

Thomas Swindell
Champion of East Anglia

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

Of quite another type to those we have referred to, was Rev. Thomas Swindell, "And he gave some apostles and some prophets and some evangelists and some pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry, the edifying of the body of Christ." Thomas Swindell was essentially the pastor and teacher. He was not a fervent evangelist like Robert Key, though in those days evangelism in the sense of soul winning, was a *sine qua non* of every minister in our Church. He was rather the statesman of the Church in East Anglia, the ecclesiastic in the democracy of Primitive Methodists. His very appearance indicated that. He was small of stature, thin and wiry, none of the robustness of Key or Charlton, but more of the anxious, studious, ascetic, though he burned not the midnight oil nor disciplined himself with long and weary vigils, but he studied hard, toiled; heavily, walked long journeys, and bore the brunt of Connexional work to



REV. THOS. SWINDELL.

the full measure of his strength. He was neat and prim in appearance, careful and methodical in habit and work. He never put off till to-morrow what should be done to-day, nor arrived at his appointment five minutes after the time for service. The older men were certainly more precise and punctual than some of us younger men are. And they were just as punctual at the other end. No long-drawn-out meetings running to the midnight hour. Thomas Swindell attended as many business meetings of the Church as most men in those days, and that is saying much, for Committee Meetings were a standing dish in the regular fare of Church life. No week could pass without a Committee Meeting. If an appointment had to be supplied, or a chairman obtained, or a letter answered, the Circuit Committee must meet and attend to this important business. And right royal meetings they were. The King's business required order and deliberation and *debate*, but not late hours, if you please. "Brethren, it is nine o'clock, we must adjourn. Let us pray," and away the ecclesiastical statesmen would go, only to meet again at a somewhat early hour to finish or renew the business matters of the week before. But every Circuit had ecclesiastical laymen then, men who felt it their business to look after the affairs of the Church, pious deacons or stewards who did not put the affairs of the Church after everything else. In these meetings Thomas Swindell was quite at home. He could preside and rule like a bishop. It almost seemed as though ecclesiastical rule and order and discipline ran in his blood. He was a born ruler of men, not harsh, nor unkind, but precise, clear, punctual, definite. The rule was there, and it must be carried out. The instruction was issued and it must be obeyed. The Conference had given its decision, and that was sufficient. *Vox populi, vox Dei.*

Such a ministry was very necessary in those days of rapid extension as it is now. To shape and mould the plastic bands of young converts into orderly societies was a work of supreme importance for the stability of the Church. And for this work Thomas Swindell was supremely fitted and finely did he do

it. Few men were consulted more by his brethren than he. When difficulties arose few men were sent more frequently to try and solve the difficulty or to unravel the tangled skein. Quiet, composed, clear-sighted, yet persistent, he could manage men as few could do, and no one knows the debt East Anglia owes to this calm statesmanlike soul who helped to build up the Church in that rural area. But it was not only as an administrator that Thomas Swindell was known. He was a fine preacher, not necessarily great, but good. He never gave the people what cost him little. His sermons were models of clearness and orderly arrangement. He was well read, especially in Methodist literature, and in the great doctrines of the Methodist Church. Christ and Him crucified was his favourite theme. It was the one subject in those days. The books read mainly bore on the Atonement, not so much on the person of Christ as on His great work. Lives of Christ were not as familiar then as now, but the great polemics of the Puritans were eagerly read and pondered. And these Thomas Swindell mastered to the amazement and dread of the younger men of his day. For was he not one of the earliest "examiners," and with fear and trembling we looked upon the "examiner" in those days. Our destiny largely lay in his hands. Another year's probation, or "returned on his pledge" was within his sphere of duty. And no one ever dreamt that Thomas Swindell would falter in his duty. He could be as tender as a child, as devoted to his younger brethren as a father, but as stern as Cromwell when it came to administrative decisions. The tutor and examiner was one to be respected and sometimes feared, but he always set a fine ideal both in teaching and practice, before his younger brethren. And in those non-college days it meant much to those who came straight from the plough and the workshop into the ministry of the Church to be under the superintendency of a man like Thomas Swindell.

But *he* could preach, not only teach and instruct others, but he could preach to the salvation of men and the edification of the saints of God. Numbers found their way into the Kingdom under the thoughtful, solid ministry of Thomas Swindell.

No fireworks, if you please, no grand eloquent phrases, no studied rhetoric, a peroration sometimes, more frequently a pointed appeal, an earnest application. But sometimes the application was interrupted, sometimes the peroration failed. It was one winterly evening in the little chapel near Rollesby Broad that Thomas Swindell came to grief. He was a very nervous man in the pulpit. He could not suffer a child to cry or a scholar to be restless in the service. It would greatly disturb and distress him. For him the service must be orderly and decorous. Confusion and disorder in the House of God he could not tolerate. But on this Sabbath evening things would go wrong. The chapel steward was a good brother, who, whatever footwear he wore on week-days, wore Dutch clogs on Sunday, which, on the brick floor of that little chapel, clattered loudly with every step the steward took. There was neither electric light nor gas, only cotton wick candles, which required snuffing many times during the service. It was no unimportant duty of the steward to go round to snuff the burning candles during the service. It required a steady hand and a dexterous grasp or the candle would be snuffed out instead of being snuffed up, and many stewards performed this duty with a due sense of the importance of this work. What if the candles burned dim and the preacher couldn't see. The work must be done and done it was by Mr. Moore. In the middle of some striking sentence or fine appeal, the steward would rise in his seat and handling his snuffers as a soldier handles his sword or a barber his razor before beginning operations, and then clatter, clatter round the Chapel Would go the wooden shoes. Mr. Swindell couldn't bear the interruption, and quietly said: "Luke, will you let the candles alone till I have finished my sermon," and the greatly distressed steward

subsided into his seat still watching those flickering lights and growing “snaasts” until the preacher was getting to the end of his sermon, when he started up again. Those flickering lights were too much for him and he was too much for the preacher. Mr. Swindell was preaching that night on “the many crowns laid up for the righteous, “but when his peroration was so rudely interrupted, he could go no further and smartly closed by saying, “may we each receive a crown, and may there be one specially reserved for Luke for snuffing his candles.” Poor Luke!

Great men are often disturbed by little things, and this staid and well-balanced preacher was greatly disturbed by the candle snuffer in a little countryside chapel with a mere handful of people.’

But long ere this, both preacher and candle snuffer have received their crowns— the preacher’s studded with many stars, for they that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars for ever and ever; and the faithful steward’s, for he that is faithful in little is faithful also in much.

References

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