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JOHN ELIOT, 1604-1690

Too little is known about this great "Apostle to the Indians" who also, it is probably true to say, was the first Protestant missionary to the native inhabitants of North America. We have no record of the parents of John Eliot or even of his birthplace except that he was born in England in 1604 and evidently reared in a godly home where "his first times" were "seasoned with the fear of God, the Word and prayer"—surely the best start in life which a young child can have. His parents were able to send him to Cambridge University, where as a diligent student he made excellent progress in Greek, Hebrew, Christian theology and the liberal arts. Later he helped a "silenced minister", the Rev. Thomas Hooker, who had started a school at Little Bad-dow, Essex. It was here, as Eliot records, that "the Lord said to my dead soul 'Live', and through the grace of God I do live and I shall live for ever". This very definite spiritual awakening determined young Eliot to devote his life to the ministry of the Gospel. Mr. Hooker was a "Separatist" minister who soon after emigrated to New England and became a most beloved pastor of a church at Hartford, Connecticut, till his death in 1647. Eliot who shared his chief's religious principles, followed his example and arrived in Boston, Massachusetts, at the end of 1631. He then acted as pastor of a Congregational church there, in the absence of the minister; but in the next year he married and served as pastor of a small church in a newly formed town called Roxbury, where a number of his English friends, who had followed him to America, formed his congregation. He remained faithful to this pastorate till his death nearly sixty years later. These religious "exiles" and pioneer settlers received a charter from Charles I granting them the liberty of conscience denied them in their native land, the "principal end" being "to win and excite the natives of that country to the knowledge and obedience of the only true God and Saviour of mankind".

But the colonists were rather slow at implementing this condition and it was not till 1646 that the Massachusetts government passed an Act to encourage missionary work amongst the Indians, although Plymouth Colony had bestirred itself in this way ten years earlier. Meanwhile Eliot became a most studious

and diligent pastor and a very earnest Gospel preacher. He gave much time to the instruction of the young by means of catechisms and by supporting a local grammar school. Although preferring the Congregational discipline, he was not a rigid Independent, since he advocated frequent Synods or Councils which could be appealed to on special occasions. He brought up his six children strictly, "in the fear and admonition of the Lord", and they all became earnest Christians; some of his sons following him in the Ministry and one predeceasing him.

But Eliot's overmastering desire was to evangelise the neighbouring tribes of Indians, twenty nations of whom lived in the territories occupied by the three United Colonies of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut. It was a truly formidable task since they were a very difficult and degraded people to christianise. They were described as "doleful creatures, ignorant, indolent and unenterprising". They could neither read nor write and they worshipped numerous gods, including the devil, whom they propitiated before any serious undertaking. They had no industries or houses and forced their women to do all the manual labour. But Eliot was not discouraged. "God", he said, "first put into my heart a compassion for their poor souls and a desire to teach them to know Christ." He spent years of preparation in studying the difficult Indian languages, and at length published a grammar and by means of an interpreter he laboriously translated the Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and many Scripture texts. At length in 1646 he started his actual task of evangelising by itinerant missionary journeys. He provided "supplies" for his own church during his absences on these evangelistic tours. His first aim was to convict the Indians of sin by explaining the Ten Commandments, and then he preached Christ to them and urged them to repentance. After much careful instruction one chief offered Eliot his eldest son to be educated. Eliot also persuaded the Indians to build a town of their own, and many were brought under deep conviction of sin from his earnest preaching and teaching. But great patience and perseverance were needed. Eliot records the despair of one Indian chief over his past evil life and his lament, "Me little know Jesus Christ". Eliot encouraged him with the assurance that the light may only dawn slowly on the seeking soul and that with further teaching about Christ "the light of day will begin to break in on him". This consecrated "Apostle

to the Indians" gave himself in sympathy and love for these "poor natives" whom he describes as "the dregs of mankind and the saddest spectacles of misery of mere men upon earth". Eliot tried to persuade the Indians to lead useful civilised lives in a community, and to this end he procured them a grant of land where they could build banks and stone walls round their dwellings. The women were taught spinning and useful trades and to help in harvesting. The first town the Christian Indians erected they named Nonanetum or "Rejoicing", and so successful had Eliot's labours been that other Indians further inland desired to be united in a regular community and to receive the Christian Faith. Their chiefs were anxious to put down evil practices like intemperance, adultery, and gambling and to adopt English customs and live peaceably and establish family worship. In June 1647 Eliot preached at Cambridge, New England, to a large assembly of Indians from all parts, and answered their questions; and schools were started where their children were taught the catechism. In this way the evangel spread from place to place and a thorough moral and spiritual reformation was soon evident in changed lives and godly habits and by the observance of the Lord's Day.

Eliot also carried out a fortnightly missionary itinerary in other parts of Massachusetts and preached to as many Indians as would listen, because naturally opposition was encountered and he often had to endure many hardships as the hostile Indians frequently used him barbarously and threatened his life. He writes to the Governor of Plymouth Colony, the Hon. Edward Winslow, telling him: "I have not been dry night or day from Tuesday to Saturday, but have travelled from place to place in that condition, and at night I pull off my boots, wring out my stockings and on with them again and so continue. But God steps in and helps me. I have considered the exhortation of Paul to his son Timothy, 'Endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ'." Nothing daunted him. He told hostile Indian chiefs that he was in the service of the great God and did not fear their threats. Some of the converts were murdered and others escaped to the colonists for safety. But in spite of persecution numbers of Indians embraced the Gospel and by 1651 they had built the town of Natick, near Boston.

Accounts of this successful missionary enterprise reached England and made a deep impression and Parliament greatly

encouraged Eliot and his helpers, and funds were raised for the furtherance of the work and for the education of Indian children. "The Corporation for the propagating of the Gospel in New England" was formed largely through the efforts of the Hon. Robert Boyle, the celebrated scientist, who a little later was one of the founders of the Royal Society and a director of the East India Company, where he sought to propagate the Christian Faith by securing the translation of the New Testament into the Malayan language. Boyle was for twenty-eight years President of this early S.P.G. In 1651 Eliot reported to this missionary society that "the Indians go on, not only in knowledge, but also in the practice and power of grace", and that several had learned to read and write and he was preparing others to act as evangelists to their fellow Indians. Civil government and regular religious worship was established at Natick and the most promising Indian children were put under English schoolmasters. A further settlement was also founded in 1657 at Punkipog near Dorchester. But Eliot proceeded cautiously and it was not till 1660 that a regular Christian Church was formed at Natick and Indian converts baptised and admitted to the Lord's Supper.

At the Restoration attempts were made to seize part of the funds of the S.P.G., but through the efforts of Robert Boyle and Richard Baxter it was restored, and Charles II granted the society a new charter. Eliot did a lasting work in his serious undertaking to translate the Scriptures into the Indian language, the different dialects of which caused him great difficulty. By his persevering labours, in 1661 an edition of the Indian New Testament with marginal references was published. It was printed at Cambridge, Massachusetts, and, as Dr. Cotton Mather rapturously exclaimed, "this is the only Bible that ever was printed in America from the foundation of the World". One of Eliot's biographers truly says that for this great achievement Eliot's name "deserves to be held in perpetual remembrance by the whole Christian community". Eliot then translated religious tracts, beginning with portions of Baxter's *A Call to the Unconverted*. Baxter himself warmly concurred in this undertaking and he commends Eliot's apostolic labours amongst the Indians, declaring that there was "no man on earth whose work is more honourable". "There is", says Baxter, "no employment in the world so desirable in my eyes as to labour for the winning of such miserable souls." Baxter supported

Robert Boyle's efforts to get public church collections to send ministers out to help Eliot in his missionary labours. A little later Eliot published an Indian psalter, several primers and catechisms, while Baxter's *Practice of Piety* was printed in 1665 and a second edition of the Bible in 1685. In order to bring about a concordat and better understanding between the Presbyterians and Independents, Eliot published in 1665 a treatise on Church Government under the title of *Communion of Churches*, in which he advocated the management of Gospel Churches by means of Councils constituted in order according to the Scriptures.

By 1674 Eliot had established fourteen stations or "praying towns" in Massachusetts for the Indians, but the disastrous war in that year between the English colonists and the Indian chief Philip led to great slaughter of the Indian warriors and to the murder of an Indian convert. This unhappy outbreak greatly injured Eliot's missionary work and as a result ten of his "stations" were broken up. But the untiring soldier of the Cross still continued his labours in spite of these serious setbacks until at length the infirmities of age prevented him from making his usual itineraries. His extreme conscientiousness led him to request his Roxbury Church to release him as pastor and appoint his assistant to that post. It was not surprising that the congregation refused this suggestion, declaring that his "very presence was worth a salary". In July 1688 Eliot wrote a farewell letter to his faithful friend and supporter Robert Boyle, telling him that "the work seemeth to my soul to be in and well towards a reviving, and many churches of Christ are in motions to gather into Church Estates, who do carefully keep the sabbath. And out of these professors we do gather up and call in such as are willing to confess Jesus Christ and seek salvation by Him".

At length, unable to continue his ministrations, the aged saint began to "wonder for what the Lord Jesus lets me live, He knows now I can do nothing for Him". But he soon falsified this verdict by catechising some poor negroes, reduced to slavery, who came to him once a week for this purpose. Eliot lived with a vivid expectation of the Second Coming of Christ and his last prayer was that the Lord would "revive the work amongst the Indians that it may live when he was gone". He died early in 1690, two years after his friend Richard Baxter had "joined the triumphant saints that sing Jehovah's praise". The secret of Eliot's success was in a large measure due to his wonderful prayer-life. Often

whole days were set apart for prayer and fasting. "When we would accomplish great things, the best policy", Eliot said, "is to work by an engine of which the world sees nothing." Certainly if all ministers followed Eliot's pastoral method our parishes would be far more blessed. "Come," he was wont to say, "let us not have a visit without a prayer"; "let us pray down the blessing of heaven on your family before we go".

As we should expect from a Bible translator, Eliot was a deep Bible student. The Bible was his necessary food. He had also a great reverence for God's House and "the sabbath day was for him a type and foretaste of heaven". Liberal and charitable, even beyond his means, to all in want and distress, with the aid of his wife's knowledge of physic and surgery, Eliot was able to minister even more effectively to the sick and suffering. In any pastoral conflict his advice was "Brother, bear, forbear and forgive". As his biographer records, "He walked in the light of God's countenance all the day", and had "a continual assurance of divine love, strengthening and refreshing him". It was twelve years after his death that the wonderful work in the seventeenth century of this first S.P.G. was followed by the formation in England in 1702 of the more famous and permanent "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts". But John Eliot, the intrepid pioneer, had blazed the trail.

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