

Taking Stock

What is done by businesses at the end of a tax year we may do for ourselves at the end of a calendar year. For there is much to be gained when we get a measure of what we are like. The person who knows himself is in a better position to deal with faults as well as challenges that come his way.

Oliver Cromwell is "one of the best known and least easily understood of all great men of history" (John Morrill). He is usually remembered for his 'mistakes' rather than for *who he was* and *what he tried to do*.

Who was Cromwell?

First, he was a Christian. We do not know exactly when he came to a personal experience of and faith in Jesus Christ. Born in 1599, it seems we cannot date with certainty his conversion before the 1630s. By 1636, though, we find him describing some within the church as 'the enemies of God's truth'. His desire at that time was to see good faithful preachers supported. To that end he appealed to George Storie, a cloth merchant, to maintain his sponsorship of a lectureship in Godmanchester, near Huntingdon. This is an act of a believer. They support gospel preaching.

Secondly, he knew he was forgiven by God. To be precise, as he informed Parliament in 1656, he knew those who belong to Jesus Christ enjoy 'the remission of sins through the blood of Christ and free justification by the blood of Christ'. He held fast to this belief to his death in 1658.

Thirdly, he knew that the 'members of Jesus Christ' are 'to him as the apple of his eye'. In other words he knew Christ delights in his people and his people are always precious to Christ.

Fourthly, he had an unshakeable belief in the providence of God. To Cromwell this meant two things. One, God is working his purposes out in history. Put another way, Oliver recognized nothing happens in our lives, or in the world, that does not serve God's plan of judgment upon or undeserved favour toward a person or people. Two, Cromwell believed God's people are to not to be mere observers of God's providences. His people are his instruments. They are used by him as he builds his kingdom amongst the people of

the world. Cromwell knew God had a plan for him. His desire was to be used by and useful to God.

How like Cromwell are we? What he was we are all to be. Christians are to demonstrate they are called by God. They are to put him first in their lives. They are to show the world Jesus Christ is Lord.

What did Cromwell do?

He sought to serve Christ faithfully. In private and public his constant aim was to do the will of God. He did not seek position, status or wealth. Instead he strove to help people see the difference between right and wrong. He knew the only standard by which such can be properly known and judged is God's Word.

Cromwell was a Puritan. As such his desire was to see both church and state fashioned by and function in accord with God's Word. He did not want to see the church or nation forfeit the status of enjoying God's favour.

Oliver understood the times in which he lived. He saw clearly 17th Century Europe was locked in an intense struggle between individuals having free consciences enlightened by the Word of God and an international Catholicism which sought to impose a false understanding of the gospel of Christ in the world.

Today we are confronted, on the one hand, by an aggressive egalitarian secularism which seeks to marginalise God from the public sphere and, on the other, by totalitarian religious systems which demand unwavering submission to their tenets.

Cromwell saw the need to confront the enemy. He was to be exposed and defeated. What he successfully did on the field of battle we are to do today. Mercifully we are not engaged in a physical battle. Ours is a warfare of words played out in the battlefield of ideas.

We are to fight this battle knowing "the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds". We do so assured God will empower us to "destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10.4f).

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