

Reminiscences of John Oxtoby

Transcription of Sketch in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by John Mitchell

In 1858, when sixteen years of age, I was appointed by the June Quarterly Meeting of the Dewsbury Circuit to accompany the circuit steward, Mr. Robert Mather, to his appointments. At a public lovefeast he related the following remarkable history of his conversion under the ministry of the Rev. John Oxtoby, better known as "Praying Johnny."

He said: "When I was a young man I was steady and moral, but not religious, and did not always attend a place of worship on the Sabbath. But one Sunday morning, when passing along the streets of Darlington, where I then lived, I came opposite what was known as the Ranters' Chapel. I thought, I will go in and see what these people with this strange name are like. John Oxtoby was the preacher, and I was not at all favourably impressed. In fact, the preacher's manner was so uncouth, his speech so rough and ungrammatical, and his matter so disconnected, that I was repelled rather than attracted; and I do not think I should have gone to the evening service, but that at the close of his morning's sermon the preacher quite startled and dumbfounded me by saying. 'Be sure all of you come to chapel to-neet, for the Lord's tell'd me He'll save ten souls here to-neet.' I at once said to myself, How could the Lord tell him any such thing? I will come to-night and see, and if there are not ten souls saved, I will tell it in our shop to-morrow what a big lie the Ranter parson told'. Accordingly I went again at night to see if his prediction was fulfilled, and to see, of course, I had to stay the prayer meeting, and I assure you I was nothing loath. It was a glorious time, a meeting I shall praise God for to all eternity; for one went up to the penitents' form, and another, and another, *and I myself was one of the ten.*"

Some years afterwards, when I was on a visit to my parents at Batley, Mr. Mather, having heard I was at home, came over "to see me," as he said, though he was then blind, and I took the opportunity of rehearsing to him the story of his conversion as I remembered it, that, if need be, he might correct any detail that was not strictly accurate. My report, he said, was correct, except in one particular; I had got the closing sentence in this form, "and I myself was the tenth." "No! no!" said the old man, "I was not the tenth, I felt too bad for that, and rushed amongst the first to the penitents' form; but I was one of the ten." The late Mr. Richard Dealtry, local preacher, of Batley Carr, once told me that he heard Mr. Mather tell this story with most thrilling effect at the Leeds District Meeting lovefeast at Halifax in 1859.

In the autumn of 1863, when stationed in the Silsden Circuit, and residing at Skipton, I and a number of Christian friends were conversing on things pertaining to the Kingdom of God in the house of a most estimable and godly dalesman, named Bainbridge, who had come from somewhere near Westgate to reside at Skipton; I rehearsed this experience of Mr. Mather, whereupon Mr. Bainbridge said, "Why, that reminds me of what happened in our little village chapel. Johnny was preaching one night, and had told us early in the service that there would be three souls converted that night; and of course we expected it, for it was not the first time he had made such assertions. He closed the service, but instead of coming down and leading the prayer meeting as usual, he remained in the pulpit, not exactly kneeling, but almost lying down on his face groaning and moaning aloud. An official opened the prayer meeting, but such hardness and darkness came on the meeting as I never

experienced in any meeting before or since. No one could utter more than a few sentences in prayer. When we rose to sing the second time, I looked round the chapel, and then said to myself, 'Thou art mistaken to-night, Johnny, for once, *for there are not three people here to be converted; we are all members.*' But even as the thought passed through my mind, Johnny (as we always called him), jumped up shouting, Glory! and there came such a sense of God's presence and power as was almost overwhelming. As he came down the pulpit steps, his face beaming, and ejaculations of praise bursting from his lips, the door opened, and three women, who had been at the service but had left the chapel, came in, fell down at the first form they came to, and began to cry for mercy. Never while I live shall I forget that awful spiritual darkness, and then that burst of glory."

In reference to Oxtoby's lying down almost prone, and the groaning and writhing of which Mr. Bainbridge spoke, may I add that I think it not improbable that it was a not uncommon experience with him. It seems to me I have received an unexpected confirmation of this recently. Until about six months ago, I did not know that my mother, who is in her eighty-sixth year, had ever seen or known Praying Johnny. But when visiting her last autumn, I learned that when a young woman she had lived with her aunt, Miss Elizabeth Stothard, of Swinefleet, who for years, in the early days of the Connexion, kept open house for the preachers, and often supplemented the meagre salaries of fourteen and seventeen shillings per week of those days by monetary gifts, in addition to making them a home. Amongst other ministerial visitors, Oxtoby, it seems, always was the guest of Miss Stothard when he came to Swinefleet, — at that time one of the strongest circuits in Hull District. The only incident my mother remembers is the following, which remains as vivid and fresh as though it happened yesterday. On one of Oxtoby's visits her aunt asked him to visit a woman named Roberts, a near neighbour, who had been a long time ill, and despite the visits and prayers of members of the Swinefleet Church, continued in great darkness and distress of soul, and could not find peace. He readily consented, and Miss S. accompanied him; but she was quite startled, and almost scandalised by what she considered his strange behaviour. She told my mother upon her return, that after talking a little with the woman to ascertain her exact spiritual condition, they both knelt down, and he began to pray. But shortly he seemed to become oblivious of his surroundings, for he lay his whole length on the bedroom floor and moaned and groaned and writhed about, uttering occasional ejaculations. Miss S. continued to kneel, but with eyes wide open, was absorbed in watching him. Suddenly opening his eyes and seeing her thus, he exclaimed in loud tones, "What art thou staring about like that for? Woman, shut thy eyes and pray and believe. Thou mun (must) believe! Thou mun believe! Thou mun believe! or we shan't get the victory." But the victory was obtained, for they left Mrs. R. rejoicing in God her Saviour.

These facts respecting this remarkable man of God, which so far as I know have never been recorded, (though many still living must have heard Mr. Mather's testimony), I thought too valuable, and illustrative of his wondrous power with God, to be lost.

References

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