

PRAISE FROM AN ADVERSARY

Editor's Note: This sketch of James Wells Ministry is from Volume 2 (1872 edition), page 274ff of the Preacher's Lantern. It is part of a series called Model Preachers. The editor was Edwin Paxton Hood, a Congregational minister and prolific writer (many of his works deal with non-Christian subjects). After reading this review the passage from Proverbs 16:7: "When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him", came to my mind. Whatever else Hood was, he was an enemy of James Wells, even though he believed him to be in heaven. There is a great deal of interest in this article, but there is also open malice, it is as though this man was forced, kicking and screaming all the way, to admit the greatness of God's blessing upon James Wells ministry. It's posted here on surreytabernaclepulpit.com because it contains a wealth of information I have not found elsewhere. I have inserted comments in square brackets and bold text where I thought it was helpful. Let the reader diligently read some of the sermons posted on this site, they give abundant testimony to the God glorifying way Wells preached.

Model preaches – James Wells

No. V. JAMES WELLS.

Probably a large number of our readers will wonder who the bearer of the name we have placed at the head of this paper may be, and what may be his claims to such an acknowledgment; it is equally probable that many others of our readers may have quite a sufficient acquaintance with the gentleman, and may altogether condemn our sense and taste in making him the subject of any criticisms. Enough, in justification, to say that James Wells did nothing during the greater part of a long life but preach, and that his funeral the other day was such as scarcely ever attends the remains of the most eminent and illustrious men. "Never," writes the Daily News, "was there on the Surrey side of the water such a scene as that which was witnessed yesterday afternoon." "This is worse than thanksgiving day!" said a policeman." In Mr. Wells's chapel, when the coffin was brought in, there were nearly three thousand persons present, all in mourning, the greater number in tears; and then for the further service at the cemetery, some miles distant, while a special train was engaged to convey numbers, every kind of vehicle was in request, and the roads and pavements to Peckham were thronged by the crowds walking. So was Mr. James Wells ushered along to his last resting-place. Most manifest it was, and is, that during his life and course of ministration he was the model preacher of some, and not an inconsiderable number of persons; so this month he shall be ours. If his spirit has any consciousness of such transactions, a gracious change must have passed over it, or it will be very cross to find itself in such companionship. James Wells has now, for considerably more than forty years, been the chosen and designated prophet of the highest of all high Calvinists. During the greater part of those years he ministered in the Surrey Tabernacle, itself a large commodious building, and always crowded to hear the prophet's voice; but some years since a much more splendid edifice was erected. The denomination of opinion represented by Mr. Wells boasts very few generous hearts, and only a scantling of very capable pockets; but, reared at a large cost, the building was out of debt as soon as opened, and some of our own friends have described to us how every little seamstress's fingers and every hyper-Calvinist washerwoman's brawny arms were actively employed to furnish the bricks for the Tabernacle. **[If Hood wants examples of coarse and ungracious words he could turn to his own here: 'little', 'brawny' and 'hyper-Calvinist' used in a very derogatory sense.]** There Mr. Wells continued his ministrations until about eighteen months since, when the painful, lingering

disease set in upon his frame, which has borne his body to the grave, and his spirit we have no doubt,— though he would have no such charitable hopes for us,—to some wider heaven than it was ever able to comprehend on earth.

Many many years have passed away since we had much acquaintance with the voice and word of James Wells. When we were but a boy we were sometimes in the habit of looking in to listen, either at his own chapel, or when he was engaged in preaching occasional anniversary sermons in other places. Since then our experience of preachers has been tolerably extensive, but James Wells stands at the head of all we can call to mind for drollery, vulgarity, and a certain coarse shrewdness, which was wont to keep his congregation chuckling and shaking their heads with remarkable self-satisfied unctiousness, realizing in the grim old Rehoboth, or Tabernacle, the Northern Farmer's self-gratulatory sentiment, "What a man he be, surely!" And this with many is a sufficient account of James Wells; but it is by no means a sufficient account. Mere rubbish will not hold together, mere coarseness and drollery could never have sustained the preacher in his place so long, or have given to him such a funeral, such a genuine, hearty outbreak of grief as that in which at least thirty thousand persons expressed their sorrow because their master was taken from their head that day. He was a strange creature, surely not without certain qualities not altogether inimitable. As to his manner, nothing can be said for it; it was rugged and jerky, unrelieved by a single grace of contour. Rather tall and thin, his face and appearance were not unimpressive; but the face had a grim biliousness, a sort of glowering blackness of darkness, which in our younger years was quite as effective as the severest logic or the most affecting instincts, in driving us away from the dreary creed of hyper-Calvinism. His language, like his manner, was jerky. It would never appear that he had the remotest care for any graces or grandeur of expression, was probably quite insensible to them. Sentiment never approached near to him, and to all matters of imagination and fancy he gave a wide berth; and yet his language, in a sense, was good; it was hard, vigorous, every sentence perfectly unmistakable, and all alive with reality and conviction. We should think, probably a worse-tempered mortal never found his way into a pulpit. He pleasantly testifies of himself, "I am sometimes as ill-tempered as a witch; but even then I am just as righteous in Christ as I am when I am on the mount of transfiguration, wrapt in the revelations of an eternal world." It was in truth a hard, gnarled set of features, a very Peter Bell kind of countenance, as the poet says,—

"As if the man had lent his face,
In many a solitary place,
Between the wind and open sky;"

— which was also very likely to be true; for, like Peter Bell, James Wells was, as our readers may be aware, a carrier, or the driver of a carrier's wagon, on one of the great London roads. To him, in this sphere of life, came, all those years ago, his prophet's call. It is to be thought he did not enter on the work of the ministry without some furniture of knowledge. The accomplished Edward Andrews took him in hand a little, and he was probably familiar with his Greek and Hebrew Bible; and we are quite aware, from our own knowledge of him, that if he did not read extensively, he read and sought after a certain rare kind of old books, which perhaps had not much relation to the formation of a higher judgment, but aided in the ripening those spiritual fancies which he loved to see depending from his vinery, and to bear in to gratify the luscious taste of the frequenters of his Tabernacle:

It is very noteworthy how deep,—even how broad and widely spread,—is the stratum of hard high-Calvinism, in English society. Let a competent, strong, clear voice utter forth its doctrines, it is quite amazing how numerous are the followers, how glad the listeners. Is it not to be confessed; is not the reason to be found in the fact that Calvinism is the theology of satisfactions — in truth the only

conservative theology? Not much of this probably entered into the minds of Mr. Wells's innumerable hearers; but in some way thus we, who seek for the rationale of things, are to account for the large following such leaders have. The creed and its believers have, to most who are outside of the charmed circle, a grimly forbidding aspect. "Grace be with all them who love our Lord Jesus Christ," forms no part of the confession of these saints; the audacity with which multitudes are dismissed is amusing. We have before us a singularly illustrative passage from one of Mr. Wells's sermons :—" Well, I can tell you this upon this matter, that I never did receive a person yet as belonging to God only just as they are made manifest to my conscience (!) They must give me some reason for the hope that is in them; they must tell me something about the way in which they found out that they were sinners, and something about the way in which the Lord was pleased to manifest His mercy to them. If they can give me no account of this humbling work, this breaking down, this pulling to pieces work, and this scattering work, this soul trouble work, and can give me no account of how the first ray of hope came into their souls, can give me no account of how the first manifestation of mercy to their souls raised them up;—then how am I to have a union of soul with them? There is a man who is a child of God, and he stands manifested to my conscience as such. Well, that man has an old man as well as a new, and circumstances may be so, that he may treat me most barbarously, most shamefully, most unchristianly, most unjustifiably, and most un-scripturally. I have seen this among the people of God, treating each other in this way. There comes another man, who is not manifest to my conscience as a good man. That man treats me kindly; that man treats me more like a Christian than the real Christian does; that man does everything he can for my comfort, and shows every possible feeling of friendship to me; but notwithstanding all this, I cannot put one in the place of the other. Now, which is the good man of these two? Which is the real Christian of these two? I must still say, though it may seem paradoxical to some, that that man. Notwithstanding all his inconsistent conduct towards me, is a good man; and the other, notwithstanding all his kindness to me, I cannot see in him the grace of God. I can see in him a noble spirit; I can see in him a great deal that I admire; and what the one has done is almost enough to make me reject him, and what the other has done seems almost enough to make me try and flatter myself into the notion that he is a Christian. Ah, this is a very awkward position to be put in; but I have been in it, and no doubt some of you have as well."

Probably most of our readers have felt that there is a side of truth to this sufficiently broad and sweeping kind of talk, to the extent, at any rate, of admitting that a life of natural amiability may be very pleasant, and yet very unreal; and a life of intense conviction may have many very unamiable, and even undesirable, not to say dishonorable characteristics. But it is assuredly remarkable to find men of Mr. Wells's school utterly reversing the Apostle's rule; he modestly spoke of "commending himself to every man's conscience;" Mr. Wells, very remarkably makes his conscience the limitation of all spiritual commendation. Surely the arrogance would be very dreadful if it were not so very droll and amusing. **[What of words from Paul such as: "But if we, or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so we say again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. Galatians 1:8, 9. Even the apostle John states "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." 1 John 4:1]** Of course such a cast of sentiment produces a narrow, selfish, coarse, and exclusive character; another type of character would be inconsistent with such a cast of opinion; hence the preaching the doctrine of election, sometimes in a broader, higher, better, purer, and more evangelical sense, but more frequently in a narrow, ignorant, perverted, and, we will venture to say, impious sense, constituted a large staple of Mr. Wells's ministrations. With this also heavy denunciations of what he called the "Duty-Faith Doctrine," as in the following delicious piece of ignorance. **[It's hard for me to find a charitable reason why Hood would use the word "delicious" in this context. He is mocking God, not James Wells]** "Had the register of heaven ever been shown to Ishmael? And did the great Creator say to him, 'Well, Ishmael, will you have

your name there or not?' And because he would not be a free son, was he cast out? No, you say, I can't admit that; that is just Duty-Faith. I am just now stripping Duty-Faith naked, and that's just what it is. It is a lie from the bottomless pit, a deceiver of the souls of men. If an angel from heaven came and preached Duty Faith, let him be accursed." This is tolerably strong and tall talk. Elsewhere he says, "We see that there is no authority for the doctrine that it is the duty of all men, indeed, it is not the duty of any man, savingly to believe in Christ." Such words as these show plainly enough what a sad hash ignorance can make when by its crotchets it perverts even the truth itself. Such extracts as these show with what justice it has been said, "An ignorant Arminian preacher blunders through his system in a tolerable manner, but a Calvinist makes dreadful work." Such extracts also show how, theoretically, such teaching as Mr. Wells's seems to release him from any responsibility as before God. No doubt these aspects of doctrine gave to Mr. Wells a large measure of his popularity: this, conjoined to a rugged vernacular speech very well fitted to meet the ears and the tastes of those who would be likely to find such doctrine to be refreshing. It is a marked peculiarity of that school of preachers that it indulges in warm and hearty vituperation of all other ministers; it delights in some coarse, rude, ignorant, pun even upon the personal name. William Irons, a minister of this order of great celebrity, some years since, at Camberwell, took possession of his pulpit after the chapel had been closed for repairs; and, referring to the ministers of other churches in his immediate neighborhood, said to his people, "Well, you have had a famous time for running about, and where have you been to? I don't know, but if you have been to Dr. Steane (an eminent Baptist), I suppose he's washed you; and if you have been to John Burnet's, he has dried you; and if you have been to George Clayton's, he starched you. But now, you have come to me, and I'll mangle you, and then I'll iron you." Well do we remember when not much more than a child— a mere young boy,—looking in, one Thursday evening, in our neighborhood, to hear one of these celebrated fathers of the faithful. Our young sensibilities were utterly shocked to find in a certain portion of the discourse every venerable name in the town punned upon, and pelted by abuse, and made to contribute a quota of mirth and jocularly to the discourse. James Wells played his part in this pleasant game, in which the Gospel was made to grin through a horse collar. James Sherman was the greatly beloved and very tender-hearted minister of Surrey chapel, which, as most of our readers know, is a large circular building. Mr. Wells reckoned him up in a well-known epigram. "Jimmy of the Round House never preached a gospel sermon in all his life." He was not much more courteous to Mr. Sherman's predecessor; when his funeral sermon was preached by William Jay, he spoke of the service from the pulpit as, "a big Jay chattering upon a little Hill" It does not take any special state of grace to enjoy this kind of joking, and there are people who like it. Our preacher says, "There are half-way ministers, they will sometimes preach for a quarter of an hour a good bit of truth; and some of their hearers, in that part of the sermon, get such a peep at the truth that they can't make the other part of the sermon go down, and they are obliged to leave that sandy fuller's-earth concern, and go where they can meet with pure bread." Again he says, "I don't care what people call me, so long as I am enjoying the truth. As good Romaine says: 'While other people are grumbling about it, I am enjoying it.' This manna is white in color; ah, there is no adulteration here; what there is in the bread we eat now-a-days, mercy knows, I don't. I know they make some of the loaves very hard to squeeze the water of the potatoes and rice out of them. And what we eat, mercy knows, I don't; they call it bread; but here in this bread of life there is no adulteration, it is pure free-grace bread, never hurt anyone yet, and never will, depend upon it." If our readers were not aware before, such illustrations we supposed to be sufficient, as setting forth the coarse and vulgar wit of the man. We dare not mean to imply that this was all

With such things every sermon abounded [**In actual fact, as is evidenced in reading the sermons of James Wells, every sermon abounds in scripture references, pinning all that was said to the Word of God.**], but every sermon abounded, or most did, with better things; and, evil as was the spirit of exclusiveness, coarse egotism, and abuse, we may hope that to the better things the preacher was indebted for that large following which for about forty-five years he maintained. Dogmatic certainty,

absolute, audacious self-assurance and self-assertion go very far; the average mind, more especially the lower and most uncultivated order of mind, cares little or nothing for processes of reasoning in the pulpit. It is eminently pleasant at all times to see a mind made up, a mind which can distinctly see the roots of its own convictions. The pleasure and happiness arising from the spectacle of such a preacher must depend, of course, upon the measure to which the hearer is able to see a whole and entire man in the convictions; a man, heart, mind, and life, all so involved that his dogmatism is not merely a conceited self-assurance to himself, but an object of rest to others. In many particulars, Mr. Wells might be instructive; but we have certainly thought especially as showing how not to preach. He was a ragged talker; his sermons constitute a kind of spiritual patchwork, queer and curious. It is singular to notice how seldom, if ever, he collects a whole healthy mind in a discourse. His sermons were always sufficiently long, but he scarcely ever finished one; he was constantly in the habit of running a very simple and lucid text through a succession of discourses, ragged talk being the characteristic of all. And in all he seemed to fit the clumsy shoes of the old Adam upon the feet of the young Gospel, and so sent it awkwardly speeding on its way. Sometimes a more fine human ring marked his words, as when, in his own manner, he says,—

The Blessedness of Work.

And after all, I make no hesitation in saying that as far as natural happiness is concerned, I say that that man that rises and goes to his work every morning as his amusement, his pleasure, and his delight—I say that that man has more real happiness than any other man can have. I do hold with one of our old writers, that "hard work is the best fun in the world;" I really think it is. And I say that the best scholar under the sun is that man that thoroughly understands his own business; or, if he does not understand it, he is determined to work at it, ABC like, to begin at the very beginning, and go on stitch by stitch, and bit by bit, and step by step, until he does thoroughly understand; and then he will go on with it with ease. And if that man cannot read any language but his own, nor even speak his own language grammatically, yet, if he understands his business well, that man is a thorough scholar, let that business be whatever it may. I declare, that if I had to get my living by sweeping a crossing, if I would not sweep it as tastily as I could, make it look as nice as I could, keep my broom as nice and myself as respectable as I could; so that I do believe that people, when they saw me in the distance, would come to my crossing for the sake of giving me something. There are some good people get into a lazy, dawdling, mumping sort of spirit, as though they could not move; they are like stagnant pools; they want someone to rout them up well. I wish I had such persons where I could keep them under my eye for a week or two, or a month or two: I'd give them no peace until they found out that what they want is just to have plenty to do. I speak from experience; I have worked hard myself; I was but seven years old when I was turned out into the world; and I never wanted a bit of bread from that day to this; anything I could get to do, I did it; and the consequence was I got on pretty well, at least as well as it was good for me to get on; and here I am now, above fifty years old, and a better man than some of you that are hardly thirty; because you have been afraid of work, and I have not. It will make you healthy and strong and spicity; and when you get seventy or eighty years old, you will be a lively, muscular, mental old gentleman. I recollect Dr. Franklin says, "Here am I, eighty-two years old, and the twelve last years have been the most active and happy years of my life. I have crossed the Atlantic four times, and consulted the English Parliament upon that great question of American Independence." People now at four or five and thirty begin to hang down their heads, and look almost as if they were old; it is all from want of action; less night work, and more morning work, that is what we want, depend upon it. So then, it is a fact, that we need the bread that perisheth, and we must labor for it I remember a minister once wrote to me, and asked me if I would be his doctor; he had a certain disease, he said; and I read the letter, and came to this, he says, "Really, I don't feel that I can work; I am got so lazy; can you prescribe a remedy?" And I wrote to him that I could not; there was no necessity for it, for there was one already prescribed; had he never read the receipt in the good old Book of records ?—" If

any man will not" (not cannot) "work, neither shall he eat." "If that doesn't cure you," I said, "I don't know what will." I don't know any remedy more powerful than that; I think it is infallible; you may depend upon it that will move men when nothing else will; for such persons generally think a pretty good deal about number one; so that when you touch them pretty close there, that will do what nothing else can. Forgive these remarks. I love the promises of Providence; I love a spirit of industry. Never mind what your difficulties are, you will in the end overcome them and surmount them.

In reviewing what we have said concerning the ministrations of James Wells, we are quite sure that many of his hearers, even of those able to form calm and reasonable judgment, [**Again he shows gross distain for those he terms hyper-Calvinists.**] may suppose our sketch has been far from just; indeed, there were many more things in the man than we have with any distinctness brought out. We have said already, it would not be possible that he should have had so large a number of followers had his material been principally composed of mere coarseness. In fact, James Wells was a very extraordinary man. Without knowing it, he was a keen logician, and he illustrates very remarkably the doctrine of a remarkable paper,—well worthy of a very close study by any of our readers,—by the late Isaac Taylor, entitled: "Logic in Theology," in which he especially exhibits the consequences of mere logic in Theology as applied to the doctrines of Jonathan Edwards. If you merely follow a logical pathway; whither does it lead? David Hume followed consistently his logical course; as consistently did Bishop Berkley; as consistently did Jonathan Edwards; as consistently did James Wells. [**It is a well-known fact that Jonathan Edwards was a philosopher, indeed he is considered by some to be the greatest American philosopher. James Wells, as Hood himself acknowledges was a preacher. David Hume was a radical philosopher. Bishop Berkeley was also first and foremost a philosopher. The comparison of Wells with these men, even with Edwards is grossly negligent if not dishonest. Edwards deserves the criticism, Wells does not.**] May we not say, that with all of them, from the greatest to James Wells, who was certainly the least,—although none of them had such a funeral,—they believed in and followed consistently a set of wordy demonstrations; and the narrower the mind, the more it is in danger from such a mode of settling truth, and like Oliver Holmes' "Deacon's Master-piece; or, Wonderful One-Horse Shay," the whole system is in danger, although—

"The deacon's art
Had made it so like in every part
That there was'nt a chance for one to start.
For the wheels were just as strong as the thills,
And the floor was just as strong as the sills,
And the panels just as strong as the floor,
And the whipple-tree neither less nor more.
And the back cross-bar as strong as the fore,
And spring, and axle, and hub encore.
And yet as a whole it is past a doubt
In another hour it will be worn out!
First a shiver, and then a thrill,
Then something decidedly like a spill,—
You see, of course, if you're not a dunce,
How it went to pieces all at once,—
End of the wonderful one-horse shay.
Logic is logic. That's all I say."

Thus it is apparently with all mere systems of logical theology. Mr. Wells adopted certain words, putting of course certain constructions upon them, following them out to legitimate conclusions. Hear him speak

away from those words, of the love of Christ, of the Sovereignty of God, of the intimate knowledge God has with the affairs of the world and souls, you would listen often with delight; but he adopted a rigidly narrow interpretation of the Gospel faith, and by so much as his own mind was narrow, he followed his idea on persistently to its close. He often appeared in his sermons to give intimations of deep knowledge of real human experience, but by his system of thought he was compelled perpetually to run up every idea into some verbal shadow of Arminianism or Calvinism, and the words haunted him until they became powers over him; as he looked at them, indeed they were and are powers, but he had no capacity for calculating for the resisting medium in things. He was like a philosopher who should discourse concerning the laws of simple radiation, without taking into account the elements of the atmosphere through which it has to pass.