

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

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OF THE

FOUNDER, AND PRINCIPAL ALUMNI

OF THE

LOG COLLEGE.

TOGETHER WITH AN ACCOUNT OF THE REVIVALS
OF RELIGION, UNDER THEIR MINISTRY.

COLLECTED AND EDITED

BY

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CHAPTER II.

MEMOIR OF REV. WM. TENNENT, SEN.

Rev. Wm. Tennent, sen.—A minister of the Irish Episcopal church—
Emigrates with his family to America—Applies for admission into
the synod and is received—Settles permanently at Neshaminy—
Erects the Log College—Visits Whitefield, and is visited by him—
His character and death.

WE come now to give some account of the FOUNDER of the LOG COLLEGE. The Rev. William Tennent, sen., was a native of Ireland, where he was brought up and received a liberal education; but at what college, or university, is not known. It is probable, however, that he obtained his learning at Trinity College, Dublin, as he belonged originally to the Episcopal Church of Ireland, in which he took orders. After entering the holy ministry, he acted as chaplain to an Irish nobleman. But there is no evidence that he was ever settled over a parish in that country; the reason assigned, by the author of the Memoir of Wm. Tennent, jr., was that he could not conscientiously conform to the terms imposed on the clergy of that kingdom. He remained in Ireland until he was past middle age. The truth is, that very little is known of Mr. Tennent, until he arrived in

America. From Dr. Elias Boudinot, who was very intimate with the whole family, we learn, that Mr. Tennent, in Ireland, became acquainted with the Rev. Mr. Kennedy, a distinguished Presbyterian preacher, who having suffered persecution in his own country, exercised his ministry in Holland, with great success. The only other notice of this zealous and evangelical preacher which has been found is, in the "Vindication" of the Rev. Samuel Blair, in which, speaking of the objections made to the revival, he says, "Several have very sufficiently answered the objections against the work itself, as Mr. Edwards in New England, Mr. Dickinson in New Jersey, Mr. Finley in Pennsylvania, Mr. Robe and Mr. Webster in Scotland, and Mr. Kennedy in Holland." He then remarks, that Mr. Kennedy had published Mr. Edwards' "Narrative," with attestations from Scotland, translated by him into the Dutch language. It would be very desirable to obtain some further information of this Mr. Kennedy, who is spoken of as a man of like spirit with Edwards, and Dickinson, and Robe, and Webster, and Finley. But, probably, there remains no earthly record of his labours, his sufferings, and successes.*

Our attention has been directed to this man, not merely because Mr. Tennent became acquainted

* In Wodrow's Church History, we have frequent mention of a Mr. Kennedy, a celebrated evangelical minister in Ireland; and also in Reid's History of the Presbyterian Church, in Ireland.

with him, but especially, because he married his daughter, who was the mother of his four sons, and emigrated with him to America. And it is exceedingly probable, that from this man Mr. Tennent imbibed his love of the Presbyterian system. Mr. Tennent's oldest son, was no doubt called after his grandfather Kennedy, whose name was, Gilbert.

In the Memoir of William Tennent, jr. it is said, that his father arrived in America, in the year 1718; but in the sketch of the life of Gilbert Tennent, in the Assembly's Magazine, for May, 1805, "that he came over in 1716," which last, is believed to be the more accurate statement. Upon his arrival, he settled first in the state of New York, where he resided for some time at East Chester; and then at Bedford. Not long after his immigration to America, Mr. Tennent applied to the synod of Philadelphia, to be received, as a minister, into their connexion. The synod did not act hastily in this affair, but after full deliberation, agreed to receive Mr. Tennent as a member of their body. Before doing this, however, they required him to lay before them, in writing, the reasons which had induced him to separate himself from the Episcopal Church. And these reasons were ordered to be entered on record. The minute of the synod, as found in the printed book of records of the Presbyterian church, is as follows: "Mr. William Tennent's affair being transmitted by the committee [of overtures] to the Synod, was by them

fully considered, being well satisfied with his credentials, and the testimony of some brethren here present ; as also, they were satisfied with the material reasons which he offered concerning his dissenting from the established church of Ireland ; being put to a vote of the synod, it was carried in the affirmative to admit him as a member of the synod. Ordered, that his reasons be inserted on the synod book *ad futuram rei memoriam*. The synod also ordered, that the moderator should give him a serious exhortation to continue steadfast in his now holy profession ;—which was done.”

This transaction took place on the 17th day of September, 1718 : it is probable, however, that Mr. Tennent’s application was first made to the synod, the previous year ; although nothing appears on the records relative to this matter. But in the short account of the Rev. William Tennent, sen., in the Assembly’s Magazine, it is stated, that after some delay” he was received. And the minute recited above, seems to speak of it as a thing before under consideration ; for it would be very abrupt and unusual, to speak of a first application in the language here used—“ Mr. Tennent’s affair,” &c., without any notice of any application made by him. It is probable that the application to synod was made in the year 1717, which was the next year after his arrival.

Whether Mr. Tennent had the pastoral care of a

church in the state of New York, does not appear; but about the year 1721, he received an invitation to settle at Bensalem, in Bucks county, Pennsylvania, to which place he removed his family, and continued to supply that small Presbyterian congregation, until the year 1726, when he received a call to the Presbyterian church at Neshaminy, in the same county. In this place, he continued the remainder of his life. And here, within a few steps of his own dwelling, he erected the building which has already been described; which though humble and even despicable in its external appearance, was an institution of unspeakable importance to the Presbyterian church, in this country.

It may be proper to remark, in this place, that from all the accounts which we have, it appears, that at this time, the state of vital piety was very low in the Presbyterian church in America. And the same was true of the churches in New England. And this was remarkably the fact in regard to Great Britain. The ministers composing the Presbyterian church, in this country, were sound in the faith, and strongly attached to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, as were also their people; and there were no diversities or contentions among them respecting the doctrines of the gospel; but as to the vital power of godliness, there is reason to believe, that it was little known or spoken of. Revivals of religion were nowhere heard of, and

an orthodox creed, and a decent external conduct were the only points on which inquiry was made, when persons were admitted to the communion of the church. Indeed, it was very much a matter of course for all who had been baptised in infancy, to be received into full communion at the proper age, without exhibiting or possessing any satisfactory evidence of a change of heart, by the supernatural operations of the Holy Spirit. And the habit of the preachers was, to address their people as though they were all pious, and only needing instruction and confirmation. It was not a common thing to denounce the terrors of a violated law, and to insist on the absolute necessity of regeneration. Under such a state of things, it is easy to conceive, that in a short time vital piety may have almost deserted the church, and that formality and "dead orthodoxy" be all that was left of religion. And nothing is more certain, than that when people have sunk into this deplorable state, they will be disposed to manifest strong opposition to faithful, pointed preaching; and will be apt to view every appearance of revival with an unfavourable eye. Accordingly, when God raised up preachers, animated with a burning zeal, who laboured faithfully to convince their hearers of their ruined condition, and of the necessity of a thorough conversion from sin, the opposition to them, both in Great Britain and this country, was violent. The gospel, among people

in such a condition, is sure to produce strife and division, between those who fall under its influence, and those whose carnal minds urge them to oppose it. It was in such a state of the church that Mr. Tennent came to this country. What his own course of religious experience had been, we have no information; but he seems to have imbibed a warm, evangelical spirit, and to have been, in this country, distinguished for his zeal and efforts in promoting vital piety. When Mr. Whitefield first visited Philadelphia, Mr. Tennent lost no time in calling upon him. Though he lived nearly thirty miles from Philadelphia, yet no sooner did he hear of the arrival of this evangelical and successful preacher, than taking with him some of his pious friends, he repaired to the city, and from Mr. Whitefield's Journal, we learn, that the visit was very acceptable to him; for he says, "At my return home, [from visiting a family] was much comforted by the coming of one Mr. Tennent, an old gray-headed disciple and soldier of Jesus Christ. He keeps an academy about twenty miles from Philadelphia, and has been blessed with four gracious sons, three of which have been, and still continue to be, eminently useful in the church of Christ. He brought three pious souls along with him, and rejoiced me by letting me know how they had been spoken evil of for their Master's sake. He is a great friend of Mr. Erskine, of Scotland; and as far as I can learn, both he and his sons,

are secretly despised by the generality of the synod, as Mr. Erskine and his friends are hated by the judicatories of Edinburgh, and as the Methodist preachers (as they are called) are, by their brethren in England." This testimony of Mr. Whitefield goes to show, that the course pursued by old Mr. Tennent and his sons, was different from that of the other ministers of the synod, to whom he stood in the same relation, as Whitefield, Wesley, and their coadjutors, to the great body of the clergy in England. Mr. Whitefield, on his return from New York, went to Neshaminy, and spent some days with Mr. Tennent.

Here again we are glad to have the opportunity of using the very words of Mr. Whitefield.

"Nov. 22. [1739.] Set out for Neshaminy, (twenty miles distant from Trent Town,) where old Mr. Tennent lives, and keeps an academy, and where I was to preach, to day, according to appointment. About 12 [o'clock] we came thither, and found about three thousand people gathered together, in the meeting-house yard. Mr. William Tennent, [jr.] an eminent servant of JESUS CHRIST, because we staid beyond the time appointed, was preaching to them. When I came up, he soon stopt; sung a psalm, and then I began to speak, as the Lord gave me utterance. At first, the people seemed unaffected, but in the midst of my discourse, the power of the LORD JESUS came upon me, and I felt such a

struggling within myself for the people, as I scarce ever felt before. The hearers began to be melted down immediately, and to cry much; and we had good reason to hope the LORD intended good for many. After I had finished, Mr. Gilbert Tennent gave a word of exhortation, to confirm what had been delivered. At the end of his discourse, we sung a psalm, and dismissed the people with a blessing, *O that the people may say amen to it!* 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, as 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. It happened very providentially, that Mr. Tennent and his brethren are appointed to be a presbytery, by the synod, so that they intend bringing up gracious youths, and sending them out from time to time, into the LORD's vineyard. The place, wherein the young men study now is, in contempt, called, THE COLLEGE, &c. Friday, Nov. 23, parted with dear Mr. Tennent, and his other worthy fellow-labourers; but promised to remember each other publicly in our prayers."

From the preceding extract we learn, that Mr. Tennent was a man of congenial spirit with Mr. Whitefield, and that he was held in high esteem by this distinguished preacher and devoted servant of God. Of scarcely any other minister, of any denomination, does he make so honourable a mention, and to no other in this region, did he pay so respectful an attention. It is certain, from the foregoing account, that Mr. Tennent was distinguished among his brethren, as the open and zealous friend of vital piety, and of revivals of religion. The character of his public preaching is nowhere given, and we are left to infer it from his character; or rather from the character of his pupils, of whom an account will be given, hereafter. As a classical scholar, there can be no doubt of his eminence. The late Hon. Elias Boudinot, LL. D., who knew him well, says, "that he was well skilled in the Latin language, that he could speak and converse in it with as much facility, as in his vernacular tongue, and also, that he was a proficient in the other ancient languages. In confirmation of what he says about his skill in the Latin language, he relates, that at the next meeting of the Synod of Philadelphia after his reception, he delivered before that body, an elegant Latin oration. The writer of a sketch of the life of the Rev. Gilbert Tennent, inserted in the May number of the Assembly's Magazine, for the year 1805, says, respecting the Rev. William Tennent, sen.: "He was eminent

as a classical 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.”

Mr. Tennent was, by his position at Neshaminy, a member of the presbytery of Philadelphia; but when the division of the synod took place, he attached himself to the New Brunswick presbytery, to which his sons Gilbert and William belonged.

It appears from the published records of the synod of Philadelphia, that in the year 1737, a complaint was made to the synod, by a part of the congregation of Neshaminy, against the Rev. William Tennent, their pastor; and also an answer to the same, from another part of the said congregation. Both of these papers were read, article by article, and both parties heard at length what they had to say. Mr. Thomson was directed to prepare a minute which should express the mind of the synod, in relation to this matter; which being done, was adopted, viz. “That the reasons advanced by the disaffected party of that congregation, in justification of their non-compliance with the synod’s judgment in relation to them, last year, and their desire to be freed from Mr. Tennent as their pastor, are utterly insufficient, being founded (as appears to us), partly upon ignorance and mistake, and partly (as we fear)

upon prejudice. It is therefore ordered, that the moderator recommend it to said people to lay aside such groundless dissatisfactions and return to their duty, which they have too long strayed from ; otherwise the synod will be bound to treat them as disorderly." This minute was unanimously approved.

The matter referred to, as having been before the synod the preceding year, was, that though Mr. Tennent had so long acted as the pastor of the church at Neshaminy, he had never been formally installed. In regard to which, the synod had come to the following judgment: "That it appears evident to the synod, that Mr. Tennent having in all respects acted and been esteemed, and looked upon, not only by the synod, but by the congregation of Neshaminy, and particularly by the appellants themselves, as the minister and pastor of the people of Neshaminy, that he is still to be esteemed as the pastor of that people, notwithstanding the want of a formal instalment among them,"

For some time before his death his health was so feeble, that he was unable to perform the duties of the pastoral office, and his pulpit was supplied by the presbytery. In the year 1742, we find the following minute on the records of the presbytery. "Mr. William Tennent, sen., gave into presbytery a paper, setting forth his inability, by reason of advanced age, to discharge the work of the ministry unto the congregation of Neshaminy, over which, for

divers years past, he has been overseer—desiring the presbytery to grant to said congregation of Neshaminy, such supplies as they can.” We find his name enrolled among the members of the New Brunswick presbytery, in the following year, (1743) and in the same year, he is mentioned as present when the presbytery met to ordain Mr. Beatty as his successor. It is evident from this, that he had resigned his charge, for Mr. Beatty is not said to have been ordained as his colleague. This seems to have been the last meeting of presbytery which he ever attended. His connexion with the congregation was, no doubt, dissolved at the time when he presented the paper stating his inability to fulfil the duties of a pastor; for, in the same year, a call was presented to Mr. William Robinson, which he declined; and after this, in 1743. Mr. Beatty, having accepted the call of the people, was ordained their pastor, in the month of October.

It is stated, in the sketch of the life of Gilbert Tennent in the Assembly's Magazine, that the Rev. William Tennent, sen. died in the year 1743; but this is not correct; for we find a record in the minutes of the New Brunswick presbytery, for the year 1746, of the following import: “It is reported to the presbytery that Mr. William Tennent, sen. deceased, since our last.”*

* The exact date of his death was May 6, 1746, aged 73. This was communicated to the author, by the Rev. Dr. Miller, who transcribed from his tomb-stone.

He died at his own house, in Neshaminy, and came to the grave in a good old age, like a shock of corn fully ripe. He was buried in the Presbyterian burying ground, where his tomb may be yet seen.

Mr. Tennent, as far as we know, never published any thing. We have, therefore, no means of ascertaining his abilities as a writer; but the benefit he conferred on the church by his school can never be forgotten. The Presbyterian church is probably not more indebted for her prosperity, and for the evangelical spirit which has generally pervaded her body, to any individual, than to the elder Tennent. Some men accomplish much more by those whom they educate, than by their own personal labours. This should be an encouragement to such ministers as are obliged to resort to teaching for their own support. If they are so favoured as to be the means of bringing forward a few pious youth, and preparing them for the ministry, they may do more good than if their whole lives had been spent in doing nothing else but preaching the Gospel. And it is good policy for Presbyterian ministers to establish schools, in their charges, wherever they are needed. And this they may do, without subjecting themselves to the drudgery of teaching, all the time. Pious young men might be found, to whom such a situation would be a favour. And such institutions are often necessary to enable a minister to educate his own sons. When the means

of acquiring a liberal education are brought to the doors of the people, many will avail themselves of the privilege, who would never have thought of going abroad for the same purpose. The truth of this remark has been verified in almost every place where a good school has been established.

It is to be regretted that our materials for a memoir of the Founder of the LOG COLLEGE are so scanty ; but his usefulness must be estimated by the character of his pupils, of some of whom we shall have it in our power to give a more particular account; and to this part of our work we shall now address ourselves.