



Revivals And Church History :: Life of John Wesley Redfield

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Introduction

By Rev. B. T. Roberts

Dead trees can be made into blocks, or boards of the same length, and breadth, and thickness. But plant two seeds from the same tree, in the same soil, exposed to the same influences, and they will grow up resembling and yet unlike each other. You can easily tell them apart. Life abhors uniformity.

In a dead church ministers may be essentially alike. They may all go through with the same routine duties, in the same manner, and with the same results. But let spiritual life get into a church, and men are raised up to do ministerial work outside of the regular ministerial channels. The church itself may recognize but one class of ministers— it may insist upon their absolute equality, and require of all the same service; but when life divine comes thrilling through its members, some will break through all their regulations, and exercise the functions of an office which the church does not recognize. And thus in face of all human provisions to the contrary, the Scriptures are fulfilled, “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.”— I Cor. xii. 28. The phrase “hath set” denotes a permanent arrangement. In the original it is a word frequently translated “ordained.” It does not refer to a short-lived plan that was to last for but a single generation. So the error is apparent, of the assumption that there were but twelve apostles; and that the apostleship ceased with these. In fact the New Testament speaks expressly of other apostles besides the twelve. The Church of England has an order of ministers which it calls “priests,” for which order the gospel of Christ makes no provision. Not once in the New Testament are any of the ministers of the gospel called priests. They are called by a great variety of names, but this is not found among them. A priest is one that offers sacrifices; and in Christ, the High Priest of our profession, the priesthood as a ministerial order ceased. James is nowhere in the New Testament called a priest, nor is Peter, nor Paul, nor any other minister of the gospel. The term priest is applied in the New Testament to all of God’s people. “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.”— I Peter ii. 5. “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood.”— v. 9. So Christians are required as priests to present their bodies a living sacrifice. (Romans xii. 1.) To present to God broken hearts and contrite spirits,— for these are sacrifices which he will not despise (Psalm li. 17.) To abound in good works. “But to do good and to communicate forget not, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.” (See also Phil. iv. 18.) To offer praise to God. “By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name.”— Hebrews xiii. 15. But none of these things can we do by proxy. No priest can step between us and God to do them for us. If not done in our own proper person, and from our own free will, they are not done at all. Others may persuade us; but any other sacrifice than that which Christ has made for us— once for all, we ourselves must make. So those who would be real Christians must reject all assumptions of priestly authority.

Though the Church of England does not recognize the order of apostles as still in existence; yet from the ranks of its ministry, John Wesley stood forth before the world an apostle sent of God.

The Methodist Church of today acknowledges no apostles, yet William Taylor has shown himself to be as truly an apostle, as was St. Paul or John Wesley.

Among Independents, Dwight L. Moody has shown himself to be an evangelist, though the Independent churches know no ministers but pastors.

So John Wesley Redfield stood forth in the Methodist Episcopal Church, the most wonderful evangelist of his day, though that church makes no provision for evangelists among its ministers.

He went into the work, because of an overwhelming conviction from God that this was his calling. Like Paul, his "own hands ministered to his necessities"; and when he felt called of God to go to a place to hold meetings for the salvation of souls, he never stipulated that he should receive anything for his services, or even that his traveling expenses should be paid. But where he went without the promise of purse or scrip he never lacked anything. The Lord, in one way or another, provided for his wants.

I first became acquainted with Dr. Redfield when I was a student at Middletown, Connecticut. He held a protracted meeting in the Methodist Episcopal Church. There was a large society, but a low state of religious experience. He preached in the afternoon to the church, in the evening to sinners. A great excitement was soon stirred up. Such preaching and such praying had never before been heard in that city. Many of the most prominent members of the church went forward for prayers, and obtained a new experience of entire sanctification. A spirit of opposition was manifested, and it seemed doubtful for a time how the tide would turn; but Dr. Stephen Olin, president of the University, who was suffering from a general nervous prostration, got up from his bed and went out to hear him. He gave the work his strongest endorsement, saying in substance, "Brethren, this is the work of God and you must stand by it."

The college faculty, and the church generally, did stand by it, and a revival remarkable for its depth, and for the number of its converts, was the result. Some twenty-five young men who afterwards became preachers were converted, The whole city was in commotion and the country for miles around. The influence of that revival is still felt, not only in this country, but also in Europe, and Asia and Africa. No mortal can tell where a mighty wave of salvation once set in motion will end.

The following pages, written by one who was converted under Dr. Redfield's labors, will give the reader a correct idea of the wonderful work which God carried on through the instrumentality of his devoted servant.

We have heard many able, distinguished preachers, but we never heard another who would stir the human conscience to its depths like Dr. Redfield. His statements were clear, his descriptions vivid and eloquent; but his appeals to the conscience were overwhelming. He made those who would not obey God feel that they were utterly without excuse. Those who were justified or sanctified wholly under his labors were not easily drawn away unto the gospel of expediency. They were governed by principle rather than by policy. Time-serving preachers did not like his converts. They had no relish for religious theatricals or church festivals. They were hard to manage. Hence, Dr. Redfield generally encountered, wherever he labored, fierce opposition from ecclesiastics. A whole city would be moved by his preaching, while the presiding elder, and such as he could influence, were doing all they could to destroy his influence. But when once started the work went so deep and so strong, that no degree of violence permitted under our laws could kill it out. All through the land are still to be found those who were saved through his instrumentality, and they are generally characterized by their uncompromising opposition to sin in all its popular forms; by their firm belief in the power of the Holy Ghost, and by their clear, strong, definite testimony.

We trust that this book will be extensively read, and that it will carry a saving influence into thousands of families.

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CHAPTER 1

John Wesley Redfield was born in Clarendon, New Hampshire, January 23, 1810. On the night of his birth an esteemed Christian woman dreamed that she was visited by an angel who told her to go to the home of the Redfields and she would find there a new born son; and that she must announce to the mother that he must be named John Wesley. She was also informed that this would be assented to immediately by the mother, who would respond, "That is his name." This woman did as she was bidden, and all came to pass as she had dreamed. In mentioning this in his journal, Mr. Redfield says, "By that unlucky name was I baptized and have been known through life."

So strongly was he impressed with his call to the ministry that when only eight years of age, and just able to write legibly, he attempted in secret to compose a sermon. When it was completed he borrowed a volume of Wesley's sermons that he might compare his production with them. When he saw the great difference between them, in perplexity and sadness he exclaimed: "Oh, I can never preach! I don't know anything about religion. I am sure I never can preach."

So persistently did the impression of his call to preach follow him in his childhood that, in mature years, when attempting to run away from it, he was inclined to consider it an "antenatal mark."

When about twelve or thirteen years of age he was informed of his mother's impressions concerning him, and the dream already related. So great, however, was his aversion to the work of the ministry that he studiously contended against his conviction by concealing his feelings and avoiding all conversation concerning the matter.

When between thirteen and fourteen years of age he had such alarming views of his sinful state that he feared he was past all hope of mercy. This fear became so intense at one period that he was tempted to provoke God to destroy him, that, without the guilt of self-murder, he might learn the certainty of his fate, and, by the shortening of his sinful course, render his doom less aggravated. He had been seeking the favor of God in a secret way for some time, but in vain. He now gave up hope, not knowing any other way than that which he had followed. His distress of mind continued without abatement until he overheard some Christian friends speak of a contemplated camp meeting, which they trusted would result in the conversion of sinners. At this, hope revived, and to himself he said, "If I go, I too may be converted."

He obtained permission from his parents to go, and when the time arrived he was on the campground. His attention was directed to the altar before the stand, with the remark, "There many were converted last year." Almost instantly his heart rebelled against the thought of going to such a place. Even in his last days he would express his astonishment at that manifestation of rebellion against God.

In due time a goodly number of tents had been erected, and an old gentleman invited him to a prayer meeting about to commence in one of them. He went and was asked to kneel with the company. He did so, but soon felt greatly mortified at the thought of its being in sight of every passerby. The praying seemed childish, if not ludicrous. He made up his mind that it would be impossible to find salvation there.

In process of time the erection of tents was completed, and the congregation gathered before the stand for the first preaching service. The sainted Wilber Fisk was in charge of the meeting. The preachers were called into the stand, and the service commenced. At the close of the sermon seekers were invited into the altar; and the troubled boy was among them. The same good old man who invited him into the prayer meeting was now to instruct him in the way of salvation. There was quite a number of seekers and all were praying lustily. This completely absorbed his attention. As many others have done, he began to criticize, instead of praying. In relating this experience he says, "I thought, this cannot be the way to seek religion! Why can't they be more calm and rational about it? Certainly they will never be able to think their way through amid so much noise and confusion! At least I can do nothing without a quiet time to think." Speaking of this in his last days, he said, "How little did I understand that all reasoning or human planning was useless here!"

But he soon saw that this apparently irrational way and this vociferous manner were successful; for some of the seekers

were getting saved. As every other way with him had failed, he at last thought he would try this one. So he cried aloud, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." but he was shocked and mortified at the sound of his own voice. He did not find salvation in loud prayers, nor was he finally converted while praying. This effort to pray proved a good thing to him, however, in one respect; he was now fully and publicly committed to seek the Lord, his pride was humbled and he was fast getting down where Jesus could help him. He gave up all his experimenting and reasoning, and determined to take the narrow way at every cost.

He soon left the altar and went out into the woods alone. Under a large tree he knelt and vowed to take Jesus for my only Saviour. Speaking of this experience, he says. "Instantly, as I ventured on Jesus, my burden was gone. I was filled with inexpressible delight, and before I was aware of what I was doing, was on my feet and shouting, "Glory God!" Shocked at this strange and almost spontaneous utterance. I said to myself "What does this mean? I had heard the Methodists say, "Glory to God," but I don't know what it means!" My burden was all gone. Everything around seemed vocal with the praises of God, and as the Indian said in similar circumstances. "The trees looked glad, and the birds sang glad, the world looked glad, and I felt glad." All nature seemed in harmony, like a beautiful and well-tuned harp, and sang praises to the Most High. My heart could now beat time to the heavenly music I heard around, above, beneath, and within. But I had not the no distant idea that this was conversion. I thought some strange thing had happened to me. I had been sure that I would know when I was a Christian by a peculiar gloom that would settle down upon me. I had thought that a peculiar desolation of the heart and of the appearance of all things would attest that had obtained that for which I sought. I was desirous of attaining such an uncomfortable state, that I might be saved from the doubts and despair that hung over me. Bewildered at what had now taken place, and wishing to know what to do, I returned to the campground and asked an elderly lady who professed to be a Christian, "What do you think is the matter with me? My burden is all gone, and I can't feel bad if I try; and I love God and everybody. I don't know but I'll have to be damned after all; but I can't feel one fear."

"Why," said she, "you are converted, and this is religion."

"But I thought that religion would make me feel gloomy!"

"Oh no!" said she, "it makes people feel happy."

"Well," said I to myself, "if this is religion, the world will now soon be converted for I shall tell it so plain that everybody will certainly believe and seek, and find it."

"So exalted did salvation seem, and so valuable, and so ardently did I desire the salvation of those around me, that I felt I could have laid down my life to impart salvation to the world. I now found elements in my soul, which by their aspiring, and exalted perceptions, and appreciative powers, "showed me to be in family alliance with the great Father. I would often say, "I am a child, an heir of God!" How astounding was the thought! How overwhelming! When I passed along the streets, after my return home, every sound and sight seemed, written all over and vocal with, "Glory to God in the highest, forever."

He immediately went to work for others. Full of the hope of success, he approached a young man of his acquaintance and spoke to him on the subject of salvation. He says, "I expected to see his eye flash with hope, and to hear him exclaim, "Where! where! where may I find it?" and to find him ready to do anything to obtain it. But he turned upon me with a look of unutterable scorn, which seemed to say, "What! have you become a Methodist fool? Away with such stuff! I don't want to hear a word about the silly subject." I was taken all aback. I had expected the same kind of a reception that I would have had if I had brought to him the news of a gold mine, or that he had been selected for one of the highest officers of the state."

After the camp meeting young Redfield started for his home. He visited some relatives on the way, told them what the Lord had done for him, and urged them to seek the same salvation. But he seemed to them like one that mocked. He obtained permission to pray with one large family, and a short time after was made happy by the news that all had been converted. On the way home he told a young man who had also been converted at the same meeting, that for a long time he had desired, that he would make a start, that it might be easier for himself to do the same, and was surprised to find that this young man had experienced the same feeling with respect to him.

When he reached home he set up the family altar in his father's house. This, by some, was thought to be going too far; but the importance of the matter, and the danger in which he saw sinners, swallowed up all false propriety. In little while he had the privilege of seeing a large number of acquaintances starting out to go with him.

He now began to go from house to house and from town to town, to carry the glad news of a Saviour. When engaged in this work he learned what he had not thought of before that the human heart hates God and dislikes those who love God ; but he resolved to be the friend of God if it made every one his enemy. Referring to those labors, he says,

I came to a house in my journey, and went in and asked of each inmate their religious state. The woman ordered me to leave. As I left, I said, "I am clear from all further obligation, and now I shake off the dust of my feet against you. I will meet you once more, in the judgment of the great day." I left, as I felt forbidden of God to stay. But the woman came to the door, and, until I was out of hearing, called for me to come back. But I followed my own impression and went on."

In the house of a Universalist he pressed the matter of personal and immediate salvation until the man's patience gave out and he threatened him with violence. Being only about fifteen years of age, his youthful appearance made him friends who protected him. He here learned a lesson the people were forsaking their sins and seeking the Lord, and the Universalists were made angry by it, notwithstanding their boasted religion of love.