



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Almighty and everlasting God, who dost kindle the flame of thy love in the hearts of the saints, grant unto us the same faith and power of love; that, as we rejoice in their triumphs, we may profit by their examples, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

--Gothic Missal, All Saints Day

George Herbert: Poet and Pastor

Life: Herbert (1593-1633) was born into an aristocratic family which had connections with the royal court. He had a deep sense of the transcendent and holy:

“Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for thee.
 (“The Elixir”)

He became increasingly disillusioned with the excessively worldly and immoral life at the Court, so although he had served in Parliament he never became a court insider or received a high appointment. He therefore planned for a retirement to a rural ministry (which he exercised at Bemerton in 1630-1633, before dying of tuberculosis, which was endemic in impoverished rural areas and contracted by visiting the poor in their homes).

Works: *The Country Parson* (short treatise on the pastoral ministry of the rural priest, the virtues of character it requires and how such a ministry may ideally be comprehensively developed) and a collection of poems (*The Temple*).

- The latter consists of didactic poetry that makes extensive use of allegory/church symbolism. These probably written and revised between 1619 and 1630 as part of his design to leave public life and pursue rural ministry.
- Note
 - the use of the church year as a topical principle and also
 - the progression from justification by imputed righteousness to sanctification, which achieves its perfect form only after death
 - Note the division into two halves:
 - “The Church Porch” (the preparation to enter the Church; from being dead and hard, the heart, as a broken altar, begins to perceive Christ’s sacrifice and to soften, receiving God’s invitation to enter into communion with Him through Christ’s sacrifice) and
 - “The Church” (the mysterious reality of the Church and life in Christ meditated upon)

- A deep indebtedness to the divine love which saves enemies:
 - “There is no dealing with thy mighty passion: For though I die for thee, I am behind” (“The Reprisal,” ll. 2-3; compare the classic passage from “The Agony”)
 - “Then for thy passion—I will do that-- / Alas my God, I know not what” (“The Thanksgiving,” ll. 49-50; ultimately the simple receiving of his sacrifice with the confession of gratitude and praise, expressed through apparently spontaneous poetry, is all Herbert finds that he can offer)

His poetry and pastoral writings are conditioned by the language of the daily office and liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer* and are typical of the classical Anglican emphasis upon

- the *via media* (“middle way” between the Catholic and [Reformed] Protestant traditions),
- the importance of the Incarnation,
- the formation of believers through their participation in the visible church, and
- the centrality of the sacraments in the Christian life and pastoral care.

Herbert’s Justification of a Protestant Ministry in the Midst of an Unstable Environment and Rapidly Changing Official Expectations

The CP written to “set down the form and character of a true pastor, that I might have a mark to aim at.”

The ministry is a sacred office to which God must call one and in which one applies the divine Word to the members of the visible church through preaching, the sacraments, prayer and counsel and no one should seek to enter into such an office hastily or for the wrong reasons:

...fain would I draw nigh,
Fain put thee on, exchanging my lay-sword
for that of th’ holy word
(“The Priesthood”)

Indeed one of the marks of Herbert’s Protestantism (in spite of his acceptance of traditional liturgical forms) is the emphasis given in *The Country Parson* (hereafter, CP) to teaching and pastoral counsel (as opposed to the traditional medieval emphasis upon the minister’s priestly role at the altar).

- Priest (intercessory/intermediary/sacerdotal functions=dispensers of grace in the sacraments) → preacher (mediating to the congregation members the divine Word which reconcile the hearers to God; requires education to accurately discern this Word through intensive study but must bridge this gap to communicate truth to the simple and uneducated) together with a life that modeled obedience to this Word/heavenly doctrine, so that ministers leads not only by his word but by his actions.

- Confessor→pastoral counsel/admonition and mediation/reconciliation of conflicts between members of the congregation

It is in virtue of the teaching functions and the ability to pray for others and to give them pastoral counsel (that leads them out of sin and points toward Christian virtue) that the priest has a place of honor within the Church. The faithful exercise of this office of faithfully speaking the Word requires that the self be brought to nought and the whole of oneself placed unreservedly in God's service. Our personal differences, though not insignificant, are not the point here, for the fundamental requirements of the teaching ministry (self-denial and conformity to Christ, that one might His Word to His people—an antidote to personal ambition) are the same for all those who exercise it. This incidentally also means that the minister of the Gospel becomes, by character and conduct, an example to other (esp. to his people) (charity, hospitality, humility, modesty, etc., which put to shame the rampant anti-clerical attitudes inherited from the Middle Ages in regard to the faults of the clergy and also build bonds of charity on the donor's own terms).

If sin lies in the wrong ordering of desires, then the pastoral care of the Church must attend precisely to this, so that **“A pastor is the deputy of Christ for the reducing of man to the obedience of God”** (CP 1; cf. T “Love II”: “Immortal Heat, O let thy greater flame/Attract the lesser to it...And kindle in our hearts such true desires / As may consume our lusts, and make the way).”

The virtue and ordering of nature according to God's providential plan, in which human beings play their own small but significant part at the apex of the created order. In this context, even the most mundane task can become a form of divine service:

All may of thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean
Which with his tincture (for thy sake)
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for less be told.

The frailty of man apart from God is often emphasized. Even in regard to the office of the ministry, which rests upon a calling and gifting from God, Herbert can say

“Lord, how can man preach they eternal word?
He is a brittle crazy glass:
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
This glorious and transcendent place,
To be a window, through thy grace.

Often human beings are tormented by a sense of God's absence and, under the pressure of affliction must struggle to recognize their utter dependence upon God and resolve to worship God in spite of their subjective perception that God is absent and that the answers to life's questions and problems lie beyond their grasp. In these moments, the most one can have is a passive desire for God in his goodness to act, even when this seems slow in coming and is hidden and concealed under apparently opposite circumstances:

“Lord Jesus, thou didst bow
Thy dying head upon the tree:
O be not now
More dead to me!

Lord, didst thou leave thy throne,
Not to relieve? how can it be,
That thou art grown
Thus hard to me?
(“Longing,” ll. 31-34, 61-64)

“Away despair, my gracious Lord doth hear... Well may close his eyes,
but not his heart” (“The Bag,” ll. 1, 6)

This is a bit like Luther's account of *Anfechtung* and theology of the cross, but Herbert not only looks upon the Cross to know that God is merciful, one must go back even to the Incarnation to discern God's fundamental willingness to sacrifice Himself and endure humiliation in order to redeem a people for Himself: “Hast thou not heard, that my Lord Jesus di'd.../The God of power, as he did ride / In his majestic robes of glory.../ He did descend” (“The Bag, ll. 7,9-10,12)

Ultimately God's acceptance of a humble state under a created form is set before us in the Lord's Supper, where one may commune with the Lord who presents himself to the faithful under the guise of bread and wine in order to strengthen them:

To me dost now thyself convey;
For so thou should'st without me still have been,
Leaving within me sin:

But by way of nourishment and strength
Thou creep'st into my breast;
Making thy way my rest,
And thy small quantities my length;
Which spread their forces into every part,
Meeting sin's force and art.
(“The Holy Communion”)

The Lord's Supper is a kind of experiential testimony to Christ's faithfulness that restores the believe by assuring them of the Lord's surpassing faithfulness and costly love:

Then let wrath remove;

Love will do the deed:
For with love
Stony hearts will bleed. (“Discipline,” ll. 17-20)

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat
 (“Love [III])

Who would know Sin, let him repair
Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see
A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,
His skin, his garments bloody be.
Sin is that press and vice, which forceth pain
To hunt his cruel food through ev’ry vein.
Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine.
 (“The Agony”)

This high cost was necessary to turn and redeem the hard-hearted sinners that we are:
Remember that thou once didst write in stone (“The Sinner”)

Giving us a new, soft heart which is moved to repentance
A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman’s tool hath touched the same.
A HEART alone
is such a stone
As nothing but
Thy pow’r doth cut. (“The H. Communion”)
And this hardness all to readily returns to dull the life of faith:
Sin is still hammering at my heart
Unto a hardness, void of love:
Let suppling grace, to cross his art
Drop from above. (“Grace”)

Medieval controversies over Christ’s mode of presence in the elements (i.e. transubstantiation and impanation) are treated as speculative and unnecessary to the life of faith:

First I am sure, whether bread stay
Or whether Bread do fly away
Concerneth bread not me...

Then of this also I am sure
That thou did all those pains endure
To’abolish Sin, not Wheat....

This gift of all gifts is the best,
Thy flesh the least that I request...
...My God give me all of Thee

The right ordering not only of personal life (through the observance of a rule of life and prayer) but also of domestic life—the home a school of virtue through catechizing and daily office of common prayer, celebrated according to the liturgical calendar, as essential to sustain the spiritual life.

Note the centrality of corporate worship through common prayer at all levels of Herbert's account of the Christian life—individual, family, church, etc.:

“Though private prayer be a brave design,/ Yet public hath more promises, more love.”