

## 4. r.b. Jones

by Robert Ellis

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*R.B. Jones' spiritual transformation led to a significant change in his preaching style and message, and had a profound impact on his ministry and the nation.*

**Scripture:** Malachi 2:6, Matthew 28:19, John 3:3, Acts 20:24, 1 Corinthians 2:4, Colossians 3:16, 2 Timothy 2:15, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Peter 4:10

**Topics:** "Holy Spirit", "Biblical Ministry"

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### Description

Robert Ellis delves into the life and transformation of R.B. Jones, a prominent Welsh preacher who initially focused on eloquence and logic in his Baptist ministry but later experienced a radical change, surrendering to the Holy Spirit and emphasizing the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Despite facing criticism and persecution for his evolving preaching style, R.B. Jones embraced a deeper understanding of the Bible, leading to a profound impact on his students and the religious community. His commitment to the Scriptures and the Kingdom of Christ culminated in the establishment of the South Wales Bible Training Institute, where he nurtured a generation of students in the divine truths of the Word.

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### Transcript

WHAT a galaxy of Welsh pulpit celebrities gather round the common surname 'Jones!' Some are affectionately remembered by their initials, for instance, E. T., S. T. and D. O. The surname has also immortalised such place-names throughout Wales as Talysarn, Blaenannerch, and, Llanedy. R. B. and Porth will be inseparable in the annals of spiritual religion. He was a child of Dowlais in more than a geographical sense. His contemporaries and closest friends testify that heat and steel were inherent in his personality. He was born in 1870, and brought up in the Baptist faith. It was a faith to him, not a mere label. It was not a case of 'baptism first and belief after,' but vice-versa, which is the scriptural and divine order.

After the usual ministerial training at the Baptist College, Pontypool, he was ordained at the early age of twenty-three, and called to his first pastorate at Berthlwyd. After a short pastorate there, he went to Caersalem, Llanelly, where Baptist and Congregational churches vied with each other for supremacy. During that period, the Nonconformist pulpits were veritable thrones of strength; Lleurwg, Taborfryn, Gwylfa, Doctor Rowlands and Thomas James wielded the sceptres of eloquence and scholarship. The young man in his early twenties at Caersalem was a rising star in his denomination. It was the age of 'hwyl'

and poetic preaching, but R. B. Jones added logic and reasoning to his natural talents which consisted of a flow of language and a pleasant voice. He was not destined to stay long at Caersalem. His talents as a preacher were such as called him to the important pulpit of Salem, Porth, which had fallen vacant. Preaching on the same scale and pattern as that of the last decade of the nineteenth century, R. B. Jones infused dignity of thought and logic into his preaching. His friend and colleague, the late Rev. W. S. Jones, describes him at this period: --

"It was my lot after an absence of some years in America to return home and undertake the pastorate of Penuel, Carmarthen, in 1897. During my absence a number of students whom I knew not had come out of our colleges, and had settled as pastors of churches. Some of them were already attracting more than ordinary attention. Comparatively young as they were, they were not infrequently called to minister in special meetings of the Welsh churches. Among them was the young minister of Caersalem, Llanelly. Soon, within a year, the opportunity came to hear him when we both ministered to a church in Pembrokeshire. The impression he made upon me was one of mixed admiration and dissatisfaction. The pleasure came from the discovery in my companion of a man who had certainly a distinct gift for Welsh preaching; the dissatisfaction from the fact that I had come back from America with a new sense of God and felt that something relating to the life of God which was so sweeping my own heart at the time was absent from the preaching of so excellent a preacher. Before we parted let me say I found that he was capable of serious thought concerning the real hidden conditions of one's soul. Of his work at these anniversary meetings the impression made upon my mind is quite clear today. The sermon every time was carefully prepared and written to the very last detail. The preacher really read it with such a mastery that it was not easy to decide that such was really the case. His utterance was distinct and deliberate. His Welsh was good and his sentences well formed, with his deep mellow voice well under control and musical, rising a few times into a shout but maintaining still its musical quality. The sermon was well thought out and well planned. It contained passages which were beautiful word pictures and the whole delivery was of a dignity not always met with in popular preachers."

This was the R.B. of 1898: the man with the sermon fully prepared, ready to be delivered with a vocabulary and a diction that made you feel it was all so clear and superior; with a voice whose depths and mellowness made it certainly pleasant to hear; with a strength of personality that gave him command over his audience; with a kind of dignified deportment compelling respect and attention; and with a shout in his delivery and such a peroration to his discourse as made the ordinary hearer sit up at the close with a feeling of having had a wonderful experience. I felt it each time I listened to him, except for the absence of something, which my heart was learning to recognise as that which was spoken by the prophet Joel, without which the greatest sermon by the best of preachers must always fall short. To quote an old saint who is now in glory-- "What a wonderful preacher I thought the Rev. R. B. Jones was in his younger days. He appealed so much to my imagination, he seemed to have so much power about him and yet somehow I was not really reached. I admired him but could not worship; I came away feeling that he was a very great preacher and a very proud man."

Yes, that was the R.B. of the last decade of the nineteenth century. In respect of externals he was a perfect preacher in manner and matter. Yet there was something amiss, in spite of those qualities that make one admire a preacher. We go home with the preacher filling every nook and corner of our thought and imagination and then we are reminded of the testimony of the American who, after hearing Spurgeon, exclaimed 'What a wonderful Saviour,' and, after hearing Parker, 'What a wonderful preacher.'

The great preacher is always tempted to put himself in the forefront, whereas the greatest preacher is so lost in his message and Master that he becomes invisible. The great preacher with the brush of his brilliant talent portrays the gospel. His paint is external and his painting objective. We all admire the talent of the painter; yes the painting is wonderful, but our thoughts are still with the painter. Olive Schreiner tells of a painter whose pictures were full of daring and excellent beauty.

About them there was a wonderful glow of red. When asked how it was, he only said, "I cannot say" and his pale face became a little tinged with blood. The more remarkable the redness of the glow in his paintings the paler he grew and one day they found him dead beside his work. Above his left breast there, was the mark of a wound and people still ask-- "Where did he get his colour from?" He bled to bless. His own lifeblood put life into his paintings. The people who remember R.

B. Jones from early days bear testimony to the radical change, which occurred in his life and ministry. The impression, which his preaching gave during the first decade, was -- 'what a wonderful preacher,' nor would he have objected to being so regarded. But the impression of the last three decades of his preaching is clearly-- "what a wonderful Saviour is Jesus, and what a tremendous thrill is this new life in Christ, even in its self-sacrifice." R. B. Jones objected to being reminded of the first decade.

For instance, an old saint reminded him of one of his great sermons during that period based on the catchy text-- "The axe did swim." The preacher replied-- "May your memory be forgiven, you remember terrible things." Many of his own denomination did not value the complete change in his ministerial life. While he was preaching in a Baptist preaching festival on the words-- "Ye must be born again," one of the elder brethren was a little perturbed and remarked-- "Think of preaching on a text like that in a 'Gymanfa.'

He has spoiled the gymanfa" His preaching had no sweet cadences, no lovely illustrations, no tickling of the imagination and emotions, but a diagnosis of human nature which is the essence of true preaching. Forsyth remarks-- "Let us rise above the idea that the preached word of God is a mere message warmly told. It is a creative statement by the medium of a consecrated personality. The effect of the preaching of the first type is mere impressionism, feelings aroused, emotions played upon, with no conviction."

The pioneers of Welsh Nonconformity were men of conviction. They preached as dying men to dying men, men who had experienced the revolutionary powers of the grace of God in their own lives. They were men of talent and intellect but they divested themselves of self-pride and placed their gifts upon the altar of the Cross of their Master. On that altar the fire of God's holiness sanctified their gifts. It was the power of God through them that caused sinners to cry out "What must I do to be saved."

Theirs was a ministry of conviction and spiritual edification, not a vanishing experience. According to Forsyth, "the test of an effective ministry is not impression but regeneration. Membership of the church means that you have passed into a higher stage than impression." R. B. Jones knew of that higher stage in his own spiritual life. Little wonder that he shuddered in later years at the terrible possibility of being an unconsecrated preacher.

Towards the end of the first decade of his ministry, R.B. felt that there was something lacking in his life. In a letter to a friend, suggesting the advisability of calling together others of similar experience, he adds in a postscript-- "Oh, how great the need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. I believe that it is a tide in the order of God. If we are caught in the flood, we shall be blessed with great success in our; work." As a result of this letter a meeting was arranged at his home in Porth. It was decided to invite the Rev. F. B. Meyer to address a number of ministers in Wales. Regretting his inability to come due to engagements, he

reminded them that he would be present at the first Llandrindod convention in 1903. A meeting of ministers with Doctor Meyer was arranged subsequently. During that week great things were experienced, not regeneration but complete surrender at a terrible cost to the Rev. R. B. Jones. This did not actually take place during that week. The inner struggle continued for three weeks, at the end of which time he relates his experience in a letter to his friend, the Rev. O. M. Owen (who is still with us and a faithful witness).

"You promised to write me giving your experience of Llandrindod meetings and after. I hope that you are continuing in your experience of joy and peace in the Lord. You will I am sure, be as glad to hear my testimony, as I have been to have yours. I am, thank God, out in the light with you. At last I am able to exercise that simple faith and trust in God's promises and truth. This power has been given me to overcome numerous temptations. Oh, how sweet it is to pray! What a wonderful book the Bible has become! Formerly it was a collection of texts, now its every word is fraught with a message to me personally. Wherever one turns on receiving this experience, one is filled with the wonder of it all and is not the greatest wonder received when one thinks that he was contented to be so long without it, and how wonderfully simple it is--Jesus living in me? In consequence of my self-surrender to him, I am His and He is mine. Yes, it is the simplicity of it all that charms me. This is the great revelation to me when confronted by trial and temptation. I have simply to repeat and plead His promise and trust Him to get me through safely and Lo, it is done! Praised be His name! I am waiting for more and there is more, more, and more. Oh, for a life of thorough dependence upon the Lord and great faithfulness to His will! How completely the Lord Jesus depended upon His Father! I was struck very much with this, this morning in reading John 5, 30." To those in sympathy with the contents, his letter is an expression of the difference between the popular preacher of the decade 1893--1903 and the burning prophet and evangelistic leader of the last three decades. He died at the comparatively early age of 63, having literally worked himself to death. The pale face and faltering footsteps of the last few weeks remind us of Olive Schreiner's painter. He put his life-blood into the ministry; the fire of the message consumed him.

His fidelity to his message brought suffering from unexpected quarters. Just as His Master could not crucify himself but had to submit to crucifixion at the hands of others, the same might be said of His servant, R B Jones Fidelity to his convictions cost him not a little in persecution Was not the great Apostle "in perils among false brethren?" Did this new experience enhance or hinder his service to the religious life of the Principality. Retrospectively one must concede to the prior view. Had he remained the preacher he was during the first decade, his pulpit services would have been nation-wide As we have already perceived, he as in great demand as a preacher during his early ministry. Circumstances occurred after his new experience that developed talents which were latent and would have remained dormant had he remained the first R B Jones The nation would have had a great preacher at the cost of losing a great Bible exponent and organiser As he himself affirmed, the Bible became a new book, a guide into spiritual realms, not merely a volume for a text-hunting preacher This new experience created by the Holy Spirit and a spirit-filled life gave to Wales R B. Jones, the Bible preacher, as seen in his volume on The Second Coming an exposition of the Thessalonian epistles, and his book "Spiritism in Bible light" and his Welsh Bible readings "Arian ei Arghwydd" He was appointed to give the Bible readings in the Keswick convention but before he could do so he was promoted to the realm of Light where faith is turned into sight and exposition unnecessary.

He was deeply convinced of the need of a thorough Biblical training, not merely knowledge about the Word but knowledge of the Word! It was not what scholars said about the Bible that mattered, but what the

Author said through it. This burning desire led to the founding of the South Wales Bible Training Institute at Porth, of which he became the first Principal, assisted by a competent staff as is indicated by-- The Rev. Ken Evans, M.A., Sidney Evans, B.A., W. W. Lewis and W. S. Jones As an exponent of the Bible it could be related of him as of his Master, "He opened unto us the Scriptures" It is best to let one of his students describe the Principal.

"He believed the Bible to be primarily and principally a revelation of moral, and spiritual truth, and that would survive all the attacks and assaults of his foes because of inherent and unalterable value and inspiration Out of a thorough conviction of the truth of this, was born a certain positiveness, not Yea or Nay but Yea. His words were not defensive so much as offensive, not destructive of error only but constructive of truth, consisting not of negatives but of positives. With a note or challenge in his voice he would remind us that the most effective spiritual leaden of the ages had found that immersion in the Scriptures, with dependence on the Spirit alike for instruction and unction, was the secret of all power. He never taught us a philosophy which we applauded but he unveiled something of Christ, which made us often repent. The connection between all his tutorial work and the Word was not fictitious; the robe of a tawdry rhetoric was never substituted for a divine simplicity of speech. He gave divine truth its celestial body. We heard Heaven's message in Heaven's dialect and we gave honour to God alone. He thought God's thoughts after God. He searched the Word, he compared spiritual things with spiritual and so learnt to understand the mind of God. Every day he had a new message with a divine genesis. It was from God. How often as he spoke did the Spirit brood over our minds until the chaos of our dim conceptions were resolved into order" Hundreds of his students the world over still feel the impact of his personality upon them It was a temptation to emulate him but what a futility if one tried. We are reminded of this by another of his former students, the Rev Owen Thomas, Llwynypia -- "Well we can remember being warned by one of our tutors in an Homiletic class against aping preachers and 'whatever you do,' said our teacher, 'do not imitate your principal. He is too great, you can never be him and you would spoil yourself.'"

During his office as Principal was also revealed his organising talent. He possessed that talent to such a degree that had he gone to the realm of business he would have been a Prince in the merchant world. Who knew better of this than the Rev. J. R. Morgan, Treharris, Secretary of the S.W.B.T.I.? --This is what he says, "His ability to marshal facts, and his keen analysis of elements involved, tended to create in others a spirit of confidence. His mastery of detail and gift for organising were talents, which he possessed in a marked degree and qualified him particularly for his life work --talents many would not associate with a ministerial career. Had he embarked upon a career in one of the constructive industries such as engineering or shipbuilding or one of the allied trades, his gift would certainly have gained for him a high position in such a vocation. In responding to the call of God and the Gospel, he consecrated those natural gifts to the great object and goal of his life--the Cause and the Kingdom of Christ."

Yes, he was an indefatigable worker for Christ. The connotation of the term "work" was not narrow. He worked with his books as well as with The Book. He sat as well as knelt. His whole personality was employed. His messages did not come direct to him in the pulpit: they came via his soul and mind. He did not dawdle with religious externals and depend upon the Holy Spirit to feed the flock of God. It was not the flippant emotional evangelist we listen to for a week preaching on the same words each night-- "Marvel not that I say unto thee, ye must be born again." No emotional appeals, no "lift up your hand and say that you accept Christ," but nights of terrific hammering, and sinners, religious and otherwise, had only one question to ask-- "Who then can be saved?" One felt powerless to stand and raise a hand. Rather did we feel like kneeling with bowed heads and crying "Lord have mercy upon me, a sinner." His life was one long

preparation and study. It was said by one of his contemporaries-- "He thought on his feet in the presence of an audience as keenly and as clearly as in his study. It was not that he did not prepare, but that his preparations were not chains upon him. He was free with the freedom of his new manner, free in the Lord, free to speak what the Lord had given him."

As one sent from God, he would adapt himself to any situation. The world was his parish and in a literal sense he went into the highways and byways. People heard him on street-corners and in public houses. During his mighty mission in Rhosllanerchrugog in 1904, when addressing open-air meetings, his preaching actually emptied public houses. Men left their glasses and fled as if stabbed by some unseen hand, and many of his listeners even today remember one remarkable phrase which still lingers in their memories- "Christ saves from the gates of hell, not from hell. He cannot save from hell but He can save from the gates."

He left no volume of sermons but something more important--lives created anew in Christ Jesus. The children of God who were honoured to listen to him went away with the right conception of preaching stamped indelibly upon their minds, convinced that the true genius of preaching did not lie in excellency of speech or wisdom, but came from that 'old rugged' Cross whereon by faith in Christ we are crucified to the world. The Rev. Nantlais Williams, his friend and collaborator in co-editing Yr Efenglydd, the Welsh evangelical magazine, which had faint roots before the revival, has placed the admirers of R. B. Jones in a debt of gratitude for his Welsh elegy, translated so well by the Rev. J. R. Morgan.

The Prophet of the Holy Scripture.

Thou didst climb the solitary tracks,

The paths by which the shepherds go:

On mountain sides, o'er perilous brakes,

Ne'er given common foot to know.

Thy soul burned hot in passionate search

Thyself wert lost to us oft time:

Whilst we in restful ease did watch

The fold and the ninety and nine.

Truly thou didst bleed from wounds received,

Yet these thou would'st not sadly mourn,

Thy friends erstwhile who narrowly perceived

Might thus discern the marks of thorn.

Through the land thine insistent cry was heard,

Thou prophet of the Precious Blood,

But those lips today speak not a word:

The shepherd is at home with God.

"The law of truth was in his mouth and iniquity was not found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and equity and did turn many away from iniquity."

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