

WELSH
CALVINISTIC METHODISM

A Historical Sketch.

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LONDON:
JAMES NISBET & CO., 21 BERNERS STREET.
1872.

CHAPTER XII.

The Rev. T. Charles of Bala—At Llanddowror school—At Carmarthen College—At Oxford—Ordination and first curacy—Marriage and settlement at Bala—Circulating schools—Sabbath schools—Letter from Mr. Charles—Owen Jones and Robert Davies at Aberystwyth—A farewell meeting and its effects—Owen Jones at Llanidloes—At Shrewsbury—Ebenezer Richard—Establishment of the British and Foreign Bible Society.

WE have already referred to the Rev. Thomas Charles of Bala, and have given an extract from a letter which he wrote on the revival in the year 1791. It was six years before that letter was written that he had joined the Connexion. He was the son of a farmer in the parish of Llanvihangel, Carmarthenshire, and was born October 14, 1755. His parents intended him for the ministry, and when he was between ten and twelve years of age he was sent to a school that was held in the neighbouring village of Llanddowror, where the Rev. Griffith Jones had so long and devotedly and successfully laboured. Mr. Jones had gone to his rest some five years before the young lad joined the school; but the influence of his work and of his character was still present in the place, and the mind of Thomas Charles was deeply impressed by it. The conversation of an old disciple of Griffith Jones, named Rhys Pugh, was greatly blessed to him. He was led to make a public profession of religion; and while yet a boy he introduced family worship into his father's house. When he was fourteen years old he was sent to the Presbyterian College at Carmarthen, where, to preserve himself from the bad influences of association with the careless and the indifferent young people around him, he gave as much as possible of his time to the reading of religious books. On the 20th of January 1773, when he was in his eighteenth year, he heard Daniel Rowlands; "and that day," he writes, "will be memorable to me as long as I live. From that day I found a new heaven and a new earth to enjoy. The change experienced by a blind man on receiving his sight is not greater than that which I felt on that day."

In his twentieth year he went to Oxford, and three years later he received Deacon's Orders and was appointed to a curacy in Somersetshire. There was a friend of his, the Rev. Simon Lloyd, living at Bala, who, like himself, was of a Methodistical turn, and he paid him a visit in the interval between his ordination and his settlement in his curacy. The two friends took a tour together of several weeks, taking Llangeitho in their way that they might have the treat of hearing Daniel Rowlands, and finished their journey at the house of Mr. Charles's father. During their stay there, the young clergyman had the privilege of preaching at the church of his native parish. We know not how long he retained his Somersetshire curacy, but

a portion of that time was spent by him at Oxford, where he took his B.A. degree. An event had however transpired during his visit to Bala which gave direction to the whole of his future life. While there, he became acquainted with a young lady in the place, a Miss Jones, and that acquaintance led in process of time to her becoming Mrs. Charles. After his marriage he made his home at Bala, and served several curacies for short periods; but in every case his Methodism was objected to, and he was consequently dismissed. He offered to serve gratuitously in a neighbouring church, but was refused. The doors of the Establishment having thus closed against him, he resolved to cast in his lot with the Welsh Methodists, and this was done in the year 1785. The Connexion had now existed for nearly half a century, but the accession of Mr. Charles to the number of its ministers cannot but be regarded as an era in its history, for in the event it exerted a mighty influence on its destinies, and contributed in no small measure, by the grace of God, to make it a greater blessing to Wales than it had ever hitherto been. Daniel Rowlands, after he had heard him preach for the first time at an Association at Llangeitho, only expressed a small part of the truth when he said, "Mr. Charles is the gift of God to North Wales."

He was an eminent preacher, and there are many instances in which his ministry was accompanied with great power, and it is certain that it was made the means of turning many to righteousness; but it is in another department of the work of the Lord that his labours were most abundant, and stood forth in the greatest prominence. In going about to preach from place to place, he was struck with, and greatly distressed by, the great ignorance of the people everywhere. He found that there was scarcely a neighbourhood in which one out of every twenty of the population could read the Word of God, while there were some localities in which it was difficult to find a single person who was able to do so. He applied himself to remedy this deplorable state of things with all his heart and soul. He resolved to attempt the establishment of circulating schools similar to those which had been established many years before by the Rev. Griffith Jones of Llanddowror. Mr. Jones's schools had proved a great benefit; but they had been confined chiefly to South Wales, and had by this time, twenty-five years after the good man's death, nearly all disappeared. The plan was to send a teacher to some locality where he would stay long enough to teach as many as were willing to learn, young and old, to read Welsh, and then to remove him to some other neighbourhood. Mr. Charles applied in every direction for help to put this idea in practice. He began with only one teacher, but as assistance from friends far and near flowed to him in greater and still greater abundance, he was before long enabled

to increase the number of his agents to twenty. In acknowledging a subscription from a lady in England towards this object, he wrote in 1796, "In travelling through different parts of the country more than nine years ago, I found that extensive districts in the mountainous parts of North Wales were sunk in the deepest ignorance. The number of those who were able to read were very few, and equally few were those who had the Word of God in their houses. I seriously began to consider how it would be possible to remove so great an evil, and I could think of no other plan which was likely to answer the purpose than to set schoolmasters to work according to the aid which I would receive, and send them to dark districts to teach freely all who would come to them, to read the Bible in their own language, and to instruct them in the first principles of the Christian religion. By the help of kind friends to whom I made known this plan, it was set on foot, and has succeeded far beyond my expectations. The demand for schoolmasters has gone on increasingly, and there is a manifest change in the sentiments and morals of the people where those schools have been at work. I established Sabbath and night schools for the sake of those who were too much engaged or too poor to avail themselves of the day schools. The attempts which I have made in this direction have been marvellously successful. The country is filled with schools of one kind or another, and all are taught simultaneously. And there are blessed results following the instruction,—a great and deep interest in spiritual things has been awoken in many localities; many have been made sensible of their sinful state and of their need of Christ, and are now, I have every reason to believe, His faithful followers. The schools have now been in operation for nearly ten years, and the results are similar in a greater or less degree. The number of teachers have been increased or diminished according to the means at my disposal. All that I get for my ministry I devote to this purpose, while the wants of my own family are provided for by the industry of my dear wife. At present I pay £12 per annum to each schoolmaster. They remain in the same place from six to nine months, and are then removed to another locality. We find that nine months is amply sufficient to teach the children to read their Bibles fluently in the Welsh language. I visit the schools myself, when I catechise them publicly, and have the unutterable pleasure of seeing the general aspect of the country marvellously changed. The desert blossoms as a rose, and the dry land has become streams of water. By means of the schools, and the preaching of the Gospel, religious knowledge spreads in every direction. Bless the Lord, O my soul!"

It was no light labour that devolved on Mr. Charles in connexion with this great movement. He had to find localities to receive the schools as well as suitable teachers for those localities, and there were not a few whom he was obliged to instruct himself, before they were qualified to

teach others. He had to be president and sole teacher of what was in effect a Normal College, as well as general superintendent of a large number of schools spread far and wide throughout the country; and he had to be secretary, treasurer, committee, and collector of the fund which was necessary to keep this vast machinery from coming to a stand. But this was not all. Teachers and children cannot make a school without books; and where were they to come from? Mr. Charles found it necessary to write and bring through the press three elementary spelling and reading books and two catechisms. One of the latter, *The Instructor in the Principles of the Christian Religion*, has passed through a great many editions, and continues to this day to be extensively used in the Principality.

He exercised great care in the selection of his masters. He sought men of moderately good parts; but they must be humble men, well conducted, of winning ways,—and not proud, lazy, or talkative; but above all they must, as far as could be judged by their life and conversation, be godly men.

Mr. Charles would, first of all, fix upon a locality in which to establish a school, and would then visit the place, call a meeting of the inhabitants, and impress upon their minds the importance of having their children taught to read the Word of God, and then signify his intention to send a teacher among them, who, without fee or reward, would instruct all who were willing to come to him on weekdays, or in the evenings, or on the Sabbath-day. In conclusion he would urge the parents to send their children to school, promising to give books gratuitously to all those who were too poor to purchase them. The master was instructed not to receive any money on account of the children whom he taught—not to be burdensome to any of the parents—not to go to any house to eat and drink unless he were specially invited, and was expected, when he remained at any house for a night, to read and pray with the family before going to rest, and also before he left on the following morning. He was likewise instructed to lead the conversation to his own special employment, and to be careful not to let it drift into vain and useless talk. These schools continued in operation for upwards of twenty years, and it is not strange therefore, that, with such means and such men, “the whole aspect of the country was marvellously changed.”

It was in the year 1782 that the Sabbath-school was begun at Gloucester by Mr. Robert Raikes, and it was only a few years later when a similar institution was inaugurated in Wales in connexion with Mr. Charles’s circulating schools. His teachers gave instruction on the Sabbath to those who were unable to attend in the week; and those schools were the means of qualifying great numbers throughout the country to become in their turn teachers themselves. Mr. Charles saw this advantage, and was not slow in

availing himself of it. He advocated the establishment of a Sunday-school in connexion with every congregation, and though he was opposed at the outset by many conscientious brethren, who regarded teaching people to read as “work,” and therefore a thing forbidden by the commandment of God, his mild spirit and kind persuasions ultimately prevailed. Schools sprang up thickly in every direction, and from that day to this the Sabbath-school has been one of the most important and efficient means of grace in the Principality.¹

We want at this point to give to those of our readers who are unacquainted with Wales some idea of the Welsh Sabbath-school, for it is a very different affair from anything called by that name which they can find in England. It is not an institution of teachers and children merely, but a meeting where the great bulk of the congregation connected with the particular place of worship to which it belongs assemble together to instruct one another in Divine things. It is very frequently the case that the first evidence of a change in a so far thoughtless man, is his beginning to attend the Sunday-school. The majority of attendants are above fifteen years of age, and they range between that and eighty or ninety. Of course the children of the congregation attend, but they are outnumbered in most cases by the seniors. We could take our reader to many a school in Wales where he would find more pairs of spectacles than in any ten in the metropolis together. There is a female class in the corner of the room, the teacher of which is a matron of seventy-two. Perhaps she has been there every Sabbath, with very few exceptions, for the last forty years. Her dear old teacher went to heaven twenty years ago, and she has occupied her place ever since. The class is numerous, and her oldest pupil is perhaps eighty-five years of age, and her youngest approaching sixty. Of course she is under no necessity to teach them to read; that they have been able to do for many years,—indeed long before we were born; but they read a portion of the Word of God together, and then talk. A thought has occurred to one of them in reading, another to another, and each in her turn expresses her thought. Possibly the conversation drifts more in the direction of experience than in that of exegesis, but it is by no means uncommon for the whole host of spectacles to be considerably dimmed, and for the dear old sisters to go home more refreshed than they have been under many a sermon. There is a class of men of similar ages in the other corner, who possibly will go deeper into doctrine than their sisters opposite. Then

¹ Jenkin Morgan, a schoolmaster and exhorter, had taught a number of people on the Sabbaths at Tynyfron, Crawlom, Montgomeryshire, as early as the year 1770 or 1771; but since that was an isolated effort it cannot be regarded as the beginning of the Sabbath-schools.

there are classes of middle-aged, and of young people of both sexes, discussing, it may be, "The fall of man," "The universality of the Flood," "The journeys of Israel," "The travels of St. Paul," "Justification by faith," "The difference between regeneration and adoption," or any other imaginable biblical or theological subject. It is this that accounts for the fact that such a large number of the common people in Wales are so much at home in the Holy Scriptures, and so well versed in theological knowledge. We do not mean to assert that all the Welsh people are thus, nor even the greatest part of them, but we believe we are right in saying that it is so in the case of a larger proportion of the working classes than in any other part of the kingdom. Some time ago we passed three working men, we believe they were colliers, sitting together on a heap of stones by the roadside, and earnestly discussing the question "How to reconcile the sovereignty of God with the responsibility of man." It struck us at the time that people of that class do not usually discuss such subjects anywhere out of Wales. Perhaps we were mistaken; but we are certain that they would not have done it, and would not have been able to do it, in Wales, if it had not been for its peculiar system of conducting the Sabbath-school.

To Mr. Charles belongs the honour of having been the father and founder of the Sabbath-school in Wales. It was the circulating day and evening schools which he had established and kept in operation by an enormous amount of labour and self-sacrifice, that produced a class of men and women capable of instructing others. It was he that urged that class to utilize the powers and capabilities which they had thus acquired for the benefit of their neighbours, young and old, by collecting them together to teach them on the Sabbath; and it was he who, by his unflagging perseverance, and kind and winning ways, completely overcame the strong prejudice against that kind of "work," that was felt by a great many earnest-minded people. But he was followed by many other zealous and successful labourers in the same field, one or two of whom we will take the liberty of introducing to our readers.

Owen Jones was born at Towyn, in Merionethshire, in the year 1787. When between seven and eight years of age, he was sent to school to a Mr. J. Jones, Penypark, who seems to have been a very efficient schoolmaster, and who was withal an earnestly religious man. He took a great liking to young Owen for his quickness in learning, and especially for the readiness with which he would at any time drop his play in order to accompany him to a religious service. After having been for some years under Mr. Jones's instruction, the lad was sent for a short term to a school in England. Soon after his return home, the master of a free school at Towyn had occasion to leave for a time, and young Owen Jones was requested to take charge of his pupils during his absence. Though only a boy himself,

he accepted the work, and did it well. During the brief period of his oversight of this school he adopted the custom of examining the children every evening on the subjects which they had studied during the day, and there he discovered in himself, and began to make known to others, that power for which he became afterwards so renowned,—the power to convey instruction by means of questioning his pupils. We hesitate not to say that Owen Jones was the greatest catechist that Wales ever produced.

Soon after this he was apprenticed to a saddler at Aberystwyth, and it was in that town that he began his marvellous career in connexion with Sabbath-schools. In the year 1799, the Rev. Mr. Williams, a clergyman of the Church of England, and a zealous advocate of Sabbath-schools, paid a visit to Aberystwyth. During his sojourn in the place, he was distressed to see a great number of people of all ages loitering about on the Lord's Day, and he resolved to gather as many of them as he could together, to give them religious instruction. He prevailed upon a number of them to assemble in a room which he hired for that purpose, and he taught them for two Sundays. But he was only a visitor in the place, and when the time of his brief sojourn was coming to its close, he looked about him for someone to carry on the work which he had begun. He was directed to a young lad named Robert Davies, who was already connected with a small school, which had been for some time carried on in the town by the Methodists. Young Davies readily consented to do what he could, but before entering upon the work, he sought and obtained the assistance of his friend and cousin, the saddler's apprentice. It was generally anticipated that the work which had been successfully begun by the good clergyman would soon collapse in the hands of two boys. But those were not ordinary boys. It flourished greatly under their care, and soon began to attract large numbers of all ages. Finding the Sabbath hours too short to do all that was in their heart to do, they conducted classes in several houses in rotation on every evening in the week but Saturday. Owen Jones's lively method of teaching, and his tact in catechising the children, attracted the notice and won the admiration of all classes throughout the town. Neither of the cousins had at the time made a profession of religion, but they always opened and closed the meetings of their school with prayer. By and bye, however, they became both deeply impressed with the importance of personal religion, and offered themselves, and were gladly accepted, as members of the Methodist Church. The deep earnestness which had thus possessed their own souls soon spread to many of those who were under their charge. But while Owen Jones was thus in the full tide of usefulness, he received an intimation from his father that he must leave Aberystwyth and return to Towyn. The prospect of leaving his beloved work was to him a most

painful one, and that of losing him was equally so to hundreds at Aberystwyth; but there was no help for it. An evening was fixed for him and the scholars to take leave of each other, and that proved an evening long to be remembered. He offered up a prayer at the opening of the meeting, and a mighty prayer it was. Earnestly, even agonizingly, did he plead with God for his own life and that of his dear, *dear* scholars, and there descended an overpowering influence which spread through the place, and extended to the crowd which had assembled outside. About eighty members were added to the Church at Aberystwyth, who had been brought under impressions on that memorable evening. The awakening which thus began mightily spread to the neighbouring districts. We give an extract from a letter which appeared in the *Evangelical Magazine* for May 1805, from the Rev. T. Charles:—

“I am glad to say that there is a happy revival of religion in some parts of Wales. At Aberystwyth and the neighbouring districts there is a general and mighty awakening among the young people and children, and some hundreds have joined the religious societies in those parts. I was lately at an Association of the Calvinistic Methodists at Aberystwyth, and it was estimated that the multitude assembled together amounted to, at least, twenty thousand. It was a happy sight to a Christian. The sermons were with the demonstration of the Spirit and with power. There were hundreds of children from eight years old and upwards to be seen in the congregation, listening with as much attention as the most earnest Christians, and bathed in tears. This work began in a Sunday-school which was conducted by two young men. Soon after the commencement of this school, both teachers and scholars were brought under deep impressions, and the work has now spread over a district extending fifty miles in length and twenty in breadth. In going along the road, it is pleasant to hear the ploughmen and the lads who drive the horses singing hymns at their work. There is nothing else to be heard all over the country. This I can testify with gratitude and joy.”

When the day came for Owen Jones to leave Aberystwyth, he was escorted by all the scholars, together with a large number of men and women, some miles from the town; and when this great escort could proceed no farther, and the poor sorrowing lad was obliged to trudge on alone, they followed him with their eyes to a considerable distance, and saw him fall on his knees to pray three times before his path had taken him out of their sight. When he was eighteen years of age we find him at Llanidloes, and hard at work instructing and catechising the young. While residing at that town, he visited several places in the surrounding districts in pursuit of his great object, and extended his labours as far as Rhayader, where he succeeded in planting a large and flourishing Sunday-school. When he

found parents indisposed to send their children to be instructed, he would ask permission to bring a number of his young folks to their house, that he might catechise them in their hearing, and that they might see what progress they were making in religious knowledge. This device scarcely ever failed to succeed.

When in his twentieth year he came to Shrewsbury, and his first care in that town was to gather the Welsh people together to receive instruction; and not finding sufficient materials among his own countrymen, he resolved to try what he could do for the English, and by going about from house to house he succeeded in establishing an English Sunday-school, numbering between a hundred and a hundred and twenty children, which he conducted with great success as long as he remained at Shrewsbury. When he left the place, his school was taken charge of by the Rev. Mr. Nunn, incumbent of St. Chad's, and became the beginning of the Sunday-school connected with that church. When Mr. Jones married he settled at Gelli, in Montgomeryshire, and became a popular preacher of the Gospel; but it was as an organizer of schools and a catechist of the children that he excelled to the end of his life; and whenever he came on his evangelizing mission to any locality, his visit never failed to give new life to the Sunday-school.

Another zealous and successful labourer in the same field was the Rev. Ebenezer Richard of Tregaron. The enthusiasm of this great and good man in the cause knew no bounds, and the excellent "Rules" for the conducting of Sabbath-schools and Sabbath-school unions, which he wrote and published, as well as his unceasing and affectionate advocacy everywhere of the claims of this beneficent institution, resulted in invaluable blessings not only to Cardiganshire, but likewise to the whole of South Wales. Will those of our readers who do not call the Principality their own dear country, pardon us if we say that England is indebted to the Welsh Sunday-school for one of its most glorious institutions, and that the world is indebted to it for one of its greatest blessings? We believe that we are fully warranted in saying that such is the truth. Before the beginning of the Sabbath-school movement the number of Bibles in the country was too few for each of those who were even then able to read to have a copy. What then must have been the state of the case after readers had been multiplied more than a hundredfold? There was quite a famine in the country—a famine for the possession of the Word of the Lord. Mr. Charles applied to the "Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge," and succeeded in obtaining from that excellent institution a grant of ten thousand Welsh Bibles. But what were they among so many? Another application was made to the same Society, and then another; but in vain. Every effort to procure any more supplies from that source proved unavailing. The promptitude

with which the Society had responded to the first application conclusively proves that it was not from any unwillingness on its part to help the Welsh people, that future applications were unsuccessful.

Mr. Charles was thus constrained to cast about for some other means to supply the great and increasing want of his country. He went to London to consult a few friends with a view of establishing a Society to supply Wales with the Holy Scriptures. Most of our readers, we presume, are aware of the fact that it was at a meeting which had been called together to consider that subject, it was resolved immediately to establish "The British and Foreign Bible Society." Before that Society had been in existence ten years it had supplied Wales with a hundred thousand copies of the Word of God.