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Thomas Clarke of Chesham Bois

LEONARD HICKIN

JUST OVER two hundred years ago the Rev. Thomas Clarke was instituted to the living of Chesham Bois in south Buckinghamshire. Chesham Bois is still a country parish, on the fringe of London's commuter belt; two hundred years ago it was in the depths of the country, a small village with no more than twenty-four houses. And it was to this quiet rural oasis that there came in 1767 one who was to win a great reputation for learning amongst his fellow Evangelicals. Romaine called him the walking synopsis—'he gives you the opinion of every commentator, and then gives his own, which is worth all the rest put together'; and Venn declared; 'I will always take Clarke's opinion until Solomon rises from the dead'.

Yet Thomas Clarke never published a book. His influence lived on through the men he trained at Chesham Bois for Holy Orders. 'Many,' writes Balleine,¹ 'of the best of the younger clergy, including Woodd, and Burn, and Jerram, and William Goode, owed not a little of their efficiency to the trouble he had taken with them.'²

Little is known about his early life beyond the fact that he was born at Poulton in Lancashire in the year 1719, and was educated at Brasenose College, Oxford. He graduated in 1739, and five years later was licensed as a Curate at Amersham Parish Church. We are told that at an early period in his life 'his mind had become the residence of vital religion';³ and it is clear that from the commencement of his ministry he sought, like Simeon, to humble the sinner, to exalt the Saviour and to promote holiness. The difference between the doctrines preached by the Rector and his Curate respectively soon became a talking-point for the parishioners. Some of them took a dislike to Clarke and made life very unpleasant for him. Others, as a result of his preaching, became changed men and women—and amongst this latter group was a close relation of the Rector. This circumstance, together with the opposition of his enemies, at length resulted in Clarke's dismissal.

From Amersham he moved to a curacy at Kippax in Yorkshire. And there he might have stayed for the rest of his life but for one of those providential circumstances which alter the whole course of men's lives. The Marquis of Tavistock happened to hear of the excellence of Clarke's character, the extent of his learning, and the persecution he had encountered at Amersham. He was so impressed that he resolved to offer him the next vacant living in his gift. Before he could do this he died from a fatal accident; but the Duke of Bedford, respecting the wishes of his son, presented Clarke to the Rectory of Chesham Bois, about one mile distant from the parish church of Amersham. Clarke was thus unexpectedly brought back to the neighbourhood of his former curacy, and his Amersham converts were able once again to benefit by his faithful ministry.

Soon after his arrival at Chesham Bois he started a school for the children of his parishioners. Though he was to be so busily engaged in educational work for the rest of his life, and particularly with the training of candidates for ordination, he never neglected the parish. He found the people extremely ignorant and inattentive to religion, but he never ceased to render them every possible assistance and he found them responsive to his ministry.⁴ 'Sunday,' writes Dr. Romsey,⁵ 'was the great day of the week; the paths across the common, and through the meadows and woods leading to the church, cheerful in all directions with people . . . and then the overflowing church.'

As a teacher Clarke knew how to get on to the wavelength of his pupils. 'In conversation,' wrote the Rev. T. Thomason⁶ in one of his schoolboy letters, 'his cheerfulness and vivacity can be compared to nothing but that of a person of eighteen. He abounds in tales and humour, and they are made the channels of instruction. Two children whom he boards in his house, declare that they are never so happy as when in his company. In his school he is equally pleasing. The more questions his pupils ask, the better he is pleased; and he will not let us pass over one word until it is well understood. It is a pleasure to be taught by such a Master, and to carry him the fruits of our labours.'

'In my last walk with him,' writes Mr. Thomason in a later letter just before he left Chesham Bois to go to Cambridge, 'a walk which was very affecting, he gave me his parting blessing, and told me he had no doubt we should meet again with everlasting joy upon our heads. "Watch strictly," said he, "over your heart, be much in prayer, and cleave closely to God. Pray for spiritual discernment, that you may have a clear perception of the path you should walk in. Pray to walk in that way in spite of all opposition; thus knowing and doing the will of God, you must be happy."'

As a preacher he lacked the charm and the fluency of a George Whitefield. 'His voice was thick,' writes a contemporary,⁷ 'his sentences were frequently too rapid, and his pauses . . . too long.' But in spite of these defects his sermons reached the hearts of his hearers.

The lasting impression they made is illustrated in the account Dr. Romsey gives us of one young man who was trained by Clarke—William Rose, in later days a much loved Rector of Beckenham. Rose was the son of a wealthy country gentleman, and had gone to Oxford to prepare for the bar. After some months his father, fearing that his love for horses was becoming a snare, and anxious that he should not attend the races in a neighbouring town, wrote to a young relative who was at that time reading with Clarke. He requested him to invite his son to spend the week with him at Chesham Bois. The invitation was given and accepted. Clarke's goodness made a powerful impression on the mind of the young visitor; and this was greatly increased by the first sermon he heard from Clarke on the following Sunday. Under the influence of these new feelings Rose asked permission to leave Oxford for the present and join his cousin at Bois to read with Clarke and so prepare for the ministry. It was some time before Rose's father could bring himself to consent to this; but at length he gave way to his son's desires.

'Instead of a few days,' wrote Rose's son in later years, 'my dear father remained at Bois for three years, having with his father's consent given up all thoughts of the bar with a view to taking orders. During this time he studied diligently under Mr. Clarke's guidance, who treated him like a son. He was to have been ordained to the curacy of Bois, but it was found that, being a donative, and not at that time under episcopal jurisdiction, Mr. Clarke was unable to give a title. . . . My father used to delight in recounting the names of faithful and evangelical clergymen who were educated by Mr. Clarke, and the testimonies of high respect borne . . . to his wisdom and learning by some of the most eminent clergymen of the day.'

Amongst the men trained by Clarke, in addition to those already mentioned, were the Rev. Stephen Langston, Prebendary J. S. Pratt, the Rev. Ambrose Serle, the Rev. Edmund Beynon, Sir Henry Blosset, chief justice of Bengal; and James Oldham Oldham who for many years filled a high office in India. 'And surely,' adds Dr. Romsey, 'the christian administration of the present Lieutenant Governor of the north-west Provinces of India, the worthy son of the sainted Thomason . . . , bears strong testimony to the influence of Bois teaching, descending to another generation.'

Nearly 40 years after his death in 1793 his surviving scholars erected a tablet to his memory in the chancel of Bois Church. The tablet bears the following inscription: 'He was an able, a learned, and a holy man; always abounding in the work of the Lord in his parish, in his ministry, and in his school, wherein he trained up many, whose praise has since been in all the churches: He was a burning and a shining light, doing the work of an evangelist in season and out of season, that all might repent and be converted unto God. . . .'

'The deepest and most fervid religion in England,' wrote Liddon in

his Life of Pusey, 'during the first three decades of this century was that of the Evangelicals.'⁹ That this was, indeed, the case was due to several factors, one of them (and by no means the least) being the labours of such holy and humble men of God as Thomas Clarke. We must not allow them to be forgotten.

NOTES

¹ Balleine's *A History of the Evangelical Party* (Longman's, 1933 Edition), page 122.

² See the Dictionary of National Biography for articles on Basil Woodd, Edward Burn, Charles Jerram, and William Goode (Senior). Edward Burn ministered at St. Mary's, Birmingham from 1785 till 1837, and for many years was the only evangelical clergyman in that city. Charles Jerram was Rector of Witney from 1834 till 1848. William Goode was the father of the learned evangelical theologian, William Goode (Junior) whom Palmerston appointed to the Deanery of Ripon.

³ See the obituary notice on Thomas Clarke that appeared in *The Evangelical Magazine* for April 1794.

⁴ The writer of the obituary notice referred to in Note 3 adds the following information about Clarke's work as a pastor and preacher:

'Not content with the satisfaction resulting from the necessary discharge of mercenary duty, which in the time of his predecessor was confined to one public service in the week, he preached thrice on the Lord's Day in the church, and once in his own house to as many as would attend. His discourses were remarkable for evangelical simplicity, for affectionate earnestness, and for the striking manner in which he recommended Christ, in all his spiritual dominion, and enforced the necessity of entire conformity to Him in all the beauties of holiness.'

He also makes this comment on Clarke's relations with ministers of other denominations:

'Although conscientiously attached to the Church of England . . . evangelical dissenters were by him highly esteemed; and, convinced of their utility in this country, circumstanced as it is, he embraced every opportunity of contributing to the success of their endeavours to propagate the Gospel.'

⁵ Much of the information in this article is derived from Dr. Romsey's *Reminiscences of a Schoolboy*. Very few copies of this book are now in existence. It was printed by J. Wright, Steam Press, Bristol, and published by Wertheim and Macintosh, Paternoster Row, in 1853.

⁶ An account of Thomason will be found in Handley Moule's *Charles Simeon* (I.V.F., 1965), pages 109-111. There is also a reference to him in Constance Padwick's *Henry Martyn* (I.V.F., 1953), pages 130 and 131. See also the *D.N.B.* article on his son, Sir James Thomason.

⁷ In another letter written from Chesham Bois Thomason describes how Clarke taught his pupils to keep their Quiet Time:

'Being dressed in the morning, let each meditate on the Divine perfections, his dependence upon God, his obligations to obey Him. Let each recollect his own particular defects and weaknesses; and wherein he is most likely to fail in his duties which he owes to God and man; remembering his reliance on the Redeemer for the forgiveness of his sins, and for power to discharge every duty. Having meditated on these subjects, let each separately apply himself to God in prayer, begging that he may have more enlarged views of the extent of God's laws, and of his own sins, whether in temper, words, or actions, entreating for an increase of dependence on the Redeemer in every office, and for ability to discharge every duty, and to suppress every wrong temper.'

⁸ See *The Evangelical Magazine*, April 1794.

⁹ Volume I, page 255. Quoted by Balleine, *op. cit.*, page 212.