

WELSH
CALVINISTIC METHODISM

A Historical Sketch.

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CHAPTER I.

Howell Harris—Daniel Rowlands—Howell Davies.

MORE than one hundred and thirty-six years ago, on Lord's Day the 30th of March 1735, which was the Sabbath before Easter, in the parish church of Talgarth, in the county of Brecon, South Wales, the officiating clergyman, whose name we have not the happiness to know, gave notice to his hearers of his intention to celebrate the Lord's Supper on the Sabbath next following. "Seeing his people negligent to come to the Holy Communion," he read the "Exhortation" which has been appointed to be read under such circumstances. In that Exhortation some of the excuses which men are apt to make for not coming to the Lord's Table are stated and replied to. But the good clergyman, in the earnestness of his soul, enlarged upon the form before him. "You plead your unfitness," said he, "to come to the Holy Communion. Let me tell you, that if you are not fit to come to the Lord's Supper, you are not fit to come to church, you are not fit to live, you are not fit to die." There was in the congregation a young man, a native of the parish, who was at the time about twenty-one years of age, and who was so affected by these earnest words, that he at once resolved to place himself among the communicants on the following Sabbath. That young man was Howell Harris, who, on many accounts, may be regarded as foremost among the fathers and founders of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism. He began forthwith to prepare himself for the holy rite. On his way home, he called upon a neighbour with whom he had a quarrel, and made peace with him. During the week he kept himself from his usual sins, and from such vanities as he considered to be inconsistent with a religious life. The following Sabbath came, and he appeared at church, feeling thoroughly satisfied with himself and with the life which he had led for a whole week. He considered himself, in fact, to be a very good young man. But while kneeling before the altar, and repeating after the clergyman the following words of confession, "We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we, from time to time, most grievously have committed, by thought, word, and deed, against thy Divine Majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable," there suddenly flashed upon his mind the conviction that he was speaking

falsehood in the presence of God. It was not grievous to him to remember his sins, nor did he feel them to be any burden at all. The sudden terror that came upon him had well-nigh compelled him to turn away, when there came to his aid the remembrance that he had sincerely resolved to amend his ways, and so, trusting in himself still, he for the first time in his life partook of the Lord's Supper.

The weeks that followed were weeks of earnest conflict. He endeavoured to keep his "heart and thoughts fixed on God;" but it was all in vain, as might have been expected, for he was attempting to make the fruit good while the tree was evil. On the 20th of April, a "Book on the Commandments, written by Bryan Duppa," was put into his hands. This he read; and the more he read, the more he saw the breadth of God's law and his own sinfulness before Him. He was constrained to flee from himself, and his own amended life and good works, to Christ to seek salvation. And he found it. When he came to the Lord's Supper on the following Whit-Sunday, the confession which in his mouth had been false seven weeks before was now true. The remembrance of his sins was indeed grievous unto him now, and the burden of them was intolerable; but he was enabled to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and in Him he found rest to his soul.

The following November his friends sent him to Oxford, "to cure him of his fanaticism." But it was of no avail. There he found pleasure in nothing but private prayer and the public means of grace. The immorality and ungodliness which he daily witnessed vexed his soul. The prospect of worldly advancement which a University education opened before him he did not regard as worth a thought, and earnestly did he pray God to deliver him from that unhappy place. At the close of the term he left for home, fully resolved not to return again to Oxford.

In a short time after his return from the University he began to go about from house to house to warn and exhort his neighbours, not only in his native place, but likewise in the surrounding parishes. He thus began to preach without the remotest idea that he was doing anything of the kind. He felt that his neighbours were in danger, and all that he did was to warn them of the alarming fact, and earnestly urge them without loss of time to seek salvation; and not satisfied with speaking thus to those whom he casually met, he called upon them that he might speak to them at their homes. He opened a day-school at the neighbouring village of Trevecca, and availed himself of that opportunity to speak to the children and young people who came together to be taught. At the time there was a man who went about the villages holding classes to teach psalm-singing, and Harris followed him about from place to place, that he might talk to the young people who assembled on these occasions about the salvation of their souls. By and by people began to assemble in great numbers at the houses which he visited, to hear him

speak. Family gatherings became congregations, and these congregations became so large that there was not a place in the neighbourhood sufficiently commodious to contain them. His speaking was accompanied by great power. God gave testimony to the word of His grace. Many confessed their sins, earnestly prayed for forgiveness, made peace with each other, and forsook their wicked ways. Family worship was established in many houses, the churches of the neighbourhood were crowded, and great numbers sought admission to the Lord's Table. Thus began that mighty preaching that roused Wales from the sleep of ages, and thus was commenced the great Welsh Methodist revival.

But simultaneously with this, and quite independently of it, there was another beginning in the adjoining county of Cardigan. About forty miles, "as the crow flies," from Talgarth, in a north-westerly direction, and separated from it by ranges of wild trackless mountains, is the little village of Llangeitho. It lies in a somewhat narrow valley, on the banks of the little river Ayrn. The officiating clergyman in the parish church of this place, at the time of which we write, was the Rev. Daniel Rowlands, a young man of twenty-two years of age. He was the son of the former vicar of the parish, but his elder brother, the Rev. John Rowlands, held the living now, and Daniel was his curate. He had been permitted to take Orders one year before the usual age, "in consideration of his superior scholarship." From the beginning he was a man of mark. He excelled in reading the Lessons, *and* in athletic sports. He spent a part of the Sunday morning in the former exercise, and a greater part of the afternoon of the day in the latter. He did both well; the great difference was that the latter had more of his heart. He did the one, for such was his duty; and joined the young men of the parish in the other, because he liked it. He had an idea, however, of becoming a popular preacher. There was a man in the neighbourhood who stole the people. This was the Rev. Philip Pugh, pastor of the Independent church at Llwynypiod, one of the very few dissenting ministers then in Wales who were able to gather together a considerable congregation. Rowlands wanted to know the secret of the dissenter's popularity, and in thinking the matter over, he came to the conclusion that it was because he "thundered." Thought he, "I will thunder too, and see the effect;" and he did so most awfully. He chose for his texts such passages as the following: "The wicked shall be turned into hell;" "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment;" "For the great day of his wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand?" His sermons were in character with such texts as these. He spoke of the sinner's miserable condition, of death, of judgment, and everlasting torments, with such eloquence and power that the church soon became crowded with attentive and awe-struck listeners; and it has been said that above a hundred of the congregation were under deep impressions before the preacher himself began to think seriously

at all.

But his time came to be brought to a personal knowledge of the truths which he so effectually preached; and it happened thus. For more than twenty years before the occurrences which we have just narrated, there lived and laboured in the parish of Llanddowror, Carmarthenshire, an eminently able and devoted clergyman—the Rev. Griffith Jones, who has been designated by some “the Apostle of Wales,” and by others “the Morning Star of the Methodist Revival.” Both appellations are amply justified by the history of his laborious and eminently useful life. Mr. Jones was in the habit of administering the Lord’s Supper monthly in his church, and assembled as many of his parishioners as were willing to attend on the Saturday preceding the Communion Sabbath, when, in addition to reading the Church Service, he catechised those who were present in the leading truths of the Christian religion. He was distressed by the ignorance manifested by his catechumens, and he traced that ignorance to their inability to read the Word of God. This led him to conceive the idea of establishing those “circulating charity schools,” which proved such a blessing to Wales, and which have immortalized his name. Their sole object was to enable the people to read the Holy Scriptures. As far as it was practicable, pious men were employed as teachers, and the plan was for each master to remain at a particular place until he had taught a number of people to read, and then to shift his quarters to some other district. Hence they were called “*circulating* schools.” There were 215 of these schools in operation the year before Mr. Jones’s death: 128 in South Wales, and 87 in the north; and it has been ascertained that as many as 150,212 men, women, and children, between the ages of six years and seventy, were in the course of twenty-four years taught by their means to read the Bible in the Welsh language. In addition to the inability to read, that was then so general in Wales, there was a great scarcity of reading material. Mr. Jones did much to supply this want by bringing out a number of good books, as well as by procuring several editions of the Bible in the language of the Principality. He was efficiently aided in these undertakings by the “Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.”

Mr. Jones was in the habit of making occasional excursions to various parts of the Principality to visit his schools, and to preach in their behalf in such churches as were open to him. Wherever he preached, great crowds came together to hear, for he was a mighty preacher as well as a great educationist. On one of these occasions he came to Llanddewi Brefi, a place about five miles from Llangeitho. When he had commenced his sermon, he noticed standing opposite him in the crowd a young man of a proud and haughty bearing. His countenance appeared to him to wear a scolding aspect, though his dress indicated that he was a clergyman. He at once lifted up his heart to heaven in prayer in his behalf, entreating that that service

might be the means of converting his heart to God, and that He might make him the instrument of saving many souls. That prayer was abundantly answered. The young man was no other than Daniel Rowlands of Llangeitho, and he went home “a new creature.” If he had “thundered” before, he did so now with far more earnestness, and therefore with greater effect. That which he spoke now was not that which he had seen or heard only, but that which he had likewise felt in the depths of his own heart. His fame spread abroad, and he was invited to preach in other counties. He travelled through the country “thundering” until the multitudes trembled in his presence, and shouted and shrieked as if they felt themselves to be on the very verge of perdition.

But while this was the means of awakening the multitudes, there was something else necessary to save them. They were deeply wounded, but left without the balm that heals. Rowlands made known to them their lost state, but said little or nothing of the saving mercy of our Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ and the riches of His grace. That excellent Nonconformist minister to whom we have already alluded—the Rev. Philip Pugh—saw this deficiency in the ministry of his zealous young neighbour, and was kind enough to teach him the way of God more perfectly. “Preach the gospel to the people, my dear sir,” said he; “apply the balm that is in Gilead to their wounded spirits, and show their need of faith in the crucified Redeemer.” “I fear,” said the young minister, “that I do not really possess that faith myself.” “Preach it,” was the reply. “Preach it until you feel it. It will come without fail. If you go on preaching the law after this fashion you will kill half the population, for you thunder those awful curses in such a terrible manner that it is impossible for any man to stand before you.” Mr. Pugh had sufficient liberality thus to advise an Episcopal clergyman, and the clergyman was sufficiently humble thankfully to receive the word of exhortation from a dissenter.

From this time there was a great and happy change in the tone of Rowlands’s ministry; now it was as full of gospel as it had been before of law. It became as remarkable for its sweetness as it had been for its terrors, and as effectual to comfort as it had been to alarm. When he proclaimed free forgiveness through the sufferings and death of the Saviour of the world, sinners ready to perish felt that there was hope even for them. In realizing that hope, they rejoiced with joy unspeakable and full of glory, and great numbers expressed their ecstatic joy in shouts of praise. The deep wailings and despairing sighs and groans of a few weeks past were now replaced by glad shouts of “Halleluiah!” “Gogoniant!” “Diolch iddo byth!” We are more than half disposed to leave the last two exclamations untranslated, for in the mouth of the Welsh worshipper, when carried away with the mighty stream of his emotions, they mean very much more than the English reader can

conceive by being told that the words which stand for them in his language are “Glory,” “Thanks unto Him for ever.” At this time there began at Llangeitho church those “rejoicings” which have ever since, and especially on occasions of revival, more or less characterized the worship of Welsh Methodists.

Mention is made of one notable Sabbath morning at Llangeitho, when there came a great tide, carrying all before it. The clergyman was reading the Litany, and, as he read on, his own soul was filled with strong emotion. When he came to the words, “By thine Agony and bloody Sweat; by thy Cross and Passion; by thy precious Death and Burial; by thy glorious Resurrection and Ascension; and by the coming of the Holy Ghost,” an overwhelming feeling passed through the great multitude. Many fell on the floor of the church, while others shouted through their tears the appointed response, “Good Lord, deliver us.” It is but a very faint idea we can give the reader of the character of Daniel Rowlands’s preaching. We have before us a small (Welsh) volume of his published sermons. There are in it many passages of great power, and which could not, when spoken by him, otherwise than produce mighty effects. He is preaching, for instance, from Romans viii. 28: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God.” “Seeming evils,” he says, “are blessings. Their trials and afflictions work together for their good. The cross is the path to the crown. It is through much tribulation that we must enter the kingdom of God. ‘Thou broughtest us into the net; thou laidst affliction upon our loins. Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place.’ Conflict *is* the way to victory. Their falling into the net was their path to liberty. The boast of the foe was the dawn of their deliverance. Hark! The enemies say, ‘They are *in* the net. Our feet are *upon* their necks. If *this* is the way to life, they shall be long enough before they reach it. But what comes next? ‘Thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place.’” The preacher speaks like a foe. The glance of his eye, the whole expression of his countenance, and the tones of his voice, are those of the bitter enemy. The people are conscious that there is pending a terrific conflict, upon the issue of which hangs their everlasting destiny, and they are beginning seriously to fear that the day is lost; when suddenly, and quite in a different tone, there comes the triumphant shout, “Thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place.” It is echoed by a hundred shouts of praise from the great congregation, and it is some time before the people are sufficiently calm to allow the preacher to proceed. But this is only one wave. There comes another, and after that another yet, and so on to the end of the sermon. And sometimes the end was very long before it came. On one Sabbath morning Mr. Rowlands was preaching, and the people hanging on his lips all unconscious of the flight of time, until a ray of light coming in through the

western window of the church made them aware of the fact that the sun was about to set. Such was the beginning of the Welsh Methodist revival at Llangeitho.

There was yet another beginning which does not seem to have had any connexion with either of the wondrous events which we have just narrated. The Rev. Griffith Jones, already mentioned, besides all his other labours, devoted a part of his time to the instruction of youth. There was among his pupils a Mr. Howell Davies, a young man of good parts, and of a serious turn of mind. Mr. Jones's ministry was blessed to his conversion, and he resolved to devote himself to the ministry of the gospel, and was accordingly ordained to the curacy of Llysyfran in Pembrokeshire. On the Sabbath on which he was ordained, Mr. Jones desired the congregation at Llanddowror church to unite with him in earnest prayer for their young friend who was that day entering upon the work of the ministry. It soon appeared that these prayers were heard in heaven. Mr. Davies's ministry was with great power, and multitudes came together to hear him, and were blessed; but there were influential parishioners who could not endure that which was spoken, and by their means he was dismissed from Llysyfran.

After this he travelled the country preaching in churches or out of them as opportunity offered, and the Lord blessed his ministry to the salvation of a great many souls. When he administered the Lord's Supper, it often happened that the churches were too small to contain half the communicants. On those occasions great crowds stood outside waiting their turn, and the church had to be filled two or three times before all had partaken. The reader will not consider this at all strange, when we have added that those sanctuaries were comparatively small, and that Mr. Davies had at one time more than 2000 communicants in the county of Pembroke.

Thus by means of these three young men, Howell Harris, Daniel Rowlands, and Howell Davies, was the great work begun. In three different counties there sprang up simultaneously three distinct streams of the water of life, the confluence of which formed that mighty river which watered the whole of the Principality, and made it blossom as the garden of the Lord.