

9. Overton Imprisoned, Canne Exiled, and Chamberlen Derided

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Persecution's long arm continued to search out and oppress the growing number who had the temerity to express their deep conviction that human philosophy and tradition, rather than Bible truth, still prevailed generally in Protestant circles in this vital matter of the nature and destiny of man. There was widespread searching of the Word as the foundation of all faith, and a call sounded for completing the Reformation, which was obviously arrested in this area of doctrine. Note three typical examples in the middle portion of the seventeenth century.

I. Overton's Stormy Career as Conditionalist Pamphleteer

RICHARD OVERTON, or "R. O." (fl. 1643-1659), [1] Baptist pamphleteer and outspoken Conditionalist—whose printer- father had a bookshop in Pope's Head Alley in London— spent his early life in Holland, as many had been forced to do because of religious convictions. The times were tense, and R. O's first publications were anonymous attacks on religious "abuses" by the bishops. He then turned to what he profoundly believed to be abuses or errors in theology. [2]

1 Because there were two writers at this period with the same initials ("R. O."), A. J. Mills contends that they indicate Robert Overton, not Richard. But authorities such as Dr. W. T. Whitley, secretary of the Baptist Historical Society, in A Baptist Bibliography (1526-1776, vol. 1, pp. 16, 25, 29, 39, and 61), clearly identify him as Richard, as do the two authorities in the scholarly Dictionary of National Biography. He is also so designated in the British Museum, where his works are found.

2 Charles H. Firth, "Richard Overton," Dictionary of National Biography, vol. 14, pp. 1279-1281; William E. A. Oxon, "John Canne," ibid., vol. 3, p. 864.

As a consequence, in 1643 Overton produced *Mans Mortality*, which for safety was printed in Amsterdam by the exiled Baptist minister-printer John Canne, likewise a Conditionalist, with a second or "corrected and enlarged" edition following twelve years later in London. The title of the treatise was then altered slightly, reading *Man Wholly Mortal*.

But in both cases it was followed by an identical explanatory subtitle. In fact, in accordance with the custom of the day, the essence of the entire argument is condensed into the extended subtitle appearing on the cover page and reading:

"Or a Treatise Wherein 'tis proved, both Theologically and Philosophically, that whole Man (as a rational! Creature) is a Compound wholly mortal, contrary to that common distinction of Soule and Body. And that the present going of the Soule into Heaven or Hell is a mere Fiction: And that at the Resurrection is the beginning of our immortality, and then Actual Condemnation, and Salvation, and not before."

As already noted, the learned Johann L. von Mosheim, chancellor of the University of Gottingen, and others, record the fact that at this time there were large numbers of General Baptists and other Conditionalists spread over Britain and on the Continent who held "that the soul, between death and the resurrection at the last day, has neither pleasure nor pain, but is in a state of insensibility." [3] Nevertheless, the appearance of Overton's bold treatise, printed for security reasons in Holland, "made a great stir" in England, as the "Bookseller's Note" attested. And the ranks of the "Soul-Sleepers," as they were called in derision, were considerably augmented.

Indeed, so great was the stir that not only did the ecclesiastics demand that "R. O." be apprehended, but on August 26, 1644, the House of Commons ordered "the authors, printers and publishers of the pamphlets against the immortality of the soul" to be "diligently" sought out. Thus Overton first came into conflict with governmental authority over his Conditionalist views. Incidentally, Overton was coupled with Milton as "the most dangerous of critics." And at this time any public denial of the immortality of the soul was visited with severe penalty.

3 Mosheim, Ecclesiastical History (Murdock tr.), vol. 3, p. 578.

Commenting on R. O.'s treatise, the learned Anglican Archdeacon Francis Blackburne, likewise a Conditionalist, in his classic *Historical View of the Controversy*, two centuries ago declared that Overton "shews himself a master of his subject." And he adds that, following the customary scholastic type of argument of the day, R. O. exhibits no less than nine teen different ancient and modern opinions on the soul, devised "to uphold this ridiculous invention" of Innate Immortality, which was "inducted from the heathens" and derived from Plato. And Blackburne adds that, examining the system of Aristotle, Overton finds "no less than sixty-nine absurdities of his opponents." [4] It was admittedly a learned treatise.

-Sharp replies to Overton's pamphlet were quickly forth coming. In 1645 two vitriolic attacks appeared, one of which was entitled *The Prerogative of Man: or His Smile's Immortality*, and high perfection defended and explained against the rash and rude conceptions of a later author who hath inconsiderately adventured to impugn it, and bitterly castigated Overton's treatise as the "vain cavils of a late worthless pamphleteer." Blackburne also quotes from another "answerer" who "in the warmth of his orthodoxy" and the caustic terms of the times called R. O. "a worthless pamphleteer, a sorry animal, who had stepped into the crowd of scriblers, in defence of an old rotten heresy, condemned and suffocated by the wise almost at the hour of the birth." [5] Such were the intense feelings of the day on the subject.

But Conditionalist-Historian Blackburne's comment was that Overton's antagonist only touched upon "R. O.'s scripture proofs with great delicacy." And he comments that the attacker builds his defence "fortress" with "the untempered mortar of human authority, from a whole cartload of philosophers and divines, poets and schoolmen, pagan, rabbinical, -papistical, Mohamed and what not, who in reality were just as much in agreement with each other, as he was with R. O." [6]

4 Blackburne, A Short Historical View, p. 49.

5 Ibid., p. 50, also Abbot, Literature of the Doctrine of a Future Life, no. 647.

II -Overton Imprisoned in Newgate and Tower for Conditionalism

Twice Arrested and Committed Order of Parliament, First to Newgate Then to Tower of London.

Overton issued several anonymous pamphlets criticizing the actions of the Westminster Assembly, which writings he later acknowledged to have authored. In August, 1646, he was arrested by order of the House of Parliament, and committed to Newgate prison. [7] But friends in the army demanded he be either duly tried or released, and in September, 1647, he was released.

Overton championed civil and religious liberty, and sent numerous petitions to Parliament, some of which he had composed while in the "most contemptible gaol of Newgate," as he phrased it. In 1649 he was again arrested. Upon refusing to acknowledge the authority of the Council of State, he was committed a second time to prison, on this occasion in the Tower. But he was once more released.

6 Blackburne, op. cit., p. 50.

7 Baptist Bibliography, p. 25.

In 1655 Overton had to flee the country to Flanders, the very year the enlarged edition of his *Mans Mortality*, now called *Man Wholly Mortal*, was republished in London. That his views as a Conditionalist were not the passing whim of an enthusiast but the settled conviction of a careful student is attested by the fact that twelve years after the initial printing Overton brought out this materially improved and enlarged edition—also showing that interest in the theme was growing. And there was yet another reprint, posthumously, in 1674.

Overton thus steadfastly maintained his Conditionalist views and risked his reputation and his life in their promulgation. For the third time, in 1659, R. O. was imprisoned for expressing his conscientious convictions. Altogether he was the author of about eighteen treatises, the majority of which, however, were on secular subjects. Such was the stormy life of a militant Conditionalist in 1643-1659.

III. Samplings of Overton's Conditionalist Contentions

1. DURING DEATH MAN CEASES TO BE UNTIL THE RESURRECTION.

Chapter one of this treatise is epitomized thus:

"Of Man's Creation, Fall, Restitution, and Resurrection how they disproved the Opinion of the Soul, imagining the better part of Man immortal: And proved him (quatinus Homo) wholly mortal." [8] And Overton clearly states that, in death, man returns to dust and is without any being, in whole or in part, until the resurrection, when he is restored to being. Thus:

"Death reduces this productio Entis ex Non-ente ad Non-entem, returns Man to what he was before he was; that is, not to be: Ps. 115.17. The Dead praise not the Lord, neither they that go down into silence: And Ps. 146.4. His breath goes forth, he returned to the Earth, in that very Day his thoughts perish, (see more pages. 5. 6. 7. 8.) But the Resurrection restoreth this non-ented Entitie to an everlasting Being, 1 Cor. 15.42. It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruptible." [9]

2. MORTALIZED BY ADAM; IMMORTALIZED BY CHRIST.

Mortality is the inheritance of all of Adam's posterity, while conversely, "what was mortalized by the earthly Man shall be immortalized by the Heavenly man." [10] Man thus became wholly mortal, without "his soul" continuing "immortal."

8 R. Overton, Mans Mortality (1643), p. 1.

9 Ibid., p. 3.

And he concludes: "Immortality or the Resurrection cannot be by Propagation or Succession, as mortality from Adam to his Issue." [11]

3. ALL HOPE GROUNDED ON RESURRECTION.

In chapter two Overton marshals the evidence of the Old Testament and the New Testament Scriptures. He quotes from Obadiah 4; Job 3, 4, 14, and 34; Psalms 6, 89, and 103; Ecclesiastes 3; and Isaiah 38, to show that "man is wholly mortal." In death the wicked is not now in torment, but "absolutely is not" until the resurrection. And from the New Testament—such as 1 Corinthians 15; 1 Peter 1; 1 Timothy 4 and 6; and Luke 20— he likewise shows that "all his hope of future life was grounded upon the Resurrection." [12] And he concludes that in death men do not live on "in their souls," but man ceases to be "till the Resurrection." [13] That is his continuing theme.

4. PARADISE ENTERED BY WAY OF RESURRECTION.

In dealing specifically with Luke 23:42, 43, concerning the thief on the cross, Overton says in the heavy phrasing of the time:

"Then it must be meant, (as the Malefactor desired) when he [Christ] was in his Kingdom, which could not be before his Resurrection: there- fore, the Malefactor could enjoy no such solitary beatitude, as from hence is supposed, and that before he [Christ] had received this Kingdome himself, but must receive the Paradise. as Christ did, by a total Resurrection." [14]

R. O.'s closing words, in this connection, are:

"Thus having found Mans Foundation to be wholly in the Dust, from thence taken, and thither to return: Let this then be the use of all: That man hath not wherewith at all to boast no more then of dirt under his feet, but is provoked wholly out of himself, to cast himself wholly on Jesus Christ, with whom in God our lives are hid, that when he who is our life shall appear, he might also with him appear in glory, to whom be the honour of our immortality for ever, and for ever. Amen." [15] So much for Overton in 1643-1655.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., p. 5.

12 Ibid., p. 6.

13 Ibid., p. 9.

14 Ibid., p. 32.

15 Ibid., p. 57.

III. Canne Braves Reprisals to Print Overton's Conditionalist Treatise

Brief reference must also be made to JOHN CANNE (c. 1590-1667), who first introduced marginal reference notes into our English Bibles, and was a Baptist minister, writer, printer, and bookseller. As just noted, he was the printer, in 1643, of Richard Overton's *Mans Mortality*, and was in accord with its Conditionalist principles. His name was boldly printed on the title page, when such a procedure courted reprisals. Overton had merely used his initials, "R. O."

Little is known of Canne's early life. Evidently he served for a brief time in the Anglican Church after his ordination.

About 1621 he was chosen as "teacher" of a company of Independents, at "Deadman's Place," Southwark, London, who were forced to meet secretly in private homes in order to avoid persecution. But the pressure became so intense that within a year or two Canne was forced to flee, banned from England for his Baptist convictions. He made his way to Amsterdam where, under "banishment," for seventeen years he served "diligently" as pastor of its "ancient English Church." [16]

"To his pulpit labours" he added writing, printing, and bookselling in Amsterdam, with intermittent visits to England.

But he considered his life mission to be the preaching of the gospel and the founding of churches after God's order.

Canne strongly advocated separation of church and state, and genuine reformation in religion. About the time he printed *Mortality for Overton*, he published his own *A Necessity of Separation from the Church of England*, proved by the Non conformists' Principles, written to justify dissent from the Church of England, to show the necessity of separation from religious error and comfortable livings, and to urge the founding of "pure churches." It exerted a wide influence.

About 1640 he again visited England, and was for a time in Bristol. There in 1641 he found a company of Separatists seeking to worship God according to the requirements of His Word.

10 William E. A. Oxon, "*John Canne*," *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 3, p. 863; William Cathart, "*John Canne*," *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, pp. 180, 181; J. M. Cramp, *Baptist History*, pp. 411, 412.

As a "baptized man" he formed them, on April 25, 1641, into the Broadmead Baptist church, [17] which has had an illustrious history. [18] Its pastors and members suffered great persecutions under Charles II, often meeting in private homes, and visited with fines and imprisonment, with the arrest of their ministers, who at one time preached to them through a hole in the wall from another room, [19] thus avoiding "apprehension." On another occasion Canne was banished from Hull after being arrested in the pulpit.

But Canne returned to Amsterdam, where he published Overton's *Mans Mortality* in 1643, which aroused much hostility against him, as well as against Overton. About this time he brought forth his own major contribution—a Bible with marginal notes, the first of its kind to be published, which formed the basis for all later reference Bibles, and for which he is best known. It was dedicated to the British Parliament and was the result of prodigious labour, extending over some twenty-one years. It was designed to help inquirers in search of truth, and was reprinted repeatedly in Amsterdam and in England. Canne's guiding motto was that "Scripture was the best interpreter of Scripture." He also stressed the Baptist principle that "the Bible is everything in religion," and that every human being should study the Sacred Scriptures for himself.

Canne spent many years working on a Bible commentary but did not live to see it completed.²⁰ However, he published some eighteen treatises. Visiting England at intervals, and becoming interested in Bible prophecy, he embraced for a time the current, widespread Fifth Monarchy principles, and in 1657 wrote a treatise on prophecy entitled *The Time of the End*.

17 "*Broadmead Records*," *Hanserd Knollys Society*, p. 18.

18 It is interesting to note that Deacon Edward Terrill, burdened to see young men trained for the Baptist ministry, left considerable property for the establishment of the Bristol Baptist College, the first of its kind, founded in 1679—for the great universities were closed against them.

19 Cramp, *op. cit.* pp. 345-347, 427, 428.

20 Cathcart, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

He was arrested and imprisoned in 1658, but was acquitted upon trial. He returned to Amsterdam from each visit to England, and died in exile from his native land.

Canne held to Life Only in Christ, and though he did not write any separate treatise thereon, he was a staunch supporter and helper of those contending for Conditionalism, as was Overton, when printing such a work was fraught with peril.

But his position is evident from various allusions in his works.

He adhered closely to the written Word, and said in the preface to his "Reference Bible"—"It is not the scripture that leadeth men into errors and byways, but the misinterpretations and false glosses imposed upon it; as when men, by perverting the scriptures to their own principles and purposes, will make them speak their sense and private interpretation. Laying therefore aside men's interpretations, and only following the scripture interpreting itself, it must needs be the best way and freest from errors."

He endured suffering and persecution for the cause of conscience. Such was the calibre and character of men advocating Conditionalism in those stormy seventeenth-century times.

IV. Court Physician—Death a Sleep, With Resurrection Awakening

Another of the unique Conditionalists of this period, in the professions, was PR. PETER CHAMBERLEN (1601-1683), brilliant court physician to three Stuart kings of England—James I, Charles I, and Charles II, and their queens—beyond which time he still continued as court physician for several years.

Chamberlen was a reformer in medicine and an independent in theology. He was a most colourful figure, taking the lead in spirited discussion and writing numerous broadsides and tractates in both fields. His medical reputation was such that the czar of Russia sought to obtain his services, but Charles II refused to release him from the British court. [21] -Chamberlen was highly trained, a graduate of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, then a student of medicine in Heidelberg, Germany, and Padua, Italy. He received the degree of M.D. from the latter university in 1619, and was licensed by Oxford in 1620 and by Cambridge in 1621. He succeeded his father as court physician to James I, and also taught anatomy under the authorization of the Royal College of Physicians. Chamberlen was a medical progressive and pioneered in various scientific advances, including the invention or perfection of the obstetrical forceps. He was a reformer in medical practice and midwifery, lifting professional standards and proposing a system of hydrotherapy. He was regarded as unsurpassed in his field and was in advance of his time.

21 J. H. Aveling, M.D., *The Chamberlens and the Midwifery Forceps*, pp. 30-124; see also *Froom, Prophetic Faith*, vol. 4, pp. 908-915.

Chamberlen was also a reformer in his religious views. He was usually classed as an Independent. But for several years he served as a Baptist pastor, though he was baptized an Ana Baptist. At that time the Baptists were commonly classed as Anabaptists, and, as such; Chamberlen was the object of scorn and derision because of his religion. Nevertheless, he boldly entered the arena of religious discussion and participated in spirited debates—some even in St. Paul's Cathedral—for public debates were the order of the day. Chamberlen was author of ten treatises, and was frequently the centre of controversy. [22] His life span covered the troubled times of the Interregnum under Cromwell, and then through and past Charles II.

In 1654, 150 Baptist signatories asked him to become their pastor. So at the age of fifty-three Chamberlen entered the dual role of pastor and court physician. He was likewise a skilled student of Bible prophecy, and in 1677 and 1682 wrote on the prophesied course of world empires as revealed in Daniel 7— impressively fulfilled, he said, in Babylonia, Medo-Persia, Grecia, and Rome, which fourth world power was in turn divided into the ten kingdoms of modern Europe, with the "Little Triple Crowned Horn," [23] as he phrased it, constituting the Papacy, responsible for the change of the fourth precept of God's law and its Sabbath "time" requirement. [24] -Chamberlen began his personal observance of the seventh-day Sabbath in 1651, continuing this practice undeviating for thirty-two years. And for four of these he served as a Seventh Day Baptist pastor, subject again to the inevitable public jibes and jeers directed at all such innovations. Those were the rugged times when John Bunyan was imprisoned for his faith, writing part of *Pilgrim's Progress* while in Bedford jail.

As a former Anabaptist this celebrated court physician not only rested in the love and mercy of God—and rejoiced in His free pardon and the full remission of sin—but believed in the inheritance of eternal life and immortality solely through Christ. Chamberlen, like many other keen thinkers and able scholars of the time, believed death to be an unconscious sleep—resting in darkness and peace from sorrow and labour. He looked for the glorious resurrection morn when he would be awakened, clothed in eternal light and life. [25] He never wrote a formal treatise thereon, but represented many who personally held this view, reflected only in attitude and incidental expression. The voice of Conditionalism was increasing surely among men in all walks of life.

22 *Froom, op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 910.

23 This expression, in varying forms, appears in at least four places in his writings— to the Jews, and to archbishops Sheldon and Sandcraft (*Aveling, op. cit.*, pp. 112, 116, 119, 120). Photostats of originals in *Conditional Immortality Source Collection*.

24 See *Froom, op. cit.*, vol. 4, pp. 910-913, where the sources (*Tanner, Ms. No. 36, fol. 147*) are given.

Thus in 1684 Dr. Chamberlen wrote An Elegy of that Faithful and Laborious Minister of Christ, Mr. Francis Bampffield. Bampffield was a prominent Anglican clergyman who had likewise become a Sabbatarian, and died for his faith in New gate prison, February 16, 1684. In this printed broadside issued at the time, Chamberlen's Conditionalist convictions are woven into this pensive poem:

"Sleep then (Dear Saint) in Peace and softly Rest.

Till Christ resuscitate thy Quiet Dust, To clothe it with immortal Beams of Light; That with its Brightened Soul it may unite." [26]

And in his own last will and testament Chamberlen looked forward to the "fruition of Eternal Life," received at the great consummation, meantime being buried "in sure and certain expectation of a Joyful Resurrection" at our Lord's return.

Most impressive of all are the final expressions carved on his imposing tombstone at Woodham Mortimer Hall (Essex), with the tiny but significant words chiselled in stone at the close of his epitaph, "Ordered by Doctor Peter Chamberlen, here entered, for his Epitaph." They were therefore of his own composition. Here are the tell-tale expressions excerpted from the lengthy epitaph:

"Death my last sleep . . . ; The end of sorrow—labour and of care, The end of trouble, sickness, and of fear.

25 Ibid., p. 915.

26 Original in British Museum; photostat in Conditional Immortality Source Collection.

Here shall I sin no more—no more shall weep, Here's surely to be found a quiet sleep; - . . . entombed in sleep and night."

But that was not all. That was not the end. Here is the "fruition":

"But in the morning we renew our light; And when I wake wrapped in Eternal light, -Crowned with Eternal glories ever blest, Oh! happy rest that brings me all the rest." [27]

The calibre and prominence of some of these adherents to Conditionalism are impressive.

27 Aveling, op. cit., pp. 121-124.

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