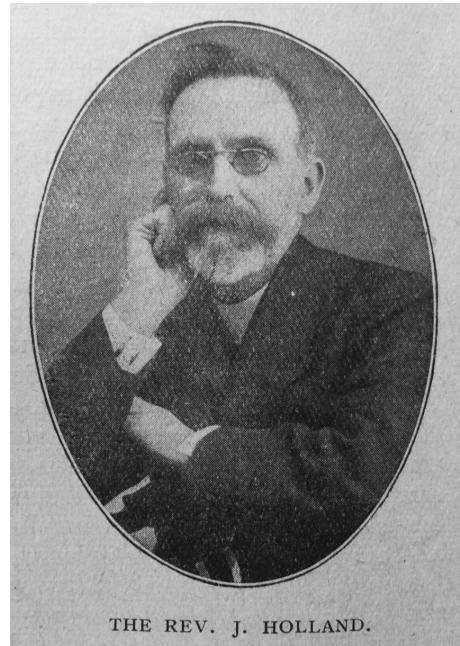


My Testimony

Transcription of article published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Rev. John Holland

I WAS fortunate in being born in a Christian home. My parents were Primitive Methodists, supremely devoted to Jesus Christ and the Church of their choice. It is true they were poor in this world's goods, but they were rich in the things of highest value, faith, goodness and character. Having a family of six children to bring up on a farm labourer's wage, very small in those days, they knew what it was to do without many things regarded as necessities, but they also knew that "Godliness with contentment is great gain."



My father was a local preacher, and more than forty years ago, living on the outskirts of a wide circuit, had long journeys to go to his appointments, but he always went. I remember many a Sunday when in the morning he would have several hours work to do feeding cattle, milking etc., and then after an early dinner would start off on a long journey for services afternoon and evening. The milking at the farm at night would be done by my mother so that he might take both services. Sometimes on the Sunday night I, as the eldest, would sit up to keep mother company. When it was getting late she would say: "Open the door and listen if your father is coming." Invariably I had to go to the door two or three times before I could hear him. He always came singing his favourite hymn, "Jesus, the Name high over all," and as he approached the cottage we could hear him singing the last verse :

"Happy if with my latest breath
I may but gasp His name.
Preach Him to all and cry in death
Behold! Behold the Lamb!"

I thank God for those early memories of that cottage home, memories that have cheered and helped me in many a difficult hour since those days. and that are an inspiration to me still.

When I was eleven years of age, mother went home to God. The days that followed were days of darkness and difficulty. We had a hard struggle. As there were five younger than myself I had to go to work. Father desired to give us a good education but so far as I was concerned it was impossible. When I was twelve I had to rise soon after 4.30., get some breakfast and tramp two miles to work on a farm from six in the morning till six at night for eightpence a day. By the time I was fourteen I was tired of being a farm labourer, so left home, much against my father's wishes and obtained a situation in the neighbourhood of Birmingham.

The next three years were spent in hotels as billiard-marker, boots, etc. Away from the restraint of home and my father's influence I forgot God and turned my back on the Sanctuary. When I was seventeen I was looking after and training greyhounds for a wealthy gentleman who had retired from business and whose hobby was in keeping and racing some of the most valuable greyhounds in

England. I attended the great coursing matches in various parts of the country and on every occasion one or other of our dogs was a winner. At this period I was doing fairly well from a financial standpoint, but was always a bit independent and one day smarting under a sense of injustice I threw up my employment and left. I had a few pounds saved, but could not get work and my money rapidly disappeared. Day after day I answered advertisements only to find after walking many miles that another was before me.

Three times I tried to enlist but was rejected because I was not big enough round the chest and was under age. When things were at their worst I received a letter from my father urging me to go home till I could get work. I gladly went for I was nearly penniless and had learnt what it was to be hungry. Almost immediately I obtained a berth of a different kind, to "live in," not far from home. I had two horses to look after, and deliver groceries and provisions round the countryside.

The first week wherever I went I saw bills in the windows and on walls announcing the School Anniversary Services in our Chapel at Brownhills. For four years I had been but rarely inside a chapel, and each time I saw one of these bills something within me said, "You ought to go." That voice became so insistent during the week that on the Saturday I determined to attend this anniversary. I was to be paid monthly and I did not care to ask for a "sub" at the end of my first week so that Sunday morning found me with only three pennies in my possession. However, after attending to the horses and having breakfast I walked to Brownhills little thinking that that day was to be the beginning of a new life for me. I sat in one corner of the gallery and saw the children take their places on the platform. And then a strange thing happened, old scenes and memories came crowding back. I was again a little lad going to Sunday school. I was getting ready for our anniversary. Recitations I had given on these occasions came to me and I found myself quietly repeating them: then I heard distinctly my sainted mother praying that I might be good and grow up to preach the Gospel of the Grace of God, and my father saying "Amen." The contrast between what mother had prayed I might be and what I was filled me with shame. I was miserable and heart-broken and did not know what to do. As the service proceeded I became more miserable, and then at last there came a message for me. The preacher was the Rev. James Davies, now superannuated at Presteign, and his text was, "This is my friend," and as he was concluding his sermon he looked straight at the corner of the gallery where I was sitting and said: "If there's a young man here this morning who desires to make Jesus his friend he need not wait for a prayer-meeting to-night. Let him open the door of his heart now, and let the Master in." What happened I don't know and cannot describe. A new experience came to me. New resolves were made and a new joy filled my heart to overflowing. Somehow I knew that Jesus' was MY friend and MY Saviour. The collection was made and I gave one of my three pennies. I hurried back, fed my horses, had dinner, and then hunted in the bottom of my trunk for a little Bible that had lain unread there for nearly four years. After reading a chapter I knelt down and prayed and then went to the afternoon service.

Mr. J. Grontage preached from Psalm 48. 12-14. "Walk about Zion" etc. It was a great uplift for me, and the second of my pennies went in the collection plate. I walked two miles to tea, did my work, read another chapter and prayed, then returned for the evening service. The chapel was packed. I sat on a bench in the aisle. The Rev. J Davies preached on "The Plant of Renown." I had a great time. I gave my last penny at the collection and so commenced the new life with an empty pocket but with the joy of the Lord in my heart. It was the last Sunday in April, 1887, when I met with Jesus and enrolled in His service.

The next week I joined our Church at Walsall Wood where there was a fine band of godly young miners who helped me much by their comradeship and counsels. I began to testify in class meetings, band meetings and open-air services. Three months later I began to preach. My first attempt was with my father in the little chapel at Spring Hill where I had gone so often as a lad. The text was: "One thing I know that whereas I was blind now I see." There was much I did not know, but I knew that Christ had saved me.

Soon afterwards I went to reside in Birmingham and was brought under the influence of the Rev. W. Wright for which I shall never cease to be grateful. He encouraged me, helped me, put me on the plan, and stimulated my desires for self-improvement. Another to whom I owe a debt of gratitude was a local preacher, Mr. Edmund Hall, who like myself came from the Lichfield Circuit to Birmingham. He and his good wife always made me welcome in their home and he spent many an hour trying to teach me Homiletics. A few months after the Rev. W. Wright had removed to Church Gresley Station he sent for me join him as Hired Local Preacher. In order that he might help me in my studies he received me into his home, and for six months I lived there and shared his study. What that meant to me I can never say. The kindness of Mr. Wright and his sainted wife to me in those days is one of the most precious memories of my life. Next to my own father I owe, under God, more to William Wright than to any other man. While with him I was recommended for the ministry and in 1890 passed the candidates' examination, and the Conference of that year gave me the Lamb Scholarship. When my father heard of the latter he said he wished to see me. I went home, and he took me to the bottom of the garden and said: "There is something I wish to tell you. When your mother and I were married my wages were only ten and sixpence a week, but we made a vow that whatever we went without we would always pay our class money and have a little for the collections, and that the preachers should always be welcome to share what we had in the home. When your mother died, though I was only having fifteen shillings a week and there were six of you, that vow was kept. And since her death I have tried as often as I could to add her class money to mine in memory of her. I did not know where the money was coming from to send you to college and when I heard they had given you the scholarship, I knelt down and said: "Lord I have not been able to do much for Thy cause but I have done what I could, and now Thou hast given it me all back and more in what Thou hast done for my lad." That day I had a glimpse of the great soul of my father. It humbled me and made me desire to prove worthy of such parentage. It was a great joy to him when after a year in college I went to commence my ministry on my home, the Lichfield, Circuit: and it was a great joy to me during my two years there to see him so often in the congregation and to have him occasionally planned with me at camp meetings. He is with God but his influence is upon me still. "Thou hast given me the heritage of those that fear Thy Name."

References

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