

Sidelights on the History and Personality of the Venerable William Clowes

Chapter VII

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

MAN begins his inward career, to quote from "Amiel's Journal," "as a tamer of wild beasts, and these wild beasts are his passions. To draw their teeth and claws, to muzzle and tame them, to turn them into servants and domestic animals, fuming perhaps, but submissive - in this consists personal education." This was the work to which Clowes had now to put his hand. He had come from the "Everlasting Nay" of despair to the "Everlasting Yea," and the experience thus gained became invaluable to him in his after Evangelistic Work. As a practical matter we know that eminent experiences grow out of profound convictions of sin. Usually, men who have been very wicked, are men who have very strong passions and appetites; men of great power and audacity, men of intensely strong natures; and where there is great power to do wrong there is great power to react from wrong. If a man has been going away from God with vigour, that same vigour should supply him with the elements by which to return.

The way was now being gradually opened for Mr. Clowes to be engaged in Christian service. About this time several of the new converts resolved to carry on aggressive work, but they keenly realised their need of better mental equipment, and banded themselves for the laudable purpose of intellectual culture. The need for this was very manifest if we remember how their minds had been allowed to run waste, so that they had become a wilderness overrun with a rank growth of folly and vice, which could only be removed by knowledge communicated by intellectual cultivation. Especially was this felt by the local preachers whose education had been, in most cases, entirely neglected. To remedy this, as far as possible, it was arranged to take advantage of the larger house into which Clowes had removed, and form what he calls a "Theological Institution." Its meetings were held on Saturday evenings in a room which Clowes fitted up for the purpose. Whatever we may think of the name which Clowes gave to this Local Preachers' Class, we cannot but admire the object of these humble potters. There is a vital connection between this Theological Institution and Hartley College. These men felt that religious knowledge was power, and it was their earnest desire to obtain that power that they might use it for the highest good. We are getting rid of a good many of our mistakes on this subject, and are slowly coming to learn that our Founders were Educationists of a high order. The most cursory acquaintance with the elementary facts of our Connexional History should have saved us from the errors into which some of us have fallen on this subject. If we want to know how the early work was done we must watch these working men, at the close of a week's toil on the pot-banks, gather in that humble cottage. We must take our place in the class and listen while they instruct each other in the deep things of God, and we shall then come to understand how they sought to fit themselves to speak to their congregations on the following Sabbath. Copying from notes taken from Mrs. Thelwell's description, as given by James Nixon, the following was the course pursued at this "Theological Institution":

"The meeting was opened with singing and prayer, after which a president and secretary were appointed. A written original piece, on some theological subject, was then produced and read by a member to the meeting. This reading was followed by a conversation on the subject, in which all were expected to take part. The president then announced a text of Scripture on which each one

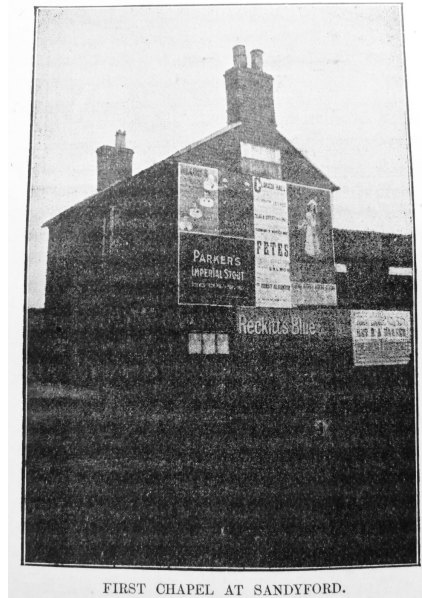
gave his view. This was followed by a full and free exchange of thought on the passage, after which a vote was taken expressing the view of the meeting, and recorded in a register kept for the purpose, and the meeting then closed with prayer." This class was continued for several years, and was very helpful to its members, several of whom entered the regular ministry. Clowes writes in his *Journal* that a "library was established in connection with this meeting, which was raised by subscriptions, donations and forfeitures. . . . Although I was not a local preacher at the time of the formation of the 'Institution,' yet as the meeting was held in my house free of any expense, I was included as a member." In tracing the wondrous development of Clowes a prominent place must be assigned to this "Theological Institution." By its means his intellectual nature was brought under cultivation, and the latent capabilities of his soul were gradually developed and invigorated. Spiritual power is the capacity to receive, and religious genius is a superior power of appropriation. Having access to this crude library Clowes absorbed the contents of the various volumes, and through the combined influence of religion and literature this ignorant, passionate, and intemperate man became transformed into an intelligent, gentle, and holy character. Indeed such a sober critical judge as Hugh Bourne was compelled to write, two months after Clowes' conversion, "such a man for faith I scarcely ever saw, he gains every blessing almost immediately. He grows up into God and our Lord Jesus Christ at a very great rate. . . This man is such an example of living by faith as I scarcely ever met with, and which I am not at present able to follow. . . He is a man of uncommonly deep experience, of unusual growth in grace, deep humility, steady zeal and flaming love. Such a man I scarcely ever met with. . . It seems as if the Lord has raised him up to assist in keeping the revival steady."

Through these meetings being held in his house, Clowes was brought into closer fellowship with many of the local preachers, who were thus given an opportunity of judging his fitness for public work. He says that sometimes he was invited to accompany a preacher to his appointments, and requested to assist in conducting the service; and occasionally, in an urgent case, he was sent as supply, and "when I went to such appointments I did not venture to take a text, but gave an exhortation, in which exercise I generally felt greatly blessed."

In connection with these early preaching services there is a strange story told, with which our informant associates the name of Clowes. We have not been able to fix the date with any exactness, and simply give the incident for what it is worth. In or about the year 1800 a few Sandemanians lived at Sandyford, a small hamlet lying between Tunstall and Grolldenhill. These people built a small chapel, in which for a time they conducted public services. Their distinctive doctrine was that the bare work of Christ, without a deed or thought on the part of man, is sufficient to keep the chief of sinners spotless, and one of their religious rites was to greet each other with a holy kiss. With the death of the principal supporter, the cause became extinct, and the chapel found fresh occupants in the Primitive Methodists, who established their first preaching station in the hamlet in this place. Shortly after they had commenced holding services the young scapegraces of Sandyford played a trick on these early Primitive Methodists, which will show the character of the people amongst whom Clowes and his coadjutors carried on their work. . . . One Saturday evening the sons of some of the master-potters in the locality obtained a young donkey, and getting into the little place, they tied its legs together and placed it in the pulpit, leaving it there for the night. The next morning when the people assembled for worship, and the preacher attempted to enter the pulpit or rostrum, he found it was already occupied by the poor donkey, who being disturbed by the preacher, broke out

in the most dismal brayings, much to the annoyance of the worshippers. It is confidently asserted that Clowes was one of the preachers at that service, but looking at all the evidence we can hardly accept such a conclusion without fuller proof.

Clowes quickly gave proof of his fitness for official work, and a circumstance transpired about this time which opened the way for fuller service. The Society class at Kidsgrove needed a leader, and the Rev. W.E. Miller strongly urged him to accept the office. This place, which is a large colliery district, is situated about two miles from Tunstall, and his weekly attendance as leader, would involve unusual self-denial and exceptional toil. But his early Christian life was marked by the highest forms of self-sacrifice. It seems that the ordinary restraining forces of life had become annulled, and his dominant passion of devotion to his risen Lord had reached such a point of intensity that it had become regal, and swept away the ordinary inhibitions and restraining forces. The amount of pressure supplied by his emotions drove his character in the direction of the Cross. His love for Christ was so strong and his self-surrender so complete, that all obstructions sank away, and impediments vanished like bubbles in the sun. We are not surprised, therefore, when we are told that he accepted the office.



FIRST CHAPEL AT SANDYFORD.

But the arduousness of the work was increased by an ugly report that a certain part of the road was haunted by an apparition. He says, "In a lonely part of the road leading to Kidsgrove, which is skirted by a wood, there wandered a ghost, as tradition and common report asserted. It was called the 'Kidsgrove bogget.' " We have made repeated enquiries of the elderly people respecting this "bogget;" and Mr. William Ebrill, senior, of Goldenhill, said that in his young days there was a report that the wood which then skirted the road leading from Kidsgrove to Goldenhill was haunted by the spirit of a person who had been murdered in the wood, and it was believed that the apparition took the form sometimes of a white hare or rabbit, and also of a goat, and many people - especially those of a nervous temperament - were afraid to go that way by night. He could give me no reason why the supposed ghost was called a "Bogget." But very probably the word is a colloquial term, belonging to the Gaelic *boc*, meaning a he goat, and its kindred word *bocan* which signifies devil in the shape of a goat, a goblin, a spectre. But whatever the meaning of the word, or the reality of the apparition, we know that the story operated very powerfully on the mind of Clowes as he journeyed alone along that Kidsgrove Road on those dark winter nights, and we are quite prepared to hear him say, "On my first induction into office as the Kidsgrove class-leader, I confess, when passing the haunted domains of this 'Kidsgrove bogget,' that I occasionally felt a little fear creeping on me; but unlike the school-boy with his satchel on his back in crossing the churchyard, 'Whistling aloud to keep his courage up,' I endeavoured to pray away those fears, and to entrench myself in the power and protection of that Almighty Redeemer to whom all spirits are subject; and on many a dark and dreary night did I tranquilly pass along, when those who had obtained reputation for courage and bravery would have trembled." Mrs. Thelwell is responsible for the statement that on many occasions her father, James Nixon, and other of the Tunstall Methodists accompanied him to his class on dark nights, or when that was not possible they arranged to accompany him on his return journey. At such times these

enthusiastic “believers” enlivened their walk, through the “valley of the shadow” with songs of gladness until they made the woods ring with their shouts of “glory”; and thus inspired with holy heroism, so far from quaking and trembling with fear they became as bold as lions.

As leader of this Class, Clowes received a training in methods of Christian Work which was invaluable to him in after days. Many of his members were rough, uncouth, untaught colliers, employed in the Kidsgrove pits, who had been recently converted, and knew but little of the usages of a Class meeting, and it was not always possible for the leader to obtain an exact expression, or even an intelligent version of their religious experience. Sterling piety and great simplicity are often strangely blended, as Clowes learned during his leadership. The reality of the conversion of one of his members was questioned, and the next evening this member was overheard praying in the following manner, “Jesus, they do not believe that Thou hast converted me. But do not mind them, Jesus, what they say, for Thou hast converted me.” Strange scenes were witnessed at this class meeting, several of which have been described to us by Mrs. Thelwell. We called her attention to the incident mentioned in the Journal, and she said that her father had spoken to her about it on several occasions. On that night her uncle and father were present, and joined in the service. While the meeting was in progress a number of half-drunken colliers entered the house, and Clowes resolved to change the character of the service, and proceeded to give an address, as he says, “to both saint and sinner.” Proceeding to speak to the ungodly a strange terror seized the intruders, and some of them rushed out of the place, saying, “that they should fall into hell if they remained, and they would take good care not to go to Billy Clowes’s class again.” One of the ruffians was so disabled that he fell like a smitten ox, and lay quietly under the seats until the meeting closed. Many who had come from the surrounding places to visit the class were converted, and a “mighty shout” of victory went through the place.

Thus Clowes continued his work. Interruptions only intensified his zeal, and all the time he continued to acquire fresh vigour. He rejoiced because God greatly blessed his soul, and continually opened to him fresh fields of usefulness.

This change in the outer life of Clowes was so marked that it produced widely different effects on various persons. An old gentleman, whose father knew Clowes pretty intimately during his residence at Tunstall, told us that his conversion wrought such a change in his character that by many he was regarded as mentally deranged. The men on the pot-banks said that he had gone mad on religion, for he reproved or admonished any one whom he believed to be doing wrong. Indeed he carried this so far that wrong-doers avoided his company. The better classes, however, gave him credit for sincerity, and thought his religious activity was only a novelty which time would eventually remedy. Mrs. Thelwell’s version of his attitude during the Tunstall “Wakes” we must hold over for our next paper.

(To be continued)

References

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