

Benjamin Evans, Author and Historian

“AN Index to Notable Baptists” has, appropriately, inserted under the name of Benjamin Evans, D.D., of Scarborough, the following description—“National leader, author, editor, historian.”¹

Evans' work as an editor was reviewed at some length by K. R. Short, in his article, “Benjamin Evans, D.D. and The Radical Press.”² His work as a national leader and, in fact, a review of his life merits a complete article. Here, I propose to consider something of the extent and vigour of Evans' work, which in the theological, historical, social and even political fields must have had no mean influence in his day.

His production in two volumes of *The Early English Baptists* (1862, 1864) stands out and remains a standard publication on Baptist history. In this work Evans' style is both vivid and scholastic and occasionally it verges on satire. His style displays that graphic element which had rendered him success in the editorial field. On the particular merits of *The Early English Baptists* the *Wesleyan Times* has been quoted as follows—“The pages of Dr. Evans read like a romance, truth is sometimes stranger than fiction; and the results of the work of the learned divine is a book which abounds alike with noble principles, established facts and most interesting narrative. Much as the style of Macaulay has been applauded, we cannot withhold our conviction that his mantle has fallen upon others, or these enchanting pages would not have been written.”³

Evans reviews Baptist history chronologically from the somewhat obscure origins of Anabaptism to the Restoration and reign of Charles II. In referring to the possibility of Baptist convictions being prevalent amongst the Ancient Britons in Wales, he asks, “Had the practice of infant baptism made its way into Wales, or was it unknown amongst these primitive disciples till the Roman missionary forced it on them by the sword of his murderous Saxons?”⁴

From the reign of Henry VIII Evans' history follows a set pattern chapter by chapter. He begins with a general survey of the national situation from the point of view of a Baptist church historian. Gradually, he introduces the impact of those whom he considered to be the fathers of his denomination—“men who ventured to think for themselves on the most vital matters, and to

express their opinions as they had opportunity; men, the triumph of whose convictions would involve in utter ruin the religious theories of the old and the new form of ecclesiastical order; men, who drawing their inspiration from the fountain of Eternal Truth, held the sacred volume as dear as life, amongst these we shall have to trace the footsteps of our fathers."⁵

In his examination of the reign of Edward VI Evans notes the spreading of Anabaptist opinions in Kent and Essex. With regard to a "new sect", examined by Cranmer in 1552, Evans wonders if it was the Family of Love.⁶ He quotes a personal letter from his friend, Professor Muller of Amsterdam, on the views of this sect and of its founder, H. Niclas. Muller concludes that the latter's views on baptism were "all but impenetrable mystery"⁷ though it seems that the sect had Anabapist connexions in that some of the followers seem to have been separatists from Menno.⁸

Commenting on the spreading of Anabaptist principles in the reign of Elizabeth I, due to the influx of refugees from the Netherlands who hoped to find under a Protestant queen partial liberty of conscience, Evans adds that whoever did find mercy it was not the Baptists. He describes the trial and condemnation of some Flemish Baptists before Bishop Grindall and quotes from their correspondence to show their views on paedobaptism.⁹

With regard to the attribution of the term Sebaptists to the English Baptist Church in Amsterdam, under Smith and Helwys, in the early seventeenth century, Evans brings to light further information.¹⁰ He refers to a theory, proposed and later abandoned by Underhill, that a manuscript belonging to the church to which Smith had been attached intimated a break between Smith and the Dutch. From this it had been deduced that the English had thought that baptism might be originated among themselves, "they were therefore called 'Sebaptists,' persons baptizing themselves; not that each one baptized himself; but among them they commenced the practice." "It thus appears that the equivocal phrase, 'se ipsos baptiza,' became the foundation of the charge that Smith baptized himself."¹¹

Evans, with Muller's help, submitted further evidence from these Dutch documents. Apparently, the church over which Smith and Helwys presided became divided and in 1610 Smith's negotiations to unite with the Waterlanders, a liberal Mennonite church, was successful. The validity of their baptism was finally accepted—distinction having been made between the baptism of those who were baptized by their minister himself and the act of baptizing by which he had baptized himself.¹²

Baptist history from this time becomes more distinct and much of Evans' narrative is well-known fact. In volume II, he notes the

growth of the Baptists in the reign of Charles I and the era of the Commonwealth following the Civil War and, finally, what he considers to be the return of moral degeneracy and oppression under Charles II.

In three historical publications—*A short sketch of the German Reformation*; *Wickliffe*; and, *An Introductory Lecture on Ecclesiastical History*—Evans' very real interest in Church History is apparent. At times his personal involvement with his subject is most evident.

Wickliffe has the atmosphere of a eulogy to the Reformer for his criticism of the Papacy and the Roman Catholic system and for his translation of the Bible. Evans' work on this subject is neither exhaustive nor purely academic, especially in the light of modern scholarship, but the narrative is revealing, interesting, and to the serious student of Evans' time was no doubt beneficial.

Much of *A Short Sketch of the German Reformation* is concerned with the impact of Luther. Evans saw the influence of the Reformation in the liberation of the mind of man, in the advancement of political freedom, in the elevating of the Bible to a position of supremacy and in the proclamation of the great truth of salvation by faith in Christ.

Evans believed that the study of Church History was necessary for an understanding of the principles which had governed historical facts and the influence of the Church on the individual and the community. To him Church History presented a wide field of investigation for those interested in mental phenomena. In his *An Introductory Lecture on Ecclesiastical History*, he writes, the "wildest vagaries of the mind" and "some of the loftiest intellects of the heathen world in their groping after the truth are unfolded" in the history of the Church.¹³ He continues, saying that philosophy, religion, ethics and dogma are all open to investigation by the Church Historian.

In this lecture Evans reviews Church History through the ages (restricting himself to the history of the Christian Church)—giving his opinions on what one's approach to the subject should be, the spirit and the motives which should influence one. He regards the subject as "the unfolding of the Divine life in man, gradually but surely transferring him into the likeness of the Saviour."¹⁴ Many of his remarks with regard to those whom he considered to be the forefathers of his denomination reflect his attitude in *The Early English Baptists*. This lecture is evidently meant to be the first of a series—much valuable work was to remain in MS.¹⁵ Lectures on this subject, beginning at the Christian era and going down until the fifth century, occupied "five volumes of microscopically written manuscript, and the material for their elaboration"¹⁶ and this work was the accumulation of a lifetime.

Of Evans' value as a Church Historian it is necessary to note that much he said is obviously not original¹⁷ and he, himself, writes, "Education, social life, religious training and sympathy frequently give a colour to our opinions.—The love of sect operates powerfully in many cases. In most of us there is a strong, it may be at times imperceptible, desire to sustain our denominational peculiarities."¹⁸

Of Evans' style, Dowson writes that it was "terse, remarkable for short sentences, but easily apprehended and adapted for historical details."¹⁹ A review of his book *Modern Popery* recommends it as both masculine and weighty.²⁰

The latter work, which grew from a series of eight letters in which Evans uses Roman Catholic literature to confute various doctrines of the Church of Rome, was published in 1855. It was a result of the resuscitation of Roman Catholicism—particularly of the restoration of the hierarchy in England by Pius IX, in 1850.

Although he believed that it was the birthright of every man to enjoy equality of civil rights and liberty of worship Evans firmly denounced what he believed to be error or perversion of the truth. Many pages might be written on this work, *Modern Popery*, in which Evans appears to seize every opportunity to challenge the Church of Rome. He writes, "I have collected a mass of facts and illustrations, from sources which are open to the whole of your people, and have thus exhibited the teaching of your priests in the light of which it is shown to the masses. I have tried to write calmly, but I confess that it is difficult to restrain the rising of that honest indignation which must be felt at a glance at some of these statements."²¹

In this work the basic difference between Evans and the Roman Catholic is apparent—the question of final authority, i.e. the Bible or the Church. Further—the sufficiency of the Bible to the Christian apart—to Evans Romanism was manifestly anti-Scriptural. He writes, "Professing to be the embodiment of the religion of Christ, in nothing do we perceive a greater contrast than in the lives of popes and your authorized teachers, and the doctrines they inculcate, to that system of love, and purity, and truth, which the only records of the Saviour's life, and the teaching of his inspired servants unfold."²²

The value of this work to his dissenting brethren of the time is apparent to some degree in the conferring upon Evans, in 1857, of a *bona fide* 'D.D.' by the University of Rochester, U.S.A.²³

Of Evans' doctrinal works it is necessary to mention his publications on the question of baptism. Writing in *The Northern Baptist*,²⁴ he says, "The editor is a baptist through conviction." It was this deep-rooted belief in the ordinance of Believers' Baptism that was the source of his inspiration for many works—not least the

aforementioned, *The Early English Baptists* and many denominational periodicals including, in 1853, his fatherhood of *The Freeman*.²⁵

Here some note might be taken of his celebrated three letters in reply to Clericus Eboracensis—addressed to the Vicar of Scarborough—on “Jewish Proselyte Baptism”, “The Mode of Baptism”, and “The Subjects of Baptism”.²⁶ With regard to the latter Evans’ case rested primarily on two factors—the text of the New Testament and the reasonable assumption that an infant is incapable of personal belief. Bearing these factors in mind Evans will not be found wanting as an apologist for Believers’ Baptism.

With regard to what he thought was considered to be the most conclusive demonstrative evidence that the Apostles must have baptized infants, in that they baptized households, Evans writes that if he, or his brethren, were to record the cases of the baptism of households they might with the utmost propriety use Paul’s language, “I baptized the household of so and so.” Evans continues, saying that household baptism was no proof of infant baptism, for, he adds, households could exist without children, or, if they had any, they could be of a mature age.²⁷ Such arguments and New Testament exegesis abounds in these letters.

Other doctrinal writings by Evans include *A Letter To A Friend On The Scripture Doctrine Of The Trinity*—apparently written to a Unitarian, and a tract *On Confirmation*—in which he argues that Confirmation is an unscriptural practice and has no relation to the New Testament reference to the imparting of spiritual gifts by the Apostles through the laying on of hands.

To conclude, B. H. Evans writes, “The mass of manuscript he has left is immense, and considering his active life and the varied works he did, it is wonderful how a single brain and pen could have composed and written so much. A member of the University of Rochester, and a valued contributor to the Baptist Historical Society of Philadelphia, in the United States, he was well-known in the New World, and it was only a few days after his death that the intimation of another degree to be conferred on him was received by his family.”^{28, 29}

NOTES

¹ *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, Vol. VII (1920-21), p. 200.

² *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XIX (1961-62), p. 243, et seq.

³ See advertisement on Evans’ pamphlet, *An Address Delivered to the Students of the Baptist Theological Institute, Bury, July, 1870*.

⁴ B. Evans, *The Early English Baptists*, Vol. 1 (1862), pp.3-4.

⁵ *ibid*, pp. 39-40.

⁶ *ibid*, p. 79.

⁷ *ibid*. Note, p. 174.

⁸ Founder of Mennonites, Menno Simons, 1492-1561, of West Friesland, who organized a sect based on certain Anabaptist views.

⁹ B. Evans, *The Early English Baptists*, Vol. I, pp. 151-2. Reference to Collier, Fuller, Fox, etc. and Benedict's *History of the Baptists*, New York, 1848.

¹⁰ On acceptance of the practice of Believers' Baptism, Smith and Helwys had difficulty with regard to who should baptise them. This resulted in Smith baptising himself, then Helwys, and then the remainder of the company. Smith afterwards became known, says Evans, as a Sebaptist.

¹¹ B. Evans, *The Early English Baptists*, Vol. I, p. 207-8. Reference to Underhill's letter to the Baptist historian Dr. Benedict of the U.S.A., *The Watchman*, U.S.A., 14th July, 1853.

¹² Later, Evans concluded, Helwys returned to England and in 1615 those remaining in the Netherlands united with the Dutch church.

¹³ B. Evans, *An Introductory Lecture on Ecclesiastical History*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *Baptist Handbook*, 1872, p. 217.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ As a Baptist writer some novelty both in presentation of facts and opinions is, however, apparent.

¹⁸ B. Evans, *Introductory Lecture on Ecclesiastical History*, p. 27.

¹⁹ "In Memoriam, The Rev. B. Evans, D.D." by H. Dowson, *The Freeman*, 21st April, 1871.

²⁰ See advertisement on B. Evans' pamphlet, *Belgium: Its Religious State*.

²¹ B. Evans, *Modern Popery*, p. 211.

²² *ibid.*, pp. 212-3.

²³ *The Scarborough Mercury*, 8th and 29th August, 1857.

²⁴ *The Northern Baptist*, Vol. III, p. 40.

²⁵ *Baptist Handbook*, 1872, p. 217. The lack of support Evans received when the newspaper was first projected is noted and how he devoted his time, money and intellectual powers, gratuitously, to it.

²⁶ *A First Letter to the Vicar of Scarborough*, by B. Evans. *A Second Letter to the Vicar of Scarborough*, by B. Evans. *A Third Letter to the Vicar of Scarborough*, by B. Evans.

²⁷ *A Third Letter to the Vicar of Scarborough*, by B. Evans, p. 19.

²⁸ *Baptist Handbook*, 1872, p. 218.

²⁹ Comprehensive source of material here gathered is my thesis, "Dr. Benjamin Evans of Scarborough, 1803-71:—His Influence, Local, National and International (with special reference to his published works)", to be located in the library of the University of Leeds.

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Nonconformity and Nottingham

(Concluded from p. 367)

⁷ *idem.*

⁸ *Nottm. Borough Records*, 1689, Vol. V, p. 329.

⁹ *Nottm. Borough Records*, Vol. V, p. 358.

¹⁰ *idem.*

¹¹ *idem.*

¹² *idem.*, Vol. VII, p. 258.

¹³ *Nottm. Borough Records*, Vol. VII, p. 267.

¹⁴ Godfrey and Ward, *History of Friar Lane Baptist Church*, Nottingham, 1903, pp. 131-56, 335, 339.

¹⁵ *Nottm. Borough Records*, Vol. IX, p. 11.

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