

EMBERS

a vanished Christian World



BASINGSTOKE TO BACKNANG 1963-5

BACKNANG 1965

CAMBRIDGE 1965-1968

MY WORLD FADES

COMING HOME

What am I attempting in this first - and longest - fragment of reminiscence? I think it encapsulates two streams of memory: my own early development as a Christian; and the sad fading of the world which nourished me in Christian experience and desire.

I am also inviting readers to ponder with me why encountering places and people I had never known felt like coming home: if you like, why I sensed that a spiritual homeland I had never inhabited was where I genuinely belong.

As I ponder, it seems to me that two streams flowed together in the formation of my Christian life at that time – say, the years dated 1963-72. They were Methodist revival and ‘old Keswick’ spirituality. We shall explore them in the opposite order, and turn to their fading and their partial rediscovery later in the story.

The pasture I languish to find
Where all, who their Shepherd obey...

Ah! show me that happiest place,
The place of thy people's abode

Wesley's Hymns 228:1, 2

BASINGSTOKE TO BACKNANG

Old Keswick

By "old Keswick" I mean the strand of Keswick teaching and spirituality, influential from the late nineteenth century until well into the mid-twentieth, which stressed total surrender to the lordship and direction of Jesus Christ, and victory over sin. What made it distinctive was its particular approach to sanctification — how Christians grow in holiness after conversion. The teaching is associated with the Keswick Convention of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. How did it reach and invade me?

The movement's key distinctives were a strong emphasis on "the victorious life" and "entire consecration", combined with the idea that many Christians lived a "defeated" life. It stressed total surrender, identification with Christ in his death and resurrection, and victory over known sin, which came not through striving but through yielded dependence on the Holy Spirit. It involved surrender, consecration, holiness, daily victory, Spirit-filled living, and missionary zeal.

I think that these emphases – especially full surrender to the lordship and will of Christ - took over my mind and heart from three main sources: a girl-friend, books, and a mentor. I shall be courteous and follow the dictum ‘ladies first’.

Pam

For some time in 1963 or 1964 I had a girl-friend called Pam, who was a Christian who attended young people’s meetings at St Mary’s Church, Eastrop. At one of the meetings I heard her sing as a solo the song *I’d Rather Have Jesus*, written in 1922 by Rhea F. Miller, sung to a tune written by George Beverly Shea.

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold;
I'd rather be His than have riches untold;
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands.
I'd rather be led by His nail pierced hand

Than to be the king of a vast domain
Or be held in sin's dread sway.
I'd rather have Jesus than anything
This world affords today.

The song belongs to the spiritual climate of Keswick surrender teaching, holiness Methodism, mission-

hall evangelicalism, and revivalist piety. Its emotional centre is renunciation: “I’d rather have Jesus than silver or gold...” It involves choosing, consecration, and the supremacy of loyalty to Christ.

That is also the emotional and devotional register cultivated by *The Life of Faith* and the Methodist Revival Fellowship circles, of which more anon.

Methodist writings

The Methodist Hymn-book

Sunday by Sunday I was absorbing the piety of the 1933 *Methodist Hymn-book*, which belonged to a world in which holiness was expected, and where surrender and consecration are the theme of hymns by John Wesley, Charles Wesley, Francis Ridley Havergal and others. Indeed, the section entitled *Faith and Regeneration* is immediately followed by the section on *Dedication*.

Evangelism and the conversion of unbelievers is another theme of the hymnbook, along with prayer for the spread and triumph of the Gospel.

Biographies, history

Among the books I acquired in those years (1963-72) were:

- *John Wesley* (C. E. Vulliamy) 6th form prize 1963
- *The Romance of Primitive Methodism* (Joseph Ritson) 1963 or '4
- *The early Methodist People* (Leslie F. Church) Christmas 1964
- *Lives of the early Methodist Preachers* 1966
- *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley, A. M.* 1972

Although I do not now recall when I acquired others of my Methodist histories and biographies, I do know that the collection grew, and I fed my soul, my faith, and my aspirations on these narratives. I have never been greatly into reading devotional literature, but have drawn my inspiration largely from records of God's dealings with individuals and movements.

Mr Wardell, the "Life of Faith", and the Gospel Lifeboat Mission, Winterslow

I spent time with an elderly Methodist local preacher, Leonard Oakford Wardell (1900-1976), who lived in

Worting Road, Basingstoke, a few hundred yards from us. I originally met him on the Saturday morning bread round on which – to earn a little extra pocket money - I helped a baker deliver the bread to customers' homes. Mr Wardell discovered I was a Christian, and at various times he took me to his sitting room, and opened the scriptures to me, exhorted me, and prayed with me. In time, probably in 1964, I began accompanying him on his preaching engagements, and taking part in the services.

When Leonard was 20 he was working as a gardener at Longford Castle Estate, near Salisbury, and whilst there he sometimes preached at the Gospel Lifeboat Mission, Winterslow.



Winterslow

In the congregation was a young woman named Ruth, who later became his wife. By 1939 they were living in Hartley Wintney, Hampshire, where he worked in a garden centre. Later they moved to Basingstoke.

He was fond of the magazine *The Life of Faith* which fitted squarely into the old Keswick world and was one of the principal devotional organs of the Keswick culture for decades. It circulated testimonies of surrender, missionary narratives, and “victorious Christian living”, and helped normalise a particular emotional and theological vocabulary such as “full surrender”, “the yielded life”, “the exchanged life”, “victory”. It carried the devotional atmosphere of surrenderedness, missionary seriousness, and testimony-driven spirituality.

Methodism was one of the conduits through which this spirituality flowed into mid-20th-century British evangelical culture. By the 1950s and 1960s, many Methodists would have recognised its familiar flavour, and it seems to me, looking back with deeper understanding, that Mr Wardell was one such Methodist. I myself do not recall ever reading it, but it seems very likely that its piety was communicated to me through the exhortations of Leonard Wardell.

On 10th January 1965 Oakley he was engaged to preach at the former Primitive Methodist chapel in Oakley, but he invited me to preach in his stead. I took the text Isaiah 53:6, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.”



Oakley

As mentioned, Mr Wardell had links with the Gospel Lifeboat Mission, Winterslow, which belonged very naturally within the same broad spiritual context. The Mission began in 1891 under Albert Shears, an itinerant evangelist travelling in a horse-drawn caravan, with the explicit image of a “lifeboat for souls.” That places it within the late-Victorian evangelical culture, conversionist, Bible-centred,

semi-detached from formal church structures, and shaped by revivalism and holiness teaching. Such movements often transmitted spirituality not primarily through formal theology but through atmosphere, testimony, preaching style, and hymnody.

The Gospel Lifeboat Mission was probably another source of that form of Christianity that was channelled to me through Mr Wardell's mentorship of me.

Methodist Revival Fellowship

The third strong flowing stream that I mentioned, which came into my life as a deep influence, was Methodist revival. In the mid 1960s I attended Methodist Revival Fellowship meetings in village chapels in three or four places which had formerly been Primitive Methodist - Charter Alley, Burghclere, and (whilst at Cambridge) at Over. In 1966 I gave a testimony at a Methodist Revival Fellowship meeting at Burghclere.



Burghclere

And at Oakley and Wootton St Lawrence, I met elderly men, probably born around 1890, who had been part of Primitive Methodist village life before WW1.

DMY - myself

It has been suggested that many people formed by old Keswick spirituality developed an unusually intense interior life, being taught to monitor motives, surrender, inward peace, promptings, self-will, hidden resistance, continuing sin; and that this could

produce remarkable seriousness, but also chronic self-surveillance.



1964

Such anguish is reflected in some of the hymns I attempted to write in 1964 and 1965. For example, in July 1964 I wrote these words:

1. Lynton (442)

CM

I know that I a sinner am,
And merit but the grave:
It seems, oh Lord, though e'er I strive,
I am to sin a slave.

I do not wish, my God, to sin,
But - oh! - its power, so strong,
Has captured me, and Thou alone
Canst save me from all wrong.

I know I do not have the strength
To live as Thou didst live;
But Thou wouldst give me all I need -
If only I'd believe.

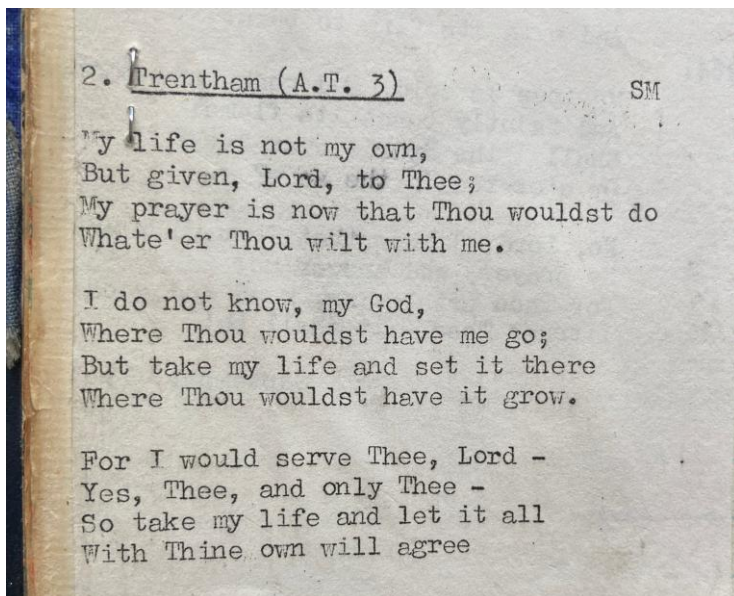
So give me faith, a stronger faith,
To ask for and accept
Thy Holy Ghost into my life,
To strengthen and correct.

I try, but never can succeed,
To live a better life;
But now, ah now, the Spirit give,
And finish all my strife.

And so, my God, when now I pray,
Hear, hear me from above;
The guilt and power of sin blot out,
And perfect me in love.

July, 1964.

And in August 1964 I penned these verses:



I was already feeling that I had a call to the full-time ministry, and I knew my parents were firmly opposed to the idea, and it caused no small inward struggle and anguish.

BACKNANG

The hour is come, but not the man

In February 1965, with a view to improving my German before starting in the October at Cambridge University, I moved to Backnang in southern Germany. There I lived at first in an upper garret which the German Post Office (Bundespost) had found for me. One night I had a vivid dream, in which I was passing a room in which people were singing the hymn, *Draw me nearer*. Verse 2 says:

Consecrate me now to thy service, Lord,
By the power of grace divine;
Let my soul look up with a steadfast hope,
And my will be lost in Thine.

In the dream, the strange thing was that as I passed further from the room (for I was outdoors), the singing sounded no quieter, but I knew that there would come a point at which it would fade. Such was my call: I was passing it by, and it was getting no less insistent; but the moment would come when it would fade and be heard no more.



in Backnang

Some weeks later, in April, while I was lodging with a Methodist family in the town, I had a remarkable and almost uniquely vivid experience. One evening, as I was walking home along Heiningerweg to the house where I was lodging in Carl-Kaelblestraße, it seemed that the Lord drew near and was as real to me as any other person with whom I had walked. When I reached the point where the path crossed Südstraße, he stopped, and told me quite plainly that I must now make my decision concerning the ministry, and that if I went beyond the point where the two ways crossed, I would go without Him.

I could not bring myself to obey his command, and with a heavy heart I continued my way home, having effectively said no to his call to the ministry. Here is a hymn I wrote in April following this experience. It shows my sense of bitter defeat.

20.

Oh darkest day that fixed my choice
Upon the world and not my God;
This heart no more could well rejoice,
Nor raptures had to tell abroad.

Oh cursèd day that broke my vows
To Him who merits all my love;
Sincere I sang not in His house,
Nor glad unto that shrine did move,

'Twas gone, my peace, my joy was gone;
The world made me no longer Thine:
It drew me, and I followed on,
Charmed to ignore the voice divine.

High Heaven that heard the solemn vow,
That broken vow no more did hear;
Until today once more I bow,
Return, and find my Saviour dear.

Thy welcome I no more shall leave,
My Father, God, so dear~~x~~ and true;
Again my all I wholly give,
And glad the broken vow renew.

April, 1965

I was offered the opportunity to stay a further three months in Germany, including a job with the post office in Lübeck, to which town I was drawn after studying the novel *Tonio Kröger* at school; but I felt homesick, for it was my first time away alone from Basingstoke, and I decided to return home - a decision I have since in some ways regretted, for it would doubtless have advanced my German.

My father met me on the way to drive me home, probably in Dover, and my English had become slightly muddled from speaking German so long. I desperately wanted to tell him I was going into the ministry, but could not bring myself to do so - and anyway, the moment had passed at Südstraße and it was too late. "The hour is come, but not the man."

The longing remained, but I now lacked any sense of direction or leading.

Back in Basingstoke, in July I wrote these words, which express something of the same conflict that had been taking place within me, and still was:

37. Glad I voice the praising song,
Worship Thee with glowing heart;
Yet I feel there's something wrong,
Some still lacking, absent part.

Can it be the heart's desire?
No! I long, I yearn for Thee,
More than all to Thee aspire,
Aching Thine alone to be.

Though my heart thus long for Thee,
How unwilling flesh and mind
To resign all that must be,
If full blessing I would find.

Break this adamant heart!
Shatter, Lord, its mass of stone!
Take each broken piece and part,
Mould, remake to be Thine own.

July, 1965

I do not know now, more than sixty years later, how to interpret that experience at the junction of Heiningergweg and Südstraße. If indeed it was the Lord, what did he mean by saying that if I continued without yielding to his call I would 'go without him'? In Genesis 2:17: Adam was told he would die on the very day he ate the forbidden fruit, but he didn't. In fact the story

tells us that he lived to be 930 years old. But he was driven out of Eden; a flaming sword barred his return; he made his living with toil and sweat from ground that had been cursed until the day came when he himself returned to the ground from which he was created: “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

I believed I had been told I would go without the Lord, but I didn’t go without him in every sense, for the hand that had been guiding me all my days continued to guide me, shape me, and prepare me for future work, though never for the long-term pastoral ministry to which I had felt called and which I so earnestly desired.

One thing I did lose was all sense of direction and guidance.

It did not return for six years. Then I was ready to obey, and the journey openly resumed, but it was another 16½ years before the Lord released me wholly from secular work and granted me the inestimable privilege of full-time service for the Gospel. That was in the summer of 1987.



1988

CAMBRIDGE 1965-1968

But we must return to Cambridge and 1965. When I went up to Cambridge in October 1965 I was a bundle of conflicting feelings and aspirations:

- I wanted to be wholly consecrated to the Lord and obedient to his will for my life
- I was defeated by one particular temptation (and still am)
- I believed I had heard a clear call to the ministry but had been unable, when the moment came, to say 'Yes' to it
- I was thus serious, zealous, defeated, strained, and disorientated.

I did not find the spiritual world I had met in and around Basingstoke reduplicated in the university Methodist Society, though I had hoped to, and for a while I joined the Society. But the old fire, zeal and longings seemed to me to be absent from it. At Sawston, with the Society, I preached on *How long*

*halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God,
follow him.*



Trinity Lane, Cambridge

But I did find the same embers still glowing in places in the Methodist Circuit, where I and my friends were allowed to take services. We visited the former Primitive Methodist chapel Haslingfield three times, being generously provided with tea by a lady of the congregation. The second occasion saw some forty people almost filling the small chapel. We were invited to take a week's mission, though that could not

be arranged, and one woman said she watched the Plan so as not to miss our services.

At Over an old lady of about 80 was in tears, thrilled with the time we had had. I also attended a Methodist Revival Fellowship meeting there, and similar meetings at Earith and Cottenham.

I was told after one service in the Circuit that I ought to "offer myself for the ministry": little did my adviser know the longing in my heart to do that very thing!

Back in Basingstoke I continued my fellowship with Leonard Wardell.

On 20th June 1967 I went up Table Mountain outside Crickhowell in South Wales and earnestly called out to God. In that period, the University was the setting for a notable time of God's blessing in evangelism, conversions, prayer, and the calling of students into Christian work after graduation. A number moved into missionary work, pastoral ministry, or evangelism. But I had experienced no glorious infilling of the Holy Spirit; still no sense of direction concerning what to do less than a year later when I was to graduate; and I suffered from a sense of strain and failure in my spiritual life. I felt somewhat like Job (Chapter 23):

Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! ... I would know what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me. ... I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him.

I climbed Table Mountain alone and came to the top at 8 p.m.. The sky was almost cloudless, and there was a magnificent view for miles around over the Welsh hills and valleys. I got down on my face and began to pray. It seemed to me that I had reached a point in my spiritual life at which I had stopped, and where I was faced with the decision of either carrying on upwards or going downwards. If I went on upwards, it would mean surrendering wholly to Jesus my hopes for a wife, money, future work, or length of life. The only other way was downward.

I thought about this for a while and prayed to be enabled to choose the upward path. I stood up, raised both my arms, and said loudly, "O God ... make it so." I felt strongly that the moment was both sacred and solemn, and I was frightened by what I had said prayed: I had prayed for grace to yield to God's choice for my life's work, journey, and circumstances.



Table Mountain © Copyright Philip Halling

I was probably, without realising it, attempting to return as it were to the junction of Heiningergweg and Südstraße, to do what I had then failed to do. But although I felt God heard my prayer, still no sense of direction or guidance was restored to me.

MY WORLD FADES

Parallel with my years of disorientation, by the mid-1960s much of what had been my world was already dying.

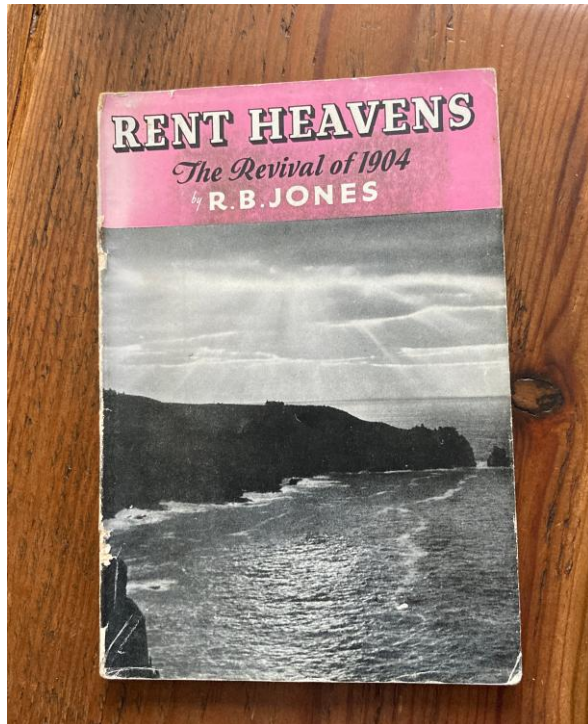
The presence and testimony of the village Primitive Methodists born around 1890 was being lost. I encountered their world only in its late afterglow; I arrived just in time to feel it before it vanished: I felt the warmth and attraction of its embers.

By the 1970s the ethos I had absorbed was fading from the churches – the longing for revival, the struggle for full surrender, the desire for inward holiness - and was being replaced by the Charismatic Movement with its emphasis on personal spiritual renewal, supernatural gifts, and renewal of church structure. A real shift was occurring within British evangelical Christianity,

The older ethos, which was and still is my natural, native religious culture and home, centred on conversion, holiness, biblical seriousness, surrender, evangelism, revival. The Charismatic Movement came to focus on inward renewal, spiritual gifts, healing, praise, worship choruses, house churches, and restoration of the pattern of New Testament church life. It marked a major transition and transformation in British evangelical culture during the 1960s–80s.

Very important for me, for my outlook and aspirations, was the fading of the longing for revival and its replacement by a desire for charismatic renewal.

Revival is sovereign, unpredictable, God-given, morally overwhelming, associated with repentance, conviction of sin, holiness, and transformed communities, with awe and brokenness.



Christians can pray, wait upon God, humble themselves, prepare, long, but they cannot

manufacture revival: it comes from God. Revival is visitation, awakening, divine intervention beyond human management. “O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down.”

The Charismatic movement changed the emotional and theological atmosphere profoundly. The fading of revival longing marked the end of an older religious civilisation: expressing it otherwise, my world was fading.

COMING HOME 1

“the North circular”

The people I met in those former Primitive Methodist chapels engendered in me a sentiment and aspiration which I have never lost, and which can be expressed in the words of Ruth in the Bible: “your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

I moved to Maidstone in the summer of 1969, and through fellowship there I encountered briefly a movement akin to the world which was ‘my world’ - the movement associated with George W. North (1913-2003). The atmosphere was not feel-good charismatic exuberance, but radical discipleship,

holiness, seriousness, longing for true church, dissatisfaction with respectable evangelicalism.

It was a movement in which several streams converged and intensified, and by the late 1960s and early 1970s, George North represented revivalist longing, holiness, seriousness, charismatic expectation, and restorationist impulse.

North spoke powerfully into people's hunger for authenticity, radical discipleship, shared life, restored church order, spiritual gifts, and deeper holiness. He preached much of the fading ethos, and belonged more to the old revivalist world than to the later and softer Charismatic culture.

Greatly to my delight, North's movement republished and used Wesleyan hymns in fuller length in the book *Hymns of eternal Truth*. Charles Wesley's hymns carry the atmosphere I have been describing: holiness, inward transformation, yearning, surrender, experience, faith. By restoring long Wesleyan hymns in fuller forms rather than later abridged versions, the North circles were helping worshippers connect with the emotional intensity, theological depth, aspirations and seriousness of older Methodism – of *my* world.

During the mission in Switzerland in the summer of 1970 – of which more later - there were occasions when a number of us would go to a hillside and listen to recordings of George North's preaching.

The Charismatic movement moved in the opposite direction: immediate emotional accessibility, repetitive praise forms, less doctrinal density, short choruses and songs providing what I have called 'the feel-good factor'.

Hymns are one of the deepest carriers of spirituality, of religious ethos, yearning and belief. This explains why the North movement instinctively reached back to Wesleyan hymnody.

David Bebbington (*Evangelicalism in modern Britain*, 1989) tells us that George North held "distinctive beliefs ... that the new birth differs in time from conversion and is to be identified with baptism in the Spirit and the coming of holiness", but I doubt that penetrated my mind very deeply if at all: I simply enjoyed the hour-long preaching, the surrounding earnestness, and the prolonged singing of Wesley hymns.

Many of the early Charismatic figures still inhabited the older emotional climate of yearning, expectation, and waiting for visitation, and it has been suggested – truly, I think – that the early charismatic movement possessed a depth and gravity that later softened as it became institutionalised, middle-class, and culturally assimilated. Later Charismatic culture increasingly settled into renewal structures, leadership systems, and praise, but not, it seems to me, praise for the range of God’s work in creation, grace, providence and redemption which earlier hymns expressed. The depth and strength of hymns written in the revival years is lacking in many of the ‘worship songs’ and choruses. At one Baptist church I preached at using Wesley hymnody, a lady commented afterwards that it made some modern songs seem like Sunday School songs.

In August 1972 I preached for the first time at the Gospel Lifeboat Mission in Winterslow, and I also spoke briefly at the former Wesleyan chapel in Nancegollan, Cornwall, as well as having fellowship with people connected with the former Wesleyan chapel at Sithney, Cornwall. This was the first time I had met any of these people, and I instinctively felt they were ‘my people’, ones who longed for the recovery or renewal of the culture of which I felt – and

feel – “your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” The chapel at Sithney was closed by the Methodist authorities, but the congregation continued to meet in a barn:

The Methodists closed nine churches in the area in about 1989. “We got praying” – prayer meetings were held in a home – “and sought the Lord as to what to do.” We were invited to hear Trevor Dearing in London on a special weekend. A prophecy was given that the Lord had something special and imminent to set in motion, and Michael [Pascoe] responded. Amy and Michael were both attending Sithney Methodist in the morning, and in the evening. “We tried to buy the chapel at Sithney and the one at Nancegollan, but were not allowed to.” ... A friend suggested we convert a farm building, and first we converted an obsolete chicken house, where we saw mighty healings and people set free from demons. ... The services were packed out, not everyone could get in, people have even stood outside listening with umbrellas because of the rain. God told us to convert a barn, and we are now the Barn Fellowship, and it is really strong today, and includes old people from Methodism. People get converted and healed.

For some years I remained within, or wished to be part of, the Charismatic movement, but disillusionment and disappointment gradually set in and after some

years I left. I cannot pinpoint an exact date in what was a gradual development within me, but I would place it some time in the 1990s.

COMING HOME 2

2014-2023

On Thursday 10th June 2014 I was invited to meet the superintendent minister of the Wrexham Methodist Circuit, Richard Sharples. I had been told that I might be invited to take a 'local arrangement' service at the chapel in Brymbo, and I contacted him to ensure he was happy for me, a renegade Methodist from the 1960s, to do so. He in fact invited me to preach throughout the circuit, and I subsequently preached in all the chapels, and continued to preach in the circuit till 2023. This also led to invitations to preach in two neighbouring circuits, including at the chapels in Knolton (in 2019) and Talwrn Green (till 2019).

One chapel in the Wrexham Circuit was at Rhosymedre, where I preached till 2023, and which undoubtedly housed my 'favourite' congregation in the Circuit. People in their 80s and 90s would come around me after services, maybe with tears in their

eyes, having loved to hear ‘the old, old story’ of salvation proclaimed, offered, experienced.



Rhosymedre, built 1840

At Talwrn Green I closed one service with *The old rugged Cross*, and ‘we sang as only Methodists can’. At Knolton my text was “Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their children for ever!”

All three were former Primitive chapels and in each of them I instinctively felt 'at home'. Something – a wisp, a memory, maybe even a nostalgia – remained from the earlier world whose embers I had briefly felt in the 1960s in chapels near Basingstoke and Cambridge.

These reminiscences have mentioned a number of places: Charter Alley, Burghclere, Oakley, Wootton St Lawrence, Over, Winterslow, Knolton, Rhosymedre, Talwrn Green. In them I was briefly inhabiting the last survivals of a fading spiritual civilisation. The poignancy springs from the fact that I arrived nearly at the end. But when I encountered its remnants, I was recognising and savouring a way of being Christian that answers something deep within me.

Such congregations preserved remnants of an earlier atmosphere after other evangelical settings had moved over to newer 'charismatic' modes.

These things operate below explicit thought, and one feels "These are my people". I recognised the last surviving embers of a world in which my inner life was first formed, and I felt "your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,
Into thy blessed hands receive;
And let me live to preach thy word,
And let me to thy glory live;
My every sacred moment spend
In publishing the sinner's friend.

-Charles Wesley

Fountain of good! all blessing flows
From thee; no want thy fulness knows;
What but thyself canst thou desire?
Yes; self-sufficient as thou art,
Thou dost require my worthless heart;
This, only this, dost thou require.

O God, of good the unfathomed sea!
Who would not give his heart to thee?
Who would not love thee with his might?
O Jesu, lover of mankind,
Who would not his whole soul and mind,
With all his strength, to thee unite?

- John Wesley