

# JOHN BILLINGSLEY (1657-1722)

## PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER

By John Benedict for Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

John Billingsley (1657–1722), Presbyterian minister, was born at the vicarage at Chesterfield in Derbyshire, the only son of John Billingsley (1625-1683), vicar of Chesterfield, and his wife, Mary (d. in or before 1665), daughter of the puritan minister Immanuel Bourne. Educated at Nottingham by John Reyner (son of Edward Reyner, the presbyterian minister of Lincoln), Billingsley briefly attended Trinity College, Cambridge, but did not matriculate. Instead he continued his studies under his father, who kept a school in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, and his uncle, John Whitlock the elder. In a remarkable instance of hereditary succession Billingsley, John Oldfield, and Samuel Coates were ordained together by their fathers at Mansfield in September 1681. On 22 August 1682 Billingsley married Dorcas Jordan (d. 1717) at Oliver Heywood's chapel at Coley, Northowram, Yorkshire. After preaching for a time to his father's former flock at Chesterfield, he moved to Sheffield to assist the Presbyterian Edward Prime. He ministered in and around Selston, Nottinghamshire, from about 1687 to 1694, when he accepted a call to succeed Samuel Charles as pastor to a joint congregation of Presbyterians and Independents at Kingston upon Hull. There he remained until 1706 when he was elected to replace Samuel Rosewell as assistant to William Harris at the Presbyterian meeting of Crutched Friars, London. He also preached a Sunday evening lecture to a society of young men at the Old Jewry, in which he expounded the Westminster assembly's shorter and larger catechisms. Despite his own orthodoxy, when the Exeter Trinitarian controversy divided London dissenters at the Salters' Hall synod in 1719 Billingsley sided with the non-subscribers, who thought the imposition of religious tests of any sort violated the fundamental principle of dissent. It is not clear whether his decision was at all affected by the prominent role taken by his cousin Nicholas Billingsley, of Ashwick, Somerset, in sheltering the Arians Hubert Stogdon and James Foster.

With its uncompromising insistence that 'strictness is not fanaticism', Billingsley's first work, *The Believer's Daily Exercise* (1690), placed him squarely within the godly tradition. Dedicated to his Selston congregation, it offered a wealth of practical guidance to help serious Christians distinguish themselves from hypocrites and formalists. This included warning readers against wasting their mornings 'between the comb and the glass', like 'the gaudy butterflies and gay peacocks of our days', and advising them, quite specifically, on what and how to read (pp. 71, 9). Personal reformation alone, however, was not sufficient, as Billingsley made clear in his two sermons preached before the societies for reformation of manners in Hull and London (1700, 1706). Christians must be reformers, first of themselves, 'but next of others also' (Billingsley, *A Sermon Preached to the Societies for the Reformation of Manners*, 1706, 20). After defending the societies from the usual charges of canting and meddling, Billingsley employed the language of patriotic whiggery in contrasting the slavishness sown in their debauched subjects by absolute monarchs with the sobriety which sustained England's freedom: 'sobriety and the love of liberty are twins that laugh and live, mourn and die together' (*ibid.*, 18). Besides a number of separate sermons he also published *Brief Discourse of Schism* (2nd edn, 1714), and the exposition of the epistle to Jude in the continuation of Matthew Henry's commentary. William Harris edited his posthumous *Sermons Against Popery* (1723).

Billingsley and his wife had five children, including one son, John, a dissenting minister in Dover, Kent, who dedicated a sermon to his father in 1717. John subsequently married a sister of Sir Philip Yorke, later Chancellor Hardwicke, conformed to the Church of England, and became a prebendary of Bristol. In addition to suffering all his life under a 'crazy constitution', Billingsley was naturally melancholy.

During his last sickness, he confessed, '[I] pretend not to transports of affection, and rapturous joys; for ... you know my temper and make' (Harris, 256–7). He died, probably in London, on 2 May 1722, and was buried on 13 May in Bunhill Fields. Harris published funeral sermons for both Billingsley and his wife in his *Funeral Discourses* (1736).

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As Jim Benedict mentions John Billingsley married Dorcas Jordan. She was the daughter of Thomas Jordan and Katherine Whitlock. Of John and Dorcas' five children we have only been able to trace a couple of generations on for John Billingsley b.1684 and Samuel Billingsley b.1696. There is a Billingsley One Name Society and I am looking forward to working with them to trace more descendants.