

THE Evangelical Quarterly

Editor

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AUGUSTUS MONTAGUE TOPLADY : A WORLD-FAMOUS DIVINE

THE BIOGRAPHER of Toplady declares that " by the side of such names as Watts, Hart, Toplady, Charles Wesley, Doddridge and Newton, the names of all hymn writers previous or subsequent look pale indeed " (Wright, *Life of Toplady* [1911], xiii). But Toplady was not only a famous hymn-writer ; he was also an outstanding eighteenth-century churchman. Bishop J. C. Ryle calls him a man " not surpassed by any one of his contemporaries, with his extraordinary mixture of grace and infirmity " (*Christian Leaders*, 359).

I. HIS LIFE

Augustus Montague Toplady was born at Farnham in Surrey on November 4, 1740. He was the posthumous son of Major Toplady who died the previous May at the siege of Cartagena in South America. His mother, to whom the orphan boy owed so much, was the daughter of the Rev. Dr. Bates of Canterbury. He received his early education at Westminster School, London, where he made good progress. But when he was fifteen, his mother, for some reason, removed to Ireland and entered her son for Trinity College, Dublin, where in due course young Toplady took his B.A. degree in 1760. His mother had evidently given him a godly upbringing, for in August 1756 the young undergraduate attended a revivalist meeting at Cooladine near Wexford in Ireland where the preacher, a man of poor education, preached on Ephesians ii. 13 : " made nigh by the blood of Christ ". " Under that sermon", Toplady records, " I was, I trust, brought nigh by the blood of Christ." " 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 is the Lord's doing and is marvellous." Always afterwards Toplady referred to this evangelist, James Marsh, who was the human agent in his spiritual awakening, as that " dear messenger ", or " that precious follower of the Lamb ", and he

kept in touch with him for years. But he was as yet a youthful, immature Christian, and also, as he declared, "there was not then a more haughty free willer within the compass of the four seas".

Toplady, who had been intended from a child for the Church of England ministry, now began seriously to study the Thirty-nine Articles, only to discover to his dismay that they were Calvinistic and not Arminian in theology. He therefore began to doubt if he could possibly take Holy Orders. It was at this time that he got into touch with John Wesley who gave him valuable advice and encouragement. Religious life was evidently at a very low ebb at this time in the University since Toplady told Wesley in 1758 that he "avoids all trifling company" and that "I do not believe there is one in the College who fears God". Apparently the local clergy were also careless, ignorant and unspiritual, so that Toplady felt compelled to worship with the Baptists. "I was obliged", he writes, "either to starve my soul by never sitting under the ministry of the Word, or to go to a Dissenting Meeting House. I made not a moment's hesitation in choosing the latter." But he carefully adds, "I constantly and strictly communicated in the Church only". "I know that this was pleasing to God by the many happy soul seasons I enjoyed, both at the Lord's Table and in the separate assembly"; "and yet", he adds, "the clergyman at whose hands I received the memorial of Christ's dying love knew no more of the Gospel than so many stocks or stones". We must remember that although a few years earlier the Christian Apologists, and especially Bishop Butler in his famous *Analogy of Religion*, had done much to repel Arian, deistic and infidel attacks on the Christian Faith, at this particular period religion was in a moribund state. As a faithful preacher reported in 1760, "the luxury, riot; lust and debauchery and madness of the age could not be painted in colours equal to life". At the age of eighteen, through reading Dr. Manton's *Discourses on St. John Ch. xvii*, Toplady wholeheartedly accepted Calvinistic views and thus in 1762 he was able, with a clear conscience, to be ordained deacon, and in June of that year he was serving a curacy at Blagdon in Somersetshire although barely twenty-one years old! He stayed here scarcely two years but he soon endeared himself to the people and started a valuable practice of giving them helpful books such as Thomas à Kempis's *Imitatio Christi*. It was while

he was at Blagdon that Toplady is supposed to have sheltered from a storm in the cleft of a rock at Burrington Combe and while waiting he wrote on a playing card which he found there the lines of his hymn *Rock of Ages* which has won him such enduring fame. An annual Open Air Service is still held at this spot to commemorate this incident, and is attended by large numbers of people from all parts. Although Toplady's was a short ministry and sadly hampered by his frequent ill health from serious lung trouble, yet he had a valuable and varied experience of different country and London parishes. Thus in May 1764 he ministered for a time at Duke Street, London, Episcopal Chapel, until he was appointed Curate of Farleigh Hungerford, near Bath, where, although he only remained there a year, his pastoral work was so appreciated that on leaving he reports that he administered the Sacrament to "a number of weeping Communicants". From the start of his ministry Toplady had stressed the importance of regular attendance at the Lord's Table. In 1766 he was appointed to the living of Harpford with Fen Ottery in Devon, but while there he had a slight paralytic stroke which affected his speech and leg until a course of the Bath waters relieved him. The next year he was given the benefice of Broad Hembury, a living a few miles distant which came to him quite unsought since his principles forbade any solicitation for preferment. He retained Broad Hembury till his death. In 1769 he spent six months in London and preached in several leading Evangelical churches there from June to December, but he returned to his parish for Christmas. Again in February he had to return to London on account of the serious illness of his mother to whom he was greatly devoted, and her death that year was a severe blow to him.

While in London he preached at Bethnal Green and at St. Anne's, Blackfriars, for his friend William Romaine. During the next few years at Broad Hembury, Toplady wrote many of his hymns, but in August 1775, partly because he felt that the climate of Devon was injurious to his health and also because there was a far larger audience and "harvest of souls" for his preaching gifts, he followed Whitfield's repeated advice and went to London where he was already well known from his writings and preaching. In December he undertook the editorship of the *Gospel Magazine* for a time, and in April 1776 he secured the use of the French Huguenot Church in Orange

Street, Leicester Square, for Sundays and Wednesday evenings and it was duly licensed by the Bishop of London. Toplady preached there regularly till his death. In spite of his weak physical condition he was one of the most popular preachers in London and his sermons thrilled and inspired his large congregations. His deliberate aims in preaching were to "preach Christ crucified", "avoid all needless controversies", "endeavour to preach more to the hearts than to the heads of his hearers", and to "seek to profit and not to be admired". We are told that "his blazing eloquence" so captivated his hearers that they regarded his sermons "as in a particular manner heavenly and enchanting".

They were certainly instructive and searching. Preaching for Romaine in 1774 on "Spiritual Feelings", "Indeed", said Toplady, "the great business of God's Spirit is to draw up 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", he adds, "one by one, has the Holy Spirit begun to reveal these deep things in your soul? If so give Him the glory of it. And as you prize your 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 a preparation for complete heaven when you die."

His worshippers included prominent and cultured people like Sir Joshua Reynolds, David Garrick, the actor, and Mrs. Macaulay. He preached before the Lord Mayor and the City Council and frequently for his friend Lady Huntingdon in her chapels at Bath and Brighton. Toplady was greatly distressed because the clergy generally ignored the distinctive Christian doctrines in their preaching. "While our Churches", he declares, "are in many places empty, dissenting meetings are generally as full as they can hold. The plain but melancholy truth is, that in various parts of the kingdom multitudes of persons, who are churchmen, are forced to go to meetings in order to hear the doctrines of their own Church preached" (*The Church of England Vindicated*, p. 142). This statement is borne out by Sir William Blackstone, a celebrated lawyer, who

at this very period went to hear every clergyman of note in London and declared that " he did not hear a single discourse having more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero ".

By 1778 Toplady's consumption got rapidly worse but he did not cease his pastoral ministry of comfort to others in sorrow or sickness. In March he paid his last visit to his Broad Hembury friends and he also managed to stay with his great friend John Rylands at Northampton. Dr. Bull and John Newton were able to see him there on his way back to London in a very weak emaciated condition. He managed to preach a few more Sundays in London and Lady Huntingdon, Lady Anne Erskine, the Earl of Dartmouth, Sir Joshua Reynolds and David Garrick were amongst his congregation. On June 14 a false report that he had renounced his Calvinist principles so roused him that, against all advice, he managed to drag himself to church to deny such a libel and to give a short last testimony to his convictions, although his cough rendered speech almost impossible. It was on this occasion that he invited his special Nonconformist friends, Rylands and Gifford, to join in the Holy Communion service after the sermon. All through his illness and great weakness his radiant faith never wavered. His assurance of salvation and the presence of his Saviour were most real to him. He had not a shadow of doubt regarding his eternal salvation and he frequently spoke of himself as the " happiest man in the world ". Like Hooker in his last illness, Toplady dwelt on " the ministration of angels to God's saints " and wondered why ministers so seldom spoke of it. On August 11, 1778, as he was dying, he declared that " no mortal man could live after the glories which God had manifested to his soul ". He was buried at his own request at Tottenham Court Chapel with " no ceremony ", although his impulsive friend Rowland Hill could not forbear giving an impromptu funeral address.

As we read the lives of these great eighteenth-century Evangelical leaders we realise something of their abounding faith, their deep spirituality and how fully they " dwelt with the King for His work ". They daily experienced their Saviour's presence and power with them. As Toplady wrote—

Lord, it is not life to live,
If Thy presence Thou deny.
Lord, if Thou Thy presence give,
'Tis no longer death to die.

We to-day can only long and pray for men of like faith and of such fully consecrated zeal for God's glory and for the salvation of others, so that the urgent task of evangelism may bear fruit before the threatened collapse of the civilised world overtakes mankind. For we should not forget that the task which these dauntless eighteenth-century revivalists faced was as formidable as that which confronts us to-day. Christianity then was ignored or scorned by the great majority of English people as "fictitious" or, in Bishop Butler's words, as "a principal subject for mirth and ridicule". Yet the hymns of Watts, Charles Wesley and Toplady and the fervent preaching of all the Methodists and Evangelicals resulted in a marvellous spiritual awakening and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and in the considerable restoration of Christian Faith and practice. And since Jesus Christ was "manifested to destroy the works of the devil", His power to change lives is "the same yesterday, to-day and for ever".

In spite of Toplady's abusive and violent controversial language which is quite inexcusable, in himself he was "one of the most polished and courteous gentlemen of his day". Lady Huntingdon declared that "even at Court she never saw a more finished gentleman", and she speaks of "his delightful urbanity" and "most polite and captivating manner, both of speaking and acting, accompanied by not the least degree of affectation".

II. HIS FRIENDSHIPS

Bishop Ryle implies that Toplady lived the life of a student recluse and had "very few intimate friends" (*Christian Leaders*, 360), but the facts scarcely confirm this verdict since he seems to have had a fairly wide circle of friends and acquaintances. He mixed freely with the cultured and literary society of his day including the famous Lord Chesterfield, David Garrick and Dr. Johnson of whom he writes: "however I dissent from various of his principles, nor can avoid smiling at some of the most unpleasing of his oddities, he still passes with me for one of the ablest and honestest men who now adorn the republic of letters. It must be owned there are very few 'Johnsons' in any kingdom, or in any age". With Mrs. Macaulay, another very popular literary and social celebrity of special charm, but vain and peculiarly susceptible to flattery, Toplady was on terms of affectionate and close intimacy. She had written a *History of England*, much praised by Pitt, but of no real merit. She had

republican sympathies but was evangelical in her religious outlook. Toplady was frequently her guest and was not insensible to her charms although she was seven years his senior. They probably would have become more than friends as Mrs. Macaulay admired Toplady both as a writer, preacher and theologian, and he told another lady friend at this time, " I am really and literally tired of being a bachelor and not unwilling to try a certain hazardous experiment though half afraid to venture ". But Toplady's poor health was definitely a bar to matrimony since it held out little or no hope of many years of life. Toplady was also on intimate terms with most of the leading Evangelical revivalists like John Berridge, John Rylands, George Whitefield, Sir Richard Hill, and Lady Huntingdon.

III. HIS WRITINGS

For his short life and his weak constitution Toplady was a prolific writer and after his death his *Works* were published in six volumes in 1794. A quantity of his letters to his intimate friends and others still remain, although he deliberately burned all of his writings within his reach just before he died. His friend John Rylands reproved him for the habit he acquired early in life of sitting up into the small hours for writing, study and prayer, a practice which probably shortened his life. Toplady refused to heed any such warning. He declared that his thirst for knowledge was " literally inextinguishable " and he adds : " and if I thus drink myself into a superior world I cannot help it ".

It was in 1769 that Toplady's translation of Zanchius's great work on *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination* was published. It was a powerful exposition of his Calvinistic views which so irritated John Wesley that he described Toplady as " that lively coxcomb " and he most unfairly and unpardonably travestied his teaching by asserting that it meant : " One in twenty of mankind are elected, nineteen in twenty are reprobated. The elect shall be saved, do what they will. The reprobate shall be damned, do what they can. Reader, believe this or be damned. Witness my hand, A—. T—." Such a sarcastic, libellous statement naturally provoked a correspondingly bitter and scandalous rejoinder from Toplady and so the uncharitable and discreditable Calvinistic Controversy began, needless to say with great harm to the cause of Christ.

It is sad to record the length which bitter controversy can go, when we find that the saintly author of *Rock of Ages* could actually exclaim of Wesley, whose Apostolic ministry and unwearied evangelistic labours had led thousands of sinners to Christ, "Oh that He in whose hand the hearts of men are, may make even this *opposer of grace* a monument of its Almighty power to save!" Only the following year Toplady had an accidental meeting with one of Wesley's prominent henchmen, the hymn-writer Thomas Olivers. The three hours' "cut and thrust" controversial dialogue between these two doughty protagonists is really a humorous record of clever friendly repartee, which was at length concluded with Toplady's wise remark: "There we differ, but let it be our mutual prayer that we may experience the efficacy of God's Word in our hearts and evidence the power of it by the holiness of our lives." If Toplady had always lived up to this Christian prayer the violent and unseemly language employed in this unhappy and well-buried controversy could never have been used. For the parallel truths of God's predestination and man's free will are inscrutable divine mysteries which our finite understanding can never fully explain. "By grace ye are saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Phil. ii. 8); and it is certainly true that "No man can come to Me except the Father which hath sent Me draw him" (John vi. 44). But it is also gloriously true that "him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John vi. 37), and that "God will have all men to be saved" (1 Tim. ii. 4). So the wide invitation is, "Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely" (Rev. xxii. 17). Moreover Toplady's Calvinism did not prevent him from declaring: "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." And speaking of reprobation he says: "Bless God for the electing love and leave Him to act as He please to them that are without." St. Paul says "He who hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. i. 6), but our Lord also warns us that it is "he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved" (Matt. x. 22). As Charles Simeon wisely said fifty years later, "In Scripture there are Calvinistic principles to act on man's hopes and Arminian principles to act on his fears.

Both are needful : and combine to produce the right effect " (Brown, *Recollection of Simeon's Conversation Parties*, p. 274).

IV. HIS GENERAL OUTLOOK

We must not regard Toplady as a pious other-worldly saint and ascetic with no interest in current happenings. He corresponded with the eminent scientist Dr. Priestley until his death, and he was greatly concerned about the war with the American colonists which he vigorously opposed, uttering a solemn protest against it in 1776. He was in favour of games and pastimes "for unbending the mind and promoting the digestion", and he definitely approved of Bishop Ridley's playing chess and tennis. He was much interested in reading the notorious Lord Chesterfield's famous "Letters to his son" although he was very sarcastic about them, as he was also over the "Feathers Tavern Petition" which Archdeacon Blackburne promoted in 1771 for the abolition of clerical subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles. "It is not subscription itself", Toplady ironically writes, "which so much constitutes the grievance complained of, but the stubborn orthodoxy of the things subscribed. Castrate the Liturgy, Articles and Homilies of their Calvinism and subscription will no longer be considered a 'yoke of bondage'. These men were not compelled into the Church and if they cannot freely and conscientiously subscribe to its forms their only honest course is to leave it." Edmund Burke, in Parliament, passed a similar strong stricture on this fantastic proposal. Toplady's was the simple and natural solution, which, however, other disgruntled churchmen since then have never been willing to face !

As might be expected, the expulsion in 1768 of six so-called "Methodist" students from St. Edmund's Hall, Oxford, roused Toplady's wrath and stirred his pen to vigorous action. These students were condemned for holding "the doctrines of Election, Perseverance and Justification by Faith without Works", and so obviously they were Calvinists rather than Arminian "Methodists". Toplady challenged the action of Dr. Nowell, the Vice-Chancellor, in a powerfully written tractate, *The Church of England vindicated from the charge of Arminianism*, in which he shows that "gratuitous predestination, justification by faith only and the efficacy of divine grace in regeneration are as palpably asserted by the Church of England, as tran-

substantiation is by the Church of Rome, or parity of ministers by the Church of Scotland". Calvinist doctrines, Toplady asserts, were generally held by the Church for the first four centuries until Pelagius taught otherwise. Toplady affirms that from the time of Wycliffe to the days of Laud, leading Church dignitaries, including Archbishop Bradwardine, have held the doctrine of eternal election and particular redemption, and he cites the Marian martyrs who suffered at the stake as professing these doctrines, as well as practically all the Elizabethan divines, and especially Hooker, Archbishop Whitgift and Bancroft, and in the next generation Bishops Hall and Davenant and Archbishop Usher. He therefore declares that these godly St. Edmund Hall students, who were defended by their College Principal as of "excellent conduct" and of "exemplary lives", were expelled "for believing the leading truths of that very Church with which the expellers no less than the expelled profess to agree". He well says that "the doctrines of the Church are to be learned from the Articles and Homilies of the Church herself, not from the private opinions of some individuals who lay hold on the skirt of her garment, call themselves by her name and live by her revenues". Toplady's tractate, like his later and fuller *Historic proof of the Calvinism of the Church of England*, is a logical, powerful and very able defence of the Calvinism of the Church of England, based on the Prayer Book and Articles, which has never been answered. He certainly was correct when he told Dr. Nowell that "the doctrine of the Scripture and of our Church is that justification itself consists in God's esteeming and counting us righteous, neither for our faith, nor for our works, nor for both of them together, but solely on account of Christ's sacrifice and obedience; that the sacrifice and obedience of Christ, as the only matter of our justification are to be received, embraced and rested upon by faith only, which faith is the gift of God; and that this faith thus divinely given and wrought in the soul by the Holy Ghost, is lively, active and purifying; having its fruit unto holiness and the end everlasting life".

V. HYMN WRITER

As a hymn writer Toplady was in great repute and over thirty of his hymns were in general use. Bishop Ryle asserts that "he was one of the best hymn writers in the English

language " (op. cit., 382), and besides *Rock of Ages* he cites, as "glorious hymns", Toplady's *Holy Ghost, dispel our sadness, Your harps, ye trembling saints, When languor and disease invade, Deathless principle, arise* and *A debtor to mercy alone*; but few of these hymns are now found in our modern hymn books, although his hymn *From whence this fear and unbelief* is familiar to many old people from the verse, oft quoted some years ago :

If Thou hast my release procured
And freely in my room endured
The whole of wrath Divine,
Payment God cannot twice demand,
First at my bleeding Surety's hand,
And then again at mine.

An edition of Toplady's hymns was published as recently as 1860. But to-day, with the exception of *Inspirer and Hearer of prayer* and of the world-famed *Rock of Ages*, they are practically unknown and unsung. His biographer rightly declares that *Rock of Ages* has been "the appointed means of diffusing a knowledge of the way of salvation over the whole Christian World and of leading tens of thousands to Christ" (Wright, op. cit., 107).

In a day of increasing ignorance of God's Word and neglect of public worship, it is certainly heartening to remember that not only God's children but numbers who are spiritually careless and indifferent still, on occasions of stress and sorrow, join in Toplady's great hymn and prayer :

Rock of ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.

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