

An Estimate of Thomas Manton - J C Ryle

The publication of a complete and uniform edition of Manton's works is a great boon to the readers of English theology. Many of his best writings have been hitherto inaccessible to all who have not long purses and large libraries. The few who know him would gladly testify, I am sure, that Thomas Manton was one of the best authors of his day, and that his works richly deserve reprinting.

The republication of this great divine's writings in their present form appears to demand a few prefatory remarks.

- What are Manton's special merits?
- What claims has a man of the seventeenth century on the attention of 1871?
- What good thing is there about him that we should buy him and read him?

These are reasonable questions, to which I propose to supply an answer in the following brief essay. A calm examination of Manton's real worth appears a suitable accompaniment to a new edition of Manton's works.

The inquiry, it must be admitted, is not an easy one. The materials for forming a judgment are singularly few and scanty. Two hundred years have passed away since Manton was laid in the grave. He died in an age when his principles and his party were very unpopular, and few cared to be known as his friends and admirers. Except the long and exhaustive biography of him by Harris, which has been wisely reprinted in this edition, we possess little information about him. All other impressions about him must be based on a patient analysis of his voluminous posthumous works. Considerable familiarity with these works forms my principal claim on the reader's attention in sending forth this essay.

Let me clear the way by considering an objection which is frequently brought against Manton and other divines of his school. That objection is that he was "a Puritan." I admit the fact, and do not deny it for a moment. A friend and associate of Baxter, Calamy, Owen, and Bates – a leading man in all the fruitless conferences between Puritans and Churchmen in the early part of Charles II.'s reign – ejected from St. Pauls, Covent Garden, by the disgraceful Act of Uniformity – a sufferer even unto bonds on account of his Nonconformist opinions, – if ever there was an English divine who must be classed as a Puritan, that man is Dr. Manton. But what of it, if he was a Puritan? It does not prove that he was not a valuable theologian, an admirable writer, and an excellent man. Let me once for all make a few plain statements about the school to which Manton belonged – the school of the English Puritans. It is one of those points in the ecclesiastical history of our country about which the ignorance of most Englishmen is deep and astounding. There are more baseless and false ideas current about them than about any class of men in British history. The impressions of most people are so ridiculously incorrect, that one could laugh if the subject were not so serious. To hear them talk about Puritans is simply ludicrous. They make assertions which prove either that they know nothing at all of what they are talking about, or that they have forgotten the ninth commandment. For Dr. Manton's sake, and for the honour of a cruelly misrepresented body of men, let me try to explain to the reader what the Puritans really were. He that supposes they were ignorant, fanatical sectaries, haters of the Crown and Church of England – men alike destitute of learning, holiness, or loyalty – has got a great deal to learn. Let him hear some plain facts, which I will venture to copy from a work written by myself in 1868 ("Bishops and Clergy of other Days").

"The Puritans were not enemies to the monarchy. It is simply false to say that they were. The great majority of them protested strongly against the execution of Charles I., and were active agents in bringing back Charles II. to England, and placing the crown on his head after Oliver Cromwell's death. The base ingratitude with which they were afterwards treated, in 1662, by the very monarch whom they helped to restore, is one of the most shameful pages in the history of the Stuarts."

"The Puritans were not enemies to the Church of England. They would gladly have had her government and ceremonial improved, and more liberty allowed in the conduct of public worship. And they were quite right! The very things which they desired to see, but never saw, are actually recommended at this day as worthy of adoption by Churchmen in every part of the land! The great majority of them were originally ordained by bishops, and had no abstract objection to Episcopacy. The great majority of them had no special dislike to liturgies, but only to certain details in the Book of Common Prayer. Baxter, one of their leaders, expressly testifies that a very few concessions in 1662 would have retained in the Church of England at least sixteen hundred of the two thousand who were driven out by the Act of Uniformity on Bartholomew's Day."

"The Puritans were not unlearned and ignorant men. The great majority of them were Oxford and Cambridge graduates – many of them fellows of colleges, and some of them heads or principals of the best colleges in the two Universities. In knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, in power as preachers, expositors, writers, and critics, the Puritans in their day were second to none. Their works still speak for them on the shelves of every well-furnished theological library. Their commentaries, their expositions, their treatises on practical, casuistical, and experimental divinity, are immeasurably superior to those of their adversaries in the seventeenth century. In short, those who hold up the Puritans to scorn as shallow, illiterate men, are only exposing their own lamentable shallowness, their own ignorance of historical facts, and the extremely superficial character of their own reading."

“The Puritans, as a body, have done more to elevate the national character than any class of Englishmen that ever lived. Ardent lovers of civil liberty, and ready to die in its defence – mighty at the council board, and no less mighty in the battlefield – feared abroad throughout Europe, and invincible at home while united, great with their pens, and no less great with their swords – fearing God very much, and fearing man very little, – they were a generation of men who have never received from their country the honour that they deserve. The body of which Milton, Selden, Blake, Cromwell, Owen, Baxter, and Charnock were members, is a body of which no well-informed Englishman ought ever to speak with disrespect. He may dislike their principles, if he will, but he has no right to despise them. Lord Macaulay, no mean authority in matters of English history, might well say, in his famous essay on Milton, ‘we do not hesitate to pronounce the Puritans a brave, a wise and honest, and a useful body.’ Unhappily, when they passed away, they were followed by a generation of profligates, triflers, and sceptics; and their reputation has suffered accordingly in passing through prejudiced hands. But, ‘judged with righteous judgment,’ they will be found men of whom the world was not worthy. The more they are really known, the more they will be esteemed.”

Such was the school to which Manton undeniably belonged. Such is the truth about the Puritans. That they were not perfect and faultless, I freely admit. They said, did, and wrote many things which cannot be commended. Some of them, no doubt, were violent, fierce, narrow-minded sectarians; some were half-crazy fanatics and enthusiasts. Yet, even then, great allowance ought to be made for the trying circumstances in which they were often placed, and the incessant, irritating persecution to which they were exposed. And where is the great school of religious thought which is not often disgraced by some weaker members? With all their faults, the leaders of the party were great and good men. With all their defects, the Puritans, as a body, were not the men that some authors and writers in the present day are fond of representing them to have been. Those who disparage Manton because he was a Puritan, would do well to reconsider the ground they are taking up. They will find it utterly untenable. Facts, stern facts, are dead against them. They may not admire Puritanism in the abstract, but they will never give any proof that we ought not to admire, value, and study the writings of Puritan divines.

I will now proceed to offer a brief estimate of Manton's merits. For convenience sake, we will examine him in four points of view – as a man, a writer, a theologian, and an expositor of Scripture. Under each of these heads the reader shall have my opinion of the man whose works are at length about to be put within reach of the public in a cheap and accessible form. I ask him to remember that I am no more infallible than the Pope; but I can truly say that my opinion is the result of an acquaintance with Manton's writings of at least twenty years' standing.

1. As a man, I am disposed to assign a very high place to the author of these volumes.

He strikes me as having been, not merely an ordinary “good” man, but one of singularly great grace and consistency of Christian character.

He lived in an age when party spirit ran very high, and the faults of an adversary were carefully noted and relentlessly exposed. None, perhaps, found that out to their cost so thoroughly as the Puritans, after Charles II. returned to England, and the Commonwealth was overthrown. To blacken the reputation of a Puritan, and vilify him before the public, was too often the way to get promotion; and woe to the unhappy man whose life had given even a semblance of a handle to his opponents!

In an age like this, Manton occupied for several years a very prominent position. He was not a country parson, living scores of miles from London, and absorbed in unobtrusive pastoral labours among a rural population. On the contrary, he was a standard-bearer in the fore-front of the battle – a city set upon a hill that could not be hid – a man who could neither say, nor do, nor write anything without being observed. Did Oliver Cromwell require a minister to offer up prayer at the public ceremony of his undertaking the Protectorship? Manton was the minister. – Did the Long Parliament want a special sermon preached before its members on that great public event? Manton was frequently ordered to be the preacher. – Did the famous Westminster Assembly want a commendatory preface written to their Confession and Catechisms of world-wide reputation? They committed the execution of it to the pen of Thomas Manton. – Was a committee of Triers appointed to examine persons who were to be admitted into the ministry? Or inducted into livings? Manton was a leading member of this committee. – Was a movement made by the Presbyterian divines, after Cromwell's death, to restore the monarchy and bring back Charles II.? Manton was a leader in the movement. – Was an effort made after the Restoration to bring about a reconciliation between the Episcopal Church and the Nonconformists? Manton was one of the commissioners to act in the matter in the unhappy Savoy Conference. – In short, if there was one name which more than another was incessantly before the public for several years about the period of the Restoration, that name was Manton's. If there was one divine who, willingly or unwillingly, was constantly standing under the full gaze of friends and foes in London, that divine was the Rector of St. Paul's, Covent Garden, Thomas Manton.

Now, remembering all this, I ask the reader to observe that throughout this fiery ordeal Manton preserved a spotless reputation. I am struck with the fact that the most violent writers of that violent day can lay nothing to his charge of the slightest importance. The most foul-mouthed and rancorous assailants of the Puritans seem unable to lay hold on any weak point in his character. No weapon

forged against him seems to prosper, and no dirt sticks to his name. Even Antony à Wood, the prejudiced author of "Athenæ Oxonienses," can find nothing to allege against Manton, and is obliged to content himself with contemptible sneers and insinuations.

Some one may perhaps imagine that Manton was a prudent, "canny" man, who avoided doing anything to give offence, and had a keen eye to his own interests. There is not an atom of foundation for such a theory. When it was first proposed to bring to trial and execute Charles I., Manton was one of fifty-seven divines who signed and published a bold protest against the design. When Christopher Love was beheaded by Oliver Cromwell on a charge of treason, Manton accompanied him to the scaffold, and afterwards preached his funeral sermon at St. Lawrence Jewry, though the soldiers threatened to shoot him. As to minding his own interests, no man perhaps ever thought less of them than Manton. The mere fact that he refused the Deanery of Rochester, when offered to him by Charles II., and afterwards resigned St. Paul's, Covent Garden, for conscience sake, is plain evidence that he never shrank from giving offence if Christ's truth, in his judgment, seemed to make it necessary.

With all these facts before us, I cannot avoid the conclusion that Manton must have been a man of uncommon graces and singular consistency of character. In no other way can I account for the comparative absence of material faults in his life, even his enemies themselves being judges. A man who went down to the grave at fifty-seven, with so fair a reputation, after spending the prime of his life in London, and mingling incessantly in public affairs, must surely have been no common Christian. It can never be said of him that his lines fell "in pleasant places," and that his grace was never tried and tested! Few modern divines perhaps ever passed through such a fiery ordeal as he did, and surely few ever came out of such with so untarnished a name. He must have been a rare combination of wisdom, tact, boldness, courtesy, firmness, sound judgment, and charity. As a godly man, I do not hesitate to place him in the foremost rank of Puritan divines; and I ask the student of his writings to remember, as they read them that they are reading the works of one who was eminently a "good man and full of the Holy Ghost."

2. As a writer, I consider that Manton holds a somewhat peculiar place among the Puritan divines.

He has pre-eminently a style of his own, and a style very unlike that of most of his school. I will try to explain what I mean.

I do not regard him as a writer of striking power and brilliancy, compared to some of his contemporaries. He never carries you by storm, and excites enthusiasm by passages of profound thought expressed in majestic language, such as you will find frequently in Charnock, and occasionally in Howe. He never rouses your inmost feelings, thrills your conscience, or stirs your heart of hearts, like Baxter. Such rhetoric as this was not Manton's gift, and the reader who expects to find it in his writings will be disappointed.

I do not regard him as a writer of such genial imagination, and such talent for illustration and similitude, as several divines of his day. In this respect he is not to be compared with Brooks, and Watson, and Swinnock, and Adams. The pages of those worthy men are often like picture-galleries, in which the pictures are so thickly hung that you can hardly see the walls. Talent of this sort was certainly not in Manton's line. He paints his pictures and exhibits them, and they are always well sketched; but their number is comparatively small.

Learning again does not stand out as conspicuously in Manton's writings as in the works of some of the Puritans. Judging by the list of quotations and references, you would say, that he had not so many authors at his fingers' end as Owen, or Caryl, or Jenkyns, or Arrowsmith, or Thomas Hall. Yet it is only fair to remember, that nearly all we possess of his works consists of sermons, and that a popular sermon is not the proper vehicle for an exhibition of learning. The great preacher will assimilate and digest the thoughts of other men, and make them his own, without incessantly confusing his hearers by reference to books. My own impression is that this was the case with Manton. I believe he was a great reader, and a very learned man, but that he had few opportunities of exhibiting his store of knowledge. In fact, reason and common sense point out that he could never have held the position he undoubtedly occupied as a London divine, and had such weight attached to his opinions, if he had not been a man of a well-furnished mind.

Manton's chief excellence as a writer, in my judgment, consists in the ease, [perspicuousness](#), and clearness of his style. He sees his subject clearly, expresses himself clearly, and seldom fails in making you see clearly what he means. He has a happy faculty of simplifying the point he handles. He never worries you with acres of long, ponderous, involved sentences, like Goodwin or Owen. His books, if not striking, are generally easy and pleasant reading, and destitute of anything harsh, cramped, obscure, and requiring a second glance to be understood. For my own part, I find it easier to read fifty pages of Manton's than ten of some of his brethren's; and after reading, I feel that I carry more away.

Let no one, moreover, suppose that because Manton's style is easy, his writings show any lack of matter and thought. Nothing of the kind. The fertility of his mind seems to have been truly astonishing. Every page in his books contains many ideas, and gives you plenty to think about. No one, perhaps, but himself could have written such an immense book as he wrote on the 119th Psalm, and yet repeated himself so little, and preserved a freshness of tone to the end. The words of Dr. Bates, no mean judge, are worth quoting on this point: "I cannot but admire the fecundity and variety of his thoughts; that though the same things so often occur in the verses of this psalm, yet, by a judicious observing the different arguments and motives whereby the Psalmist expresses the same request, or some other circumstance, every sermon contains new conceptions proper to the text." This witness is true. If

Manton never soars so high as some writers, he is, at any rate, never trifling, never shallow, never wearisome, and never dull. It was a striking remark of one of his cotemporaries, that "he had heard the greatest men of their day sometimes preach a mean sermon, but he had never heard Dr. Manton do so on any occasion."

I close this part of my essay by reminding the reader that Manton's writings, with few exceptions, were originally published under very great disadvantages. Most of them never saw the light till after his death, and were printed without receiving the author's last touches and corrections. This is a fact which ought not to be forgotten. None but an author knows what a vast difference there is between a work in manuscript and a work in type, and how many emendations and corrections are made in the best of literary productions, when the writer sees them in the shape of proofs. For my own part, when I take up a book of Manton's, and remind myself that it never received the author's final corrections, I am amazed that his writings contain so few blunders, and admire him more and more every time that I read him.

3. As a theologian, I regard Manton as a divine of singularly well-balanced, well-proportioned, and scriptural views.

He lived in a day when vague, indistinct, and indefinite statements of doctrine were not tolerated. The Christian Church was not regarded by any school as a kind of Pantheon, in which a man might believe and teach anything, everything, or nothing, so long as he was a clever and earnest man. Such views were reserved for our modern times. In the seventeenth century they were scorned and repudiated by every Church and sect in Christendom. In the seventeenth century, every divine who would achieve a reputation and obtain influence, was obliged to hold distinct and sharply cut opinions. Earnestness alone was not thought sufficient to make a creed. Whether Episcopalian or Presbyterian, whether Conformist or Nonconformist, whether an admirer of Luther, or Calvin, or Arminius, every divine held certain distinct theological views. A vague, colourless, boneless, undogmatic Christianity, supplying no clear comfort in life, and no clear hope in death, was a Christianity which found favour with none.

Now, Manton was a Calvinist in his theology. He held the very doctrine which is so admirably set forth in the seventeenth Article of the Church of England. He held the same views which were held by nine-tenths of the English Reformers, and four-fifths of all the leading divines of the Church of England down to the accession of James I. He maintained and taught personal election, the perseverance of the saints, the absolute necessity of a regeneration evidenced by its fruits, as well as salvation by free grace, justification by faith alone, and the uselessness of ceremonial observances without true and vital religion. In all this, there was nothing remarkable. He was only one among hundreds of good men in England who taught all these truths. But in Manton's Calvinism there was a curiously happy attention to the proportion of truth. He never exalts one doctrine at the expense of another. He gives to each doctrine that place and rank given to it in Scripture, neither more nor less, with a wisdom and felicity which I miss in some of the Puritan divines.

Manton held strongly the doctrine of election. But that did not prevent him teaching that God loves all, and that His tender mercies are over all His works. He that wishes to see this truth set forth should read his sermon on the words, "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son" (John 3:16) and mark how he speaks of the world.

Manton held strongly the need of preventing and calling grace. But that did not hinder him from inviting all men to repent, believe, and be saved.

Manton held strongly that faith alone lays hold on Christ, and appropriates justification. But that did not prevent him urging upon all the absolute necessity of repentance and turning from sin.

Manton held strongly the perseverance of God's elect. But that did not hinder him from teaching that holiness is the grand distinguishing mark of God's people, and that he who talks of "never perishing," while he continues in wilful sin, is a hypocrite and a self-deceiver.

In all this, I frankly confess, I see much to admire. I admire the scriptural wisdom of a man who, in a day of hard-and-fast systems could dare to be apparently inconsistent, in order to "declare all the counsel of God." I firmly believe that this is the test of theology, which does good in the Church of Christ. The man who is not tied hand and foot by systems, and does not pretend to reconcile what our imperfect eyesight cannot reconcile in this dispensation, he is the man whom God will bless. Manton was such a man; and because he was such a man, I think his works, like the "Pilgrim's Progress," deserve the attention of all true Christians.

4. As an expositor of Scripture, I regard Manton with unmingled admiration.

Here, at any rate, he is "facile princeps" among the divines of the Puritan school.

The value of expository preaching is continually pressed on ministers in the present day, and not without reason. The end of all preaching is to bring men under the influence of God's Word; and nothing seems so likely to make men understand and value the Word as lectures in which the Word is explained. It was so in Chrysostom's days; it ought to be so again. The idea, no doubt, like

every good theory, may be easily ridden to death ; and I believe that with ignorant, semi-heathen congregations, a short pithy text does more good than a long passage expounded. But I have no doubt of the immense value of expository preaching, when people will bring their Bibles to the service, and accompany the preacher as he travels on, or go home to their Bibles after the service, and compare what they have heard with the written Word.

The readers of Manton's works will find in them a very large supply of expository sermons. Few, probably, are aware of the enormous quantity of exposition which his writings contain. They will find full and complete sets of sermons on Psalm 119, on Isaiah 53, on Matthew 25, on John 17, on Romans 6, on Romans 8, and on 2 Corinthians 5; besides regular commentaries on **James** ([click for links to each chapter](#)) and **Jude** ([click for links to each verse](#)). In all these works they will find every verse and every sentence explained, expounded, and enforced, plainly, clearly, and usefully, and far more fully than in most commentaries. Indeed, I defy any one to preach a sermon on any text in the above mentioned chapters, and not to find some useful thoughts in Manton, if he will take the trouble to consult him.

The value of these expository sermons, in my judgment, is very great indeed; and it is much to be regretted that hitherto they have been so little known. Of course they are not all of equal merit. Sometimes our author digresses, and wastes his time in discussing questions not necessarily belonging to the text. But, taking them for all in all, I unhesitatingly say that Manton's expository sermons are most valuable, and the republication of them in a portable form will prove a great blessing to the Church.

The excellence of Manton's expository sermons, I think lies in the following points.

1. He generally sticks to the subject of each verse, and does not launch off into everything that may be said about each word.
2. He generally gets over the ground with reasonable brevity, and does not weary the reader with an interminable flow of thought upon each expression. As an instance of what I mean, one single folio volume contains all his sermons on Matthew 25, John 17, Romans 6, Romans 8, and 2 Corinthians 5. In striking contrast with this, Jacomb on Romans 8:1-4, occupies 622 quarto pages; Hildersam on Psalm 51:1-7, fills 720 folio pages with 150 lectures; and Hardy on the 1st and 2d chapters of the 1st Epistle of John, takes up two quarto volumes and 1100 pages! Flesh and blood of ordinary mould cannot stand such lengthy work as this. I hold it to be a prime excellence of Manton's expository sermons that, while they are very full, they are never too long.

For my own part I am painfully struck with the general neglect with which these expository works of Manton's have been treated of late. Modern commentators who are very familiar with German commentaries seem hardly to know of the existence of Manton's expositions. Yet I venture boldly to say, that no student of the chapters I have named will ever fail to find new light thrown on their meaning by Manton. I rejoice to think that now at length these valuable works are about to become accessible to the general public. They have been too long buried, and it is high time they should be brought to light. I value their author most highly as a man, a writer, and a theologian; but if I must speak out all I think, there is no part in which I value him more than as a homiletical expositor of Scripture.

It only remains for me to express my earnest hope that this new edition of Manton's works may prove acceptable to the public, and meet with many purchasers and readers. If any one wants to buy a good specimen of a Puritan divine, my advice unhesitatingly is, "Let him buy Manton."

We have fallen upon evil days both for thinking and reading. Sermons which contain thought and matter are increasingly rare. The inexpressible shallowness, thinness, and superficiality of many popular sermons in this day is something lamentable and appalling. Readers of real books appear to become fewer and fewer every year. Newspapers, and magazines, and periodicals seem to absorb the whole reading powers of the rising generation. What it will all end in God only knows. The prospect before us is sorrowful and humiliating.

In days like these, I am thankful that the publishers of Manton's Works have boldly come forward to offer some real literary gold to the reading public. I earnestly trust that they will meet with the success which they deserve. If any recommendation of mine can help them in bringing out the writings of this admirable Puritan in a new form, I give it cheerfully and with all my heart.

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