and there seems no reason to doubt that it is a tolerably accurate picture of his mode of living from the time of his ordination to his death.

So little is known of the particular events of the last fifteen years of Toplady’s life, that it is impossible to do more than give a general sketch of his proceedings. He seems to have attained a high reputation at a very early date as a thorough-going supporter of Calvinistic opinions, and a leading opponent of Arminianism. His correspondence shows that he was on intimate terms with Lady Huntingdon, Sir R. Hill, Whitefield, Romaine, Berridge, Dr. Gill, Ambrose Serle, and other eminent Christians of those times. But how and when he formed acquaintance with them, we have no information. His pen was constantly employed in defence of evangelical religion from the time of his removal to Broad Hembury in 1768. His early habits of study were kept up with unabated diligence. No man among the spiritual heroes of last century seems to have read more than he did, or to have had a more extensive knowledge of divinity. His bitterest adversaries in controversy could never deny that he was a scholar, and a ripe one. Indeed, it admits of grave question whether he did not shorten his life by his habits of constant study. He says himself, in a letter to a relative, dated March 19, 1775:—

“Though I cannot entirely agree with you in supposing that extreme study has been the cause of my late indisposition, I must yet confess that the hill of science, like that of virtue, is in some instances climbed with labour. But when we get a little way up, the lovely prospects which open to the eye make infinite amends for the steepness of the ascent. In short, I am wedded to these pursuits, as a man stipulates to take his wife; viz., for better, for worse, until death us do part. My thirst for knowledge is literally inextinguishable. And if I thus drink myself into a superior world, I cannot help it.”

One feature in Toplady’s character, I may here remark, can hardly fail to strike an attentive reader of his remains. That feature is the eminent spirituality of the tone of his religion. There can be no greater mistake than to regard him as a mere student and deep reader, or as a hard and dry controversial divine. Such an estimate of him is thoroughly unjust. His letters and remains supply abundant evidence that he was one who lived in very close communion with God, and had very deep experience of divine things. Living much alone, seldom going into society, and possessing few friends, he was a man little understood by many, who only knew him by his controversial writings, and specially by his unflinching advocacy of Calvinism. Yet really, if the truth be spoken, I hardly find any man of the last century who seems to have soared so high and aimed so loftily, in his personal dealings with his Saviour, as Toplady. There is an unction and savour about some of his remains which few of his contemporaries equalled, and none surpassed. I grant freely that he left behind him many things which cannot be much commended. But he left behind him some things which will live, as long as English is spoken, in the hearts of all true Christians. His writings contain “thoughts that breathe and words that burn,” of any writings of his age. And it never ought to be forgotten, that the man who penned them was lying in his grave before he was thirty-nine!

The last three years of Toplady’s life were spent in London. He removed there by medical advice in the year 1775, under the idea that the moist air of Broad Hembury was injurious to his health. Whether the advice was sound or not may now, perhaps, admit of question. At any rate, the change of climate did him no good. Little by little the insidious disease of the chest, under which he laboured, made progress, and wasted his strength. He was certainly able to preach at Orange Street Chapel in the years 1776 and 1777; but it is equally certain that throughout this period he was gradually drawing near to his end. He was never, perhaps, more thoroughly appreciated than he was during these last three years of his ministry. A picked London congregation, such as he had, was able to value gifts and powers which were completely thrown away on a rural parish in Devonshire. His stores of theological reading and distinct doctrinal statement were rightly appraised by his metropolitan hearers. In short, if he had lived longer he might, humanly speaking, have done a mighty work in London. But He who holds the stars in his right hand, and knows best what is good for his Church, saw fit to withdraw him soon from his new sphere of usefulness. He seemed as if he came to London only to be known and highly valued, and then to die.

The closing scene of the good man’s life was singularly beautiful, and at the same time singularly characteristic. He died as he had lived, in the full hope and

peace of the gospel, and with an unwavering confidence in the truth of the doctrines which he had for fifteen years advocated both with his tongue and with his pen. About two months before his death he was greatly pained by hearing that he was reported to have receded from his Calvinistic opinions, and to have expressed a desire to recant them in the presence of Mr. John Wesley. So much was he moved by this rumour, that he resolved to appear before his congregation once more, and to give a public denial to it before he died. His physician in vain remonstrated with him. He was told that it would be dangerous to make the attempt, and that he might probably die in the pulpit. But the vicar of Broad Hembury was not a man to be influenced by such considerations. He replied that "he would rather die in the harness than die in the stall." He actually carried his resolution into effect. On Sunday, June the 14th, in the last stage of consumption, and only two months before he died, he ascended his pulpit in Orange Street Chapel, after his assistant had preached, to the astonishment of his people, and gave a short but affecting exhortation founded on 2 Pet. i. 11, 14: "I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance." He then closed his address with the following remarkable declaration:—

"It having been industriously circulated by some malicious and unprincipled persons that during my present long and severe illness I expressed a strong desire of seeing Mr. John Wesley before I die, and revoking some particulars relative to him which occur in my writings,—Now I do publicly and most solemnly aver that I have not nor ever had any such intention or desire; and that I most sincerely hope my last hours will be much better employed than in communing with such a man. So certain and so satisfied am I of the truth of all that I have ever written, that were I now sitting up in my dying bed with a pen and ink in my hand, and all the religious and controversial writings I ever published, especially those relating to Mr. John Wesley and the Arminian controversy, whether respecting fact or doctrine, could be at once displayed to my view, I should not strike out a single line relative to him or them."

The last days of Toplady's life were spent in great peace. He went down the valley of the shadow of death with abounding consolations, and was enabled to say many edifying things to all around him. The following recollections, jotted down by friends who ministered to him, and communicated to his biographer, can hardly fail to be interesting to a Christian reader.

One friend observes:—"A remarkable jealousy was apparent in his whole conduct as he drew near his end, for fear of receiving any part of that honour which is due to Christ alone. He desired to be nothing, and that Jesus might be all and in all. His feelings were so very tender upon this subject, that I once undesignedly put him almost in an agony by remarking the great loss which the Church of Christ would sustain by his death at this particular juncture. The utmost distress was immediately visible in his countenance, and he exclaimed, 'What! by my death? No, no! Jesus Christ is able, and will, by proper instruments, defend his own truths. And with regard to what little I have been enabled to do in this way, not to me, not to me, but to his own name, and to that only, be the glory.'

"The more his bodily strength was impaired the more vigorous, lively, and rejoicing his mind seemed to be. From the whole turn of his conversation during

our interview, he appeared not merely placid and serene, but he evidently possessed the fullest assurance of the most triumphant faith. He repeatedly told me that he had not had the least shadow of a doubt respecting his eternal salvation for near two years past. It is no wonder, therefore, that he so earnestly longed to be dissolved and to be with Christ. His soul seemed to be constantly panting heavenward, and his desire increased the nearer his dissolution approached. A short time before his death, at his request, I felt his pulse, and he desired to know what I thought of it. I told him that his heart and arteries evidently beat almost every day weaker and weaker. He replied immediately, with the sweetest smile on his countenance, 'Why, that is a good sign that my death is fast approaching; and, blessed be God, I can add that my heart beats every day stronger and stronger for glory.'

"A few days before his dissolution I found him sitting up in his arm-chair, but scarcely able to move or speak. I addressed him very softly, and asked if his consolations continued to abound as they had hitherto done. He quickly replied, 'O my dear sir, it is impossible to describe how good God is to me. Since I have been sitting in this chair this afternoon I have enjoyed such a season, such sweet communion with God, and such delightful manifestation of his presence with and love to my soul, that it is impossible for words or any language to express them. I have had peace and joy unutterable, and I fear not but that God's consolation and support will continue.' But he immediately recollected himself, and added, 'What have I said? God may, to be sure, as a sovereign, hide his face and his smiles from me; however, I believe he will not; and if he should, yet will I trust him. I know I am safe and secure, for his love and his covenant are everlasting!'"

To another friend, speaking about his dying avowal in the pulpit of his church in Orange Street, he said: "My dear friend, these great and glorious truths which the Lord in rich mercy has given me to believe, and which he has enabled me (though very feebly) to defend, are not, as those who oppose them say, dry doctrines or mere speculative points. No! being brought into practical and heartfelt experience, they are the very joy and support of my soul; and the consolations flowing from them carry me far above the things of time and sense. So far as I know my own heart, I have no desire but to be entirely passive, to live, to die, to be, to do, to suffer whatever is God's blessed will concerning me, being perfectly satisfied that as he ever has, so he ever will do that which is best concerning me, and that he deals out in number, weight, and measure, whatever will conduce most to his own glory and to the good of his people."

Another of his friends mentioning the report that was spread abroad of his recanting his former principles, he said with some vehemence and emotion, "I recant my former principles! God forbid that I should be so vile an apostate!" To which he presently added, with great apparent humility, "And yet that apostate I should soon be, if I were left to myself."

Within an hour of his death, he called his friends and his servant to him, and asked them if they could give him up. Upon their answering that they could, since it pleased the Lord to be so gracious to him, he replied: "Oh, what a blessing it is that you are made willing to give me up into the hands of my dear Redeemer, and to part with me! It will not be long before God takes me; for no mortal man can

live, after the glories which God has manifested to my soul.” Soon after this he closed his eyes, and quietly fell asleep in Christ on Tuesday, August 11, 1778, in the thirty-eighth year of his age.

He was buried in Tottenham Court Chapel, under the gallery, opposite the pulpit, in the presence of thousands of people, who came together from all parts of London to do him honour. His high reputation as a champion of truth, the unjust misrepresentations circulated about his change of opinion, his effectiveness as a preacher, and his comparative youthfulness, combined to draw forth a more than ordinary expression of sympathy. “Devout men carried him to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.” Foremost among the mourners was one at that time young in the ministry, who lived long enough to be a connecting link between the last century and the present—the well-known and eccentric Rowland Hill. Before the burial-service commenced, he could not refrain from transgressing one of Toplady’s last requests, that no funeral sermon should be preached for him, and affectionately declared to the vast assembly the love and veneration he felt for the deceased, and the high sense he entertained of his graces, gifts, and usefulness. And thus, amidst the tears and thanksgivings of true-hearted mourners, the much-abused vicar of Broad Hembury was gathered to his people.¹

The following passage from Toplady’s last will, made and signed six months before his decease, is so remarkable and characteristic, that I cannot refrain from giving it to my readers: I most humbly commit my soul to Almighty God, whom I honour, and have long experienced to be my ever gracious and infinitely merciful Father. Nor have I the least doubt of my election, justification, and eternal happiness, through the riches of his everlasting and unchangeable kindness to me in Christ Jesus, his co-equal Son, my only, my assured, and my all-sufficient Saviour; washed in whose propitiatory blood, and clothed with whose imputed righteousness, I trust to stand perfect, sinless, and complete; and do verily believe that I most certainly shall so stand, in the hour of death, and in the kingdom of heaven, and at the last judgment, and in the ultimate state of endless glory. Neither can I write this my last will without rendering the deepest, the most solemn, and the most ardent thanks to the adorable Trinity in Unity, for their eternal, unmerited, irreversible, and inexhaustible love to me a sinner. I bless God the Father for having written from everlasting my unworthy name in the book of life—even for appointing me to obtain salvation through Jesus Christ my Lord. I adore God the Son for having vouchsafed to redeem me by his own most precious death, and for having obeyed the whole law for my justification. I admire and revere the gracious benignity of God the Holy Ghost, who converted me to the saving knowledge of Christ more than twenty-two years ago, and whose enlightening, supporting, comforting, and sanctifying agency is, and (I doubt not) will be my strength and song in the hours of my earthly pilgrimage.”

Having now traced Toplady’s history from his cradle to his grave, it only remains for me to offer some general estimate of his worth and attainments. To do this, I frankly confess, is no easy task. Not only is his biography a miserably deficient one —this alone is bad enough—but his literary remains have been edited in such a slovenly, careless, ignorant manner, without order or

arrangement, that they do not fairly represent the author's merits. Certainly the reputation of great writers and ministers may suffer sadly from the treatment of injudicious friends. if ever there was a man who fell into the hands of the Philistines after his death, that man, so far as I can judge, was Augustus Toplady. I shall do the best I can with the materials at my disposal; but I trust my readers will remember that they are exceedingly scanty.

1. As a *preacher*, I should be disposed to assign to Toplady a very high place among the second-class men of the last century. His constitutional delicacy and weakness of lungs, in all probability, made it impossible for him to do the things that Whitefield and Berridge did. Constant open-air addresses, impassioned extempore appeals to thousands of hearers, were a style of thing entirely out of his line. Yet there is pretty good evidence that he had no mean reputation as a pulpit orator, and possessed no mean powers. The mere fact that Lady Huntingdon occasionally selected him to preach in her chapels at Bath and Brighton, of itself speaks volumes. The additional fact that at one of the great Methodist gatherings at Trevecca he was put forward as one of the leading preachers, is enough to show that his sermons possessed high merit. The following notes about preaching, which he records in his diary, as having received them from an old friend, will probably throw much light on the general turn of his ministrations:—(1.) Preach Christ crucified, and dwell chiefly on the blessings resulting from his righteousness, atonement, and intercession. (2.) Avoid all needless controversies in the pulpit; except it be when your subject necessarily requires it, or when the truths of God are likely to suffer by your silence. (3.) When you ascend the pulpit, leave your learning behind you: endeavour to preach more to the hearts of your people than to their heads. (4.) Do not affect much oratory. Seek rather to profit than to be admired.

Specimens of Toplady's ordinary preaching are unfortunately very rare. There are but ten sermons in the collection of his works, and out of these the great majority were preached on special occasions, and cannot, therefore, be regarded as fair samples of his pulpit work. In all of them there is a certain absence of fire, animation, and directness. But in all there is abundance of excellent matter, and a quiet, decided, knockdown, sledge-hammer style of putting things which, I can well believe, would be extremely effective, and especially with educated congregations. The three following extracts may perhaps give some idea of what Toplady was in the pulpit of Orange Street Chapel. Of his ministry in Broad Hembury, I suspect we know next to nothing at all.

The first extract forms the conclusion of a sermon preached in 1774 at the Lock Chapel, entitled "Good News from Heaven:"—"I perceive the elements are upon the sacramental table. And I doubt not many of you mean to present yourselves at that throne of grace which God has mercifully erected through the righteousness and sufferings of his co-equal Son. Oh, beware of coming with one sentiment on your lips and another in your hearts! Take heed of saying with your mouths, 'We do not come to this thy table, O Lord, trusting in our own righteousness,' while perhaps you have in reality some secret reserves in favour of that very self-righteousness which you profess to renounce, and are thinking that Christ's merits alone will not save you unless you add something or other to

make it effectual. Oh, be not so deceived! God will not thus be mocked, nor will Christ thus be insulted with impunity. Call your works what you will—whether terms, causes, conditions, or supplements—the matter comes to the same point, and Christ is equally thrust out of his mediatorial throne by these or any similar views of human obedience. If you do not wholly depend on Jesus as the Lord your righteousness—if you mix your faith in him with anything else—if the finished work of the crucified God be not alone your acknowledged anchor and foundation of acceptance with the Father, both here and ever—come to his table and receive the symbols of his body and blood at your peril! Leave your own righteousness behind you, or you have no business here. You are without the wedding garment, and God will say to you, ‘Friend, how camest thou here? If you go on, moreover, to live and die in this state of unbelief, you will be found speechless and excuseless in the day of judgment; and the slighted Saviour will say to his angels concerning you, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into outer darkness, for many are called, but few are chosen.’”

My second extract is from a sermon on “Free Will,” preached at St. Anne’s, Blackfriars, in 1774:—“I know it is growing very fashionable to talk against spiritual feelings. But I dare not join the cry. On the contrary, I adopt the apostle’s prayer that our love to God and the manifestation of his love to us may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all feeling. And it is no enthusiastic wish in behalf of you and myself, that we may be of the number of those godly persons who, as our Church justly expresses it, ‘feel in themselves the workings of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and drawing up their minds to high and heavenly things.’ Indeed, the great business of God’s Spirit is to draw up and to bring down—to draw up our affections to Christ, and to bring down the unsearchable riches of grace into our hearts. The knowledge of this, and earnest desire for it, are all the feelings I plead for; and for these feelings I wish ever to plead, satisfied as I am that without some experience and enjoyment of them we cannot be happy living or dying.

“Let me ask you, as it were one by one, has the Holy Spirit begun to reveal these deep things of God in your soul? If so, give him the glory of it. And as you prize communion with him, as ever you value the comforts of the Holy Ghost, endeavour to be found in God’s way, even the highway of humble faith and obedient love, sitting at the feet of Christ, and imbibing those sweet sanctifying communications of grace which are at once an earnest of and a preparation for complete heaven when you die. God forbid that we should ever think lightly of religious feelings. If we do not in some measure feel ourselves sinners, and feel that Christ is precious, I doubt the Spirit of God has never been savingly at work upon our souls.”

My last extract shall be from a sermon preached at St. Anne’s, entitled, “A Caveat against Unsound Doctrine:”—“Faith is the eye of the soul, and the eye is said to see almost every object but itself; so that you may have real faith without being able to discern it. God will not despise the day of small things. Little faith goes to heaven no less than great faith; though not so comfortably, yet altogether as surely. If you come merely as a sinner to Jesus, and throw yourself, at all events, for salvation on his alone blood and righteousness, and the grace and

promise of God in him, thou art as truly a believer as the most triumphant saint that ever lived. Amidst all your weakness, distresses, and temptations, remember that God will not cast out nor cast off the meanest and unworthiest soul that seeks salvation only in the name of Jesus Christ the righteous. When you cannot follow the Rock, the Rock shall follow you, nor ever leave you for a single moment on this side the heavenly Canaan. If you feel your absolute want of Christ, you may on all occasions and in every exigence betake yourself to the covenant-love and faithfulness of God for pardon, sanctification, and safety, and with the same fulness of right and title as a traveller leans upon his own staff, or as a weary labourer throws himself upon his own bed, or as an opulent nobleman draws upon his own banker for whatsoever sum he wants.”

I make no comment on these extracts. They speak for themselves. Most Christians, I suspect, will agree with me, that the man who could speak to congregations in this fashion was no ordinary preacher. The hearers of such sermons could never say, “The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed.” I am bold to say that the Church of the nineteenth century would be in a far more healthy condition if it had more preaching like Toplady’s.

2. As a *writer of miscellaneous papers on religious subjects*, I do not think Toplady has ever been duly appreciated. His pen seems to have been never idle, and his collected works contain a large number of short useful essays on a great variety of subjects. Any one who takes the trouble to look at them will be surprised to find that the worthy vicar of Broad Hembury was conversant with many things beside the Calvinistic controversy, and could write about them in a very interesting manner. He will find short and well-written biographies of Bishop Jewell, Bishop Carleton, Bishop Wilson, John Knox, Fox the Martyrologist, Lord Harrington, Witsius, Allsop, and Dr. Watts. He will find a very valuable collection of extracts from the works of eminent Christians, and of anecdotes, incidents, and historical passages, gathered by Toplady himself. He will find a sketch of natural history, and some curious observations on birds, meteors, animal sagacity, and the solar system. These papers, no doubt, are of various merit; but they all show the singular activity and fertility of the author’s mind, and are certainly far more deserving of republication than many of the reprints of modern days. Of Toplady’s “Family Prayers” I shall say nothing. They are probably so well known that I need not commend them. Of his seventy-eight letters to friends, I will only say that they are excellent specimens of the correspondence of the last century—sensible, well composed, full of thought and matter, and supplying abundant proof that their writer was a Christian, a scholar, and a gentleman. I cannot, however, do more than refer to all these productions of Toplady’s pen. Those who wish to know more must examine his works for themselves. If they do, I venture to predict that they will agree with me that his miscellaneous writings are neither sufficiently known nor valued.

3. As a *controversialist*, I find it rather difficult to give a right estimate of Toplady. In fact, the subject is a painful one, and one which I would gladly avoid. But I feel that I should not be dealing fairly and honestly with my readers, if I did not say something about it. In fact, the vicar of Broad Hembury took such a very prominent part in the doctrinal controversies of last century, and was so

thoroughly recognized as the champion and standard-bearer of Calvinistic theology, that no memoir of him could be regarded as complete, which did not take up this part of his character.

I begin by saying that, on the whole, Toplady's controversial writings appear to me to be in principle scriptural, sound, and true. I do not, for a moment, mean that I can endorse all he says. I consider that his statements are often extreme, and that he is frequently more systematic and narrow than the Bible. He often seems to me, in fact, to go further than Scripture, and to draw conclusions which Scripture has not drawn, and to settle points which for some wise reason Scripture has not settled. Still, for all this, I will never shrink from saying that the cause for which Toplady contended all his life was decidedly the cause of God's truth. He was a bold defender of Calvinistic views about election, predestination, perseverance, human impotency, and irresistible grace. On all these subjects I hold firmly that Calvin's theology is much more scriptural than the theology of Arminius. In a word, I believe that Calvinistic divinity is the divinity of the Bible, of Augustine, and of the Thirty-nine Articles of my own Church, and of the Scotch Confession of Faith. While, therefore, I repeat that I cannot endorse all the sentiments of Toplady's controversial writings, I do claim for them the merit of being in principle scriptural, sound, and true. Well would it be for the Churches, if we had a good deal more of clear, distinct, sharply-cut doctrine in the present day! Vagueness and indistinctness are marks of our degenerate condition.

But I go further than this. I do not hesitate to say that Toplady's controversial works display extraordinary ability. For example, his "Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England" is a treatise that displays a prodigious amount of research and reading. It is a book that no one could have written who had not studied much, thought much, and thoroughly investigated an enormous mass of theological literature. You see at once that the author has completely digested what he has read, and is able to concentrate all his reading on every point which he handles. The best proof of the book's ability is the simple fact that down to the present day it has never been really answered. It has been reviled, sneered at, abused, and held up to scorn. But abuse is not argument. The book remains to this hour unanswered, and that for the simplest of all reasons, that it is unanswerable. It proves irrefragably, whether men like it or not, that Calvinism is the doctrine of the Church of England, and that all her leading divines, until Laud's time, were Calvinists. All this is done logically, clearly, and powerfully. No one, I venture to think, could read the book through, and not feel obliged to admit that the author was an able man.

While, however, I claim for Toplady's controversial writings the merit of soundness and ability, I must with sorrow admit that I cannot praise his spirit and language when speaking of his opponents. I am obliged to confess that he often uses expressions about them so violent and so bitter, that one feels perfectly ashamed. Never, I regret to say, did an advocate of truth appear to me so entirely to forget the text, "In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves," as the vicar of Broad Hembury. Arminianism seems to have precisely the same effect on him that a scarlet cloak has on a bull. He appears to think it impossible that an Arminian can be saved, and never shrinks with classing Arminians with

Pelagians, Socinians, Papists, and heretics. He says things about Wesley and Sellon which never ought to have been said. All this is melancholy work indeed! But those who are familiar with Toplady's controversial writings know well that I am stating simple truths.

I will not stain my paper nor waste my readers' time by supplying proofs of Toplady's controversial bitterness. It would be very unprofitable to do so. The epithets he applies to his adversaries are perfectly amazing and astonishing. It must in fairness be remembered that the language of his opponents was exceedingly violent, and was enough to provoke any man. It must not be forgotten, moreover, that a hundred years ago men said things in controversy that were not considered so bad as they are now, from the different standard of taste that prevailed. Men were perhaps more honest and outspoken than they are now, and their bark was worse than their bite. But all these considerations only palliate the case. The fact remains, that as a controversialist Toplady was extremely bitter and intemperate, and caused his good to be evil spoken of. He carried the principle, "Rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith," to an absurd extreme. He forgot the example of his Master, who "when he was reviled, reviled not again;" and he entirely marred the value of his arguments by the violence and uncharitableness with which he maintained them. Thousands who neither cared nor understood anything about his favourite cause, could understand that no cause ought to be defended in such a spirit and temper.

I leave this painful subject with the general remark, that Toplady is a standing beacon to the Church, to show us the evils of controversy. "The beginning of strife is like letting out water." "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin." We must never shrink from controversy, if need be, in defence of Christ's gospel, but we must never take it up without jealous watchfulness over our own hearts, and over the manner in which we carry it on. Above all, we must strive to think as charitably as possible of our opponent. It was Calvin himself who said of Luther, "He may call me a devil if he will; but I shall always call him a good servant of Jesus Christ." Well would it have been for Toplady's reputation, if he had been more like Calvin! Perhaps when we open our eyes in heaven we shall be amazed to find how many things there were which both Calvinists and Arminians did not thoroughly understand.

4. There is only one point about Toplady on which I wish to say something, and that is his character as a *hymn-writer*. This is a point, I am thankful to say, on which I find no difficulty at all. I give it as my decided opinion that he was one of the best hymn-writers in the English language. I am quite aware that this may seem extravagant praise; but I speak deliberately. I hold that there are no hymns better than his.

Good hymns are an immense blessing to the Church of Christ. I believe the last day alone will show the world the real amount of good they have done. They suit all, both rich and poor. There is an elevating, stirring, soothing, spiritualizing, effect about a thoroughly good hymn, which nothing else can produce. It sticks in men's memories when texts are forgotten. It trains men for heaven, where praise is one of the principal occupations. Preaching and praying shall one day cease for ever; but praise shall never die. The makers of good ballads are said to sway

national opinion. The writers of good hymns, in like manner, are those who leave the deepest marks on the face of the Church. Thousands of Christians rejoice in the "Te Deum," and "Just as I am," who neither prize the Thirtynine Articles, nor know anything about the first four councils, nor understand the Athanasian Creed.

But really good hymns are exceedingly rare. There are only a few men in any age who can write them. You may name hundreds of first-rate preachers for one first-rate writer of hymns. Hundreds of so-called hymns fill up our collections of congregational psalmody, which are really not hymns at all. They are very sound, very scriptural, very proper, very correct, very tolerably rhymed; but they are not real, live, genuine hymns. There is no life about them. At best they are tame, pointless, weak, and milk-and-watery. In many cases, if written out straight, without respect of lines, they would make excellent prose. But poetry they are not. It may be a startling assertion to some ears to say that there are not more than two hundred first-rate hymns in the English language; but startling as it may sound, I believe it is true.

Of all English hymn-writers, none, perhaps, have succeeded so thoroughly in combining truth, poetry, life, warmth, fire, depth, solemnity, and unction, as Toplady has. I pity the man who does not know, or, knowing, does not admire those glorious hymns of his beginning, "Rock of Ages, cleft for me;" or, "Holy Ghost, dispel our sadness;" or, "A debtor to mercy alone;" or, "Your harps, ye trembling saints;" or, "Christ, whose glory fills the skies;" or, "When languor and disease invade;" or, "Deathless principle, arise." The writer of these seven hymns alone has laid the Church under perpetual obligations to him. Heretics have been heard in absent moments whispering over "Rock of Ages," as if they clung to it when they had let slip all things beside. Great statesmen have been known to turn it into Latin, as if to perpetuate its fame. The only matter of regret is, that the writer of such excellent hymns should have written so few. If he had lived longer, written more hymns, and handled fewer controversies, his memory would have been had in greater honour, and men would have been better pleased.

That hymns of such singular beauty and pathos should have come from the same pen which indited such bitter controversial writings, is certainly a strange anomaly. I do not pretend to explain it, or to offer any solution. I only lay it before my readers as a naked fact. To say the least, it should teach us not to be hasty in censuring a man before we know all sides of his character. The best saints of God are neither so very good, nor the faultiest so very faulty, as they appear. He that only reads Toplady's hymns will find it hard to believe that he could compose his controversial writings. He that only reads his controversial writings will hardly believe that he composed his hymns. Yet the fact remains, that the same man composed both. Alas! the holiest among us all is a very poor mixed creature!

I now leave the subject of this chapter here. I ask my readers to put a favourable construction on Toplady's life, and to judge him with righteous judgment. I fear he is a man who has never been fairly estimated, and has never had many friends. Ministers of his decided, sharply-cut, doctrinal opinions are never very popular. But I plead strongly that Toplady's undeniable faults should never make us forget his equally undeniable excellencies. With all his infirmities, I firmly believe that he was a good man and a great man, and did a work for

Christ a hundred years ago, which will never be overthrown. He will stand in his lot at the last day in a high place, when many, perhaps, whom the world liked better shall be put to shame.

FOOTNOTE

1 “It is a curious fact that Toplady expressly desired that he might be buried at least nine feet, and, if possible, twelve feet, under ground! He assigned no reason. Perhaps it was because he wished to be buried inside his church.