

William Henry Meadows
Champion of East Anglia

Transcription of 'Sketch' In the Christian Messenger by W.A. Hammond

AMONGST the early makers of Primitive Methodism in East Anglia, few men rendered finer service than William Henry Meadows, who for nearly half a century laboured and toiled for the good of men in the Eastern Counties.

He was a born East Anglian, hailing from the little town of Downham Market, where he attended the Sunday school and received such impressions for good that at the age of fifteen years he surrendered himself to Christ and started on his life's service for Him.

He was the outstanding type of a great evangelist, well-built, of massive frame, above the average height, broad-chested and possessing great mesmeric, or perhaps we should say to-day, great psychic power. He had a broad, open, pleasant face, indicative of great strength of will and religious fervour. His voice was rich and flexible in the zenith of his strength, though in later days it became hoarse and husky through excessive usage. And use it he did, in labours more abundant and in service most effective.



He was not a great student. No one would describe him as a widely read man, though what he read he read well and to good purpose. His reading was mostly confined to Methodist Theology, and even in this narrow field he limited himself to one particular phase of it. He fully accepted the views of John Wesley in relation to entire sanctification, and became an ardent and powerful advocate of this definite doctrine of early Methodism. How he revelled in the fulness of the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ! How he delighted to proclaim a full, free and present salvation! Possibly he laid emphasis upon one side of truth to the oversight of others, but it was a delightful onesidedness. He lived in the sunshine of the Divine presence, and gladly led others into the same experience. No doubt obscured the brightness of his face He was distinctly a witness for Christ, and especially a witness of His power to save *unto the uttermost*. And under his ministry hundreds were lifted from the lower planes of a poor, effeminate, emasculated religious life into the richer fulness of fellowship with Christ.

"So many saved and so many sanctified" was a common expression in his diary, and to him the one was as distinct an experience as the other. He called men up to fellowship with God on the Holy Mount, where His face could be seen and the accents of His voice be heard.

One can hardly imagine what the message meant to many in those rural districts. Theirs was a somewhat hard lot. The only pleasure of which they knew anything was mere sensuous excitement, the mere physical pleasure of brutal sports and coarse drinking. On such the message of this

messenger fell with wondrous power. Rough men were subdued by a higher power. The lower pleasure was left because a higher joy was set before them. Multitudes learned to sing as they responded to his appeal:

"Let worldly minds the world pursue. '
It hath no charms for me."

He had the creative energy of a great soul. He knew how to win men from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God. Wherever he went he carried the flaming torch with him. In town or village. in well-established societies or new mission fields, on the wide reaches of Brandon Heath or Briston Common, or in towns like Yarmouth, or Bury St. Edmunds or Cambridge, he proclaimed his uplifting message. What a ministry it was! It was at Cambridge, in our Panton Street Chapel, that Gipsy Smith's father and two uncles were won to Christ under his ministry, and, I rather fancy, "Gipsy" himself. The wandering gipsies became great evangelists, but they owed their transformation and much of their inspiration to William H. Meadows. How he swept men into the Kingdom! Some cautious souls said. "He swept them in too fast, they could not all be retained." Perhaps not. But it is better to sweep them in too fast than not to sweep them in at all. He was quite ready to gather every kind into his net. The good could then be retained and the bad be cut away. Certain it is that many remained to testify of the grace of God and enrich the churches of East Anglia with their gifts and service. If great preaching be the art of persuading men to turn to God, W.H. Meadows was a great preacher.

But probably his great power was in prayer. How he prayed! It was worth going a long way to hear him pray. Of his sermons many remember little, but of his prayers many remember much. With open face and out-stretched hand he seemed to stand on the very threshold of the Holy of Holies, to have close and intimate communion with God. It was no strange entrance into the sacred presence, but the confident entrance of the trustful and reliant child. He knew whom he believed. He knew what he wanted, and with repeated words and intense emphasis he would plead until a strange and mighty power rested upon the congregation. It was wonderful pleading—sheer wrestling with the unseen. He was a wrestling Jacob and prevailing Israel. He would "hang on" until the promise was fulfilled.

In visitation he was just as powerful in prayer as in the public service of the sanctuary. He lived in the very presence of the Unseen, and though sometimes his prayers, especially if prolonged, seemed strangely incongruous, yet no one ever complained. It was noonday in a little country village. The preacher's home was with the village shopkeeper, as is often the case in East Anglia. It was a home that was ever open to any servant of God, whether planned in the village or not. Mr. Meadows was driving from one place to another (for he kept his pony and trap in those days), and called for dinner for pony and himself. At noon the dinner was ready, and most of the family sat down to a well-provided meal, but others were detained in the shop till the meal had nearly ended. No sooner had Mr. Meadows finished his dinner than he turned from the table and said, "Let us pray." It seemed strangely out of place. Here were young fellows waiting for a well-cooked meal. But they knelt in prayer. He prayed long, but no one grumbled or complained, for the whole room was filled with a sense of the Divine presence. The hungry were kept waiting, but they had food to eat that no earthly table could provide.

We had taken tea together in the minister's home. After tea came the familiar words, "Let us pray." Only three were present, but that prayer will never be forgotten by those who were there. It was the meeting place of earth and heaven, the inner chamber of the Divine presence.

He was a strong man, masterful yet tender, firm yet conciliatory, a strict disciplinarian, yet anxious to save. He led because he was strong. Something had displeased one of his officials one day—a lady, bye the bye—and snatching the missionary bill from her window she said she would not display another bill for the church. But Mr. Meadows quietly took the bill and said, "My good woman, this bill must not be removed from your window; I must put it back again," and in the window the bill again appeared, no one attempting to dispute his authority. Such men were born for their time. Strong, impulsive, mighty men, they might not know many things, but they knew some things well. They knew how to plead with God and how to persuade men; how to win men from sin and form them into Christian societies.

On wonderfully meagre salaries they lived and gained respect. How they lived is a puzzle to some of us. They were passing rich on Goldsmiths forty pounds a year, or little more. Mr. Meadows was as well dressed as any bishop, and carried himself with as much dignity. He never had what is now the minimum salary, yet he lived and enriched the Connexion with gifts as well as service. One of our late Connexional officers recently said, "I always thought he was a man of means, for when I was pleading the Jubilee Fund he offered twenty-five pounds. Twenty-five pounds from a superannuated minister! He must have private means." No, he had none beyond what he had saved for his "old days," but when he died he left one hundred pounds to one village chapel, and one hundred pounds to another, and at good legacy to a third.

He was a good man. Soon after his death his widow, the companion of his toil, said: "My husband was a holy man. I can, never get as near the Throne as he, but I shall find an entrance through the gates." They are both in the Homeland, and, I doubt not, equally near the Throne.

References

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