

# Matthew Henry's Preaching and Pastoral Ministry at Hackney, 1712-1714

ALLAN M. HARMAN

## Abstract

From Chester, Matthew Henry moved to Hackney (then on the northern border of London) for the final two years of his life and ministry. As a leading dissenter, he was immediately called to preach extensively beyond his congregation. In addition, he was working on his *Exposition* and publishing sermons. But various challenges faced him, in particular ill-health and tensions within his family. As at Chester, he had no formal elders or deacons to assist him. His extant diary from 1705 to 1713 gives a detailed account of his ministry. He displayed the Puritan ideal of a pastor/preacher, together with involvement in other dissenting interests. His ministry shows his deep devotion to New Testament teaching on the role of shepherding God's flock.

## Keywords

*Puritans, Matthew Henry, dissenters, non-conformists, Chester, commentaries, Hackney, Puritan spirituality*

---

**A**t the very end of the Puritan period, Matthew Henry pastored a Presbyterian congregation at Chester in northwest England for twenty-five years. His own Puritan connection is clear, for his father, Philip Henry of Worthenbury, was among many who lost their livings in the Great Ejection of 1662.

Moreover, Philip Henry was a pupil of the great Puritan professor, Dr. John Owen of Oxford. If anyone could claim Puritan lineage, then it was Matthew Henry.

In 1712, he moved to Hackney, which was then a separate township on the northern side of London. He only ministered two years there before his sudden death in June 1714, when he was returning from his second annual visit back to Chester. His ministry was essentially the same in Hackney as it had been in Chester, though by moving he was in the center of a considerable group of dissenting congregations. He had been used to ministering in small villages in proximity to Chester during the week, but at Hackney he took his place among the leaders of the dissenters. His ability as a preacher, and his known gifts as an expositor of Holy Scripture because of his *Exposition of Holy Scripture*, meant that he was in constant demand for his services. But there were changes as well that had a marked effect on his work and most probably contributed to his early death.

### ***1. Problems Faced at Hackney***

Henry was no stranger to London. In 1680 he went to London to study at Dr. Thomas Doolittle's academy. This and other similar academies were illegal establishments intended for nonconformist students. Their courses of study were more vigorous than the universities, and they also catered to students preparing for the ministry.<sup>1</sup> Accompanied by his cousin, Robert Bosier, Henry commenced study there before a virulent fever hit the students. He was ill and recovered, but his cousin contracted the disease and died. This led to Matthew's return home on September 25, 1680, to the family property at Broad Oak, south of Chester and across the Welsh border in Flintshire.<sup>2</sup> After pursuing studies under his father's supervision, he returned to London in April 1685, and at Holborn Court, Gray's Inn, he undertook studies in law and philosophy. Apart from a short period back at Broad Oak (from June 1686 till early 1687), he stayed in London until his ordination to the ministry on May 9, 1687.

---

<sup>1</sup> The dissenting academies commenced soon after the Great Ejection, when nonconformist students could no longer study at Cambridge and Oxford. Ejected ministers, to supplement their incomes and to provide education for students in subjects like logic, philosophy, Latin, and divinity, took young men into their homes. At times there was persecution, and the academies had to move regularly.

<sup>2</sup> Many have written as though Henry completed a full period of study at Dr. Doolittle's, but in reality, he was a student there only a few weeks.

### 1. *His Call to London*<sup>3</sup>

The whole process of moving to Hackney, and his lack of clear conviction regarding the call, dominated the latter part of his ministry at Chester (June 1710 to May 1712) and much of his time at Hackney (May 1712 to June 1714). It was a serious distraction for him and must have drained his energy at a time of increased pressures on him (moving to a new congregation, preaching and lecturing so often around London, continuing writing his *Exposition*, and publishing various addresses), not to mention the increasing disability he suffered because of kidney disease and diabetes.

### 2. *His Health*

John Williams, one of his early biographers, believed that Matthew Henry's health had started to fail as early as 1704. That year he was preaching one Sunday and fainted in the pulpit, though he recovered after a short time and insisted on continuing the service.<sup>4</sup> At various times, he mentions in his diary that he took "physic" (medicine), without indicating either the reason or the exact nature of the remedy. He also suffered from colds, some of which lingered for a long time. But in 1710, shortly after he received the invitation to Hackney, he had his first attack of kidney stones, or "gravel," as he often described them, and he had a succession of these. In two years, he had seventeen attacks.<sup>5</sup>

Another more serious illness was becoming apparent after his first visit back to Chester following his move to London. He returned to Hackney on the Saturday and preached twice on the Sunday. On Monday, he was fatigued and sleepy, and on Tuesday he consulted a very prominent physician, Sir Richard Blackmore, who diagnosed diabetes. Yet he preached the lecture on that day and baptized a child in Clapton. Sir Richard forbade him to preach the following Lord's Day, which then became "a melancholy day," the first Lord's Day he had missed preaching since he became a pastor. On the Tuesday, he recorded in his diary,

---

<sup>3</sup> I have dealt much more fully with the prolonged period after he received the call to Hackney and his removal there in Allan M. Harman, "Matthew Henry's Move to Hackney in 1712," forthcoming in the *Reformed Theological Review*. In these two articles, I am accessing material from his diary for the years 1705-13, held by the Bodleian Library, Oxford, which I have transcribed and am now preparing for publication. The references are cited by the date on which they were written.

<sup>4</sup> John B. Williams, *Memoirs of the Life, Character and Writings of the Rev. Matthew Henry, with Matthew Henry's Biography of His Father, The Life of Rev. Philip Henry, A.M. with Funeral Sermons for Mr. and Mrs. Henry, Corrected and Enlarged by J. B. Williams* (1825; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 88.

<sup>5</sup> I have listed the attacks with the locations where they occurred in the article "Matthew Henry's Move to Hackney in 1712."

Stud[ied] but little, being still indispos'd. I impute it to my indulging myself too much in drinking small Beer or mixt Beer w<sup>n</sup> I was thirsty as I often was & being too cool by which I lost the benefit of sweating.<sup>6</sup>

The reference to being often thirsty is significant because increased thirst is one of the symptoms of diabetes. By the following day, he recorded that his indisposition was going off, but that he was “dull.”

Henry's diary is not extant for the last six months of his life, so we have no autobiographical notes concerning that period.<sup>7</sup> It is clear that his health was failing significantly, and though he was attempting to carry on as usual, the effect of declining health was leaving its mark. These kidney attacks were very debilitating, as modern analgesics were not available, and instead of resting afterward, he usually just carried on with his usual schedules. This included going out to preach the same day as he had passed stones.

### 3. Family Problems

Mary Henry, Matthew's wife, never kept good health.<sup>8</sup> When he was considering the call to Hackney, he had to tell his correspondents there that she was pregnant, and this would delay somewhat his removal.<sup>9</sup> For the period covered by the extant diaries, in addition to the birth of Theodosia (February 14, 1708) and Mary (March 31, 1711), Mary Henry suffered several miscarriages.

There were also problems with his son-in-law, Daniel Wittar. Just before the wedding of Daniel to Katherine, Henry's daughter by his first marriage, when arranging the marriage contract, he found out that there were discrepancies in the accounts left by Daniel's father. In particular, an annual payment of £38 had to be made to Alderman Street's widow. This almost jeopardized the marriage.<sup>10</sup> After the move to Hackney, Daniel and Katherine came to stay with them before moving into nearby accommodation. Later he commented on some unsatisfactory aspects of Daniel's character and commends Katherine for the way she was dealing with them.

<sup>6</sup> *Diary*, August 24, 1713.

<sup>7</sup> The only parts of his diary for 1714 available are some brief quotations in the early biographies. See William Tong, *An Account of the Life and Death of Rev. Matthew Henry* (London, 1716), 367–70, and Williams, *Memoirs*, 162–63.

<sup>8</sup> He noted this in his *Diary*, December 2, 1708.

<sup>9</sup> *Diary*, November 4, 1710.

<sup>10</sup> This difficulty in settling the marriage treaty may have been one of the reasons why the marriage was a very private one, with friends only being told afterwards that it had occurred. *Diary*, December 22, 1708.

His father, Philip Henry, had been brought up in London, and two sisters were still living in Chelsea when Matthew came to Hackney. He had been in regular correspondence with his aunts while at Chester, and there is mention of monetary transactions. It is unclear whether these go back to Philip Henry's time, for he was faced with financial difficulties on various occasions. Insufficient information has survived to work out accurately the financial standing of the family throughout Matthew's lifetime.<sup>11</sup> When his Aunt Dyer died, he and his wife went to Chelsea, but the reception they received was not good. In his diary, he comments,

Studied. Went to Chelsey. My Aunt Henry pretty well. My wife went with me, we were not very welcome; but I went purely as a debtor to the memory of my dear father. My Aunt Dyer was very privately buried in Chelsey Church, between 8 & 9 at night.<sup>12</sup>

Another problem for him was the two families of in-laws, the Hardwares (from his marriage to Katharine) and the Warburtons (from his marriage to Mary). Again, the diary reveals many conflicts with members of both families, and these continued even after he moved to Hackney. He had had much difficulty with two sisters-in-law, Alice and Esther Warburton, and with male members of their family as well.

Finally, Henry could not escape his responsibilities for family property and finances, for beginning at the time of his father's death in 1697, he was responsible for them. Leases with tenants had to be arranged, and often the tenants did not pay on time. Dealings with his publishers and those selling his books were not always straightforward and added another aspect to his business life.<sup>13</sup> On the positive side, however, like his father before him, he used his wealth to lend or give money to others in need.

## **II. *Preaching at Hackney***

On moving to Hackney, Henry immediately assumed full responsibility for all aspects of congregational life. The following list shows the scope of his work as a pastor:

---

<sup>11</sup> Chester Archives hold some manuscripts relating to the finances of the Henry family, as does the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

<sup>12</sup> *Diary*, September 22, 1712.

<sup>13</sup> See the entry for May 14, 1711: "y<sup>e</sup> Booksellers w<sup>th</sup> me – some uneasiness about y<sup>e</sup>ir shares in my Book."

Preaching (twice on Sunday).  
 A mid-week lecture.  
 Pastoral visits, especially to the sick and dying.  
 Funeral services.  
 Catechizing.  
 Admission to the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.  
 Occasional congregational Fast Day services.  
 Occasional thanksgiving services.  
 Special sermons for the young people.

It was Thursday, May 15, 1712, when Henry reached Hackney, his wife and children arriving some weeks later. He preached for the first time as the pastor on the following Sunday, May 18, from the text Acts 16:9, "Come over into Macedonia, and help us." But his health problems manifested themselves immediately, for July 4–7 he was seriously troubled with kidney stones and finally passed one on July 7. From time to time thereafter, he notes in his diary that he took "physic" (medicine). He seems to have been unaware of how his health was failing, for after attacks of kidney stones he either writes of how his health was fully restored or that he was pursuing his work with full energy. Here is one example:

I was taken ill of the gravel but blessed be God I was enabled to go through the work of the day with usual vigor.<sup>14</sup>

Another sign of his ill-health appears in comments relating to how he failed to complete any work on certain days. He can write, for example, that he "trifled away much time"<sup>15</sup> or that he "did little in the afternoon"<sup>16</sup> or that when he aimed "to do a deal sometimes I bring little to pass."<sup>17</sup> This is in marked contrast with entries for earlier years, when his general commitment to work is set out in his comments at the start of 1707: "O that the work of this year might be better done than that of the last, and my time more filled up, and that, I may never go weary of well-doing."<sup>18</sup> Early in 1713 he had another kidney attack that lasted for five days (February 14–18). Admitting that it was a "sore attack," he wrote that he was "not so recover'd yet as to rise early & keep close to my work."<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> *Diary*, September 21, 1712.

<sup>15</sup> *Diary*, June 24, 1712.

<sup>16</sup> *Diary*, July 25, 1712.

<sup>17</sup> *Diary*, December 1, 1712.

<sup>18</sup> *Diary*, January 1, 1707.

<sup>19</sup> *Diary*, April 22, 1713.

While ministering in Chester, Henry followed a carefully worked out scheme of preaching. He did not follow the example of many older Puritans who picked a doctrine and pursued it week after week from the *same text*. Rather, he chose a doctrinal subject and preached on various aspects of it *from different texts*.<sup>20</sup> Shortly before he left Chester, he sent a list of his preaching over his twenty-five years there to his friend William Tong, who included them in his biography.<sup>21</sup> What is surprising is that Henry does not seem to have followed this method when he moved to Hackney. No lists of his sermons at Hackney are provided in the biographies of either Tong or Williams, but they are noted in his diary for 1712 and 1713. That list yields no discernable pattern, which suggests that he was choosing texts of Scripture on which to preach that had no necessary connection with each other.

In moving to Hackney, Henry was conscious that he was going to a smaller congregation. At Chester, the Crook Street chapel where he ministered had over 350 members, while at Hackney he had less than 100. Several times in his diary he notes that an absence of new members being added to the communicants' roll was a concern for him. Thus, he wrote on April 29, 1713, "It is a trouble to me that there are so few Admissions to the Sacr[amen]t here; I have urged it all I can. The Lord enforce it."<sup>22</sup>

When an examination is made of the texts used in Hackney, they do not appear in the main to be ones that he used at Chester, which means that he was still doing fresh pulpit preparation at this time.<sup>23</sup> This is confirmed by the entries "Stud." in his diary in reference to preaching at Hackney and in London. The indication "Studied" is one of the most frequent annotations in his diary, and it is a reminder of how diligent he was in making due preparation before preaching. One fact, though, is strange. At least some of his books were packed on May 8, 1712, at Chester, in preparation for the move to Hackney, where they were unpacked on June 24. However, the main consignment of his books did not reach him there until the end of 1713.<sup>24</sup> This means that he was doing fresh sermon preparation (and also

<sup>20</sup> At times he preached consecutively through passages like Hosea 14, Hebrews 11, or the Lord's Prayer.

<sup>21</sup> Tong, *Life and Death of Rev. Matthew Henry*, 163–97; Williams, *Memoirs*, 273–92, gives Tong's list.

<sup>22</sup> *Diary*, April 29, 1713.

<sup>23</sup> One exception was a series of six sermons on the worth of the soul, which he had preached at Chester in 1696. They were printed in *The Miscellaneous Works of the Rev. Matthew Henry, V.D.M., Containing, in Addition to Those Heretofore Published, Numerous Sermons, Now First Printed from the Original MSS.* (London: Joseph Ogle Robinson, 1830), 1209–39. See Henry's comment on the response of the congregation to these sermons, *Diary*, October 12, 1712.

<sup>24</sup> *Diary*, December 14, 1713, "My Books came safe to me to day from Chester by long Sea y<sup>e</sup> freight £3-5s-0d besides other charges." Is it possible that he thought he would not continue long at Hackney, and hence deliberately delayed getting the rest of his books?

continuing work on his *Exposition*) without the major part of his library for about eighteen months. Of course, his head was filled, first with Scripture (this comes out in the many quotations and allusions to biblical passages in the diary) and then with the reading and thought he had given to Scripture for over twenty-five years.

When preaching at Hackney on his visit in July 1711, Henry lamented that he did not have the pleasure of expounding on large passages of Scripture as he was accustomed to doing at Chester.<sup>25</sup> His normal practice was a chapter from the Old Testament at the morning service and a chapter from the New Testament in the afternoon. As soon as he moved to Hackney, he instituted the practice there, starting with Genesis 1 and Matthew 1. This meant that in addition to preaching from individual texts, he was also expounding much larger sections every Sunday.

In addition to preaching on Sundays, Henry, like most nonconformist pastors of the time, preached a lecture at a mid-week meeting as well. He had preached a lecture at his chapel in Chester every Wednesday evening, and he began following the same pattern as soon as he arrived at Hackney. There does not seem to be any real difference between the Sunday addresses and those at the mid-week meetings. There are references to his practice in the two early biographies of Tong and Williams.<sup>26</sup> One striking feature about his lecturing practice at Hackney is that he was using material that he had preached on already at Chester. He preached over twenty sermons on Hosea 14 that he had already delivered at Chester. Whereas he had preached 140 sermons on Hebrews 11 at Chester, he abbreviated that to a much lesser number at Hackney.<sup>27</sup> These series of continuous exposition also complemented his preaching from isolated texts on Sundays.

When at Chester, Henry devoted much time to preaching in other dissenting congregations during the week. While this was mainly in Cheshire, it extended also into neighboring counties as well. As soon as he moved to Hackney, he recognized that his sphere of usefulness had widened, to use his own expression, and many of his fellow dissenting ministers took the opportunity to get him to preach. A week after he arrived in Hackney, he delivered the evening lecture at Mr. Harris's congregation. After the lecture that evening, he went to Rotherhithe with Mr. Ratcliff and preached the morning

---

<sup>25</sup> *Diary*, May 27, 1711.

<sup>26</sup> Tong, *Life and Death of Rev. Matthew Henry*, 207–10, 355; Williams, *Memoirs*, 158 and 292.

<sup>27</sup> The exact number cannot be determined because of the missing diary for January–June, 1714.

lecture there the next day.<sup>28</sup> This was the beginning of many occasions on which he preached for fellow ministers in the London area. From May to December of 1712, he preached in over forty congregations in addition to his own at Hackney. When at Chester he accepted almost every invitation he received to preach. At Hackney, only on one occasion did he refuse an invitation.<sup>29</sup> These sermons or lectures were in addition to his two services on Sunday, his regular mid-week lecture, occasional fast and thanksgiving days, and funeral services. He also instituted within the congregation similar conferences and colloquia such as he had had in Chester.<sup>30</sup>

During 1713, Henry preached over seventy times outside his own congregation. His reputation had grown over the years, for he had visited London several times and preached in various chapels. Also, from the time the first volume of his *Exposition* was published in 1706, he had become known widely in the Christian world, not just among dissenters. This probably explains why so many prominent people, including nobility, came to hear him preach. He was one of the best-known dissenting ministers, and not surprisingly, he was associated in London with leaders such as Dr. Edward Calamy and Dr. Daniel Williams. He was afforded many opportunities to preach at combined services, as well as for individual congregations.

As already noted, few of the manuscripts of Henry's sermons preached in the Mare Street chapel at Hackney have survived. After the deaths of Philip and Matthew Henry, their manuscripts were dispersed widely, and some of Matthew Henry's are held in at least six different British libraries. However, several of his sermons preached in other pulpits so impressed hearers that they requested that they be printed. Seven of these appear in his *Complete Works*.<sup>31</sup>

Preaching was his calling, and he drove himself to fulfill invitations to the very end of his life. Even though he was seriously ill, he maintained all his duties at Hackney—preaching, pastoral work, catechizing, and conferences—and he also ministered to a widely dispersed group of dissenting chapels in the London area. Not even Sabbaths were reserved for Hackney, for early morning or later evening lectures in London could be added to his

<sup>28</sup> In his diary, he notes that Mr. Ratcliff was very involved with catechizing young people, and that four thousand had passed through his classes in five or six years. *Diary*, May 23, 1712.

<sup>29</sup> On June 30, 1713, he wrote in his diary, "Much perplex'd about an invitation to preach by Chatham. Lord lead me in a plain path—declined it & had comfort in y<sup>e</sup> reflexion."

<sup>30</sup> He had a conference for young men in the congregation and a colloquium for more mature Christians that met following an evening meal in homes of members.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew Henry, *The Complete Works of Matthew Henry: Treatises, Sermons, and Tracts* (Edinburgh: Fullarton, 1855; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 1:153–97, 198–213, 213–30; 2:157–73, 264–80, 334–52, 477–95.

day's work. Having come to London, he was determined to serve the whole dissenting community.

### **III. Pastoral**

At Chester, Henry had carried out extensive visitation and even asked if others knew of people in need; they would tell him so that he could go and pray with them.<sup>32</sup> At times, he would call in and pray for dying people several times on the same day, if he thought it necessary. Of course, Chester was a small walled city, and though dwellings were being built outside the walls, the population in 1700 was only approximately 7,500. Hackney may well have had a similar population, but it was on the edge of the metropolis of London with a combined population of 630,000. Henry did not take long to settle into visitation, for after arriving from Chester on Thursday, May 15, 1712, he visited fifteen people the next week, and the week after he visited nineteen. One thing noticeable about his diary for the period he ministered in Hackney (May 1712 to December 1713) is that the entries are becoming shorter, and less detail is given about individuals to whom he ministered. At Chester, he quite often had to counsel those who were “melancholy” (in depression) or were tempted to “self-murder” (suicide), and the same counseling took place at Hackney. Visits to sick young children were far more frequent at Chester, and often these visits were followed by their funerals.

The constancy of pastoral visitation saw no real change with the move to Hackney. Almost immediately, he was visiting those in his congregation, and especially those who were sick, though the number of pastoral visits was noticeably smaller. Two explanations could be given for this. The first is that the congregation was considerably smaller. The second is that at Chester, Henry was so well known and respected during his long ministry that people belonging to the Anglican church, as well as the membership of his own nonconformist chapel, were calling for him to minister to them in time of need.

---

<sup>32</sup> Williams, *Memoirs*, 133.

#### IV. *His Writing*

Henry's major writing project was his *Exposition of Holy Scripture*. He had begun to write notes even before there was any possibility of publishing on the horizon. The library of the University of St. Andrews has a full commentary on Matthew's Gospel in his handwriting that is dated 1698. Also, he began a commentary on John's Gospel in 1702. He did not begin his *Exposition* until 1704, but he was working through the Scriptures in family worship in his own home and expounding two whole chapters every Sunday. He must have had considerable notes available when he began to write the *Exposition*, for that alone explains how speedily he accomplished the task.<sup>33</sup> Even before he left Chester he would complain if he was hindered from continuing his writing, and while other duties were not neglected, clearly the *Exposition* had become a dominating feature of his life. If visitors came to his home, he would record how it kept him back from his work, "much hindered" being a frequent diary entry.

When he left Chester, Henry had finished Malachi, chapter 1. Arriving in Hackney on Thursday, May 15, 1712, he picked up his *Exposition* again the next morning, and within a few days had finished Malachi 2. In spite of settling into a very busy life, he continued, finishing Malachi 3 and 4 by May 29, 1712. His diary note was "Mal. 4 through y<sup>e</sup> good hand of God I have this day finish'd the Expos[ition] of the O. T. Blessed be God."

That was not the completion of his work on the fourth volume. He had to read over it, correcting any mistakes, and provide a preface. When it was set up, the sheets came back to him for proofing. He was also involved in other publishing, as hearers were calling for sermons of his to be printed, and he was acquiescing.<sup>34</sup> It was not until September 11, 1713, that he was able to make a start on the New Testament. Many times, his progress was impeded by other pressing demands on his time, either at Hackney or, more often, in connection with the wider dissenting community. He took part in inductions, examination, and ordination of candidates for the ministry or attended meetings of the Presbyterian Fund.<sup>35</sup> At times, he could finish a chapter of Matthew in three days, while at other times it took him six days. Even six days is a remarkably short time, but he was utilizing material he

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *Memoirs*, 302–7, has a list of the manner in which he progressively wrote on the Old Testament from November 1704 until May 1712.

<sup>34</sup> For the list of his publications after he moved to Hackney, see Williams, *Memoirs*, 231–35.

<sup>35</sup> From 1688, the Presbyterian Fund was the main source of grants for ministerial candidates, needy ministers, and struggling congregations. Henry became a trustee of the fund before he left Chester, and after coming to Hackney he was a regular attendee at meetings.

had already at hand, even before there was any suggestion of publishing an exposition of the whole Bible.

### **V. Assessment of Henry's Ministry at Hackney**

The first aspect of Henry's ministry at Hackney that needs comment is his perplexity over the call to Hackney, and his final decision to move there. He himself called his communication that set up a trial period at Hackney "the fatal letter."<sup>36</sup> What happened was a replica of the events relating to his earlier call to Salters' Hall in 1709, except for the length of time to consider the call and the conclusion of the matter. It was an unsolicited call that elicited a negative response from him, followed by intense pressure from ministers and leading men, especially those in the Hackney congregation. He vacillated and, in finally accepting, displayed very mixed feelings about the move. Repeatedly in his diary he makes comments like these: "Wrote to Mr Ball [at Hackney] that I could give less encouragement than ever to them to think of my settling with them";<sup>37</sup> "The love of my friends increases my grief";<sup>38</sup> "The more I see the impossibility of getting off here, the more perplexed I am. Lord let my soul dwell at ease."<sup>39</sup> From Chester there were the pressures on him to stay, and after arriving at Hackney he could write that he was "in continual pain and uneasiness about Chester."<sup>40</sup> Some of his longstanding and close friends expressed themselves very strongly. Mr. Kirks, who had been such a great supporter, made his feelings known. Henry wrote, "In the evening with Mr Kirks who fell very foul upon me leaving Chester. Passed many severe censures upon me, but if I know my own heart very unjust. I bless God I bore it with meekness."<sup>41</sup> Another old friend, Mr. John Hunt, advised him to take his leave of Chester earlier than he had planned, "being desirous," wrote Henry, "I should go away sooner than I intended, which makes me hasten to take the coach." At Hackney, there was disquiet over the protracted negotiations, and after arriving he went to visit Mr. Anthony. Of that visit he wrote, "[He] tells me that some here began to be impatient of my delay, yet all well now that I am come."<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> *Diary*, October 14, 1710.

<sup>37</sup> *Diary*, January 31, 1711.

<sup>38</sup> *Diary*, February 28, 1712.

<sup>39</sup> *Diary*, February 8, 1712.

<sup>40</sup> *Diary*, July 19, 1712.

<sup>41</sup> *Dairy*, March 3, 1712.

<sup>42</sup> *Diary*, May 19, 1712.

Related to this was the harassment that Henry had received from many in London urging him to come to Hackney. Undoubtedly, he was one of the most prominent dissenting pastors, from an impeccable Puritan heritage and with considerable gifts in preaching and writing. While it was going to be convenient to be near the printers, yet he had been managing well enough for the six years since the publication of volume 1 of the *Exposition* had commenced. He was besieged by letters from individuals, the congregation at Hackney, and groups of dissenting pastors. The main thrust of this pressure was that Henry had a duty to move to make himself more accessible to a greater number of people. Near the end of 1712, Mr. Tomson of Hackney sent him a letter that said, wrote Henry, "that they insist upon my coming." Not surprisingly he adds a prayer: "Lord help me."<sup>43</sup>

The second factor was his ill health—which seems to be responsible for his indecision over the call—and, after he arrived in Hackney, his worry whether he had done the right thing. He was suffering from two major illnesses, repeated attacks of kidney stones and type 2 diabetes. These may well have been interrelated. There is no doubt that he was a seriously ill man before he left Chester. He knew the fatal effects that both diseases could have because he notes in his diary men who had died from them.<sup>44</sup> He also expressed, particularly in the annual reviews he wrote at year's end, that he could see death ahead of him. From the first attack of kidney stones in October 1710 to the end of his extant diary for 1713, he suffered seventeen bouts of kidney stones. Also, he was constantly thirsty, had put on weight so that people remarked on his corpulence, and lacked concentration, and cognitive impairment appears to be behind his extreme indecision about the call to Hackney. All these features had been seen earlier in relation to the call to Salters' Hall in 1709, but now, as his health rapidly declined, they manifested themselves even more markedly.

The third aspect that requires comment relates to the amount of work he achieved after moving to Hackney. His extant diary covers just over nineteen months. In this period, he normally preached twice each Sunday to his own congregation and gave one midweek lecture. He preached/lectured constantly in other dissenting congregations in London, sometimes even three times in one day.<sup>45</sup> While back in Cheshire in 1713 from July 23 to

---

<sup>43</sup> *Diary*, December 11, 1712.

<sup>44</sup> For the deadly effects of stones in the kidney, see *Diary*, March 21, 29; April 3, 8–9, 1706; April 20, 1708; September 16, 1712; for death from diabetes, see *Diary*, March 20, 1705; May 21, 1705; September 16, 1712.

<sup>45</sup> For examples of him taking his own two services and then lecturing in another congregation, see his *Diary*, January 11, January 25, March 8, April 12, May 10, 1713.

August 12, he preached or lectured thirteen times. He completed the last three chapters of the Old Testament for his *Exposition* immediately after he arrived at Hackney, and from September 1712 to April 1714 he wrote the *Exposition* from Matthew 1 to Acts 4. How do we explain such a productive period for a seriously ill man? He has various expressions in his diary that show that his health was not permitting him to work under the same pressure as formerly. He was not getting up as early, he was “dull,” he wasted away time. His vocation was to be a faithful pastor of God’s flock, and having sensed that call over twenty-five years earlier, he never allowed it to disappear. His final New Year’s Day brought these observations in his diary:

Reflecting with sorrow, and shame upon my manifold defects, and short-comings in holy duties; and at other times inward expressions, not always answering outward expressions; having begged for pardon in the blood of Christ.

I this morning renewed the dedication of myself to God, my own self, my whole self, body, soul, and spirit. Father, I give thee my heart; use me for thy glory this year; employ me in thy service; fit me for thy will. If it should be a year of sickness, and pain; if a new of family affliction: if a year of publick trouble; if of silencing and suffering; bonds and banishments; if it be my dying year, welcome the holy will of God; if a year of continued health, peace and liberty, Lord I desire to be busy in the improvement of it, both in study and preaching, in an entire dependence upon divine grace, without which I am nothing, and can do nothing.<sup>46</sup>

A fourth aspect is the lack of ecclesiastical organization within the Presbyterian congregations themselves and among the congregations as a group at that time. At Chester, and again at Hackney, there is no evidence that Henry had a body of elders or a diaconate. He admitted communicants and exercised discipline. On the one hand, this was a doctrinal issue, as many pastors, like him, believed that it was the pastor who administered the keys of the kingdom (Matt 16:19) and disciplined erring members.<sup>47</sup> While in Chester, he met informally with other Presbyterian pastors in Knutsford six-monthly for fellowship, for discussion of vacant congregations and possible pastors, and for the examination and ordination of ministerial candidates. The same practice was observed in the London area. No full Presbyterian system was in operation. He himself was disappointed when he was in perplexity about the call to Hackney and appealing to the dissenting ministers in London that they declined to enter into discussion in relation

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Williams, *Memoirs*, 161.

<sup>47</sup> See the discussion on these practices in Williams, *Memoirs*, 131–32. Major decisions were often made by a small group of trustees or wealthy seat-holders. This has been described as church government by “a select oligarchy.” See Duncan Coomer, *English Dissent under the Early Hanoverians* (London: Epworth, 1946), 11.

to it.<sup>48</sup> Another factor has to be taken into account, and that is the desire of Henry and others to see a comprehensive plan adopted whereby Presbyterians could be permitted back into the Anglican Church without some of the very restrictive practices that had precipitated the Great Ejection of 1662. The practices that would have been unacceptable were reordination by Anglican bishops and strict adherence to the liturgy of the Prayer Book. As late as 1705 (over forty years after the Great Ejection), Henry was still praying for “comprehension,”<sup>49</sup> and even in 1713 he was discussing with other nonconformists how they could work with the more moderate churchmen.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

Matthew Henry lived a very productive life in Christian service. He was dedicated to his role, and demands on time and effort were put above personal or family concerns. Life for him was obedient service to his Lord. In his diary there are practically no days that are recorded as vacation. Even on the Lord's Day he was working on his *Exposition* early in the morning before turning to the main preaching work of the day.

The tragedy of Henry's life was that an eminently gifted minister's life was cut off at the age of fifty-one. With modern medicine, his illnesses could have been controlled. With good advice from elders and fellow ministers, he could have curtailed his activities to match his physical abilities. There can be no doubt that many of them knew of his persistent ill health, but they seemingly ignored the warning signs and continued to press him to fulfill extra responsibilities.

No evidence of his profound ill health appears in his publications during his two years in Hackney, nor is there any hint that his preaching suffered. In regard to the *Exposition*, he pressed on with the New Testament at an amazing rate. Matthew was completed in exactly twenty-one weeks, while Mark took just five weeks. This could only have occurred if he was using material he had already prepared, which, with minimal change, was adapted to this purpose.<sup>51</sup> The same applies to his exposition of John's Gospel. This also explains the consistent quality of the parts of his *Exposition* that he

<sup>48</sup> *Diary*, June 5, 1711.

<sup>49</sup> *Diary*, December 31, 1705, in his concluding review of the year.

<sup>50</sup> *Diary*, July 22, 1712.

<sup>51</sup> The speed at which he finished the New Testament portion of his *Exposition* (Matthew-Acts) depends on his use of pre-existing written material, either from pulpit or from family devotions, or from the writing he did for his own pleasure.

completed after arriving in Hackney. His use of written exposition already in his possession ensured that the quality of Matthew-Acts was very similar to that of Genesis-Malachi.<sup>52</sup>

Death interrupted Henry's work on the *Exposition*. However, a "dear friend," usually taken to be William Tong, oversaw the production of the remainder of the commentary. It was published in 1721. Fourteen dissenting ministers completed the work, using considerable notes that Henry had left. A commentary on Romans was almost complete, and use was made of shorthand notes that auditors had taken while listening to Henry preaching. Dr. Isaac Watts, on a blank page at the beginning of his copy of the sixth and final volume, listed the names of the contributors, indicating that they endeavored to complete the *Exposition* in the style and method of Henry himself.<sup>53</sup>

From an early age Henry was addicted to his study. His mother had to try to get him to leave his books and go outside and get exercise.<sup>54</sup> His only form of exercise appears to have been either walking or horse-riding, as these were his means of transport to all the places he went to preach or lecture while at Chester. He was even riding from Chester to London in May 1711 when illness forced him to transfer to a coach.<sup>55</sup> There are one or two references to his time at Hackney that indicate that occasionally he rode into London, but he normally probably walked.

Puritan spirituality was exhibited in all of Henry's life. Regardless of his personal circumstances, he tried to learn from experiences and was constantly applying Scripture to himself. Christian ministry was his calling, and self-comfort and self-ease were unknown to him. Though coming at the tail end of the Puritan period, he was a fine exemplar of the Puritan spirit, overcoming many obstacles in his ministry and leaving writings that have benefited many ever since. His legacy lives on.

---

<sup>52</sup> For a brief introduction on Henry as biblical expositor, see Hugh O. Old, "Henry, Matthew (1662–1714)," in *Historical Handbook of Major Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 195–98. For a much more detailed assessment, see my discussion on "Matthew Henry the Commentator," in Allan M. Harman, *Matthew Henry: His Life and Influence* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2012), 147–70.

<sup>53</sup> See the discussion on the completion of the *Exposition* in Williams, *Memoirs*, 308–9, and Philip Alexander, "Matthew Henry: An Annotated Bibliography," in Matthew A. Collins and Paul Middleton, eds., *Matthew Henry: The Bible, Prayer, and Piety: A Tercentenary Celebration* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 250–52.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, *Memoirs*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Diary*, May 9, 1711.