

Providence

Words and deeds reveal. They are a window on our soul. In other words people discover something about us from what we do and say. As the Lord Jesus taught, it is "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (*Matthew 12.34*).

Oliver Cromwell is a misunderstood man. People hate or love him. Rarely do you find someone neutral in their attitude toward him. Sadly few bother to discover what made him 'tick'. Why did he do what he did? Was he a man who sought greatness? Or was greatness conferred upon him?

Clearly Cromwell was an inspirer and leader of men. He did not become a military leader because he lacked skill. But our concern is not to examine his military prowess. Rather it is to explore why he opposed King Charles I, why he was prepared to put himself in danger at the front of a cavalry charge, and why he accepted the position of Lord Protector during the years of the Commonwealth when the nation had no monarch?

We want to examine this theme not because we are interested in matters historical. No, our concern is to discover what we can learn from the example of Oliver Cromwell.

Providence is key. You will never understand this man whom Milton describes as "our chief of men" if you fail to see that he was convinced God is sovereignly working out his purposes amongst us here on earth. The earth belongs to him. We are made in his image not to amuse ourselves but to love and serve him. God deals with individuals. He calls each one to be in a right relationship with him. He gives gifts to his own that each may fulfil their duty to him in the very circumstances in which he places each. Nothing is random. Nor are we to sit back and let things happen around us.

Our responsibility is to discover God's will (which we do from the Bible), to seek his strength (which we do through prayer and the anointing of his Spirit), and to work with and for him (which we do by obeying his Word and fulfilling our calling). Each strand is important. None is to be neglected. Oliver Cromwell understood this very

well. His grasp of who God is (our Creator, Saviour and Judge) and of what God is doing now (gathering to himself a people who love him and are keen to keep his commands) cannot be questioned. They are evident from his letters and speeches.

Something else emerges. It is central to his understanding of providence. Cromwell was an Englishman. He was an Englishman who knew something of what had happened in England before his birth (in 1599) and of what was happening during his life (he died in 1658). His years were spiritually significant.

In the 16th century God visited this land in reviving power. Although not everyone was born again by his Spirit, in the public sphere God's Word and truth became known. The church was reformed. This process continued under the Puritans in the 17th century.

We are not perfect. We do not always get things right. Far from it, we often err. Notwithstanding that fact, it is true Cromwell saw clearly it is the duty of God's people to make known the good news of God and to preserve advances made. Moreover, he argued, as we are here to serve God, it is our duty to do all we can to ensure that our community and nation does not forfeit God's blessing. We will do so if we turn from him, his law and his gospel.

The problem, as Cromwell saw it, was that King Charles I and his supporters wanted to lead the nation backward. They favoured the religious ways of men rather than the truth of God's Word. At this point some will say 'It is just a matter of interpretation. After all both sides used the Bible but understood it differently'. There is truth in that. But, as Cromwell knew, both sides could not both be right.

Our duty is to seek the Lord. In so doing we discover the truth which sets us free (*John 8.32 & 14.6*). Cromwell found God. He discovered the truth and God's purpose for his life. He sought to live for God. He also sought to see the peoples of these islands set free from the tyranny of men.

It was (and is) a noble aim.