

A Treatise of Ruling Elders and Deacons

By James Guthrie (1612-61)

Biography

This tract was written by James Guthrie (1612-61), a distinguished minister and martyr of the Church of Scotland. Jock Purves, in his book on the Covenanters, supplies us with a biographical sketch of Guthrie, from which most of the following information is taken:

James Guthrie had much whereof he might have trusted in the flesh, amongst which was a very liberal education, given not with the object of making him a Covenanting minister. But, meeting with 'yours in his sweet Lord Jesus, Samuel Rutherford', all he had learned against the non-conforming Presbyterians

vanished forever, and among them he became a preacher of the Gospel in 1638, the year when the National Covenant was signed. His name, too, is set there on that great spiritual Magna Charta. While on his way to pen his name, he met the hangman. This moved him somewhat, and, feeling that it was prophetic, it made him walk up and down a little before he went forward. But his signature is there in martyr lustre with the honoured names of those thousands of others on that great parchment of deerskin, 'the holiest thing in all Scotland, a vow registered in Heaven'.

As minister of Lauder (1642-9), he was among the Scottish delegates who in 1646 met Charles I at Newcastle and pressed the claims of the Reformed Church. The

last 12 years of his life were spent as minister of Stirling (1649-61), where he strongly upheld the principles of the Covenant. An undaunted fighter in a worthwhile cause, and a hater of everything lower than true godliness, he was soon, and always, in conflict with the loose-living King Charles Stuart and his like Committees. He utterly refused such a profane ruler any authority in the affairs of the Church. Although dismissed after one big trial, his refusal to allow the king any power over the conscience of a Christian was made much of against him in his last trials, ten years later.

He helped to write the searching pamphlet, *The Causes of the Lord's Wrath against Scotland*, and this paper was the principal pretext for his condemnation and execution. It had the honour of being put on a par with *Lex Rex* by Samuel Rutherford, and the common hangman publicly burnt copies of both books. To hold a copy of either work was treason against King and government. The purpose of these writings was said to be 'to corrupt the minds of his majesty's loyal subjects, to alienate and withdraw them from that duty of love and obedience that they owe unto his sacred person and greatness, stirring them up against his majesty and kingly government, and containing many things injurious to the king's majesty, person and authority'. But above all that base slander, the principles they taught are those upon which the true British

Constitution is based. It was a noxious doctrine that Erastus taught when he averred that a king was sovereign and supreme in all matters temporal and spiritual, and that if a Church exercised powers of government and discipline in her own lawful sphere, it broke in on the authority of the magistrate. Every page of the prescribed books is for the Crown Rights of the Redeemer in his Church, the freedom of the conscience, and against the so-called Divine Right of Kings.

Shortly after the Restoration of Charles II, in 1660, Guthrie, with others, was apprehended and cast into prison. In February of 1661, he was tried, and in April of that year he made a defence before the well-named Drunken Parliament. It concludes with these words, 'My Lord, my conscience I cannot submit. But this old crazy body and mortal flesh I do submit, to do with whatsoever ye will, whether by death, or banishment, or imprisonment, or anything else; only I beseech you to ponder well what profit there is in my blood. It is not the extinguishing of me or of many others that will extinguish the Covenant or work of the Reformation since 1638. My blood, bondage or banishment will contribute more for the propagation of these things than my life in liberty would do, though I should live many years'. At the close of this speech, some members withdrew, saying that they would have no part in his death, and one made a strong appeal urging banishment. But his judges were

baying for his blood, and he, with Captain William Govan, a fit companion, was sentenced to be hanged at Edinburgh Cross on 1 June, 1661. The head of Guthrie was to be stuck on a pike high above the Netherbow Port, his estate confiscated, and his family arms torn. The head of Govan, pike-stuck, was likewise to be high up on the West Port. On receiving this sentence, Guthrie said to the members of the Drunken Parliament, 'My Lords, let never this sentence affect you more than it does me, and let never my blood be required from the King's family'. But it was required, with the blood of many others, in the fullness of time.

On the morning of his execution, Guthrie arose at about four o'clock for worship, and was asked by James Cowie how he was. 'Very well', said Guthrie. 'This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it'.

His two little children, Sophia and William, came to see him. Taking five-year old William on his knee, he said to him, 'Willie, the day will come when they will cast up to you that your father was hanged. But be not thou ashamed, lad. It is in a good cause'. Little Sophie and her mother were banished from the country, and part of the savage sentence was that the children and their posterity should be beggars forever - which was to reckon without him who takes beggars from the dunghill and sets them among princes, and who will not see the righteous

forsaken nor his seed begging bread.

With hands tied together, James Guthrie walked slowly up the High Street to the city cross. Broad-shouldered William Govan kept pace beside him. The one was nearly fifty, the other not yet out of his thirties. Greatheart and Valiant for Truth were to be seen once again upon the human scene. Soon they were upon the scaffold above the serried rows of glittering steel, and Guthrie, who had been offered a bishopric and had refused it, stepped forward with loving zeal to give his last message. The great crowd stood hushed to hear him say, 'I take God to record upon my soul, I would not exchange this scaffold with the palace and mitre of the greatest prelate in Britain. Blessed be God who has shown mercy to me such a wretch, and has revealed his Son in me, and made me a minister of the everlasting Gospel, and that he hath deigned, in the midst of much contradiction from Satan, and the world, to seal my ministry upon the hearts of not a few of his people, and especially in the station where I was last, I mean the congregation and presbytery of Stirling. Jesus Christ is my Life and my Light, my Righteousness, and strength, and my Salvation and all my desire. Him! O Him, I do with all the strength of my soul commend to you. Bless him, O my soul, from henceforth even forever. Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace for mine eyes have seen thy salvation'. He handed a copy of his last testimony to a

friend, for his son William when he should come to years. Then further up the ladder of death he went, exclaiming, 'Art not thou from everlasting, O Lord my God. I shall not die but live'. And in the last seconds before he was with Christ, he lifted the napkin from his face, and cried, 'The Covenants! The Covenants! They shall yet be Scotland's reviving'.

Captain William Govan, intently watching, stood by. His martial shoulders were squared. Gazing lovingly at the dangling dead minister of Christ, he thought of Calvary's Tree. 'It is sweet! it is sweet!' he cried, 'otherwise how durst I look with courage upon the corpse of him who hangs there, and smile upon these sticks and that gibbet as the very Gates of Heaven'. The hangman had him prepared. The brave soldier taking a ring from a finger, gave it to a friend, asking him to carry it to his wife, and to tell her that he died in humble confidence and found the Cross of Christ sweet, and that Christ had done all for him, and that it was by him alone that he was justified. Someone called to him to look up to the Lord Jesus, and he smilingly said, 'He looks down and smiles at me'. As he ascended the ladder there rang out from him across the crowds these words: 'Dear friends, pledge this cup of suffering, as I have done, before you sin, for sin and suffering have been presented to me and I have chosen the suffering part'. The rope adjusted, he ended his witness with, 'Praise and glory be to Christ for ever'. A little pause, a

little prayer, the signal given, and all was over, and he too swung in the warm summer air. Another who had magnified Christ in life magnified him also in death.

Ruling Elders

The Ruling Elder's personal qualifications are the same with those which the apostle requires in the conversation (or behaviour) of a minister (1 Tim 3:2-7; 1 Tim 6:11; Titus 1:6-8). In which scriptures, under the name of an overseer, he comprehends all these officers who have the oversight and charge of souls, and sets down what manner of persons he would have them to be in regard of their conversation and carriage.

I shall speak of these things with application to the Ruling Elder. That the Ruling Elder ought to be of a blameless and Christian conversation is above question, but that it may be more distinctly known what the Holy Ghost requires of such in regard of their conversation, I shall from these scriptures show, Firstly, What the apostle would have them not to be - Secondly, What he would have them to be.

The things of the first sort are these:

1. A Ruling Elder must not be given to wine, they must not be lovers or followers of strong drink, nor debased in riot and excess, nor tittle away time in alehouses

and taverns.

2. He must not be a striker nor a brawler, nor given to quarrelling and contentions.

3. He must not be covetous nor greedy of filthy lucre; for the love of money is the root of all evil, which while some covet after, they err from the faith and pierce themselves through with many sorrows.

4. He must not be a novice, or one newly come to the faith, lest he be puffed up with pride, and fall into the condemnation of the devil. The spirits of novices are not yet well ballasted, nor brought low enough by the frequent exercises of the cross, and so come to be more easily puffed up; therefore there is need that he be an exercised soldier of Jesus Christ, and one who by experience is taught to know the wiles of the devil, and is able to endure hardness.

5. He must not be self-willed, adhering perniciously and without reason to his own judgment, and refusing to hearken to the judgment of his brethren, though sound and wholesome.

6. He must not be soon angry, whether upon real or conceived causes of provocation.

The things of the second sort be these:

(i) He must be blameless, that is, one who walks without offence towards God and men.

(ii) If married, he must be the husband of one wife; such a one who shuns all unlawful lusts, satisfying himself with and keeping himself within the bounds of the remedy provided of God.

(iii) He must be vigilant, watchful over his own soul, that no temptation prevail upon him, watchful unto every good duty, and to take hold of every opportunity of well-doing.

(iv) He must be sober and temperate and of a sound and humble mind, moderating his own appetite and affections, and satisfying himself with a moderate use of the creatures and of the things of this world.

(v) He must be of good behaviour or modest, of a grave and staid, yet of an affable and courteous carriage, neither light and vain to the losing of his authority and rendering himself contemptible, nor sullen and self-pleasing to the discouraging and scaring away of the flock by his needless distance and austerity.

(vi) Given to hospitality, ready to receive strangers to his house, especially the poor and those who are of the household of faith.

(vii) Apt to teach, that is, a man of knowledge, and able to instruct others, one who hath a ready and willing mind to teach others, which is not so meant as if it were requisite for the Ruling Elder to be endued with the gifts of exhortation and

instruction competent to the Pastor and Teacher, or that he may and ought to employ himself therein, but of that fitness and ability to teach that is competent to his calling, which he must be ready and willing to exercise so far as belongs thereto.

(viii) Moderate in the original language, rendered patient. Not rigorous, nor exacting the height of the law in his dealing, but in his own particular of a condescending nature, and remitting something of strict justice.

(ix) Patient, one who without wearying waits on his duty, notwithstanding difficulties, and doth bear the delays, untractableness, and injuries of others.

(x) One who rules well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; to which the apostle adds this reason, 'If a man know not how to rule his own house how shall he take care of the church of God'? The church of God is of a larger extent than one family, and the duties to be performed in it be of greater eminency and difficulties, and require more skill, wisdom, and courage than those that are to be performed in a family. The ruling well of his own house doth import not only ability for doing of it, but also that he make conscience of and actually perform these duties that are required for the right and well ordering of a Christian family, to teach and instruct his children and servants in the knowledge

of God, to take care of their sanctifying the Lord's Day, of their profiting in godliness, of their seeking of God, and of their ordering their conversation aright, to read the Scriptures, sing psalms, pray in the family, and to exhort, admonish, rebuke, and comfort all that are of his household, as their condition doth require; for if these duties lie upon all masters of families who profess the Gospel, then in a special way upon Elders, who are appointed to stir up and go before others in the performance thereof.

(xi) A lover of good men, one whose soul cleaves to those who fear God, having such in estimation above all others, cherishing them and conversing ordinarily and familiarly with them.

(xii) He must be just, one who is straight and upright in all his dealings among men, deceiving no man, defrauding no man, withholding nothing from any man that is due to him, but giving to every man his own.

(xiii) Holy; careful to express the life of religion and power of godliness in all his conversation.

(xiv) He must be one who holds fast the faithful word that he hath been taught, one who is stable in the faith, holding fast the truth of God, without wavering or turning aside to error.

(xv) Lastly, he must be one who hath a good report of those who are without, lest

he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil, that is, he must be such a one whose blameless conversation and sober and Christian walking doth extort a testimony even from those who know not God, and who doth by well-doing put to silence the ignorance of foolish men, that if any speak evil of him, as of an evil doer, they may be ashamed who speak falsely against his good conversation in Christ. The apostle comprehends all these summarily in two sentences. 'Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity'. 'But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness'.

Deacons

The apostle shows what must be their qualifications (1 Tim 3:8-12).

- (i) They must not be double-tongued nor liars nor dissemblers nor deceivers.
- (ii) They must not be given to much wine, nor tiplers nor drunkards, nor lovers nor followers of strong drink.
- (iii) They must not be greedy of filthy lucre, nor such as are covetous, and whose hearts run after the things of the world.

(iv) They must be grave men, of a poised and staid carriage, and not of a light and vain behaviour.

(v) They must be such as hold fast the mystery of faith in a pure conscience, that is, who do not only know the doctrines of the Gospel, but do hold fast the faith thereof without wavering, and study to have a good conscience in walking answerably thereto.

(vi) They must be the husband of one wife*, such as abstain from all unlawful lusts, satisfying themselves with the remedy allowed of God.

(vii) They must be such as rule their own houses and their children well; such as command and instruct their children and household to keep the way of the Lord, going before them in the practice of piety and godliness, and all holy and religious duties.

*Literally, 'a one-woman man'. This does not mean that a deacon (or elder for that matter) has to be married. The apostle is not referring to marital status, but to a character trait. A deacon must not be flirtatious, he must be a man of unquestioned morality.