BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN ANGELL JAMES

by C.A. Haig

Haig's biographical account of John Angell James, the prominent nineteenth-century Congregationalist minister and influential author, documenting his pastoral ministry, literary contributions, and significant impact on English Christianity.

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Chapter 1

Biography of John Angell James

John Angell James When John Angell James was born in 1785 in the small Dorset town of Blandford, Dissenters were still no more than second-class citizens in England. University education and public office were alike closed to them. The outbreak of the French Revolution added fear to prejudice. They were hated as enemies of the English Constitution, for some of the more radical among them had declared their admiration of Revolution principles. The rapid increase of their numbers during this period further alarmed the clergy and sharpened the antagonism. (In 1772 there had been 380 Congregational churches while in 1822 there were nearly 800). Their close alliance with the Wigs made them a political force which was to grow formidable during the next 50 years. The Evangelical Revival had brought new life to the Dissenters as well as to the established Church. It shook them out of their pietism, and brought through the doors both, converts and inquirers. It softened their high Calvinism and gave them a new missionary spirit. In 1795 Congregationalists joined with other Evangelicals to form the London Missionary Society, and they gave great support to the British and Foreign Bible Society founded in 1805. James himself was to play a notable part in the rapid growth of the Congregational Churches over the next fifty years and in the advocacy of the missionary enterprise. For the work which he would have to do nature had equipped him well. He had a warm heart, a beautiful voice and the gift of eloquence. Education however had little chance to refine and improve his natural gifts. His father took him away from school when he was but 13 years of age and bound him apprentice to a draper in Poole. It was while working in the Sunday school there that he 'first felt the desire to engage in the work of Christian Ministry.' His father opposed his intentions, for he had but recently paid out a handsome sum as a premium on his apprenticeship. However, a friend of the family won over his father, and he consented at length to the breaking of its articles. Accordingly, in the year 1802 James left Poole and departed to Gosport to study under Dr Bogue.

David Bogue had in 1789 begun an academy for the training of young men for the Congregational Ministry. When the Missionary Society was formed the directors appointed him to be tutor to the intending missionaries. This early contact with men of world vision was to influence the whole of James's ministry. Among his fellow students was Robert Morrison, the pioneer of Protestant missions to China. No doubt it was to him that James gained that interest in China which was to burn up into flame at a later stage in his life. Not that everything was well done at Gosport! James later wrote 'When I went to Gosport, I passed through no examination either as to piety, talents or acquirements from anyone.' Although the Academy curriculum included such subjects as Latin, Greek and Hebrew geography, astronomy, etc, by his own account James's course largely consisted of dogmatic theology. James was only there for two and a half years and in later life he was very conscious of this disadvantage in having had so short period of preparation for the ministry. As is common in theological college's students was sent out to preach in neighboring towns and villages each Sunday. An incident from this period illustrates the outlook of many Christian people at this time. At Romsey, one of the Deacon's gave an entertainment for his son's

21st birthday, and a dance was got up in which James joined. The result was that some of the congregation would not come again to hear him preach. He confesses that the act was a ‘thoughtless folly,’ but pleads that he was only between 18 and 19 at the time. In 1804 the young student was invited to preach at Carr’s Lane Church, Birmingham, for three or four Sunday’s during this summer vacation. The church was not flourishing in those days. A year or two before, dissension had split the congregation, and half the worshipers had gone off with the minister to form a new church. James tells how in a place which would seat 800 persons, only 150 were present. But it was not so much the fewness of their numbers but the greatness of the age that appalled the youthful preacher. ’It looked like an assembly of the ancients.’ The chapel itself was entered under a gateway to a row of small tenements, and was surrounded by the noise, smoke, dirt and dispute of about 40 families of paupers who lived on the doorstep. On September 16th, 1804, the Church expressed a unanimous wish that James should come and exercises ministry among them. He accepted their invitation, subject to the approval of this tutor as to the time when he might properly leave the college and take up his duties. He finally settled among them in September 1805. He was only 20 years of age. His first seven years in Birmingham gave him little encouragement. At the end of 1805 the members of the church numbered sixty two: at the end of 1806, sixty nine; at the end of 1807, seventy seven; they reached one hundred in 1808 but fell back to ninety eight in 1809. After that, for several years the church record grows more and more imperfect, and then ceases altogether. It seems that he suffered much bad health at that time, although he had married in 1806 a wife whom he dearly loved, the daughter of a doctor. He confessed later to himself that some of his failure may have been due to his undue confidence in his own powers, and to his is inadequate education and sermon preparation. To these things must be added the fact that he preached in a ’mean the chapel set in a dirty street.’ The turn of the tide came at the end of 1812. His sermons at the annual meeting of the London Missionary Society and his speech at the annual meeting of the Birmingham Auxiliary of the British and Foreign Bible Society in that year made a deep impression. To read that speech now is to be made to realize how much taste has changed. Its florid style would irritate rather than enthrall a 21st-century audience, but evidently captivated the men and women of 1812.

1813 -- 34 The next few years in the life of James were marked by increasing popularity and deep personal sorrow. His eloquence excited great admiration and drew large crowds to Carr’s Lane Church. Perhaps the discipline of weakness and loss saved him from being spoiled by success. In 1817 he fell ill and for nine months was unable to preach. He seems to have been suffering from complete nervous exhaustion. His wife nursed him through his illness. Not long after his recovery she herself fell sick and died. The loss of this affectionate and gracious lady affected him deeply, but did not cause him to draw back from public work. In 1819, less than four months after her death, he preached the annual sermon on behalf of the London Missionary Society in the Surrey Chapel, London. The invitation to preach this sermon was especially significant in that for several years James had been highly critical of the policy of the Society. In 1816 the directors had decided that John Smith, then studying at Gosport, should go out at once to Demerara. He had only just commenced his studies, and both Dr Bogue and James considered him altogether unprepared to go. There was, however a powerful group among the directors who considered theological training as of little importance, and they insisted upon having their own way. James accused the directors of looking upon the missionaries and missionary students as ’menial servants whom they are to govern at their sovereign pleasure... they were sending out men to the heathen that who although

truly pious, had not even such a knowledge of the Gospel of Christ as to be able to teach it with propriety.' He also opposed what he called 'an unreasonable fondness for the South Sea Islands and South Africa.' He wanted them to send more men to the East. He had not forgotten his fellow student Morrison laboring amidst loneliness and difficulties upon his translation of the Bible into Chinese. His missionary sermon on May the 19th was a prodigious piece of work. He neither read not spoke from notes, but preached from memory the sermon which he had already written down. His brother sat in the pulpit with the manuscript in his hand, in case he should forget anything. Although the sermon lasted for two hours he did not need to be prompted once. At the end of the first hour he paused to rest while the congregation sang a hymn. When the congregation sat down he rose refreshed and went on for another hour. First he spoke of the great object of missionary zeal-to bring men to Christ, next, of the grand instrument of missionary exertions- the Cross. Thirdly he spoke of the final consummation of missionary success. The appeal at the end produced the largest collection ever made after the Surrey Chapel sermon. In the meantime a new chapel had been built in Carr's Lane, and it was opened in August 1820. Although it seated 1800 persons it was soon filled. One of the earliest meetings after the opening was the annual meeting of the Birmingham Auxiliary of the London Missionary Society. So crowded was the chapel to see the trophies of Christ's victories over paganism, abandoned idols from the South Seas, that the gallery of the new building began to crack. Happily it did not fall, or thousands of people would have been killed and injured. In his autobiography James sums up the story of the next few years as follows; 'After the opening of the new place, things went on for many years in an even kind of prosperity. The chapel was filled, the church increased, and the sun of prosperity shone upon us with cloudless splendor.'

John Angell James as a Preacher This seems an appropriate point at which to say something about James as a preacher, in an attempt to understand that reason why crowds flocked to hear him. In the first place he had a passion for souls. In this sermon entitled 'The Conversion of Souls the Great End of the Christian Ministry' he wrote; 'if there be any correctness in our views of the nature and necessity of conversion, in what an appalling condition are the multitudes at our very doors! The great stream of the population is dashing in one mighty cataract over the precipice of impenitence and unbelief--into the dreadful gulf below!' In a letter to R W Dale written in 1853 he wrote 'They watch for souls as they that must give account' has been my motto; and constant aim at conversion in the good old Puritan meaning of the turn, has been my aim.' He had no use for 'a cold intellectuality' in preaching, 'heart is moved by heart'. To read this sermon is now is to feel the outpouring of emotion which sometimes descends into rhetoric and sentiment, but never ceases to glow and burn. He made great use of embroidered an even extravagant images which today would not be acceptable, but in his day evidently enthralled his great congregations. He had a fine voice and a commanding presence, and an eloquence which carried all before it. Above all he believed in preaching as a God-given instrument and the highest employment of a man's powers of mind, imagination and voice. He prepared every sermon most carefully and did his utmost to make every word compelling. His fluency might have been his undoing, had he not submitted himself to painstaking Bible study and thought.

James did not shrink from seeking to awaken alarm by depicting the Divine wrath in vivid terms, but he used the appeal to fear in order to turn the sinner to the mercy of God in Christ. His love for his congregation underlined the sincerity of every word he spoke. He had neither the education nor

the intellect of his successor R W Dale, but his piety and eloquence were sufficient passport to popularity among the manufacturers in the growing town of Birmingham. Today this sermon gives the impression of verbosity and rhetoric, but his earnestness still comes through.

Three years after the death of his first wife he married a widow of considerable property. She proved a most suitable helper and became loved by all in the church for further liberality and goodness.

Public Influence In the 20 years in 1813 to 1833 the congregation at Carr's Lane increased from four or five hundred to nearly two thousand, and the membership numbers rose from about one hundred and fifty to five hundred. There was enough work here to occupy the energies of any man, but it did not deter James from playing an influential part on a wider stage. His concern for the life and witness of the Congregational churches led him to see the necessity for the formation of the Congregational Union. His love of Protestantism and his longing for Christian unity made him a virtual founder of the Evangelical Alliance.

It was necessary however that many battles needed to be won before these goals could be achieved. On the one hand at the opponents of the proposed Union claimed that it would constitute a threat to the equality of pastors and the independence of churches. On the other hand those who favored the Union argued that the isolation of the Independent churches weaken their evangelistic efforts, and better Union would bring together churches and ministers in mutual sympathy and help and enable them to have friendly fellowship with other bodies of Christians. James was very active on behalf of the proposed Union. In May 1831 at a meeting of ministers and delegates held in the Congregational Library, London, it was he who moved 'that it is highly desirable and important to establish a Union of Congregational Churches throughout England and Wales founded on the broadest recognition of their own distinctive principles, knowing that the scriptural rights of every separate church to maintain in perfect independence in the government and administration of its own particular affairs.'

During the next 12 months a plan for the Union was circulated, and criticism and comments were invited. In May, 1832 it appeared that 26 out of 34 English county associations were in favor, James moved the adoption of the report of the provisional committee. It was then resolved that a 'General Union of Congregational Churches and ministers throughout England and Wales be formed.' Later in the morning he introduced a paper containing a 'Declaration of principles of Faith and Order of the Congregational body,' which had been prepared by Dr Redford of Worcester. By his eloquence, influence and sagacity, James helped to overcome the hesitation of those who feared that a Congregational union would take away the Gospel freedom of the Congregational Church.

James, though a convinced Congregationalist was never of a sectarian frame of mind. In a day when the struggles between Dissenters and Anglicans over church rates were becoming increasingly bitter, he aimed at restraint and moderation. Indeed he incurred the hostility of the more violent 'Anti-State Church' Nonconformists by his refusal to go all the way with them. Nevertheless he viewed with sorrow and alarm the increasing influence of the ritualists in the Church of England. He longed for union of all those holding Protestant and Evangelical principles to 'raise up the defense against Infidelity, Popery, Puseyism and Plymouth Brethrenism.' at the Annual Assembly of the Congregational Union in May 1842 he spoke for the first time in public

about his longing for Union of all Protestants. Encouraged by the response to these words he wrote an open letter to the secretaries of the Congregational Union in July 1842. It is a remarkable letter. He had seen a vision of a United Church based upon acceptance of basic Protestant principles and involving acknowledgment as brethren of all who believed in them. He envisaged the mutual recognition of the ministries of those ‘who are partakers of apostolic spirit and are preachers of apostolic doctrine.’ He aimed at contrasting this charity of spirit with the narrowness and intolerance of the ritualistic party. In prophetic vision he looked across the seas with the hope that ‘Christians of other countries, to earth’s remotest bounds, would solicit to be admitted into this holy league.’ The Autumn Assembly of the Congregational Union in that same year authorized its officers to take the matter further. James spoke in favor of this move. Early in 1843 the secretaries of the Congregational Union called together representatives of various denominations and a united committee was formed. It in its turn arranged a public meeting at Exeter Hall. The crowd is said to have been so great, that people’s clothes were in many cases torn from their backs! James was again one of the principal speakers. The movement rolled forward amidst great enthusiasm, until in August 1846 representatives from all parts of the British Isles and from Germany, France, Switzerland, and the United States and Canada resolved to form ‘confederation on the basis of great Evangelical principles held in common by them… under the name of ‘The Evangelical Alliance.’

Looking back some years later upon these exciting days, James expressed his disappointment in the outcome of it all. "Its first days were its best. It seems to have come too soon. The Christian church was not prepared for it. Sectarianism on the one side and religious bigotry on the other, were, and still are, too rife for its extensive success." Perhaps, in his enthusiasm he had expected too much. Nevertheless, his vision and his labors with speech and pen showed him as one who loved the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Anxious Inquirer

James was a prolific writer as well as eloquent preacher. His busy pen poured out a constant stream of tracks, pamphlets and sermons. The one which achieved the widest circulation was ’The Anxious Enquirer after Salvation Directed and Encouraged’, published in 1834. It is not a brief tract, but a book of 186 pages in length. It had an immediate success. In the year after publication it had already reached its sixth edition, and by 1839, 200,000 copies had been published. The Religious Tract Society had translated into Gaelic, Welsh, German, French, Swedish and Malagasy. It was the evident means by which many people were led to trust in Christ alone for salvation. James relates how a Dutch minister on one occasion has to meet him, and told him that he had translated The Anxious Enquirer into Dutch. It had brought great benefit to his fellow countryman, he said, and he knew of twelve students for the ministry who had been converted by reading it.

It is a direct and vigorous work. The author warns, pleads and challenges. The style is conversational, and the language is simple. The author clarifies his points with homely illustrations. He leaves the ‘Anxious Enquirer’ in no doubt as to the seriousness of his condition, but warns him not to seek for relief in any other way except by faith in Christ. He sets out the way of salvation which God has appointed, and affectionately urges the ‘Enquirer’ to trust in him. He seeks to remove perplexities, overcome difficulties and afford encouragement. How well he met the need of his day is proved by the wide sale and great influence of the book. When one considers the sketchy sort of education which James had received, his achievements in writing and preaching

appear the more remarkable. He was determined that so far as was in his power he would try to secure better training than he had received himself for young men preparing for the ministry. At the founding of Spring Hill College, Birmingham, in 1838 he was elected Chairman of its Board of Education, and he held the office until his death. He was extremely anxious to lift the level of scholarship among Nonconformists. He insisted upon the value of classical and philosophical studies in addition to Biblical and theological work, and approved of the affiliation of the Independent colleges to the University of London so that the students might have the stimulus of working for a degree. At the same time he was aware that there were some men endowed with many qualities which fit them to be good ministers, who would be injured rather than improved by the attempt to make them scholars. For them he proposed shorter, less academic courses. Many stories have been told of his personal kindness to individual students. Almost every Saturday he had two of three of them to dinner with him, and its cheerful seriousness and personal interest were long remembered by those who had been present. He was an untiring beggar on behalf of College Funds. Not content with pleading in public for a large collection it was his custom, whenever it was practicable, to arrange a meeting of some of the wealthier members of the congregation, so that he might press upon them individually claims of the College. Occasionally he was unsuccessful, but on at least one occasion he succeeded far beyond his expectations, when a wealthy and eccentric gentleman, having listened to him without much interest, finally said ‘Well, I will give you a cheque for £5000.’

During these middle years of his ministry when his strength was stretched to the utmost by his heavy labors as a preacher, pastor, writer and church leader--James was carrying heavy burden at home. His daughter had been an invalid since childhood, he himself was subject to fits of acute mental depression and after a long illness his second wife died in 1841. In public he showed no sign of the weakness which troubled him for years. He appeared to be strong and confident, and yet for many years he scarcely ever slept on Saturday night so great was the apprehension with which he looked forward to the services of the Sunday. As the day for an important public engagement drew near he felt less and less able to cope with it, and sometimes caused great disappointment by withdrawing a few days before. For several years he seldom preached away from Birmingham for this reason. It was only about 1842 that he began to resume his general public work, and even as late as 1849 he was greatly agitated when he had an important engagement. It is evident that the constant pressure of demanding work of many kinds, took a heavy toll on his nervous strength. The Last Years The last decade of his ministry found James still capable of responding adventurously to new opportunities. In 1853 news reached England that the officers of one of Her Majesty’s ships reported that the Yang- tse Kiang was littered with the wrecks of idols floating out to sea. In one of the remotest provinces there had appeared a new party in revolt against the government and professing a new religious creed, a kind of corrupt form of Christianity. It was they who had destroyed the idols and roused the populace. The news caused great excitement in England. It seemed to many that all China was about to adopt Christianity and a friend wrote to James boldly proposing that an appeal be made for funds to send one million New Testaments to China. James took up the matter with enthusiasm. The British and Foreign Bible Society agreed to act as the agents of the Churches. By writing to the chief religious newspapers and by advocacy in the pulpit, James put all his influence behind the movement. Support came from all quarters; churches, Sunday Schools and individuals contributed. By the end of 1854 the Bible Society reported that enough money to print not one million but two million

Testaments had been received! There is little doubt that the lead which Angel James took in the matter was largely responsible for this happy result. It was the kind of project which appealed to his generous imagination. In 1858 when the treaty at Tientsin secured an opening into China for Christian missionaries, James was again quick to seize the opportunity. He wrote a pamphlet calling the Protestant Churches 'to their duty and their privilege in reference to… China. Having sent forth a call for a million Testaments…. I seem almost authorised to raise another call for one hundred missionaries.'

It was during these years that James had begun to look for a co-pastor who might in time become his successor. In the year 1847 R W. Dale had begun his studies at Spring Hill College. James noted him as one with great gifts, for in 1849 he asked him to preach for him when he was unwell. In 1851 the older man begged him not to listen to any 'hint or solicitation about settling with a congregation without consulting me.' When Dale's college course ended in 1853, the Church was asked to sanction his appointment as assistant minister. At the close of the year's assistantship, the Church unanimously decided to call Dale to the co-pastorate. Thus began Dale's subsequent lifelong ministry at Carr's Lane Chapel. In 1855 Church celebrated the Jubilee of James's ministry at Carr's Lane. What a fifty years they had been in the history of England. Since commencing his ministry, he had seen the defeat of Napoleon, the granting of Roman Catholic emancipation, the passing of the Reform Bill, the repeal of the Corn Laws, and the outbreak of the Crimean War. Through all these changes he had labored unceasingly to preach the Gospel, to convert souls and to build up the Church. The membership of the Church at Carr's Lane had risen from fifty in 1805, to about one thousand in 1855. Some eight other chapels had been built in the town and suburbs. Nearly two thousand children were in attendance at the Sunday and day schools, and night schools for young men and women met regularly. Of James himself, his successor wrote 'The stainless reputation and incessant labors of fifty years, won for him a respect, and gave him a moral and spiritual influence in Birmingham, which the brightest genius might have coveted in vain.'

It was characteristic of the generous spirit of the man that he determined to make the £500 presented to him at his Jubilee meeting the nucleus of a Pastors' Retiring Fund for Congregational ministers. From his own pocket he made it up to £1000, and by 1860 when the trust was executed the fund amounted to nearly £15,000.

He had built up a strong Church, and not just a loosely held congregation. He had to admit with sorrow that he had found it impossible to devote much time to individuals, but there were not many people in the Church whom he did not know. For the regular oversight of the Church he made a double provision. The town was divided into six districts, and two deacons had the care of each. It was their duty to ascertain the reason for the absence of any member from the monthly communion, to administer relief to the poor, to visit the sick, to notify the minister of any cases of serious illness and know the general character of all the members assigned to their care. Another set of districts was placed under the charge of 'superintendents,' private members of the Church selected by the minister and deacons.

There was very little discussion at the Church meetings since he made it his business to discuss matters with the deacons beforehand and to present them in such a way that they secured agreement. The discipline committee of ten was appointed each year, and the Church always

acted upon its recommendations. Drunkenness and dishonest practices in business were matters most frequently requiring the exercise of discipline. His later years were clouded by growing weakness and the loss of some who had been very dear to him. His brother who had been a great help to him in the Church died in 1852. Carr's Lane owed much of its efficiency to his sagacity, ability and public spirit. Between 1853 and the year of his death he had several grave illnesses. During the summer of 1859 he complained of great feebleness and languor. He died quietly on October 1st, 1859. According to his wish he was buried in the vault beneath the front of the pulpit. The ministers of the town of all Protestant denominations, the municipal authorities, representatives of the religious institutions which he had served and hundreds of members of his Church followed the coffin. The long route was lined with mourning people, the shops were shut and not a vehicle was to be seen. So Birmingham paid its tribute to the man whose long life had been devoted to serving God and the people.

He had a profound sense of the greatness of the preacher's vocation. In a day when for much of the middle classes the sermon was the only permissible form of drama, he addressed himself to the imaginations and passions of his vast congregation as well as to their judgments. He exercised great influence but he was too humble and devout a Christian to have his head turned by it. He looked beyond Birmingham to the ends of the earth, and longed for the day when men everywhere would be turned to Christ and be saved. The great Church at Carr's Lane which he had built up over a lifetime, and had now handed to a successor; the Congregational Union of England and Wales, which he had done so much to found; and the Evangelical Alliance which his vision had inspired--these are the lasting memorials to a great and good man.

Adapted from C A Haig

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