

The Evangelical Intelligencer



REV. GILBERT TENNENT.

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MODERN MISSIONARY SOCIETIES.—CONTINUED.

THE MASSACHUSETT'S MISSIONARY SOCIETY.

This Society was instituted in May, 1799. Its officers are a president, secretary, treasurer, and ten trustees, all of whom are chosen by ballot at the annual meeting of the society. The duties of the trustees consist in examining candidates for the respective missions, to employ and direct them, and, if necessary, to recall them; also to manage and dispose of the property of the society, and generally to transact all its concerns. Each member pays two dollars into the treasury at his admission into the society, and a like sum annually during his membership. It is from this source that the funds of the society are principally derived.

At the first meeting of the trustees two ordained ministers were appointed to undertake the labours of a mission, and to proceed without delay in the undertaking. Several obstructions, however, frustrated these appointments.

At the annual meeting in May, 1800, the numbers and funds of the society were found to be considerably augmented, and it was voted that four missionaries should be appointed. This number was accordingly engaged by the trustees. Two of them undertook, and were laboriously engaged, in a mis-

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THE REV. GILBERT TENNENT, the subject of this memoir, was born in the county of Armagh, in Ireland, on the 5th. day of February, A. D. 1703.

He was the son of the Rev. William Tennent, to whose labours and pious zeal the American Church is in no small degree indebted, and of whom therefore a short account shall here be given.

William Tennent had received episcopal ordination in Ireland and emigrated to this country, with his wife and four sons, Gilbert, William, John and Charles, about the year 1716. Not long after his arrival in America, he made a communication to the Synod of Philadelphia, in which he expressed a desire to relinquish all connection with the church to which he belonged, and to be received under the care, and as a member of that Synod. His proposal, after being held sometime under consideration, was eventually accepted; and his reasons for forsaking the Episcopal church are recorded at length in the minutes of the Synod in the year 1718. It is not known with what presbytery he was at first associated. He spent a short time in the state of New-York, and then in the year, 1721 or 1722, he removed to Bensalim, in Pennsylvania, and was now connected with the Presbytery of Philadelphia. At Bensalim he remained not more than four or five years; for in 1726, it appears that he settled at Neshaminy, about twenty miles north of the city of Philadelphia, where there was then a small presbyterian congregation, of which he became the pastor. Here he established a seminary of learning, which soon received, and was long known by, the name of the *Log College*. But however humble its appellation, this institution was the nursery in which many ministers of the gospel were trained up for eminent usefulness and distinguished success. Among these were the four sons of Mr. Tennent himself, who all received their educations under the sole instruction of their father.* He appears, indeed,

* Under Mr. Tennent were educated Messrs. Rowland, Campbell, Lawrence, Beatty, Robinson, and Samuel Blair, with

never to have had an assistant in his academy, except that his eldest son Gilbert acted in this capacity for a short time, while pursuing his theological studies. The calls for ministerial service were extremely urgent, and all the sons of Mr. Tennent were sent out to preach the gospel as soon as they were qualified for their work. Of these sons, John died in early life, and the others lived to advanced age, and were among the most respectable and useful ministers of their time. Their father, had the happiness to see them all employed in the service of the church for several years before his death.—He died and was buried at Neshaminy about the year 1743. He was eminent as a classic scholar. His attainments in science are not so well known, but there is reason to believe they were not so great as his skill in language. His general character appears to have been that of a man of great integrity, simplicity, industry and piety.

Gilbert Tennent, of whom a more particular account is now to be given, was about thirteen or fourteen years of age, when he came with his father to America. As has already been stated he received his whole education under his father. His intimate friend Dr. Finley, and one of the presidents of New-Jersey College, has left a pretty ample sketch of his life and character; from which, as possessing unquestionable authenticity, copious extracts will be given. These extracts will be distinguished by the marks of quotation that whatever rests on the Doctor's authority may be seen at once.

‘ He began to be seriously concerned for the salvation of his soul when he was about the age of fourteen, and continued so for several years, being often in great agony of spirit, until it pleased God to *give him the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ.*

‘ Having begun the study of divinity in those days, while under the conviction that his spiritual state was bad, he durst not persist in it with any view to the ministry; but betook himself to the study of Physic for the space of a year, before he was satisfied as to his interest in the divine favour.

‘ After a due course of Presbyterian Trials, in which he acquitted himself to the great satisfaction of all concerned, he

a number of others who were eminently useful and respectable as ministers of the gospel.

was licensed to preach the gospel in May, A. D. 1725; and was ordained in New-Brunswick, A. D. 1726, in Autumn.

‘His ministrations, for a considerable time at first, were very highly esteemed by all who had the privilege of enjoying them. He was not only the delight of the sober and pious, but loved and honored even by the profane; *to whom he was like a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument*: and his character was as unblemished as any man’s. But it is remarkable, that as soon as God began to bless his ministry to the awakening of secure sinners, and *turning them from darkness to light*; (the first eminent instance of which, was on Staten Island) he then presently lost the good opinion of carnal professors; his name was loaded with reproaches; he was charged with blasphemy as assuming the divine prerogative of being a searcher of hearts, and pretending to know, by seeing a man’s face, whether he would be saved or damned; the grossest immoralities were imputed to him, and, in a word, *all manner of evil was spoken of him falsely*, for Christ’s sake. But *none of these things* in the least moved him; *neither did he count his life itself dear to him, that he might finish his course with joy*. He delighted in the cross of Christ far more than in the applause of all mankind; and cheerfully bore the malignant treatment of sinners.

‘As to his person, he was taller than the common size, and every way proportionable. His aspect was grave and venerable; and though at first view he seemed distant and reserved, yet upon nearer acquaintance, he was ever found to be eminently affable, condescending, and communicative. And what greatly endeared his conversation was an openness, and undisguised honesty, at the greatest remove from artifice and dissimulation, which were the abhorrence of his soul while he lived. Besides he was tender, loving, and compassionate; kind and agreeable in every relation; an assured friend to such as he esteemed worthy of his regards; and a common patron to all who he apprehended were injured, or distressed.

‘He was of a truly publick spirit, and seemed to feel the various cases of mankind in general; but very sensibly partook in all the good or ill, that befell his country: and while he guarded against being unministerially pragmatical, yet so far as he judged it consistent with his character, he warmly interested himself in whatever seemed to contribute to the

safety and advantage of this province in particular. He needed no other motive to exert himself, than only to be persuaded, that the matter in question was an important public good; and in such cases he was much regarded, not only because of his known integrity, but his generous and catholic disposition. For, although he was a great lover of truth, and very zealous for it's propagation, yet he was so far above a narrow party spirit, that he loved and honoured all who seemed to have *the root of the matter* in them, and made it their business to promote the essentials of religion, though they were, in various points, opposed to his own sentiments.

‘He was, moreover, an example of great fortitude and unshaken resolution. Whatever appeared to him subservient to the advancement of the Redeemer’s Kingdom, the salvation of souls, or the common good of mankind, he pursued with spirit; and *what he did, he did it with his might*. If the end seemed to be attainable, great obstructions and difficulties in the way were so far from dispiriting, that they rather animated him in his efforts; nor would he give up the point while one glimpse of hope remained. Hence he accomplished many important matters, which one less determined and enterprising would presently have abandoned as desperate.* He would go through honour and dishonour, through evil report,

* ‘*From among many instances of his firmness and perseverance I shall select only two. First, the New Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, a large, elegant, and stately fabric, owes its erection to his influence and indefatigable industry, by which he procured the greatest part of the money in benefactions, though the house and burying ground cost some thousands. And notwithstanding he met with various rebuffs, and a rough reception from some; yet he desisted not until he gained his purpose. The other instance was his undertaking a mission to Great Britain and Ireland, in order to solicit benefactions for the College of New-Jersey, of which he was an original and zealous Trustee. In the execution of this, especially at the beginning, he encountered numberless discouragements; yet resolutely persisted in the face of them all, and was finally successful beyond all expectation. His list of benefactions demonstrated the amazing pains and fatigue which the procuring them had cost him; and this 199 in an advanced age.*’

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and good report: and though he had sensibility, with respect to his personal character, as well as other men, yet if preserving it seemed, at any time, to require the omission of duty, or sinful compliances, he readily determined to expose himself to all risks; and if adhering to the will of God should be accounted vile, he resolved he *would yet be more vile*.

‘ A great part of his life was a scene of unremitting labour. He studied hard, travelled much, and preached often, while his health and other circumstances permitted. He was *instant, in season, and out of season*; always about his master’s business. They who have journeyed, or been often with him in company, could not but observe his constant endeavours to do good by his conversation; to introduce some convincing or edifying topics; and his watching for proper occasions for speaking of God; and very faithful was he in warning sinners of their danger, and persuading them to seek salvation in earnest. Thus he plainly showed how much religion was his element, and promoting it the delightful business of his life; how benevolent towards mankind he was, and how precious immortal souls were in his esteem. Every advantage accruing to them, 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 expression 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. 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.*

‘Did he set himself to alarm the secure sinner? Hell, from beneath, was laid open before him, and destruction had no covering; while *the heavens above gathered blackness*, and a tempest of wrath seemed ready to be hurled on the guilty head. Many a sinner has trembled, *the visage of his countenance changed, and his knees have smitten one against another*, while this man of God *reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and the judgment to come*. To this purpose the reverend, learned, and pious Mr. Prince speaks of him, in his *Christian History*, page 385. ‘He seemed to have such a lively view of the divine majesty; the spirituality, purity, extensiveness, and strict-

* ‘*The Reverend Mr. Prince of Boston, a minister eminent both for deep learning and exemplary piety, in his Christian History, page 384, says of Mr. Tennent, ‘In private converse with him, I found him to be a man of considerable parts and learning; free, gentle, and condescending; and, from his own various experience, reading the most eminent writers on experimental divinity, as well as the Scriptures, and conversing with many who had been awakened by his ministry in New-Jersey, 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.’ And, in page 390, he says, ‘His (Mr. Tennent’s) 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 the suitable and principal means of their conviction.’*

ness of his law, with his glorious holiness, and displeasure at sin; his justice, truth, and power in punishing the damned; that the very terrors of God seemed to arise in his mind afresh, when he displayed and brandished them in the eyes of unrepentant sinners.'

'Did he comfort the mourners in Zion, and encourage the timorous and self-diffident? the atoning blood of a Redeemer, that only sovereign balsam, was applied to their recent or festering wounds. Heaven smiled, the clouds were dispelled, the sky became serene, *the Almighty God* was shown to be *their refuge, and underneath were the everlasting arms.* Then his exhilarating words dropped upon them like the dew.

'As his preaching was rightly calculated, so God blessed it abundantly, and made him the instrument of turning many to righteousness. The seals of his ministry in New-Brunswick, and parts adjacent, where he first exercised it, were very numerous. Many have I known, in those and in other parts where he only preached occasionally, whose piety was unquestioned, who owned him for their spiritual father. Many also, I have heard of in different places.*

* Nothing in Mr. Tennent's life was more remarkable and memorable than the preaching tour which he took through the New-England States, in the close of the year 1740, and beginning of 1741. To this journey, if the compiler of this memoir has been rightly informed, he was importunately urged by the celebrated Mr. Whitefield. However this might be, Mr. Tennent went forth 'in the spirit and power of Elias.' Nor were the habiliments in which he appeared very different from those which distinguished John the Baptist. A loose great-coat, girt about him with a leathern girdle, was the dress in which he commonly went into the pulpit; and which, in connection with his large stature, grave aspect, and undrest natural hair, gave him the appearance of much dignity and simplicity. He would never admit that there was any thing very peculiar in his preaching, during this journey. An eminently pious woman told the writer of this, that she once asked Mr. Tennent what there was, in the matter or manner of his addresses at this time, that produced such a wonderful and irresistible effect. His answer

‘In his journey through New-England A. D. 1740-1. multitudes were given him for his joy and crown. This was testified by many eminent ministers of Christ in Boston, and other parts, who far from envying, rejoiced in the grace given to him; and, unmoved by selfish principles, honoured him the more. Particularly the aforementioned excellent Mr. Prince, in his *Christian History*, page 390, after showing the nature of genuine convictions of sin by the holy spirit, says, ‘such was the convictions wrought in many hundreds in this town 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.’ Much more to the same purpose may be seen in the afore-said history. So highly did it please God to honour this his faithful servant, not only in blessing him, but making him a public blessing.

‘As he lived to the Lord, his death was his unspeakable gain; and his being conscious of it made him ardently wish for the pleasing hour, when he would *enter into the joy of his Lord*. So *the hireling earnestly desires the shade*, the retreat

was—‘Madam I had very little to do with it. I did not preach better than common—perhaps not so well: for I was often much fatigued with travelling, and had little time to collect or arrange my thoughts. But I went into the pulpit and spoke as well as I could, and God taught the people.’ This was, no doubt, a simple statement of the fact. Nothing but the power of God could have produced the astonishing effects which followed from his preaching. Formality in religion existed in a large part of the region through which he travelled, but the power of vital Godliness was in a great measure fled; and in some places profligate impiety prevailed and triumphed. This journey of Mr. Tennent was the beginning of a wonderful and general change for the better, the effects of which, it is believed, remain, in a degree, to this day. People of every description, the rude and the learned, the rich and the poor, were almost equally touched under the powerful discourses of this apostolic man.—In the funeral sermon of the Revd. Dr. Sproat the author tells us, that the Doctor gave the following account of his conversion.

from his wearisome labour. He had an habitual, unshaken assurance of his interest in redeeming love, for the space of more than forty years: but above eight days before his death, he got a more clear and feeling sense of it still. And though he lamented that he had done so little for God, and that his life had been comparatively so unprofitable, yet he triumphed in the grace of Jesus Christ, who had pardoned all his sins; and said his assurance of salvation was built upon the scriptures, and was more firm than the Sun and Moon. Surely brethren, Jesus Christ gave you of this Congregation, a vastly precious gift, the fruit of his merits and intercession, when he sent you a *Pastor after his own heart*, to whom he vouchsafed his gracious presence, that he might *feed you with knowledge and understanding*. His having been such, should excite you the more closely and seriously to examine how his ministry has been improved. Are there yet *some in the gall of bitterness*, in darkness and security, after all his clear, searching, alarming, and animating sermons? Hear the awful judgment of Christ himself upon such a case as

‘His own relation to me, of the circumstance here alluded to, was nearly thus. ‘Mr Gilbert Tennent, the founder of our church, in his memorable tour through the eastern states, preached, among other places, at the college, where I then was—a careless unthinking youth. I had never seen or known of him before. But the power of God seemed to go with him wherever he went, and the first sermon that I heard him deliver made impressions on my soul that have never been effaced.’ It is pleasing to remark and remember such a circumstance as this:—To observe how one faithful minister of the gospel is made instrumental in raising up another, and of providing himself with an immediate and pious successor, in a place far distant from the scene of his stated ministrations. As this event also happened a considerable space before the congregation of which they both had the charge, and which was so dear to both, was organized or collected, we are led to observe how the great head of the church takes care for its supply and edification beyond the utmost reach of human views; and that a laborious servant of Jesus Christ may perform some of his most essential services at a time, and in a manner, wholly unknown to himself.’

this, n Mat. xi. 23, and thou Capernaum, which art exalted to Heaven, shall be brought down to Hell: for the better adapted the ministry was, the guilt of neglecting it is the more aggravated.

‘ Here he now lies; his lips, sealed in death, will never warm, invite, or persuade you any more. But from hence he will arise at the last day, and be a swift witness against the careless and impenitent, who heard his exhortations, but regarded them not. Think sinner, how thou wilt bear to see him who so earnestly strove to bring thee to glory, when he shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and thou arisest to shame and everlasting contempt.

‘ But for you who have been either converted, comforted, or helped on, in your christian course, by his ministry; you will have a most joyful meeting with him in the presence of the Lord. O what triumph! What mutual congratulations will be there! All hail, happy saints! You shall shine in glory with him, and pass in company to that house of God not made with hands, eternal in the Heavens. May God grant you, brethren, another pastor of equal talents, fidelity, piety, and zeal; and forbid that any, but one whom he approves, should ever be intrusted with the care of your souls!

‘ On this occasion, I beg leave to say, that the very generous respect you have manifested to the memory of your once dear and venerable minister, sets you in a very amiable point of light; and is a rational encouragement to any other man of God, cheerfully to take the oversight of you in the Lord.’

Such is the account given by Dr. Finley of one whom he thoroughly knew and tenderly loved. The limits to which we are confined forbid the insertion of some of the private letters of Mr. Tennent, which would have exhibited a most favourable view of the habitual and fervent piety of his mind.

But as it is scarcely noticed by Dr. Finley, and yet forms an interesting part of the life and character of Mr. Tennent, we must not omit the active part which he took both in dividing and uniting the Presbyterian Church. It has already been hinted that Mr. Whitefield and Mr. Tennent were connected in their views and labours. The limits and the preaching of Whitefield were strictly calvinistic; but he indulged a severity in speaking of those who he supposed departed from the spirit of evangelical truth, as well as an impetuosity in his general conduct, in early life, which, with a candour that did him the

highest honour, he afterwards both condemned and reformed. This too was precisely the system and character of Mr. Tennent. The union of two such ardent spirits was calculated to urge them farther than either would otherwise have gone. The evil was greatly augmented by the opposition which they both met with. Whitefield was so coldly or so harshly treated by a great part of his own church, that he more readily associated with other denominations of christians and particularly with the presbyterians. They, at this time, and especially in this country, were strictly calvinistic in their creed; but there were many, both among the clergy and the laity, who, there was too much reason to believe, were little better than mere formalists in religion. All these, without exception, were violently opposed to Whitefield and to Tennent, who supported him; and they in their zeal probably represented a number of prudent and pious men, who only wished to moderate their vehemence, as possessing no better a character than those who at heart were enemies to the truth. The consequence of all this was, that in a short time the Synod of Philadelphia was split into two parts, each of which erected itself into a separate synod, and for several years treated each other with great severity and censoriousness. After some time, however, good men on both sides became sensible of the error they had committed; and especially Mr. Tennent, as he had been principally concerned in promoting the separation, now laboured with the greatest zeal and industry to heal the breach. His longest and most elaborate publication, entitled, '*The peace of Jerusalem,*' was upon this subject—Nor did he labour without success. The Synods were again happily united in the year 1758, and both parties, having profited by the controversy, the church at large was probably preserved in greater purity, peace, and order than if no alienation had ever taken place. The whole transaction served strongly to mark and illustrate the character of Mr. Tennent, in whom an ardent love to what he conceived to be the truth always triumphed over every other concern, over all considerations of a merely personal kind. He was the head of his party both in receding and advancing, and he was prepared to do either, without fear or hesitation, just as he thought the interests of truth and piety required.

His congregation, who were much devoted to him, placed a monumental stone over his grave in the broad aisle of his church, which his friend Dr. Finley inscribed with an epitaph in classic latin. He was thrice married, but had no issue, except by his last wife. By her he had a son and a daughter, who died in early life. One daughter still survives.