

Rev. John Webster

Transcription of obituary published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Martha Webster

JOHN WEBSTER was born at Morley, near Leeds, on December 26th, 1826. His mother was a woman of rare excellence and sterling piety, and from the earliest dawn of reason in her children, she sought to train them for God. Her eldest child, John, partook largely of his mother's principles and disposition, and while she was prayerfully instructing him in Divine things, he eagerly drank in her instructions, and the result was that before he was fourteen years of age he became a decided follower of the Lord Jesus, and a member in the same class in which his mother had met for many years among the Primitive Methodists at Morley. He soon became deeply interested in the prosperity of the society generally, but especially of the Sabbath school with which he had been connected from infancy, and in which he rose successively from a scholar to be a teacher, secretary, and assistant-superintendent.

Meanwhile he attended diligently to the cultivation of his own mind and heart, availing himself of all possible means to promote his personal growth in grace, and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. In a private band-meeting such a glorious baptism of the Holy Ghost was vouchsafed that under its influence he gave himself fully to God, and from that time lived in the enjoyment of that "perfect love which casteth out fear." So much did his profiting appear unto all, that at the March quarterly meeting, 1846, he was proposed as a candidate for the preachers' plan, and as a preacher on trial God made him a blessing to many souls. His thoughts and desires now turned towards the itinerant ministry, but he spoke not of it to his most intimate friends, but acted out the injunction of the psalmist, "Commit thy way unto the Lord, trust also in him, and he shall bring it to pass." God honoured his confidence, opened his way, and thus gave him the desire of his heart, and from this time his sole ambition was to make full proof of his ministry, and live and die a Primitive Methodist minister.

In 1847, the authorities of Wrockwardine circuit applied to the conference held at Halifax for a young man for the ministry, when the late Rev. G. Bagley recommended the subject of this memoir, who was at once communicated with, and regarding the call as from God, he consented to go, and immediately entered upon the important duties of the Christian ministry. His superintendent was the late Rev. J. Petty, who he found had kindly opened his way all through the circuit. In this circuit he laboured hard, and he and his colleagues realised an encouraging amount of success; and at the March quarterly meeting, he was requested to stay another year, but deeming that a change would be best for the circuit and himself, he declined the invitation, though as long as he lived he cherished the most grateful remembrance of the kindness he received in this station.

His next three stations were Tunstall, Bishop's Castle, and Minsterly. In each of these stations he was deeply respected, and he saw many sinners converted

On July 19th, 1853, he married Martha, the youngest surviving daughter of the late Mr. Sankey, of Rorrington Hall, who still survives to mourn her loss, and who in compliance with his often expressed desire, is now penning this inadequate sketch of his life. He then removed to the Brierley Hill circuit, where he pursued the even tenor of his way, labouring on at God's command, and offering all his works to Him. He was appointed to Hadnall in 1855, and while he was working to bring the societies generally into a healthy, vigorous state, his wife and Mr. J. Powell, sen., circuit steward, were united and constant in their prayers for an abundant outpouring of the Holy Ghost upon the whole circuit; God gave them the assurance that he would visit his people, and thus was laid the foundation of that uninterrupted prosperity which that circuit has enjoyed to the present time.

His next station was Whitchurch branch, which was shortly afterwards made into a circuit. As was his wont, he here consecrated his service unto the Lord, and probably realised a greater amount of visible success on this station than any other during his superintendency; and when he left the oldest officials were unanimous in affirming that they never knew the station in such a generally healthy and prosperous state.

Sandbach was his next station. The Lord was with him here, so that at the end of two years he had not only sustained the circuit, but very successfully managed the building of three excellent chapels, and reported an increase of twenty-two members. Here his unrelenting toil began to tell upon a constitution never very robust ; but upon his removal to Bishop's Castle circuit he nearly recovered his former energy. In this town our success had been seriously hindered by the want of a new chapel. His predecessor had taken steps to secure this object, but the difficulties being deemed insurmountable, the attempt was given up. Mr. Webster believed that to build this chapel was the great work which God had led him to this circuit to do; he therefore concentrated all his energies upon it, and by dint of tact, perseverance, and courtesy, he succeeded in erecting a commodious and beautiful sanctuary, worthy of a circuit town, and placing it in such circumstances, that in a very few years it will be free from debt ; and the cherished anticipations of spiritual good resulting from this work have been pleasingly realised.

In 1864 he was appointed to Congleton circuit, where a great depression in the silk trade for several years had induced such poverty and distress as was scarcely exceeded in any town during the Lancashire famine, His loving spirit entered deeply into the trials of the people; he endeavoured to lessen their anxieties, to lighten their burdens, and relieve their necessities. Very many of the officials and members left the circuit in search of employment, so that despite of his utmost efforts he saw the circuit declining. Meanwhile, the cattle plague swept over the country parts, inducing anxiety there scarcely less than in the town. No wonder that he broke down under this accumulated burden; his illness assumed the form of rheumatic fever, which resulted in a diseased heart. Notwithstanding which he had no sooner regained a degree of strength than he was active as ever in his Master's work. In 1865, the district meeting relieved the circuit of a marriageable preacher, and such were the financial prospects, that the officials decided not to call out another young man in his place, so that my husband was left single-handed in the field. In order to make up this lack of service to the people, he, if possible, redoubled his efforts, and this was manifestly at the risk of his life.

His next station was Prees Green, when through comparative freedom from anxiety, pure country air, good homes, and aided by an efficient colleague, he hoped in some measure to recruit his exhausted strength, but it was too late. Only for a few weeks did he engage in his beloved employment, when he was compelled to retire, and at the conference of 1868, he requested superannuation. Providence directed his steps to Ludlow as the place of his location, where in the daily companionship of the Rev. W. Chubb, whom he loved and looked up to for more than twenty years as a father, and amid an increasing circle of loved and loving friends, his remaining days passed happily and usefully away. He was able to preach though not to walk; and such was his willingness to serve other churches, when not occupying our own pulpits, that for ten months he had only one vacant Sabbath. In August last his health began more visibly to decline, yet on more than one occasion he conducted public service in the sanctuary, when his feebleness excited the sympathy of the whole congregation. It was observed and remarked by some that he was fast ripening for heaven, and that he would be soon at home with God, and so he was.

On Sunday, November 21st, he was planned to preach anniversary sermons at Orlton Common, and though he had not been able to preach for some weeks, his heart seemed so much set upon going there, that when a friend sought to dissuade him from it, I requested his friend to desist, believing that the disappointment would do him more harm than the exertion requisite. He praised God for being permitted once more to

preach Christ, while the whole man seemed more like an inhabitant of heaven come down to earth than a mortal like ourselves. We were driven to the chapel, when he took the whole of the afternoon service, and assisted me at night, after which he was so much exhausted that it was with difficulty he climbed the bank to the friend's house, who kindly entertained us for the night. In the morning he was bright and cheerful as ever, and enjoyed the drive home very much, but soon after complained of weariness; but this being deemed a reaction after the previous day's excitement, did not create alarm, as we thought he would rally in a few days. He had suffered much for several days from oppression on his breath, and a bad cough, which we attributed to a severe cold. When we retired to rest on Wednesday night, we did not think him any worse, but I awoke a little after two o'clock, and found him sitting up; he said he had not slept, and after a little conversation he lay down, when I noticed a change in his breathing, and spoke, but there was no answer; I raised his head, but he was not, for God had taken him.

The overwhelming sense of the divine presence which filled my soul is indescribable. I felt indeed that God was there, and that unto my beloved partner had been granted an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He slept in Jesus, November 25th, 1869, in the forty-third year of his age, the twenty-third of his ministry, and the thirtieth of his church membership. His remains were borne to their last resting-place, in the Congregational graveyard, Ludlow, by six local preachers, when the Revs. W. Chubb, J. Timmins, B. Salt (Primitives); J. W. Bundle (Wesleyan); and J.T. Grey (Congregational), took part in the mournful service. As an evidence of the respect and esteem which he had won here in the short space of fourteen months, upwards of thirty tradesmen and others from the Congregationalist, Wesleyan, and Primitive congregations, wearing hat-bands, etc. furnished at their own expense, followed the body to the grave.

As a husband he was kind; as a man he was upright, honourable, conscientious, always approachable, while the children everywhere claimed him as their own special, personal friend; as a total abstainer he was firm and enlightened; as a preacher he was generally acceptable, being systematical, sound, pointed, and practical, possessing a good voice and pleasing address; as a colleague he was considerate and courteous; as a superintendent he was patient, punctual, prudent, attentive, impartial, and efficient; his self-control was remarkable. Truly he hath left us an example that we should follow in his steps.

References

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