



The Life of George Herbert: Anglican Priest

There was, in Wales, a castle with a huge estate which had existed since the time of the Norman conquest bearing the name of the town, Montgomery, which housed members of a notable British aristocratic family--the Herberts. The Herberts were widely known as loyal and capable servants of their King and country. They were of Norman descent and had taken root in Wales by 1210.¹ Izaak Walton² traced the lines of the Herberts' service as far back as the reign of King Edward IV (1461-1483). *Five generations later, the poet, George Herbert, was born at Montgomery Castle on April 3, 1593.

His mother was Magdalen Newport, the youngest Daughter of Sir Richard who was also the father of Sir Francis Newport of

¹ F.E. Hutchinson, The Works of George Herbert (London: Oxford, 1941) xxi.

² Izaak Walton, "The Life of Mr. George Herbert," (1675) George Herbert: The Critical Heritage, ed. C.A. Patrides (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) 92.

* During the reign of Edward IV, William Herbert was Earl of Pembroke and his youngest brother was Sir Richard of Colebrook in the County of Monmouthshire. Sir Richard's son, also Richard, was the father of Sir Edward Herbert. Sir Edward's son, another Richard, was the father of George Herbert, the poet.

High Arkall in the County of Shropshire--a Knight. When George was three years old, his father passed away. Magdalen brought up her seven sons and three daughters with firm determination to give them good education. When George's father died, their eldest child, Edward, was a thirteen-year-old undergraduate at Oxford. Two years later, in 1598, Edward married and Magdalen, in order to take good care of Edward and the other children, moved her family from Montgomery Castle to Oxford. At Oxford, the family of Lady Herbert began its ever closer friendship with Dr. John Donne. When George Herbert was eight years old, in 1601, Lady Herbert established her family at Charing Cross, London.

From his childhood, George was taught by a chaplain or tutor in his home. In 1604, he became a student of Westminster School, under the care of Dr. Neale, the Dean of Westminster, and Mr. Ireland, Headmaster of the school, respectively. A year later, he was elected a scholar at Westminster School where:

the beauties of his pretty behaviour and wit shin'd
and became so eminent and lovely in this his innocent
age that he seem'd to be marked out for piety, and to
become the care of Heaven, and of a particular good
Angel to guard and guide him.³

During this time, Herbert studied languages and proved to be excellent in Greek.

At the age of sixteen, Herbert was nominated a King's Scholar of Westminster School. In 1608 he was one of the Westminster-School scholars elected to Trinity College,

³ Walton 93.

Cambridge.⁴ His mother entrusted him to the care of Dr. Nevil who was the Dean of Canterbury and Master of the College. In 1609, after twelve years of remaining a widow, Lady Herbert married Sir John Danvers, who was a "Noble Gentleman, the Brother and Heir of the Lord Danvers, Earl of Danby."⁵

At Cambridge, Herbert "consecrated the first-fruits of his early age to vertue, and a serious study of learning."⁶ In his first New Year's letter, 1610, from Cambridge to his mother, apart from mentioning about his ague, he composed two sonnets to her. Part of the introduction of one sonnet reads, "For my own part, my meaning (dear Mother) is in these Sonnets, to declare my resolution to be, that my poor Abilities in Poetry shall be all, and ever consecrated to God's glory:"⁷

After five years of strict studies and parental-like support of Dr. Nevil, Herbert graduated as a Bachelor of Arts in 1613. Immediately he continued to study for the degree of Bachelor of Divinity. Two years later, on March 15, 1615, he was made a Major Fellow of the College, a position that carried with it tutorial responsibilities. A year later, he gained his MA degree. He continued to be one of the institutions's most illustrious students and in 1618, he was chosen to deliver university lectures in rhetoric. During these years, he also took up the serious study of music and became a great master. He did this because music "relieved his drooping spirits, composed

⁴ Hutchinson xxiv.

⁵ Walton 94.

⁶ Walton 96.

⁷ Walton 97.

his distracted thoughts, and raised his weary soul so far above Earth, that it gave him an earnest of the joys of Heaven, before he possest them."⁸

In order to understand our Anglican George Herbert better, it is necessary to emphasize some small but significant incidents in his life which had a lot to do with his studies for the degree of Bachelor of Divinity. John N. Wall, Jr.'s observation is very helpful to our study.⁹ In the seventeenth century, as had been the case for many centuries, it was an appropriate choice of a younger son of a noble family to enter the service of the Church. Herbert's decision to pursue the degree in Divinity was with his own clear determination as testified by his letter to Sir John Danvers, his stepfather, dated March 18, 1618: "I want Books extremely, . . . You know, Sir, how I am now setting foot into Divinity, to lay the platform of my future life, and shall I then be fain always to borrow Books, and building on Another's foundations?"¹⁰ Ordinarily, if Herbert's perception of serving God had not given way to alternatives for the ministry, he would have been ordained in 1623. However, Herbert's experiences in the following few years seemed to offer him other ways of serving God.

On January 21, 1619, Herbert was elected Orator of the University, the post of public relations, of addressing noble visitors and writing letters to present and potential

⁸ Walton 98.

⁹ John N. Wall, Jr., George Herbert: The Country Parson, The Temple (London: SPCK, 1981) 19.

¹⁰ Wall 19.

benefactors of the University, a position in which he served for eight years. On several occasions during this time, Herbert manifested his abilities suited to his employment. He wrote a letter in excellent Latin to King James who "took him to be the Jewel of that University."¹¹ He also wrote Latin poems in response to the attack on Episcopacy of Andrew Melvin, a minister of the Scottish Church and Rector of St. Andrews. These poems were so good that Dr. Duport, Dean of Peterborough, later collected and printed them in honourable commemoration of George Herbert.

Izaak Walton further reported that the Orator performed his function on the King's frequent visits to Cambridge so well that he gained the King's favour of gracing him with a private audience, after which, the King pronounced "that he found the Orator's learning and wisdom, much above his age or wit."¹² During this time, Herbert established a friendship with Dr. Andrewes, Bishop of Winchester, who was translating many of the Psalms of David. The two scholars shared their opinions about the translations before they were printed. At one point of sharing, they debated about 'Predestination' and 'Sanctity of life'. A short time after the debate broke out, Herbert wrote a long letter in Greek to the Bishop. The letter, was so remarkable for the language, and reason of it, that after the reading it, the Bishop put it into his bosom, and did often shew it to many Scholars . . . but did alwaies return it back to the place where he

¹¹ Walton 99.

¹² Walton 100.

first lodg'd it, and continu'd it so near his heart,
till the last day of his life.¹³

While serving as the Orator of Cambridge, Herbert managed to master the Italian, Spanish, and French languages. Meanwhile he gained more favour with the King and the Royal Court. It is clear that Herbert was aiming to tread the path of the two former Orators of Cambridge who became Secretaries of State. Herbert's ambition seemed closer to its realization when the King appointed him to a Sinecure.* With honourable position of the Oratorship and enjoying the grand style of the Court company, Herbert diminished his role at Cambridge. At this point Herbert wanted to travel and to leave the University--the very desires his mother opposed. Since he was constantly threatened with consumption and fever, he thought that leaving the University would unburden him of studies which weakened his health. Perhaps he wanted to drop the work at the University in order to prepare himself for better chances of serving in the Court. However, he submitted to his mother's opinion, at least for the time being.

Growing and living in the atmosphere of people close to royalty and the national government, inspired by other brothers who became either ambassadors, naval or military personnel, and being in touch so constantly with friends in high places like Sir Francis Bacon, Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, and King James' favourite courtiers like the Duke of Lennox and the Marquis of

¹³ Walton 101.

* A Church office that pays a salary without involving care of souls.

Hamilton, Herbert had every reason to take up a public career. Herbert stood for election to Parliament from Montgomeryshire and took his seat in Parliament when it met in London in February and May 29, 1624.

Though Herbert's service in Parliament seemed to be a sharp break with his earlier desire to serve God, it is not too hard to see that in fact it was just another way of service. Let us not forget that Christian thinking in Herbert's time was inherited directly from the Elizabethan Establishment. The Tudor Reformation provided all English society with official documents about the proper environment for living out the Christian life, and affirmed that doing God's will in this world was through service to the Crown. Undoubtedly, under the pious care of Lady Herbert, her children were taught to be faithful to the instructions of the Church. As for George, being a highly learned man himself, he must have been quite familiar with most of the Church documents of the time and must have been so convinced of the Church teachings and practices that he wrote the letter, so precious to Bishop Andrewes, as mentioned above. Let us also not forget that Herbert was closely associated with the Sidneys and would have been familiarized with the concept of Sir Philip Sidney's heroic image of the true Christian knight, serving God through serving his Queen. Therefore, it is probable that Herbert's apparent ambitious quest for major positions in government was not for his personal glory but another means of offering himself to God as the Church of that time taught.

The other evidence of Herbert's true motivation could be seen when he reassured his stepfather that his firm desire of serving God in the civil service would not divert him from the path of divinity. He expressed his conviction in another letter

to John Danvers:

I understand by Sir Francis Nethersole's letter, that he fears I have not fully resolved of the matter, since this place (the post of Public Orator) being civil may divert me too much from Divinity, at which, not without cause, he thinks, I aim; but, I have wrote him back, that this dignity, hath no such earthiness in it, but it may very well be joined with Heaven.¹⁴

However, Herbert's attempt to serve God through service to the Crown soon ended in disillusionment. His original perception of serving a peace-loving monarch like James I was tested when a crisis in the relationship between England and Spain dissolved the earlier treaty of peace of 1604 on March 23, 1623 and war between these two countries broke out. In the Parliament of 1624, the visions of enduring peace of Herbert and his Cambridge friend, Nicholas Ferrar, were dashed by the powerful militant stand of Prince Charles. The two friends fought a lost fight. Parliament voted supplies for war against Spain and Ferrar's Virginia Company was revoked by the Crown in April 1624. Facing the same fate, Herbert and Ferrar left Parliament. Around that time, his most powerful friends, Lodowick, Duke of Lennox and James, Marquis of Hamilton, died. By June 11, 1624, Herbert obtained from the Cambridge Senate a six-month leave from his duties as Public Orator. On November 3 of that year, the Archbishop of Canterbury granted a special dispensation allowing John Williams, Bishop of Lincoln, to ordain Herbert a deacon. Determined to hold his idealism in the face of such realities,

¹⁴ Wall 19.

he returned to the Church, the source of that idealism, for ecclesiastical employment. He began his diaconate at Llandinam, Montgomeryshire, sometime between early November and early December of 1624. Parallel to Herbert, Ferrar turned to the life of the Christian community, at Little Gidding. A few months later, King James I died.

The following six years were a kind of long retreat for Herbert. He had to examine many conflicts within himself, about whether to serve God in the way he had been trying or whether he should pursue the studies of Divinity and enter into sacred Orders. As a deacon, Herbert plunged himself into stricter devotional practices like observing the services of Morning and Evening Prayer, and reading the Psalter. Herbert visited Little Gidding three times and he served as ecclesiastical protector for Ferrar's community. On July 5, 1626, Herbert was installed as a canon of Lincoln Cathedral. Bishop Williams also put the stone church at Leighton Bromswold under Herbert's care. This stone church had been falling down for twenty years.

Herbert paid some visits to London where his Court friends asked about his resolution to become a priest. He replied:

It hath been formerly judged that the Domestick Servants of the King of Heaven, should be of the noblest Families on Earth: and, though the Iniquity of the late Times have made Clergy-men meanly valued, and the sacred name of Priest contemptible; yet I will labour to make it honourable, by consecrating all my learning, and all my poor abilities, to advance the glory of that God that gave them; knowing, that I can never do too much for him, that hath done so much for me, as to make me a Christian. And I will labour to be

like my Saviour, by making Humility lovely in the eyes of all men, and by following the merciful and meek example of my dear Jesus.¹⁵

Taking full responsibility for the decaying parish church under his care, Herbert immediately approached his associates for collections for the restoration. He received good cooperation from his friends as well as from the people of that locality. He reconstructed the church according to the Anglican doctrine of that time:

the Reading Pew, and Pulpit, were a little distant from each other, and both of an equal height; for he would often say, 'They should neither have a precedency or priority of the other: but that Prayer and Preaching being equally useful . . . and have an equal honour and estimation.'¹⁶

After the reconstruction of the parish church, Herbert fell ill with sharp quotidian ague. So as to recover from the sickness, he stayed at Dantsey in Wiltshire which was the house of his stepfather's elder brother, Lord Danvers. Around this time, he wrote a consoling and encouraging letter to his sick mother who died in 1627. The remarriage of his stepfather which took place only a year after the decease of his mother, seemed to reflect the final break-up of his family household. Herbert continued to stay with the Danvers till, in 1629, he decided to marry Jane Danvers, the daughter of a cousin of Lord Danvers. Izaak Walton gives a detailed account of how the couple married.

¹⁵ Walton 102.

¹⁶ Walton 103.

T.S. Eliot described their marriage straightforwardly as: "It was a happy marriage."¹⁷

About three months after his marriage, Herbert underwent another sharp conflict within himself when he could not make a decisive choice about whether or not he should accept appointments of a clerical nature. It so happened that after a month of Herbert's indecision, King Charles I and his courtiers visited Wilton where Herbert was spending a happy time with his wife and one of his close friends, Mr. Arthur Woodnot. Izaak Walton reported that Dr. William Laud,* then Bishop of London, "did the next day so convince Mr. Herbert, That the refusal of it was a sin."¹⁸ A few days later, April 26, 1630, Bishop Davenant of Salisbury named Herbert the rector of the parish church of St. Peter's Fugglestone, and of the church of St. Andrew's Bemerton, which is a mile from Salisbury. On Sunday 19 September Herbert was ordained a priest by Bishop Davenant in Salisbury Cathedral.

Having abandoned his earlier service to the Crown and given himself for the service of the Church as a priest gave Herbert a sense of fulfilment. Herbert disclosed his contentment to Mr. Woodnot in the night of his induction as the parish priest of Bemerton. In the same disclosure, he also voiced his resolution about being a priest, saying:

I now look back upon my aspiring thoughts, and think myself more happy than if I had attain'd what then I so

¹⁷ T.S. Eliot, George Herbert (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1962) 11.

* Archbishop of Canterbury under Charles I.

¹⁸ Walton 109.

ambitiously thirsted for: And, I can now behold the Court with an impartial Eye, and see plainly, that it is made up of Fraud, and titles, and Flattery, and many other such empty, imaginary painted Pleasures . . . I will now use all my endeavours to bring my Relations and Dependants to a love and relyance on him, . . . above all, I will be sure to live well, because the vertuous life of a Clergyman, is the most powerful eloquence to perswade all that see it, to reverence and love, and at least, to desire to live like him. And this I will do, because I know we live in an Age that hath more need of good examples, than precepts. . . I beseech him that my humble and charitable life may so win upon others, as to bring glory to my Jesus . . . I am so proud of his service, that I will alwaies observe, and obey, and do his will . . . I will always contemn my birth, or any title or or dignity that can be conferr'd upon me, when I shall compare them with my title of being a Priest, and servant at the Altar of Jesus my Master.¹⁹

For Herbert who, according to T.S. Eliot, was not "naturally of meek and mild disposition" but "on the contrary, somewhat haughty; proud of his descent and social position; and, like others of his family, of a quick temper,"²⁰ living up to the resolutions would not be easy.

However, Herbert did keep his word. He lived the short remaining years of his life so holily, so full of charity,

¹⁹ Walton 110-11.

²⁰ Eliot 13.

humility and other Christian virtues that his eldest brother, Lord Edward Herbert of Chirbury, wrote in his autobiography, "his life was most holy and exemplary; insomuch, that about Salisbury, where he lived, beneficed for many years, he was little less than sainted."²¹ Izaak Walton had this to say:

that it deserves the eloquence of St. Chrysostom to commend and declare it! A life, that if it were related by a Pen like his, there would than be no need for this Age to look back into times past for the examples of primitive piety: for they might be all found in the life of George Herbert.²²

During those three years of his ministry, Herbert attended to the needs of his parishioners actively and faithfully. He explained the Scriptures, preached inspiring sermons, administered sacraments, led public worship, made his parishioners understand what and why they prayed, and observed all liturgical celebrations and practices prescribed by the Book of Common Prayer. Utilizing his literary and musical ingenuity, Herbert revised many poems he had written earlier, composed many more hymns and poems, and organized them into a volume called The Temple. From his clear understanding of Christian education from the cradle to the grave he laid foundation of teaching the catechism. He also spelt out how an ideal priest should live his life and carry out his ministry in a book called A

²¹ Edward Herbert, "Autobiography," George Herbert: The Critical Heritage, ed. C.A. Patrides (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) 66.

²² Walton 110.

Priest to the Temple or The Country Parson: His Character, and Rule of Holy Life, a book considered standard for Anglican priests for a long time. Not only did he edify his fellow priests and ministers to better their lives, but. . .

by that inward devotion which he testified constantly by an humble behaviour, and visible adoration, he like Josua,* . . . brought most of his Parishioners and many Gentlemen in the Neighbourhood, constantly to make a part of his Congregation twice a day; and some of the meaner sort of his Parish, did so live and reverence Mr. Herbert, that they would let their Plow rest when Mr. Herberts Saints-Bell rung to Prayers, that they might also offer their devotions to God with him: and would then return back to their Plow.²³

Meanwhile, he received full understanding and support from his wife who became no less famous than her husband in terms of charitable works for the less fortunate in that parish. He also beautified the chapel and repaired the church and the parsonage at Bemerton. Herbert kept in close touch with Nicholas Ferrar, his Cambridge friend who had been ordained deacon by Bishop William Laud in 1626 and had established his Anglican community at Little Gidding, and also with Mr. Woodnot until, at the age of forty, consumption** ended his life on March 1, 1633 in his rectory at Bemerton.

* Josua succeeded Moses who was the spiritual and political leader in the Israelite exodus from the land of Egypt in the thirteenth century B.C.

²³ Walton 119.

** or Tuberculosis.

An Outline of George Herbert's Life. Contemporary events.

- 1593 Born on April 3.
- 1596 His father, Richard, died.
- 1597 Richard Hooker's Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity published.
- 1598 Magdalen, his mother, moved her family from Montgomery Castle to Oxford. Lady Herbert came to know John Donne.
- 1600 English East India Company chartered. Death of Hooker.
- 1601 Magdalen moved her family to Charing Cross, London. Essex' rebellion and execution. Elizabethan Poor Law. Lancelot Andrewes appointed Dean of Westminster.
- 1603 Death of Elizabeth I; accession of James I (1603-25).
- 1604 After twelve years of tuition at home, Herbert entered Westminster Grammar School and was under the care of Dr. Neale, the Dean, and Mr. Ireland, the Headmaster of the school.
- 1605 Elected a scholar of the School. Gunpowder Plot failed. Bacon's Advancement of Learning published.
- 1608 Gained a King's Scholarship and moved to Trinity Milton born. Robert Cecil created Earl of

- College, Cambridge. Salisbury, appointed Lord
Dr. Nevil, Dean of Treasurer.
Canterbury and Master of
Trinity College, was his
close supervisor.
- 1609 Magdalen married Sir John Danvers.
- 1610 Herbert sent two sonnets Galileo reports on his telescopic
to his mother. view of the heavens.
- 1611 Authorized King James Bible
published.
- 1613 Graduated a Bachelor of Crashaw born.
Art and continued studies
for the degree of Bachelor
of Divinity at Cambridge.
- 1615 March 15, elected a Major
Fellow of the College.
- 1616 Obtained his MA degree. Death of Shakespeare.
- 1618 Chosen to deliver Bacon appointed Lord Chancellor.
university lectures
in rhetoric.
- 1619 January 21, elected Public Andrewes appointed Bishop of
Orator for the University. Winchester.
- 1620 The Pilgrims settled at Plymouth,
Massachusetts.
- 1621 Donne appointed Dean of St. Paul.
Marvell born.
- 1622 Henry Vaughan born.
- 1623 Pascal born. Charles and Buckingham
went to Madrid. The first
Shakespeare Folio published.

- 1624 Elected as a Member of Parliament. Ordained deacon in November or December.
- 1625 England declared war on Spain. The French marriage treaty was ratified.
- 1625 Accession of Charles I (1625-42). Charles I married Henrietta Maria of France. Nicholas Ferrar settles at Little Gidding in Huntingdonshire.
- 1626 July 5, installed a canon of Lincoln Cathedral. Bishop William put the stone church at Leighton Bromswold under Herbert's care. He reconstructed the damaged church, and began his stay with the Danvers for the recovery from his sickness.
- 1627 Herbert's mother died.
- 1628 His stepfather remarried. Petition of Right. Buckingham assassinated.
- 1629 Married Jane Danvers. Edict of Restitution. Parliament was dissolved and not summoned again until 1640,
- 1630 April 26, named rector of St. Peter's, Fugglestone and

St. Andrew's, Bemerton
 by Bishop Davenant of
 Salisbury. Bishop
 Davenant ordained him a
 priest on Sunday,
 19 September.

- 1631 Death of Donne. Dryden born.
- 1632 Birth of John Locke and
 Christopher Wren. Crashaw
 visits Little Gidding.
- 1633 Died of tuberculosis Laud becomes archbishop of
 in his rectory at Canterbury.
 Bemerton on March 1.

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