

The Late James Wells¹

WHEN Dr. Hamilton handed to the printer in his study the last sheet of his “Life of Ely,” he said, “And let me beg of you to be quick about it, sir, for ministers are soon forgotten!” This remark is painfully true in many cases, not only of ministers, but of persons in general. However, the remembrance we have of certain champions of truth whose souls have long been with God abides in freshness to-day.

“All pensive memories as we journey on, Longings for vanished smiles, and voices gone.”

Foremost in the galaxy of good and great men whose names we cherish, is the late Mr. James Wells, Pastor of the Surrey Tabernacle.

DECISION OF CHARACTER MARKED THE LIFE OF JAMES WELLS

James Wells was born in the year 1803 at Alton, an ancient and interesting market-town in Hampshire. During his boyhood days he appears to have suffered great deprivations and hardships. But the Lord who never errs preserved him as one of His chosen vessels for great usefulness. Young Wells possessed by nature an indomitable and persevering spirit which impelled him onward to success; and when the grace of God reached his heart, the same characteristic features under the power of the Holy Spirit, marked his future steps in the mighty work he was honored to do as Pastor of one of the most happy, united, and successful Churches in the Strict Baptist Denomination. He sweetly fell asleep in Jesus, March 10th, 1872, and his remains were interred in Nunhead Cemetery on the 20th of the same month. A splendid granite monument marks the spot where his sacred ashes rest. After many years, the widowed Church received of the Lord a man after His own heart, as Pastor, in the person of our beloved brother Mr. O. S. Dolbey, whom God long preserve.

The autobiography in brief of Mr. James Wells will be found in his last published work: “Anchor’s Gloomy Vale.”

PAXTON HOOD ON JAMES WELLS AND HIS MINISTRY

Some time ago we received a book for review entitled “The Vocation of the Preacher,” by E. Paxton Hood. In the body of this rather bulky work, about sixteen pages are devoted to the ministerial career of Mr. James Wells, and never did we read on the whole a more uncharitable critique of him, and of the glorious truths he preached than what is therein written. The pen and ink sketches of William Huntingdon and James Wells by Mr. Hood forcibly remind us of a burlesque on the plurality of livings, written by an anonymous author of seventy years ago, and in which W. Huntingdon is grievously misrepresented.

¹ Taken from the Earthen Vessel and Gospel Herald. E.V. volume 45 no. 514: G.H. volume 57, no. 673. For January 1889. This is the first article.

We hope that we shall not be misunderstood by our readers in presenting them with a few of the most temperately written passages from Mr. Hood's account of Mr. Wells. The spirit which actuated Mr. Hood in penning the eleventh chapter of his work will speedily be detected. Some persons will perhaps say, Why quote from the book at all? Well, it is not always amiss that we should know what men out of our own religious pale think of us. Those who are "shod with the preparations of the Gospel of peace" as was Mr. Wells, have power given them of God to "tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt them."

After apologizing for giving Mr. James Wells a place in his book, Mr. Hood writes, "Enough, in justification, to say that James Wells did nothing during the greater part of his long life but preach, and that his funeral, a few years since, was such as scarcely ever attends the remains of the most eminent and illustrious men." "Never," wrote 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 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 James Wells ushered along to his last resting-place."

It is a grand thing, when men dead set against the truths we hold, are necessitated to say nothing but good of us. Our author descanting on James Wells as being more than forty years "the chosen and designated prophet of

"THE HIGHEST OF ALL HIGH-CALVINISTS,"

notes, that "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 the order 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 washer-woman's brawny arms were actively employed to furnish the bricks for the new Tabernacle."

Mr. Hood tells us that many years ago he occasionally heard Mr. Wells preach, but from the description he has given of him, he was evidently not taken either with his appearance or mode of enunciating the truth, and seems only to have remembered certain expressions of originality from the lips of Mr. Wells, which at the time may have provoked the risibility of some of his hearers, but forgot the blessed account to which he turned those expressions, and the divine truths to which they were frequently linked. He says: "It would never appear that he (Mr. Wells) 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 every sense was good; it was hard, vigorous, every sentence perfectly unmistakable, and all alive with reality and conviction." The last clause of this statement will in some measure be accounted for by the fact that Mr. Wells fully believed the truths he advanced. But it is false to say that he exercised no powers of imagination in his preaching. We shall not soon

forget the display of his vivid imagination coupled with truth, in describing, on one occasion especially, the grand difference between a mere pleasure-seeker and a real Christian. Many of his beautiful word-pictures are still fresh in our memory.

Reminding us of the obscurity of Mr. Wells' origin, Mr. Hood writes, "Like Peter Bell, James Wells, had been, as our readers may be aware, a carrier, or a driver of a carrier's wagon, on one of the great London roads. To him, in this sphere of life, came the prophet's call. It is to be thought he did not enter on the work of the ministry without some furniture of knowledge."

JAMES WELLS AND DE. EDWAED ANDREWS OF WALWORTH.

Mr. Wells was no doubt considerably benefited by the help he realized from the late Dr. Edward Andrews, of Walworth, one of the most accomplished scholars of his time. "Under the tuition of Dr. Andrews, Mr. Wells became familiar (says our author) with his Greek and Hebrew Bible; and we are quite aware, from our own knowledge of him (continues Hood), that if he did not read extensively, he read, and sought after a certain rare kind of old books, which perhaps have not much relation to the formation of a higher judgment, but which aided in ripening those spiritual fancies which he loved to see depending from his vinery, and to carry in for the gratification of the luscious taste of the frequenters of his Tabernacle." Mr. Hood infers that "hard high-Calvinism" is widely spread and deeply rooted "in English society" and is the "theology of satisfaction," which accounts for the following such leaders as Mr. Wells have. We are not ignorant of the reason which moved our author in treating with Mr. Wells' Calvinism to advance the annexed questionable expression. "The creed audits 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 the saints: the audacity with which multitudes are dismissed is amusing." Prejudice against the truth and truth-lovers is a woefully blind and stubborn quality.

HALF-WAY MINISTERS AND FREE-GRACE BREAD

Mr. Wells' description of "half-way ministers," together with his definition of the nature of "pure free grace bread" brings to the front Mr. Hood's view of true humor which he is careful not to "confound with vulgarity." He says, "We listened to a man like James Wells, who had a congregation of from twelve to sixteen hundred persons constantly listening to him; we heard him Spiritualizing a Wheelbarrow! describing his own power in analyzing the subterfuges of sin, because he was like the old woman who, having been in the coal-hole, knew where to look for her daughter! likening the Arminian theology to milk and water, and the Gospel dispensation to fine old crusted port." It must be understood that although Mr. Wells may have alluded by way of illustration to the preference of port wine to milk and water, he himself was a total abstainer up to his death.

Nothing could be more untrue than to call Mr. Wells' discourses "ragged talk." Yet Mr. Hood does not hesitate to designate them as such. He moreover says that he (Mr. Wells) "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." This was exactly the reverse of Mr. Wells' preaching, as his printed sermons amply testify.

Now and again Mr. Hood is obliged to acknowledge that “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.” How strange it is that men professing to be taught of God should be so blind to the position in which all men are by the Fall, and of God’s plan of saving sinners. The man who wrote such trashy stuff as the following, relative to Mr. Wells, could only be a novice in divine things, i.e., “It has been said, an ignorant Arminian preacher blunders through his system in a tolerable manner, but a Calvinist makes dreadful work.” Mr. Wells’ faithful protest against duty-faith is called “strong tall talk.” “We see,” says Mr. Wells “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.” This truthful statement is held up to scorn by Mr. Hood as a perversion of the truth itself. Mr. Hood, moreover, goes on to say that “such extracts also show how, theoretically, such teaching as Mr. Wells’ seem to release him from any responsibility as before God.” Could anything be more illogical and unscriptural than such threadbare twaddle? and yet Mr. Hood, in drawing his severe critique to a close, calmly says “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, 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 In fact,

JAMES WELLS WAS A VERY EXTRAORDINARY MAN.

“Without knowing it, he was a keen logician, and he illustrates very singularly the doctrine of a remarkable paper, by the late Isaac Taylor. . . . 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 of the affairs of the world and souls, we 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 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.” Thus

PAXTON HOOD CONCLUDES HIS ANIMADVERSION²

on the God-honoring ministry of the late James Wells. **Notwithstanding all Mr. Hood has written against Mr. Wells and his ministry, we are sure that no man ever preached a more discriminating and Christ-exalting Gospel than did James Wells³.** It is clear enough that Mr. Hood was in constant antagonism to the distinctive doctrines of sovereign grace which Mr. Wells preached for nearly fifty years. But it is to be hoped that before he (Mr. Hood) passed the boundary of time the Lord graciously •opened the eyes of his mind to see as much beauty in Christ as Mr.

² criticism or censure

³ My own emphasis

Wells saw, and that he now enjoys the fulness of that blessed divinity which crowns Jesus Lord of all, and of which Mr. Wells wrote and sung nearly sixty years since:

“The beauties of Jesus, my soul would adore!
The God-man Mediator, that's bless'd evermore,
I would cleave to His mercy, His grace and His blood,
And sing of my safety, for Jesus is God.”

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