

William Meade, 1789-1862: Third Bishop of Virginia, The “Beloved Diocesan”

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WILLIAM MEADE was born in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia on 11 November 1789. The year of his birth was an eventful one, for on 14 July the Bastille fell and the momentous French Revolution began. The independence of the young American Republic had been recognized by Great Britain six years previously, and James Matra's scheme for a British colony to replace those lost in America had become a reality the previous year in distant New South Wales. Meade's life was to span the three score years and ten, but whereas his early years were spent amongst those who had participated in the War of the Revolution, his last days were to be clouded by the events of the Civil War.

Through his father, Colonel R. K. Meade, William was directly descended from Richard Kidder, Bishop of Bath and Wells. During the War of Independence Colonel Meade acted as aide-de-camp to General Washington. When peace was restored he purchased with his depleted resources 1,000 acres of land in the Shenandoah Valley, where he erected a log house for his wife and family. The dwelling was a modest structure around which the wolves howled nightly, but it was there that his second son, the future Bishop of Virginia, first saw the light of day.

The greatest blessing to the home was the mother, Mary Meade. She had exchanged the comforts and ease of Lower Virginia for the hardships of a western housewife. It was her duty to see to the religious education of her children and she gave instruction in the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. It was doubtless the practice of repeating the catechism, reading the Psalms and other Scriptures daily, and using the morning service on Sundays when there was no public worship which kept alive the knowledge and attachment to the Church in many families which might otherwise have been lost.

In 1808 William matriculated at “Nassau Hall”, Princeton, New Jersey. In later life he never attributed to Princeton any of the ecclesiastical opinions he held, or hardly a religion impression, but he maintained that he could not remember a time when he was without some sense of God's presence and when he did not think of himself as a subject “of the operation of the Holy Spirit”. It was his elder sister, Mrs. Page, who first suggested the ministry as the path of duty. This suggestion, supported by his mother, commended itself to him increasingly, till at last his decision to enter the ministry was fixed.

As there were no theological seminaries at the time, it was proposed that he should study at the direction of the Rev. Walter Addison of Maryland. His entry into Parson Addison's home proved to be a real blessing for it was there that books of an evangelical character were first put into his hands. Of the books William read at Mr. Addison's, he mentions two in particular: Soame Jennings' *Internal Evidence of Christianity* and Wilberforce's famous *Practical View*. It was when he read the former, that he first received a clear and satisfactory view of the necessity and reasonableness of the propitiation for sin by our blessed Lord. “I shall never forget,” he states, “ the time, instrument, and the happy effect; and how I arose once and again from my bed to give thanks to God for it”. He then experienced a distinct

consciousness of having “passed from death unto life”. Of Wilberforce’s book he says: “It gave a direction and colour to my whole life”.

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It was a passing wonder to the Virginians that a young man of good family, a graduate of Princeton, should seek to enter the ministry of the Episcopal Church. The conditions prevailing at the time are explanatory.

When the treaty of peace with Great Britain was signed in 1783, the Episcopal Church in the new Republic was confronted with the problem of securing the episcopate, creating a Constitution, and adapting the Prayer Book to changed political conditions. The Episcopalians in Connecticut led the way by securing the consecration of Samuel Seabury at the hands of the Scottish non-juring bishops in 1784. Three years later William White and Samuel Provoost were consecrated in Lambeth Palace Chapel for Pennsylvania and New York respectively, as was James Madison for Virginia in 1790. It has been said that these efforts appear to have exhausted the energies of the church which was small and feeble, and suspect by reason of its English origin. Little was attempted and little accomplished. The bishops were far from being aggressive and abhorred anything savouring of “enthusiasm”. Every bishop was either the rector of a parish or the president of a college. They regarded their episcopal office as of little significance except in regard to ordinations, and presiding at the diocesan conventions. For twenty years Bishop White’s visitations averaged only six per year and they were mainly in the vicinity of Philadelphia. In his long episcopate of forty-nine years he only once visited the parishes beyond the Allegheny Mountains. He vigorously protested against “the supposition that a bishop should always be engaged in visitations”. The first Bishop of South Carolina never administered confirmation and had no candidates for the ministry. In 1801 Bishop Provoost suddenly resigned his jurisdiction in New York and retired to the country to study botany.

The gloom was deep in Virginia. After his consecration, Bishop Madison made but one general visitation in the diocese and then of necessity confined himself to his arduous duties as President of the William and Mary College. Prior to the war, for almost two centuries the church had been established by law, and the clergy had been maintained by public taxation and glebes. The war period in Virginia, 1776-83, was one of bitter confusion for the Anglican Church. At the outbreak of war the clergy in Virginia had numbered over ninety, but in 1785 only fifty-seven continued to minister. The greatest contributing factor to the collapse of the church in Virginia was, however, the strong and rapid growth of deistic and anti-religious thought which reached a peak in 1802 with the seizure of the property of the formerly established church by the State Legislature. Glebes were sold for a “song” and the Legislature enacted that the proceeds should be “used for any public use, not religious”. The influence of French thought was widespread and “Jeffersonian” infidelity was rife in the State. Bishop Madison was utterly discouraged and regarded the future of the church as hopeless.

It is little wonder, therefore, that people shook their heads when they heard that Colonel Meade’s son was seeking to enter the ministry of the Episcopal Church.

When William approached Bishop Madison with a view to ordination, he did it with a particular doubt in his mind which he determined the bishop must resolve. His difficulty concerned a canon of the Church which forbade servile labour to the clergy. In 1810, at the time of his marriage to Mary Nelson, his mother had given him a farm without a house,

where he went regularly to work, helping to build the house, to plough the first field, and to sow the seed, which he continued to do for many years. The manual labour undertaken did not hinder but rather assisted his growth in grace. It was necessary for him to work at his farm in order to support his family.

Wishing to enter the ministry with a good conscience and a correct understanding of the ordination vows, he wrote to Bishop Madison asking for advice and direction. The bishop resolved his doubts by saying: "It would be unfit for a minister to keep a tavern or grog shop, etc., but certainly not to follow any occupation where good may result both to the community and to the individual. The honest discharge of clerical duties, with a life preaching by example, are in reality the principal requisites". Upon receiving the letter, William made arrangements for ordination.

Williamsburg, where the bishop resided, was two hundred miles from his home. It was past midwinter, the ground was covered with snow but the young candidate for orders, in his twenty-second year, set out on horseback over the icy roads and swollen rivers to Williamsburg. He was examined by the bishop and Dr. Bracken before breakfast and ordained in historic Bruton Parish Church on Sunday 24 February, 1811. The description he gives of the service is indicative of the state of religion in Virginia at that time: "As we went down to the Church, companies of students with guns on their shoulders and dogs at their sides met us on their way to the country attracted by the frosty weather which was favourable to the chase; and at the same time one of the citizens was filling his ice house. On arriving at the church, we found it in a wretched condition, with broken windows, and a gloomy comfortless aspect. The congregation which assembled consisted of two ladies and about fifteen gentlemen, nearly all of whom were acquaintances. The morning service being over, the ordination and the communion were administered and then I was put into the pulpit to preach, there being no ordination sermon".

He goes on to say: "The religious condition of the college (William and Mary) and the place, Williamsburg itself, may easily and justly be inferred from the above. I was informed that not long before these two questions were discussed in a literary society of the college: first, 'whether there be a God', secondly, 'whether the Christian religion had been injurious or beneficial to mankind?' Infidelity was then rife in the State, and the college of William and Mary was regarded as the hot-bed of French politics and religion. I can truly say that then, and for some years later, in every educated young man of Virginia I expected to find a sceptic, if not an avowed unbeliever". He left Williamsburg, as may well be imagined, with sad feelings of disappointment. He determined, however, that Virginia should ever be the scene of his labours for God, and he prayed: "O that I could see her already what my hopes portray".

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William Meade began his ministry as assistant to the Rev. Dr. Balmaine, rector of Frederick parish. The parish contained two churches, one at Winchester, where the rector lived, and the Stone Chapel, about seven miles from the Meade home. During this period he continued to work at his farming, but he had not completed the first year of his ministry when an urgent call came from Christ Church, Alexandria, asking him to become rector. He determined to go for a time, but found the church suffering from such a long period of neglect that he decided to remain.

It was here that he first appeared as a reformer. Of his preaching in those early days Bishop Johns writes: "Under these circumstances [that is, the decline of vital religion in Virginia] when a beardless youth, in his homespun dress and with his boy-like collar and black neck-ribband, stood up in the pulpit zealously preaching Jesus Christ and Him crucified as the Saviour of perishing sinners, it is not surprising that wherever he officiated the church was filled with attentive hearers and some began to entertain the hope that better things were in reversion for the old church in Virginia". Some of the members of Congress were attracted by the character of his preaching and attended the services at Christ Church.

William became a strong and unceasing fighter against immoral and unworthy customs in the social life of the people. Throughout his whole life he fought against drinking and gambling and the common custom of duelling which had disgraced the life of the State for two generations.

Whilst ministering at Christ Church he procured an edition of Bishop Wilson's works which had been presented to General Washington by the bishop's son. Selecting various portions of the bishop's extensive writings, William compiled a small volume of private and family prayers.

Bishop Johns records the story of a distinguished politician who visited a number of his constituents in Virginia. In nearly every house in which he stayed the members assembled to unite in prayer before retiring to rest. "Well, what a change in old Virginia", he observed. "When I first canvassed this district, family worship was almost unknown". Meade's volume of private and family prayers played no small part in bringing about such a salutary change.

Bishop Madison died in the spring of 1812, and only fourteen clerical delegates and eighteen lay delegates came to attend the diocesan convention, which had not met since 1805. Without any enthusiasm they proceeded to elect the Rev. Dr. Bracken of William and Mary College as bishop. For a year the matter remained in abeyance during which time Dr. Bracken withdrew his name.

Many expressed the belief that the Church in Virginia was too far gone to be revived, but the 1813 convention saw the beginning of a new era in church life. The old ineffectual Standing Committee was dropped and an entirely new membership resulted from the election. Dr. Wilmer, the new rector of St. Paul's, Alexandria, preached the convention sermon, and said: "We want a bishop who has passed through the pangs of the new birth, and whose great theme will be 'Christ Crucified'". On the advice of those who were qualified to know, Dr. Wilmer entered into correspondence with the Rev. R. Channing Moore, D.D., of New York, an action which led ultimately to Moore's election.

Dr. Wilmer, as representing the Standing Committee, offered Dr. Moore the rectorship of a church which was not yet in existence and the episcopate of a diocese which was practically dead. The rectorship offered to him was that of the Monumental Church then under construction in Richmond. He accepted the challenge and, on 18 May, he was consecrated in Philadelphia as second Bishop of Virginia.

"With Dr. Moore's entrance upon the duties of his episcopate, a favourable change commenced", Meade records. "We all loved him more and more to his life's end. His was an extraordinary power in the pulpit . . . he preached the Gospel with zealous power. His grey hair and trembling hands, his eyes, often overflowing with tears, his tender appeals—all

united in producing a sensation hitherto un-paralleled in Virginia.” In all his sermons he laid great emphasis upon God’s love for the sinner, preaching the glorious doctrines of grace. For twenty-seven years he ruled prudently; and discipline, long absent, was enforced on clergy and laity alike. Old parishes were revived and new parishes established. He was devoted to the Liturgy, requiring its use in the services of the church, but he also encouraged informal gatherings for fellowship and prayer, a practice which his former diocesan Bishop Hobart of New York roundly condemned.

Early in Bishop Moore’s episcopate the Rev. Oliver Norris came to take charge of Christ Church, Alexandria, and William Meade was free to return to his “earthly paradise”. Upon the death of Dr. Balmaine he became the rector of Frederick parish.

Generally he officiated at his own church only on every other Sunday, the alternate Sundays being given to building up congregations in desolate places. In the vigour of his manhood he journeyed far and wide on horseback, and his animal was usually a good one, for he shared that love of horses which is characteristic of Virginians. He was undaunted by the weather unless it made departure a physical impossibility.

Long before he was elected bishop his influence and power were felt throughout the whole diocese and in other parts of the country. In 1826 he was recommended as Assistant Bishop of Pennsylvania, but some complications arose and in the interests of peace he withdrew his name, in spite of the protestations of his friends. The following year the College of William and Mary conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Divinity. The next year Bishop Moore asked for an assistant, and so on 23 May 1829 William Meade was elected Assistant Bishop of Virginia.

At the time of his appointment Bishop Moore wrote: “You ask me, provided I have any doubts as to your fitness for office, to say so; so far from having any doubts, you are the man of my choice. You have the best claim to the appointment, having taken the church by the hand when the case was hopeless and having largely contributed to that prosperity with which the Almighty has so signally blessed us”.

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Bishop Meade’s episcopate began with a series of visitations. Owing to Bishop Moore’s growing infirmity, his visitations became more and more arduous. In 1831 he crossed the mountains and visited the infant churches in Kentucky and Tennessee. Despite all this he continued for some years as rector of Frederick parish.

With Bishop Moore’s blessing, W. H. Wilmer, William Meade, and others, organized the famous “Virginia Associations”—gatherings of clergy and laity from given areas for Bible study and prayer. The effects of these gatherings, together with the annual diocesan conventions, were immense. The conventions usually lasted a week and people came from all over the State to attend.

With the resuscitation of old parishes and the new districts throughout the diocese, there was a constant demand for more ministers. In 1823 the Virginia Theological Seminary came into being and for the first two years the classes were held in Dr. Wilmer’s rectory.

Bishop Meade devoted much care and energy to developing the seminary at Alexandria. He did this not only to secure properly trained men to staff the diocese, but also because he saw beyond Virginia and was anxious to secure a centre where the Evangelical cause would be maintained, and from which it would spread. For part of each year he resided there, lecturing the senior class on pastoral care and on preaching.

What kind of teaching did he give? His *Lectures on the Pastoral Office*, published in 1849, are now practically unknown. Bishop Meade's theology was akin to that of all Evangelicals in its stress on man's hopeless condition, the salvation offered in Christ, the sanctifying and guiding power of the Holy Spirit, the Bible as the sole foundation and rule of faith. Next to the Bible he valued the Prayer Book, the Thirty-nine Articles, and Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. He believed that the fundamental teachings of the Gospel should be given the first place in preaching rather than the particular customs and doctrines of the Episcopal Church. He believed that preaching was the primary means by which men were won to Christ and built up in the faith. Together with his Evangelical contemporaries he opposed the Oxford Movement, thinking it would lead people away from reliance on the atonement, from proper love of the existing Prayer Book, and from acceptance of the Thirty-Nine Articles.

He refused to deny the validity of non-episcopal orders, holding to the episcopate as of very ancient origin and as the mode of government in the Anglican Church, but not as absolutely essential to the being of the Church. For example, he supported the interdenominational Bible Society from which the high churchmen abstained. He repudiated the doctrines of transubstantiation and of the sacrifice of the mass as unscriptural and untrue. To him membership in the Church was both a privilege and an obligation laid down by Christ. The Church was composed of "the great body of those who profess and call themselves Christians and who hold the substance of the truth as it is in Jesus". Its chief function was to teach the Bible, to witness to Christ, to engage in works of mercy. Its sacraments are of great help to the believer. But though Church and sacraments are essential, they are secondary, for they are both means, not ends. To Bishop Meade, the great heresy was "that of the Jews, namely, raising means to the primary place; and for Christians, that means putting the feeding on Christ in the Sacrament above, or even on an equal plane with, the true feeding upon Christ which is done by faith alone; or reckoning that membership in the Apostolic Church and devout obedience to its discipline can win salvation".

"The first qualification for the ministry", he emphasized, "is that of personal holiness. A more happy, honourable, and useful character is not to be found on earth than a pious and faithful minister, whose life preaches, by example, the same things which his tongue commands".

He did not want his students to be needlessly discouraged, pointing out that some defects are to be found in the best of characters. But while excluding complete perfection from the ministerial character, he stressed the indispensable need for personal sanctity of heart and life, without which no minister of Christ must either hope to be saved himself or to be the instrument of much good to others. He believed in experimental religion: "To preach an unknown God, is worse than to worship an unknown God; only those able to say 'we speak that we do know' can speak authoritatively and without fear of contradiction".

It is not surprising that a number of Bishop Meade's lectures were directed to the great importance of preaching. He taught that no fact in ecclesiastical history has been better

attested than that of the effectiveness of preaching as the instrument of conversion and edification, clearly demonstrated by our Lord, the Apostles, the Fathers, and the Reformers. His lectures naturally stressed the importance of preparation for preaching: “The preacher should know how rightly to divide the Word of Truth, to use the Word as the ‘hammer of the Lord’, to break the hearts of stone to pieces—as the ‘sword of the Spirit’ to pierce through with conviction of sin—as the fire of the Lord to purify corruption”. “Let our style”, he said, “our imagery, our allusions be scriptural, and let everything be established by ‘thus said the Lord’”. “He that has learnt the best use of Scripture language in Scripture truth is the best preacher”. Referring to the saintly Henry Martyn, he said: “As to Henry Martyn, we might know from his almost matchless character as a servant, minister, and missionary of Christ that he must have lived, as it were, in the Bible”. To Bishop Meade, the Lord Jesus Christ was the great subject for preachers of all ages and the effectual preaching of Christ must be such as will convince the soul of sin. He was prompt to remind his students that “it is not only Christ without us that we are to preach, but also Christ in us, and our putting on Christ, by an holy heart and life”.

Remembering his own conversion he dwelt upon the subject of passing from death to life—the great work of God in the soul of man. He said: “Hebrews, chapter 11, shows that the faith which saves, or which as a hand lays hold of salvation, is the special confiding trust of a penitent believer in Christ”. Then he underlined this by saying: ‘I will only remark, that nothing can be more emphatic, nothing more exclusive than the Article [Article XI on Justification] in declaring that we are justified by faith only, for the merits of Christ, that is by faith as the instrument, and the merits of Christ as the cause of our justification. Let it be seen that more and better works, by far, proceed from gratitude for the love of God in Christ than from the endeavour to merit His love. Ours it is to love Him because He first loved us, and because He has so loved us we must love one another. Any other order than this is not the order established by God”.

Bishop Meade was not one to uphold the position of those who believe that the Anglican Church is a *Via Media*. “Truth”, he states, “is not that which always lies just halfway between two opposing parties or opinions. That is truth which God’s Word teaches, that is duty which it commands, and it is our part humbly and diligently to seek it out. Some think that to stand between two opposing parties and condemn both is the only real independence and true charity. But there may be as little independence, and as much uncharitableness, in this as in being of the one or the other party. So we are constituted, that on the great questions of morals, religion, and politics, which agitate and divide mankind, almost all men who pretend to think or read, will feel themselves more or less inclined to the one or the other.”

He deplored the practice of prayers for the dead. He believed that a resort to prayers for the dead meant a failure to grasp the doctrine of justification by faith. He urged his students to pray for others now, to work for them now, to endeavour to save them now, for we are “accounted righteous before God” from the very moment we accept Christ.

The ceremonial prevailing in Virginia was essentially simple and in accord with the Reformation Settlement. In principle, Bishop Meade agreed with Bishop Otey of Tennessee, who said that “insistence upon excessive ritual is the lamentable proof of the absence of an instructed faith”.

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Bishop Meade's interest in the spread of the Gospel was not limited to his own country. The fields of foreign missions were dear to his heart; they received generously of his means, and felt the benefit of his influence. It was partly due to his inspiration that the zeal of the students at Alexandria for "them that are afar off" was as great as "for them that are nigh".

The theological seminary over which he presided for so long has had a glorious record of missionary service. In the first hundred years of its life it gave to Liberia sixteen clergymen and two bishops; to China, thirty-six clergymen, including four bishops; and to Japan it sent Bishop Channing Moore Williams from China, afterwards sending fifteen clergymen and another bishop. In later years its sons established the Episcopal Church in Brazil.

In 1841 William Meade paid a visit to England. He was entertained by Bishop J. B. Sumner (who in 1848 was to become Archbishop of Canterbury) and other evangelical leaders. The Rev. Canon W. Carus, in his *Memorials of Bishop McIlvaine*, writes: "I had the privilege of receiving Bishop Meade during his visit to Cambridge, where he preached for me in Trinity Church. The sermon was remarkable for its spirituality and clear exhibition of the great truths of the Gospel and for the earnestness of its delivery". Writing to Canon Carus, Bishop McIlvaine said: "Bishop Meade was delighted with his visit to England and speaks thankfully of what he saw and received in Cambridge. I hope you saw his true gold. He is of great simplicity and excellence".

During the same year the venerable Bishop Moore died and William Meade became Diocesan. At the Convention in 1842 he asked for an assistant, and later that year the Rev. John Johns was consecrated as assistant bishop. So began a harmonious partnership which was to last for twenty years.

One of the great social problems of his day was that of slavery. He did not believe the holding of slaves in the circumstances of the South to be a sin, but he maintained it to be the paramount duty of masters to afford their negroes religious instruction. Early in his career he freed some of his own slaves and tried to persuade other to do likewise, but later he came to think that this was a mistaken kindness. Emancipation alone in a slave-holding community seemed useless and therefore it was necessary to find some place where freed slaves could form a community of their own. He took a very active part in forming the American Colonization Society, which bought a large tract of land in West Africa (the modern Liberia), and provided transportation thither for freed men and sums of money with which to get started in their new home.

He bade the clergy view all souls as being equally precious in God's sight. He reminded them that the Lord Jesus took special pains to preach the Gospel to the poor, and that St. Paul, in his inspired epistles, gave so many wholesome admonitions to servants. The Bishop sought by every means at his disposal to ensure that negroes held by his own people had proper opportunities to hear the Gospel. To ministers and lay people alike he said: "Soon shall we and our servants stand together before the bar of our Almighty Judge, and O what rapture in the thought that some of them may rise up and call us blessed because we have been the instruments of their conversion and salvation!"

The other great problem with which William Meade had to grapple was that of the Civil War. He thought that war was sinful; he had no sympathy with the extreme view of states' rights, and he was against fighting to preserve slavery. However, when the Union armies entered Virginia, and as a result the State seceded, he felt the whole situation had changed. He

believed that a state had the right to secede, much though he deplored it doing so, and that to defend the homeland in such a case was one's clear duty. So he urged the Virginians to resist and he made every possible exertion to provide chaplains for the army. At the conclusion of his charge to the Convention of 1861 he referred to the numerous Episcopalians, officers and men, in the army of Virginia and said: "Let us pray that grace may be given them to be faithful soldiers of the Cross as well as valiant and successful defenders of the State".

At the height of the war in 1862 he agreed to go to Richmond to meet with Bishop Johns and Bishop Elliott of Georgia for the consecration of the Rev. R. H. Wilmer, son of his ablest co-worker in the revival of the church in Virginia, as Bishop of Alabama. He arrived in Richmond a very sick man and was scarcely fit to attend the service at all. However, he courageously summoned the necessary strength to go to the church just before the act of consecration. Within a few days it was evident that his life was ebbing away and he died on 14 March 1862.

Far away in Italy, whilst travelling by train to Milan, Bishop McIlvaine read of Bishop Meade's death and recorded his feelings: "Alas, who shall supply his place here? What a loving spirit, and yet so decided and strong. He was a wise man, a devoted man, a holy man, a spiritually enlightened man, a man who lived for Christ. Two bishops could not have been more perfectly of one mind in all associations, works, and views with which we had to deal. How short the time before I shall depart also! Then I shall go where he has gone before, and where union is for ever, 'joy unspeakable', holiness with-out spot—where Jesus is".

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