

‘A Well-Spent Life’ Matthew Henry: Pastor and Writer

Allan Harman*

** Dr. Allan Harman has been Professor of Old Testament at the Free Church College, Edinburgh, the Reformed Theological College, Geelong, and the Presbyterian Theological College, Melbourne, where he also served as principal for twenty years. He has served as Moderator-General of his denomination, the Presbyterian Church of Australia (1994-1997), and is the author of Matthew Henry: His Life and Influence (2012).*



The year of Matthew Henry’s birth, 1662, was not a good one for his family. His father, Philip Henry, had lost his position as an Anglican minister and the family had been put out of the minister’s residence. Like over two thousand other Anglican ministers, Philip Henry would not conform to the new requirement compelling them to use the Book of Common Prayer and to be ordained by a bishop. They were forced to leave their parishes and were deprived of regular income.

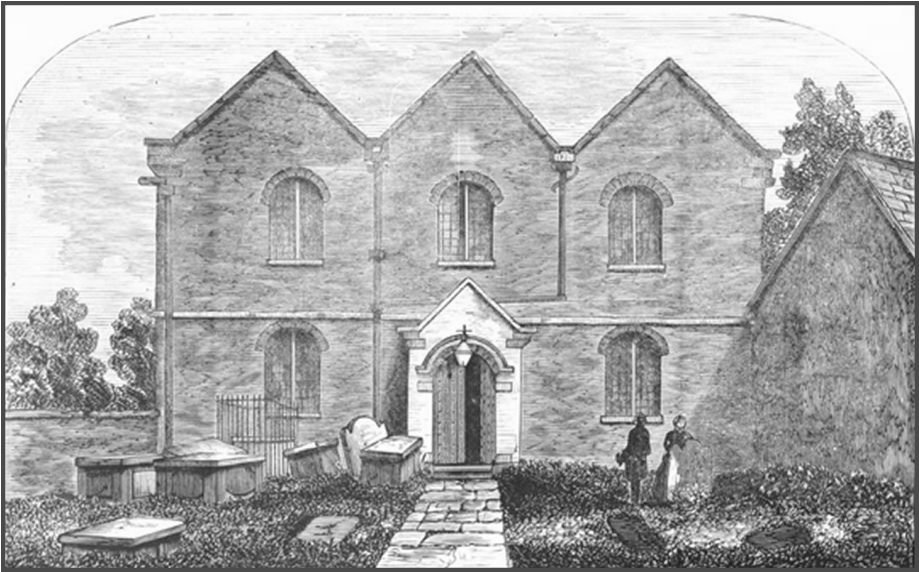
The Henry family were somewhat better off than many others. Philip Henry had been an excellent student at Oxford University, where he studied under the great Dr. John Owen. He had come to Worthenbury in Shropshire and married Katherine Matthews, an only daughter, whose parents owned a farm, Broad Oak, that was just over five miles away. The Henry family moved to her family home, and ultimately the property was owned and worked by Philip and Katherine. He never had the privilege of being a minister of a congregation again, though he continued to expound the Scripture in his own and other family residences.

Matthew was a precocious child, early starting Greek and Latin. He had a tutor for a time, but his father was his main teacher. In spiritual things he listened to his father explain Scripture and teach the Westminster Shorter Catechism. At the age of eleven he came to personal faith in the Lord Jesus and seems to have set himself the goal of becoming a pastor. Apart from a period of about eighteen months in London studying mainly law, his father’s instruction and example prepared him for pastoral ministry.

The dissenters or non-conformists were forbidden to meet together publicly, but in the late 1680s it became clear that a change was coming. Groups of people were starting to meet openly for worship, and one of these in Chester invited him to become their pastor. He was ordained in London by a small

group of Presbyterian pastors, and he commenced his ministry in June 1687. The congregation grew, and the meeting place had to be enlarged. By 1700 the congregation realised they had become too big for the premises they were using, and so bought land in Crook's Lane in the centre of Chester.

The new chapel (pictured below) was opened almost free of debt, though it is interesting and significant that Matthew Henry's own donation of £20 was the largest contribution to the building fund. Within a few years he had 350 communicant members connected with his congregation, and the chapel had to be enlarged by the addition of a gallery.



Soon after starting at Chester, Matthew Henry married, but his wife died after giving birth to their first child. He married again, and six children survived that marriage. In addition, he and his wife took into their home one of his sister's children, when both she and her husband died.

A faithful pastor

Several things mark out Henry's life as important. First of all, he was a diligent pastor. Every week he had two services on the Lord's Day, at which he both expounded chapters of Scripture in sequence, but also preached. He was very systematic in his selection of passages for sermons, and a record exists of his schedule for the whole of his ministry at Chester. He was plain and simple in his style, with almost no illustrations, but with many memorable sayings and references.

In addition to preaching and catechising in his own congregation, he preached to the prisoners in Chester Castle. Neighbouring centres around Chester were often favoured by his preaching on weekdays, and even congregations in London heard him with pleasure. Some tried to get him to become their pastor.

A commentator on the Bible

Out of his parish preaching and teaching came his commentary on the Bible. He started to write in 1704, and by 1706 he had completed the section on the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. The reception was exceptional from the outset, and so he continued to work away, day by day, on his task. By the time he moved to Hackney near London in 1712, he had completed the whole of the Old Testament. Just before his death in 1714, he finished up to the end of Acts, and left notes on considerable parts of the rest of the New Testament, especially the book of Revelation. Other pastors completed the remainder of the New Testament books.

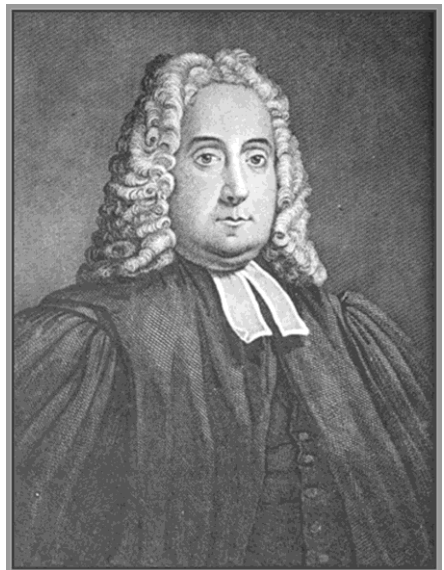
This was one of the first commentaries aimed not at pastors but at the ordinary Christian people. Its style was unpretentious, and much of it had the characteristics that marked out his preaching, such as abundant references to Scripture, the use of alliteration for his headings, and practical application.

A writer of Christian literature

Amidst all his other activities, Matthew Henry wrote many books. He was the author of a large biography of his father, who died in 1696, and this passed through three editions in his lifetime. He produced songs for congregational singing, many of them Psalms but including other passages such as Mary's song (Luke 1) and parts of Revelation. More than once, he defended the position of the dissenters over and against the Church of England, rejecting claims that they were schismatics. The area of spiritual life was his main focus. In particular, his writings on prayer have been often reprinted.

His influence

Henry's personal ministry and writings brought blessing to many in his own lifetime, but his works have continued to bless for three centuries. Jonathan Edwards in New England knew and used Matthew Henry's books. The Wesleys were well-acquainted with them, and even though John Wesley did not agree with his Reformed position, he still utilised parts of his writing in his notes on Scripture. Charles Wesley was more sympathetic and many of his hymns were sayings of Matthew Henry that he incorporated into Christian poetry. The words of his hymn "A charge to keep have I, a God to glorify" are taken exactly from Mat-



thew Henry's commentary. George Whitefield, when short of time for sermon preparation, would kneel on the floor with his Greek New Testament, Cruden's concordance, and Matthew Henry's commentary open before him. The structure and outline of his sermons often betray the influence of Henry.

Many others, ever since his time, have testified to the blessing of his writing. No other commentary has been kept in print for three hundred years as has happened with his. Now it is available in many editions, sometimes with newer English translations replacing the Authorised Version. His collected works are available in two volumes, his biography of his father has been reprinted, and his writings on spiritual and family life have reprinted many times and are currently available.

Of course, we have much other Christian literature available to us, both from the past and from the present, but still Matthew Henry's commentary sets a pattern. It was an attempt to explain the meaning of the Bible, book by book, verse by verse. He knew what others had written, but his aim was to faithfully expound what he believed the text meant.

His final days

Reluctantly, Matthew Henry left Chester in 1712 for Hackney, believing that God was calling him to minister there. The near proximity to his publisher was clearly an attraction. Though not well in health, he made the move and entered into a very busy period of ministry. However, ill-health was starting to take its toll. He suffered from kidney stones, and he had developed diabetes. On leaving Chester after a final visit in 1714, he fell from his horse, continued on to Nantwich, preached in the evening, and died the following morning. At the age of fifty-two he had completed his ministry. As he himself had said shortly before returning to Chester for his final visit, "a holy, heavenly life, spent in the service of God and communion with him, is the most pleasant and comfortable life that any one can live in this world".