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ANNALS
OF THE
AMERICAN PULPIT;
OR
COMMEMORATIVE NOTICES
OF
DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN CLERGYMEN
OF
VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS,
FROM THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTRY TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE.
WITH HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS.
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mankind he was, and how precious immortal souls were in his esteem. Every advantage accruing to them, or to the interests of religion in general, he reckoned as clear gain to himself; nor were they who divide the spoil ever more joyful than I have known him to be, on occasion of the hopeful conversion of sinners, whether by his own or the ministry of others; and often has his soul wept in secret places, for the pride and obstinacy of those who refused to be reclaimed.

"His great reading, with his various and long experience of the workings both of grace and corruption in the heart, made him a wise and skilful casuist, who could resolve perplexing exercises of mind with clearness, and comfort others with those consolations wherewith he himself, in like cases, had been comforted of God.

"He was a faithful attendant on the judicatures of the Church, as is natural for one so anxiously concerned for the interest of religion as he was; and, having accurately observed the effects of a lax and negligent government in some churches, he became a more strenuous assertor of due and strict discipline. But, above other things, the purity of the ministry was his care; and therefore, at the hazard of the displeasure of many, and in the face of reproach, he zealously urged every scriptural method, by which carnal and earthly-minded men might be kept from entering into it, and men of piety and zeal as well as learning introduced.

"As a preacher, few equalled him in his vigorous days. His reasoning powers were strong; his thoughts nervous and often sublime; his style flowery and diffusive; his manner of address warm and pathetic,—such as must convince his audience that he was in earnest; and his voice clear and commanding; and in a word, all things conspired to make him a judicious, zealous, popular and pungent preacher. With admirable dexterity, he detected the bold presumer, discovered the vanity of his confidence, and exposed the formal hypocrite to his own view."

JOHN TENNENT.*

1729—1732.

JOHN TENNENT, the third son of William Tennent, (Senior,) was born in the County of Antrim, in Ireland, November 12, 1706. He was but twelve years old, when his father came with his family to this country.

He had naturally strong feelings and a somewhat hasty temper, which often occasioned him sore trouble and bitter repentance. His mental exercises, previous to and at the time of his hopeful conversion to God, were most intense, and for a while he seems well nigh to have yielded to the conviction that his case was hopeless. His brother Gilbert, in describing his situation at that time, says,—“I have, through the riches of free grace, been favoured with the sight of many a convinced sinner, but never did I behold any other in such a rack of acute and continued anguish, under the dismal apprehensions of impending ruin and eternal misery, from the vengeance of a just and holy God.” So bitter was his agony, that, at one time, he lay speechless for some minutes, and was supposed to be actually in the article of death; but, a few hours after, his countenance kindled with a glow of rapture, and he requested his brother to sing the thirty-fourth Psalm, in which he also joined with uncommon clearness and energy. His brother William was at that time exceedingly ill, and supposed to be past recovery; but such was the fervour of his spirit, that he walked a distance of thirty rods to see that sick brother, that he might communicate to him, on this side the grave, the surprising deliverance of which he had been the subject. Subsequently to this, he was subject to intervals of great doubt in respect to the genuineness of his religious experience; though his mind soon settled into an habitually trusting and happy state.

* Memoir by Gilbert Tennent.—Hist. Log. Coll.—Webster's MSS.

He was educated, both classically and theologically, at the Log College. He was taken on trial by the Newcastle Presbytery, November 21, 1728, and was licensed to preach on the 18th of September, 1729. Shortly after his licensure, he visited the congregation of Freehold, Monmouth County, N. J.,—a congregation originally formed of some Scotch people, who, in escaping from a shipwrecked vessel, were cast upon the Jersey shore. These people being Presbyterians, and wishing to enjoy the ordinances of public worship, after the manner to which they had been accustomed in their own country, set themselves to building a church with reference to this object; and, for some time, the Rev. Joseph Morgan was employed to preach to them; but he having left them in the year 1729, they invited John Tennent to preach as a candidate. Being a young man of great modesty and humility, it was with no small reluctance that he yielded to their request; and he even regretted his engagement, after it was made, believing, as he said, that they were a people whom God had given up for the abuse of the Gospel. He was, however, agreeably disappointed in his visit; for his very first labours were instrumental of bringing many of his hearers to serious consideration and inquiry. This greatly encouraged him, insomuch that he told his brother William that, though they were a poor, broken people, yet if they called him, he would go to them, even though he should be under the necessity of begging his bread. They gave him a unanimous call on the 15th of April, 1730, and he was solemnly set apart as their pastor on the 19th of November following.

He had but a brief ministry; for his death occurred on the 23d of April, 1732; and, for six months previous, owing to his enfeebled health, (he died of consumption,) his brother William had supplied his pulpit.

Gilbert Tennent has given the following account of the closing part of his life:—

“As he drew nearer to his end, his love for his people and concern for their welfare increased. He would often express himself to one of his brothers in such language as the following:—‘I am grieved for my people; for I fear they will be left to wander as sheep without a shepherd; or get one that will pull down what I have poorly endeavored to build up.’ His brother, who watched with him in his sickness, has frequently overheard him in the deep silence of the night, wrestling with God by prayer, with sobs and tears, for his people. Yea, when so reduced by consumption that he could scarce walk alone, he bore the pains of this lingering disease with unbroken patience, and silent submission to his Father’s pleasure, until it pleased God to open a door of escape to his captive soul, through the ruins of his decayed frame.

“On Saturday evening,—the last evening of his life, he was seized with a violent pang of death, which was thought by his attendants to be the last; from which unexpectedly recovering, and observing a confusion among them, he addressed one whom he saw uncommonly affected, with a cheerful countenance, in the following words:—‘I would not have you 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.’ Afterwards, in the night, he often prayed,—‘Come Lord Jesus! Oh Jesus, why dost thou linger?’ Sometime before day, he repeated, with humble confidence, the last words of David,—‘Although my house be not so with God, yet hath he made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure; for this is all my salvation and all my desire.’ II. Sam. xxiii. 5.

“About the break of day, he called his brother William to prayer, and earnestly desired him to implore Heaven for his speedy removal; for, he said, he longed to be gone. About eight or nine o’clock of the next day, which was the Sabbath, his desire was granted, when it pleased his Master to translate him to that great assembly of the just, ‘the Church of the first-born,’ there to celebrate an eternal Sabbath in praises and songs of triumph.

“A few minutes before he expired, holding his brother William by the hand, he broke out into 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."

He was buried in the grave yard near the church in which he had preached, and a monument was erected to his memory, which still remains. It bears the following inscription,—more honourable to the character of the subject, than to the poetical talent of the writer,—by the Rev. Jonathan Dickinson of Elizabethtown.

"Who quiet grew old in learning, virtue, grace,
 "Quick finished, well yielded to death's embrace;
 "Whose mouldered dust this cabinet contains,
 "Whose soul triumphant with bright seraphs reigns;
 "Waiting the time till Heaven's bright concave flame,
 "And the last trump repairs his ruined frame."

The session of his church made the following entry concerning him in their Church Record:—

"A mournful providence and cause of great humiliation to this poor congregation, to be bereaved in the flower of youth, of the most laborious, successful, well qualified and pious pastor this age afforded; though but a youth of twenty-four years, five months, and eleven days."

Gilbert Tennent published a short memoir of his brother John, in connection with one of his sermons, the subject of which is Regeneration. This discourse evinces a clear and discriminating mind; and there is much reason to believe that, had his life been spared, he would have been in no wise less distinguished than either of his brothers.

His brother Gilbert, in the memoir already referred to, thus describes him as a preacher:—

"In his public discourses, not to mention the justness of his method, the beauty of his style, and the fluency of his expression, by which he chained his not unwilling hearers to his lips, he was very awakening and terrible to unbelievers, in denouncing and describing, with the most vehement pathos and awful solemnity, the terrors of an offended Deity, the threats of a broken law, and the miseries of a sinful state. And this subject he insisted much upon, because he, with many others, found it the most effectual and successful means to alarm secure sinners. He used a close, distinguishing and detecting method, in the application of his sermons, which, with his pungent mode of expression, was very piercing and solemn. But, as Dr. Watts observes of Mr. Gouge, 'he knew the pity of Immanuel's heart, as well as the terrors of Jehovah's hand.' He was as tender and compassionate in his addresses to gracious souls, as faithful to brandish and apply the law's lancet to the secure; and he was as willing to do the one as the other. But, indeed, he was very cautious of misapplying the different portions of the word to his hearers; or of setting before them only a common mess, and leaving it to them to divide among themselves, as their fancy and humour directed them; for he well knew that was the bane of preaching.

"He was a successful preacher. * * * It may truly be said of him that he gained more poor sinners to Christ in that little compass of time which he had to improve in the ministerial work, which was about three and a half years, than many in the space of twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty years. But though he was thus honoured with the smiles of heaven upon his labours, and though favoured with the kind regards of a loving and generous people, who, had it been possible, would have plucked out their own eyes and have given them to him,—so that no minister before was ever the object of a more respectful regard and sympathy; yet was he far from being exalted in his own mind, but, through grace, retained a just, grateful and humble sense of God's distinguishing goodness and his own unworthiness."