

Theophilus: Father of Modern Unitarianism Sunday, 18 August, 2019 Sermon

Theophilus Lindsey was born in Middlewich, Cheshire on 20 June 1723. He was named after his godfather, Theophilus, Earl of Huntingdon. The Earl was the husband of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon.

Before her marriage, Lindsey's mother Jane had been a member of the Huntingdon household. His father Robert Lindsey was a mercer and part-owner of a salt-works.

After initial schooling in Middlewich, where he showed early promise, it was arranged that he would enter the free grammar school, Leeds. Under the influence there of the master, Thomas Barnard, he began to prepare for a university education and a career in the church. His connections with Yorkshire were to prove important for him. Two of his later parishes in the Church of England were in Yorkshire, and among his closest friends were Francis Blackburne, archdeacon of Cleveland; the dissenting minister William Turner of Wakefield; and the lawyer and politician John Lee, who was a native of Leeds.

Theophilus Lindsey was admitted to St John's College, Cambridge, in 1741. He received financial support from several quarters. He graduated BA in

In 1747 he became morning preacher at the Wheler Chapel, Spitalfields, London, and later that year

he was ordained priest. He also served as domestic chaplain to the Duke of Somerset, and accompanied the future Duke of Northumberland on a trip to France as his tutor. He became rector at Kirby Wiske in North Yorkshire in 1752, and vicar of Piddletown in Dorset in 1755. In 1760, in the parish church of Richmond, Yorkshire, Lindsey married Hannah Elsworth, the step-daughter of his friend Francis Blackburne, the archdeacon of Cleveland.

Hannah was to prove his life-long companion and supporter in all he did, including his move to a unitarian position in his theology.

As early as 1755 Lindsey had experienced his first crisis of conscience with regard to subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, and whether he could remain within the Church. By

his marriage to Hannah he acquired as father-in-law one of the leading latitudinarian clergymen in the country, whose writings and views were to exert a major influence over his career. Nevertheless, Blackburne, perhaps concerned for his step-daughter, generally advised him to remain within the Church, reminding him: "You must have bread".

In November 1763 he moved to become Vicar of Catterick, where he was to remain for ten years. During his time there he was highly conscientious in his work as a clergyman, and he became one of the first exponents of Sunday School teaching, assisted by his wife.

In 1769 he met Joseph Priestley, who was then Minister at Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds. This marked the beginning of their long theological co-operation. He had also met William Turner, Minister of Westgate Chapel in Wakefield, who was to become one of his most valued correspondents over many years. These contacts could not fail to re-awaken his doctrinal scruples. During his time at Catterick, Lindsey had decided that, like Blackburne, he would accept no further preferment - promotion - with the Church of England. However, he decided not to resign his living immediately. Rather, he decided to launch a campaign for ecclesiastical reform.

The Feathers Tavern petition of 1772 sought the abolition of subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles for clergymen, and for those graduating from Oxford and Cambridge universities. Some 250 clergy signed the petition, but the House of Commons rejected it by a large majority.

"It was natural for your Lordship .. to bid me beware of precipitation in a matter of such moment. But though suddenly and so lately communicated to your Lordship, this resolution is no hasty step, but the result of many years' anxious enquiry and deliberation, and trying every expedient that might give me ease. And my faith is built not on a system of philosophy,

but on an impartial examination of the mind and will of God, as discovered in the Old and New Testament. And I am constrained on this occasion to tell your Lordship, that I am so

persuaded of the strict unity of God, taught by Moses and the prophets, and last of all by our Saviour Christ, that though no one is further from condemning others that differ, I should hold it impiety in me to continue to worship Christ, or any other being or person. I cannot,

therefore, continue to lead the devotions of a congregation in the Church of England, who esteem it sinful in myself constantly to use that worship and abet it ... Whatever be the

distressing consequences of this determination with regard to worldly things, I can never repent of it, as led to it by no motive but a desire to

approve myself to God, and what my duty to him required."

He resigned as Vicar of Catterick. Turning down an offer from the Earl of Huntingdon to become his

Supported by his friends, Lindsey determined to open a chapel. A room was leased in Essex House, near the Strand, from an auctioneer, Samuel Paterson. The publisher Joseph Johnson was instrumental in securing this room, though the registration of the chapel was to prove more complicated. The opening of the chapel on Sunday 17 April 1774 was reported widely in the London and provincial press. The tone of these reports was generally sympathetic, with an emphasis on the scruples of conscience that led him to resign from the church; on the respectability of his audience; and on the decorum of the service. Those attending included Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Priestley, Sir George Savile MP, the Attorney John Lee, and Lord Le Despencer.

Lindsey himself, in a letter to John Jebb the following day, wrote:

You will be pleased to hear that everything passed very well yesterday; a larger and much more respectable audience than I could have expected, who behaved with great decency, and in general appeared, and many of them expressed themselves, to be much satisfied with the whole of the service. Some disturbance was apprehended, and forboded to me by great names - but not the least movement of the kind. The only fault found with it was that it was too small. From impressions that seemed to be made, and the general seriousness and satisfaction, I am persuaded that this attempt will, through the

divine blessing, be of singular usefulness. The contrast between ours and the church service strikes every one. Forgive me for saying, that I should have blushed to have appeared in a white garment. No one seemed in the least to want it. I am happy not to be hampered with anything, but entirely easy and satisfied with the whole of the service; a satisfaction never before known."

Lindsey's ministry quickly established itself and it was resolved to erect a permanent chapel. Other suitable premises were not available, so in May 1777 the freehold of Essex House was purchased, thanks to generous financial contributions from supporters.

The following report was published in the Public Advertiser on 18 April, the day after the service:

"Yesterday Morning a Chapel for Divine Worship was opened at Essex House, Essex Street, in the Strand, on the Plan of a reformed Book of Common Prayer, by the Rev. Mr. Lindsey, late Vicar of Catterick, in Yorkshire, which Benefice (from conscientious Principles) he has lately resigned. The new Book of Prayer, offered in the Consideration of all well-disposed Christians, contains many pious and judicious Alterations of the Church Service, nearly on the Model recommended by the celebrated Dr Samuel Clarke, formerly Rector of St James's. The

the Service was performed with the greatest Solemnity, Decency and Decorum; and the Auditors seemed to be particularly pleased with the spirit of Moderation, Candour and Christian Benevolence of the Preacher, whose Sermon was perfectly adapted to the Occasion. The text was from Ephes. Ch. 4. v. i i i 'Endeavouring to keep the Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace.' "

After extensive re-building work, the new chapel was formally opened on 29 March 1778. In 1783 Lindsey published An Historical View of the State of

Unitarian Doctrine and Worship from the Reformation to our Times. He remained minister until his resignation in 1793, when he was succeeded by Rev Dr John Disney, who had been his assistant minister since 1783, and who had himself left the Church of England.

Lindsey continued to live at Essex House with his wife Hannah until his death on 3 November 1808, and was buried in the Bunhill Fields Dissenters'

Cemetery, where his tomb can be seen today. Hannah died in 1812, and was buried in the same tomb.

Lindsey was always disappointed at the small number of other Anglican clergy who followed his example and left the church. His purposes remained the same: to encourage liturgical reform within the

He did succeed in making his views accessible to sections of the reading public through his theological works, and his reformed prayer book was an important contribution to unitarian liturgical practice. In the book Memorable Unitarians (1906) Lindsey, Joseph Priestley and Thomas Belsham are called "the three fathers of modern Unitarianism".

Although he avoided political content in his sermons, his private views - as revealed in his letters - were perhaps surprisingly radical - for example his support for the American revolution.

On 7 December 1774, after his move to London, in a letter to William Turner of Wakefield he wrote:

"Farewell to Old England's greatness, if the sword is drawn and blood shed in America. What will three battalions or 30 battalions do? But our infatuation is astonishing. Not the least symptom of kindness or humanity towards our brethren in America from the throne, or in the speeches of the Ministerial people, but all war and vengeance. ... Nothing but calamity seems capable to awaken us out of our unfeelingness towards justice and our true interests: And that seems to be coming."

"By his inspiration of the Feathers Tavern Petition, against clerical subscription to the thirty-nine articles (1771-72) he provoked one of the most profound debates within the eighteenth-century Church of England. By his anti-trinitarian convictions and consequent resignation as Vicar of Catterick in 1773 he helped to further the emergence of Unitarianism as a separate denomination and made his chapel at Essex Street, off the Strand in central London, a focus both for theological and political radicalism. He served as a point of contact for relations between many other significant figures, both Anglican and Dissenting, notably Francis Blackburne, William Frend, Christopher Wyvill, Joseph Priestley and Richard Price."

What were Lindsey's anti-trinitarian views?

In A second address to the students of Oxford and Cambridge relating to Jesus Christ and the origin of the great errors concerning him, published in London in 1790, he declared:

- 1) That there is ONE GOD, one single person, who is God, the sole creator and sovereign lord of all things;

3) That the SPIRIT, or HOLY SPIRIT was not a person, or intelligent being,; but only the extraordinary power or gift of God, imparted, first (Acts i. 2) to our Lord Jesus Christ himself, in his life-time; and, afterwards, to the apostles, and many of the first Christians, to empower them to preach and propagate the gospel with success; and

4) That this was the doctrine concerning God, and Christ, and the Holy Spirit, which was

That seems like a good point at which to stop, and to which to say:

Amen.