

Editor's Note: The following information was taken from *The Earthen Vessel and Christian Record*, the 1850 issue, pages 246 and following. It is by Walter Banks.

The Origin of the Church at, and the Re-Opening of the Surrey Tabernacle Borough Road

The first remarkable event recorded of Manasseh, after his conversion, was this— "he built a wall without the city of David; and put captains of war in all the fenced cities of Judah." Whereas before time he had been a curse to Jerusalem, being now a partaker of divine grace, he labors to become a blessing; and his first concern was to defend, to establish, and to secure peace to the Church of God. Divine grace gives to all its possessors—more or less— these three essential blessings:— eternal life to the soul—holy love to the heart— a clear and an exalted conception of heavenly truth to the mind: and thus furnished, the poorest sinner that ever breathed, the vilest worm that ever crawled, the most ignorant creature that ever walked the face of the earth, is qualified to become, and labors to become, a real blessing to his fellow-men. A striking instance—a living illustration, of the truth of these simple remarks it is our happiness to record in the following lines.

In the Borough-road, Southwark, (nearly opposite to the British School Establishment) stands a commodious Baptist chapel, known by the name of "the Surrey Tabernacle," which has been the scene of Mr. James Wells's labors in the gospel ministry for very many years. Since the days of William Huntington, we think we may say, (fearless of contradiction), that in no man (standing in the faithful ministry of Christ's gospel) has there ever been a greater exhibition of the sovereign, sanctifying, teaching, expanding, and preserving powers of Almighty grace, than has been witnessed in the personal experience, and in the public ministry of our esteemed brother James Wells.

We know very well that when we thus write, we stir up the jealous feelings of many of our brethren; and they accuse us of being moved hereunto by bad motives. They may say what they please; the truth we will tell; the fact is, there is a lot of us little parsons, that (in our natural minds) would like to have as large a place, as fruitful a mind, as numerous an auditory, and as extensive a field of usefulness as our brother Wells; but because the good Lord has not been pleased to give us so many talents, nor so much work in the vineyard, why should we secretly harbor unpleasant feelings towards one that is thus favored? Rather let us labor to be thankful, first, for that we are in the vineyard at all; and, secondly, for that it hath pleased God to give his churches (in these days) one that is able boldly to defend the truth, and blessedly to feed the souls of hundreds and thousands of British saints, with knowledge and understanding.

We now come to a brief review of the origin and progress of the Church under our brother's care. It is not everybody that knows the origin of Mr. Wells's ministry. We believe he commenced as an out-door itinerant, preaching the gospel principally in Westminster. This was the means of gathering some friends around him; and on the 19th of October, in the year 1830, the church was first formed in a school-room, in Prince's place, Westminster. The number of members at the time was only twenty, the greater part of

whom remain alive unto this day. We believe that seven of them still continue honorable members of the church; three of them died in the Lord: and some have been removed in Providence, so that in the case of most of them we see the blessedness of an experimental possession of divine grace: it walks with the believer while he lives; lays down with him when he dies. What a day of pleasure and astonishment must the 20th of October, 1850, have been to the seven original members, who are still standing fast by the staff; and who have seen in Mr. Wells ministry (instrumentally at least) some fulfilment of that vision which Daniel had, when he saw a stone cut out without hands, and which smote the image, so that the wind carried it away; while the stone itself became a mountain, and filled the whole earth. The idolatrous image in many a sinner's heart (we know) has been smitten by the gospel ministry in the Surrey Tabernacle, and the wind of the Spirit has carried it away. God grant much more of this work may be done for many years to come. But, say you, what became of the others? Two of them apostatized from God's truth—(one of these two went into profanity, and the other one settled down in rank Pharisaism:) "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall."

At the formation of the church in Westminster, as above-named, Mr. John Foreman gave the pastoral charge from Nehemiah vi. 3. "I am doing a great work"— [What a prophetic text! How truly has it been verified in the labors of him to whom the charge was given!] That charge, by some that heard it, has been declared to be the most luminous, powerful, pointed, apt and instructive discourse that ever they listened to in their lives; and often have they regretted that it was not printed at the time. The late Mr. George Francis, of Snows' Fields, preached to the church, in the evening, a very spiritual and affectionate sermon, from 1 Thess. iii. 8, "For now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord."

In 1831, the church and congregation removed to Dudley-court chapel, Denmark Street, Soho, where they only remained twelve months; removing from thence to the Surrey Tabernacle, where they have worshipped for eighteen years last January. The present chapel was built in 1838; but for some few years past it was not large enough to accommodate the crowds who flocked to hear; it has, therefore, this autumn been considerably enlarged, and is now supposed to hold about 1,400 person. It was re-opened on Lord's day, October, 20th 1850; Mr. James Wells preaching the morning and evening discourses; and Mr. John Foreman, the afternoon, whose text was John v. 26, 28. The re-opening day was indeed an auspicious one in the history of the church at the Surrey Tabernacle, which now comprises Five Hundred and Sixty Members; and their congregations were from 1,400 to 1,600. The collections amounted to £59 14s. 6d. As Mr. Wells's sermons are to be published we shall (d.v.) notice them next month. We hope that for, at least, another twenty years he may there stand in the very spirit and practice of Mr. Foreman's text at his ordination, not verbally, but evidentially saying, "I am doing a great work."

On the evening of the opening day two or three hundred persons went away, not being able to get into the place.