

Richard Thomas of Harley Wood.

TO most people the title of this article will be little more than a name. But Richard Thomas was an interesting Baptist of the eighteenth century, being particularly known in parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire.

Of his history we have only a few isolated facts. The year 1737 finds him, "of Broadhead in Erringden," being made trustee of a newly-erected meeting at Robertshaw, generally known as the Slack Meeting-house. A letter in 1742 was addressed to him at "under-Bank-in-Harlewood." A year later he was a signatory to the dismissal from Slack and Rodhill End, Todmorden, of a number of members living at "Sallonden Nook," for the formation of a separate church there. The same day he witnessed the signing of their Church covenant, and in the following year acted in a similar capacity for the re-organisation of the Barnoldswick Church under Alverey Jackson. In 1747, at this time living in Moorgate Shaw, he was ordained pastor of the original church, at the Slack Meeting-house. The next known fact of his history is in 1763, when, still at Slack, he dismissed several members to form the Wainsgate Church. Upon his death, in 1772, the people at Slack requested Fawcett, of Wainsgate, to become his successor: the meeting-house was presently disused, and the church dissolved about 1783, melting into Hebden Bridge and Todmorden.

Association life was at a low ebb for most of Richard Thomas's life. The many converts of Mitchell and Crosley on the Pennines, organized a Baptist Association at Barnoldswick, on 21-23 September, 1695, the minutes being fully printed in "Baptists of North-West England." In 1719, when the fear of suppression had passed, the Association was reorganized at Rawdon; the minutes were signed by Thomas Greenwood, pastor at Heptonstall (and Stone Slack) where a church had been organized two years earlier. Both meetings emphatically repudiated Crosley, but as he hailed from this township, Greenwood admitted him as a private member. Four years later, the church entertained the Association. Letters of the Association in 1728 and 1738 are extant, then there is a gap in records till 1757. In 1766 it met at Halifax, and in 1773, the year after his death, at Wainsgate, when Medley of Liverpool and Parker of Barnoldswick were preachers.

From a few extant letters written to him, it is apparent that his friends regarded Thomas as a man of peculiarities, but withal, interesting and loveable.

In his "under-Bank-in-Harlewood" days it is plain that discretion was not his strong point. David Crosley, who had been nurtured there and later became a famous Baptist evangelist, writes, in 1742, from Bacup, where he spent his closing days, in an appealing letter to the old home church: "My dear friend Richard Thomas, I entreat to set aside his too great forwardness in resenting matters. There is a sinful taking as well as giving of offence. I would not have him hot or peevish. But true charity-like to bear all things, endure all things, that the Church's peace be not disturbed, nor the success of religion hindered." It is fair here to point out that Thomas's attitude was not unprovoked, for Crosley explicitly appeals to some offenders: "I particularly entreat my friend John Greenwood and his family to treat Richard Thomas with more tenderness and freedom . . . and to study himself a pattern of humility and usefulness."

But that Thomas himself was of a strange temperament is made clear by two very intimate letters written to him by James Winterbottom, the first Baptist minister known to have legally qualified in Lancashire. Writing from Manchester in 1749 and 1750, Winterbottom explicitly purposes to give his friend advice, for he even tabulates it numerically. But direct though the counsel is, his spirit is kind. "The advice is well-intended; I hope it will be well taken."

Some of the advice given may well have arisen from Winterbottom's own serious conception of the ministry, and thereby bear no reference to idiosyncrasies in the character of Thomas. For instance, he would wish for him always that both his person and his doctrine "be strictly conformable to the pure, sure Word of God," and also that he should not fail to "shew the necessity and nature of repentance towards God as antecedent to Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." Or again, a sane warning against impostors—"Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing (the country swarms with 'em) who cover all their villany with a profession of Christ."

All the foregoing counsel might have been given to any minister. But is there not a hint as to Thomas's loquacity in this—"Decline controversy both in public and in private. I have known much evil done by it, but never any good."? And there immediately follows what is, in part, a reiteration of this: "Beware of Great Talkers in Religion. Empty vessels make the greatest noise. They often do much mischief in Society"; and a little later, advice somewhat akin,— "Be much in converse with God, but as little with the creature as possible." There can be no

doubt whatever that Winterbottom thought Richard Thomas a "Great Talker" in the pulpit. "If you desire that your work in the ministry may be acceptable and profitable, do not take up too much time either in preaching or prayer. Judicious hearers are cloyed with tedious discourses, and say, 'The man loves to hear himself talk.'" Winterbottom becomes unusually personal when he tells him. "Drop the habit of smacking your lips at the end of a sentence." But in the same paragraph he returns to this same pronounced weakness of Thomas—"Neither preach nor pray half as long as usual; neither must you preach in prayer."

And yet Thomas could not have been unbearably burdensome in the pulpit, for he was often invited to preach elsewhere, but in his loyalty to Slack, always refused. There is a hint that perhaps Winterbottom would have been happy to have Thomas occasionally to preach for him, but was nervous that he might overleap discretion. "If you are called to preach at Manchester at any time," he advises him, "decline preaching or expounding out of the Book of Canticles, because most preachers do not keep within the bounds of modesty in treating of such subjects as the Book of Canticles abounds with."

From all this we may create a mental picture of this eighteenth century Baptist minister. It is impossible to fill in the details, but the outline is fairly clear. Richard Thomas was an enthusiast. As a preacher he waxed eloquent and long. As a pastor there is little doubt he had a strong concern for his church. But he was lacking in imagination. Because he did not, like Ezekiel, "sit where they sat," he either wearied or offended them.

But there is perhaps at least some ground for sympathy with Thomas. Some of his correspondents wrote rather morbidly, which may well have provoked his high-spiritedness to impatience. Alverey Jackson informs him rather mournfully of the death of several friends, and winds up the list by adding—"And whose lot it may be next we do not know. I find *myself* not very well this day,—and goes on to say that the issue lies in other hands.

There is one supremely sound piece of advice that Winterbottom gives him. "Read searching authors, and study to be a 'search' preacher." It is plain that those words were well and truly aimed. But there is evidence too, that not alone in the duties of pulpit and study had Richard Thomas much to learn from this counsel, but also in his wider reading of men.

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