



## **ROOTS II**

Seven more biographies to  
encourage our faith

John Benton

## CONTENTS

	Page number
Introduction	3
1. John Knox	4
2. John Wesley	7
3. Daniel Rowland	10
4. William Carey	13
5. Charles Spurgeon	16
6. John Charles Ryle	19
7. Mary Slessor	22

*Besides other sources, I am much indebted to Don Stephens for his MP3 series 'Great Christians You Should Know' available from Know Your Bible Recordings, P.O. Box 125, Liverpool, L17 0WX and to the Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals published by IVP, 2003.*

© 2021 John Benton

Cover image: iStock

## Introduction

God makes some Christian lives to stand out as examples to us all.

We do well to take note of them and be inspired by them. The Lord Jesus is, of course, to be our great example, Hebrews 12.2. But the apostle Paul knew that we benefit from good role models wherever they are found. By God's grace, he was able to say of himself, 'Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice', Philippians 4.9.

He pointed to others too, as those to honour and pattern our lives on. A man like Epaphroditus was to be honoured 'because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life...', Philippians 2.30. The household of Stephanas were held up by Paul as examples to follow because 'they devoted themselves to the service of the saints,' 1 Corinthians 16.15.

And throughout the history of the church there have been stellar Christian lives directing us to what God is able to accomplish through ordinary folk dedicated to his service. These people were not perfect but their lives encourage our faith and challenge us to 'track and trace' their paths.

### **To whom is the preacher referring?**

Often these great men and women of Christian history have become used as staple illustrations of preachers seeking to illuminate their messages with glowing examples: John Wesley, Charles Spurgeon, Mary Slessor and more. But do 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians know who these people are anymore? I am worried that they are being forgotten. Do we listen to such names broadcast from our pulpits, and nod sagely, but with little or no understanding of who it is to whom the preacher is referring or what that person did? Contemporary Christians need a little history to be added to their curriculum.

A previous generation of evangelicals read books of Christian history and biography. But 'time poor' people of the present day might need some aid. This little booklet is a second bite of the cherry of history of evangelical roots, intended to be a help in filling the void in our knowledge.

**Proverbs 14.34**

**In recent decades, devolved governments have been established for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.**

In Scotland, there is ongoing pressure for an independence referendum. But how was it that we ever came together as one nation in the first place?

In the 1500s there was no United Kingdom. England, Scotland and Wales hated each other deeply. In particular, the border between England and Scotland was a flashpoint of warring parties and armies and the greatest ally of Scotland was France. What stopped the wars was that Scotland became a Protestant country. The alliance with France was broken. And behind all this was one man who set things in motion. That man was John Knox.

**Preacher's bodyguard**

He was a little man, born in *circa* 1514 at Haddington near Edinburgh. His father was a farmer. After grammar school, he went on to St. Andrew's University. In 1536 he was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest. By the early 1540s he was tutor to the sons of landowners near his home town. We are not sure of the date of his conversion but in 1543 he heard the ex-friar Thomas Gwilliam proclaim the good news of salvation by faith in Christ alone. By December 1545, he was accompanying the outlawed evangelist George Wishart as he preached on a tour around Leith and West Lothian. Bearing a two-handed sword, Knox acted as his assistant and bodyguard.

**The galleys**

Knox himself was preaching in St Andrews in July 1547 when a French Fleet, supporting the Catholic cause, brought soldiers and laid siege to the place. The town surrendered and Knox was among those rounded up and sent to a galley as a slave. He was chained to work the oars of a boat named the *Notre Dame*. He says in his book *The Reformation in Scotland* that while the boat was at anchor in the Loire estuary near Nantes, pressure was put on him to renounce his faith and come back to Catholicism by venerating a statue of the Virgin Mary. These Catholic zealots tried to hand him the statue. He repeatedly said, 'Don't give it to me!' They did and the statue went out through the porthole into the river! He

only seems to have got away with this because the ship needed rowers.

He was released in 1549. At that point, the boy King Edward VI sat on the English throne and he and his Council were anxious to promote the Protestant Faith in England. Knox was asked to go to Berwick where there was a rowdy garrison of soldiers. He spent two years there and then two in Newcastle, where he met his future wife, Marjorie Bowes. In both places, he planted a gospel church.

### **Exile in Geneva**

But King Edward died at the young age of 15 in July 1553. To avoid the persecution of Protestants, which followed when Mary I ascended the throne determined to re-establish Catholicism, Knox fled to the Continent and to Geneva. Calvin's influence had just reached its height in that city which seemed to Knox 'the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the apostles.' Many Christians who had become refugees because of their commitment to the Reformation were there. Eventually Knox became the pastor there of the church of the English refugees. Here, he and Marjorie had two sons. In 1558 he published a treatise aimed at the English Queen (nick-named 'Bloody Mary') entitled *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. It called for a revolt on the basis of a broadly held aversion to female rule. This back-fired on Knox when the Protestant Elizabeth I became Queen after Mary had died. Knox later said, 'my *First Blast* has blown from me all my friends in England.'

### **Reformation in Scotland**

Knox was finally recalled to Scotland. When he arrived back, the country was at a crossroads. There was a lot of anti-Catholic feeling, much of it to do with the many Protestants who had been martyred, burnt at the stake on the area where now the Edinburgh Military Tattoo is staged. Mary of Guise, Queen of Scotland, died and English and French forces withdrew. But more importantly the gospel was beginning to sweep through Scotland. Knox was appointed minister in Edinburgh with the approval of the town council.

Political change ensued. The Scottish Parliament broke with France, outlawed mass, abolished papal authority and established the Scots Confession of Faith. Knox was the key man in all of this. The Parliament decided there should be a school in every town so that children could read the Bible. There were to be colleges for gifted scholars. Money was set aside for the relief of the poor.

Around this time, the English Ambassador heard Knox preach. Subsequently he wrote, 'In one hour that one man put more life into the congregation than if they had heard five hundred trumpets!' Sadly, Knox's first wife died leaving him with sons, two and three years old.

Then Mary Queen of Scots, the daughter of Mary of Guise, returned from France to take the Scottish throne. She set out to restore Catholicism and was allowed to hear mass privately at Holyrood. This particularly vexed Knox and idolatry and the right of the people to resist ungodly leadership were central themes of the four heated meetings between the new Queen and Knox between 1561 and 1563. Eventually royal scandal and dissatisfied nobles led the Queen to abdicate in favour of her son James VI in 1567. Knox preached at the coronation of the young King. The Reformation in Scotland was established.

### **His legacy**

It was because both England and Scotland became Protestant that the path to the union of the nations became possible.

Two years before Knox died, a man named James Melville heard him preach. Knox was frail and was escorted to the pulpit by two strong men. He ascended the pulpit with difficulty and gave out his text. Melville began to take notes but he said that after half an hour he put his pen down for he had begun to tremble. In the pulpit Knox's weakness seemed, almost miraculously, to disappear. 'He was so active and vigorous,' wrote Melville, 'that he was like to ding that pulpit to blads' (break the pulpit to pieces).

Knox had remarried. On his deathbed, he asked his young wife to read from John 17, 'where I first cast my anchor' he said. Presumably this text had been crucial in his conversion to Christ. One historian wrote of him, 'Wherever that man went, he left a church.'

**Romans 12.11**

**John Wesley was a small man, just 5'5" tall, but his ministry was large by any measure.**

He was born the first of 8 children, the son of an Anglican clergyman in Epworth Lincolnshire in 1703. The only really noteworthy incident from his childhood was that in 1709 their house caught fire from end to end. All the children got out, except 6-year-old John caught in a bedroom. He stood on a box and called. A large man propped himself against the wall. Another man stood on his shoulders and managed to lift John out just as the roof collapsed. From that moment, young John was convinced God had a special purpose for his life and ever after kept that day, 7<sup>th</sup> February, as a solemn anniversary, for years afterwards.

He was sent to Charterhouse School (then in London) and then to Oxford where he met George Whitefield. He received his MA in 1727 and was ordained as a Church of England minister. But soon, full of zeal, he was off to the American colonies as a missionary. However, the problem was he was not converted! And, as you can imagine, his missionary labours were not successful. His ideas were more to do with moralism than the gospel.

**His Conversion**

It wasn't until some 11 years later, just before his 35<sup>th</sup> birthday that he found salvation. It is a famous story and is worth quoting at length. It was Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> May 1738. He was in London and was invited by his friend James Hutton to go to a Moravian meeting in the city.<sup>1</sup>

They walked through mean streets, past alleys and brothels. They stepped over men and women drunk in the street from gin. In his journal Wesley recorded: 'In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the *Epistle to the Romans*. About a quarter to nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given to me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.' In his journal

---

<sup>1</sup> The Moravians were originally German Christians connected with the work of Count Zinzendorf, who had experienced new birth and were keen missionaries to other lands.

the words 'my' and 'mine' are in italics. Before he had something of a head knowledge but now his heart had been touched. He found, as Luther says, that the essence of Christian faith is in the personal pronouns.

### **His Ministry**

Meanwhile the fire of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Revival was already ablaze. George Whitefield was already preaching in the open air to 1000s of miners at Bristol and he asked Wesley, his old friend from Oxford, to come and help.

Early on Wesley made a decision, never to preach unless he could 'follow up the blow he struck.' Whitefield was undoubtedly the greater preacher, but Wesley consolidated. He organised the new converts and enquirers into 'Methodist societies' where people encouraged and prayed for one another; but told them to attend parish church. (There was no Methodist Church until after Wesley's death). His advice to these societies about worship was 'sing lustily and with good courage'.

For 53 years Wesley preached repentance, faith, new birth and personal conversion – in other words the gospel. He criss-crossed the country and went to America travelling some quarter of a million miles, preaching some 40,000 times during his long ministry. Until he was 70, he rode everywhere on horseback. After that he had a carriage made, with books and a desk. He never wasted time.

As an example of his ministry, let me quote from one of his letters about a visit to Newcastle. 'Last week I was informed that an abundance of Sabbath breakers and drunkards used to wander about the Sand Hill on Sunday evening. Immediately my heart burned within me to call those sinners to repentance. I came, and (nothing terrified by their noise) cried aloud in the name of the Lord – *'Sinners turn; why will you die? God, your Maker, asks you why.'* They subsided apace, and more and more began to sink into seriousness. Some gentlemen laboured to prevent this...and gave money to persons to strike and push their neighbours.' But against such opposition Wesley preached and, of his time in Newcastle said, 'Many were saved from their sins. The drunkards are sober, the common swearers fear God, the Sabbath breakers now keep that holy day.'

### **His influence**

He was a man of habit. He went to bed at 10pm and he rose every day at 4am. He tried to preach his first sermon by 5am to catch workers going to the early shifts – these were the first days of the Industrial Revolution. When he died in 1791 at the age of 88, Britain was a changed country. In the 1790s (unlike France

where there was Revolution), Britain had become a different place from what it had been in the 1730s with all the drunkenness of the gin craze etc.

The social influence of the revival was immense. Now there were schools and help for the unemployed. One of Wesley's last letters was to William Wilberforce encouraging him in the abolition of slavery. Wesley had his faults. He opposed the Bible's teaching on predestination and he believed in sinless perfection (though he did not think this of himself). These things sadly led to division from Whitefield and probably hindered the results of the revival being greater. He also had an aristocratic bossiness which upset many people. But such faults God allows to stop us making idols of men.

### **His challenge**

His challenge to us is his untiring zeal for the gospel. He inspired others to be like him. Listen to some of his points to his helpers: 'Be diligent; never be unemployed for a moment. Be serious. Let your motto be holiness to the Lord. Believe evil of no one unless you see it done. Speak evil of no one; else your words will eat as a canker. Be ashamed of nothing but sin. You have nothing to do but save souls.'

When he died, he left his preaching gown, 6 spoons and 6 guineas for the 6 men who carried his coffin. Everything else he had spent on gospel work.

**Acts 1.8**

**The 18<sup>th</sup> century revival deeply touched the hearts of the people of Wales, making it ‘the land of song’.**

Daniel Rowland, along with two others, Howell Harris and the hymn writer William Williams of Pantycelyn were, under God,<sup>2</sup> instrumental in the great reshaping of the nation which took place then. They were the founding fathers of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism.

**Oh, for a word!**

Rowland was born, probably in 1711, at Nantcwnlle, Cardiganshire, in mid-Wales. He was already ordained as a deacon in the Church of England before he was truly converted to Christ under the ministry of an Anglican minister named Griffith Jones, who was a kind of forerunner of the revival. This appears to have been in the winter months of 1735 and one biographer describes what happened as follows: ‘When (Jones) was preaching in a churchyard, he saw a young man in the crowd who appeared restless and rebellious. He observed him for a moment, pointed at him, and with an expression of gentle compassion, exclaimed, “Oh, for a word to reach your heart, young man!” Soon it was evident that his restlessness had ceased, and he listened earnestly for the rest of the sermon...That was the way this great man was convicted: great before in his hostility to Christ’s Gospel...great after that in godliness.’

**Preaching that melted people**

He was ordained as a ‘priest’ by the Bishop of St David’s in August 1735 and became the curate of Llangeitho about 18 miles south of Aberystwyth. Following his conversion, a marked change took place in his preaching. Rowland now could not help but devote every spare moment to studying the Bible, encouraged by his godly wife, Elinor. Years later his son said that he ‘knew almost the whole Bible...by heart; so that hardly a passage could be mentioned to him, that he could not tell the chapter and verse where it was found.’

But it was not simply Rowland’s Scriptural knowledge but the evident power of

---

<sup>2</sup> Williams is perhaps most famous for his hymn *Guide me O Thou great Jehovah* still sung at rugby matches in Cardiff.

the Holy Spirit which attended his preaching that made such a profound impression. Wonderful authority and light accompanied his ministry. Howell Harris wrote to a friend, 'I was last Sunday at the Ordinance with Brother Rowland where I saw, felt, and heard such things as I can't send on paper any idea of. The power that continues with him is uncommon'. Whole congregations became convicted and 'melted' under the gospel in a way that cannot be explained at a simply human level. Tears and joy went hand in hand and great numbers converted to Christ.

### **Strained relations and revival**

Though he knew Whitefield and Wesley, Rowland hardly ever travelled outside Wales. For 55 years until his death his home was in Llangeitho which became a centre for Welsh Calvinistic Methodism. This movement went through a period of prosperity and consolidation between 1739 and 1745 with societies springing up across Wales.

But relations with Howell Harris went through a difficult phase. This was partly because Harris began travelling as an evangelist with a married woman from North Wales named Sidney (yes!) Griffith, who, it was claimed had prophetic powers. Harris was a married man and insisted his relationship with Griffith was purely platonic, but it led to a cutting of ties in 1750. Sidney Griffith died in 1752 and Harris withdrew into seclusion and then spent some time in military service.

The early fires of revival had somewhat waned, with little showers of God's blessing from time to time. But in 1762 an 'exceptional and torrential flood' of the power of the Holy Spirit engulfed Llangeitho once again. The beginning of this can be traced to a prayer meeting which started in discouragement but ended in power. The blessings spread like a flood, carrying all before it. William Williams wrote, 'The sermons were a delight, the listeners plentiful, thoughtful and eager to listen. There were some convicted in every service...Now the tone of the whole district was changed.' This revival was characterized by whole nights of praise and singing, such was the joy of God's people.

The influence of the revival led to a reconciliation between Rowland and Harris. With the new outpouring of the Spirit there was a great need for the organizational skills of Howell Harris. Rowland and William Williams reached out to Harris and by 1763 he was working again with the association of Welsh Calvinistic Methodists.

But also, in 1763 the Anglican authorities turned on Rowland. Perhaps worried by the revival, they expelled him from his curacy. This was very unpopular with the parishioners. Two attempts were made to have him reinstated within Anglicanism, but both failed. Meanwhile Rowland kept up public worship in a house and in the open air, such were the crowds that gathered. By 1770, a Methodist meeting was well established in Llangeitho.

### **Bringing heaven with them**

The sermons of great men like Daniel Rowland often brought joy to their hearers. Christmas Evans records being at Rowland's preaching and, as he warmed to his subject, 'the effect on the people was wonderful; you could see nothing but smiles and tears running down the faces of all.'

Many would sing in anticipation of Rowland's ministry, coming from miles away to be there. 'It is well known that some hundreds of these pilgrims used to meet at a well within about two miles of Llangeitho on the morning before divine service, to take some refreshment, drinking water from the well, after long and tedious journeys through the night. After asking a blessing upon their food, and returning thanks, and praying, they would then sing a hymn, and proceed towards Llangeitho in this happy frame of mind, praising the Lord. Rowland was generally struck with their heavenly singing, as he was walking out musing on his sermon before the service. He would stop, listening, then observing, "Well, here they come, bringing heaven along with them."<sup>3</sup>

### **Lesson**

The great lesson to be learned from the life of Daniel Rowland is the need of the power of the Holy Spirit to attend the preaching. Without the Holy Spirit nothing of any worth happens. William Williams said of Rowland, 'the Spirit like a blazing fire,' was with him.

---

<sup>3</sup> See *Daniel Rowland and the Evangelical Awakening in Wales*, by Eifon Evans, Banner of Truth, 1987, pages 353, 360.

**Matthew 28.18-20**

World mission is a major theme of the New Testament, Revelation 7.9,10. But although there had been foreign missions of various kinds from apostolic times, the greatest steps forward in evangelizing the world began during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and seem to have gained special impetus from the work of William Carey.

It was the age of colonialism and the countries of Europe building empires. Britain famously had an empire 'on which the sun never set'. Much of this was exploitative and rapacious and cannot be defended. But under God, this situation was used to bring the gospel, and with it the beginnings of education and hospitals, to many poorer parts of the world.

**Conversion and ministry**

William Carey was born in August 1761, in the small village of Paulerspury, Northamptonshire. His father was the village schoolmaster. This gave his son access to many books and maps. Around the age of 14, William became an apprentice to a shoemaker and there he met John Warr, another young man, who was a Christian. Warr's witness for Christ led to Carey's conversion.

When he was just 19 years old, Carey was married to Dorothy and later was baptized. He began preaching and studying Latin, Greek and Hebrew in his spare time and in 1785 became the pastor of the Baptist Church at Moulton. This led him into the fellowship of vigorous group of leaders among the Particular Baptist churches of the East Midlands where he met Andrew Fuller who was to be a friend and helper. In 1789, the year of the French Revolution, Carey moved to the pastorate of Harvey Lane Baptist Church in Leicester.

**Mission to India**

But his interest in overseas mission had already been stirred, partially by reading the accounts of Captain Cook's voyages to the South Seas. Through his writing, he began to urge Christians to see their duty to spread the gospel across the world. Although it met with some opposition from hyper-Calvinists, his booklet entitled, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*, was published in 1792 and found support in the

theological work of Andrew Fuller. In May 1792, Carey preached his famous sermon on Isaiah 54.2,3 in which, with world mission in mind, he told the Association of Baptist Churches in Nottingham, we are to 'attempt great things for God and expect great things from God.' This led to the formation of the Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen.

Carey was no armchair leader. By November 1793 we find him in Calcutta. With little funding from home, he accepted the position of manager of an indigo factory to support himself and his family. He soon learnt Bengali and Hindi and began to preach and translate the Bible into Bengali. In 1800 he moved south to the Danish settlement of Serampore, the *East India Company* having refused permission for missionaries to have a compound on their territory. Among those who joined Carey in India were Joshua Marshman, a teacher and William Ward, a printer. These three did much to build up the work at Serampore and news of this reached Britain and stirred great interest. The first Hindu to come to Christ was Krishna Pal, who was baptized at Serampore in December 1800.

### **Uphill struggle**

A network of mission stations was built up over the years. But the work proved an uphill struggle. Dorothy had not been keen on going to India and became mentally ill. She died in 1807. There were so many languages in India to learn – obviously essential to the mission. Enormous strides were made in producing books of grammar and dictionaries for languages like Bengali, Marathi, Sanskrit etc. He translated the Bible into six languages and portions of it into many more. In fact, Carey's expertise in Indian languages soon made him useful to the *East India Company*. They paid him a good salary to teach, which gave the mission more viability for the long term.

But Carey was working on a universal dictionary of languages derived from Sanskrit when, in 1812, a fire destroyed all his notes and much of the printing equipment. It was a tremendous setback. But he wrote to Andrew Fuller speaking of the fire in terms of how much worse it might have been. News of the fire actually drew more attention to the mission back in Britain and resulted in attracting more support.

The group began a college to train Indians to become preachers. By 1821 there had been around 1400 people converted to Christ and baptized at Serampore.

## **Social reform**

Carey's links to the *East India Company* gave him influence. In India the local customs of those days included the practice of *sati*. This was the forcible burning to death of women whose husbands had just died on the man's funeral pyre. Lord William Bentinck served as the Governor General of India from 1828 to 1835. In 1829 he brought in the Bengal Sati Regulation which banned the practice. The abolition of this terrible custom probably owed more to Carey's lobbying than to any other single individual.

The mission progressed and inspired others to begin missionary societies. But Carey's later years were marred by more difficulties. These revolved around the question of whether mission policy should be determined by the committee of supporters in London or decided by those who were on the field with first-hand knowledge of what was happening and what needed to be done. He died at Serampore in 1834.

## **Lessons**

He never regarded himself as a great man, but amid the challenges of the work he said, 'I can plod.' He also is reported as saying, 'I am not afraid of failure. I am afraid of succeeding at things that don't matter.'

And notice, the seeds of great growth in world mission began as one young apprentice at work spoke of his faith in Christ to another.

**2 Timothy 4.2**

Being brought up in a Christian family does not make someone a Christian.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon's father was a Congregationalist minister and so was his grandfather. Because of family hardship, for the first 6 years of his life Charles lived with his grandfather, James, in the tiny village of Stamborne in Essex. A gifted child, he would often climb up to the attic and read his grandfather's theological volumes – especially the works of the Puritans and of John Bunyan. But yet, though often convicted of his sin, he remained unconverted.

**A snowy day**

But God had his time for Spurgeon. As a lad of 16, his school at Newmarket was closed because of an outbreak of fever. He went home to his parents in Colchester. On 6<sup>th</sup> January 1850, he set out for church, but a snowstorm filled the town and diverted him. Instead going to the church he intended, he went down a side street and entered Artillery Street Primitive Methodist Chapel. The snow meant the designated preacher did not arrive and a local lay preacher took the service.

There were less than 20 people in the congregation and the preacher struggled to say much from his text, which was Isaiah 45.22, 'Look to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other'. He could do little more than to keep repeating the text. But Spurgeon later wrote, 'Then, stopping, he pointed to where I was sitting under the gallery, and he said, "That young man there looks very miserable" ...and he shouted... "Look! Look, young man! Look now!' Then I had this vision...not a vision to my eyes, but to my heart. I saw what a Saviour Christ was...Now I can never tell how it was, but I no sooner saw whom I was to believe than ...I did believe in one moment'. Young Charles was saved.

**A pastor at 17**

With something of a photographic memory and steeped in the Calvinistic theology of the Puritans from his boyhood, soon Spurgeon was preaching. In October 1851, at the age of just 17, he became the pastor of Waterbeach Baptist Chapel near Cambridge. Within 2 years the congregation grew from 40 to 400.

In 1854 he was called as the minister of New Park Street Chapel in London. To say his ministry was an overnight sensation is an understatement. Soon the chapel, which had been adapted to accommodate up to 2000 people was too small for the crowds. A thickset young man, not greatly handsome, he was caricatured and opposed for his Biblical Calvinism and savaged by the press. But still his popularity increased. It was therefore decided to hold services at the Surrey Gardens Music Hall which had a capacity of 10,000.

## **Tragedy**

But the first service, on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1856, ended in disaster. The building was already overflowing, with many people still outside wanting to enter, when someone started to shout 'Fire!' In the panic and confusion 7 people were trampled to death. Young Spurgeon stood at the front of the auditorium unable to do anything as the tragedy unfolded before his eyes. He was traumatized and experienced deep depression for some days.

A fortnight after the tragedy, he preached from Philippians 2 on 'The Exaltation of Christ'. He said of the tragedy, 'God forgive those who were the instigators of that horrid act...It shall not stop us, however; we are not in the least daunted by it. I shall preach there yet again...and Satan's empire shall tremble more than ever...The text I have selected is one that has (had)...power to comfort my depressed spirit...' Services were resumed at the Music Hall until 1859, and then in 1861 a new church building, the Metropolitan Tabernacle, with a capacity of 6,000 was opened at the Elephant & Castle.

## **Wider ministry**

In 1856, Charles married Susanna Thompson. They had twin sons, Charles and Thomas who both became Baptist ministers. Later in that same year Spurgeon began to prepare men for the Christian ministry. This was later formally organized into the Pastors' College. His book *Lectures to My Students* still remains a classic among ministerial training manuals and by his death around 1,000 men had passed through the college and into ministry.

The publication of his sermons began in 1855 being mailed to subscribers, but also many were printed in newspapers around the world.

In 1867, under Spurgeon's instigation, the Stockwell Orphanage was opened. It

eventually expanded to include 12 houses seeking to look after 500 girls and boys.

### **Controversy**

In 1864, he preached on 'Baptismal Regeneration' to oppose the idea that all that is required to be a Christian is to be baptized by the church. His target was the influence of the Roman Catholic leader John Henry Newman and the rise of the Anglo-Catholic 'Oxford Movement.' The sermon proved to be dynamite as it boldly declared 'baptism without faith saves no-one'. This directly contradicted the formularies of the Church of England. Over 350,000 copies were sold.

Later in his life, he resigned from the Baptist Union for its failure to adopt a clear statement of faith, particularly regarding the inspiration and authority of Scripture. This led many other ministers to turn on him and is known as 'the Downgrade Controversy'.

However, amidst the controversies people were being converted under his ministry with overall nearly 15,000 people added to the church. But in all this he had to battle ill health. He suffered from very painful gout and frequent bouts of depression. His wife, Susanna, was an invalid from 1868 and often the couple would spend time in Mentone in the South of France to escape the cold, wet climate of the foggy London winters. Eventually, to the huge loss, both of his church and of the evangelical cause generally, it was there he died on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1892 at the age of 58.

### **Lesson**

Do not despise the day of small things, Zechariah 4.10. What a huge ministry resulted from that little back street meeting in Colchester, where Spurgeon met Christ!

**Ephesians 2.8**

J. C. Ryle was the most outstanding evangelical bishop of the Church of England during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As the son of a Methodist banker who was MP for Macclesfield, Ryle came from a privileged background. He was educated at Eton and then Oxford. But it was through a former Eton school friend that he was converted in 1837 while at Oxford.

**Conversion and catastrophe**

His friend, Algernon Coote, had encouraged him to take Christianity seriously – to ‘think, repent and pray’. Soon after that he was in church on Sunday afternoon and heard a reading of Ephesians 2.8, ‘By grace are ye saved (pause) through faith (pause) and that not of yourselves (pause) it is the gift of God’. The succession of phrases had a powerful effect. ‘Nothing,’ Ryle later said, ‘to this day appeared to me so clear and distinct as my own sinfulness, Christ’s presence, the value of the Bible, the absolute necessity of coming out of the world, and the need of being born again, and the enormous folly of the whole doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration’.

After Oxford he returned to his home and was involved in his father’s bank. But then disaster struck. Due to mishandling of things at the Manchester branch, the bank collapsed. The family went bankrupt. It was a dreadful time and Ryle writes, ‘If I had not been a Christian at this time, I do not know if I should not have committed suicide’.

After much heart searching, Ryle felt that this trouble was something of God’s preparation for entering ‘the Church’. He was ordained into the Anglican ministry in December 1841.

**Concern for the congregations**

Following the bankruptcy, his parents had moved to Gosport in Hampshire. Ryle became a curate at Exbury in the same county. Then he moved to St Thomas’ church in Winchester. He was always a very gifted and direct speaker and the congregation soon grew. He next moved to Suffolk, to churches first at

Helmingham and then Stradbroke.

Church going was respectable in Victorian England. He was concerned for vital Christian faith. He gave away tracts and then began to write his own. Ryle boldly challenged the superficiality of the average congregation. Here is a typical passage from him: 'Look around the congregation with which you worship every Sunday. Mark how little interest the great majority of them take in what is going on. Observe how listless and apathetic ...they evidently are...They are thinking of business, or money, or pleasure, or worldly plans, or bonnets or gowns...Their bodies are there, but not their hearts – and what is the reason? ...They need conversion. Without it they only come to church for fashion and form's sake, and go away from church to serve the world or their sins.'<sup>4</sup>

He battled for the gospel against both the liberal theology which was emanating from Germany at this time ,and the drift towards Roman Catholicism in the Anglican church engendered by the Oxford Movement.

With this in mind, among the many books he wrote there were those of church history and biography, reminding Christians of their spiritual roots. *Light from Old Times* focused on the Protestant leaders and martyrs of the English Reformation period through to the Puritans. *The Christian Leaders of England in the Eighteenth Century* recounted the stories of the men God used in the revival – like Whitefield, Wesley and others. These books and others were a rallying call to walk in the old paths (a title of another of his books) of Biblical Christianity.

His strident ministry brought him to the attention of some in the hierarchy of the Church of England. In 1880, Ryle was called to become Bishop of Liverpool, an appointment made at the last minute by Disraeli, the outgoing Prime Minister who had just lost a General Election to Gladstone.

## **Liverpool**

Alongside London and Bristol, Liverpool was one of the greatest seaports in the country. It had a multinational population, which had already grown to over a million people. Alongside great riches, poverty and degradation in the city was appalling.

Ryle acted to reorganize and stimulate gospel work in the city. He set up an

---

<sup>4</sup> *Old Paths*, by J. C. Ryle, Banner of Truth, 2013, page 308

annual diocesan conference to which all clergy and two lay people from each parish church were invited. He promoted the office of 'Scripture Reader', paid workers in support of the ordained ministry. Fifty Readers took services in mission rooms, organized Sunday schools and visited the sick.

27 new churches and 48 mission halls were built between 1880 and 1890 and the number of clergy in the city was greatly increased. There was pressure for a cathedral to be built, but Ryle felt that the money would be better spent in supporting the parish work. His impact for good on the city was immense.

Addressing the clergy, Ryle said: 'You preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ so fully and clearly that everyone can understand it. If Christ crucified has not His rightful place in your sermons, and sin is not exposed as it should be, and your people are not plainly told what they ought to be and do, your preaching is of no use.'

### **Lesson**

As with the story of William Carey we see that personal witness from a friend was the catalyst which, under God, brought into being a hugely influential and strategic ministry. Let us use whatever opportunity we can to witness for Christ to friends. Who knows what God can do?

**Hebrews 11.32-34**

You do not have to come from a rich family to be useful to God's kingdom.

Mary Mitchell Slessor was born in December 1848, one of 7 children, into a working-class family in Aberdeen. Times were hard and, in 1857, the family moved to Dundee in search of work in the textile industry. Her father was an alcoholic and died young. The whole family lived in one room in a slum area of the city. They attended Wishart Presbyterian Church, Mary's mother being a devout Christian woman.

**Mill girl**

Mary became a 'mill girl' at Baxter Brothers & Co. which also provided some limited education for the children it employed. By the time she was 14, Mary worked a linen power loom. But she was also an avid reader and could read during the working day with a book propped up on her loom. Many churches, including her own, were strong supporters of overseas mission and from the monthly mission magazines she would have read of remote parts of the world and the daring adventures of the great Scottish missionary David Livingstone (1813-1873) in Africa.

In her twenties, Mary volunteered to teach for a Sunday School in one of the poor areas of Dundee. Her sense of humour made her a popular teacher and her own experience of poverty meant that she had a heart for the local children. But Mary found herself being called to a greater work.

**Sailing to Africa**

The Wishart Presbyterian Church was linked to the Calabar Mission in West Africa, an area we now know as Southern Nigeria. Mary's application to the mission board was accepted and that was followed by a 3-month training course in Edinburgh. Having grown up in difficult circumstances, Mary had already become a resourceful and resilient woman, which also prepared her for the life on which she was to embark.

In August 1876, she set sail from Liverpool on the S. S. Ethiopia bound for Duke Town in Calabar. The journey took roughly 5 weeks. Duke Town was very

different from Dundee. The average temperature was 38 Centigrade. Mud huts and rows of graves greeted her. She knew that to feel and be ill, often with malaria, would be part of the price of her work. The mission there had begun in 1846 and she soon began to learn the local language and to teach the children. Besides her blue eyes and red hair, dressing in African clothes and eating local food made her stand out from the other missionaries. Illness meant that twice she had to return to Scotland for convalescence.

But her life was anchored in God through Bible reading and prayer. Three of her worn out Bibles with her writing in the margins are still kept in Dundee Museum. On one page is written, 'God and one are a majority.'

There was often hostility between the different African tribes and slavery was still practised there. Mary began to feel that she should spend more of her time up the Creek River, in the interior where there were few roads and it was certainly more dangerous, especially for a woman. Her prayer was, 'Oh, for power. Oh, for a heart full of love to Jesus. Only God can change these people'.

### **Witch doctors**

Witch doctors and superstitious tribal customs held sway. Once a house collapsed killing a chief's son. With no evidence, the witch doctor laid the blame on people taken prisoner from another village. Mary and a missionary carpenter named Charles Owens intervened. They made an elaborate coffin for the dead son and dressed his body in Western clothes augmented with feathers to make him look impressive. Knowing that the chief would not murder the prisoners in their presence, Mary and Owens kept vigil for 2 weeks to save the prisoners.

Living among the people and helping them, gradually Mary began to win the trust of the local people. Especially, she worked hard to improve the lot of women and children.

### **Twins, the devil and malaria**

In this region, it was considered that when twins were born, one of them was the child of the devil. Not knowing which one meant that both were killed and the mother killed or banished from the community. Rescuing twins and their mothers became one of Mary's key roles as well as working to show from the Bible how wrong this was.

Mary adopted some of the abandoned twins and eventually 9 such children became her family. She taught them reading and writing and they became her helpers in the work in this remote part of 'darkest Africa'.

### **'Queen' of Calabar**

By 1903, a gospel church had been established in the jungle away from the coast. She saw people baptized and turn to Christ. She also had the idea of training African evangelists to take the gospel to other African people.

When the British appointed vice-consuls to supervise the running of native courts, they chose Mary for that office among the Okoyong people. She was the first woman to be appointed to such a post in the whole British empire.<sup>5</sup>

Such was the honour in which she was held that she became thought of as 'the uncrowned Queen of Calabar'. When she died in 1915, many African people travelled to Duke Town and she was given a state funeral by the British. She was buried there and a large granite cross from Scotland marks her grave.

### **Lesson**

As a woman Mary went into a very dangerous situation. She said, 'Courage is only the consequence of conquering fear by faith'.

---

<sup>5</sup> See *Swift and Beautiful* by David B. Calhoun, Banner of Truth, 2020, page 8