

Church History (54): Matthew Henry

Matthew Henry (1662-1714), was a Presbyterian minister, whose *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, had a lasting impact upon generations to follow. For example, George Whitefield "literally studied it on his knees; read it through four times; and to the close of life spoke of its author with profound veneration: even calling him—the great Mr. Henry" (Trumbull).¹

I. Matthew Henry

1. *His life and death.* "Matthew Henry was born at Broad Oak, Flintshire (a small town on the boarder of Wales and England), on October 18, 1662, less than two months after his father, Philip Henry, was ejected from the ministry in the Church of England. Born prematurely, he was a frail child, yet was spiritually robust and gifted in learning. He was educated primarily by his father, with the assistance of tutors" (Beeke).² In a manuscript dated October 18, 1675, Henry described his conversion as happening three years before. "I think it was three years ago, that I began to be convinced, hearing a sermon by my father on Psalm 51:17, 'The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.' I think it was that which melted me; afterwards I began to inquire after Christ."³ A year later, on December 7, 1673, he heard a sermon wherein the marks of true grace were described. "I tried myself by them, and told my father my evidences; he liked them, and said, if those evidences were true (as I think they were), I had true grace."⁴ Henry then described three marks of grace that were now true of him.⁵ "1. There is true conversion where there have been covenant transactions between God and the soul. And I found that there have been such between God and my soul, and I hope in truth and righteousness. If I never did this before, I do it now; for I take God in Christ to be mine. I give up myself to be His in the bond of an everlasting covenant never to be forgotten." "2. Where there hath been true repentance for sin; and grief, and shame, and sorrow, for it, as to what is past; with all the ingredients of it, as confession, aggravation, self-judging, self-condemning. And I have found this in me, though not in that measure that I could desire." "3. Where there is true love of God. For to love the Lord our God with all our soul, and with all our strength, is better than whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices. Now, as far as I know my own heart, I love God in sincerity."

But is that love indeed sincere? As far as I can judge, it is so: for, (1) I love the people of God; all the Lord's people shall by my people. (2) I love the word of God. I esteem it above all. I find my heart so inclined. I desire it as the food of my soul. I greatly delight in it, both in reading and hearing of it; and my soul can witness subjection to it in some measure. I think I love the word of God for the purity of it. I love the ministers and messengers of the word. I am often reading it. I rejoice in the good success of it. All which were given as marks of true love to the word, in a sermon I lately heard on Psalm cxix. 140: 'Thy word is very pure, therefore thy servant loveth it.'

"The home into which Matthew was born was the very best of Puritan families. His parents had a great love and respect for each other and Philip Henry never forgot the date of their marriage. On their twentieth wedding anniversary Matthew's father wrote: 'We have been so long married and never reconciled; that is, there never was any reason for it'. Together they loved and sought to instruct and discipline in a God-honoring way their son Matthew and his four sisters, Sarah, Katharine, Eleanor and

¹ Charles Trumbull, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1:1

² Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 323

³ J.B. Williams, *Memoirs of the Life, Character, and Writings of the Rev. Matthew Henry*, 27-28

⁴ J.B. Williams, *Memoirs of the Life, Character, and Writings of the Rev. Matthew Henry*, 28

⁵ J.B. Williams, *Memoirs of the Life, Character, and Writings of the Rev. Matthew Henry*, 28-30

Ann, who were born in quick succession from 1664 to 1668."⁶ Matthew Henry often praised his parents for their consistent Christian witness and religious instruction. "When I was born, as I have often heard my mother say, I was very weak, and so sickly, that most thought I could not live, yet the Lord appeared for my deliverance; it is today thirteen years since I was born, and the Lord has preserved me ever since, blessed be His holy Name; blessed be God that I have had a good education, and was taught so earnestly to read my Bible" (MH).⁷ Matthew Henry published *An Account of the Life and death of Mr. Philip Henry* a year after his father's death (1697). He said in the preface: "It pleased God graciously to prolong the life of my dear and honored mother almost eleven years after my father, very much to the comfort of all her relations; she continued, to the last, at her house at Broad Oak, where she was born, a great example of wisdom, piety, and usefulness, and abounding in good works."⁸ On June 4, 1707, he preached his mother's funeral sermon from Proverbs 31:28, "Her children shall arise up, and call her blessed." He said: "We ought always to maintain a grateful remembrance, and take all occasions to make an honorable mention, of our godly parents. We cannot keep them from the grave, but we may keep them from the 'land of forgetfulness;' let their memories live with us when they are dead; live while we live, and be transmitted to those we leave behind; let them be always dear and precious to us."⁹

In 1686, Henry moved to Chester, England (where he would eventually become pastor in 1687). "In 1687, Henry married Katherine, who died in childbirth in February of 1689. In 1690, Henry married Mary Warburton. They had one son, Philip, and eight daughters, three of whom died in infancy" (Beeke).¹⁰ This included their first child, one-year old Elizabeth, who died in 1692. "On the day she died, 19 July 1692, he wrote these touching words that, far from driving him away from God, encouraged him to trust that she was in safe keeping: 'In the morning I had the child in my arms, endeavoring solemnly to give her up to God, and to bring my heart to His will; and presently there seemed some reviving. But while I was writing this, I was suddenly called out of my closet. I went for the doctor, and brought him with me; but, as soon as we came in, the sweet babe quietly departed between the mother's arms and mine, without any struggle, for nature was spent by its long illness; and now my house is a house of mourning'" (Eveson).¹¹ The following April (1693), they had a second daughter, named Mary. Three weeks after her birth she fell sick and died. Henry again turned to his dairy: "The Lord is righteous: he takes and gives, and gives, and takes again. I desire to submit: but, O Lord, shew me wherefore Thou contendest with me."¹² Baby Mary was buried that Sunday, after Henry preached in the AM and Afternoon services. He preached on Job's need to submit to God's providence in the morning, and why infants die in the evening. He closed the latter sermon by saying: "Resign, and give up your dying children to God. They cannot do it. You must do it for them. Father, into Thy hands I commit my child's spirit. They are His by right: and His by your consent. You should restore them when He calls for them, and do it freely. I know it is hard, but it must be done."¹³ "Joy came to the Henrys in the following year when a daughter, Ester, was born on 27 September 1694. Despite various illnesses, especially one when she was three years old, she survived. At the time Matthew Henry referred to her as 'the Delight of my Eyes'" (Harman).¹⁴

⁶ P.H. Eveson, *Matthew Henry*, 23-24

⁷ Allen M. Harman, *Matthew Henry: Life and Influence*, 30

⁸ Matthew Henry, *Works*, 2:604

⁹ Matthew Henry, *Works*, 2:595-596

¹⁰ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 325

¹¹ P.H. Eveson, *Matthew Henry*, 66

¹² P.H. Eveson, *Matthew Henry*, 67

¹³ P.H. Eveson, *Matthew Henry*, 68

¹⁴ Allen M. Harman, *Matthew Henry: Life and Influence*, 95

"In May of 1714, Henry revisited Chester (as he had since moved to London). As he rode back to London, he fell from his horse at Tarporley and was taken to the house of a neighboring nonconformist minister. He died the following day" (Beeke).¹⁵ That day, Henry's sister Sarah came to view the body. She wrote about this experience as follows: "I went to the place to take leave of the dear earthen vessel, in which was lodged such a treasure. How is the gold become dim, and the fine gold changed! I have reason to think he loved me the best of all his sisters, and it is with satisfaction I think of the love I had for him, and the great unity that was amongst us then, so that I do not remember one angry or unkind word betwixt us."¹⁶ "Matthew's bodily remains were taken to Chester. We read that when the procession reached the city, 'it was met by eight of the clergy, ten coaches, and a large company of horses; many dissenting ministers followed the mourners; and universal respect was paid by persons of note, and distinction.' There were sermons preached on the following Sundays in both Chester and Hackney. Dissenting ministers throughout England and Wales mourned the passing of this godly, faithful preacher and Bible expositor" (Eveson).¹⁷ Mary Henry was left a widow with seven surviving children. She survived her husband for seventeen years, dying in August 1731.

2. *His pastorate and preaching.* Matthew Henry pastored two churches. The first was in Chester (1687-1711), and the second London (1712-1714). "It is believed that, from his childhood, Mr. Henry had an inclination to the ministry. He discovered it by the remarkable eagerness with which he read the Bible; by a peculiar attachment to ministers; and by a pleasure in writing and repeating sermons, which was so predominant as to be almost prophetic" (Williams).¹⁸ In 1686, Henry was invited by some friends, to come to Chester and preach a sermon to some Christians gathered in a house (until the Toleration Acts of 1689, it was common for dissenters to hold religious meetings in houses). These Christians were a part of a church that called Henry to become their pastor. After consulting with his father, Henry accepted the call, relocated to Chester, and was eventually ordained on May 9, 1687. After his ordination, Henry wrote in his diary: "I resolve by His grace to lay myself out for the spiritual good of those over whom God shall set me. I will by the grace of God suffer cheerfully and courageously for the truths and ways of Christ—choosing rather with Moses to suffer afflictions with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. This is the substance of what I promise in the strength of the spirit, in the grace of Christ, and having sworn by His strength, I will perform it, that I will keep His righteous judgments, and the Lord keep it always in the imagination of the thoughts of my heart, and establish my way before Him."¹⁹ "A meetinghouse built for Henry in Crook Lane was opened in 1700. In 1706, a gallery was added to accommodate another congregation that joined Henry's. The number of communicants rose to 350. In addition to his congregational work, Henry held monthly services at five neighboring villages and regularly preached to prisoners in the castle" (Beeke).²⁰

His constant work, on the Lord's Day, at Chester, was to pray six times in public, to sing six times, to expound twice and preach twice. He went to the congregation exactly at nine, began the public worship with singing the hundredth psalm; he prayed a short but fervent and suitable prayer, then he read some part of the Old Testament and expounded it, going through it in course, from beginning to end; then he sang another psalm, then he prayed for about half an hour, then he preached and gave the blessing. He did the

¹⁵ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 326

¹⁶ Allen M. Harman, *Matthew Henry: Life and Influence*, 132

¹⁷ P.H. Eveson, *Matthew Henry*, 111

¹⁸ J.B. Williams, *Memoirs of the Life, Character, and Writings of the Rev. Matthew Henry*, 31

¹⁹ Charles Chapman, *Matthew Henry: His life and Times*, 502

²⁰ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 325

same exactly in the afternoon, only expounding the New Testament. This was his constant Lord's Day work.²¹

"In 1710, Henry was invited to Hackney, one of the most important congregations in London. He agreed to move, though not immediately. He finally preached his farewell sermon at Chester on May 11, 1712, amid many tears. His ministry in Hackney, began the following week" (Beeke). "On his last Sunday at Chester he wrote: 'A very sad day. O that by the sadness of their countenances and mine, our hearts may be made better. I see I have been very unkind to the congregation who love me too well.' When he finally arrived at Hackney there was still obvious uncertainty as to whether he had made the right choice, for we read, 'Lord *am* I in my way? I look back with sorrow for leaving Chester; I look forward with fear: but unto Thee I look up'" (Eveson).²² Henry's ministry in Hackney was short (2yrs) and busy. "During the short time he ministered in Hackney Matthew had very little time to himself. Besides the regular three Sunday services in his own congregation, he would often deliver an early Sunday morning lecture (exposition) at Little St. Helen's within the city walls, where a Presbyterian congregation had been gathering since 1672. Sometimes, after his own Lord's Day services, he would travel to other congregations to deliver evening expositions. During the week he was often employed two or three times a day in preaching in and around the London area" (Eveson).²³

3. *His commentary and writings.* "Henry began his *Commentary on the Whole Bible* in November 1704. After ten years of diligent study, he was able to finish expository comments on Genesis through Acts. After his death, thirteen of Henry's fellow ministers compiled a commentary primarily from Henry's notes and writings on Romans through Revelation" (Beeke).²⁴ "The text of the whole Bible is given with the *Commentary*. Matthew Henry gives an introduction to each book, as well as a brief summary and outline at the head of each chapter; then follow the Scripture, a few verses at a time, and the notes on the text. Following a well-known expository principle, he states, explains, and applies. In every passage of Scripture, he finds lessons for daily living" (Trumbull).²⁵ This can be illustrated by the full title of the *Commentary*: "A Commentary on the Whole Bible: Wherein each chapter is summed up in its contents. The sacred text inserted at large in distinct paragraphs; each paragraph reduced to its proper heads; the sense given, and largely illustrated with practical remarks and observations." He began the first volume by saying: "We have now before us the holy Bible, or *book*, for so *bible* signifies. We call it *the book*, by way of eminency; for it is incomparably the best book that ever was written, the book of books, shining like the sun in the firmament of learning, other valuable and useful books, like the moon and stars, borrowing their light from it. We call it the holy book, because it was written by holy men, and indited by the Holy Ghost; it is perfectly pure from all falsehood and corrupt intention; and the manifest tendency of it is to promote holiness among men."²⁶

The Commentary itself is one that, on its own merits, deserves to be read and re-read by all classes of society. There is much in its spirit that will make it welcome to men of every religious denomination. There are hundreds of sentences, yea paragraphs, that could only be written by one whose heart was full of Christian love. The great aim of the writer is to let the truth be seen and appreciated. His reverence for what God has said is most profound. There is no trifling; no hyper criticism; no undesirable aptitude for seeing difficulties and contradictions where they do not exist. He makes you feel

²¹ Allen M. Harman, *Matthew Henry: Life and Influence*, 89

²² P.H. Eveson, *Matthew Henry*, 100

²³ P.H. Eveson, *Matthew Henry*, 102

²⁴ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 328

²⁵ Charles Trumbull, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1:2

²⁶ Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1:1

that he is conducting you to the feet of the Great Teacher of all, and awakens the teachable spirit he himself experienced. The general tenor of the remarks is intended to show the sense of the words in their original application in their bearing upon all people.²⁷

In addition to his *Commentary*, Matthew Henry also had several sermons and treatises published. These were soon collected into *The Complete Works of Matthew Henry*, and contain several funeral sermons, as well as treatises such as *A Brief Enquiry into the True Nature of Schism* (1690), *A Discourse Concerning Meekness and Quietness of Spirit* (1699), *A Scriptural Catechism* (1702), *A Plain Catechism for Children* (1703), *A Church in the House: A Sermon Concerning Family-Religion* (1704), *The Communicant's Companion* (1704), *Four Discourses Against Vise and Profaneness* (1705), *A Method for Prayer* (1710), *Directions for Beginning, Spending, and Closing Each Day with God* (1712), *Sober-Mindedness Pressed upon Young People* (1713), *Christ's Favor to Little Children* (1713), *A Sermon Concerning the Catechizing of Youth* (1713) and *The Pleasantness of a Religious Life, Opened and Proved* (1714). Henry published his treatise *The Communicant's Companion: or Instructions and Helps for the right Receiving of the Lord's Supper*, in 1704, "and immediately won acceptance as an impressive explanation of the Puritan view of the Lords Supper" (Harman).²⁸ Henry said in the preface: "I here humbly offer you (Christian readers) some assistance in that great and good work which you have to do, and are concerned to do well, when you attend the table of the Lord."²⁹ After describing some of the names by which it is known, (the Sacrament, the Lord's Supper, Communion, Eucharist, and the Feast), he then described "the nature of the ordinance."³⁰ "(1) The ordinance of the Lord's supper is a commemorating ordinance. 'Do this in remembrance of Me.' Do it for a memorial, do it for a remembrance, of Me." "(2) It is a confessing ordinance. The supper is a solemnity by which we constantly avow the Christian name, and declare ourselves not ashamed of the banner of the cross, under which we were listed, but resolve to continue Christian faithful servants and soldiers to our lives' end." "(3) It is a communicating ordinance. Here are not only gospel truths represented to us, and confessed by us, but gospel benefits offered to us, and accepted by us." "(4) It is a covenanting ordinance. 'This cup,' our Savior tells us, 'is the new covenant.'"

Christ, and all His benefits, are here communicated to us. Here is not only bread and wine set before us to be looked at, but given to us to be eaten and drank; not only Christ made known to us, that we may contemplate the mysteries of redemption, but Christ made over to us, that we may participate of the benefits of redemption. God, in this ordinance, not only assures us of the truth of the promise, but according to our present case and capacity, conveys to us by his Spirit the good things promised. Receive Christ Jesus the Lord, Christ and a pardon, Christ and peace, Christ and grace, Christ and heaven: it is all your own, if you come up to the terms on which it is offered in the gospel.³¹

Henry also published *A Treatise on Baptism*. It contained seven chapters: I. The Nature of Baptism. II. The Subjects of Baptism. III. The Necessity of Baptism. IV. The Manner of Baptism. V. The Practical Improvement of our Baptism. VI. Directions to Parents Concerning the Baptism of their Children. VII. Directions to those Present when the Ordinance of Baptism is Administered. Concerning the practical improvement of baptism, Henry said: "When I say we must improve our baptism, I mean, that we must carry it in every thing as a baptized people; and our whole conversation must be under the influence of

²⁷ Charles Chapman, *Matthew Henry: His Life and Times*, 85

²⁸ Allen M. Harman, *Matthew Henry: Life and Influence*, 177

²⁹ Matthew Henry, *Works*, 1:284

³⁰ Matthew Henry, *Works*, 1:290-297

³¹ Matthew Henry, *Works*, 1:294

our baptism. Would you have all our Christian duty in one word, it is, to behave in every respect as those who are baptized; that is, 'to have our conversation as becomes the gospel of Jesus Christ' (Phil.1:27)." Thus, to improve upon our baptism, is to believingly and humbly remember all that baptism signifies. Henry provided six ways baptism is improved:³² "(1) Baptism is to be improved, as a restraint from all manner of sin. When we are tempted to be proud, or passionate, or intemperate, or unjust, or the like, we must remember our baptism. In baptism, we were solemnly admitted into the visible church as members, and so took upon us the profession of Christ's holy and excellent religion. Sin is a breach of our baptismal engagements. We were then sealed, and bound, to be the Lord's; and shall we be unruly, as to break such cords of love from us. When a temptation to sin comes, answer it with that of the psalmist, 'thy vows are upon me, O God!' (Ps.56:12); not upon me as a burden, which I am weary of, but upon me as a bond, which I am obliged by." "(2) Baptism is to be improved as an incentive to duty. As we are Christians, we have not only temptations to be resisted, and sins to be avoided, but work to be done; great and necessary work, for God and our souls, and eternity. In Baptism we were taken into our Master's family, and owned as members of it. We put on our Master's livery: it is the badge of our profession, and so in baptism we obliged ourselves to do our Maser's work. It is a bond upon the soul. A covenant like that of Josiah's, 'To walk after the Lord, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies' (2Chron.34:31). When we begin to loiter, and spiritual sloth takes off our chariot wheels, let this help to quicken us, that in baptism we took the yoke of Christ upon us, and that we were not yoked to play, but to work."

"(3) Baptism is to be improved by us, as a strong inducement to repent of sin. As we should improve our baptism to prevent our fall; so, when we are fallen, we should improve it to help us up again. Baptism is 'the baptism of repentance' (Lk.3:3). The apostles were sent to preach repentance, and to that baptism was annexed, 'Repent, and be baptized.' (Acts 2:38). Our baptism engages us, not only to the first repentance from dead works, but to an after repentance, as there is occasion. Our first washing in the laver of baptism obliges us every day to wash our feet (Jn.13:10), from the pollutions we contract. Our covenant was, not to sin; but if we should sin, repent. Impenitency is the most direct falsifying of our baptismal covenant that can be; it is against the prescribed method of cure. Baptism is a continued seal of our pardon upon repentance: an assurance, that if we be truly sorry for what we have done, and will come and confess it, and do so no more, all shall be well; iniquity shall not be our ruin." "(4) Baptism is to be improved by us, as a great support to our faith. Unbelief is the sin that does not easily beset us: there are remainders of it in the best; and it is at the bottom of our many sinful departures from God. By baptism we were admitted into covenant relations. God did then make over Himself to us, to be our God; and to take us to Himself, to be His people; and shall we then ever distrust Him? Relation is a great encouragement to dependence. As by baptism, God has hold of us when we depart from Him, so by baptism, we have hold of God when He seems to withdraw from us. It is an excellent support to faith, when we walk in darkness, and have no light, that we may stay ourselves upon God; ours in covenant; ours, for He has made Himself over to us to be our God. Be not dismayed then, for He is thy God. Use this as an anchor of the soul in every storm; and whatever happens keep hold of thy covenant relation to God." "(5) Baptism is to be improved by us, as a special friend to prayer. In baptism, we took God for our God; and 'should not a people seek unto their God?' (Isa.8:14). Baptism put us into the relation of a people to God; which, while we live in the neglect of prayer, we refuse to stand to, and so forfeit its privileges." "(6) Baptism should be improved by us, as a powerful engagement to brotherly love. All Christians who are duly baptized, however differing in other things, are interested in one and the same covenant, guided by one and the same rule, meet at one and the same throne of grace, are entitled to one and the same inheritance, and all this by one and the same baptism: and should they not then love one another?"

³² Matthew Henry, *Works*, 1:540-550