

James Travis

Transcription of article in the *Christian Messenger* by Rev. John Mayles

The active ministry of James Travis covered nearly half a century, beginning in 1859 and ending in 1906. During that period probably no man exerted a more powerful influence in Primitive Methodism than he. With the exception of five years spent in London as General Missionary Secretary, he travelled in the Manchester and Liverpool Districts, but was known throughout the denomination as a great administrator, and a forceful and eloquent preacher. In the very early days of his ministry he rose to fame, and in Chorley, Bolton, Manchester and elsewhere, he was probably the most popular speaker that had ever represented our Church in these centres. The buildings which he found were inadequate for the ministry of such a king among men, and in an era famous for the erection of Chapels, Mr. Travis must have been near the head of a list of successful builders. His Circuits enjoyed unprecedented prosperity. Conversions were continuously witnessed, and people unaccustomed to attend public worship were attracted by his virile and enthusiastic ministry. While his Circuits were his chief concern, and preaching his highest vocation, social and political causes claimed him, and at the height of his fame no speaker was in greater demand for Free Trade Hall and other meetings in Lancashire than he. Social wrongs aroused his fierce indignation, and on such themes as education, temperance and purity he spoke with all the fiery ardour of an Old Testament Prophet.



James Travis was an ecclesiastical statesman of the front rank, and his hand can be traced in much of the legislation passed by our Church during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. He was easily among the first half dozen debaters ever known in the denomination, and in Committee and Conference his advocacy of a measure was often a guarantee of its adoption. In this brief article it is impossible to specify the various schemes upon which his genius left its stamp; but I mention one subject upon which he wrought strenuously, and with wonderful effort, viz., Ministerial education. He himself had but slender advantages in this regard, and his own limitations intensified his desire that those coming after him should have more adequate equipment. The Manchester College, which now bears the name of Hartley, owed its establishment to a few ardent spirits, and our friend was one of the foremost of these. After his superannuation he modestly wrote, "It is, I hope, with pardonable pride, that I think of having contributed some little to originate and establish this great institution, of having pleaded for it on countless platforms, and in numberless homes, and of having taken part in all the public functions associated with the erection and dedication of its various sections."

He was an ardent missionary advocate, and while abnormally young for the honour of such a place in the May Meeting programme, he thrilled the vast audience in the Metropolitan Tabernacle to an extent that has rarely been equalled. That speech, delivered in the late seventies, combined with

other exploits, secured for him an unusually commanding position, which he maintained to the end of his active ministry, and beyond it. He did much to reorganise our Missionary Society, and in 1889 succeeded the late Rev. John Atkinson in the Secretariat. At that time Mr. W.P. Hartley (afterwards Sir William) was achieving commercial distinction in Liverpool, and Mr. Travis secured him as General Treasurer. That fact marked an epoch in the history of the Society, and during the five years of office, new prospects were initiated in Africa, and new Missions opened in London. By a happy coincidence the Secretary and Treasurer were respectively President and Vice-President of the Norwich Conference in 1892, and it was then that the Jubilee Fund of £50,000 was launched. That was the greatest financial project which up to that time had been inaugurated in Primitive Methodism, and the next two years or so, saw its triumphant completion.

One of the crowning honours of our friend was his election as President of the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches. He was the first member of our Church to occupy the position. His predecessors were among the most illustrious of non-conformist ministers, but he filled the office with such distinction that at the close of the year Dr. T.B. Meyer, on behalf of the Council said, "The way you, sir, have presided over the meetings of the Committee, and the way you have represented us on great public occasions, has gathered around yourself our increasing respect and esteem. We congratulate the Church, of which you are so distinguished a leader, and we thank that Church for having given us so eminent a President." If the selection had been with our own Church I have no doubt that with one voice we should have said, "Travis is the man."

I should not have consented to write this appreciation but for my personal relations with Mr. Travis. The first time I came into intimate contact with him, was at the Missions District meeting, held at Torquay in 1890. I had travelled only eight years, and was working in one of the most insignificant outposts of the Connexion. But he took me to his heart, and invited me to rambles with him. We might have been equals by the way in which he took me into his confidence. And this was characteristic. A more brotherly man and one less free from swank it would be impossible to find. I then discovered what subsequent friendship confirmed, that there was a fine scorn of everything that was mean or cowardly. There was a noble generosity which invariably gave credit to one who was trying to do his best. But while there was the heart and the winsomeness of a little child, there was a moral passion which flamed out against wrong whether enshrined in an individual or in society. At that Synod he made a remark which has influenced me more than most things that I have heard. Said he, "I have never sought position, but I have made it a rule to accept what the Church has offered." There was no self-seeking, but on the other hand no cowardice to prevent the acceptance of responsibility. I count it a great honour to have enjoyed the friendship of one whom I believe was among God's greatest gifts to our Church.

References

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