



BURNING AND SHINING LIGHTS;

or,

Memoirs of Eminent Ministers of Christ.

BY THE

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"LIVES MADE SUBLIME," ETC., ETC.

"Oh, could we copy their mild virtues! then
What joy to live, what blessedness to die."

WORDSWORTH.

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V.

THE REV. WILLIAM TENNENT,
OF FREEHOLD, NEW JERSEY,

THE PASTOR IN THE WOODS.

“**T**HE higher Christian life” is felt to be a want by many believers in the Lord Jesus. Where privileges are so rich, and work for Christ so abundant, there ought to be a higher attainment of spiritual character in order fully to enjoy the advantages offered, and to discharge the spiritual duties required. Those who have lived up to their privileges have hitherto been most honoured in their Master’s service. There are many examples to illustrate this in the history of the Church. Not a few of them have lived in the youth and early struggles of American Christianity.

We present a sketch of a “burning and shining light,” who shone in the transatlantic Church—in whose brightness many rejoiced while he lived, and by which he, being dead, yet speaketh. WILLIAM TENNENT was the son of a worthy sire, who, with four of his sons, adorned the ministry in America during the eighteenth century. He was born in the county Antrim, Ireland, on the 3d January 1705, and went with his father to Philadelphia in 1718.

The Rev. William Tennent, senior, was a clergyman

of the Episcopal Church, but never took a cure of souls in Ireland, on account of his conscientious scruples in reference to the terms imposed upon the clergy. He emigrated to America, where he thought to provide better for his sons, and enjoy greater liberty of conscience for himself. As soon as he landed, he applied to the Synod of Philadelphia to be received into the Presbyterian Church. After satisfying the Synod with regard to his reasons for renouncing the Episcopal Church, he was formally recognised as a minister. He preached at various places during the two succeeding years, but settled at Bensalem and Smithfield in Bucks county, Pennsylvania, in 1721. He remained there till 1726, when he was invited to the church at Neshaminy, in the same county. He accepted the invitation, and continued to fulfil his ministry there until his death in 1746.

His American biographer informs us that "some time after his removal to Neshaminy, Mr. Tennent, being deeply impressed with the importance of a well-educated as well as pious ministry, resolved on establishing a school at which young men might acquire the requisite qualifications for the sacred office. He was admirably fitted to conduct such a school, being a fine general scholar, as well as a thoroughly read theologian; and with the Latin language he was so familiar, that he could write and speak it, not only with perfect ease but with remarkable elegance. He is said to have delivered a Latin oration before the Synod, not long after he was admitted a member, which was greatly praised for its correct and splendid diction, and which showed the more finished education, which, at that time, was obtained in the mother country.

"Mr. Tennent, with a view to carry his benevolent purpose into effect, erected a humble building, within a few steps of his own dwelling, for the accommodation of those who might offer themselves as students. His kinsman, James Logan, had presented him, in 1728, with fifty acres of land, and on this lot stood the building referred to. His expectations were more than realized; for here, before many years had passed, had been educated a considerable number of the most distinguished Presbyterian ministers of their time. Among them were Tennent's own sons, Samuel and John Blair, William Robinson, &c. It may safely be said that the establishment of this institution, known as the 'Log College,' marked an epoch in the history of clerical education, at least in the Presbyterian Church in this country." *

He was a man of fervent evangelical piety, and deeply interested in the work of the Lord, and therefore, with his scholarship, admirably qualified to direct the minds of aspirants to the holy ministry. He was one of the first to welcome the great evangelist WHITFIELD on his first visit to Philadelphia, and made a deep impression on his mind. Mr. Whitfield thus refers to this meeting in his journal, "At my return home (from visiting a family) was much comforted by the coming of one Mr. Tennent, an old grey-haired disciple and servant of Jesus Christ. He keeps an academy about twenty miles from Philadelphia, and has been blessed with four gracious sons, three of whom have been, and still continue to be, eminently useful in the Church of Christ." Mr. Whitfield paid a visit to his residence, and preached to about three thousand people who had assembled to hear him. He thus records

* Dr. Sprague's "Annals of the American Pulpit," vol. iii.

his visit, "After our exercises were over, we went to old Mr. Tennent's, who entertained us like one of the ancient patriarchs. His wife, to me, seemed like Elizabeth; and he, like Zachary; both so far as I can learn, walk in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. Though God was pleased to humble my soul, so that I was obliged to retire for a while, yet we had sweet communion with each other, and spent the evening in concerting what measures had best be taken for promoting our dear Lord's kingdom."

His son, William, the subject of this chapter, was early under serious impressions, and aspired to the Christian ministry, in which he had already three brothers. He, as well as they, had the advantage of the "Log College," and their close relationship to its preceptor, for the prosecution of their studies. He had a great thirst for knowledge, and made very respectable acquirements. Ere he entered upon the work of preaching, he went to New Brunswick, where his brother Gilbert was settled, that he might continue his theological studies under his brother's superintendence. "When he left home, his father, with his parting blessing, gave him a small sum of money, telling him, that if he behaved well, it would be all he would need; and if he did not behave well, it was more than he deserved." While he was resident at his brother's, he was seized with fever, and, after an illness of six weeks, apparently died. His body was laid out, and preparations were made for his interment. But as he was being laid in the coffin, a young doctor—his particular friend—averred that he perceived a tremor in his flesh, and that he was not dead. No other entertained any hope of this, but as the young man's importunity was great, it was

deemed advisable to postpone the funeral. Every means were used by the medical man, who never left him for three days and three nights, but no sign of life appeared. Friends were again called to the funeral, but the doctor begged first an hour, then half an hour, and then a quarter. To the surprise of all, Mr. Tennent opened his eyes, and swooned away for a couple of hours. Again he opened his eyes, and a second time fainted away. By degrees he recovered, but his body "broke out in boils to such an extent that it seemed throughout a complete ulcer; insomuch that his nurses were obliged, for nearly a whole year, to sew up sheets, and stuff them with wool, in order to absorb the humours. It was more than a year before he could stand upon his feet, and his intellectual faculties seemed to be gone." He recollected nothing of his studies. He did not know the letters, and had to be taught as a child. One day, however, as his sister was instructing him, he observed her to turn her head and weep. On inquiring the cause, she said, "I am distressed to think that your sickness has been so severe that, notwithstanding you have had a good education, you have forgotten all you ever knew." Suddenly the past rushed back into his mind, and his faculties returned. One who knew him well once said to him, some years afterwards, "Sir, you seem to be one indeed raised from the dead, and may tell us what it is to die, and what you were sensible of while in that state." He replied as follows, "As to dying, I found my fever increase, and I became weaker and weaker, until all at once, I found myself in heaven, as I thought. I saw no shape as to the Deity, but glory unutterable." Here he paused, as though unable to find words to express his views, let his

bridle fall, and, lifting up his hands, proceeded, "I can say, as St. Paul did, I heard and saw things all unutterable! I saw a great multitude before this glory, apparently in the height of bliss, singing most melodiously; and I was transported with my own situation, viewing all my dangers and all my troubles ended, and my rest and glory begun; and was about to join the happy and great multitude, when one came unto me, looked me full in the face, laid his hand on my shoulder, and said, '*You must go back.*' These words went through me—nothing could have shocked me more—I cried out, 'Lord, must I go back?' With this shock, I opened my eyes in this world."

The impression of this ecstasy remained long upon his mind. He said, "For three years this sense of divine things continued so great, and everything else appeared so completely vain, when compared to heaven, *that could I have had the world by stooping down to pick it up, I believe I should not have thought of doing it.*"

This is one of the most striking experiences in history, and there is no doubt of the fact of his apparent death. When he was sufficiently recovered, he was licensed to preach the gospel, and became the successor of his brother John—early removed by death—in the Presbyterian church at Freehold, Monmouth county, New Jersey. His ordination took place on October 25, 1733. During the long space of forty-four years he preached the great doctrines of the gospel with much fervour and fullness, and adorned them with a remarkably holy life. He attained to a higher Christian experience than most believers do. Of this we have a very remarkable proof told by Judge Boudinot.

"He was attending the duties of the Lord's day in his

own congregation as usual, where the custom was to have morning and evening service, with only a half-hour's intermission to relieve the attention. He had preached in the morning, and in the intermission had passed into the woods for meditation, the weather being warm. He was reflecting on the infinite wisdom of God, as manifested in all His works, and particularly in the wonderful method of salvation, through the death and sufferings of His beloved Son. The subject suddenly opened on his mind with such a flood of light, that his views of the glory and the infinite majesty of Jehovah were so inexpressibly great as entirely to overwhelm him, and he fell almost lifeless to the ground. When he had revived a little, all he could do was to raise a fervent prayer that God would withdraw Himself from him, or he must perish under a view of His ineffable glory. When able to reflect on his position, he could not but abhor himself, as a weak and despicable worm, and seemed to be overcome with amazement that a creature so unworthy and insufficient had ever dared to attempt the instruction of his fellow-men in the nature and attributes of so glorious a Being. Overstaying his usual time, some of his elders went in search of him, and found him prostrate on the ground, unable to rise, and incapable of informing them of the cause. They raised him up, and after some time brought him to the church, and supported him to the pulpit, which he ascended on his hands and knees, to the no small astonishment of the congregation. He remained silent a considerable time, earnestly supplicating Almighty God (as he told the writer) to hide Himself from him, that he might be able to address his people, who were by this time lost in wonder to know what had produced this un-

common event. His prayers were heard, and he became able to stand up by holding the desk. He now began the most impressive and pathetic address that the congregation had ever received from him. He gave a surprising account of the views he had of the infinite wisdom of God, and greatly deplored his own incapacity to speak to them of a Being so infinitely glorious beyond his powers of description. He then broke out into so fervent and expressive a prayer as greatly to surprise the congregation, and draw tears from every eye. A sermon followed, that continued the solemn scene, and made very lasting impressions on all the hearers."

In his early ministry he intrusted all his pecuniary concerns, for the management of which he seemed to have no fitness, to his servant, and he found himself heavily in debt. He mentioned this to a friend, who recommended him to marry. He accepted the proposal, and wished to be introduced to a lady who would be suited to him. His friend recommended his own sister-in-law, who, within a week from her introduction to Mr. Tennent, became his wife. She was a help-meet indeed; for her prudent and economic management enabled her to get quit of her husband's embarrassments, and to provide for the wants of their family. Three of their children lived to mature age. Two of them became physicians, but died before their father. The third became a minister, and carried down the succession of a family to whose ministry the Presbyterian Church in America will ever be indebted.

Notwithstanding his devoted piety and exemplary life, Mr. Tennent had peculiar trials. One of these was a charge of perjury, which he was enabled to disprove most

successfully by the unexpected arrival of the only person who could give evidence. The story is too long for quotation, after what we have already quoted.

He was ever ready to confess his Master, and to rebuke sin. Once in an inn, along with a brother minister, he was asked by a person in the room to play cards. Mr. Tennent replied, "With all my heart, sir, if you can convince us that we are thereby serving our Master's cause, or doing anything in aid of the object of our mission." After some more words Mr. Tennent said, "This gentleman" (meaning his companion) "and myself are ministers of the gospel; we both profess ourselves Christ's servants; we are sent out on his business, which is to persuade men to become reconciled to God." The cards were soon removed, and the company manifested a willingness to hear Mr. Tennent speak to them on their eternal interests. It was a night to be remembered.

On another occasion, being in company with George Whitfield, the great evangelist, who was complaining of the trials of life, and longing to be with Christ, asked him, "Brother Tennent, don't you want to get your dismissal too?" Mr. Tennent replied, "I have no wish about it. I have nothing to do with death. My business is to live as long as I can, as well as I can, and to serve my Lord and Master as faithfully as I can, until it shall be his pleasure to call me to my rest."

This is the testimony borne by Dr. Henderson, his physician, to his ministerial fidelity:—"With regard to the manner in which he discharged the duties of the pastoral office, I can say something from actual knowledge, having lived chiefly under his ministry from my infancy

to his death, a period of between twenty and thirty years. I think I may say with confidence, that he was regarded by all classes as a fervent, impressive, and successful preacher of the gospel ; and I doubt not that the records of his church will prove that a greater number were received to communion during his ministry than in any other church in the then province. His labours in spiritual concerns were far from being confined to the pulpit ; he was indefatigable in his endeavours to do good in private. A considerable part of his time he appropriated to visiting his congregation, and would apply the truths of the gospel personally to individuals of every age, rank, and character ; and he was particularly attentive to the little children of his charge, taking care that they were early taught the Catechism, and explaining the various doctrines of the gospel to their comprehension, as they were able to receive them. He was remarkable for his great attention to the particular situation of persons afflicted either in body or mind, and would visit them often, and with as much care as a physician would do, and proved frequently a very comforting spiritual physician to their souls."

It is not easy, at least in the present age, for a minister to divide his labours so equally over all the departments of pastoral duty ; yet it must do much to insure the completeness of ministerial work to preach, and visit, and catechize. In the *speculum episcopi* which we have in St. Paul's labours at Ephesus, the pulpit and pastoral duty seems to have been his constant exercise ; for he "taught there publicly, and from house to house." Dr. Chalmers set a very high value on domestic ministry ; and he was accustomed to say to his students, "A house-

going minister makes a church-going people." In large cities there may be some excuse for not regularly visiting the homes of the people, and some are not gifted with that ability; but generally this department, well attended to, would greatly aid the work of the Lord.

There was a considerable awakening in Mr. Tennent's congregation, of which he gave some account to the Rev. Mr. Prince at Boston, which he embodied in his "Christian History." After referring to the character of the people, which he describes as "loose and profane," both in principles and practice, he states, "About this time my dear brother John (who is now with Christ) was licensed as a candidate for the sacred ministry, a youth whom the Author of every good gift had uncommonly furnished for that important trust." He was ordained in November 1730, and died April 23, 1732. "During this short time his labours were greatly blessed, so that the place of public worship was unusually crowded with people of all ranks; and they seemed to hear generally as for their lives; yea, such as were wont to go to those places for their diversion,—namely, to hear news, or speak to their tradesmen, &c., even on the Lord's day, as they themselves have since confessed,—were taken in the gospel net; a solemn awe of God's majesty possessed many, so that they behaved themselves as at the bar in his house. Many tears were usually shed when he preached, and sometimes the body of the congregation was moved or affected. I can say, and let the Lord alone have the glory of it, that I have seen both minister and people wet with their tears as with a bedewing rain. It was no uncommon thing to see persons, in the time of hearing, sob-

bing as if their hearts would break, but without any public outcry ; and some have been carried out of the assembly, being overcome as if they had been dead."

It was to this sphere that Mr. Tennent came. He preached six months before his brother's death, with much acceptance and considerable success. "Many," he says, "came inquiring what they should do to be saved, and some to tell what the Lord had done for their souls." Almost every house had some anxious inquirers. He saw the fruit of his brother's labours, and he reaped that harvest. Much success attended his own ; and during the succeeding ten years he could say that many had been added to the Lord. "What the number is of those who have tasted the sweet fruits of the Redeemer's purchase in a saving manner in this congregation I cannot tell ; it is my comfort that the Lord will reckon them, for he knows who are his ; and, indeed, none but the omniscient God is equal to the difficult province of determining certainly concerning the internal states of men. Yet I may be bold to say, that to all appearance, both old and young, males and females, have been renewed ; though none so young as I have heard of in some other places." As to the general results, he says, "In a word, the sapless formalist is become spiritual in his conversation ; the proud and haughty are made humble and affable ; the wanton and vile, sober and temperate ; the swearer honours the venerable name he was wont to profane, and blesses instead of cursing ; the Sabbath-breaker is brought to be a strict observer of holy time ; the worldling now seeks treasures in the heavens ; the extortioner now deals justly ; and the formerly malicious forgive injuries ; the prayerless are earnest and incessant in acts of devotion ; and

the sneaking self-seeker endeavours the advancement of God's glory and the salvation of immortal souls."

Happy must be the minister who can report so great a change wrought upon his congregation. This was the felicity of William Tennent. He had, as others have, disappointment in many; but his own high standard of piety served to keep up the standard of his people, and his ministry never lost its savour, or its spiritual power.

He was happy in the Christian fellowship of his father and his brothers. Of his venerable parent mention has been made already. His brother Gilbert was an eminent evangelist, and highly honoured in the conversion of souls. Mr. Prince thus describes him: "He seemed to have as deep an acquaintance with the experimental part of religion as any I have conversed with; and his preaching was as searching and rousing as ever I heard. . . . It was frequently both terrible and searching. It was often, for matter, justly terrible; as he, according to the inspired oracles, exhibited the dreadful holiness, justice, law, threatenings, truth, power, majesty of God, and his anger with rebellious, impenitent, unbelieving, and Christless sinners; the awful danger they were every moment in, of being struck down to hell, and being damned for ever; with the amazing miseries of that place of torment. But his exhibitions, both for matter and manner, fell inconceivably below the reality. Such were the convictions wrought in many hundreds by Mr. Tennent's searching ministry; and such was the case of those many scores of several other congregations as well as mine, who came to me and others for direction under them. And, indeed, by all their converse I found it was not so much the terror, as the searching nature of his ministry, that

was the principal means of their conviction. It was not merely, nor so much, his laying open the terrors of the law and wrath of God, or damnation of hell (for this they could pretty well bear, as long as they hoped these belonged not to them, or they could easily avoid them), as his laying open their many vain and secret shifts and refuges, counterfeit resemblances of grace, delusive and damning hopes, their utter impotence, and impending danger of destruction; whereby they found all their hopes and refuges of lies to fail them, and themselves exposed to eternal ruin, unable to help themselves, and in a lost condition. This searching preaching was both the suitable and principal means of their conviction.

“And now was such a time as we never knew. The Rev. Mr. Cooper was wont to say to me, that more came to him in one week, in deep concern about their souls, than in the whole twenty-four years of his preceding ministry. I can also say the same as to the numbers who repaired to me. By Mr. Cooper’s letter to his friend in Scotland it appears that he had had about six hundred different persons in three months’ time; and Mr. Webb informs me he had had in the same space about a thousand.”

Mr. John Tennent, whose ministry was so brief, was also remarkably devout. In his awakening he had most intense convictions, but his peace and joy were correspondingly high. His labours were greatly blessed, as we have read in his brother’s testimony. William was with him in his last illness, and succeeded him in the ministry. Amidst his dying agonies he said to one, “I would not have you to think the worse of the ways of holiness because you see in me such agonies of distress, for I know there

is a crown of glory in heaven for me, which I shall shortly wear."

"A few minutes before he expired, holding his brother William by the hand, he broke out in the following rapturous expressions: 'Farewell, my brethren! farewell, father and mother! farewell, world with all thy vain delights! Welcome God and Father! welcome sweet Lord Jesus! welcome death! welcome eternity! Amen.' Then, with a low voice, he said, 'Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus!' And so he fell asleep in Christ, and obtained an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom of his God and Saviour."*

Charles, his youngest brother, was also a minister, but his character suffered an eclipse.

Mr. William Tennent was a most laborious minister. "He hated and despised sloth," says Judge Boudinot. He was a faithful servant of Christ, and considered no work too much to do for the Lord he loved, and for souls he wished to save.

His last days were spent amidst the revolutionary struggle for independence. This cause he aided by his prayers. In March 1777 he was seized with fever, which terminated fatally on the 8th. Among the last words he uttered, addressed to the medical gentleman attending him, were these: "I have no wish to live, if it should be the good pleasure of my heavenly Father to call me hence." He was buried in his own church, in the presence of his people, who "loved him as a father, revered him as the pastor and bishop of their souls, obeyed him as their instructor, and delighted in his company as of a friend and brother."

* "Memoir," by Gilbert Tennent.

Spirit, by whose operation
Faith and holiness proceed,
Source of heavenly conversation,
Strength in weakness, help in need !
Spirit, by whose inspiration
Prophets and apostles spake,
Martyrs bled, and tribulation
Saints endured for Jesus' sake !

Lord, endue us with Thy blessing,
That, though babes we be in grace,
Faith and love and zeal possessing
For Thy house and holy place,
We may stake our dearest treasures,
All the good things of this life,
Honour, wealth, and darling pleasures,
In the great and holy strife.

Give us Abram's faith unshaken,
That the promise must be true,
And what God hath undertaken,
He assuredly will do ;
Which not only could unmoved
Trust the covenant of grace,
But the thing which he most lovèd
At the Lord's disposal place.

Give us Joseph's chaste behaviour,
When the world, with crafty wiles,
Seeks to draw us from the Saviour
To herself, with frowns or smiles ;
Give us grace and strength for shunning
This ensnaring Potiphar,
Wisdom to elude her cunning,
Strength her open hate to bear.

Give us Moses' intercession,
When he pleaded, wept, and prayed,
That the people's sore transgression
Might not to their charge be laid.
Let us not with selfish coldness
See the sinner go astray,
But with Moses' holy boldness
Plead and wrestle, weep and pray.

Give us David's bold defiance
Of the Lord's and Israel's foes,
And, in trouble, the reliance
Which on God, his Rock, he shows ;
His right princely disposition,
Friendship, constancy, and truth,
But still more his deep contrition
For the errors of his youth.

Arm us with the stern decision
Of Elijah, in these days
When men, led by superstition,
To false gods new altars raise.
Let us shun the mere profession
Common in our days and land,
Witnessing a good confession,
Even if alone we stand.

Give us the apostles' daring,
And their bold undaunted mood,
Threats and fierce reproaches bearing,
To proclaim a Saviour's blood.
Let us to the truth bear witness,
Which alone can make us free,
Nor leave off, until its sweetness
All shall taste and know through Thee.

Give us Stephen's look collected,
And his calm and cheerful mind,
When we meet with unexpected
Trials of the sharpest kind.
In the midst of shouts and crying,
Let us with composure stand ;
Open heaven to us in dying,
Show us Christ at God's right hand.

Spirit, by whose operation
Faith and love and might are given,
Source of holy conversation,
Bearing seed and fruit for heaven.
Spirit, by whose inspiration
Prophets and apostles spake,
Visit us with Thy salvation,
Dwell with us for Jesus' sake.

SPITTA.

