

The Preaching Baronet.

IN the early part of the year 1797 the editors of the *Evangelical Magazine* expressed their "wish to collect, arrange and publish Hints and Plans on the Means of doing good." Later, they suggested four distinct subjects on which they would welcome information, viz. "1. Sunday Schools; 2. Societies for Spreading the Gospel; 3. Societies for the relief and instruction of the sick; 4. Societies for printing and distributing Religious Tracts." In 1798 they acknowledged "with gratitude the reception of many valuable papers, chiefly on the first of these subjects." These four topics suggest the chief concerns of many Christian people of that day. We remember, of course, that many societies devoted to these different objects came into existence at that time. In 1785 a society had been formed in London for the support and encouragement of Sunday Schools in the different counties of England, and in 1793 they were able to report that they had helped 892 schools, in which 56,820 children were instructed, and that they had given away 76,705 spelling books, 21,010 Testaments, and 4,756 Bibles. Beginning with the B.M.S. in 1792, the Missionary Societies were in process of formation; and the Religious Tract Society came into being in 1799. Thinking of these great concerns, and of the widespread interest which they aroused, of the preaching career of John Wesley, then at its close, of Christian attention, and action directed, by Christian leaders to questions such as slavery, prison conditions, etc., one gets the impression of a strong, virile Christian community, and of a mighty urge to evangelise both new lands and new spheres of life.

Into such an atmosphere came a young man from America. He bore the name of a family which had been settled in Cheshire before the Conquest. One of his ancestors had been Lord Mayor of London during the momentous year in which Mary died and Elizabeth became queen. His grandfather had had to leave the country, but had been given an honourable position in South Carolina. His father possessed considerable estates there, but, espousing the King's cause at the outbreak of the War of Independence, he lost everything. Consequently, the son, young Sir Egerton Leigh, returned to England to seek possession of the family estates in this country. Not much remained, however, and he settled at Little Harborough Hall, in Warwickshire. By some means not recorded this young baronet was brought into contact with those evangelical circles. Some genuine experience of conversion is hinted at in the contemporary description of him

as "a signal monument of sovereign grace." The reality of his spiritual life is further evidenced in the work of itinerant preaching which he commenced, and which proved for a time most successful. Large crowds gathered to hear him, conversions followed, and also opposition. At the village of Wolston his opponents pulled down during the night that part of the new chapel which had been erected during the day. Missiles were thrown at him as he journeyed between the villages, and on one occasion a number of men waited at a narrow lane through which he was accustomed to pass in order to kill him; but his horse refused that night to enter the lane, so he returned home by another route unharmed. In recording the opening at Lawford of a chapel which Sir Egerton Leigh erected, the *Evangelical Magazine* for 1797 states: "The honourable baronet . . . feeling the power of the Gospel and the pleasures of religion, retired into the country and began to preach to the poor ignorant villagers in the several parishes round his seat. In this laudable work he was greatly opposed; but amidst violent persecution and sometimes at the hazard of his life he zealously persevered with diligence and success. The good effects of his itinerant labours are evidenced in the conversion of many and the reformation of more. The inhabitants of Lawford, among other games, took great delight in the barbarous custom of throwing at cocks on Shrove Tuesday; but after the Gospel found a residence among them, the religious people on one of the returns of this day resolved to employ the whole of the afternoon in prayer at several parts of the village. Though twenty-five cocks were brought from other places for the purposes of the sport, the innocent animals were carried back in whole skins, as their owners could not find a solitary individual so inhuman as to throw at the poor unoffending creatures." Twenty-seven ministers assembled for the opening of this chapel; evidently a gala day.

This work of preaching brought Sir Egerton Leigh into prominence among Independent circles. On May 9th, 1797, he was ordained by Rowland Hill to "an itinerant ministry." When the Honourable Baronet, among other questions, was asked why he chose ordination in that way in preference to a particular charge, he answered, "That as God called me to itinerant labours, I think this kind of designation more congenial to the nature of my work than the other."

This interest in the work of evangelism led to a close association with the work of missionary societies, then in its infancy. He was one of the first directors of what was known as The Missionary Society, took the Chair at some of the business meetings, and also shared occasionally in the public gatherings of the Annual Assembly in London.

The same spirit is shown in his connection with an interesting movement which originated in Bedford. On October 31st, 1797, a meeting was held at Bedford for the purpose of forming an extensive union of serious Christians. A month later, a second meeting was held at Little Harborough, Sir Egerton Leigh's country seat. Four resolutions were unanimously approved, of which the following three may be of interest :

1. That the universal union of serious Christians of all denominations is highly desirable, and ought to be attempted.
2. That this meeting, earnestly wishing to promote such an union, do approve of the general plan proposed by our brethren at Bedford.
3. That the ministers present engage to make their respective congregations acquainted with the proposed union, and endeavour to excite their attention to it.

On April 24th following this, "the Second Assembly of the Union of Christians at Bedford" was held. Among those who took part were John Sutcliffe of Olney and Andrew Fuller of Kettering. It was reported that forty-five ministers of various denominations, Baptists, Independents, Church of England and Methodists had joined; that 250 private Christians had been active in conducting services for prayer, teaching children, etc.; that 200 towns and villages had been "supplied with opportunities of evangelical instruction and devotion." The deep sense of fellowship which this Union provoked is worth recording in the following quotation from the *Evangelical Magazine* of 1798. "The solemn engagements of the day sufficiently evinced that the hopes entertained at the formation of this union among Christians of all denominations in the neighbourhood were grounded upon the foundation which God had laid in Zion, and that they had been prepared by His signal blessing. At a subsequent conference many of the servants of Christ avowed, with genuine humility and love, their shame and regret for the prejudices which had formerly separated them from their brethren, expressing their gratitude to the Lord for the spiritual blessings they had experienced in their mutual fellowship and united exertions."

Enough has been written to indicate the wide interests of Sir Egerton Leigh. About this time he appears to have experienced some change in his convictions, dissociating himself from the Independents, and adopting Baptist views. The erection of several Baptist chapels resulted from his labours, including one at Rugby, a town—or village—in which, apparently, he had experienced difficulty in finding an opportunity. This little chapel

was considerably enlarged in 1803, and a dusty grey stone still exists on which we may see, rather roughly carved, the words: "Foundation Stone laid by Lady Leigh, 1803." To this church at Rugby Sir Egerton Leigh devoted an increasing amount of attention. His spiritual outlook at this time may be judged by a paragraph which appears on the first page of the old Minute Book. "Sir Egerton also proposes that there be no articles to the Church, it being formed upon the plan of Particular Redemption, to be wholly guided by the Doctrines and Discipline set forth in the Holy Scriptures." Then follows the quotation of Romans viii. 28-31; Ephesians i. 3-11; Matthew xxviii. 10, 19, 20. But the opening paragraph of the church Minute Book reveals that all was not smooth progress, even with a popular preacher. "The Baptized Church of Christ formed at Little Harborough was dissolved at Rugby Chapel 27th March, 1808, by Sir Egerton Leigh, as the only deacon had thrown up his office, and there being no officers, nor that kind of communion between the minister and members by which it was likely without contention to appoint any. No member offered any objection to the church being dissolved, and the Baptized Church of Christ now at Rugby was then formed by most of the old members. . . ." The church at Rugby made good progress after this, having Sir Egerton Leigh as pastor till 1811. During the later years of his ministry he felt some concern for the future of the church, and this showed itself in two ways. In 1809 he published a little book entitled, *The Answer of God addressed to the Baptized Church of Christ at Rugby*. The book consists of about 400 questions, with the answers given in words of Scripture. Here are some examples:

Q. In what state are the elect before they are called?

A. Behold I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Q. Have they good hearts?

A. Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Q. What is the real state of the human heart universally?

A. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

Q. Can any one with a heart in that state go to heaven?

A. Except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.

Q. Who is the builder of the Church?

A. Jesus answered, I will build My Church.

- Q. Is the Church ever called a city?
 A. He (Abraham) looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.
- Q. Is the Church capable of being inhabited, and by whom?
 A. In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.
- Q. Has the Church a foundation?
 A. Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.
- Q. Of what materials is the Church built?
 A. Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house.
- Q. Is the Church of God, then, people?
 A. Feed the Church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood.

In his preface he stated the purpose of this catechism. "In all your meetings with each other, especially on a Lord's Day, instead of idle conversation have your book with you, and exercise each other's memory by asking the questions. Teach them to your children and neighbours, use them at your family devotions, and use them in secret. . . ." "If you make a good use of this little book I shall, as the Lord may enable me, proceed in my endeavours to serve God and you in this way." However, no second part was ever issued. His concern for the church was also shown in the maintenance of a young man of his congregation, one Edward Fall, at "Dr. Ryland's Academy in Bristol." Edward Fall succeeded Sir Egerton Leigh as pastor, and he it is who records in the church Minute Book that Sir Egerton Leigh "died at Bath, happy in Christ, on the 26th April, 1818."

This account gives some indication of one of those small movements of spiritual awakening of which many hundreds must have occurred in the history of the Church; not great outpourings of the Spirit, but seasons of refreshing for numbers of individuals. Behind this movement we see an earnest, energetic and enlightened figure, who endeavoured to direct the movement from vague experience to the useful channels of an ordered life in Christian communities, and who possessed a genuine love for the churches he founded, so that he endeavoured to instruct them himself, and to provide for their ministry after his retirement.

L. G. CHAMPION.