

# William Huntington

by J.C. Philpot

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*William Huntington's ministry was characterized by a deep experience of the law and a clear understanding of the gospel, which enabled him to separate himself from a lifeless profession and gather a large congregation.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 119:105, 1 Corinthians 2:4, Ephesians 6:12, 2 Timothy 3:16, 1 Peter 5:8

**Topics:** "Law And Gospel", "Christian Ministry"

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## Description

J.C. Philpot reflects on the life and ministry of William Huntington, acknowledging the depth of experience, separation from lifeless profession, and discrimination between law and gospel that characterized Huntington and his followers. Despite his faults, Huntington's grace, gifts, and clear deliverance of the gospel attracted many to find rest and peace in his ministry. Philpot highlights the unique power and influence of Huntington's writings, emphasizing the force of truth, deep experience, and strict accordance with God's word that make them invaluable to the Church. He also discusses the opposition and slander Huntington faced from legal preachers of his time due to his views on the Law and the Gospel, which provoked their wrath and contempt.

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## Transcript

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Thomas Hardy, in one of his excellent letters, makes the following remark, "The best Christians I meet with are generally Huntingtonians." This witness is true. There is, or as we must now say there was, for so few of them are left, a depth and clearness of experience, a savor and a sweetness, a rich, tender, feeling, unctuous utterance, a discrimination between law and gospel, letter and spirit, form and power, a separation from a lifeless profession, whether presumptuous or pharisaical, which distinguished them, in a most marked and decisive manner, as a peculiar and separate people. They had their failings and infirmities, as their justly admired and esteemed pastor and teacher had before them; and there were those, doubtless, in their ranks who had caught his faults without catching his grace, who were followers of his doctrine, but not followers of his Lord. Seeing all delusion but their own, taking hold of their teacher's skirt, as if he could thereby pull them into heaven, idolizing and extolling him, as if thereby a part of his grace were reflected upon themselves, and clinging to him as a servant of God, as if that were the sum and substance of Christian experience; if there were such among his hearers, it was only what he himself declared and denounced, and is but another proof of the desperate wickedness and deceitfulness of the

heart of man.

His eminent gifts and grace, his great abilities as a preacher and writer, his separating, discriminating ministry, and the power of God so evidently resting upon him, not only gathered together a large congregation, but wherever there was a saint of God of any deep experience of the law in other congregations seeking rest and finding none under a letter ministry, he as it were instinctively crept in to hear the man who could and did describe the feelings of his heart. And when from the same lips the gospel was preached, with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven, and pardon and peace reached his conscience, the wanderer settled under his ministry, as fraught with a divine blessing, and loved and revered him as the mouth of God to his soul. When he went into different parts of the country it was still the same. In Kent and Sussex, in the Isle of Ely, in Lincolnshire at Grantham, in Nottinghamshire at Newark and Nottingham, wherever he went, his Master went with him, and accompanied the word with signs following. His ministry was especially blessed to the gathering together of the outcasts of Israel, those peculiar characters whom Hart so well describes:

"The poor dependents on his grace,

Whom men disturbers call;

By sinners and by saints withstood,

For these too bad, for those too good,

Condemned or shunned by all."

Like Simon Peter, he was made a fisher of men. He could throw the hook into deep waters, where his brethren of the rod and line knew not where or how to angle. His own deep experience of the law, of diverse temptations, of soul distress, of spiritual jealousy, of the hidings of God's face, enabled him to drop his line into the dark waters and gloomy sunken holes, where some spiritual fish hide and bury themselves out of sight and light; and his clear and blessed deliverance qualified him to angle also for those which leap and bask in the bright beams of the noon-day sun.

By his writings, occasional visits, and constant correspondence, he kept up the tie which knit him to his country friends. His liberal hospitality opened his house to them when they came to London, where he fed body and soul, entertaining them with his lively, witty, cheerful, yet spiritual conversation, reading at a glance their foibles and failings, and entering into their varied experience of sorrow and joy, with all the freedom and familiarity of an intimate friend, and all the authority of a revered and beloved teacher.

Though not ourselves Huntingtonians, in the usual sense of the word, yet, as lovers of good men, as admirers of the grace of God wherever seen, and as pressing forward to the experience and enjoyment of the same power of godliness, we venerate with the greatest esteem and affection the memory of Mr. Huntington and his immediate friends and followers.

It is impossible, we believe, for any person who knows anything of the power of vital godliness in his own soul to read half a dozen pages of Mr. Huntington's writings without feeling that there is a peculiar stamp upon them which none of his friends and followers, as they themselves would willingly and readily admit, have ever been able to reach. It is not merely the great and striking grasp of thought, the singular boldness and originality of expression, the wonderful aptness of scripture quotation, the firmness and decision of mind, the vigor and clearness of style, the lively wit and playful humor, the sparkling figures

and pregnant comparisons, all which must ever characterize them as literary performances of a very high order to those who understand what mental ability and powerful writing are; but it is not, we repeat, these mere literary excellences (though even these have an unperceived weight and influence on the minds of many who from lack of education or mental cultivation can hardly appreciate them) that stamp Mr. Huntington's writings with such undying worth and value. It is the force of truth, the weight of deep and undeniable experience, the close and strict accordance with the testimony of God himself in the inspired word, and the life and power in them which so search the conscience and reach the inmost heart that make them acceptable to the family of God, and will always render them a priceless treasure to the Church of Christ.

The ministry of the preached word is such an express ordinance of God that he himself accompanies it with a peculiar blessing. No writings, therefore, of a servant of God, nor even his published sermons, however faithfully or accurately reported, can come up to what he is in the pulpit when his Master is with him. The sweetness and savor that fall with his words, the entrance they find into the conscience, the demonstration of the Spirit and of power that attend them to the heart, the blessing that they communicate as speaking peace, pardon, and salvation with the very voice of God himself, the softening influence that they spread to melt and dissolve the soul into humility, contrition, and love--these, and similar effects, cannot be reproduced by our holding in our hands the exact words which, as they fell from the lips of God's servant, were attended with these blessings.

At this distance of time, therefore, though we have Mr. Huntington's works, we have not Mr. Huntington. We have the sermons, but we have not the minister; we have the words, but we have not, at least not in the same measure, the power which accompanied them. It was himself, whom they saw and heard--the reality, the substance; we have but the shadow. When he stood up before them, he so spoke what he personally and experimentally knew, what he had tasted, felt, and handled of the word of life, what he had received by divine revelation from the Lord of life and glory, that his words fell with a weight and power upon their consciences which we who read his writings can hardly now realize; for his speech and his preaching were not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; and thus the faith of his believing hearers stood not in the wisdom of man but in the power of God. From this power resting on his ministry Mr. Huntington gradually gathered round him not only a large body of hearers who warmly loved and deeply revered him for his work's sake, but a circle of attached friends who vied with one another in showing him sincere respect and affection.

The 'letter ministers' whom he exposed sometimes with such keen, caustic humor, and sometimes with such sharpness and severity, and the 'empty professors' whom he sent away stripped naked and bare of all their professed religion, naturally enough, in their spite and vexation, reviled and slandered him. He took away their gods, and what had they more? This was an unpardonable offence, and his unsparing mode of doing it made it worse. But their very outcry against him only made his real friends cleave more closely to him, as seeing in the very scorn and contempt manifested by them only the stronger proof that he was walking in the footsteps of his despised Lord, and that it was enough for the disciple to be as his Master.

Among the many striking features which distinguished the life and labors of Mr. Huntington, this was not the least conspicuous, that by the graces and gifts which the Lord bestowed so abundantly upon him he attached to himself so large a number of personal friends, some of whom became eminent ministers of the gospel. As a proof of this assertion we need only mention the names of Jenkins, Brook, Lock, Beeman, Chamberlain, Turner, Parsons, and, though last, not least, the late Mr. Vinall. The names of others may

occur to our readers which have for the moment escaped our memory, or are unknown to us, but we have mentioned, we believe, the most conspicuous. Mr. Huntington, it is true, shone among them and above them all as the moon among the planets, or as David amid his mighty men of valor. In grace, in gifts, in experience, in light, life, and power, in originality and variety, in the knowledge and ready use of Scripture, in acquaintance with the human heart, in wielding the weapons of warfare on the right hand and on the left to defend truth and beat down error, none of his friends and followers approached him, if we may use the expression, within speaking distance. There was, therefore, no rivalry between them.

Before they were drawn within his circle, the Lord had set him on high as a burning and a shining light. They had, therefore, nothing to give, or teach him, though he had much to give and teach them. Thus naturally, necessarily, he took his position, and they theirs; and his friends no more thought of rivaling him than the friends of a prince strive to be greater than he. This was not on their part servility, or on his undue assumption. The bond which knit them together was a spiritual, not a natural tie. A poor despised coalheaver as he had been, though now, by the providence and grace of God, raised up to an eminent position in the church of Christ, had no places of honor or of emolument at his disposal. If he were in their eyes the King's prime minister, he had no preferment to bestow but that of hatred from the world and scorn from the professing church.

Those, therefore, who boldly stood forth as his followers and friends had to bear their share of ridicule and shame. Competition being precluded, there was little room for envy and jealousy, for these exist chiefly among equals. Mr. Huntington was raised above rivalry, for none so fully admitted his superiority as his immediate friends. He fully repaid their respect and kindness. He gave them wise counsel in their difficulties, sympathized with them in their troubles, and was always ready to help them with his purse in their necessities. We are not setting up Mr. Huntington, for, like other great men, he had great infirmities; but merely describing what is plain to all who have read his correspondence with his friends, or have ever heard them speak of him since his decease.

To have known him, to have had the privilege of his friendship, was to the latest period of their lives regarded by them as one of their choice mercies. As flesh mixes with everything, we do not deny that on his side there might have been the gratification of pride in being so looked up to and almost revered, and on theirs the pleasure of being received by him as saints and servants of God. We think that we have seen traces of both these feelings in their communion; and as unchecked authority is apt to degenerate into tyranny, and unresisting obedience into submissiveness, so in some cases Mr. Huntington might have condemned too severely, and his friends acquiesced in his authority too implicitly.

Let us also bear in mind that, like other great men, Mr. Huntington had his flatterers who often spread their net for his feet, and many admirers who walked in the light of his knowledge and gifts without any share of his grace. It could not be expected, therefore, that he would never be entangled by fair speeches, or always see through the mask of profession. But with all these deductions, which a sense of duty compels us to make, we must still bear in mind that, amid the storm of ridicule and contempt which assailed him from every quarter, it must have been a solace to Mr. Huntington that he had for his personal friends some of the excellent of the earth, and for them that they had the fullest persuasion in their own consciences that he was an eminently favored servant of God.

Few men have had to encounter such a storm of contempt, slander, enmity, and opposition as that eminent servant of God. The only doubt among those who despised and hated him was whether he were a fanatic or an impostor; and some very quietly and curtly settled the doubt to their own full satisfaction by

pronouncing him both.

Reproach and calumny which were heaped upon him from all quarters, reaching him even after his death, and spread all over the world. But in his case there was this peculiar feature, that his greatest opponents and most violent calumniators were the preachers and professors of his day. There were, no doubt, peculiar reasons which drew forth an enmity against him and a storm of contempt and scorn by which few have been assailed as he was.

His views of the Law, at that time novel, his bold declaration that it was not a rule of life to believers, his strong and stern denunciation of the legal preachers of his day, the keen way in which he ripped up their arguments in his controversial writings, and the uncompromising language in which he laid bare their erroneous views, unmasking at the same time their profession and showing how ignorant they were not only of the truth of God but of any saving light in their own souls, provoked their wrath, and goaded them almost to madness. Knowing nothing for themselves of the sweet liberty of the Gospel, of a revelation of Christ, of a living faith in his Person and work, or of any union or communion with him, and resting all their hopes, if not professedly, yet really on a broken Law, or at the utmost on the bare letter of the word, they were naturally stung to the quick to see all their religion brushed away by him as a spider's web. He took away their gods, and what had they more? He broke up their idol, and with it fell both their countenance and their hope.

What course was then left to them? If they wrote against him, he was as a controversialist so unrivaled in his knowledge of Scripture and the use of it, so acute to discern the whole state of the argument, so keen in his dissection of their legal views, so fearless in his attack, and so thoroughly persuaded that God was with him and would stand by him, that none of his opponents could stand before him. We are free to admit that he did sometimes mingle his own spirit in his controversial writings with that Spirit of grace and truth by which he was undoubtedly led; but he himself, who knew best his own spirit, would not allow this, and we shall, therefore, leave the point.

He tells us that "God gave him so uncommon a spirit of meekness, at his first setting off to preach that he found himself rather too tender to declare the whole counsel of God." "I was more fit," he says, "for the character of a nurse than for that of a soldier. But when these Arians came to tear up the very foundation of my hope, that spirit of meekness gave way to a fiery zeal. When I came in private before God, my soul was overwhelmed with contrition; but when I got into my pulpit, I was clad with zeal as with a cloak."

As, then, his opponents could not overthrow his testimony on grounds of Scripture and truth, and as they had nothing to say against his life and conduct, for that was most circumspect and exemplary, they turned all the current of their reproach against his views upon the Law, as if by them he had removed the very foundations of morality. Not knowing in and for themselves the constraining love of Christ, the sweet and sacred influences of the Holy Spirit, the springing up of godly fear as a fountain of life, or anything of that sacred power whereby the child of God is led into all holy obedience to God's will and word, and kept from evil that it may not grieve him, they set up an image as a mark for their arrows, which was nothing but the imagination of their own mind. Every 'young theological sprig'--as he speaks, had a word against 'the Antinomian'--against his horrid doctrine, his dreadful views, his licentious sentiments, and what a wide door his preaching and writing opened for all ungodliness.

It was impossible to convince these men of their mistake. They were honest, many of them, as far as they went, but in leveling their arrows against his doctrines it was not so much the doctrines themselves as the

consequences which they in their ignorance drew from them that they attacked. They did not see that the Law for which they so zealously contended was a ministration unto death and not unto life, of condemnation not unto justification, of bondage not unto liberty, and that its fruits and effects were not to produce obedience unto holiness, but to provoke and irritate the carnal mind and thus stir up and put power into sin, so as to deceive and slay the soul under it. Now, Mr. Huntington, on the contrary, held that the Gospel, in its truths, promises, and precepts, was the rule of life in the hands of the Spirit; and that from it--and not from the Law--flowed not only pardon and peace but holiness in heart, in lip, in life.

We are great admirers of Mr. Huntington's writings. From his works and those of Dr. Owen we have derived more instruction, edification, encouragement, consolation, and we may add conviction, counsel, reproof, and rebuke, than from any other source, except the word of God; and indeed it is because the writings of these two eminent men are so in harmony with the Scriptures, so breathe the same spirit, and are so impregnated with the same heavenly wisdom, that they are so profitable to those who know and love the truth. The Spirit of God speaks in and through them, because what they wrote they wrote under his special influences, and out of the treasure of a good heart brought forth those good things which make them so weighty and so valuable.

Mr. Huntington's greatest work is probably his "Contemplations on the God of Israel;" but for our own private reading we prefer his "Posthumous Letters" to any of his other writings. In them we see the man just as he was in his private moments before God; in them he pours forth to his various correspondents the treasures of wisdom and grace with which he was so largely endowed and blessed. There we see him not as a warm controversialist, nor a keen disputant provoked and irritated, as he sometimes unduly was, by the slanders of his enemies, or the errors of the day, against which he contended with such earnest zeal; but we see in them the breathings of a tender, kind, and affectionate spirit, mingled with such openings of the Scripture and the various branches of living experience as made them full of instruction and edification. As a letter writer he strikes us as unrivaled. Even apart from the subject of his letters, the ease, flexibility, originality, strength, and variety of his language is something marvelous. You never find in them anything dry, dull, and prosy; you are never wearied with long, obscure phrases and periods from which it is hard to extract sense or meaning; but his language flows from his pen with all the freshness and clearness of a summer brook, so transparent that you can see at once to the bottom, and as free from mud and mire as when it first gushed out of the hillside.

As his correspondents were very numerous, and as they were in different stages of the divine life, his Letters, taken as a whole, touch upon and unfold every branch of living experience, from its first movements in conviction to its fullest joys in deliverance and consolation. Some of his correspondents were very young, both in age and experience. Some, like Mr. Charles Martin, for instance, had only just begun to set their faces Zionward; some had been long and deeply exercised with trials and afflictions; some were contending with sharp and powerful temptations; and some, like himself, after having been much favored and blessed, were engaged in a perpetual conflict with a body of sin and death, had to labor under the weight of a daily cross, and to endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ.

Now, as he had traveled all these paths, and knew for himself more deeply than they did the various exercises, desires, sensations, feelings, sorrows, and joys of a believing heart, and was favored with a most wonderful gift in unfolding from the Scriptures and his own experience every feature of the divine life, he could suit his letters so as to meet the case and state of every correspondent. There is, therefore, we believe, scarcely a feeling, a sensation, or a movement of divine life in the heart which he has not touched upon or described as no other but he could do, and this with a life and power, a clearness, decision,

certainty, and authority which carry with them an indescribable influence that seems to penetrate into the inmost soul. We read them again and again, and ever find something in them to instruct and edify the soul, strengthen faith, confirm hope, or draw forth love. He seems to have been singularly fond of writing to his friends, and would sometimes spend nearly a whole day in his little cabin in this use of his pen. Where he felt union, it was strong. There were few, perhaps, comparatively speaking, who had crept into his heart; but if once there, they were there forever. Those who spoke of him as harsh, austere, and stern, only knew him as opposed to errors and evil doings. They knew nothing of the man as spending hours and days in prayer and meditation, on his bended knees, before his dear Lord and Master, with flowing eyes and a broken heart. They knew nothing of his confessions in secret, his earnest wrestlings, or of the sweet union and communion with which, in answer to them, he was blessed and favored.

But if he were despised and hated by his enemies, who in truth were the enemies of God, he was proportionately loved and esteemed by his hearers and friends. Indeed, the feeling entertained toward him by many of his hearers was almost idolatry. We remember hearing a good woman say, to whom he had been much blessed, that when she looked at his house, she almost worshiped the smoke that came from the chimney of his study. This she confessed was but idolatry, yet it showed the strength of her feeling. And, indeed, there was much in the man, independent of the grace that rested upon him and his wonderful gifts in the ministry, to make him the center and object of the greatest esteem and affection. He was gifted with a noble, liberal mind, abhorring covetousness, and giving away his money with a most profuse liberality. Though born and bred in so low a state, yet he was one of nature's gentlemen; and we have heard from those who intimately knew him that there was a dignity in his person, manners, and appearance which commanded respect.

He was also naturally of a warm, affectionate spirit, and in his conversation there was a playfulness, though no levity, and a humour without jesting, which made his company very pleasant. That he was most hospitable in his own house, we can see from his letters, in the invitations which he gives to his friends to come and make themselves at home with him; and when he saw and felt the grace of God in them, and he would have no other company or other companions, he would converse upon the things of God with such wisdom, tenderness, contrition, knowledge of the Scriptures, and so open up every point from his own experience, that it was most blessed to hear him converse. Not but that he had his angry, peevish fits; not but that his natural temper was not one of the sweetest and most equable; but at these seasons he kept much to himself, and fought the battle alone with his own spirit, with many prayers and tears before God.

We have had the pleasure and privilege of knowing at various times some of his friends and hearers, and what we have thus written about him has not been at a mere uncertainty, but been gathered both from what we have read in his writings and from what we have heard from those who knew him. And we are free to confess that we have generally found in his hearers and friends a savor, a life, a feeling after, where not full enjoyment of those divine realities, in which the power of vital godliness so much consists, that we have not found in others.

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