

A Thanksgiving Day Thought

Well, actually, it's a thought for every day!

On Friday, the 21st of July, 1620, the members of the church which had left Scrooby some twelve or so years before, met for their last day together upon earth.¹ They were about to set sail from Holland, *via* England to New England. The preacher was John Robinson. Robinson lifted up his voice and preached to the whole church for the last time. As he drew to a close, he said:

We are now ere long to part asunder, and the Lord knows whether ever we shall live to see one another's faces. But whether the Lord has appointed it or not, I charge you before God and his blessed angels, follow me no further than I follow Christ; and if God shall reveal anything to you by any other instrument of his, be as ready to receive it as ever you were to receive any truth by my ministry. For I am confident the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word. I bewail the state and condition of the Reformed churches, who have come to a full-stop in religion, and will go no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn beyond what Luther saw; the Calvinists, they stick where Calvin left them. This is a misery much to be lamented; for though they were shining lights in their times, yet God did not reveal his whole will unto them, and if they were alive today they would be as ready to and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received. Keep in mind our church covenant, our promise and covenant with God and one another, to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known to us from his written word. But take heed what you receive for truth – examine it well and compare it and weigh it with other scriptures of truth before you receive it. It is not possible that the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick anti-Christian darkness, and that perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.

This farewell sermon of John Robinson has resonated down the centuries. Its stirring appeal has affected many for good. He called upon the people to search the Scriptures, to follow all the light

¹ I have drawn this from my *Battle for the Church: 1517-1644*. See also my *Voyage to Freedom*.

which God grants in his word, and not to follow men, even great men, even men which have been much used of God. It is most remarkable that Robinson emphasised this particular point in his final sermon to the departing saints.

How is it that many who think highly of the 1620 settlers pay so little attention to Robinson's excellent point? For instance, why do they give the impression (to put it no stronger) that they cannot accept that Calvin, great man though he was, did not see all the truth? Why do they so often try to make out that he was entirely consistent with himself at all times? Let me extend the point. Why do so many think that the men of Westminster, in the 1640s, with their Confession and other documents, set out the final word for all believers until the end of the age? Why is it that not a few of those who take such a view actually preach the Confession and not Scripture (2 Tim. 4:2)? And when confronted with new-covenant teaching on, say, the law or the discontinuity of the covenants, why are they singularly unwilling to face Scripture, and read it shorn of their confessional-spectacles? I do not say that they should throw the spectacles away, but I am asserting that they should read, interpret and apply their Confession by Scripture, and not the other way round. The same goes for all who treat the Heidelberg Confession, the Savoy Declaration, the 1689 Particular Baptist Confession, the writings of J.C.Philpot or John Nelson Darby... in like manner.

And it's not only John Robinson who laid down this vital marker, is it? We have the inspired record, a record that was surely given to set an example for us:

These Jews [of Berea] were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11).

Clearly, the Spirit demands that believers in all ages – not least, that we today – search the Scriptures, and be ready and willing to submit our minds, hearts and lives to what God has revealed in his word. Christ rebuked the Jews, not for searching the Scriptures, but for not applying them: 'You search the Scriptures... yet...' (John 5:39-40), he complained. As he prayed for his people: '[Father] sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth' (John 17:17). And, as

the prophet thundered: ‘Should not a people seek their God?... To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them’ (Isa. 8:19-20; see also Luke 16:29; 2 Tim. 3:14-17). What Scripture does *not* say is: ‘To the Reformers, to the Puritans! Never move beyond them and their great Confessions!’