

Gospel Blessings in the 19th Century in Salisbury

By John and Angelia Magee

The Gospel Goes Forth

'The fact is indisputable that revivals of true Christianity issue in missionary effort.' The outworking of this truth was evidenced in the formation of numerous missionary societies in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Following the Whitefield and Wesley revivals, many individuals in England had a great desire to see the Gospel advance beyond the boundaries of their own homeland. William Carey, George Muller, Henry Martyn, John Paton, William Burns, and Hudson Taylor were among those who left these shores to spread the Gospel amongst the heathen countries. God, who

went before them, blessed their labours as many at home uplifted them in prayer for safety and success. Salisbury was one of the cities that was blessed with men who possessed a missionary zeal. The strengthening of the Baptist cause in Ireland is traced back to John Saffery of Salisbury who was instrumental in the formation of the Irish Baptist Society.

Societies were also formed at this time for the publishing of the Word of God. The British and Foreign Bible Society was established in 1804, and developing from this, the Trinitarian Bible Society was formed in 1831 in response to a need for a society with a clearer Trinitarian doctrine.

The Church under Attack

Perhaps the two most notable preachers of the nineteenth century in England were Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) and John Charles Ryle (1815-1900). God once again displayed marvelous favour to the people of England through the ministry of these two men. As the effects of previous revivals began to recede, the Church of the Living God became subject to attack once again, especially in the form of doctrinal error. Despite the Herculean work of Spurgeon and Ryle, the Church was unable to withstand the influences borne upon it by the Oxford Movement, the evolutionary teaching of Darwin, and, most especially, the influence of the Higher Critics. Higher Criticism 'claimed the power to go behind Bible documents and decide from what sources the Bible's writers derived their material. All Protestants had been agreed on such matters in the past, but now men arose who argued that the Bible must be treated like all other books, criticized as to its sources, and perchance shown to be inconsistent with itself and in need of correction as if it were the work of fallible men.' Protestantism had lost its Reformation distinctive and its unity in the faith. Consequent upon these events was the mushrooming of new Protestant denominations, creating for the first time a diverse spectrum of Biblical doctrine among those who espoused the name of Protestant. Thus in this century we hear of

the formation of the Christian Brethren and the Salvation Army. In 1880/81 the Salvation Army opened their first Salisbury branch, and in 1895 the Open Christian Brethren had their first public meeting in the city.

The Baptist Cause is Weakened

The Baptist church in Brown Street, Salisbury, also seems to have suffered spiritually during this period. After the death of John Saffery, six different ministers were appointed in close succession. During this time Moore noted that ;... the church had fallen into a state of spiritual lassitude', and he goes on to remark that 'the activities of the church were maintained but with no vigour or enthusiasm'. This once-distinguished Baptist church had in just a few decades reached distressing spiritual extremities, and the advance of the Kingdom of God in Salisbury seems to have weakened.

Spiritual problems were especially highlighted at this Baptist church during the ministry of George Short from 1868-1897. The tribute to him in the Salisbury Times on his retirement spoke of him as:

'... a devoted pastor, a thoughtful and useful preacher, a tender and gracious visitor, a friend of the young, the guardian of the Church's best interests; ... in the city, the intelligent useful citizen, speaking the truth in love, maintaining inflexibly his principles with a kindness and

discrimination which has won for him no small share of esteem and respect.'

He struggled with the lack of spirituality in his congregation. Although he desired to regulate the life of the church by the Word of God, we find in the Year Book for 1895 that he wrote concerning the prayer-meeting, 'Our more educated and prominent friends are often conspicuous by their absence'. On this Moore comments, 'We feel there that the pastor was disappointed that the Prayer Meetings were not given their rightful importance in the spiritual life of the church'.

Disappointing spiritual times indeed, but they were not exceptional. However discouraging these days may appear, we can rejoice to know that the work of God in Salisbury (and throughout the country) was not totally eclipsed.

As the nineteenth century advanced, the Evangelical wing of the Church of England began to gain strength. Indeed, Salisbury was surrounded by eminently godly ministers. William Jay was in Bath, Claudius Buchanan in Bristol, and J.C. Ryle in Winchester. It was said that when Ryle came to Winchester that 'within a very short time he had filled the church "to suffocation and turned the parish upside down"'.

John Charles Ryle

John Charles Ryle (1816-1900) was born among the gentry and educated among

the elite of the land. In all things material he lacked for nothing. He knew the benefits and pleasures of wealth. At Eton he excelled not only in his studies, but in what he acknowledged to be 'his first love' - cricket. His success at Eton opened the way for his entrance into Christ Church, Oxford. Ryle admits that he had not read his Bible for fourteen years, but during a period of illness in 1837, and confined to bed, he was drawn to reading the Scriptures and to praying. This prompted him on his recovery to attend a Sabbath service where the passage read was from Ephesians chapter two. 'When the reader came to verse 8, each phrase spoke to him with spiritual power. He was converted not by a tract, nor a sermon, but by the Word of God.'

History records what a profound blessing Ryle was to his people, and even in our day many receive great spiritual encouragement from his writings. His writings on Christian themes were prolific, commencing initially with tracts and developing into warm-hearted, devotional, and doctrinally sound commentaries on the Four Gospels. His book Holiness was written to assist 'a cause which everyone who loves Christ and desires to advance his Kingdom in the world, should endeavour to help forward'. All who have read this book will assent to having been compelled to examine their own walk in holiness in the light of the exhortations of this book, and to see, what can be attained in the Christian life.

Ryle was an ardent Anglican with an evangelical zeal hardly equaled among his fellow churchmen. His link with Salisbury, though tenuous, bears mentioning. The growing reputation and respect with which Ryle was held by a large body of churchmen marked him out as a candidate for higher preferment. His name was known in Church and State, and on the death of Dean Henry Parr Hamilton, Dean of Salisbury for thirty years, the Crown nominated Canon J.C. Ryle to the Deanery.

'It was a striking departure from tradition to nominate a parish clergyman, an Evangelical, and a tract-writer to a Cathedral close.' Many appeared alarmed at his nomination especially as the dichotomy between the religion of the Anglican Cathedral Close and that of an Evangelical clergyman seemed irreconcilable. Sadly for Salisbury, Ryle had profound misgivings too. The Bishop of Salisbury was not a spiritually minded man. Bishop George Moberly had sympathies with the Oxford Movement and opposed the damnatory clause in the Athanasian Creed. (This creed is divided into two doctrinal parts. The first part deals with the doctrine of the Trinity, while the second part defines the doctrine of the person of Christ. The damnatory clause declares that individuals, who do not hold to the doctrine of the Trinity and to the doctrine of Christ's person and work, are barred from heaven.) The likelihood of these two men being united

in the Truth was impossible. Regarding the office, Ryle said, 'the more I looked at it, the less I liked it. But although I did feel, and do feel incompatible, I felt it was my duty to go'. However, the Lord intervened, and before his acceptance was acknowledged he was summoned to London, where he was offered the Bishopric of Liverpool. His reply, though memorable, was most telling with regard to the spiritual state of Salisbury: 'I would rather wear out as Bishop of Liverpool than rust out as Dean of Salisbury.'

From such an account one could justly conclude that the Gospel privileges previously experienced among the people of Salisbury were veritably extinguished, and that spiritual blessings had been arrested. However, we shall find that the Lord had preserved a remnant of his people in the city, and the advance of the Kingdom, though almost imperceptible, had not utterly ceased.

Anglicanism in Salisbury

The Cathedral was not the only Anglican church building in Salisbury. St. Paul's Anglican Church had been built in 1851-1853. It was in the parish of Fisherton Anger, Salisbury. Due to the growing population of the area, the local church, St. Clements', had to be closed and this new one built. The site of St. Clements was in what is now called Churchfields, in the west side of the city. It boasted of being the oldest church building in the

Diocese of Salisbury, dating back to the twelfth century. It had a stormy history during the Reformation and Puritan periods and demonstrated little sympathy for the non-Conformists of the city. The Fisherton Martyrs, Maundrel, Coberly, and Spicer, underwent their final examination and condemnation in St. Clements Church on the 23rd of March, 1556, the eve of their martyrdom. The land for the building of St. Paul's was secured beside the County Gaol and work advanced rapidly, reaching its completion in less than two years.

Canon Thwaites

Edgar Nembhard Thwaites (1839-1919) was called to be rector of St. Paul's, Fisherton Anger, in 1873. There is a paucity of information surrounding the birth, family life, education, and even the conversion of this man. Records at St. Paul's Church do not assist us here, neither does there appear to be any record kept of his sermons or prayers. There is, however, a small entry under the section 'Wiltshire Clergy' in E.E. Dorling's Wilts and Dorset at the Opening of the Twentieth Century: Contemporary Biographies where a reference is made to Canon Thwaites. Here we discover that he was born in Somerset, and that, his father was a justice of the peace there. We also learn that he was tutored at home. Though this deficiency of knowledge is acute, we trust, by God's grace, that the fruit of this man's labours prevail to our

present day. Indeed, there may even be some yet alive, who in their childhood heard mention of this minister of God from parents or grandparents. Prior to this appointment, Thwaites had been curate at St. John's, Keswick (1862-1865), where he served with Canon Battersby, and rector of Blaisdon, Gloucester (1866-1873). He came to St. Paul's therefore, somewhat experienced in parochial life and in the duties of an Anglican minister. St. Paul's was his last and longest charge, ending at his retirement forty-one years later.

The Maundrel Hall

It was not long before Edgar Thwaites' reputation for evangelism and missionary work began to spread around the city. There had been an influx of working class people to the city as work on the railroads advanced. Many of these people refrained from attending Sabbath worship as they felt unfit to be among the better-dressed people of the city. Thwaites' burden for their souls grew, until eventually he resolved to address the problem. He did so by undertaking to have a hall built in Fisherton Street (opposite the Clock Tower) where these workers could meet and attend the preaching of the Word. The hall, which was financed completely by public subscription, was opened on April 20th, 1880. It was named the Maundrel Hall. John Maundrel had been one of the three Salisbury Martyrs burnt at the stake in 1556 in Thwaites' parish.

In Memory of a Martyr

When the idea of an Evangelical hall first occurred to him [Thwaites] he looked around to see to whom it could be dedicated, and on reading Foxe's Book of Martyrs he found there recorded the death of three Wiltshire martyrs, who were burnt a short distance from that spot, namely, where the Devizes and Wilton Roads separate, and one of the most prominent among them was John Maundrel - a monument of God's grace, who chose rather to be burnt than to deny his trust in the Lord Jesus - and it was therefore determined to link his name with the building. Such sentiments comport with a man who was profoundly affected with the life and death of this Wiltshire yeoman.

Fox reminds us of this wretched incident in his Book of Martyrs:

On the 24th day of the same month [March], they were carried out of the common gaol to a place between Salisbury and Wilton, where were two posts set for them to be burned at. On coming to the place, they kneeled down, and offered their prayers secretly together, and then being undressed to their shirts, John Maundrel spoke with a loud voice, 'Not for all Salisbury'; which words men judge to be an answer to the sheriff, who offered him the Queen's pardon if he would recant. And after that, in like manner, spake John Spicer, saying,

'This is the most joyful day that ever I saw'. Thus were these three godly men burned at two stakes; where most constantly they gave their bodies to the fire, and their souls to the Lord, for the testimony of his truth.

Thwaites' opening words, after reading from 2 Chronicles 6 on the Dedication of the Temple, demonstrated with clarity his purpose for this newly provided building. Church records document that 'after quoting the prayer of the king and referring to the manner in which his supplications were answered by God, the speaker said he hoped the prayers which would be offered in regard to that hall would be accepted, and that the work would be blessed'. This indeed was a significant occasion for Thwaites, who was not ashamed to identify himself with such men who suffered the shame of the Cross.

Three meetings were held in the hall that day, and all well attended. From a functional point of view the hall was considered 'very handsome and was certainly the finest room in Salisbury'. It could accommodate up to 700 people and '... was not to be devoted exclusively to Churchmen or Nonconformists, and was intended for non-sectarian purposes'. It served a blessed use in its day and occasioned many opportunities for countless numbers of working people to have the gracious overtures of the Gospel extended to them. Other buildings were subsequently built around the Maundrel

Hall and were also devoted to Christian purposes.

The Maundrel Hall Trust

The Maundrel Hall Trust was created in 1895 by a J.H. Maundrel. A History of the County of Wiltshire furnishes us with some information about the trust and also records what eventually happened to the Hall.

In 1895 J.H. Maundrel settled £500 in trust for the benefit of the hall. The erection of the new Parochial Hall beside the church, and the shift of population westwards deprived Maundrel Hall of much of its usefulness, and under Orders made by the Charity Commission in 1953 and 1954 it was sold, together with Little Maundrel Hall and the Princess Christian Hotel. It was taken over by Messrs. Graham, furniture dealers, and the other property by Maidment's Publicity, Ltd. The Maundrel Hall has since been re-sold several times over, and is now a part of a restaurant chain.

While Thwaites' organisational skills were deemed extraordinary, and seemed by many to be his singularly distinguishing trait, we would impugn the grace of God in him, and do Thwaites a great injustice, if we allowed such practical skills to eclipse the essential make-up of this minister. A man whose life is wholly subject to the Word of God will cultivate relationships that savour of Christ, and

promote a godly example in speech and in habit. Glimpses of Thwaites the spiritual man are gleaned in what he wrote to his congregation in the parish magazine which he was responsible for starting.

'Sometimes the thoughts of the opportunities for good which I have failed to grasp fills me with anxiety; sometimes the recollection of the many things I have done that would better have been left undone, and the words that I have spoken that should have remained unspoken, fills my heart with great sorrow; yet I know that I can trust in the merciful forgiveness of my Lord through Jesus Christ, for "we have not an High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, for he was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin;" and "if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanse thus [sic] from all sin"'.

Here, indeed, was a Christ-centred theology, out worked in a Christ-centred ministry which acknowledged Jesus Christ to be the Author and Fountain of all of our blessings.

Thwaites' evident evangelistic zeal did not stand as an isolated aspect of his ministry, but rather was an expression, in part only, of a well-orbed Gospel testimony. Coupled with his local evangelical out-reach was a heart taken up with the desire for the Kingdom of God to be universally

proclaimed. Thwaites kept well informed of the missionary enterprises undertaken by Englishmen and others in distant lands. It was said that 'Thwaites made his parish a centre of missionary activity at home and overseas'.

The Salisbury Conference

A significant event occurred in Salisbury in 1883. Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) had recently returned home from China hoping to stir up spiritual and financial interest in his Gospel labours there. However, he found that edifying and encouraging reports had preceded his visit, and many wanted to hear of how God had blessed his work in China.

In many parts of the country people were wanting to hear how the seemingly impossible had been brought to pass; how, without appeals for money or even collections, the work had been sustained; and how in the many distant parts of China little groups of converts were being gathered. Meetings, therefore - meetings in all directions - soon claimed the leader of the Mission - the unobtrusive man so sure of his great God!

Thwaites was captivated by the missionary zeal of Taylor and was impressed by his distinctive piety. He was also burdened for the missionary cause Taylor was representing. In the overruling Providence of God these two men came together for a brief period.

Hudson Taylor's visit to Salisbury in 1883 was to speak at the Salisbury Conference, which Thwaites was attending also. Here it was said that:

'Canon Thwaites was impressed with Mr. Taylor's humility more than anything else - 'or the way, rather, in which God clothed him with humility'. Yet there was power in his addresses, especially in the missionary meeting, a power of the Holy Spirit which 'was intense, almost awful'; and of the praise meeting with which the Conference ended, Mrs. Thwaites hardly knew how to write. No reference was made on that occasion to the Inland Mission, but it was for China that lives were consecrated and money flowed in. In spite of there being no collection, people emptied their purses, stripped themselves of their jewels, handed over watches, chains, rings, and the like, and gave their lives to God for his service.'

What a wonderful occasion to witness, and to see lives changed as a result of the faithful preaching of a minister. There must have been much rejoicing in Salisbury that day and for many days to come. We are left to speculate as to what conversation may have taken place between these two men, but suffice to say if it did; it was most certainly full of Christ. Sad to recount, Hudson Taylor had become an exponent of the 'Keswick teaching', as it became known, with aberrant views on sanctification which was opposed by Bishop Ryle and other

evangelicals. Ryle had demonstrated in his expose of the Higher Life teaching that it '... did not have any credential in Scripture'.

'An Evangelical of the Purest Water'

Thwaites pressed on in serving the Lord for many more years in Salisbury. He was appointed as Canon of St. Paul's (his own parish church) in 1908, and in the same year as recognition of his Gospel labours, became prebend of Wilsford and Woodford, a little to the north of Salisbury. This would have been a means of income for him for the remainder of his life. It is from his own words that we receive encouragement regarding the blessings the Lord bestowed upon his work in his day: 'I have seen so many useful Institutions started here, so many Sinners brought to Christ, so many Believers revived, and God's blessing so manifest...'.

The Daily Graphic of December 16th, 1908, in an article entitled 'Religious forces in Salisbury', described him as 'an Evangelical of the purest water'. It is no wonder then, that when, in 1914, Canon Thwaites had to retire because of failing health, the occasion was one of deep sadness. It was felt to be a time of '... deep regret at the severance of his connection with the parish and the city. His retirement, in April 1914, was marked by a remarkable gathering, testifying to

the deep affection in which Canon Thwaites was held, both by the parishioners of St. Paul's and the citizens generally'.

His retirement to Bournemouth was for a brief period only. He continued with some visitation work in Bournemouth and occasionally preached. Thwaites reached his eightieth birthday in January 1919, and was taken to be with the Lord he loved and served on April 30th of the same year.

A Hope for the Future

While the nineteenth century had not seen such blessing as before in Salisbury, yet Gospel light was far from being extinguished. The need to hope in, and wait patiently for, the Lord who has granted great blessing in years gone by and will surely bless in years to come, is well expressed by General Robert E. Lee:

'The truth is this: The march of Providence is so slow and our desires so impatient; the work of progress is so immense and our means of aiding it so feeble; the life of humanity is so long, that of the individual so brief, that we often see only the ebb of the advancing wave and are thus discouraged. It is history that teaches us to hope.'