WELSH

CALVINISTIC METHODISM

A Historical Sketch.

BY

THE REV. WILLIAM WILLIAMS.

LONDON:

JAMES NISBET & CO., 21 BERNERS STREET.

1872.

CHAPTER II.

William Williams—Peter Williams—Harris’s ministry—Row­lands at home—Llangeitho gatherings—Pilgrims from Bala—A ship-load from Carnarvon—Exhorters—Successes.

Among the earliest and most important results of the ministry of these young men, must be placed the conversion of several who became efficient fellow-labourers with them in the great work which they had undertaken. One or two of these were so emi­nent, and took such a prominent part in the Methodist movement, that they are placed by common consent among the fathers and founders of the Connexion. Howell Harris was in the habit of attending the parish church at Talgarth on Sabbath morning. At the close of the service he usually went out and stood on a tombstone, or on the wall of the churchyard, to address the dispersing congregation. On one of those occasions there stood among his audience a young medical student from Carmarthenshire, who was at the time pursuing his studies at the neighbour­ing town of Hay. The words to which he then listened were blessed to his conversion, and he even­tually resolved to relinquish his medical studies and to devote himself to the ministry of the gospel. This young man became one of the mightiest instru­ments of the revival. He afterwards became known as the Rev. William Williams of Pantycelyn, eminent as a minister of the gospel, but more eminent still as the sacred poet of Wales. Very often in those early days was the smouldering fire which had been kindled by the sermon fanned into a flame by a hymn of W. Williams’s which was sung at the close. It is not too much to say that his Welsh hymns have never been approached by the productions of any other writer in the language; and now that every denomi­nation has its own hymn-book, the great majority in each selection, including that of the Establishment, are the hymns of W. Williams, Pantycelyn. He also wrote some English hymns, several of which, such as “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,” and “O’er those gloomy hills of darkness,” are found in very many selections in that language.

Mr. Williams took Deacon’s Orders in the Estab­lishment in 1740, but his Church career was a short one. In his first curacy he gave so much offence that a representation was made to the Bishop, con­taining no less than nineteen charges against him. One of these was, that he did not use the sign of the cross in baptism; another, that he omitted some portions of the service; and another, that he did not confine his ministrations to the church, but went out to the highways and hedges and preached wherever he could get people to hear him. We have not been able to ascertain what were the other sixteen, but it is reasonable to infer that they looked in the same direction as the above three. When he came to the Bishop for his Priest’s Orders, he was peremptorily refused, and he therefore withdrew from the Establishment and gave himself to work among the Metho­dists.

A somewhat later accession was that of the Rev. Peter Williams, a native of Llaugharne in the county of Carmarthen. He was from his early childhood of a serious turn of mind, and was educated for the ministry. While he was a student at Carmarthen College, the renowned George Whitfield came to preach to the town, and so full of prejudice was the tutor against the “fanatical preacher,” that he gave strict orders that none of the students should go to hear him. Four young men ventured to disobey this injunction, and one of these was Peter Williams. The sermon so deeply affected him, that he lost all taste for his former amusements, and became so earnestly religious, that he was thenceforth regarded by his tutor and fellow-students as a “Methodist.” “And in their opinion,” he writes, “that was suffi­cient to cover me with eternal disgrace.” He after­wards took Orders in the Church, and served several curacies for exceedingly brief periods—for his earnest ministry gave such universal dissatisfaction, that he likewise was obliged to withdraw, and fully identify himself with those despised people whose spirit he had already so largely imbibed. These two young men, W. Williams and P. Williams, though they came a few years later on the scene than the three mentioned in the preceding chapter, are always associated with them as the reformers of Wales and the founders of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism.

They were all young men, and so were Whitfield and his colleagues, by whose instrumentality the Lord was, at the same time, carrying on a great work in England. The labourers in the Principality knew nothing of that which was done by their brethren on the other side of the Severn, but by some means reports of the former reached the ears of the latter, and in 1738 Howell Harris, to his great delight, received an encouraging letter from George Whitfield, and before the expiration of that year the two met for the first time at Cardiff in Glamorganshire. When the Welsh brethren were making preliminary arrangements for their first “Association,” which in Wales means the same thing as a “General Assem­bly” in Scotland, it was resolved to invite the Rev. G. Whitfield to attend. He acceded to the invita­tion, and presided at the meetings of the Assembly. This first Association of Welsh Calvinistic Methodists was held at Watford, in the county of Glamorgan, in the year 1742. Besides the chairman, there were present Daniel Rowlands, Howell Harris, W. Wil­liams, J. Powell, and other preachers and exhorters. They were met to devise means to bring the numer­ous converts which had been already made under some spiritual supervision, and to concert measures for the further extension of the great work; and it is worthy of remark, that all the leading spirits of this important assembly were young men varying from twenty-one to twenty-nine years of age.

Of the tremendous power of their ministry it is difficult now to form an adequate conception. Howell Harris was a veritable Boanerges. We can judge from his portrait that he was a person of most com­manding presence. The owner of those flashing eyes and firmly set mouth was not a man to be trifled with. It was not seldom that thousands in his presence experienced much the same sensations as the assembly of Israel at the foot of Sinai. Often were giants in iniquity, who had come for the express purpose of disturbing the services, made to quail before his fiery glance, or driven home trembling in every limb after listening for a few minutes to the thunder of his voice. A congregation of 2000 people have been known to stand for upwards of two hours in a drenching rain to hear him preach. It is said that during the first few years of his ministry there was scarcely one instance of his preaching without being the means of bringing a number under con­viction. For some time he confined his ministry to his own neighbourhood. He was afterwards invited to visit other counties, and soon he extended his travels into North Wales, everywhere lifting his voice like a trumpet against the prevailing irreligion and sin, and apprising the crowds that assembled to hear him of their impending doom. Everywhere he found the people like those of old who dwelt in the land of Zabulon and the land of Nephthali, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, sitting in darkness and in the region and shadow of death; but it was a most unusual thing for him to leave a town, village, or hamlet without leaving behind him the nucleus of a religious com­munity. His indomitable spirit triumphed over the rough usage to which he was exposed by his burning zeal for his Master’s glory and the salvation of im­mortal souls. And his sufferings were neither light nor few. On several occasions, he, like another apostle, was pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that he despaired even of life when in the hands of an infuriated mob but after barely escap­ing alive, with torn raiment and a bruised and bleed­ing body, he would again fearlessly face the storm. He went to fairs, wakes, and revels to preach the gospel, thus invading the kingdom of darkness, and attacking sin on its own territories. The gentry regarded him as a disturber of the peace, and threatened him with legal proceedings. The clergy looked upon him as a false prophet, and however badly off they might be for sermons, were never at a loss for a text when he was in the neighbourhood. The mob regarded him as a defenceless individual, whom they could have the inexpressible delight of belabouring with impunity to their hearts’ content—and they often did so without mercy. But it was useless to attempt by any such means to arrest him in his mighty career. Often while he was addressing an assembly in the open air did a magistrate appear on the scene, commanding the crowd to disperse, and enforcing his orders with the reading of the Riot Act. Harris would reply to the magnate by reading the sentence pronounced by the Judge of all upon his own guilty soul. When the rabble hooted him, his voice was heard above their loudest howls, tell­ing them of judgment to come. When dragged about and beaten by a mob maddened by drink, and by devils, he preached between the blows, and urged his savage assailants to hasten their escape from the stormy wind and tempest. Such is a faint picture of this extraordinary man. He believed and there­fore spoke, and with such power and effect that many thousands in the Principality of Wales were turned to righteousness.

Rowlands was by far the greater preacher. Harris never *made* a sermon. He made it a point to abstain from formal premeditation, but spoke as he was moved and enabled at the time. Rowlands, on the contrary, carefully prepared, and his published ser­mons are full of matter, and of matter forcibly and eloquently arranged. He possessed extraordinary powers of mind, and was a speaker of unsurpassed eloquence; but after all, the secret of his tremendous power must be sought for in the depth and inten­sity of his own religious convictions. On Sabbath mornings he generally rose early, and as much as possible avoided conversation, even with his most intimate friends; but on some occasions, when his studies had been unsuccessful, it was difficult to get him out of his bed in time for the service. He was then “unwell, could not preach without any message from God to the people.” Sometimes his servant had to help him in a half-fainting condition from his house to the pulpit, but once there he was at home; and it has been observed that it was on such occasions he usually preached with the greatest power. The people could see that he intensely felt all that he said. Once in his prayer before sermon, while dwelling on the sufferings of the Saviour for us, he seemed to have Him before his eye, and ex­claimed, “Oh, those emptied veins! Oh, that pallid countenance!” and then, overwhelmed by emotion, he fainted away. After a while he recovered, and mighty indeed was the sermon that followed.

Howell Harris’s ministry for many years was wholly itinerant, but Rowlands, having a regular charge, confined his labours chiefly to Llangeitho, though he made occasional evangelistic tours to other districts, and from time to time visited every part of the Principality. But his ministry at Llangeitho alone exerted a mighty influence far and wide, for it soon began to attract hearers from the most distant parts of Wales. It was by no means an uncommon thing to see as many as thirty of the people of Bala, which is above sixty miles distant from Llangeitho, among his congregation on Sabbath morning. Those people started early on Saturday morning, each tak­ing with him the provision necessary for the journey. There were well-known halting-places on the road,—on the banks of streams, from which they could moisten their morsel, and there they sat and re­freshed themselves. They travelled far into the night, got a few hours’ rest in such places as they could find, started again with the early dawn, and were right glad if they could reach Llangeitho in time for the morning service. On their pilgrimage homewards they had something to talk of—the ser­mons to which they had listened on the preceding day; and often was the resting-place by the brook a veritable Bethel, and echoed the sounds of joy and praise.

On one occasion forty-five people from Carnarvon went towards Llangeitho by sea as far as Aberys­twyth, where they left the ship, intending to return in the same manner. But by Monday the wind had shifted, and they were obliged to walk the whole distance, which could not be much short of a hundred miles. On their journey homewards their large number created quite a sensation in the towns and villages through which they passed. At Aberdovey they were recognised as “Methodists,” and hooted well as they passed. At Towyn, the population came out to meet them, and attempted to prevent them from passing through the place. At Barmouth, which they reached against night, in a pelting storm, some of them found accommodation in the town, while others were lodged in farm-houses farther on. One house in the town, at which they had been angrily refused, took fire, and was completely destroyed before the morning. Resuming their journey next day, they had to pass through Harlech, and here the people rose *en masse* to stone them. Some were struck in their heads and badly wounded; and one man was so injured by a blow on his foot that he was lame for weeks. This incident will give an idea of the burning zeal of the early Methodists, and of the inveterate hatred with which they were regarded by the great mass of the people.

A large number of the early converts being men of some talent, felt it to be their duty to preach unto others that gospel which they had found so precious themselves. They were for the most part men of little education, who scarcely knew anything of any book in existence but the Welsh Bible; but they preached wherever they could find an opening, and were known and recognised, not as ministers, but as “exhorters.” Numbers of these, from every part of Wales, congregated at Llangeitho on the monthly Sabbath. The effect of this periodical contact with the ministry of Rowlands was most beneficial to themselves, and by their means his ministry told on the whole of the Principality. They caught the fire themselves, and, like Samson’s foxes, spread it throughout the length and breadth of the land. The others whom we have named were young men of precisely the same spirit with Harris and Rowlands. It is not strange, therefore, that their labours pro­duced great results. In 1742, six years from the beginning of the movement, we find that there were labouring in conjunction with the episcopally or­dained clergy, who by this time had become ten in number, as many as forty exhorters. We have no more statistics of that date, but we find that by 1744, two years later, there had been formed, in South Wales alone, 140 “Societies,” which in process of time came to be designated “Churches.”