

The Wicket Gate Magazine

A Continuing Witness



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THE FLOATING CHURCH

The Pastor's Letter (February 1972)

My dear friends,

In these days when it is often difficult for new congregations to obtain a permanent place of worship it should always do us good to remember that our present situation is far from unique in the history of Christ's Church and that the scope of our abilities and ingenuity has, perhaps, not yet been stretched to the full.

In the "Annals of the Disruption," published some years after the succession of the "Free Kirk" from the Established Church of Scotland in 1843, numerous incidents of ingenuity, sacrifice, and adaptability are recorded as time and again the new "Free" congregations were refused land on which to erect their own places of worship, or even refusal to build. The following account of "The Floating Church" at Strontian in Argyll-shire, however, must rank high among the most unique of the ventures of that trying and testing time.

"The whole district of Ardnamurchan was the property of Sir James Riddell, extending over an area of forty miles in length. Many of the people joined the Free Church, and forwarded a respectful petition, asking for sites. His reply was a refusal, and the people of Strontian had to meet – which they did to the number of about 500 – in the open air. At communion season, and at other times, Mr. MacLean of Tobermory held services on the hillside, often in severe weather, and sometimes when the congregation 'was very wet.' Mr McRae of Knockbain, has preached to them with snow on the ground, and when 'it was laying snow'"

The refusal of sites by the proprietor of 40 miles' of landed estates was a serious matter, but men at that time were not easily baffled. A Floating Church was proposed, which might be anchored in some sheltered bay near the beach, and give accommodation to the people until better days came round. The idea was eagerly taken up, subscriptions were raised, plans carefully drawn out, the vessel was contracted for at an expense of £1400, and much

interest was felt as her construction went on in one of the building yards of the Clyde, under the skilful superintendence of Robert Brown, Esq. Of Fairlie. Then came the launch, and the voyage from Greenock to Loch Sunart. At first there was some difficulty as to a proper anchorage for the vessel ...

The best place, safest for the ship and most convenient for the people, would have been just under the windows of Sir James Riddell's Mansion, but, as a matter of good taste, another was chosen two miles off, and there, at a point about 150 yards from the shore, the vessel was safely moored.



“How gladly the people left the storm-beaten hillside for this strange Highland Church of the sea, need not be said. It was a singular spectacle on each returning Sabbath morning, as the hour of public worship drew near, to see the boats coasting along from North and South, each with its contingent of hearers, while numerous groups could be descried far inland, wending their way down from the hills to where the floating church lay moored. Men speak of it as a stirring scene, when ropes and cables were run out from the beach, and the boats were rapidly passed backwards and forwards, conveying the worshippers on board. In winter, the hearers came from a distance of eight or nine miles, and in summer from a still wider circuit. In rough weather it was no slight undertaking to get so many people on board. Even in summer, when all was calm, it was a tedious operation, and not infrequently darkness was settling in before all were again on shore. The numbers who assembled depended on the reputation of the Minister expected to preach, and the people had their own way of testing the esteem in which the different clergymen were held. It was found that, for every hundred hearers, the vessel sank an inch in the water; nothing therefore, could be easier than to keep the register. They could tell to an inch the popularity of every minister who came. A depression of six inches told that a congregation of six hundred had been drawn together, and on some occasions it is said that this number was exceeded.”

In this respect, Dr. Beith of Stirling, seems to have been one of the most notable preachers to have crossed over the waters of Loch Sunart to preach on the iron church; “I was thanked by the office-bearers,” he tells us in the

Annals, “and told that their church had never been so deep down in the water before.” It is also from Dr. Beith that we learn that the actual amount raised by the people for the building of the church actually came to the sum of £2000, although the church only cost £1400. Like the children of Israel building their Tabernacle in the wilderness they brought more than the Lord required so that He had to restrain their giving. But, it should be appreciated that the sum of £2000, in the eighteen forties is comparable to something like £60,000 by our rates today (1972) for the average wage of those days was little more than 10/- (50p) a week. But the Lord’s people required a House wherein the Lord’s honour might dwell, and their hearts were bent in that direction. There was no elaboration in design; functionability appears to have been the keynote according to the ship’s description, also given by the same Dr. Beith.

“The huge hulk, constructed of iron, was built, fitted up with pulpit and benches, small vestry etc., and successfully towed from the Clyde round the Mull of Kintyre by one or two tug-steamers, and in the end safely moored in the appointed place ... As a place of worship the accommodations was very comfortable. The pulpit stood at the bow – under cover of course – having the vestry at one side. The entrance for the congregation was towards the stern; that for the minister near the bow. A passage on one side, running the whole length of the church, afforded access to the benches, which were ranged straight across ship throughout her whole length, and occupied the entire breadth, excepting what was required for the passage. About 750 hearers could be comfortably accommodated.”

And so the worship continued, until ... and here is the most glorious episode of all the church’s life, for, they who honour the Lord, He will honour. One night a violent storm struck the shores of Loch Sunart, bringing havoc in its wake to the surrounding countryside. The home of Sir James Riddell was badly damaged in the storm, and when the further consequences of the winds were later related to him he became a changed man with changed views towards the people of the Free church who had also gone on to serve the Lord, none daring to make them afraid. For the storm that had blasted the unsympathetic Laird’s Mansion had also blown the iron church from her moorings and had hurled her on to the shores of the Loch; but in such a way that the Lord’s hand in that night’s transactions could in no way be denied. For one thing, the church had been set – and firmly wedged between two great rocks on the shore. It is said that a spirit level later revealed a perfect reading both horizontally and vertically. On top of that, however, it was discovered that the church had settled – due to the nature of the winds that night – on that

part of the shore between high tide and low which is designated in Scotland as “no man’s land,” thereby preventing the Laird’s intervention, even if he was in a mind to do so. This was not the case, however, and at a future date, land was granted and the people moved from what was now their church on the shore to one on the land.

Of a truth, the Lord will build His church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Yours sincerely,
W. J. Seaton



Gleanings In the Psalms

(Psalm 44 - Concluded)

Verse 9. “**But thou hast cast us off, and put us to shame...**” Here the patriot bard begins to contract the past glories of the nation’s histories with its present sadness and distress; which he does not ascribe to the death of some human champion, or to the accidents of war, but solely and alone to the withdrawal of Israel’s God. It seemed to the mourner that Jehovah had grown weary of His people and had put them away in abhorrence, as men lay aside leprous garments, loathing the sight of them. To show His displeasure He had made His people to be ridiculed by the heathen, whose easy victories over their largest armies covered Israel with disgrace. Alas! For a church and people when the Lord in the active energy of His Spirit withdraws from them. He will not cast away His people finally and totally, but many a church as been left to defeat and disgrace on account of sin, and therefore all churches should be exceedingly watchful lest the like should happen to them.

P. H. Spurgeon

Verse 13. “**Thou makest us a reproach to our neighbours, a scorn and a derision to them that are round about us.**” How blessed is the Church of Christ when she is the object of the world’s attacks and hatred on account of her “looking forth as the morning ... terrible as an army with banners” against

the sins of Godlessness. How pathetic that same Church has become” a reproach” to her neighbours and “a scorn and a derision to them that are round about,” on account of her “Godlessness” – i.e. the **absence** of God in all that she does and thinks.

“Verse 15. “My confusion is continually before me ...” When the visible church is visited with calamities, the true members of it are partakers of the trouble, and sorrow, and shame of that condition.

David Dickson

Verse 17. “All this has come upon us: yet have we not forgotten thee, neither have we dealt falsely in thy covenant.” Happy the man who can echo these words even in the worst of times of backsliding in the history of the church. Although we cannot excuse ourselves from many other sins for which thou hast justly punished us yet this we must say for ourselves, that through Thy grace we have kept our selves from apostasy and idolatry, in spite of all the rewards promised, and punishments threatened. We trust that Thou wilt graciously consider this, and not suffer us to be tempted above what we are able to bear.

Matthew Poole.

Verse 17. “... .. neither have we dealt falsely in thy covenant.” But I shall tell you, sirs, the right way of covenanting with God. It is when Christ and the believer meet, and our Lord gives him His laws, statutes, and commands. Jesus charges him not to quit a hoof of them; no, though he should be torn into a thousand pieces, and the faithful covenanter says, Amen.

Sandy Leden (Covenanter)

Verses 18 & 19. “Our heart is not turned back ... though thou hast sore broken us ...” Neither the persecuting hand of men, nor the chastising hand of God, had deterred the ancient saint. True believers resemble the moon which emerges from her eclipse by keeping her motion. Shall we cease to be believers because others will not cease to be persecutors?

William Secker

Verses 20 & 21. “If we have forgotten the name of our God ... shall not God search this out? For he knoweth the secrets of the heart.” In the time of persecution for religion, nothing can counterbalance the terrors and allurements of the persecutors, save the fear of God and the love of God settled

in the heart. The reason for the saint's steadfastness in this psalm, is because God would have searched out their sin if they had done otherwise, "for he knoweth the secrets of the heart."

David Dickson

Verse 21. "Shall not God search this out?" As God cannot be deceived by our subtlety, neither can He be excluded by our secrecy.

Thomas Watson

Verse 22. "Yea, for thy sake are we killed all the day long ..." So long as the world is the world, and the devil the devil, there must be warfare, and believers in Christ must be soldiers. The world hated Christ, and the world will hate true Christians. As the great reformer, Luther, said, "Cain will go on murdering Abel so long as the church is on earth."

J. P. Ryle

Verse 26. "Arise for our help, and redeem us for thy mercies sake." Our help and his mercies are good bedfellows. - AMEN.



On August 29th in the year 430, the great "Father" of the North African Church, Augustine, died. The object of his Godly mother's prayers for many years, Augustine was at last converted when he overheard a child singing the words, "Take up read, take up and read." The book that he took up and read was Paul's epistle to the Romans. There he found his salvation and his firm conviction that his salvation was "by grace alone." It was this conviction that led him to do such magnificent battle with Pelagius and his doctrine of free will and human ability in the matter of redemption.

On August 10th 1572 the faithful French Huguenot leader, Gaspard de Coligny fell victim to an assassin's bullet. Although the wound was not immediately fatal, de Coligny never rose from his bed, but was overtaken by the mobs of

the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre on August 24th. Charles, King of France, fired his pistol into the air, shattering the stillness of that black Bartholomew's morning and the slaughter of the professing church of France had begun.

Ninety years later – on the same date - another black page of church history was recorded when two thousand Puritan ministers of the Church of England were ejected for their non-conformity.

On August 31st 1688 “The Immortal Tinker of Bedford,” John Bunyan, proved that, indeed, his flesh was as mortal as any man's and departed this life. The mortal has now “put on immortality” however, and lives, not only through his written words, but around the throne of God above.

In 1707, on the 24th August - St Bartholomew's Day again – God's gracious providence ordained the birth of a baby girl that was to mark that day blessed for many souls. Selina, later to become the Countess of Huntingdon, first saw the light of day and after her entrance into the light of the gospel day became truly, one of those women who “labour in the gospel.”

Half-a-century later, on the same day – August 24th – another who used his gospel liberty to strive for the temporal liberty of his fellows was born – William Wilberforce. In the face of endless opposition, Wilberforce finally saw his Bill for the abolition of the slave trade pass through Parliament.

John Bunyan's “Comforting Times”
(By Alexander Whyte)

John Bunyan was immensely indebted to the Puritan preaching of his day. It was the Puritan preaching of his day that first opened John Bunyan's eyes to see himself. It was the Puritan preaching of his day that first opened his eyes to see his Saviour. And it was when his comforting time was come that he heard one preach a Puritan sermon on a sweet passage in the Song of Solomon. (Behold, thou art fair, my love, behold, thou art fair.)

Do you know my brethren, and from your own experience, what a truly Puritan sermon is? Do you know what it is that differentiates and exalts a genuine Puritan sermon above all other sermons? And can you trace in yourselves, and can you trace up to Puritan preaching, such a succession of spiritual blessings as John Bunyan traces here and indeed traces all through his

“GraceAbounding?” For this very title of this spiritual masterpiece of his may very well be taken as the title of every genuine Puritan sermon; that is to say: first, sin abounding, and then grace much more abounding.

As to the special sermon of this comforting time, after many years Bunyan remembers the preacher’s text, and his five heads, and his application of his fourth particular. And no wonder. For it was that application that sent Bunyan home from Church that Sabbath in such an ecstasy of unearthly joy. “So as I was going home that application came again into my thoughts; and, as I well remember, I said then in my heart: What shall I get by thinking on what I have now heard? And, still as what I had just heard ran thus in my mind, the words of the text waxed stronger and warmer, and began to make me look up. Now was my heart filled with comfort and hope, and now could I believe that my sins should be forgiven me. Yea, now, I was so taken with the love and mercy of God that I could not contain myself till I got home. I thought I could have spoken of God’s love and mercy to me, even to the very crows that sat upon the ploughed lands before me, had they been capable to have understood me. Wherefore, I said in my soul, and with such gladness: Well, I would I had a pen and ink here, and I would write this down before I go any further. For surely I will not forget this forty years hence.”

Now like that comforting Sabbath morning to John Bunyan, so every returning Sabbath morning of our own is appointed of God to be a comforting time to us also. Every returning Sabbath morning the command comes forth from the God of salvation to all His true preachers: “Comfort my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her iniquity is forgiven. Say to her that He who was delivered for her offences was raised again this morning for her justification.” Now all other preachers among us but the Puritan preachers are either afraid, or they are ashamed, or they are in some way not willing, or are in some way not able, to preach the one thing worth preaching: a free and a full justification by faith in Jesus Christ; and then, out of that, a life of evangelical obedience. You never hear the one divine message of a free and full and an immediate forgiveness from any other pulpit but the Puritan pulpit. Or if you ever hear it, all other preachers mix it up and adulterate it with the wood and the hay and the stubble of our own impossible performances. For my part, the older I grow and the wiser I grow, I both preach and pray and sing more and more every Sabbath morning Paul’s gospel, that is to say, the Puritan gospel.

And Jonathan Edwards, that mighty Puritan, says to us that we are on this day (the Lord’s day) specially to meditate upon and to celebrate the work of our

redemption. We are with special joy to remember the resurrection of our Lord, because His resurrection was the full finish of our redemption. This was the Day of the great gladness of His heart. For this was the Day of His deliverance from the chains of death, as it was the day of our deliverance from the chains of hell. And as John Bunyan has it in his own inimitable and incomparable way: On every Sabbath morning he always asserted that he saw Jesus Christ, leaping and dancing and singing around his deserted grave, because He had that morning finished for ever John Bunyan's justification.

Keep up your hearts, all you Puritan preachers. For yours is the only truly heart-comforting and soul-satisfying preaching in all the world. That preaching of yours made Paul, and it made Luther, and it made Hooker, and it made all the English and Scottish Reformers and it made the Pilgrim Fathers, and it made Spurgeon. It made them all, because there is nothing else to be called true preaching: there is nothing else to make true preachers in all the world. There is no other preaching with such Scripturalness, and such depth, and such strength, and such insight, and such adequate and expert treatment of the case, and such adequate and expert treatment of the Cross. The true "Comforting time" comes again to every truly Puritan and evangelical preacher and people with every returning Lord's Day morning.

(By Grace ye are saved.)

BOYS AND GIRLS PAGE

Importance of Knowing the Whole Story

Dear Boys and Girls,

As I have been reading over the life of that great man Joseph in the Bible it has occurred to me how important it is to know the "whole story" of a person's life, or else we will always have a wrong idea about that person and who he or she really was, and what they really did.

Most of us know the "first part" of the life of Joseph very well, and how he was taken by his brothers, who were jealous of him, and was placed in a pit and then, sold as a slave to some people who were going into the Land of Egypt. We know of how the brothers took his "coat of many colours" and

after they had torn it and dirtied it and smeared blood on it, showed it to his father Jacob, pretending that a wild animal had caught Joseph and ripped it to pieces. But, there we sometimes leave the story of Joseph, and the only remembrance we have of him is that dirty and dusty coat with the blood on it, or that pit in which he was thrown, or the men who carried him away to sell him as a slave in Egypt. But, that wasn't the end of the life of Joseph! The Bible tells us that God was with Joseph and that he soon became the most important person in the whole land of Egypt, with the exception of the King himself.

A great famine came to the land of Canaan, where Joseph's brothers lived, and the next time we see Joseph and his brothers together again it is very different from that time when they put him in the pit and took his old crumpled coat of many colours back to his father. Now they stand before Joseph, and they see him dressed in his royal robes, the one who rules the land for the King of Egypt. What a change, boys and girls; and you only know about the change by reading all that the Bible has to say about Joseph.

But, the Bible tells us of a greater change than that, boys and girls. How many people only think of our Lord Jesus Christ when He was a baby in the manger? Or when He, too, was sold for the price of a slave by Judas Iscariot? Or when He died upon the cross and was laid in the grave? But, that wasn't the end, boys and girls, and Jesus is now exalted at God's throne, and one day He is coming back to the world again. Do you want to meet Him then, as your Saviour? Then, believe with all your heart.

Love,
Mrs Seaton

MORE THAN THE TALE OF A WHALE

So then, the Book of Jonah has not got to do with a man being swallowed by a whale! But the prophecy of Jonah has got to do with a spirit of unyielding opposition and disobedience to the Will of God by the Children of God.

It is one of the most searching books, in fact in the whole of the Old Testament – and the New Testament as well. And small wonder that Satan has spent so much time and energy on deflecting the believers' heart and minds away from

the essential message of its pages, lest their heart and their minds should be duly searched in the reading of them.

You know the kind of thing that happens, and has happened with so many in the past apparently? Along comes one of the world's sceptics who wants to down the testimony of the Word of God in the life of a professing child of God. Invariably the Book of Jonah comes under the lash of his tongue: "You don't mean to tell me," he says "that a person like you believes that story about a man being swallowed by a whale?" The believer doesn't have a ready answer, perhaps – especially in the young years of his Christian profession when he is most likely to be met with this opposition – and so, off he goes to make one or two enquiries, and read up on one or two authorities on this kind of question. Yes! Of course he discovers, a fish can swallow a man just as that fish swallowed Jonah so many years ago. Why, the history of the sea, even up to this present time, is full of incidents like that recorded in the Book of Jonah. And so, back he goes to his assailant armed to the teeth with his shattering information! He's got the victory! He's laid the devil low! And what's more, he has at last uncovered the mystery of the fifth book of the Minor Prophets, and he goes on his way rejoicing!

And the devil? You say. Ah, the devil rubs his hands with glee; for yet another believing child of God has fallen for his well-tryed bait. The poor believer thinks that he has landed the greatest fish in the world, but it's he himself that has been reeled-in by the greatest angler in the world. And the soul-searching message of the Book – the message of the evil of failing to render heart obedience to the will and to the purpose of God – is left unread and unstudied in the life of yet another professing child of God.

(From our Introduction to the Book of Jonah.)