

Sidelights on the History and Personality of the Venerable William Clowes

Chapter IX

Transcription of Article in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by J.T. Horne

MR. JOSEPH SMITH was a well-known man of substance in the pottery district, and an outstanding figure in Tunstall Methodism a century since. It may not be generally known that it was in his house that the first Methodist service at Tunstall was held. The story as given by the local historian shows that one of his servants was a member of that Society, and in conversation with his employer he lamented the absence of such services at Tunstall. Mr. Smith suggested that he should hold such a service, and offered him the use of his dwelling house as a chapel. The result was a congregation was gathered, a Society formed, and in a very short time the place was overcrowded. When it was decided to build a chapel, Mr. Smith generously offered to meet Mr. Wesley during one of his visits to Burslem, and their interview is thus reported, -

“Mr. Wesley said – ‘Well, Brother Smith, I understand you want a new chapel in your town.’ ‘Yes sir.’ ‘Well, Brother Smith, I am very glad to hear that the cause of God is prospering in your neighbourhood. What will you give towards this new chapel?’ ‘Sir, I will give land, in a very eligible situation.’ ‘Thank you, Brother Smith, but you know we cannot build chapels without money - what will you do more?’ ‘Sir, I will give twenty guineas.’ ‘Please bring me pen and paper,’ and he writes at the head of the paper, ‘A new chapel at Tunstall - Mr. Joseph Smith will give land and twenty guineas; John Wesley ten guineas,’ and others came forward and made smaller promises.”

This chapel was built in 1788, about twenty years before the Mow Camp Meeting, in the middle of a field, in what is called Chapel Street. Mr. Smith was very much interested in William Clowes, and on several occasions encouraged him by words and acts to persevere in his struggles. We have been told that he frequently invited him to his house, and Clowes himself tells us that Mr. Smith sent his tailor to measure him for a suit of clothes, “which was accepted.” “It was in this same house that these prayer meetings were held - indeed, it seems that this kitchen figured very prominently, not only in Clowes’ movements, but in the developments of early Methodism at Tunstall. It was an important centre in the evolution of our Church, and we would have given an illustration of the place, but it has been long since demolished. It was this “kitchen” for which Father Hugh obtained a license in 1807, and where the three Jameses - Steele, Bourne, and Crawfoot - principally supplied the preaching appointments. Towards the close of 1810 Clowes was preaching in the place, and from this time he became a very popular preacher. It has been told us that this popularity was attributable - among other causes - to the deep interest in Clowes’ movements taken by the owner of the kitchen; but the main reason may be found in the marvellous spiritual manifestations at his services and resulting from his prayers.

Quoting from our notes of conversations with Mrs. Thelwell:- “Those were wonderful times in that kitchen. Father said that sometimes waves of power swept over the place and he scarcely knew whether he was in the body or out. The place was shaken again and again. It was like a repetition of Pentecost. They asked nothing from men, and certainly they lacked nothing from God. I wish I could tell you some of the things father said about those times. When Clowes touched God it seemed as

though he had holy boldness which others lacked, and he talked with Him as a friend talks with friend. Clowes could use the promises, and he was a famous 'prevailer' with God."

There is something here that is worth considering. Perhaps this man so read his New Testament that he believed there was a Divine power somewhere that could be moved by his praying. With the law of equation hold in the spiritual realm? On the one side we see men wedded to their sins; on the other there is Clowes pleading with God, and fasting; and the result, the vilest turning to righteousness. Is this a coincidence? Or is there any connection between the one and the other? William Clowes read in the New Testament "Howbeit, this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting," and he prayed and fasted and men were radically changed. These early Primitive Methodists studied their psychology in the light of the contact of the Living Spirit of God with the spiritual nature of man.

We may give one illustration of this "kitchen" work. A joiner was employed by Mr. Smith in making some needful alteration to his house, and had been persuaded to stay to the prayer meeting. When Clowes arrived he was informed what had been done, and at the commencement of the meeting he laid his hand on the young man's shoulder saying, "Lord, lay Thy hand on the joiner! Awaken his soul. Awaken his soul to a sense of its danger!" Earnest, rapid and successive appeals now followed that the joiner might be awakened to a sense of his danger. Conviction pierced the young man, and he left the meeting deeply concerned about his spiritual condition. The following evening he returned, and received the forgiveness of sins. He at once joined Mr. Clowes' class at Kids Grove, and shortly after became a minister of the Wesleyan Church.

Hostility to services attended by such remarkable success could not consistently proceed from Mr. Smith, for he was a "fellow-helper" in the work, as he provided the place, and encouraged attendance at the meetings. Then why did he interfere with these remarkable "rules," and his movable pulpit? In answering we simply give an opinion formed after hearing many statements on the subject. The leaders of the prayer meeting movement had formed an association for suppressing Sabbath desecration and Sunday drinking, which at that time were very rife in the Potteries. The members met every Monday evening in the house of Mr. Smith, and decided their course of proceeding. So enthusiastic were the workers that in a very short time they brought several incorrigible delinquents before the justices, and obtained convictions. These proceedings caused great excitement, and some of the publicans threatened to murder the reformers if they dared to continue the campaign. Regardless of such threats the reforming work continued, and Sabbath breakers were made to feel the force of the law; and then opposition came from an unexpected quarter and completely crushed them. The Steward of the Burslem Circuit was a wine and spirit merchant, who supplied the inns and public houses of the district. These landlords combined and informed the Steward that unless he exerted himself to stop the doings of the Reformers they would cease doing business with him. In this matter the Wesleyan authorities appear to us in a very bad light. The Steward consulted with the Superintendent minister, Mr. Riles, and a meeting was summoned to stay the proceedings. The Reformers were solemnly informed that their conduct gave general dissatisfaction; and if they proceeded any further they would be expelled from the Methodist Society; and the Superintendent struck the last blow by announcing to the public congregation on the Sabbath that he disapproved of the measures of the association. No wonder that a wail of agony escaped from Clowes. Mrs. Thelwell said that the workers were not expecting

ecclesiastical censure, and for a time were paralysed by such a decision. Their motives had been noble and pure. They were jealous for God's honour, and now they had been wounded in the house of their friends. Clowes writes: "Our brethren had armed the wicked against us, . . . and we dissolved the association, and left the consequences with those who had been instrumental in driving us most reluctantly, to adopt this conclusion.

Not satisfied with breaking up the association, the Wesleyan authorities struck at these modern Puritans through the prayer-meetings. They brought pressure upon Mr. Smith, and represented to him that as a leading Methodist he ought not to sanction and encourage such disorderly meetings under his roof, for it would inevitably lead the cause to be spoken evil of; it was his duty to suppress them. The judgment of the prudent house-holder was swayed by such reasoning, and with a mind as well as a body probably enervated by old age he decided that there should be an alteration in harmony with the wishes of the Steward and Co., and the prayer meetings should be of such a character that neither saint nor sinner should feel disturbed. The trial confronting these zealous saints took this form; they must either remodel their mode of worship, or they could not be tolerated. It was clearly an attempt to strangle spiritual life with "red tape" – to substitute "the religion of authority for the religion of the Spirit"; to "crib, cabin, and confine" the life of the Spirit into what Mr. Smith's advisers called "order." The first attempts were attended by strange proceedings in a religious service. In the meetings following the drawing up of the "rules" Clowes says that Mr. Smith "came behind me whilst I was praying, and thrust his hand into my mouth, and with his other hand he pressed my head against his breast, so that for some time there was a dead silence in the meeting which was crowded. When he liberated me I told him he had better let me alone, or the Lord would be angry with him." The attempt to bring the proceedings into "order" and "propriety" failed; and as Mr. Smith witnessed so many clear manifestations of spiritual power he very prudently refrained from any further attempt to enforce his will upon the praying people; and from that time became more warmly attached to Clowes and Co.

It was felt desirable that those who were brought into the kingdom at these prayer meetings should be gathered into Church fellowship and it was only reasonable that they should look to Clowes as their leader. They had shared in the splendid victories of his stalwart, daring and mighty faith, and they had come to him for counsel in perplexity and consolation in sorrow. It therefore seemed to them that he was the one to whom they should look as the shepherd and leader of their souls, and Mrs. Thelwell gives us the information that Clowes undertook the charge of this class at Tunstall at the request of its members, Mr. Smith warmly supporting their application. Into its meetings he infused a wonderful praying element, for nearly half a score were trained to pray at the commencement of the services, within a limit of two minutes each. The reasons which he assigns for this are worthy of being pondered by all class leaders. He says, "I thus got the whole into the exercise of faith; then I found it a very easy matter to lead thirty or forty members in an hour and a quarter; for I found that leading did not consist so much in talking to the members, as in getting into faith, and bringing down the cloud of God's glory, that the people might be truly blessed, as well as instructed in Divine things." It was from this class that Clowes was expelled because he would not promise to discourage the Camp Meeting services.

It seems almost impossible for a working potter to attend to two classes, fulfil numerous preaching appointments, and support these various religious services; but we have to remember that Clowes

was of active habits, of an ardent temperament, and favoured with good health. To his other engagements he now added that of a colporteur. In this fresh enterprise he had for his colleague James Nixon, and these two men visited all the villages around Tunstall, distributing religious literature, and forming Class Meetings, and establishing regular preaching services wherever it was possible. Many remarkable conversions followed this new labour of faith, and many instances of ignorance and stupidity came under their notice. Several of our existing churches in that district were established, or grew out of the visits of these devoted men. Whilst he was thus engaged distributing books and conducting preaching appointments in Cheshire he first heard the name of James Crawfoot, and was told of meetings for the promotion of holiness being held in his house in Delamere Forest. Panting for a fuller knowledge of the deep things God he resolved to attend one of these services. On his arrival on a Saturday afternoon the meeting had just commenced, and he entered heartily into the spirit of the service. After spending a little time with the old mystic he returned home with a firm and steadfast determination to obtain more of that holiness of heart which arms the soul for enterprise in all that relates to the highest welfare of man and the glory of God. Shortly after his return from Delamere he received a visit from Hugh Bourne to whom he gave particulars of the forest meeting, and his conversation with Crawfoot; Bourne expressed a strong desire to see Crawfoot and attend one of his services, and a little later we find both Clowes and Bourne present at one of Crawfoot's meetings. It was in this way that Clowes led Bourne into the fellowship of Crawfoot, who a little later became our first travelling preacher, and to whom as a Church we owe more than we surmise. Indeed Bourne is not slow to confess that both he and Clowes learned much from this rude son of the forest.

It is known to most readers of the ALDERSGATE that Clowes was expelled from the Wesleyan Church, and Mr. Kendall has told us in his History that after this separation Woodnorth and Nixon paid him ten shillings per week to devote himself exclusively to Evangelism. There are many interesting incidents relating to Clowes at this period, which we have gathered, and which it is hoped sometime will be given to our Church; but for the present we must confine ourselves to the surroundings of this engagement. Thomas Woodnorth and James Nixon were members of Clowes' class, and these godly men felt that their leader was fitted for a wider field of service. They believed that he possessed powers which adapted him for extensive usefulness if it could only be arranged for him to give himself to that work. They therefore proposed that he should go out and labour at large, as a Home Missionary, offering to give him out of their earnings ten shillings weekly whilst he was so employed. When this proposal was first made to him he refused, but as they pressed their request, he asked for time to lay the matter before the Lord in prayer, and also for time to confer with Mrs. Clowes on the question. To engage in such a work, at a salary of ten shillings per week, meant a weekly sacrifice of about fifty shillings, and in such a surrender Mrs. Clowes would have to share. Besides, she was in a precarious state of health and already symptoms were appearing of that mental affliction from which she afterwards suffered. Before deciding therefore, on such an important step, he spent five days and nights in fasting and prayer, seeking guidance from the Lord, and if it were His will to send him, for a special anointing for the work. Ultimately it was made clear to him that he must "go," and he went forth from that little chamber with a Divine power resting upon him to his first service as an Evangelist, which he held on a potbank at Tunstall. This potbank was a part of the pottery now in the occupation of Messrs. Lingard, Webster and Jones. It need hardly be recorded that a marvellous manifestation of spiritual power attended that service, and it

was the beginning of that wonderful Evangelistic career during which Clowes went like a white flame of holiness throughout England.

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1906/891