

WELSH
CALVINISTIC METHODISM

A Historical Sketch.

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CHAPTER IX.

Contentions—Strong terms—The disruption—“Harris’s people” and “Rowlands’s people”—H. Harris retires to Trevecca—Building of the great House—The “Family”—Daily sermons and services—Preaching on a sick-bed—Harris joins the militia with twenty-four of “the Family”—Made a captain—Preaches in regimentals at Yarmouth and in the west—Return to Trevecca—Monthly sacrament—Attachment to the Church.

WE have now to turn from this scene of earnest labour and triumphant success to another, which we cannot contemplate but with painful feelings. Up to the year 1750 the career of the Calvinistic Methodist body had been one of success. Persecution had in a great measure ceased, and outward opposition had been prevailed over; but about that time there arose a contention within the body itself which threatened it with utter ruin. Harris and Rowlands were regarded as the leading men of the Connexion, but which of the two was the leading *man* was a point which was not determined, and a point about which few, if anybody, cared. Between those two men a serious dispute arose, which had the disastrous result of dividing the Connexion for many years. It was not a dispute on the question, “Who shall he greatest?” as some have groundlessly insinuated, nor was it on a personal matter at all, but on a question of doctrine, and not of doctrine either, properly speaking, but about the words in which a doctrine, which each of them believed with all his heart, ought to be expressed. There is no truth which those brethren held with a firmer and deeper conviction than that of the proper Deity of our blessed Redeemer; but the terms in which that great truth was taught by Rowlands and others were too indefinite and colourless to satisfy Howell Harris; while he, on the other hand, employed terms and expressions which to his brethren sounded harsh, if not irreverent. A few passages from Harris’s Diary will help the reader to form an idea of the nature of the misunderstanding between those apostolic men, which began as early as 1745, and came to an open rupture in the year 1751:—

“In the year 1743, the glory of the Divinity of Jesus Christ was more deeply impressed on my soul than ever. The more I meditate on that text, ‘Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh,’ the more the glory thereof shineth on my soul. I had also much help to see more of the glory and wonders of the Divinity of Christ by reading a tract called ‘A Sling and a Stone.’ I now was brought to see more and more wonders in His infinite incarnation, life, blood, death, and resurrection.”

In 1746 he writes, “As my spirit increased more and more in beholding the glory of that GOD-MAN, whom I now beheld clearly the wonder of all worlds, the terror of devils, the delight of angels, and the real and only

hope of poor sinners, then I began to find great opposition to my preaching his Godhead and death, especially in Wales. This opposition gained ground, and I began to be openly opposed, and also by many who called themselves my spiritual children. But the year following (1747) the enmity grew stronger against the preaching of God's humiliation and death; still I bore all in the hope of seeing this storm ceasing, as I had seen many others. I now also beheld very evidently a tendency in the ministry to please men, and to appear wise and popular in the world, and a great many of my nearest friends both in England and Wales losing their former simplicity, although the number of teachers increased daily. I found also that the spirits of many grew whole, great, and proud, and would not take the word of reproof or exhortation, although they called me their father, and (I) really was so, as I began the work in this last revival, especially in Wales, though I have spent a great part of my time in England, to spread abroad the fame of the dear Saviour. . . . As the Lord himself sent me round the country at my first setting out, and gave me a desire to please Him only, and helped me to speak plain truths, so at this time a necessity was laid upon me to preach that great truth which He revealed to my own soul, viz., the wonderful condescension and mystery of God in our nature reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their sins; that He was God in the womb of Mary, when He assumed our nature, laying in Himself the foundation of our salvation and deliverance, and was the supreme God in His poor birth and swaddling-clothes, and in all His sufferings; that He was the great I AM, the ALPHA and OMEGA, and that there is none other God but He! There are three Persons, but one God, and those who worship another god besides Him do so worship an idol, for in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And when the time came to make an atonement for our sins; when He, the great sacrifice, was raised on the altar of the cross, all nature—earth and hell was in an uproar or confusion. The sun was darkened, the earth trembled, the dead awoke and were raised, that all might inquire what is the cause and meaning of all this—“TIS THE MIGHTY MAKER DIES!”—*Dr. Watts*.

“I went on thus some years through Wales bearing my testimony to those truths in the face of carnal professors, *Arian* and *Socinian*, who all railed against me. Although it proved to be an occasion of much murmuring, contention, and division, yet I am in a lively hope that the Lord will bless His own truths in His proper time; it may be when I am gone.”

The great truth of which Howell Harris speaks as having been revealed to his soul, is now held in the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist body as the main foundation on which the whole fabric of Christianity rests; but there is not one amongst us who would express it in the same words as he did, nor one whose feelings would not be shocked by hearing it so

expressed. It strikes us that he began to preach with a very incomplete knowledge of Christian doctrine. The burden of his ministry for years was, "Escape to the refuge!" The world was perishing in sin. His soul within him longed to save it from its terrific doom, and he devoted himself with fiery zeal and tremendous energy to that great object. Gradually the distinctive doctrines of the gospel began to dawn upon his mind, and foremost of all the great fundamental truth of the Divinity of our Redeemer, and he regarded it as having been revealed to his own soul. Most probably he was under the impression that his brethren were still as ignorant of it as he had been so far himself. This is by no means an uncommon thing. Wales has in our days been visited from time to time by zealous evangelists and revivalists from beyond the Severn; and we have heard some of those good brethren insisting with great vehemence on very rudimentary truths, which, to themselves, were evidently recent discoveries, but which to most of their hearers were old, familiar, and much-valued friends.

The probability is, that Howell Harris, after these great truths "were revealed to his own soul," began to preach them in a manner that implied that they were unknown to his brethren, and it is certain that he expressed them in terms that were, to the wisest and best among them, offensive. Rowlands and others could have taught him the way of God more perfectly had he been willing to be instructed; but it is evident that he suspected them of not being quite sound in the faith. They did not preach that God had died; they were even unwilling that he should say so, and that went far with him to prove that they did not really believe that He who died was a Divine Person.

The contentions of those years have not been preserved on record, but there are allusions to them here and there in Howell Harris's Autobiography. In 1746 he writes: "Yet we proceeded in Wales, notwithstanding the great jars and disputes that arose amongst us." There are allusions to the same painful state of things made by others; but there is no history of those disputes that could throw complete light upon them. During the first years of the movement, the fathers were engaged at their Associations in organizing means and measures for the consolidation of the churches and the spread of the cause, and of those we have ample records; but when misunderstandings arose, the Associations became the scenes of disputes and contentions, and of these we have no minutes at all.

It was at an Association held at Llanidloes, in the year 1751, that the disagreement, which had been raging with more or less violence for several years, culminated in a separation. At that time it could be said of Harris and Rowlands, as it had been said before of two other apostles, "And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other." It does not appear that the great mass of the people knew

much of the subject in dispute between them; but they of necessity took sides, and did so, most probably, according to their personal preferences. Most of the preachers went with Rowlands; but the people clung to one or the other according to the esteem in which each was held by them. The body was divided into two parties, known respectively as “Harris’s People,” and “Rowlands’s People;” and for a number of years a most unhappy spirit prevailed between those two sections. Let us give an instance:— Edward Parry of Brynbugad, Denbighshire, was one of the exhorters who adhered to Howell Harris. At the time of the disruption he gave up preaching himself; but he received “Harris’s People” to preach and hold services at his house. His father lived in the adjoining house; and he, being on the other side, opened his door for sermons and services by “Rowlands’s People;” and so strong was the bad feeling between those two parties, that not any of the one ever attended the services of the other. This is an extreme case; but there are instances of the same kind all over the country. The consequences were most disastrous. Many of the exhorters ceased from their exhortation. Many of the members returned to the Establishment, and others joined Dissenting communities; while the churches everywhere, torn by internal dissensions, were brought to the very brink of ruin. It seemed for some years as if the work which had begun so mightily, and prospered so greatly, was coming to naught.

Howell Harris was an extraordinary man, and he did many extraordinary things. The step which he took at this time astonished a great many of his friends, and is now regarded by some as the grand mistake of his life. He gave up the work of an itinerant evangelist and confined himself almost exclusively to his own home, preaching daily to those who would come together to hear him. Great numbers coming from a distance, and wishing to remain near enough to Trevecca, to enjoy his constant ministrations, led to another strange step. He built a large house, into which was gathered a numerous family from all parts of Wales, and which in some respects was like a monastic institution. We give a few extracts from his “Biography,” which was “collected by his successors,” and published at Trevecca, with his Autobiography as “The second part,” in the year 1791. Those “successors,” like Harris himself, wrote in English, and therefore we are not in any danger of doing them injustice by translation.

“After seventeen years of hard labour in the Lord’s work through Wales and great part of England, Mr. Harris settled at Trevecca, where he spent the greatest part of his time in his own house; though he made several journeys from thence in the following years. A few of those who received a blessing through his ministry in former years began to gather to him there; and as he preached to them two or three times a day, they earnestly desired to stay there with him. The ardent desire of these sincere

people he could not withstand, and thus in April 1752 he laid the foundation of the present building at Trevecca, though he had at that time neither friends nor money. He set about it purely in faith, relying on the Lord and His promise; having an impression in his mind for some years past that he should build a house for God. And he set about it in the full persuasion that the same God, who had sent him at first in an uncommon manner to awaken the country, also laid this undertaking upon him. He himself writes thus concerning it:—‘I was impelled to build by the same Spirit which sent me about to preach, and at a time [when] I was far from being provided with money and friends; for the latter had deserted me, and instead of the former I had demands upon me, and about forty workmen to pay and maintain; and yet I made use of no means to get one shilling, but a humble pleading of, and confiding on, the promise, on which I trust my all, as both for temporal and spiritual things.’

“But soon after he began to build, some people came to offer their work, and to help him, that they might have a more convenient opportunity to be under his care, and profit by his ministry daily. Thus the family began to be gathered together this year. Mr. Harris had at this time a severe fit of sickness; but yet, though very weak, he would preach to the people till he was seemingly ready to die from fatigue, being not able to move himself from the chair he used to sit in and speak from, but we were obliged to carry him in it into his room. At other times, when he recovered a little, he would call the family to his bedroom, and would exhort them from his bed for a long while,—the Divine blessing attending it to their souls. He continued some months in this fit of sickness, expecting to go home to his dear LORD and SAVIOUR; as he himself expresses it: ‘I was all this time in continual hopes of going home to my dear SAVIOUR, and expecting it with solicitation.’ And yet all this while he continued to discourse daily to the people, as one already in the suburbs of heaven.

“In the year 1753, a part of the building being finished, a great number of people flocked to him from all parts, many of them under conviction, merely to hear the Word, and others partly from curiosity, the report of Mr. Harris’s preaching daily at Trevecca having spread throughout all Wales. Satan also began to rage and set the whole country as it were in an uproar, inventing all manner of lies, etc., that originated in their various ideas of the aim of the multitude crowding to that place. However, the people continued to come there from all parts of Wales, some staying for a time, others returning home, partly because their circumstances did not admit of their staying at present,—partly complaining, some of the fare, others that the preaching and discipline were too hard, and that Mr. Harris was an intolerable reprovcr, etc.; yet, for all this, many settled there this year, especially single persons, both men and women, giving themselves

to the Lord and His work, because they believed it was a part of the Lord's work, and suited to the rules laid down in the Bible.

“At the end of this year, and the beginning of the year 1754, there was a settled family at Trevecca of about a hundred persons, besides those coming and going, as we hinted before; and Mr. Harris took upon him the sole care of their spiritual and temporal concerns, having nothing outwardly adequate to provide for such a family, nor any manufactory set up, but only a couple of small rented farms, and a little quantity of wool bought for the women to spin, to get their maintenance by. It is a difficult thing to imagine what straits Mr. Harris went through at this time concerning the outward care of the people only, besides the care of their souls, preaching publicly and exhorting privately daily, watching many nights to pray and wrestle with the Lord, and, as soon as the family arose in the morning, preaching again, exhorting them for hours together without having had any rest in bed, but yet with fresh power and spirit from the Lord. Of this we are living eye-witnesses.

“As to outward matters the Lord has been with him in a surprising manner. Frequently, when a call for payment came to him, he had no prospect in the world how to discharge the debt but applying to the Lord in prayer and pleading His promise, and that he did not bear these burdens for himself, but for Him, and therefore relying upon Him that he would certainly help and carry him through. And very often the Lord answered him in an unexpected manner, by sending some person or other with as much money as he wanted, either as an acknowledgment for the benefit received from his work, or as a loan. Thus the Lord never forsook him, as he writes:—‘Being often in straits concerning temporal things, wanting twenty, or fifty, or even a hundred pounds, and having nowhere to turn to for assistance but to the promise, the Lord not relieving till the last pinch, and then appearing from a quarter that none could ever imagine, some bringing, and some sending me, £10, or £20, and even £100, though living at the distance of seventy or eighty miles, being compelled so to do only by the Word sounding in their conscience night and day, and no man in the world knowing or imagining anything of it. Thus the Lord appeared for me many times. This seems strange to many, and well it may: yet it is real truth.’

“In the year 1755 several families came to Trevecca, especially from North Wales, some to live in the family, and others to farms in the neighbourhood, that they might have a more convenient opportunity of attending Mr. Harris's preaching. Many of them had substance; others were poor, and having many children, were obliged to be assisted. Mr. Harris wrote thus about that time:—‘No sooner was a great part of the building finished, but there appeared presently here and there a family, which I

neither thought of nor sent for, nor could expect. Therefore it appears evident to me that not man, but the Lord, hath done great things for us. Many people continued to come here, notwithstanding crosses and trials, to a place represented by all in the blackest manner, being drawn only by love to the truth, and the force of the Lord's voice they found to their hearts through my ministry, freely leaving their country and all that was dear to them, working and living hard, and leaving it wholly to me to order them, both in their work and fare. There are now above one hundred persons, old and young, that board, work, and sleep in the house, amongst which are ten families; and ten families live out in farms in the neighbourhood.'

"At the end of this year there were about 120 persons in the family, besides those families in the neighbourhood that belonged to it. Mr. Harris preached publicly two or three times daily to the family, besides keeping private meetings with one part or other of them an hour every day of the week. They gave themselves thus to the Lord, and to His servants by the will of God, as the Holy Ghost directs us to do (2 Cor. viii. 5). From the beginning of this work the Lord had moved and fitted two or three 'Exhorters' as assistants to Mr. Harris, to exhort both at home and abroad; and by this time the Lord had raised others as helpers, both in the ministry and government of the family."

Some of the "Exhorters," above alluded to, were not very successful in their labours "abroad." They went out to preach at fairs and merry-makings, as their leader had once done, but soon found, to their dismay, that not one among them was a Howell Harris.

About the end of 1759 Howell Harris did another strange thing. We shall let his "successors" and himself tell the story in their own words:—"Towards the end of this year, when the nation was alarmed with an invasion intended from France, Mr. Harris showed much concern about the welfare of the kingdom in general, and our rights and privileges, both public and private. About that time some of the gentlemen of the county offered him a commission in the Breconshire militia, and he then answered that he would not agree with the offer but upon condition that they would give him liberty to preach the gospel wherever he should go; and told them further, that his chief motive and concern in that affair was the danger he saw to the liberty of the gospel, and of our privileges being taken from us; and having been for many years in danger of his life for preaching the Word of God in many places, he was now willing to lay down his life, if occasion required, to defend it; but that if he should serve as a soldier for King George, he must have liberty to preach the gospel of King Jesus. The officers assenting to these motives, and insisting upon his accepting the office, he replied again that he must pray to the Lord for knowledge of His mind and will, and have the consent of his large family,

to which also they made no objection.

“Thus, after waiting on the Lord in prayer, he was fully persuaded in his mind, that the same Spirit of God who sent him at first to preach the Word in an uncommon manner, would send him now in the like extraordinary way to defend it, and to offer his life for the truth he preached, and the liberty we enjoy in this kingdom. He laid the matter thus before the family, imploring the assistance of their prayers how to act in this critical affair, and also asked whether any of them had an inclination to go for the Lord’s sake with him, to offer their lives in defence of the gospel. The matter was then further considered, and laid before the Lord in prayer by the whole family, and all consented that Mr. Harris should go, believing it to be the will of God. Many also of the men were willing to go with him and to lay down their lives for the precious Word of God, if occasion required, and the rest of the family willingly resigned him and the men who intended to accompany him.

“Mr. Harris, having settled all at Trevecca, and delivered the affairs of the family into the hands of trustees, went intending to serve the Lord and his king even unto death, together with twenty-four men of the family, twelve of them as volunteers at Mr. Harris’s own cost,—arms, clothing, and maintenance for three years. They embodied with the Breconshire Militia in the beginning of the year 1760. Mr. Harris received an ensign’s commission at his entrance into the battalion, but afterwards was made a captain. Before we proceed we must insert a few lines, that he himself wrote at this time on the value of the Word of God, the Bible:—

“I am resolutely and coolly determined to go freely and conscientiously, and die in the field of battle in defence of the precious Word of God, the Bible, against Popery. Who can sufficiently set forth the value of a Book wherein God speaks, and that to all ranks, degrees, ages, and languages of men? Who can set it forth in its own real and majestic glory? O the infinite and unfathomable depth of glory, and Divine wisdom and love that are in it! The glory of the sun is nothing in comparison to the glory of this valuable treasure, which is indeed the image of God Himself drawn by Himself. A Book which He has made the standard, touchstone, and rule to try even His own work by; whereby all spirits, doctrine, ministry, and church discipline, all faith, love, truth, and obedience are proved! A Book that God has referred all men to, from the monarch to the peasant: the universal Teacher of all men! Here is the seed whence the Church and her faith are begotten, and herein is she purified and nursed. Here is the believer’s armoury. Herein is the true ineffable light of the world. Herein the unerring Father and Teacher of all speaks, both to young and old, high and low, rich and poor. Here man’s pride is humbled, his wounds searched, the SAVIOUR revealed, and declared to be made ours. .

. . O the ineffable Treasure! No wonder so many thousands triumphed in dying for the precious Bible! Now I go freely, without compulsion, to show the regard I have for the privileges we enjoy under our best of kings,—our ineffable privileges, especially the precious gospel of our Saviour, contained in the whole Book of God, which now is openly read throughout the kingdom; every person being suffered to exhort his neighbour without molestation. Now I commit my family to the Lord, and am going with a part of it, who freely offered their lives on this occasion, to defend our nation and privileges, and to show publicly that we are dead to all things below, or at least, that we can part with all for our dear Lord and Saviour, even with life itself, and that we seek a city above, Heb. xiii. 14.’

“The first route which Mr. Harris and the militia had, was in the spring of the year 1760, to Yarmouth, a seaport town in Norfolk. It pleased the Lord, as soon as they arrived at Yarmouth, to open a door for him to preach there and at other places, in his regimentals, every evening to many hearers, who seemingly attended to the Word, and a blessing rested upon some souls there.

“The following winter they returned to Brecon by another road, which gave him an opportunity to preach in other towns, and as they made Brecon their head-quarters for that winter, he had an opportunity to be a part of his time, now and then, at Trevecca with his family. The following summer they took another route, to the west of England, so that he had a new field for preaching the gospel. Then they settled for a while at Bideford and Torrington, where he met with a kind reception, and many hearers. In the summer of 1762 he went to several other populous towns in the west, as Barnstaple, Plymouth, etc., where he continued to preach the gospel at every opportunity.

“After being thus three years in the militia, the war over, and a treaty of peace concluded, he and his little company returned to Trevecca, after showing his faith and love to the Lord Jesus, and also his love and loyalty to his king and country. He spent the remainder of his life at Trevecca with his large family, except only some few rounds he took, now and then, to preach both in England and Wales.

“In the year 1764 he agreed with the vicar to have a monthly Sacrament at our parish church, which had only been administered four times a year before. On Sunday February the 6th 1764, we received the first monthly sacrament, and he wrote thus:

““This was a great day indeed,—the first day we had the Communion according to our wish and request; and this privilege has been given us in answer to our prayer, and is a further open proof of our Saviour’s love to us. We were happy in the morning in exhorting, and went happily together

to the public service, and, I trust, in one spirit to the Lord's table.'

"The 19th of this month our people sat for the first time in the gallery of the parish church, to sing, and ever since continue to do so every Sunday. . . . And as the late revival in religion began in the Established Church, we think it not necessary or prudent to separate ourselves from it; but our duty to abide in it, and to go to our parish church every Sunday, to join in the prayers, to hear the reading of God's Word, and to use the ordinances. We find that our Saviour meets us there by making them a blessing to our souls."