

# A Welsh Man of God.

## The Inaugural Henton Lecture\*

I MUST first record my sense of privilege in being invited to deliver the first "Henton Lecture". This courteous gesture has given me great pleasure and I wish to record my appreciation of the goodwill of the officers of the Society. This lecture is founded in commemoration of the Baptist section of my mother's family and it is my hope, if health and circumstances permit, to double the endowment in due course. I understand that the Lecture should be given every other year and that the choice of lecturer should rest with the officers of the Baptist Historical Society, the Secretary of the Baptist Union of Gt. Britain and Ireland, and the Principal of Regent's Park College.

Apart from my parents, my personal friends and colleagues, there are six men who have played a formative part in the direction of my life. In chronological order these are: first, Edward George Henton, my mother's brother, one of the members of the Henton family commemorated in the name of this lecture. Of this remarkable man I have been given occasion to write in one of a series of autobiographical essays shortly to be published by Dr. Goldman, Principal of Didsbury College, and recently Professor of Education at the University of Reading.

The second is James Griffiths, who was minister of Calfaria Baptist Church, Aberdare, where I was brought up, who baptised me, and who launched me into the Baptist ministry.

The third was Theodore Henry Robinson who was my father in Old Testament studies. I went to the University College, Cardiff, to read Philosophy and subsidiary Hebrew. After six months with the Hebrew grammar and Theodore Robinson, I realised the error of my ways and, changing my course, gave my life to the study of Jesus Christ's Bible. My debt to Theodore Robinson is incalculable.

It must not be forgotten that Theodore Robinson was a student of Regent's Park, and that like B. Grey Griffith, he learnt his Hebrew from G. Pearce Gould, who was one of the great Hebrew scholars of his day. Thus the Hebrew tradition of Regent's inaugurated by Pearce Gould, transmitted through Theodore Robinson to J. C. Jones, erstwhile Bishop of Bangor, Aubrey R. Johnson and myself, has now returned to Regent's, in part, in my own person.

The fourth was Thomas Phillips of Bloomsbury, as he was known, who became my Principal at Cardiff Baptist College. This genius, with all the virtues and faults of a genius, was a wizard in preaching and we remember him and hail him as "Grace and Glory" Phillips after his World Alliance Sermon. The effect of his ministry was to

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convince me of the worth and relevance and necessity of the ministry of preaching as these are set forth in the New Testament.

The fifth is Henry Wheeler Robinson, ninth Principal of Regent's Park College, and the real founder of its new estate and destiny within the city and University of Oxford. I count it a very great honour indeed to belong to that very select group of students who were pupils of these two famous Robinsons. In view of the difficulties and antipathies in the relationships of these two men, it is quite extraordinary that one of Theodore Robinson's pupils should now serve in Wheeler Robinson's succession, and be entrusted with the working out of the life of the College in its new capacity as a Permanent Private Hall of the University of Oxford. This is all the more extraordinary because Wheeler Robinson in 1933 rejected me as a possible tutor, so that I now feel that I embody as no other, a reconciliation of the two Robinsons in my own life and ministry.

The sixth is Wilbour Eddy Saunders, President Emeritus of Colgate Rochester Divinity School, whom I did not meet until 1958. It was he who gave me my first introduction to Baptist life in the United States, an introduction which has built into my life the conviction that our future as British Baptists lies in ever closer fellowship with our brethren in the U.S.A. Perhaps you will allow me to add this personal note. When my only brother died in 1964, Wilbour Saunders wrote telling me that he had never had a brother, and that since I had lost my only brother he proposed that we should adopt each other as brothers. Apart from my call to the ministry and my married life, this action is the single most glorious thing that ever happened to me, and my only regret is that the relationship appears to me to be so one sided to the advantage of Regent's and to mine.

These are the men then, not to mention J. M. Davies, T. W. Chance, T. W. Manson, M. E. Aubrey, R. R. Marrett, R. Bultmann, A. Dakin, and S. L. Greenslade, who have played a decisive part in my life.

The subject of this lecture is "A Welsh Man of God" and by this title is designated one of the above six, namely James Griffiths, the pastor of my youth, and my father in God. Let me first tell of the succession in which he stood and of the church where he served in Aberdare.

The first recorded act of Believers' Baptism at Aberdare took place in 1791 and a small cause was begun in 1805, and a Sunday School in 1807. There was a baptism in the frozen river in 1808, and the first church was constituted or embodied in 1810. In 1811-2 the first sanctuary called Penypound was erected on what is now the site of Carmel English Baptist Chapel, Aberdare. In 1813 one of the first Sunday School scholars, William Lewis, was ordained as the first minister. In 1815 an industrial depression set in which was to last four years. William Lewis moved away in search of work but served the church every other Sunday, two lay ministers helping out. William Lewis returned to the full pastorate in 1826 and remained until 1845 when he moved to Tongwynlais. He was an able preacher and a

devoted pastor, and was by trade a builder and an architect. He built several chapels in South Wales, sometimes preaching the first sermon in the chapel which he had both designed and erected.

He was popularly known as "three voiced Will", because he had the ability to change his voice three times in any given sermon. Dr. Ellis Evans of Cefnmawr in North Wales had two preaching voices, but William Lewis had three. After a pastorate of six years at Tongwynlais, and during his presidency of the Welsh Baptist Union, he died in 1851.

In 1846 the church called Thomas Price to be its second minister, and something must be said of this remarkable man. He was born of Anglican parents on April 19th, 1820, in a village near Brecon. He was at first a page boy, and then an apprentice painter at Brecon where he joined the Baptists. Later he walked 160 miles to London in three days with less than twenty shillings in his pocket and joined the firm of Messrs. Peto and Gazelle as a painter. He was in membership at Moorfields W. Baptist Church. In 1838, when eighteen years of age, he preached his first sermon and joined Earl Street Baptist Church. From 1842 he was a student at Pontypool College until the end of 1845 and became minister of Calfaria, Aberdare, on January 1st, 1846. He was to serve there for forty-two years, this being his only pastorate. These forty years coincided with the population explosion of Aberdare, and soon the new pastor began to organise the Baptist witness in the growing town.

In 1849 he dismissed and gathered 121 members to begin Gwawr, Aberaman. In 1852 he built a new chapel called Calfaria across the street from Penypound, and left behind fifty-eight members, to begin the new English Church, now known as Carmel, Aberdare.

In 1855 he dismissed and gathered eighty-seven members to begin Mountain Ash. In 1862 he dismissed and gathered one hundred and sixty-three members to begin Bethel, Abernant. In 1862 he dismissed and gathered one hundred and thirty-one members to begin Ynyslwyd.

After all this there remained three hundred and fifty-four members in full communion in the Jubilee year in 1862. Seven years later the Gadlys chapel was begun with forty-nine members. In all, this man and this cause built seven chapels, three Sunday Schools and initiated eight new churches. From 1846-63 the church also grew from ninety-one members to 1031, with 1214 Sunday School scholars. From 1845-89, 3912 new members were received. The church was also a nursery for ministers, assistant ministers and lay preachers, and exercised a close watch and indeed superintendent ministry, almost like a circuit, over the daughter churches.

Quite remarkable was the way in which Thomas Price organised joint projects among this closely knit group of churches. The members of the churches met for corporate efforts for musical occasions, concerts and oratorios, whereby the funds were raised to pay for the erection of the chapels. They met too for processions of witness for Sunday School and other work, but not seldom these public processions, common in other parts of the country, concluded in public

celebrations of Believers' Baptism in the river near the town bridge. Joint Communion Services are also mentioned and special reference is made to one of these in the great Jubilee occasion of the mother church. He used the population explosion as the means of building, spreading and consolidating the Baptist cause in the Aberdare valley in such a way as to render him one of the most important nineteenth century Baptists, and his work one of the really great and exciting Baptist experiments in the entire history of our denomination. In 1861 more than one in ten of the total population of 31,000 in Aberdare were baptised members of his group of churches. No other denomination exhibited this "continuing cohesion between the mother and sister churches" as did the Baptist. The Baptist denomination was particularly successful in achieving and maintaining a very close relationship between the mother church and the churches born from her.

It is impossible in the time and space at my disposal to describe the full life and remarkable contribution of this man Thomas Price. He not only built a great church, founded many causes, but was a prominent figure in the public life of the town, its public affairs, in the relations between the workers and the iron founders, its problems of health, highways, morality and education. He was the John Clifford of the Welsh denomination, and was certainly one of the great nonconformist political leaders of the Welsh people.

He helped to found and establish a school "under the aegis of the British and Foreign School Society". He broke the monopoly of the iron masters in the affairs of the Parish Vestry and of the Poor Law Guardians. A new burial ground, a new public park, safety in the pits, a gas company, the Church rate question itself and the local Health Board, all illustrate the spheres of his influential leadership. He played a great part in the Friendly Societies, and in 1865 was Grand Master of the Oddfellows, as he had been of the Ivorites in 1859.

In 1855 he became Editor of the *Gwron*, a weekly paper reflecting the new industrial Society, and in 1860 he became the sole editor of *Seren Cymru*, the Welsh Baptist Times. He was a preacher of great power, a lecturer of great range and an orator of great ability. In 1863 he opposed the formation of the Miners' Union, but advocated a Perpetual Fund for the relief of disasters, and supported the Liberation Society—a sort of non-conformist forerunner of the present day Welsh Nationalist Party. He advocated the reform of Parliament and sought to include all householders within the franchise.

1868 saw the zenith of his political influence and activity, and thereafter his political significance declined. In 1869 he visited Ireland and also represented the B.M.S. on a deputation to the Welsh Baptists in the U.S.A. on behalf of the British and Irish Baptist Mission.

Most of the records relating to this remarkable church, to this interesting group of churches and to this great figure, Dr. Price, are in Welsh, and so the story remains comparatively unknown. This is

particularly true of the last twenty years of his life and ministry, for unfortunately in 1912 the minute book of these years was reported to be missing. Nevertheless it is not too much to say that the story of the church is one of the greatest episodes in the growth and development of the Baptist denomination in Wales, and the stature of this man Thomas Price entitles him to be placed amongst the first twenty leading Baptists of the nineteenth century. He died on the 29th February, 1888, at 67 years of age. Both Calvary and Carmel were full with those who attended the funeral, and counting the hundreds who failed to gain admission, more than 2,000 persons must have gathered to mark the end of forty-two years of ministry.

In this great story too the Henton family had its small part to play. My mother's father, Benjamin Henton, was secretary for more than twenty years from 1860-82 (approximately). In the official history of the church he is described as "faithful and accurate in his work. He kept accurate records of all the work of the church for many years, but his book, to our great loss, is missing".<sup>1</sup> His brother John was deacon from 1862 to 1891 approximately. Benjamin Henton's eldest son, Gwilym, was tried out as a preacher and rejected by the pastor, and so turned instead to banking. Benjamin's second son, Edward, became an architect, and served as Sunday School teacher and Church Librarian for many years. He also decorated the ceiling of the chapel in many colours, and in 1919 instituted a recreation ground for the young people. Benjamin Henton's only daughter, my mother, was one of the principal hostesses in the church for many years, and was in particular a devoted supporter and organiser of the B.M.S. Zenana in the chapel and in the district.

My own membership began in this church and one further fact must be recorded. Since 1852 Calvary Welsh, and Carmel English, Baptist churches have stood directly opposite each other in Monk Street, Aberdare. Of the English church, Carmel, R. L. Child, the tenth Principal of Regent's Park College was a member. Of the Welsh Baptist church I, the eleventh Principal, was a member. One Sunday night during the early years of the first world war, my step-grandfather introduced me as a young boy to a young man saying "This is Mr. Child". This was before Mr. Child, with my step-grandfather and others seceded from that church to found Christ Church Baptist Church in Aberdare in 1918. How very remarkable that two successive Principals of Regent's Park College, Oxford, should have come from two churches, mother and daughter, on opposite sides of a street in a mining town in Glamorgan.

Into this great and influential church then, Calvary, Aberdare, and as successor to this great and extraordinary man, Thomas Price, M.A., Ph.D., came James Griffiths as Pastor, and he is the proper subject of this lecture.

He was born the third of thirteen children in 1856 in Pencoed, Glam., and was baptised and became a member of the church in a hamlet near Bridgend, with the mellifluous name of Melinifanddu—'Black Evan's Mill'. He was baptised by Rev. Hopkyn Jenkins who

<sup>1</sup> A brief obituary notice appeared in *Y Gwlad Garwr*, 19 May 1882.

added the words "I am baptising a preacher now". He was then twelve years of age. He pursued the work of a weaver, but began to be drawn to the ministry. He felt himself, however, to lack the necessary qualifications, especially for preaching, and it was only after much hesitation, and after hearing the testimony of an old minister by name of Christopher John, that he became aware and fully convinced of the heavenly call.

In 1879 then, when he was twenty-three, he went to Pontypool Baptist College, and three years later on 18th February 1883 he was ordained to the ministry at Calfaria, Llanelli, where he ministered for seven years. He was married on March 9th, 1886, to a Baptist lady from Libanus, Treherbert. In February 1889 he preached as a supply in Calfaria, Aberdare, and the church fell in love with him. Despite his reluctance to leave his newly erected and full sanctuary and happy pastorate at Calfaria, Llanelli, and in spite of an initial refusal, Calfaria, Aberdare, persisted and on Christmas Day 1889 he began his ministry at Calfaria, a ministry that was to last for forty-one years. Thus from 1826 to 1930, three ministers only spanned these one hundred and four years in the pastorate of Calfaria.

In 1890 a new communion service was brought into use and a new harmonium purchased. In 1898 the Welsh Baptist Union held its annual assembly at Calfaria. In 1903 an organ was purchased at the cost of £850. In 1906 he visited America but in the following year tragedy befell the family, for Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths buried their elder son George. In 1907 a Sunday School Library was begun. Two years later all the premises were renovated and the hall was divided into two rooms for classes. In 1912 the church celebrated its centenary, having received into membership from 1845 to 1912 no fewer than 5,399, and 2,208 of these by baptism. In Mr. Griffith's first twenty years 1,487 new members were received, 599 through baptism.

In 1914 a weekly offering system and individual communion cups were first employed. Electric light came in 1919. To meet the changing language system a children's address in English before the evening sermon was introduced. This soon gave way to Lantern Lectures in the Hall every Sunday night. In 1919 too a scheme for recreation and tennis grounds was begun, which happily served the church for thirty years. These grounds were bought by some of the members, and old and young people actively laid them out, themselves performing the manual labour involved. In 1919 the church resolved to admit no one into membership "unless they had been before the church for three months".

In 1923 the Welsh East Glamorgan Association held its meetings at Calfaria, and the Baptist Union of Wales elected James Griffiths as its president for that year. In 1929 he was elected a life member of the General Committee of the B.M.S. and in 1930, at the age of seventy-four, he resigned from the ministry. He died April 12th, 1933, and I shared in the service in the burial ground of Paran, Melinifanddu.

It remains for me now to give some examples of the teaching and practice of his ministry. He was of course the minister of my youth, and his handsome appearance and his beautiful and gracious nature endeared him to all the members and all the children. We all ran to him when we saw him. He was very gifted in the Welsh language and his Welsh was known in the church as 'deep'. He was deeply versed in the Scripture and references to Biblical, especially O.T. characters, incidents and localities, are abundant in his few printed works. He was always in his pulpit a few minutes before the hour of worship. The organist was expected to complete his voluntary soon after 10.59 a.m. We waited then in silence for the chapel clock, behind the pulpit, to strike. It struck once on each hour and half hour and on the stroke of 11 a.m. James Griffiths would rise to begin morning worship. Likewise he himself had closed worship when the clock again struck one hour later. Impressions of his work as a pastor, preacher and counsellor remain, but the greatest impressions of all are the grace of his personality and the beauty of his Communion Services. The solemnity, the stillness of the Communion Service are beyond telling and left their never to be forgotten impression on us all. Children as well as members were always expected to be present. Of his ministry at Communion I cannot speak too highly, and even as I write and read, the audio-visual memory of such occasions is very powerfully present.

The Communion Service was held every fourth Sunday night, and this had to be remembered. I well recall that my mother's calendar was partly controlled by this timing of the Communion on the fourth Sunday, and how she counted the Sundays accordingly. Our present custom of the first Sunday morning or evening in the month is certainly easier, but the active recollection of the particular Communion Sunday was probably of greater spiritual value.

James Griffiths had developed a theology of this Communion weekend which I have not experienced elsewhere, in which the communion was one service in a regular pattern of four services. Of course, like all the churches in the valley, two meetings were held each week, a prayer meeting on Monday to resume the Sunday preaching and worship, and a general Fellowship meeting on Thursday evening. The quadruple Communion pattern made use of his normal weekly course as follows:

a) The first meeting was the Fellowship Meeting on the Thursday before the Communion Sunday. This was entitled and always described as "The Preparation Meeting", on the analogy of the Gospel phrase, "The Preparation of the Passover". The meeting was substantially a Prayer meeting for the Communion, and no address was given. It was the ideal rule of the churches that absence from the Preparation Meeting disqualified you from partaking at the Communion, though you could be present. I have seen deacons who had been absent from the Thursday Preparation Meeting, refuse to take the elements at the following Communion.

I remember too how a minister at Abercwmboi told me that he

had felt he had to refuse to preside or to partake at the Communion because he had been absent the previous Thursday. Of course the rule was not perfectly kept but the monthly Preparation Service was always a largely attended service and laid a truly remarkable foundation for the following Communion.

b) The second service was the preaching service on the Sunday evening, just prior to the Communion. This service was the counterpart to the prayer meeting, and the sermon was directed to the Cross, the Atonement, the love of God or some like theme.

c) The third was the Communion at which only those baptised by immersion and admitted by covenant could partake. After my baptism I refused to join the church for nearly a year because of this closed shop idea, and only gave way when I found that my way to the ministry was barred, because though baptised I was not a member. If members were absent three times in succession an explanation was required.

d) The fourth meeting of the pattern was the prayer meeting on the Monday evening immediately following the Communion. This prayer meeting was always the monthly missionary meeting and was so called. At this meeting prayers were largely confined to the theme of saving mankind. So the pattern was Preparation Prayer Meeting: Preparation Sermon Meeting: All present Communion, and Missionary Prayer Meeting. He based this pattern on this verse "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all unto me" (Jn. 12. 32.). Cross, Communion and world-mission were thus integral, and I commend this interesting example of a liturgy controlled by scripture to your consideration.

I well remember the first rule he taught us in his baptismal class. He spoke of the reading of the Bible and of prayer, and then said "You must always offer your prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour". That is a piece of advice which needs to be emphasised again. Revelation and prayer take the same route even if in reverse. Indeed prayer is scripture in reverse.

He also prepared a brief study on the use of the Ten Commandments which was virtually a catechism on the Commandments for young people.

Then too I still remember the ceremonies associated with Church Membership and the promises we young people made when we joined the church. Even now after forty three years I recall the very words and scriptures that I was called upon to subscribe when I joined the church. These were:

- (1) Faithful attendance at the means of grace.  
Scripture: Heb. 10:25: "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together. . . ."
- (2) Regular giving to the cause as the Lord blesses you.  
Scripture: 1 Cor. 16:2: "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him . . . ."
- (3) Acceptance of admonition in the spirit in which it is given.



Scripture: Heb. 13:23: "And I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation."

(4) The Things of the House within the House.

Scripture: Matt. 7:6: "Give not that which is holy unto dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine . . . ."

To join the church was to receive the church covenant by the right hand of fellowship and prayer. Deacons were made by the election of the church and by the laying on of hands and prayer. Is it wishful thinking or merely sentimental recollection that makes me feel that it all used to be far more solemn and less casual than it is today, and that these ceremonies were vested in the name of the Trinity in a way in which they are not today?

You will I feel sure be interested in his handling of me as the only candidate for the ministry who emerged during the 48 years of his ministry. I was his only begotten ministerial son in the faith, and he was inordinately proud of me and loved me in spite of, and partly because of, the difficulties he had with me. When first I confided in him the perplexing, unexpected discovery of my call to the ministry, he kept the secret for nearly a year. Then when released he announced to the church that I was a candidate for the ministry. On June 19th 1924, a Thursday, I preached a sermon on "A place called Calvary". I was accordingly invited to preach on a Sunday evening at which I failed very badly. A third attempt when the sermon was entitled "The Encircling Christ" was more successful and I was accepted. At the next Communion Service my minister proposed and the senior deacon, Rees Rees seconded and the church unanimously resolved to adopt me as a candidate from the church for the ministry.

From now on James Griffiths took full control, did everything for me and I was not allowed to make any move in this connection on my own.

First he approached the local Association, and at the request of Calvary church, I was appointed to preach before three churches, their ministers being present. These three ministers reported favourably on behalf of their churches, and I received the commendation of the Association. By rule I then sat the 'A' examination of the Baptist Union of Wales, and when I had passed this, I was qualified to apply for college.

In fact I never did. I asked Mr. Griffiths how I was to do it. He told me that that was his privilege to do this for me on behalf of the church. A short time later he told me again after a Communion Service "I am going home now to write your application for college". This application I never saw, for I was not an individual candidate. I was an official candidate sponsored by the minister and church at Calfaria, Aberdare, and endorsed by the Association, and as such was received into Cardiff College in 1925. From time to time in my life I have been supported and strengthened by this fact that I was put forward by my church and Association as a candidate for the ministry, and forty three years later my call to the ministry and its context remains the vital spring of my life.

James Griffiths was a great man and a winsome christian. Handsome in appearance, beautiful in character, gifted in diction, versed in the Scriptures, both Testaments equally, he gave himself to preaching and pastoral ministry. Happy in himself, pleasant in all his ways, evenly balanced in his personality, he was a man of peace, and an able and faithful minister of Jesus Christ. All his ways were pleasant and all his paths were peace.

I called on him once every week during my college vacations, and he went over his Sunday sermons with me. He prepared and wrote all his sermons and addresses standing at a high desk which he had had specially made and which accounted for his specially healthy kidneys as revealed by various tests.

His unfailing greeting was always "Every blessing", and I recall one conversation with him after he had published the catechism in "The Ten Commandments". He said to me that I would find I could not agree with some of the things he had written there. "You are in college", he said, "and you will learn many new things and it is too late for me to learn them". His toleration was astounding, it was christian.

That great and brilliant Oxford Scholar, A. L. Rowse, has unfortunately found it necessary in the published recollections of his youth to speak in bitter and disparaging terms of his Cornish nonconformist boyhood. My experience was totally different. Calfaria chapel was a beautiful fellowship in which to grow up and learn and discuss a true way of life. Of course there was superstition, narrow mindedness and sometimes bigotry, but all these are intelligible and forgivable in the light of the hard and cruel lives they were forced to live. Only the truly redeemed and educated man is free from prejudice, and he is hard to find. My memories of that church, its members and its deacons, are gladsome and refreshing. To that church and the churches of South Wales, as the churches of my apprenticeship, I owe a great debt which I am proud to acknowledge and thankful to own. But above all I owe to James Griffiths the memory and example of a christian life, which I have badly imitated; patterns of ministerial practice and thought which I have endeavoured to fill; and in particular his launching of me into the Baptist ministry with which I have been content all my life.

In the first week of February 1942, Dakin, Farrer, Child, Payne, Aldwinckle, Brockington and myself were present at 55, St. Giles, Oxford, to present a volume of essays to H. Wheeler Robinson on his seventieth birthday and I read a tribute in Hebrew verse. None of us will ever forget Dr. Robinson's reply. He spoke of his life, its aims, its hopes and its outcome. Towards the end he assessed himself as follows: "If I was called upon to do so, I would put myself in the upper second class" or words to that effect. The pathos of that assessment remains and indeed will help us all to preserve our sense of values.

Then may I say in recollection of James Griffiths that I would bestow upon him the highest degree that Scripture affords "An

Israelite in whom there was no guile" and "A man of God".

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