

John Whitford

Transcription of obituary published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by J Mitchell

JOHN WHITFORD was born in March, 1811, near Gwennap, the celebrated natural amphitheatre where Wesley and his coadjutors were accustomed to preach to assembled thousands. He had the good fortune to be born of pious parents, and to be reared amid the restraining and hallowing influences of home piety. Parental precept and example combined to direct his feet into the way of life. His father and mother were Wesleyans, his father being a class-leader and conducting a class-meeting in his own house. Respecting his conduct prior to conversion we have not been able to gather any details, but have the impression that, being thoughtful and studious, no immoralities or gross improprieties of conduct were chargeable to him. Nevertheless, when 19 years of age, by the light of the Spirit he apprehended the breadth and spirituality of the law and was convinced of guilt and pollution, and after struggling for some time with his burden he at length at a class-meeting in his father's house cast his soul upon the atonement of Christ and received the assurance of the remission of sins, and joined the Wesleyan church.

Being of studious habits and possessing more than average mental ability, he was shortly called upon to preach "the unsearchable riches of Christ." In his studies he was greatly helped by the Wesleyan ministers successively stationed in his circuit, who made his father's house their home when preaching at Gwennap. Discerning his natural capacity they urged and helped him to cultivate it, most probably with a view to his entering their own ministry. Such, however, was not to be his destiny. The manner of his entrance into our ministry was somewhat exceptional—less so however then than now. Being considered one of the most acceptable and efficient local preachers in the district, he was frequently called upon to supply our pulpits both on ordinary and special occasions. He had no intention to join us. He felt no disaffection to the Church to which he belonged: but the Redruth Primitive Methodist circuit in which he resided requiring an additional preacher, the Rev. S. Wilshaw, its superintendent, asked him to become a hired local preacher, and after due deliberation he resigned his connection with the Wesleyans and gave himself fully to the work of the ministry amongst the Primitive Methodists thus becoming by express invitation at once a member and minister with us.

After labouring in Redruth Circuit with great acceptance and success for upwards of two years, he was appointed to St. Ives Circuit, residing at Penzance. He subsequently travelled at Hereford, Tredegar,—and while here was united to her who now laments his loss—St. Ives a second time, Micheldever, and Marlborough. The following testimony by the Rev. C.T. Harris will give a fair impression of his ministerial standing at this time. "Our late brother Whitford was a very useful man in the cause of God. I first became acquainted with him in Hereford, July, 1842. He was appointed to that station as my colleague, and at once we were united in Christian love as well as in Christian labour. He was sound in doctrine and earnest in manner, so that he soon made a good impression in all his stations and was successful in the conversion of souls. He generally spent some time every Saturday in conversation about the work of God and the best way to get it on. His judgment was sound, he was very fond of controversy and was a very fair and able disputant. As a colleague he was agreeable, kind, and upright in all his dealings; as a friend he was faithful. He was a good disciplinarian, and had a large share of discretion in business matters, and was very useful in our official meetings."

He was constitutionally delicate, and while in the Micheldever and Marlborough stations the long journeys so overtaxed him that he was frequently laid aside for a few days or weeks. His physical energies were unequal to the strain put upon them, utter collapse was threatening, and acting upon medical advice he was reluctantly compelled to relinquish the work he loved and to enter into business. Nothing but sheer

necessity induced this step. Neither the hardships and privations that were then the lot of our ministers, nor the prospect of immunities and comforts out of the ministry that were denied him in it, could have induced him to resign. Physical inability to perform the long journeys, was the sole cause of the connexion's loss of his services as an itinerant minister. Nor was this loss small. All who then knew him testify that he was unusually acceptable, impressive, and useful as a minister. The work of the Lord prospered in his hand, every station improved under his spiritual husbandry. But in this, as doubtless in many other instances, owing to the large area covered by circuits in thinly populated districts, the only alternative presented to men of great intellectual and moral worth, but of feeble physical constitution, has been resignation, or premature death. The former alternative, much against his will, Brother Whitford was compelled to accept—persistently the while questioning, whether after all it were not God's will that he should go on and die, but somewhat reconciled to his lot by the consideration that he could still serve God and his generation by preaching almost constantly on the Lord's Day.

He located at Penzance, the place of his wife's nativity, and where he had spent nearly four of the ten years he had been in the ministry. The Lord prospered him in business, and he became one of the most influential laymen I have known. Not that we considered him perfect. In conversation (not in preaching, for in the pulpit he was ever practical and earnest) he gave an undue prominence to speculative subjects. He was very fond of controversy, and prone to spend his own time and that of his friends in "sawing the beams of spiders' webs into planks."

His attachment to the connexion was strong; no one unacquainted with the fact would have judged that he had ever belonged to another communion. He ever showed the deepest interest in everything affecting not merely the interests of his own circuit, but of the connexion as a whole. His knowledge of connexional rule and usage was surpassed by few, and his quickness of perception and readiness of speech making him an able debater, he was frequently the representative of his circuit in the District Meeting and of his district in the Conference.

For about a year prior to his decease, his friends had noticed a gradual declining of strength; but the grey hair bleaching into white, and the drooping shoulders, were looked upon simply as the usual accompaniments of declining years, and not as symptoms of approaching utter constitutional collapse. He attended the District Meeting at Kingswood, in May, 1875, and none of those who had so often "tilted a lance" with him, gathered from his appearance or speech the impression that they should see his face no mere. But so it proved. On Lord's Day, June 13th, he preached at Penzance for the last time with great fervour, but was very much exhausted by the effort. A fortnight afterwards he thought himself the subject of a feverish cold, which the simple remedies he applied failed to remove. Medical advice was sought and he seemed to recover a little. Change of residence being advised, it was secured, and all medical and hygienic means used to restore him, but in vain. The doctors were of opinion that the fever under which he sank was associated with decay of nature. Physical stamina was exhausted, and no recuperative power left with which to combat disease. During his illness there was no ecstasy, but always a calm resting upon Christ. The chief characteristic of his experience was its uniformity—a changeless unwavering trust in a loving Saviour. In answer to a question by Mrs. Whitford, he said, "I am as I always was, trusting on the cross; I always hold fast there, all is well." To the writer and others, substantially the same testimony, in varying terms, was given. But no dying testimony is needed to assure those who had known him intimately for years, that "absent from the body he is present with the Lord."

The Sunday preceding his death, he wished a few of the members and officials to come and sing to him the songs of Zion, selecting "Rock of ages," and "Jesus, lover of my soul." And while they sang these hymns, so expressive of a believer's exclusive trust in a divine Saviour, his face was radiant with peace and joy. On the

following day, Monday, Aug. 9th, 1875, in the 65th year of his age, and after a connection with the Christian church of forty-six years, he quietly breathed out his soul to God.

References

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