

Robert Hall of Arnesby: 1728-1791.

“THE year 1779, on account of the following circumstance, was, I consider,” wrote Joseph Ivimey in his well-known *History of the English Baptists*, “the commencement of a new era in the history of our denomination.” The circumstance to which he referred was a meeting of the Northamptonshire Association held at College Lane, Northampton, when the Rev. Robert Hall, of Arnesby, preached a sermon on Isaiah lvii. 14, “Cast ye up, cast ye up, prepare the way, take up the stumbling block out of the way of my people.” In response to numerous and pressing demands Hall published the sermon in the form of a small book entitled, *Help to Zion's Travellers*. He described it as an attempt to remove various stumbling-blocks relating to both doctrine and practical religion. With that sermon a new age began in the splendid story of Baptist life and witness.

For fifty years the Baptist churches in this country had, in the face of great opportunities, suffered from spiritual paralysis. It was an era of torpor and stagnation. Irrelevant controversies, heresy-hunting, preoccupation with matters of organisation and doctrinal speculation had absorbed the attention of the churches. It was a most unimpressive and uninspiring period. One of those who helped to bring this melancholy era to an end and to inspire vitality and awakening, was Robert Hall, Baptist minister at Arnesby, a village near Leicester.

Robert Hall was born on April 26th, 1728, at a village near Newcastle-on-Tyne. In his earlier youth he was sorely troubled by feelings of sinfulness and guilt, making himself thoroughly miserable by introspection and by allowing his mind to dwell unhealthily upon the prospect of damnation. Upon his conversion at the age of twenty-six he experienced great spiritual and mental relief by the knowledge of God's love and mercy, and a load of anxiety fell away. Convinced against his own inclinations of the truth of Baptist principles by a reading of Wilson's Scripture Manual, he presented himself for baptism in January, 1752, at Hamsterley, after which he became a member of the church at Hexham, and, five months later, he was called to the ministry.

The little Baptist church at Arnesby was already nearly a hundred years old when, in 1753, its people invited Robert Hall to the pastorate. While they awaited his arrival from Northumberland, the Arnesby Baptists felt certain they had made a wise choice in calling Robert Hall. In addition to their own

knowledge of him they had heard that his ancestors were farmers, a fact which promised stability of character and firmness of mind. From the first days of his ministry among them they saw that their hopes were fulfilled. The zealous pastor showed a balanced judgment, a sound grasp of fundamentals, and displayed a pleasing eloquence in the pulpit. For nearly forty years he laboured among them, their leader, counsellor and friend, revealing all those qualities which combine to make a sound minister of the Word of God. For several years the poverty of his people prevented them from raising any more than a mere pittance of £15 a year for his support, and he was obliged to augment his stipend by cultivating a small farm. "I found my heart so united to the people that I never durst leave them, though I often thought I must. . . . It appeared pretty clear to myself and my wife that we were where God would have us be," he said on one occasion. Hall quickly established himself as one of the strongest pillars of the Association, and from time to time he was invited to write the circular letter which that body sent out to its churches, the most notable of these letters being his work on the Trinity, which ran into several editions.

But Robert Hall was to have a far wider influence than that of a mere local celebrity. Generally speaking, the denominational theology of the time was cast within the rigid moulds of an iron Calvinism. Any prospect of advance was held up by the barrier of an inflexible theology. Predestination to the point of fatalism meant eternal life for a selected few, the rest being condemned to damnation. With such a doctrine there was no motive for the elect minority to go forth and evangelise the remainder. To God was left the gathering in of those upon whom the eye of His favour fell. Among the Baptists two men set themselves to the task of liberation, and under their influence the fetters began to fall. They were Andrew Fuller and Robert Hall. The way was opened by Hall when he preached the sermon which Ivimey rightly judged marked the beginning of the new era. Hall, with his *Help to Zion's Travellers*, and then Fuller, with his *Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation*, mellowed and broadened Baptist theology and proved that the old doctrinal power of Calvinism could be united with practical evangelism to the revival of fervour, the salvation of souls and the glory of God. Without Robert Hall, and the lead he gave, the course of Baptist history would have been far different, and the little gathering in a Kettering parlour on October 2nd, 1792, could never have taken place.

In Robert Hall's congregation at Arnesby there could occasionally be seen a young man who frequently walked more than

twenty miles to hear Hall preach. His name was William Carey. Robert Hall was Carey's hero, and it was from him that the father of modern missions learned to preach. Carey once wrote: "It was one of my chief privileges to be favoured with the kind advice, and kinder criticism, of men of the greatest eminence, and their friendship was a jewel I could not too highly prize." No doubt while the cobbler-preacher was listening to his hero preaching, his mind went back to the time when, at twenty years of age, he was trying to formulate his spiritual experience into a creed which would satisfy both the intellect and the soul, and his friend, the Rev. Thomas Skinner, put a little book into his hands of which Carey later declared: "I do not remember ever to have read any book with such raptures." The volume which helped him so tremendously and cleared his doubts, while confirming his self-wrought views, was Hall's *Help to Zion's Travellers*. The same copy, well-thumbed and worm-eaten, with careful notes in his own neat handwriting on the margin of every page, was found amongst his possessions in India after his death.

How much the Baptists, and indeed all Christendom, owes to the saintly village pastor, Robert Hall, cannot adequately be assessed, and it is to be hoped that when the B.M.S. celebrations are held next year due honour and praise will be accorded to his name. In addition to his influence over Carey, and upon the doctrinal thought of his day, Robert Hall's part in shaping the mind and character of his great son, himself a powerful advocate of the B.M.S., cannot be overlooked. When Hall had been at Arnesby eleven years his fourteenth child was born and given his father's name. The younger Robert Hall was to become the Chrysostom of the British pulpit, the greatest Free Churchman of the age, and, as the *New York Observer* declared, "the boast of Christianity and the pride of learning." The son outshone the father in intellectual genius, pulpit power and universal fame, but the formation of his strong and lovely character, his theological convictions, and his decision to consecrate his unique gifts to the service of God, can be traced to the unconscious example, as well as the direct teaching, of the worthy minister of Arnesby. It may be said without exaggeration that the greater Robert Hall would not have been the giant he was had it not been for his venerable father. His father's wise teaching in theological matters, upon which the younger Hall once said he regarded him as "not less than an oracle," the sage advice he gave in those long, intimate talks they had together by the kitchen fire in the old home, the guidance in preaching, the ever-present example of Christian beauty of character at its best, all contributed to make Robert Hall the younger, the man, the thinker, the great preacher that he became. And it was certainly fitting

that when Carey's pulpit at Leicester fell vacant Robert Hall junior should be invited to the pastorate, to add yet more fame to the church at Harvey Lane. The younger Hall's influence upon the life of the Free Churches and upon the entire nation, from the most eminent to the lowest ranks of the humble, was truly incalculable. The two greatest figures of the religious life of that day may well be claimed to have been William Carey and the younger Robert Hall. All that they were in character and in power, all that they achieved for the Kingdom of God, may be traced to a humble, saintly village pastor in the obscurity of the Leicestershire countryside.

On Sunday, March 13th, 1791, after he had preached to his little congregation, Robert Hall was taken ill. To a friend who had called to see him he said, "Fear nothing: do not be afraid of trouble, trials, nor even death: if the Lord is with you, you will do." They were almost his last words, for in the evening he collapsed at the feet of his wife and quietly passed away. On the following Thursday the little chapel proved too small to hold the crowd which had gathered to pay tribute to his memory, and Dr. Ryland was obliged to preach the funeral sermon in the open air, taking as his text the words, "It is finished." In the course of a lengthy delineation of Robert Hall's character, his great friend, Fuller, declared: "He appeared to the greatest advantage upon subjects where the faculties of most men fail them, for the natural element of his mind was greatness." He concluded his testimony to the all-round nobility of his friend by saying, "Upon the whole, if a strong and penetrating genius, simplicity of manners, integrity of heart, fidelity in friendship, and all these virtues consecrated by a piety the most ardent and sincere on the high altar of devotion, have any claim to respect, the memory of the deceased will long be cherished with tears of admiration and regret by those who knew him." Twenty-three years later the memory of his father's spiritual greatness was still fresh within the mind of the son, for he stated, "I shall ever esteem it one of the greatest favours an indulgent Providence has bestowed upon me, to have possessed such a father, whom, in all the essential features of character, it will be my humble ambition to imitate, though conscious it must ever be—'*Haud passibus aequis.*'" To-day, a hundred and fifty years later, we thank God, as did those who mourned his death the more deeply because of their personal knowledge of his qualities, for the witness, the influence and the memory of Robert Hall the elder, the village pastor who travelled triumphantly to Zion and led many along the same joyful pilgrimage.

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