

# **Edward Reynolds (1599-1676) – A Puritan Bishop**

Churchman 58/2 1944

**C. Sydney Carter**

*Principal of Clifton Theological College*

Probably, apart from the General Confession, there is no other feature of our Prayer Book so well known and so highly prized as the General Thanksgiving. It has been well described as “a marvellous compendium of thanksgiving and a marvellous standard of consecration.” It has, with a remarkable compression of language, inspired the devotion and ‘deepened the practical piety of many generations of churchmen and Christians in all lands. And yet even few churchmen know more of its author than the bare fact that he was the only Puritan who accepted a bishopric at the Restoration. It is true that the records of the life and career of Bishop Edward Reynolds are singularly few for a man of such a prominent position and outstanding merit, but certainly this Thanksgiving prayer alone entitles him to a permanent place in the Church’s Calendar of saints and scholars.

Born in 1599, the same year as Oliver Cromwell, we know practically nothing of his parents except that his father is styled ‘One of the customers of Southampton.’ He was educated there at King Edward VIth’s Grammar School,—the school that later on trained the famous Independent divine Dr Isaac Watts,—and in 1615 he went as an Exhibitioner to Merton College, Oxford, and in due course took his B.A. in 1618. Owing to his special proficiency in Greek he was made a Probationer Fellow of his College in 1620. Unwisely, like many others of his day, he eschewed all relaxations and studied so diligently and assiduously that in consequence his health suffered seriously in later years. He read widely and his ability was so well known that when only 23, just at the time of his ordination, he was chosen to succeed the celebrated Dr John Donne as Preacher at Lincoln’s Inn. In 1631 he was appointed to the living of Braunston, Northants, and therefore felt obliged to relinquish his post at Lincoln’s Inn. Here he faithfully and conscientiously ministered to his flock for over 10 years until the outbreak of the Civil War and the accompanying overthrow of the Church. By nature, disposition and temperament Reynolds was unfitted for an age of war, revolution and bitter ecclesiastical strife; and the harsh and intolerant controversies of this constantly changing period were most repellent to his kindly pacific character. His personal sympathies and his preferences in Church worship and ceremony were with the Puritan insistence on a pious and disciplined life and on a simple Scriptural and unsymbolical form of worship. He therefore disliked the use of the surplice, kneeling at Communion and the sign of the Cross in Baptism, but he had accepted episcopal Orders without question and did not differ at all from the doctrinal teaching of the Church. He was in no sense a ‘party’ controversialist and it was the accident of those unquiet times which led him to throw in his lot with those Puritans who for political reasons only, accepted the presbyterian platform and signed the Solemn League and Covenant.

The harsh, coercive, persecuting policy pursued by the bishops towards the Puritan clergy under the Laudian regime had provoked a strong reaction against episcopacy as then tyrannically exercised. But even after the outbreak of the Civil War, when the Royalist members had withdrawn, the major part of the House of Commons were, as even Clarendon testified, “cordially affected to the established government” of the Church. The adverse fortunes of War, however, compelled the Parliament to seek aid from the Scots who with

their recent unhappy experience of episcopacy in Scotland insisted, as 'part payment,' on the acceptance of the 'Covenant,' and also a virtual promise to conform the English Church to the Scotch Presbyterian model. So in June 1643 Parliament summoned an Assembly of Divines to meet at Westminster to discuss matters concerning the liturgy and government of the Church of England. This famous Assembly of 120 Divines and 30 M.P's sat for four years with an average attendance of 60, and in that time it compiled a Larger and Shorter Catechism and a Confession of Faith which is still the standard teaching of the Church of Scotland. But the 'Scots Commissioners,' sent to England with a 'watching brief,' would be satisfied with nothing less than the establishment of Presbyterianism, and the Parliament was most reluctantly compelled to pay this 'price' for their military aid. Several prominent churchmen were nominated as members of this Westminster Assembly but scarcely any attended its meetings. Reynolds was also a member and was put on a special Committee to revise the 39 Articles and to review the later Confession of Faith which superseded them. By staying 'in the country' he avoided the unwelcome 'Covenant' test as long as possible but at length had to conform. As he was regarded as one of the most eloquent preachers of his age it was only natural that he was put on a Committee for the examining and approving of candidates chosen by their parishes for Livings, and Parliament in 1646 also nominated him as one of the Ministers who might preach in any church in Oxford.

Although he wrote a very moderate preface to the new 'Directory of Public Worship' which the Scotch Assembly had approved for use in England, he would certainly strongly disapprove of the harsh persecuting clause in it which penalised the use of the Prayer Book even in private families. In fact Reynolds never became an orthodox Presbyterian and he resolutely refused to concur in the assertion of the *jus divinum* of Presbytery, or in a Resolution of the Assembly that "Christ himself hath appointed a Church government distinct from the Civil magistrate." Instead he followed Whitgift in affirming that no special form of Church government is laid down in Scripture and it may vary as occasion requires.

In June, 1647, Reynolds was included in the Parliament's Committee for the 'Visitation' of Oxford for the purpose of compelling the members of the University to take the 'Covenant,' but he took no prominent part in what must have been to him an objectionable and intolerant proceeding, although he reaped the fruits of it, since Dr Fell refused to acknowledge the authority of Parliament and was therefore displaced as Vice-chancellor and also ejected from the deanery of Christ Church. Reynolds was appointed to succeed to both these offices and awarded the D.D. degree. As Vice-chancellor, Reynolds pleaded for example and counsel rather than severity in reforming the University and he avoided as much as possible all share in the subsequent ejections, and Anthony Wood, the strong royalist and Church diarist, admits that "he was loath to nauseate his reputation by actions so much repugnant to his profession till baited with Cheynell's execrations of his detestable neutrality." Reynolds, like other charitably minded souls at that time, thus discovered to his sorrow that persecuting intolerance was not confined to Laudian prelates and that "new presbyter was but old priest writ large." As a result of this stern Visitation twelve Heads of Colleges and eight Professors were expelled, but their successors were men of "unquestionable learning and high personal character," three of whom, including Reynolds, later on became bishops.

When the Commonwealth in 1650 substituted for the Solemn League and Covenant the 'Engagement' with the promise 'to be true and faithful to the Commonwealth of England as it is now established without a King or House of Lords,' Reynolds, who in common with the Presbyterian party had opposed the overthrow of the monarchy, refused to take this new oath and even passed a petition against it in Oxford Convocation, although he declared his

intention to live peaceably under the existing regime. For this fidelity to his convictions he was evicted from his University offices and the Independent, Dr John Owen, succeeded him as Dean of Christ Church. Reynolds returned to his cure at Braunston but was soon after given the living of St Lawrence, Jewry, in London, which he held till the Restoration. In this central position he was regarded as the “pride and glory of the Presbyterian party,” and he frequently preached before different public bodies. When the expelled presbyterian M.P’s were restored to their seats in March, 1660, another attempt was made to enforce Presbyterianism, and Reynolds, Manton and Calamy, were deputed to edit a new edition of the Westminster ‘Confession of Faith’ for the Church of England, and soon afterwards, on the ejection of Dr Owen, Reynolds was again appointed Dean of Christ Church, Oxford. But by this time the Nation was obviously tired of military dictatorship and ecclesiastical chaos, and in April, 1660, Reynolds preaching before Parliament rehearsed the evils and confusion of the past years, and looked forward with hope to the restoration of the ancient forms of constitutional government. In May, Parliament deputed him with four other ministers to present an address to Charles II at Breda, in which they advocated a moderate episcopacy and liberty for tender consciences in indifferent matters of ceremony. On his Restoration, Charles included Reynolds in a list of 10 presbyterian divines as his Chaplain, and Reynolds was asked to preach at Court. In June, he joined with other ministers in submitting for the King’s acceptance, Archbishop Usher’s Scheme of modified episcopacy, consisting of suffragan bishops and diocesan Synods, which had been proposed to the Long Parliament in 1641. They also asked for a revision of the Liturgy and for the optional use of the surplice, the sign of the Cross in baptism, and kneeling at Communion. The Bishops refused to consider such concessions, but as a result of a conference of the two parties before the King, when some concessions were allowed, Charles issued a Royal Declaration in October in which he agreed to summon a Synod of Divines “to give us such further assistance towards a perfect union of affections as is necessary,” declaring that the Presbyterians had been falsely reported as ‘enemies to the Liturgy.’ Meanwhile he promised that no bishops should ordain or pronounce Church censures without the advice of presbyters and that tender consciences should be relieved of offending ceremonies. The prospect of this amicable settlement was accompanied by the offer of high preferments to the leading presbyterians, and Baxter, Calamy, and Reynolds, were offered bishoprics. Baxter and Calamy declined the honour, doubting the sincerity of the King, or, at least, his ability to get this Declaration legalised. But rather inconsistently Baxter urged Reynolds to accept the offer and he was supported by Sir Matthew Hale. Reynolds consented after making a clear declaration of his belief that a bishop was only a chief presbyter and should only govern with the assistance of his co-presbyters.

As one of the presbyterian members of the Savoy Conference, Reynolds pleaded for a moderate and conciliating policy, but with no effect, since the majority of the Church party had no desire to placate the presbyterians, and nearly all their suggestions were rejected. Moreover, the new Parliament definitely refused to legalise the concessions outlined in the ‘Royal Declaration’ and Reynolds was therefore regarded by some as having surrendered his principles by retaining his office as bishop. But he had not the rigid fanatical convictions of a fiery leader of a great crusade and, as we may gather, he was naturally of a timid and compliant rather than of a resolute character. Perhaps Baxter well sums him up when he calls him “a solid honest man, but through mildness and excess of timorous reverence to great men, altogether unfit to contend with them.” Others at the time, ungallantly credited his continued conformity to the ambition of his wife to act as hostess in the episcopal palace! But Reynolds remained puritan in his outlook and conduct. He did not meddle in affairs of State, but led a retiring life, spending all his time and energies in most diligent and faithful work in his diocese of Norwich. He restored the ruined palace and built a new chapel almost entirely

at his own expense. He was most benevolent and charitable and gave largely to the poor and specially in support of needy clergy widows and children. He also remained true and faithful to his former friends, as he was most considerate and indulgent to the Nonconformists in his diocese, and even allowed on occasions ejected ministers to preach in vacant parishes. One such minister—John Cromwell—was specially befriended by Reynolds. Once when dining at the bishop's table, on leaving, the bishop courteously accompanied him to the door, to the scornful and ill-mannered hilarity of some clergy present. Reynolds sternly rebuked such unchristian conduct, declaring that Cromwell "had more solid divinity in his little finger than they had in their whole bodies." His episcopate at Norwich lasted for 16 years till his death in 1676, and he must have exerted a truly reconciling influence in that harsh persecuting period as even the strong churchman, Anthony Wood, eulogises him as a "person of excellent parts and endowments, of very good wit and fancy and judgment, and much esteemed by all parties," while Sir Thomas Browne calls him "a divine of singular affability, meekness and humility, of great learning, and a frequent preacher." Ill health, seems to have prevented him from exercising this preaching for some period during the Commonwealth, since in 1658 he laments that he has "owing to a long infirmity been unable 'to preach the Gospel,' so he was revising and publishing his sermons that he might bear his Christian witness by the 'pen of a ready writer.'" A perusal of these sermons, even after nearly three centuries, gives ample evidence that he must have been a very moving and a practical preacher, with a clear evangelical message. In a powerful sermon on 'the life of Christ in the Believer,' Reynolds stresses what Article XVIII states as the 'Obtaining of eternal salvation only by the name of Christ,' when he says "There is but one name, but one sacrifice, but one blood, by which we can be saved, perfected and purged for ever, and without which God can have no pleasure in us." This, as Reynolds knew experimentally, was the one divinely provided 'means of grace and hope of glory.'

Reynolds preached no narrow exclusive Calvinistic doctrine of 'particular election,' but a free gospel to all who will turn to a Father God of love and mercy—"Adam," he says "looks on Him as a judge, and hides," "the prodigal looks on him as a *father* and returns." But he insists that this 'return' must be a full, thorough, and continued conversion." In his expositions and exhortations, Reynolds lays great emphasis on sin as a curse, and then as a burden, which will, as Christian discovered, lead men to repentance and to the Cross of Christ for pardon and deliverance. There is a very necessary modern note in his pertinent application in the conclusion of one of his exhortations, when he says "We would fain have things well in our country . . . we would fain have better times, but have we yet laboured for better hearts?" "Let," he concluded, "our chief prayer be 'Lord, make us a happy people by being *our* God.'"

We can therefore remember the Author of our General Thanksgiving as being in the words of his biographer "a profound scholar, an eloquent and sound divine, and a man whose character and works were highly esteemed by all parties during his long and useful life."

### **C. SYDNEY CARTER**