

Welsh Baptist Polity.

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NOTWITHSTANDING time and distance, the Baptists of Wales would trace their origin to Palestine and to the days of our Lord and His Apostles. Spiritual kinship, a sense of reality and oneness and a constant mental practice of associating their religious life with the New Testament far outweigh any thoughts of chronology or geography. To Baptists whatever may be the value of tradition and history, the simple and direct teaching and the example of the Master are paramount.

Church life during the twelve centuries from 300 A.D. to 1,500 A.D., cannot claim the sympathetic interest of Baptists. The organized Christianity of the New Testament ceased to be with the pagan catastrophe engineered by the Emperor Constantine. The Spirit of Jesus Christ, nevertheless, continued to bear witness to the message of Calvary. The so-called Church denied Him, still a holy remnant of the faithful remained. During the darkness and sorrow of the Dark Ages brilliant flashes of light pierced the gloom at intervals, but were soon quenched in blood. For the moment, these would quicken hope and awaken our sympathy, inasmuch as the martyr victims of those days stood, as a rule, for the truths and principles for which Baptists stand today. The long night had to give place to another day. In the West the power of the Church of Rome was broken by the Protestant Reformation. In the East, the Greek, or Eastern Church, held its unchecked sway into this century, then happily to be itself broken by the Russian revolution.

The clash of motives, powers and interests in the Reformation produced quite a medley of creeds and opinions. Personalities, schools of religious thought and political parties took part in the fray. Sophisticated theologians, political reformers, uneducated peasants and artisans and men simply enamoured of the truth as it is in Jesus were busy. All Europe, in a religious sense, was practically in the melting pot. The Anabaptists, having found an open Bible, bestirred themselves to preach the Christian doctrine of opposition to war, rejecting priestcraft, objecting to the christening of infants, the union of Church and State and all restrictions and interference with the rights of conscience. Luther opposed papal authority, preached justification by faith, condemned the sale of indulgencies and translated the Bible into his own native tongue, but he and Calvin still taught infant

baptism, the use of the sword and the union of Church and State. In different quarters baptism was given various forms. Some immersed, some sprinkled, while others practiced affusion. Later all Baptists adopted immersion. After Robert Browne's re-discovery of the New Testament ideal of the visible independent Church, Church independency gained favour with Baptists, and even Independents and Presbyterians became separate bodies. Baptists, and Quakers also, after much contention and argument, built for themselves separate folds. For years both had been cradled on the same hearth. Upon separation they divided the Anabaptist legacy between them. The Quakers became staunch Pacifists, held to belief in the "inner light," eschewed the official priesthood, but discontinued the celebration of the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptists stood by Believers' Baptism and Baptism by Immersion, the Authority of Scripture, absolute freedom in religious matters, Church independence and the separation of Church and State. At no time could differences be distinguished and set apart by geometrical lines or labelled and kept apart like drugs on an apothecary's shelves. Baptists have never known authoritative denominational Confessions of Faith. England and Wales have had their Particular and General Baptists, Free and Close Communion Churches, Union or Strict membership Churches. Opinions may have differed on minor matters within the same local brotherhood. Still a Baptist Church is a fairly well known and understood entity

WALES BEFORE THE REFORMATION.

The Dark Ages told heavily upon the Principality, and left it poor, ignorant and superstitious. The dire legacy of a popish and corrupt Church had brought it low indeed. The great message of John Penry, one of the saintliest of souls, who was hanged in 1593, took long to tell among his native hills. Taking his description, together with those of Vicar Pritchard and Thomas Charles of Bala, Wales must have been in a sad plight in the sixteenth century. Hardly any of the lower classes could read. Gentle and simple folk, clergy and lay alike, practiced gluttony, drunkenness and licentiousness. In a spiritual sense the Church was non-existent. The Redeemer's name was never heard from a pulpit. Parishes were often without incumbents. Absentee bishops appropriated the tithes, but were allowing "known adulterers, thieves and roisterers, and most abominable swearers" to remain in the ministry.

JOHN MYLES AND ILSTON CHURCH.

The story of Nonconformity during the seventeenth century is much the same in Wales as it is in England. Persecuted and

crushed under the Stuarts, the Nonconformists of Wales took heart under the Commonwealth, and grew fairly strong in the hope of religious liberty. With the return of the old order in 1660 again, persecution and revenge became rampant. Nonconformists, and especially Baptists, were fairly strong by the end of the reign of Charles I.

In 1639, the union Church of Llanfaches, Monmouthshire, was formed, Independent in name, but consisting of both Baptists and Independents. The Senior minister, William Wroth, was an Independent, with William Thomas, a Baptist as Co-Pastor. Baptists were scattered throughout South and Mid-Wales. A Baptist Church was formed at Ilston, near Swansea, in 1649; others followed at Llanwenarth and Carmarthen in 1651. Soon Pembrokeshire, Radnorshire, Montgomeryshire and East Denbighshire followed suit.

The church at Ilston, now recognised as the first Baptist Church in Wales, was formed under the leadership of John Myles, and, for a short period, gathered within itself all the Baptists of South Wales, from Llanelly, in Carmarthenshire, right across Glamorgan to Abergavenny in Monmouthshire. John Myles, who had studied at Oxford, acted as chief pastor, worthily seconded by a few strong fellow-labourers such as Lewis Thomas of the Moor, near Porthcawl. Early in 1649 Myles and Thomas Proud visited the church at the Glass House, London, for instruction and guidance, if not also for baptism.

After the Restoration in 1660, persecution became rife, John Myles escaped and migrated to America, settling down at Rehoboth, Massachusetts. Vavassor Powell (1617-1670) was cast into prison, and after passing through thirteen of these places of torture, and enduring eleven years of imprisonment, entered upon his rest at the Fleet, London in 1670. Powell's successor, Henry Williams, of Ysgafell, spent eight years in prison, accompanied by his courageous wife during most of the time. Hundreds of Baptists, Quakers and Independents were led in bonds like cattle along the roads, huddled into filthy and overcrowded prisons and in some cases, for the lack of accommodation, compelled to sleep out in the open.

The Ejections of 1660 and 1662 meant comparatively little to the Baptists of Wales, as they had been accustomed to live independent of Government aid. They were of Nonconformist origin and did not regard themselves as secessions from the State Church. During the Commonwealth, they had generally declined to receive Government grants even when they were pressed upon them. The Rev. T. Shankland mentions forty-three Baptist ministers, who flourished during that period, and claims that at least thirty-five of their number had never received Government

aid. In 1655, a resolution was passed by the central and influential church at Llanwenarth, withdrawing from all association with ministers who received state pay. Both Methodist bodies had their early Church associations. John Wesley died a Churchman. The Welsh Calvinists regard 1811 as their year of formal separation from the Church of England. Their "Legal Deed" is dated 1826. Of course their Societies existed long before this. The historical references have their bearing upon our denominational consciousness to this day.

WREXHAM DISTRICT.

The dissenting movement at Wrexham was initiated by clergymen of the Established Church. Walter Cradoc was curate of this parish for nine or ten months in 1635. His powerful preaching drew great crowds. Taverns became empty and breweries were closed down. Companies of preachers went around the country as evangelists. Cradoc was driven away by the Bishop at the instigation of the Drink Traffic and the Farmers. Later he was succeeded by a fiery pupil, Morgan Llwyd o Wynedd (1619-1659) who also became curate of Wrexham and established the Nonconformist cause in town and district. The resultant church at Wrexham was later divided into three Churches: The Baptist Church of "The Old Meeting," "The Independent Church" at Chester Street with its Presbyterian traditions, and the Independent Church now at Salisbury Park.

V. POWELL AND MID-WALES.

Vavassor Powell was the Apostle of Mid-Wales. After leaving Oxford he kept school and became a curate. Converted by Walter Cradoc, as the story goes, he became a powerful preacher and gathered about twenty congregations, in Montgomeryshire mainly, but also in Cardiganshire, known as "Vavassor Powell's People" or "The Montgomeryshire Church." The chief centres were at Llanbryn-mair and Llanfyllin. At first the Mother Church at Llanbryn-mair had Baptist Pastors. Powell was, however, an open-unionist and the churches he gathered were Union-Churches, with necessarily an unrestricted Communion table. In time the Baptist Pastors gave place to Independents and all the Churches, with one exception, were lost to the Baptist denomination.

RADNORSHIRE.

Hugh Evans (1617-1656) was born near the confines of Radnorshire and Shropshire. In 1642, he was a member of the General Baptist Church at Coventry, a brotherhood so full of missionary zeal that it sent the young man as a missionary to his

own people in Wales. As a pupil of Jeremiah Ives, he contended much with Quakers and Paedo-baptists and had also to cross swords with the hot Calvinists of his day. He laboured hard and successfully in Radnorshire, Breconshire and parts of Montgomeryshire. "Hugh Evans's People" were strict in membership and Communion and the clashes between them and "Vavassor Powell's People" were frequent and hot.

SOUTH WEST WALES.

South West Wales, or the counties of Pembroke, Carmarthen and Cardigan also have their apostle in the person of William Jones Rhyd-Wilym. Historians are still contending as to the details of his story. His name is enshrined in the name Rhyd-Wilym—William's Ford. His Nonconformity placed him as a King's guest in Carmarthen Goal. There he found quite a number of Baptists among his fellow-prisoners and the divine ordinance soon became the subject of debate among them. No sooner was William Jones free than he made for the Olchon (or Longton) Baptists in order to be baptised. By dint of conviction, zeal and hard work, West Wales was transformed and the Baptist Churches of the whole region are thriving to this day.

ANGLESEY AND CAERNARVONSHIRE.

The last general region that calls for attention is the *ultima thule* of Wales, Caernarvonshire and the Island County of Anglesey. Baptist Churches were numerous and thriving in other parts of Wales for a century and a half before attention was paid to these parts. At long last, however, a mission was arranged mainly through the interest and influence of the Rev. William Williams, J.P., of Cardigan. The campaign was opened in 1776, and soon a number of enthusiastic young ministers were at work, hailing chiefly from Pembrokeshire, where William Williams's influence was felt. The Lleyn peninsula had particular attention. In 1789, Christmas Evans came into south Caernarvonshire and was ordained as pastor of the Church at Salem and its many branches. The work prospered, nevertheless, in 1791, the young seraph-preacher was translated to become Primate of all Anglesey. At that time the diocese would contain about half a dozen small churches. By 1831, they numbered upwards of twenty, together with several branches. The great preacher stood supreme in the pulpit. Physically also he overtowered all, but was not celebrated either for tact or for the gift of organisation. Fortunately Mrs. Evans was rich in these qualities. Though diminutive in body she knew how to supplement her eminent husband's failings. On one occasion, Christmas Evans, in a fit of temper, expelled one of the more prominent members of one

of his churches. Arriving at the Manse, he reported the deed to his good wife, expecting her approval and confirmation. But Catrin sensed the situation, laying down the law with a finality that knew no pity. "What? Expelled the best member in the Church? You must go back and apologise and set things right at once. There is not a morsel of food for you here until you have done so. What next, I wonder?" Poor Christmas! He could do nothing but walk about and moan: "Petticoat government, petticoat government, petticoat government." In due time the giant obeyed his little queen. The clouds disappeared, and sunshine brought peace and joy once more. But good and wise Catrin's call hence came. The mighty preacher lost his guide, philosopher and friend. In his simplicity, he would have liked to be the one absolute authority in Church affairs, but twenty churches, and a number of strong fellow ministers had other ideas, and the increasing demands of Anglesey could not wait. Respect for past services, experience and age were not enough to make up for the impatience and lack of time of a man of sixty. Pulpit calls throughout the Principality were still numerous and exacting. Christmas Evans left Anglesey in 1826, alone, forlorn and without his guardian angel, Catrin. His life at Caerfili, Cardiff and Carnarvon, his marriage with his old servant, Mary, arranged for entirely by others, together with his mighty preaching and temperance work are vital parts of the Baptist epic in Wales.

(To be continued)

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