



PROFILE IN FAITH

Edward Dering: A Model of Puritanism

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Edward Dering (1540-1576) was one of the early models who set the pattern for future Puritan ministers. Although he is less well known than other theologians or pastors of later Puritanism, he was well known to them. People such as William Perkins and William Ames, who were leading Puritan theologians, looked to him as a model for the kind of pastor they wanted to produce. He was trained in Christ's College at Cambridge, the "seed-bed of Puritan religion." Later, Perkins, Ames, and many others were to come out of this same college.

Dering's central concern was the preaching of sin and its remedy. His emphasis (and that of later Puritans) was that since this was the central task of the minister, the worst thing to happen to England was the presence of ignorant, non-preaching clergy. In fact, few people, even in Puritanism, have held a higher view of ministry. Dering was the only early Protestant writer to maintain that the mere fact of preaching—apart from the truth of the doctrine preached—was an essential mark of the Church.

Dering had an opportunity to preach before Queen Elizabeth I. He laid his career on the line in this sermon. He presented a classic example of uncompromising Puritan preaching and of the intense concern for an educated, godly ministry. No Elizabethan sermon was more often reprinted in later years, and Elizabeth never forgot the sermon or Dering. His promising career was limited by the Queen's wrath. Here is a sample of the sermon:

I needed not seek far for offences where God's people are grieved, even round about this chapel I see a great many, and God in his good time shall root them out. If

you have said sometime of your self, tanquam ovis, as a sheep appointed to be slain, take heed hearer not now of the prophet, tanquam indomita luvenca, as an untamed and unruly heifer.

Later he said to the Queen:

Look upon your ministry (clergy), and there are some of one occupation, some of another: some shake bucklers, some ruffians, some hawkers and hunters, some dicers and carders, some blind guides and can not see, some dumb dogs and will not bark. And yet a thousand more inequities have not covered the priesthood. And yet you in the mean while that all these whoredoms are committed, you at whose hands God will require it, you sit still and are careless, let men do as they list. It touches not your common wealth, and therefore you are so well contented to let all alone.

Certainly these are daring words to say to a queen. It would be fair to say that the frequent reprinting of the sermon was due not only to the uncompromising manner, but also to the content. This emphasis on a godly preaching ministry was central to the Puritan concern. Elizabeth was willing to live with a relatively ignorant clergy. But the Puritans saw that the only way to reform the people, and the nation, was to reform the ministry.

Dering's focus in his preaching was a practical divinity. His letters show a great desire to heal troubled consciences. Collinson says:

... that Dering was first and always "a physician of the soul," a practical divine whose letters were full of little but encouragement to forsake the world and to go forward in

the pursuit of godliness. It has sometimes been implied that the puritans discovered this practical divinity only in the early seventeenth century when their attempts to reform the externals of worship and church government were finally defeated, but I have no doubt that "mere religion" had always been the first concern of the majority of the godly preachers of the Elizabethan Church.

This "practical divinity" with its focus on conscience and "cases of conscience" was part of Puritanism from the very beginning. We see this illustrated in the letters of Dering to Mrs. Honynood. She was a woman who was troubled with the greatest of all the cases of conscience—lack of assurance of salvation. In fact, she thought that she could not be saved. Dering's letters are directed to comfort her by showing that her afflictions were a sign of God's favor. This focus on the judicial aspect of conscience—establishing the state of a person before God—and providing comfort, especially with regard to the assurance of salvation, was important to the Puritans. They were concerned about applying the Word of God to troubled consciences.

Dering is especially revered as the model Puritan in the way that he was written about after his death. Memorial verses were composed by Thomas Norton, a writer on early Puritanism. Dering's letters containing spiritual counsel were collected and published; he was the first Puritan to have his work posthumously published. His final words were preserved. In all these ways Dering became a Puritan example and hero. He had fought the good fight, he had not compromised his conscience, he had finished the course faithfully.

Dering in his life and work showed a number of the marks of Puritanism. He objected to the Anglican ceremonies and church order—in a moderate fashion. He believed in the sole authority of Scripture. Preaching was viewed as an essential for the Church. Practical divinity—with a focus on comfort for the wounded conscience—was important to Dering's idea of ministry. Dering truly was a model Puritan. His life helped set the pattern for later Puritan ministers.

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