

Rev. George Welbourn

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Mr. GEORGE WELBOURN, itinerant minister. There is little in which our thoughts can be occupied with greater advantage than in the contemplation of character, If it be exhibited in its true colours, free from false glosses on the one hand, and from dark misrepresentations on the other, it can scarcely fail to be instructive and profitable. Do we contemplate the character and end of the ambitious, the libertine, the profane, and the impious, we behold that which is degrading and terrific and calculated to deter us from the pursuit of vice; but when we view the life and death of a true Christian, if our minds are rightly disposed, we are attracted by what is truly great and good, by what is accompanied with a thousand blessings in this life, and which will be crowned with the reward of heaven in the life to come. Doubtless much of the stimulus given to the cause of religion from age to age may be attributed to the biographical records of those with whom piety and usefulness, formed the chief end of living. These attributes belonged to the character of the subject of the following sketch. During the best portion of his life he lived to serve God, and to be useful in his day and generation.

George Welbourn, the son of George and Hannah Welbourn, was born at Hessle, near Hull, Yorkshire, on October 14th, 1811. When very young he was the subject of serious thoughts and impressions, which appear to have been originated under God by maternal influence; but when he was about six years of age, it pleased the Almighty to take away his pious mother, and then he had no one who sought to deepen his religious impressions. He was afterwards heard to say that he was not a good child. Being the subject of strong passions, and possessing a great flow of spirits, he manifested qualities, and exhibited conduct which are found in most children of similar temperament; who, in order to prevent them from being carried into extremes by the impulses of their nature, require to be made objects of special care. What wisdom and patience parents need? What fine discrimination, and calm judgment, and firm decision, combined with great forbearance are required by them; for, not unfrequently, they have as many kinds of dispositions and tempers to deal with, as is the number of their children, and these require diversified treatment, which however, when properly applied, is generally followed by beneficial effects.

George Welbourn had a pious mother who understood how to promote his religious education; and though he became wicked beyond an ordinary degree, he considered, in after life, that good results might sooner have attended his early religious impressions had his mother been spared. Alluding to her death, and to his own peculiar position after it had occurred, he said, "I had no one then to lead me towards God; had I had some one to do so, it might have been better with me." Oh! who can tell the value of a pious mother, especially if she have intelligence in connection with piety.

Though brother Welbourn's mind, when a child, was religiously impressed, yet losing his pious mother while young, he lived in an unconverted state till the year 1828, During the former part of this year, his religious impressions being revived, he went to hear Mary Burks, one of our female itinerant preachers; and when in the early part of the service, she exclaimed "*Believe!*" brother Welbourn, who was seeking the Lord, was enabled to believe and then realized an interest in God's pardoning mercy. But the next day, through intercourse with a work-fellow, he lost his evidence of the Divine favour; but about Whitsuntide in the same year he regained the blessing he had lost, and yet, alas! he again fell into a backsliding state, by getting intoxicated at the close of harvest. This is one instance amongst thousands, of the ensnaring effects of those drinking customs which have long been, and still are, a great curse to the church, and to the world. Brother Welbourn having thus fallen into gross public sin, he gave himself up to profligate habits, very seldom visiting the house of God for two years and a half.

In the spring of 1831, he again sought the Lord with many groans and prayers, and although the struggle was hard, God in mercy received him, and restored unto him the joy of his salvation. It has often happened that those persons who have been energetic and valiant in sin, have, when converted, turned their determinate spirits with more than ordinary zeal to religious pursuits; and in not a few instances, such persons have been called to the work of the ministry. So it was with brother Welbourn, who was soon appointed to speak in public; for in the year 1832, he was employed to call his fellow-sinners to repentance. When he commenced this work, he was no little concerned lest it should not be his province to enter upon such a sphere of labour. This probably arose in part from the fact that he had twice made shipwreck of faith, and partly from a consciousness of his unfitness for the work, knowing his ignorance of many subjects with which it is well for a preacher of the gospel to be acquainted; but in the midst of many fears, he obeyed the call of God and the church. And so it should be, a truly converted man—one who has himself felt the influence of the gospel on his heart—when probably called to preach the word which has been salvation to him, must not refuse compliance, simply because he cannot all at once do according to his wishes. It is his duty to obey; and with the Bible in his hand, and the spirit of God in his heart, to go and spread the doctrines of the cross, that others may taste the grace that has saved him. Thus brother Welbourn decided; for though to commence preaching was a heavy cross to him, he took it up, and in the name of God began a course of zealous labour which closed only in the affliction that terminated his life.

During the year 1835 he was engaged in the itinerant work by the Hull circuit, being first sent to Barnard Castle for a few weeks; and from thence he removed to Whitehaven. At this time he was afresh assailed with fears that he should not be able to succeed in the work upon which he had entered. He felt that to be wholly given up to the ministry was different to speaking occasionally in the pulpits where he was known; the people would expect more from him as a regular minister, and he would often appear before the same congregation, and therefore would need a variety of matter with which to feed the people. I have heard him say, that at this time he had often thoughts of leaving his station, and of returning to his plough and spade. But he tugged on at his studies, and in the various active duties that devolved upon him, and God graciously assisted him, so that he soon became a very acceptable young preacher, and had the pleasure of seeing his labours owned in the good of the church, and in the conversion of souls. After spending a year at Whitehaven, he was stationed on a mission at Norwich; where, amid abundant labours, mental and physical, and sometimes in much persecution, he continued two years. There, on one occasion, he was stoned by a mob while preaching in the open air. From Norwich he removed to Brigg, in Lincolnshire, where he remained two years, and then to Barton for one year, increasing in acceptability, and giving proof that he was a workman that needed not to be ashamed.

In October 1841, brother Welbourn entered into matrimonial alliance with Miss Jane Parker, daughter of James Parker, then a local preacher at Brigg; after which he laboured at Scarborough, Swinefleet, York, and Pontefract, two years in each station. At Scarborough, though there was no extraordinary revival under his labours, yet, he was popular and useful. In Swinefleet circuit there was a glorious work whilst he was stationed there. A great revival began under the labours and tears of his predecessor, brother Featherstone, who has gone to his reward, and it was further promoted by brother Welbourn; so that from the time of his entering that circuit to the time of his leaving it, there was an increase of 241 members. Brother North says, "He was well beloved by the people, was an acceptable and soul-saving preacher," and that "his name is embalmed in many hearts."

Though brother Welbourn was a strong athletic man, his constitution in a few years gave way before the labours into which his energetic soul unceasingly pushed him. His impassioned spirit could scarcely be restrained; and its fiery operations were too consuming for the earthly house in which it dwelt long to sustain uninjured. Blazing forth, it seemed to carry him irresistibly before its burning impulses, and thereby

shortened his days. During his first year in the Pontefract circuit, both his colleagues, brothers Featherstone and Maw, were taken from his side by death; after which, for a considerable time, he worked the circuit by himself, though it had previously been the scene of three preachers' labours. Many of his brethren questioned the propriety of his doing so; and certainly it was not the most prudent plan to adopt, for the labours he thus endured, notwithstanding his shattered constitution, could not have been well borne by him in the best of his days. He was in a few months laid aside by sickness; this was the case repeatedly afterwards, and for six months prior to leaving that circuit for Burnley, he had not preached a single sermon. When he came to Burnley he began to preach again; and by the number of his appointments on the sabbath being limited to two, and being lessened as much as practicable on work-days, he was enabled to continue his labours a little more than six months. His last public effort was on the missionary platform at Burnley, when, as usual, he unrestrainedly threw himself into the matter of his address, and spoke with his accustomed warmth and energy; after which he retired home, and sunk under the strength of his disorder, to rise no more.

As to his intellectual character, it may be said that he possessed a mind of more than ordinary strength. His studies had not been very various; but he had much native talent, and withal, what may be fitly designated uncommon mental nerve. All who were well acquainted with him know that he did not observe great niceties in his remarks on some occasions, when satisfied of their truthfulness. Though some of his phrases and illustrations lacked good taste, yet, inasmuch as they possessed strength, and point, and appropriateness, he betrayed not the least fear or delicacy in putting them forth, even in the presence of persons of quite different casts of mind and habits. He was a man of impassioned feeling, lively imagination, and great fluency of speech; and his mind found congeniality and scope in imaginative exercises, while his thoughts were often dressed in a garb of figures, similes, and lengthened comparisons, which were generally appropriate and pithy.

From what has just been said, it may be supposed that his ministry was of a character somewhat peculiar. Every man's work bears the impress of his intellect and heart. Brother Welbourn's preaching was not marked by any extraordinary acuteness and depth; but his thoughts, often highly condensed, sustained by scriptural truth, and adorned by rather novel figures and comparisons, were delivered with peculiar facility of expression and association, and mostly with great warmth and energy, so that they proved very impressive. When preaching on such subjects as, "The Prodigal Son," "The Sluggard," and what he termed "The Great Lie,"—grounding in the latter instance his discourse on the words of the serpent to Eve, "Ye shall not surely die,"—his observations were equally striking and thrilling. When he enjoyed his usual freedom, he exercised great command over the passions of the people, alternately melting them into tears and exciting their smiles. His aim was to grasp the gist of his subject, and then to invest it with such a garb as would at once interest and profit. He was also uncommonly out-spoken on any subject that required plain dealing. When reproofing the faults of professors of religion—when speaking against flagrant vices, and addressing the consciences of impenitent sinners, he was accustomed to deal out heavy blows. The writer once heard him on a missionary platform speak with peculiar power on the duty of professing Christians to support the missionary enterprise. And how closely did he press the duty—how did he thrash the parsimony and half-heartedness of many wealthy persons towards the missionary cause; and what an awful picture he drew of the condition of mankind, partly on account of the lack of feeling and liberality on the part of those wealthy persons. Then he launched out into dissertation on the probable judicial dealings of God with such persons, telling them that if they would not listen to the groans and cries of perishing humanity, if they would not yield to the Divine claims, God might soon empty their purses and bags, and drain from them far more in the form of *affliction*—a broken leg and doctors' bills—than liberal contributions would amount to. Numbers have retired from hearing him enlightened, convicted, and improved. He was an earnest minister of the New Testament.

After his cessation from active labour, he lingered at Burnley from March till near Midsummer last, obtaining medical aid, and using all means in his power for the purpose of his recovery; but being advised by two of the faculty to remove, as the air of Lancashire was injurious to him in his feeble state of health, he went to Hesse, the place of his birth, the place of his conversion, and which also proved to be the place of his death. Here he languished for nearly four months, the subject of heavy affliction. The large discharges from an abscess which had formed in his lungs often well nigh choked him. Alternately hopes were entertained and fears felt respecting what would be the issue, as sometimes, in the intervals between the discharges, he appeared much better; but the hopes were only raised to be disappointed, for his disease triumphed over all the means employed to arrest its progress.

During most of the time of his last affliction he appeared to be under a cloud, his mind being subject to a degree of gloom. This cloud, however, was destined shortly to flit away for ever, and to be succeeded by bright sunshine and the glory of the beatific vision. Through the rough and dark valley along which he had to travel, and in the fiery furnace of affliction through which he had to pass, his confidence in God was unshaken, and he was anxious to be fully resigned to the Divine will, and to enjoy a complete fitness for the inheritance of the saints in light. Those two beautiful, and to him very appropriate verses of Wesley, often expressed his feelings and wishes :—

“O what are all my sufferings here,
If, Lord, thou count me meet
With that enraptur’d host t’ appear,
And worship at thy feet?

Give joy or grief, give ease or pain,
Take life or friends away,
But let me find them all again
In that eternal day.”

In the last week of his life he was strongly tempted by the adversary of his soul; but it was the final conflict, the upshot of his strugglings with spiritual foes, in which the enemy was foiled, and our dear brother was more than conqueror. The day before that on which he left the world he was very happy, and said to his wife, “I am as happy as I can be.” He was nearing the heavenly shore; the celestial port was coming into view; the storm was hushed, the clouds had fled; and now he was about to have a calm entrance into the haven of eternal repose, surrounded by the brightness, and peace, and stillness of the heavenly country. His mind now dwelt on celestial themes. Earth now had little interest for him, and hence his conversation was in heaven, from whence he looked for the coming of the Lord Jesus. About half an hour before he died, he spoke to an acquaintance about getting ready for eternity, and urged her to meet him in heaven; and as she passed out of the room he exclaimed, “Another sinner saved by grace.” To a pious friend he said, “See that you hold fast.” This he uttered with great earnestness. A few minutes before he died he wished to be lifted out of bed, which was done; and being laid down again, he gazed smilingly on the countenance of a friend, and delivered up his soul into the hands of his Redeemer, on October 1st, 1850. Thus died brother George Welbourn in the 39th year of his age, leaving a wife and four small children to lament their loss:

“Go, child of darkness, see a Christian die!
No horror pales his lip or dims his eye;
No fiend-shaped phantoms of destruction start
The hope religion pillows on his heart,
When with a faltering hand he waves adieu!

To all who love so well and weep so true;
Meek as an infant to the mother's breast,
Turns, fondly longing for its wonted rest,
He pants for where congenial spirits stray.
Turns to his God, and sighs his soul away."

THOMAS CROMPTON

Burnley, October 28th, 1850.

References

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