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TOPLADY AND THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

By Don Elcoat

*The work which His goodness began,
The arm of His strength will complete;
His promise is Yea and Amen,
And never was forfeited yet.*

I first became interested in Toplady nearly forty years ago when I was given a copy of his *Works*, edited by Walter Row. My interest was rekindled recently when, having purchased what I thought to be bound copies of the 'Gospel Magazine' for 1869, I discovered that they included a Toplady Memorial Issue for May 1899, containing some material not in the collected *Works*.

Augustus Montague Toplady is chiefly known today as the author of the hymn 'Rock of Ages', which was not, as legend would have it, composed in a cleft rock at Burrington Coombe, the theme of Christ the Rock being present in his writings long before his Somerset days. Many people are also aware, mainly through Bishop Ryle's short appreciation of Toplady in his *Eighteenth Century Christian Leaders*, that he carried on a bitter controversy with John Wesley over the Doctrines of Grace. In his evangelical Library Annual Lecture of 1978, Paul Cook called Toplady a 'Saintly Sinner'. It is an apt description.

Conversion

The outline of his life of only thirty eight years can be stated briefly. Born in Farnham in Surrey 4th November 1740, he was baptized in the Parish Church there on 29th November, his Christian names being derived from the forename and surname respectively of his sponsors. His father, an army officer, died shortly afterwards. His mother, a clergyman's daughter, encouraged Augustus in his youthful desires to be a preacher. He became devoted to her. After schooling at Westminster, he went to Trinity College, Dublin, graduating B.A. in 1760. While accompanying his mother on family business in County Cork he was converted to a living faith in Christ through the preaching of a semi-literate Methodist layman in a barn. Reflecting later on the event he wrote:

That sweet text, Ephesians ii. 13, 'Ye who were sometimes far off, are made nigh by the blood of Christ', was particularly delightful and refreshing to my soul, and the more so, as it reminded me of the days and months that are past, even the day of my sensible espousals to the Bridegroom of the elect [the day when I knew that I had become a Christian]. It was from that passage that Mr. Morris preached on the memorable evening of my effectual call; by the grace of God, under the ministry of that dear messenger, and under that sermon, I was, I trust, brought nigh by the blood of Christ, in August, 1756.

Rural ministry

After conversion he at first fed his soul on Anglican sacramental writings and in hearing non-conformist preaching. Through reading the Puritans, especially Thomas Manton on John 17, he became a decided Calvinist, a position from which he never wavered. He was ordained in the Church of England and served mainly in rural parishes in Somerset and Devon. He was known as a fervent preacher and a zealous visitor. The comparative lightness of his parish duties gave him time to study, which he did almost to excess. The spread of Deism and Arminianism, which had had such a devastating effect on preaching and Christian living in the early eighteenth century, led Toplady to research the basis of Anglican doctrine in the sixteenth century Reformers and seventeenth century Puritans.

Move to London

Sickness caused him to resign the living of Broad Hembury, Devon, which he had served between 1768 and 1775. He went up to London where he was able to continue his researches and to listen to the great evangelical preachers of the day, notably William Romaine, who had earlier demonstrated the fact that one could be a staunch Calvinist and yet have a fervent desire for the salvation of the lost. Without a cure of souls, he was free to accept invitations to preach in chapels in the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, though his conscience would not let him, because of his ordination vows, preach in Dissenting churches. He was particularly effective in his ministry at Orange Street (Leicester Fields) Chapel, which had housed a Huguenot congregation, where he drew great crowds by his fervent preaching of the Gospel of free and sovereign Grace. For a time he edited the 'Gospel Magazine' to which he also contributed articles on theological, philosophical and scientific subjects.

Dying Avowal

By Spring of 1778 he was too weak to preach, but hearing on his sick-bed that John Wesley had apparently spread rumours that Toplady had renounced his Calvinistic views, he dragged himself to the chapel on 14 June and re-affirmed his belief in the doctrines of Grace. His sermon was printed a few days later with the title 'The Rev. Mr. Toplady's dying avowal of His religious sentiments'. When his doctor remonstrated with him on the effect such exertions would have on his frail body, he is said to have replied, 'I would rather die in harness, than die in the stall'. He ended his paper with the words, 'I am every day in view of dissolution. And, in the fullest assurance of my eternal salvation . . . am waiting, looking and longing for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.' He died on Tuesday 11 August 1778, surrounded by friends. In spite of instructions in his will that his funeral should be a very simple affair, it is said that two thousand were present at his burial. He was buried under the gallery facing the pulpit at Whitefield's Tabernacle in Tottenham Court Road. He once wrote, 'What is the grave, but the believer's wardrobe, of which God is the doorkeeper!' In accordance with his own wishes, no inscription was placed over the grave.

Writings

In spite of his having ordered all his manuscripts to be destroyed after his death, he was prevailed upon to save some of them. His extant writings fill over nine hundred pages of close print in two column pages in my medium octavo copy. They fall into five categories:

1. **Hymns and poems**, including such classics as 'A debtor to mercy alone' and the incomparable 'Rock of Ages'. They reveal a man of deep Christian spirituality. Some hymns, such as those on the Trinity, are mini-confessions of Faith.
2. **Sermons**. Unfortunately, relatively few of these have survived, as he seems to have preached *extempore* in his rural parishes. The extant sermons are from his London ministries and have been carefully edited by him. Besides those on general biblical themes, such as 'God's mindfulness of man' and 'Jesus seen of angels', there are the fuller expositions of the Doctrines of Grace, such as 'A caveat against unsound doctrines', in which he claims 'with the Bible in one hand and the Church articles in the other' to 'fix' his 'foot upon Arminianism' that 'gangrene of the Protestant Churches'.
3. **Historical essays and dissertations on theological and philosophical subjects**. Chief among these are the 'Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England', 1774, and the 'Scheme of Christian and philosophical necessity asserted'. In the former, he undertakes to prove that the founding fathers of the Church of England were Calvinists to a man, and that the, albeit evangelical, Arminianism of John Wesley and his followers was an aberration from the Articles, Homilies and Liturgy. In the latter, Toplady answered a similar work of John Wesley's entitled

Thoughts upon Necessity', May 1774. He tries to refute Wesley's charge that, if man is not free, all moral endeavour and rewards and punishments are meaningless, by claiming that, although God is sovereign, man is still responsible for his actions.

4. **Articles** on diverse subjects - doctrinal and scientific - mainly from the 'Gospel Magazine'. Among these is the eccentric, yet powerful, comparison of the National Debt with the debt of guilt which sinners owe to an offended God, computed on a daily basis.

5. **Letters** to many who were evangelical leaders of the day, such as Richard Hill, John Wesley, William Romaine and Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, which show that, far from being a gloomy recluse, confined mainly to his study, he was a man who could offer friendship and counsel on spiritual matters.

Saintly Sinner

In spite of his acerbity and his sometimes coarse language, typical of controversial writings of the period, Toplady shows a fine grasp of the march of Christian truth through the ages and of the necessity to contend earnestly for the Faith once delivered to the saints. At the same time he displays pastoral concern and skill in dealing with the problems of individuals. How we need the example of this 'Saintly Sinner' in our own days!

Don Elcoat (at the time of publication) was a Reader in the Diocese of York, and a lay member of his Diocesan Synod.