



## Matthew Henry on the aim of exposition<sup>1</sup>

Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Bible* is still, despite its great age, widely used and highly regarded. It became Henry's *magnum opus*, the crowning work of a ministry during which many excellent literary works appeared in print from his hand. Little is known today, however, of the life of the author, or, more importantly, of the principles which shaped his approach to the text of God's Word.

Matthew Henry was the son of Philip Henry, a noted minister of the later Puritan era. Born in October 1662, Matthew showed signs of an early interest in the Word of God, and also of academic promise. At the age of ten he became very ill and his parents feared for his life. God spared him, however, and the incident was blessed to him as he began to look at life with marked seriousness. His habit was to spend much time in prayer.

Since there was no institution for theological training belonging to the nonconformists of the day, Matthew Henry's education took him to various centres of learning. His training completed, in 1686 he came to Broad Oak near Whitchurch, the place of his birth, and preached there for a year before moving to Chester in 1687. He preached in many of the surrounding villages, and remained there until 1712, when he moved to London. Two years later, however, he died, aged only fifty-two. His remains are interred at Chester.

Matthew Henry's first publication was a treatise on Schism, which appeared in 1690. Thereafter several works came from his hand. The *Commentary* was begun in November 1704, and when Matthew Henry died ten years after this he had completed the *Commentary* as far as the Book of Acts. Romans through to Revelation was completed by various other ministers. The fact that the commentaries on these books are often ascribed to Henry himself is a tribute to his massive contribution to the exposition of the Bible.

Our aim here is to look at the principles which guided Matthew Henry in his exposition of the Word of God. These principles are of great importance, and deserve to be thoroughly mastered by those of us whose task it is to make the same Word known today. In the words of the first editors of Henry's *Commentary*, he '*searched very narrowly*' the Scriptures. It must surely be of great value to learn what these principles were which guided him in his 'search'. He might be speaking of our own age when he writes in the Preface to the *Commentary* on the New Testament, that he was living 'in an age when Christianity and the New Testament are more virulently attacked by some within their own bowels than by those upon their borders'. The attack on the authority of Scripture was greater, in other words, within the professing Christian church than outside it. The same, alas, is true today. For this very reason we too do well to become 'narrow searchers' and faithful expositors of the Bible.

### **Seriousness, not curiousness**

According to Matthew Henry, seriousness is of supreme importance to the expositor of God's Word. He can write: '*I pretend not to gratify the curious; the summit of my ambition is to assist those who are truly serious in searching the Scriptures daily*'. 'Curiousness' is altogether a wrong attitude in our approach to the Word of God. By this term Henry refers to a merely intellectual or philosophical inquiry into the meaning of the Bible. The attitude which we need to have is that of 'Seriousness'. This is reflected, for example, in his treatise 'On Family Religion', where he addresses heads of families in these terms: '*You must read the Scriptures to your families in a solemn manner, requiring their attendance on your reading, and their attention to it*' (Henry, *Works*, vol. 1). To come to the Bible in any other spirit is to insult the God whose book it is.

According to Henry, God has stamped his own image on the Word. In it we see *'the image of God's wisdom in the awful depths of its mysteries, the image of his sovereignty in the commanding majesty of its style, the image of his unity in the wonderful harmony and symmetry of all its parts, the image of his holiness in the unspotted purity of its precepts, and the image of his goodness in the manifest tendency of the whole to the welfare and happiness of mankind in both worlds; in short, it is a work that fathers itself'*.

To those who argued that the Bible is only a fraud, Henry answered: 'Bad men would never write so good a book ... and good men would never do so wicked a thing as to counterfeit the broad seal of Heaven'.

There are, he maintained, two all-important issues to be determined by the expositor. These are: *'What is this?'* and then: *'What is this to us?'* (Preface to Vol. 1). The exposition of the Scriptures, therefore, involves us in these two tasks: exegesis and application. The first of these concerns the meaning of the text (What is this?) and the second concerns the practical demands of it (What is this to us?)

### **'What is this?'**

The first duty, that of exegesis (lit. 'drawing out' of the meaning of Scripture), presupposes inerrancy and divine inspiration. The Bible, says Henry, is *'perfectly pure from all falsehood and corrupt intention'* (Introduction to the Commentary on Genesis). *'The great things of God's law and gospel are here written to us, that they might be reduced to a greater certainty'*. There is, therefore, in the inscripturation of divine revelation, a reduction. The great things of God become verbalised. At the same time there is a promotion of the content of the revelation. This lays the foundation for the unity of the Bible, the corollary of which is its self-interpretative character.

In introducing his Commentary on Exodus, he writes:

*Moses, in this book, begins, like Caesar, to write his own Commentaries; nay, a greater, far greater than Caesar is here ... There are more types of Christ in this book than perhaps in any other book of the Old Testament, for Moses wrote of him.*

(John 5:46)

The meaning of the Scripture, therefore, is to be found within itself. One part sheds light on another. We are not to think that the Old Testament *'is an almanac out of date'* (Preface to Vol. 1). The principle to follow is that *'as the New Testament expounds and completes the Old ... so the Old Testament confirms and illustrates the New, and shows us Jesus Christ'*. If this is the case, then:

*It concerns us also to be mighty in the Scriptures, as Apollos was (Acts 18:24), that is, to be thoroughly acquainted with the true intent and meaning of them, that we may understand what we read, and may not misinterpret or misapply it, but by the conduct of the blessed Spirit may be led into all truth.*

(John 16:13)

### **'What is this to us?'**

But exegesis alone is not enough. Exposition has as its aim the salvation of the soul since *'the manifest tendency of (the Bible is) to promote holiness among men'* (Introduction to Genesis). In the first Preface to the work he states his own aim as an expositor in this way:

*I have not obliged myself to raise doctrines out of every verse or paragraph, but only have endeavoured to mix with the exposition such hints or remarks as I thought profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, aiming in all to promote practical godliness, and carefully avoiding matters of doubtful disputation and strifes of words.*

He compares the task of exegesis to rolling the stone away from the mouth of a well, and the work of application to the drawing of water for the people of God. Altering the metaphor, he writes: *'The*

*Word of God is designed to be not only a light to our eyes, the entertaining subject of our contemplation, but a light to our feet, and a lamp to our paths, to direct us in the way of our duty'.*

The following quotations from his Prefaces will make this point clear:

*'The histories of the Old Testament were written for our admonition and direction, and not barely for the information and entertainment of the curious' (Preface to the Pentateuch). He says in the same Preface that he has aimed to answer these questions in his exposition of the Word: 'What use may we make of it? How may we accommodate it to some of the purposes of that divine and heavenly life which, by the grace of God, we are resolved to live?' In his work as a commentator he has sought to have an 'honest design to promote the knowledge of the Scripture, in order to the reforming of men's hearts and lives'. The histories of the Old Testament have been written for our example. In commenting on them, he states: 'I cannot pretend to write for great ones. But if what is here done may be delightful to any in reading and helpful in understanding and improving this sacred history, and governing themselves by the dictates of it, let God have all the glory'. In his Preface to the Psalms, he states that this book is 'a directory to the actions of our lives'. Proverbs, he says, contains 'in a little compass, a complete body of divine ethics, politics, and economics, exposing every vice, recommending every virtue, and suggesting rules for the government of ourselves in every relation and condition, and every turn of the conversation'. His Preface to Proverbs concludes with these words: 'The best comment on these rules is to be ruled by them'. For the Puritan expositor, as for the Puritan preacher, the aim is practical.*

Leland Ryken puts it this way: the Puritan sermon, he says, *'was a rhetorical or persuasive art ... a subversive activity' (Worldly Saints: the Puritans as they really were)*. William Perkins speaks for all Puritans when he affirms that the goal of preaching is *'holy reformation'*. Matthew Henry's life and work marked the close of the Puritan era but the Puritan ideal is everywhere visible in his *Commentary*.

We today who are the successors of our spiritual forefathers of the 17th century must learn the same lessons for our exposition and application of the Bible. The meaning of a text must first be opened up and then its truth applied.

Henry's Introduction to the Prophets contains words which are characteristic of him:

*I have likewise endeavoured to accommodate these prophecies to the use and service of those who desire to read the Scripture, not only with understanding, but with pious affections, and to their edification in faith and holiness.*

These words are golden. Three centuries have elapsed since his life-time but no new insights of subsequent scholars have made Henry's principles invalid. The aim of true Bible exposition remains the same at this hour.

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<sup>1</sup> The reader who wishes to learn more of Matthew Henry, should obtain *The Lives of Philip and Matthew Henry* by J. B. Williams, reprinted by the Trust in 1974.