

## Concise church biographies

### William Twisse

The high Calvinist William Twisse was born near Newbury in 1575 and was educated at Winchester and Oxford, where he became a fellow for 16 years, famous for great scholarship. In 1604 he was ordained to the ministry and gained a doctorate in Divinity in 1614. He worked with Sir Henry Seville in transcribing Thomas Bradwardine's work against Pelagianism. James I appointed him to be chaplain to his daughter Elizabeth, the princess Palatine in Germany. He then became the vicar of Newbury and studied, refusing offers of church promotion, and was a popular preacher. He was noted for his great piety.

He had an international reputation as a Reformed scholar with a moderate spirit and gained fame for refusing to obey the royal edict to read the Book of Sports in churches on Sunday<sup>1</sup> and wrote powerful works against Arminianism. In the Civil War Cavaliers forced him out of his parish and put him in poverty. Then the Long Parliament unanimously appointed him Prolocutor (chairman) of the Westminster Assembly in 1643, which was uncomfortable to him, especially the heated debates and his health broke down. He died in 1646 aged 71 and was interred at Westminster Abbey. He died a widower with four sons and three daughters. After the Restoration of Charles II his body was dug up and cast into a pit in St Margaret's churchyard. His children were also cheated out of his inheritance but God ensured that they were supported.

William was a scholar and excelled in defending the faith, especially against Arminianism and the Jesuits. He was a strong Supralapsarian but did not direct the Westminster Assembly to follow this line, acting impartially. He wrote on assurance arguing that a Christian can be certain of his faith by the Scriptures. His work against the Jesuit Middle Knowledge ('Scientia media') was warmly commended by Bishop Joseph Hall. But it is his strong and thorough arguments against Arminianism that he is rightly famous, such as his posthumous, *'The Riches of God's Love unto the Vessels of Mercy, consistent with his absolute Hatred or Reprobation of the Vessels of Wrath'*, Oxford, 1653, commended by John Owen. This contains his admirable defence of Supralapsarianism, though he denied this was a reason for church schism. Another defence of Calvinism against Arminius was, *'Vindication of the Grace, Power, and Providence of God'* published in Amsterdam, 1632, praised by William Cunningham.<sup>2</sup>

He strongly argues that differences amongst Calvinists on predestination must not lead to a breach of fellowship. His position is that election is an act of mercy and reprobation of justice. One weakness was his assertion that God can remit sins even without satisfaction (atonement), the exercise of justice being optional. This was answered respectfully by John Owen, who otherwise praised him.

In short, William Twisse was a strong defender of the sovereignty of God and grace and one of the most able original contenders against Arminianism, even disputing with Arminius himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Many church leaders who did the same lost their livings or were put in prison. Finally the Book of Sports was burned by the hangman in May 1643.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation', p. 371ff.