

## **The Soteriology of James Ussher The Act and Object of Saving Faith**

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The life of Archbishop of Armagh James Ussher (1581–1656) as primate, politician and intellectual heavyweight, offers a rich subject for study. This learned and well-connected man, who was also popular in the pulpit, is the subject of Richard Snoddy, who has shaped his doctoral thesis into a monograph that offers a case study in doctrinal development amid the religious and political turmoil of the first half of the 17th century. Snoddy analyzes Ussher's evolving thought on the nature of salvation with great care and precision, leaving readers with a compelling new perspective on the way Ussher considered this, the most essential question in the life of the Christian believer.

Snoddy is able to throw light on the subject of Ussher's soteriological position not because the topic has yet to receive its due attention; in fact, the archbishop's ideas about salvation were hotly debated as competing parties vied for his legacy even immediately after his death. The central question lay in the question of general or limited atonement, that is, whether Christ's death constituted a general pardon for the sins of all men, or was of sole salvific benefit to the elect only. Though the issue had previously dogged the reformed churches in England and Ireland, during Ussher's lifetime the challenges presented by the Roman church, Arminian theology, and the Laudians brought concerns about 'the Pelagianising tendency' (p. 25) to the forefront. As a leading Protestant apologist and a well-respected divine, Ussher's endorsement of one doctrine over the other was a highly sought prize.

But what were the archbishop's own thoughts? Snoddy deftly wades through the various claims to Ussher's legacy to present a fresh take on his views. He does this not by any methodological innovation, but through a painstaking search through Ussher's catechetical, polemical and devotional works, correspondence, notes, and in particular, his sermons. Snoddy's choice to focus on homiletical works is a good one: there are a substantial number of sermons extant; recent research has shown that when sermons were recorded (as most of Ussher's extant sermons were), if it was done carefully, notes were largely accurate; and preaching was at the very core of Ussher's religious framework.

Snoddy mines these sermons alongside other material to offer two new conclusions. First, he proves through close analysis that in the earliest years of the 17th century, Ussher was an adherent of the high Calvinism in

which he had been schooled at Trinity College, Dublin, but that by 1618, this had changed (a less ironclad case can be made for this change to have been in place by 1612), and he had come to take the position of hypothetical universalism. Hypothetical universalists, unlike strict particularists, believed that Christ died for all humanity, not merely the elect, and that salvation was possible on the condition of faith. Unlike Arminians, hypothetical universalists affirmed special election and stipulated the necessity of God's special grace so that Christ's sacrifice could be applied. Ussher's, therefore, was a mediating position between high Calvinism and Arminianism.

Snoddy also reveals a second radical change in Ussher's soteriological thought. At the beginning of the 17th century, Ussher closely associated assurance with faith as it justifies, closely enough that Snoddy claims 'as a young man he held that assurance is of the essence of faith'. However, 20 years later Ussher had become an exponent of experimental predestinarianism, the idea that one could be assured of salvation by reading the motions of the Spirit in themselves, not through the direct act of faith. This change, in addition to Ussher's eventual favouring of hypothetical universalism over high Calvinism, constitutes a fresh assessment of Ussher's doctrinal thinking on the matter of salvation. Snoddy shows not just that Ussher's views changed, but that these changes followed a different narrative than the ones thus far presented in Ussher's biographies. Instead of the more radical supralapsarianism suggested by other authors, Snoddy proves that Ussher's consistently infralapsarian framework indicates changes in his theology were more conservative than they are sometimes portrayed.

This book is well presented and well arranged. Snoddy manages to untangle a very complicated issue with many components and introduce those components in such a way that there is not much overlap, and topics logically build on one another. After a brief introduction laying out some of the historiographical background, Snoddy devotes much of the first chapter to a critical analysis of his sources, while also introducing Ussher himself. He also gives a brief overview of the Irish and English context, with a succinct and helpful summary of the historiography of puritanism. Chapter two delves into the nature and extent of atonement according to Ussher and his contemporaries. Here he proves his first major argument: that Ussher's perspective moved away from high Calvinism and into hypothetical universalism. Snoddy begins by examining the wider framework of atonement, zeroing in on Ussher's preaching concerning Christ and the cross. From here, he outlines the reasoning behind the archbishop's rejection of the strict particularist argument, and elucidates the two main theologians who influenced his thought: Ambrose of Milan and Prosper of Aquitaine. This chapter also gives an overview of English hypothetical universalism and its influence in Europe at the Synod of Dort.

In chapter three, Snoddy skillfully parses Ussher's ideas concerning justification by faith. He explains the classic Protestant formulations of the doctrine, noting that Ussher, as a young man, held to the same understanding as most Protestants: 'a forensic declaration, based upon the imputed righteousness of Christ, with a systematic distinction made between justification and sanctification' (p. 137). Snoddy then explains how Ussher employed the idea of double justification in order to reconcile the differences between Protestant divines and the fathers on justification, and also the differences between the apostles Paul and James, with regard to the relationship between faith and works. Perhaps the most revelatory aspect of Snoddy's work in this chapter is the degree to which Ussher was influenced by the earlier Reformed tradition, specifically Martin Bucer, whose work Ussher appropriated.

From justification, Snoddy moves logically enough to sanctification. He analyses the intense concern for sanctification found in Ussher's sermons, and diligently untangles the role of works, merit, and reward in the archbishop's thought. Ussher held that human works had no place in the process of justification, but perform a positive function in sanctification. Snoddy helpfully incorporates his discussion of Ussher's call to a holy life in Christ into a wider consideration of the 'ethical edge to English Protestantism' (p. 140), and the puritan obsession with sanctification.

This need for purity, and the insecurity that often accompanied it, is the topic of Snoddy's final chapter. Ussher's intensive pastoral concern meant that he confronted the problem of uritan anxiety, a confrontation

that Snoddy argues led to the second sea change in Ussher's thinking. This chapter chronicles Ussher's move away from seeing assurance and justifying faith as closely connected, and toward the experimental piety espoused by William Perkins and Richard Greenham. Ussher told his listeners from the pulpit that assurance was both possible and highly desirable; evidence of it could be found in the motions of the Holy Spirit, which drove the elect to hunger and thirst for righteousness, delight in hearing God's Word preached, love brothers in need, and distinguish between heavenly and earthly priorities. Significantly, concern about hardness of heart 'became a telltale sign of the motions of the Spirit in the heart' (p. 230), and therefore religious anxiety was a positive component of the Christian life.

Because these chapters focus on the nature and mechanics of salvation, a fruitful and fundamental topic in early modern British religious culture, this book contributes to a wide and impressive range of historiographical discourses. To name a few: the extent to which debates about soteriology were influenced by medieval scholastic thought, not just Erasmian humanism; the international nature of English concerns over modes of salvation and the influence of English practical divinity on mainland Europe; and scholarly arguments over the continuity and/or discontinuity between Calvin himself and the second generation of theologians at Geneva. In addition to these historiographical tussles, Snoddy touches on issues such as the legacy of the early Reformation in 17th-century religious thought, the memory of Ussher, and the significance of history in Ussher's formulations.

Covering such a wide range of complex and interconnected issues is commendable, and Snoddy's devotion to uncovering Ussher's thoughts is clear on every page. That said, Snoddy does not shy away from the fact that occasionally Ussher's thoughts are inconsistent, and it is laudable that he resists the temptation to harmonise Ussher's views or make them more coherent than they were. Snoddy should be praised also for his identification and use of so many types of primary sources. His numerous and diverse references to Ussher's own words, and his fluency in moving between personal, devotional, and polemical sources, make for convincing, well evidenced arguments. Last, to put it plainly, Ussher was a polymath, and Snoddy has gone a long way toward figuring out what he made of a hugely complex topic. It is a huge feat.

The strengths of this book far outweigh its weaknesses, but there are one or two niggles. Although on the whole, Snoddy's writing is lucid and logical, it is nevertheless at times jargon-heavy, though perhaps this is unavoidable given the topic involves many labels applied by a variety of scholars. (I wish to clarify here that Snoddy is very careful with his terms). One disadvantage of the work is that the majority of sermon material analyzed comes from notes taken by hearers. Snoddy points out that this offers a glimpse into 'what was heard rather than what was spoken' (p. 35), and though this would be ideal if the study were about the reception of Ussher's theology, when analysing Ussher's own views, there remains an element of doubt about their strength as a primary source. While Snoddy rightfully reminds us (using the words of Arnold Hunt) that '[o]ne must ... be mindful of "the indeterminacy of sermon texts and the impossibility of ever establishing an 'authentic' version"', we then have to weigh this downside against their worth.<sup>(1)</sup> In the end, Snoddy is right to recognise that these materials are too valuable to dismiss; nevertheless this is a caveat worth mentioning.

Although the author has covered a great deal of material in this book, I did feel two issues perhaps warranted more discussion, and I would be delighted to know if he has further thoughts on these topics. First, at many points in the book, Snoddy mentions the debt that Ussher's thinking owed to medieval scholasticism. There seems to be a tension, though, between the archbishop's belief that late medieval scholastics invented ideas about justification (such as the merit of congruity and condignity) and his own propensity to employ scholastic categories in thinking about atonement. Was Ussher aware of this tension, or would he have been comfortable separating the 'innovations' of medieval scholastic thinkers from their methodology? Another issue stems from Ussher's self-identification as godly or puritan (if not in those words), and Snoddy's skillful weaving of Ussher's soteriological thought into the wider picture of puritanism. As Snoddy himself points out, scholarly debates about the nature of puritanism have shifted emphasis from soteriology to the visibility of the church. How does the author see this book contributing to historiographical discourse about puritanism?

Regardless of how he answers these questions, Snoddy has made a major contribution to the field of historical theology with this work. His careful analysis of the thought of an eminent Reformed theologian will be indispensable to researchers at postgraduate level and beyond working in the fields of Reformed theology, Reformation-era preaching, polemic, and pastoral concern, and religious reform in the British Isles.

(1) Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and Their Audiences, 1590–1640* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 145. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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