

MEMOIR OF RICHARD TOWNSEND,

LATE A. P. M. ITINERANT PREACHER,
Who died at North Shields, November 15, 1839.

Richard Townsend was born in May, 1801, at Tideswell, in the county of Derby, of parents who ranked in the labouring class of society. His education was of a very limited character; but it appears he duly appreciated and subsequently improved it. His natural disposition being placid and agreeable, greatly endeared him to his parents, and he endeavoured to render himself increasingly deserving of their confidence and esteem, by strict attention to their wishes and injunctions. Being habituated to attending a place of worship on the sabbath, besides being a Sunday scholar, begot in his youthful mind a veneration for, and delight in sacred things; and this further impressed him with that hallowing principle, by which men depart from evil. And as a consequence he grew up in the distaste of the common vanities of youth, secluded himself from the giddy throng, and walked in his own simple method the path to knowledge. His means of acquiring it were small, but these he plied with the greater assiduity; made good his ground, but made no parade of his attainments. Thus he passed the morning of his life, till he had exceeded the twentieth year of his age, about which time the P. M. missionaries visited Tideswell.

It appears he joined the society in the year 1822 or 1823. His conversion was brought about in a somewhat singular manner. On a sabbath day morning his father sent him into the fields to look after a heifer, which he feared might come to some harm. Richard thought, and even dared to express it, that it was not a proper day to be busied in such matters.* But as he had been trained up in entire subjection to his parents, it was easier for him to do what he was bid, than to see its lawfulness in the eye of that holy God whom he feared to offend. Accordingly he went and saw that the heifer was safe, but he did not return home till night. He made the best apology he could for his absence, without either fully stating the facts, or defiling his conscience by a falsehood. But it was not long before he broke through his natural timidity, and told his christian friends how he spent that day, which was in the following manner: being deeply convinced of the sinfulness of his errand, he kneeled down to pray among some rocks in the field; and while he prayed, all his sins came before him in dreadful array; and he continued there to wrestle with God, till he was fully liberated from the guilt and danger of all his transgressions, a new heart was given him, and he could rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Having now entered into the path of righteousness, he meekly held on his christian course, and was loved and admired as an unostentatious but consistent follower of Christ. In this new character his constitutional habits became sanctified by the genuine spirit of piety; and of course formed a basis for his future life and labours. He considered himself a pupil in the church, and therefore was more ready to hear than to offer the sacrifice of fools. His ear and heart were always open to instruction, and what he learned he was careful to turn to the best account he possibly could. Hence his spiritual profiting appeared unto all. This feeling view of his novitiate produced another happy effect, in prompting him to a regular and punctual attendance on the means of grace. Hence was formed that feature of his conduct, which graced him as a minister of Christ, and is testified of by his last superintendent in these words: "He was punctual in all his engagements to a moment—the very picture of good order."

His piety being established, he was called upon to assist in leading the class, and was acceptable to the members; and at the (Bradwell circuit) quarterly meeting, Dec. 1828. he was put on the plan, to speak in public. It cannot be said that his talents were such as to warrant high expectations in regard to pulpit eminence; but sterling piety, a good understanding, love to precious souls, and zeal for the glory of God, were sufficient to authorize the church to call for his help, in promoting the gospel of salvation. His attachment to Christ, and the community to which he belonged, prompted him to ply his powers with unremitting diligence, in the discharge of every duty that devolved upon him; hence he read and studied intensely the book of the Lord, attended the ordinances of worship, filled up most diligently his appointments on the plan, with a view to save himself and those that heard him; nor did he labour in vain.

*There must have been something peculiar in this; as, in general, to see to the cattle on the sabbath is right. —EDITOR.

He was a tree of righteousness, in which God was glorified by his bearing much fruit. In this sphere he continued to move with acceptance and profit, till called to occupy a higher station in the church.

In the year 1833, he was taken out to travel in the Isle of Man; and at the following Conference, 1834, he was stationed in the Stockport circuit. In 1835, at Preston; 1836, Chester; 1837, Preston Brook; (during which time he laboured chiefly in the Irish Mission at Newry,) in 1838, at Stockton, and in 1839, at North Shields, where he finished his course and entered into rest.

It appears that his labours in this capacity were generally acceptable; and his steady and devoted attention to his work, together with his deep and genuine piety, gained him the affections of the people. That he entertained just views of the nature of his work, will appear from a letter to his father, written from the Irish mission; and contrasting the state of that country with our own, he adds, "But souls are as precious in Ireland as England, and here are many thousands that want plucking as brands from the burning." And in accordance with this view of the danger of sinners, he adds in the same letter, "Every market day since I have been here, I have held up the banners of a crucified Redeemer to the market people, and I trust, not without good effect." His concluding remarks of the letter are, "I still feel, as an individual, desirous to please God and find my way to heaven, wherever my lot may be cast; and it is my anxious desire that all mankind may partake of the same peace and heavenly blessing that I enjoy."

The value of these passages, as bearing upon the point in hand, will lose none of their lustre and importance, when it is recollected they were written in the midst of the toils and peculiar trials of a missionary station. These statements will be confirmed, moreover, by the following testimony of Bro. J. A. B., his last superintendent, who says, "His labours, as far as they went, were acceptable in this circuit. He was useful in the conversion of souls; this work lay near his heart, and he was the most attentive and diligent young man I ever knew. He had always every thing right and straight; was punctual in all his engagements to a moment; the very picture of good order. As a colleague, he was amicable, respectful, and kind."

So far as the writer has had the means of ascertaining his character in other places, the above appears to be a fair representation. That he was useful in the work, appears pleasingly certain, but to what extent, must be left for the day of final inquisition to declare.

Brother Townsend possessed but a slender frame of body; and hence the excellency of the power that sustained him, during his itinerant labours, must have been of God. His earthen vessel, however, seems to have been shaken, when he entered on his labours in the North Shields circuit; and after enduring his toil, amidst increasing weakness and pain, he retired from the field in the beginning of October, 1839.

We now come to observe how far he had learned Christ, while he had taught others. In a letter, dated Oct. 25, he writes to his father, "I feel desirous in all states to learn to be content, and I do feel for me to live is Christ, and to die will be gain." It would seem, as Bro. B. says in a communication to me, "His mind during the first part of his affliction, was occasionally tried." This is not at all strange, considering he was at a great distance from his friends, &c. Nevertheless, "he rose above his trials, as well as the severe affliction which proceeded rapidly to reduce his earthly tabernacle." Bro. B. further observes, "I visited him repeatedly, and always derived benefit from his conversation. His confidence was fixed, broad and deep, in the blood of Jesus. He said, 'This is my anchor and my all.' The person also who attended him bears testimony that he bore his affliction with resignation to the will of God; that his piety was eminently conspicuous to those who visited him, and he preached Christ to them to the last. He was visited by Brother B. the morning before he died; who says, 'I spoke to him relative to his prospect, and asked him if he felt the power of those truths he had preached to others, upon his own soul.' He said, 'Yes, I do; I feel it a struggle, but all is right. O if I had strength I would shout his praise.'"

Two hours before he died he repeated,

"My Jesus to know,
And feel his blood flow,
Tis life everlasting,
*Tis heaven below."

He requested to be removed; which being done, he again wished for strength to praise God, adding, "I'll praise him for ever:" The glory of God seemed to fill the room; and he instantly expired without a lingering groan, and entered the joy of his Lord, Nov. 15, 1839, aged thirty-eight years,

Bro. J. A. Bastow preached his funeral sermon in our North Shields chapel, on Sunday Dec. 1, 1839; and such appears to have been the excitement, that hundreds went away who could not gain admittance.

That all the brethren in the ministry, whom brother Townsend has left still in the vineyard, may, like him, finish their course with joy, and the ministry they have received of the Lord Jesus, is the most fervent and devout prayer of the compiler,

G. W. ARMITAGE.

Bradwell, April 18, 1840.

(Approved by the Circuit Committee.)

References

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