

Rev. William Swift

Transcription of obituary published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Thomas Large

The death of a good man at any time is a loss to society: his personal effort, pious example, and general deportment make themselves felt; and the cessation of such influences necessarily causes a void. But when a good man dies full of years and honours, having served his God and his generation, according to the will of God, he falls as a shock of corn fully ripe, ready for the Master's garner, and an autumnal glory tinges the circumstances and sheds a mellow lustre over the scene. Widely different, however, are the scenes of a young man's death and the feelings occasioned by such an event, especially when that young man gives promise of more than ordinary piety, ability, or usefulness. Like an early summer flower, nipt by some stray frost that has out-tarried its kindred, and with one fell stroke levelled to the ground, leaving its place vacant ere its perfume had enriched the spot where it grew or its beauty repaid the hand that tended it, so a young minister suddenly removed from the scene of his labours leaves the world ere the hopes of the church have been realised, or the fruits of his labour gathered in. Such was the case with the subject of this brief sketch.

William Swift was born at Melton Mowbray, December 31st, 1843. At the time of his birth his parents were not connected with any religious community, but had the reputation of being honest, virtuous people. His father was a journeyman shoemaker by trade, and often suffered much through scarcity of employment, in consequence of which he removed with his family to Bourne in Lincolnshire, when William was about three years old; here he spent two or three years with little better success than at Melton, whither he returned in 1849, and shortly afterwards he and his wife joined the Primitive Methodist Society, and sent their children to the Sabbath-school.

Here our acquaintance with our departed friend commenced, and here also the principal features which characterised his after life began to develop themselves. He applied himself closely to his lessons, and soon found his way to the top of the first class, while such was his cheerful obedience to the rules of the school, his devout and serious attention at the services of the sanctuary, that he exerted a considerable influence over the minds of the other scholars; the superintendent states that he was a scholar six years, during which time he was absent only thirteen noons, was uniformly a good boy, and in no single instance had he to correct or chastise him.

Early in the year 1859 some special services were held in the Wesleyan chapel, and a number of young people were converted. William, with others went, and while there the Holy Spirit operated powerfully upon his mind; he saw and felt that he needed something he had not as yet realised, and in penitence of soul he wept and prayed, but such was his sense of the enormity of sin that it was some time ere he could be brought to believe that there was mercy for him; when, however, he was enabled to cast his soul by simple faith upon the atonement, and God for Christ's sake pardoned his sins, he gave unmistakable proof of the change which had been wrought in him; he boldly and manfully told his former associates that he had given himself to the Lord Jesus Christ, and could no longer take part in the amusements they had previously mutually enjoyed; he made a profession of religion, and strove to live cut that profession before the world, and succeeded.

For a few weeks he met in class with the Wesleyans, and probably would have continued to do so, but his father remarked one day that he would rather he belonged to our people than the family might not be divided, but he would leave it to his own judgment. He reasoned the matter over, and came to the conclusion that as he was only fifteen years old it would adorn religion as much to obey his parents, as to

abide by the cause that had been the means of his conversion, and disregard the desire of his father to preserve the unity of the family. He therefore went to the class-leader and thanked him for the advice he had given him and the solicitude he had manifested for his welfare, telling him that he should leave his class and join the denomination to which his parents belonged, as he felt it his duty to afford them all the comfort he could. Accordingly on the following Sabbath morning I found him at my class, and from that time to the period when he left to enter the ministry, I found him one of the brightest specimens of intelligent, consistent Christianity it has been my lot to meet with.

About a year after our brother's conversion the officials of the circuit thought he might be useful as a preacher, and decided upon giving him appointments on the plan. This was a time of great trial to him, he had been brought up to help his father from the time he was first able to do anything, and his education had been to a great extent neglected, and now he felt his deficiencies. He resolved, however, to do the best he could, and every moment he could possibly spare found him at his books, or upon his knees; and not unfrequently have his friends been aroused in the long hours of the night by his strong cries and pleadings at the throne of grace as he dedicated himself to God and sought Divine help in the great work he had undertaken. Beside this he spent an hour early in the morning, five days in the week, with a friend who engaged to devote a little time to directing his studies, as well as attending to his daily occupation. And God did bless him, he succeeded beyond the expectation of his most sanguine friends; congregations heard him gladly, and wherever he went he was asked for again. Being short of stature, and of slender build, he looked like a boy in the pulpit, and many were amazed when they heard him preach, and felt the influence that attended his preaching. And in the neighbourhood around, other denominations, as well as other circuits in our own, sought his services.

In June, 1862, the Ashby-de-la-Zouch circuit, wanting a young man, applied to the authorities of this station for his services, as they having heard of brother Swift were anxious to take him out. The required documents were unhesitatingly given, and after seeking Divine direction our friend, believing it would be right to comply with the call of the church, gave himself up to the work and entered upon his new sphere of labour July 19th, in the same year. On arriving at Ashby he felt more than ever the importance of the work, and with fear and trembling committed himself to God, while he laboured for the promotion of his glory, pursuing his studies with the same assiduity as before, "studying to show himself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth;" nor did he labour long without producing effect. Although his career was short, a goodly number will be the crown of his rejoicing in the day of the Lord.

Soon after entering the ministry he was called to endure a heavy affliction; his father was taken ill and suffered under acute disease for several months, and while bells were ringing, bands playing, and the whole nation giving expressions of joy at the marriage of the Prince of Wales, his happy spirit took its flight to the Paradise of God, March 10th, 1863, thus not only bereaving our brother of paternal assistance and advice, but leaving to his solicitude a widowed mother and an orphan sister. This stroke he felt acutely, but he did not relax his efforts; his constant aim appeared to be to become a useful minister of the Lord Jesus Christ. One of the ministers who succeeded him (the Rev. James Norton), in a letter to the writer, says, "I had not the pleasure of knowing brother Swift. I am not aware that I ever saw him, nevertheless, I do not hesitate to affirm that of all the young men I have followed in circuits, or heard friends speak of, during the twenty years of my ministry, I have never known one whose praise was so much in all the churches, one against whom less fault was spoken, or one for whom so deep a respect was expressed generally."

As the district meeting approached he became very anxious about passing his examination, and expressed some fear that he should be below par; he, however, passed through creditably, was planned to preach at

the Camp Meeting, and many will not soon forget the clear enunciation of bold masculine thought, in language truly eloquent, by such a youth, while scores of heaving breasts and tearful eyes bore testimony to the deep emotions aroused by it.

The Conference of 1863 stationed him at Newark, whither he removed at the usual changing time; he commenced labouring as before, and soon began to make himself felt; congregations increased, the hearts of the people were affected, and good was done; with an efficient active superintendent, and such a second preacher, the officials hoped for good days for Primitive Methodism in the town and neighbourhood. Alas! for human hopes, the long journeys and consequent tax upon the physical system soon began to act unfavourably upon our brother. But no serious results were expected; even he hoped to become sufficiently inured to it to serve the circuit at least for one year; but the constant weariness he experienced made him feel unwell, and although he continued to fulfil his duties the labour told fearfully upon him. On Sunday, October 18th, he preached missionary sermons, and the following week attended a round of meetings; he came home weary and unwell, but preached anniversaries at Sutton, on the 25th. The following day he was so much worse that it was deemed advisable to call in medical aid; on Tuesday Mr. Price called upon him and found him very much worse, prayed with him, and he responded heartily and fervently, but towards evening delirium manifested itself, and the following day he became quite insensible, when the doctor declared his disease to be brain fever. His mother was immediately sent for, and everything that human skill could devise was done, but such was the rapid progress of the disease that he died on Sunday, November 1st, in the 20th year of his age.

It would perhaps ill become us to indulge in any laudatory remarks of a person so young, and one who had seen so little service, but thousands who live to riper years are not so well worthy of our imitation and admiration as the youth whose death we record; and though his sun went down ere it was mid-day, his light will long shine in the circles where he was known. One circumstance will show the influence he exerted in the town where he last lived; he had been there only a few days more than three months, and the doctor said to his host on one of his visits, "Who is this young man, Mr. Bell? everybody is asking how he is." That a youth should go into a town like Newark, an entire stranger, and in addition to traversing an extensive circuit, should have made himself so thoroughly known and respected in the town in so short a time, shows him to have been an extraordinary youth. Having known our brother for some years, and seen in him those traits of character which cannot fail to recommend themselves, I may be pardoned if I say of him, as Shakespeare has said, He was a youth, "take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again." That God may raise up an army of young men for our ministry of similar piety, talents, and industry, is the prayer of THOMAS LARGE.

References

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