

friend:

“It is now nearly two years since I began very earnestly to seek after holiness, and in very deed to prepare for eternity. It pleased God to give me to see very soon that I had little or no spirituality and that, if Christ was in me at all, he was certainly neither formed in me, nor doing His great work in me – I mean condemning sin in the flesh. The discoveries that were made to me of my thorough selfishness were awfully appalling. My mind appeared a complete thoroughfare for the uncircumcised and the unclean, and crowds of thoughts without my leave or control were constantly passing to and fro. I was like unto one bound to a rock, and vultures picked at me and tore me in pieces. Observe, this state had nothing to do with outward sin; the conflict was altogether internal.

“In this state of mind, the life and works of Tersteegen were very providentially put into my hands. I then, for the first time, found there was in truth a hidden life, a state of real union with Christ, which was to be enjoyed on earth and which, by God's grace, I most earnestly set myself to seek. About this period, I received benefit from the works of the Mystics and read very prayerfully Guyon, Fe'nelon, Bourginon, Law, etc., God giving me very clearly to see their errors, and yet at the same time to profit by the truths that their works contain.

“The only improvement which I could mark in the state of my soul during this time may be thus described: I had every day deeper discoveries of self, a continual consciousness that I had been serving the Lord from selfish motives, that I had taken pleasure in His work instead of in Himself, that the liberty I had enjoyed in prayer was chiefly of a fleshly kind. And the fear of God, of grieving or insulting Him, and of willing what He did not will, gradually began to operate upon me. Still, the hidden life appeared as far from me as ever. I was afraid to pray, afraid to preach, and had well-nigh fled from the work of the ministry. ‘The Spirit, the Spirit, oh, give me the Spirit!’ was my almost continual cry.

“Although I could not use many words in prayer, it was less irksome to me to spend ten or twelve hours upon my knees before God than one hour had been previously. And this I very often did – yes, three nights generally in the week from sunset to sunrise. Thus by the works of the law sought I the perfection which my soul desired in vain. To prayer were shortly added fastings and, if God had not stopped me, scourgings would in all probability have followed. But it pleased God in this, my darkness, to give me one drop of consolation – one precious, bright, clear direction.

“Oh, that I could tell you the way in which it was given, but I cannot, nor can I in any way describe it. But, for the first time, I felt that my spirit was perfectly distinct from my mind, yes, as distinct as my body was from my mind, and that God Who is a Spirit clearly spoke to my spirit. And oh, how much did the communication lose of its clearness and weightiness and fullness by being brought into my mind. The difference just appeared to be between finity and infinity, Heaven and earth, natural and spiritual, God and man. The communion might thus be worded, but words tell not half: ‘I dare not do more for you spiritually than I am doing, or give you more knowledge and wisdom than I am giving; it would destroy you. Follow Me, obey Me, lie still in My hands, give over your activity, let Me work, I love you, and everything that love could do for you has been done, is doing, and shall be done. I am the Lord.’

“All this, and a thousand times more was communicated to me apparently in one act, without one word or the semblance of one, and yet so clearly that all the words in the world can give but faint, a very faint conception, of what was communicated. From that time to the present, it has pleased God occasionally to communicate consolation and direction in much the same way. The teachings have chiefly had reference to practice, and there appears so much in the Sermon on the Mount that it looks as if in a long lifetime I should not get through it.

“The principal error of my religious life was discovered to me more than twelve months ago, and it was this – a continual laying again of the foundation that Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures...The Fountain is ever accessible and ever needful. Yet it is spiritual death to the soul to find its rest there. Oh, that men would learn the truth that, if we are reconciled unto God by the death of His Son how much more shall we be saved by His life! How needful is it to apprehend Christ dying for us, but how precious, how glorious is it to have Christ living in us.

“True, my heart is but a poor stable, and there are oxen in it still. But, oh, my adorable Maker has humbled Himself to come there and He is working meekness and lowliness and nothingness and moderation and patience and charity. As soon as it was given me of God to experience Christ in some small manner formed in me, I began constantly to look for the things that are, and not the things that appear. The consciousness of God's presence became to some extent abiding and although it is very holy, yet it is very desirable, and ever joyous. At this time when I am alone, which I chiefly am, I can very frequently fall down at His feet, very sensibly feeling Him near me. There is no similitude to all in my mind, but just a consciousness that Christ is indeed with me, and that I am in very reality come to Mount Zion and the Church of the Firstborn.”

After such a determined period of seeking and such a glorious reality of finding, it is little wonder a friend could say of him:

“He lived, worked, and preached in the light of an extraordinary realization of eternity. At one period, he asked of God to make known to him the meaning of that word, and so overwhelming was the sense God gave him of the stupendous ‘forever,’ that for three days he could neither eat, drink, nor sleep, and he must have died under the weight of it had he not entreated God to take it from him. But the experience have the most intense earnestness to his appeals.

“We have never met with anyone so weighty in intercession. It was not only days of prayer, and nights of prayer, or even weeks, but frequently one, two, three months or more were devoted by him to ceaseless intercession for the places he was to evangelize.”

God did begin to work and the parish began to be visited with revival. “We have had a little movement in the parish” writes Robert, “and in consequence, I have preached sixty-three sermons in fifty days and held nearly as many prayer-meetings.” An observer has said that such a “little movement” became periodic in Pendeen. Robert himself observes:

“On my return on Monday, I found my whole parish in a flame under Knott and Fenton. There had been some eight or ten conversations before I left, which made me most unwilling to leave, but they now number upwards of one hundred. You see, it

never rains in Cornwall but it pours. In short, we had a downright Cornish revival at old Pendeen. Penitents are praying and rejoicing around me in different rooms. My voice is quite gone, and I have been praying with penitents since I returned. I mean, night and day we have work...”

“We had a bit of a shower last night. The personage was full of penitents in every room, and in the passages too. On one side was Mr. Winter, Vicar of St. John's, with his sister who was a penitent; and, on the other, the superintendent Methodist preacher, with his wife, weeping over their son and daughter who were in deep distress. Some soon got through, so that the work may be said to have begun. The country around now appears to be awakening, as if from a long sleep.”

As well as the services within the Church, seekers came from distant parts to share the hospitality of the large manse. Some stayed for weeks and some for several months, and in this atmosphere many found help for their seeking souls. Mrs. Aitken was indeed a true helpmeet. With her stepdaughters, she worked with the servants in the kitchen or had someone read a spiritual book while the women were engaged in needlework. At noon, the Angelus was rung, when everyone throughout the house observed silent prayer for a quarter of an hour. Rev. Haslam was among the pilgrims who made their way to this spiritual haven for counsel when seeking the Lord's face.

On July 12, 1873, while Robert Aitken was inquiring about the times of trains to Penzance, Cornwall, his loving heart suddenly ceased its beating. The strong frame collapsed at the feet of the railway porter on the platform of Paddington Station, London, and was later borne to Cornwall, where his body lies awaiting the glorious resurrection morning when time shall have ceased and eternity begun.

From: “They Knew Their God”

BIRTHDAYS & SPECIAL EVENTS IN:

July

4th – Independence Day

6th – Taylor Cordle

8th – Stephanie Kirby

11th – Andrew and Stephanie Kirby's Anniversary

22nd – Daniel Twomey

28th – Jacob Kirby

NCO Kids

Monthly News



July 2014



Robert Aitken

He was a young man of striking appearance and commanding personality. A curate, preaching at the local church on the Sabbath and a gentleman farmer the remainder of the week, Robert Aitken wielded no small influence in this rural community in the Isle of Man. Furthermore, his pride and strong will had caused him to undertake the draining of an unhealthy swamp on his property just because others thought it could not be done. As he assisted the laborers, he was startled and disturbed by a persistent nagging question, “You fool! Where you sent into the world with no higher purpose than to drain a bog?” This solemn challenge haunted the highly respected young curate, and from this time he was the subject of serious meditations and heart searchings.

Is was, however, while preparing a sermon on the atonement that Robert Aitken heard a Voice – not audible, but as distant to his spirit as an outward voice, saying, “You are making a Gospel for God, instead of believing God's Gospel.” Perplexed, the young man fell upon his knees and begged for further light. Again the Voice spoke. This time it was even more distinct than before, and he looked around to see who was in the room. The Voice continued, “All thy righteousness is as filthy rags.”

Assured that this had been a warning from God to him, Robert Aitken neither ate nor slept for sixteen days, finding help from neither God nor man. His young wife, fearing for her husband's mind, sent for their physician who, however, was not at home. On the sixteenth day, in utter exhaustion, Robert threw himself upon his bed, exclaiming, “Now, Lord, let me see Thy salvation.” He then sank into a deep sleep and later awoke with joy unspeakable flooding his soul. Climbing the neighboring mountain, the new convert shouted aloud God's praises where he would not disturb or be disturbed!

Robert's family and then the whole parish soon felt the impact of the freshly kindled flame which glowed in his heart. He was as earnest in telling

men about God's great salvation as he had been in draining his bog. He went everywhere – in the fields, in the warehouse, in the factory, in the market place. To all he spoke of Christ and His wonderful redemption. At this time, he was only twenty-eight years of age, but for almost half a century this untiring prophet knew only one passion – the salvation of souls and the pleasing of his Lord.

The subject of this sketch was born January 22, 1800, into a “guid auld” Scottish Presbyterian family in Crailing, near Jedburgh, Roxboroughshire. Here his father had for many years been the master of the established school. While the Aitken home was guided by fine, moral principles, the parents were not of that deeply religious bent on what would have been expected in the background of a son of such unusual spiritual intensity.

The lad was privileged to enjoy the best of education at Jedburgh Grammar School under a stern master. He later obtained his degree and spent the next few years assisting his older brother Mark who had founded a private school at Whitburn, near Sunderland. This led to his ordination by the Bishop of Durham, and he became curate at the local church. Previously, Robert had not taken kindly to the Calvinistic approach of the Presbyterians, and so it was through the influence of the godly Bishop Jolly that he was attracted toward the Church of England.

It was at Whitburn that he met the attractive Ann Elizabeth Eyres, daughter of Lieutenant-Colonel Eyres. Anna's mother, however, having more ambitious hopes for her child, strongly objected to their proposed union, but the young couple, both of age, took the matter into their own hands and were married at the local church. In the meantime, Mark Aitken had turned the management of the school over to his brother, Robert, who now brought a measure of success to it by his indefatigable efforts.

When the young bride's health became such that a change to a warmer climate was necessary, the Aitkens purchased property in the Isle of Man, and this is where Robert met God and became the preacher who, in years to come, would faithfully proclaim His Gospel to thousands.

As reports of the success of the fiery young preacher filtered across to England from the Isle of Man, invitations to preach began to multiply. The Anglican Church then was not open to such innovations, with the result that the Methodists, quickly sensing the fire of eloquence in this potential prophet, soon opened their doors to him. For the next ten years, Robert Aitken was a free-lance evangelist, experiencing his greatest success in the Midlands and north of England. Thousands and thousands of souls were brought to the knowledge of truth under his earnest preaching. So large, indeed, was his following that the word “Aitkenite” became almost as common as the term “Wesleyan,” which had been adopted for the converts of Wesley.

However, he was conscious of an inner growing discontent that could not be suppressed. Writing to a friend he said:

“I have long been and, doubtless, though I knew it not, desired to be, a very big man. And the moment that God's grace wrought in me the determination to become a very little child – that the least of all the little children, the holy Child Jesus, might lead me – I soon found that the cause of my secession from the Church, and my vacillating conduct as to returning to it, was pride – was self – was sin. Conversion is, indeed, the veriest beginning of grace. And now, when I had thought that I had well-nigh finished my course, I find I am but beginning to begin it, and

the first thing I desire is to be placed in circumstances where I shall not have my own will.”

It had become customary for him, with a few others, to spend two entire nights a week in prayer when, together, they sought for light and a greater degree of holiness. It was during one of these times that his attention was drawn to the parable of the wheat and the tares. The conviction was borne in upon him that, regardless of how the field had been sown with tares, he should not have left the bosom of the Church because of her faithlessness to evangelical truth. He now decided, rightly or wrongly, that, whatever the mixture of the tares among the wheat, he should return to the fold, for he at this time deemed the sin of schism the deadliest of sins. Writing to a fellow-clergyman he said:

“After a trial of nearly eight years, I dare not voluntarily occupy my present position any longer. I shall do my utmost to return to the Church...I am satisfied that under any circumstances an act of schism is an act of sin. The Lord has plainly told us what would be the state of the Church in the last days; but He, Who would not have the tares rooted out, has also refused to give a license to become sectarian; it is enough for the believer that he himself remains in the Church, corrupted though it be.”

As a disciplinary measure, the Church of England, as was usual in such cases, imposed a three years' silence upon Robert. Three ministers were to observe his behavior during that time, and upon their testimonial, he was to be reinstated into the ministry. Churchmen misconstrued Aitken's action and thought his mind unbalanced; Methodists misunderstood and opposed the step he had taken, so that truly his soul was weaned from all earthly props. He gladly submitted to the demand for three years of silence, purposing to retire to the Isle of Wight, where he could enjoy quiet and prepare for the sacred duties of his office. However, the ban was averted, and he recommenced his ministry in Hope Hall in Liverpool on his own property. This building was now licensed as the Church of St. John the Evangelist.

From a letter written to a minister friend at this period we are able to judge the state of his soul:

“You may be disposed to imagine from what I have written that my own state of soul is easier than when I last wrote to you, but this is not the case. The truth is that the most distressing feature in the whole history is that light is continually breaking in upon me but, instead of giving me peace, it increases my uneasiness. 'Without holiness no man can see the Lord' – this is still my text.

“The whole Gospel appears to give the lie to the generally received doctrine that the state of grace is a state of sin. But how can we that are dead to sin live any longer therein? It is true, a remedy is mercifully provided in any man sin, but clearly the 'if marks out an extraordinary exception to the general rule, which is holiness, and the holiness is defined – 'blameless and incorruptible in His sight,' 'abounding in the work of the Lord,' 'filled with the fullness of God,' 'one spirit with the Lord because joined unto the Lord,' 'partakers of the divine nature.' These are very high sayings, and they cannot have less than very high meanings because it is God Who speaks them, Who is the truth, and in Him is no lie at all, no exaggeration.

“I write this because I am most willing to be helped, for my case is truly a lamentable one. The constant flowing up of the rivers of life, where is it? Not within me, for rivers are great things. All earthly things have long ceased to interest me, and less

so now than ever. The waste or ill-spending of an hour in conversation is to me both painful and disgusting – continual seriousness I have because there is continual thoughtfulness mingled with deep anxiety about my state and, notwithstanding this, though separated from earth, I have not found Heaven.

“Eternity is awful to me, not through fear of torment, but its infinitude is most painful. I often feel as if God and my soul were the only existences in the universe and, although He appears reconciled and I can hold Him as my Savior and accept His offices as my High Priest, yet to realize His as my portion and so gain rest, I find not. I have none other occupation but meditation and prayer; I seldom leave my room, nor have I any wish to do so – it is a cross to me to do so. It is a cross to me to write a letter. I desire nothing; I cry for nothing but God, as a satisfying portion to an immortal spirit which He has raised into a continual consciousness of immortality, and yet I attain not to it.

“My brother, I am a miserable being, and yet my misery is bounded and supported by God, for when it reaches a certain point, He takes it away in a moment. And, when soul and body are somewhat relieved, He brings it again without my asking.”

From his Liverpool appointment, Rev. Aitken retired to a quiet spot in Cornwall near Penzance. The ill health of his wife or one of his children had often necessitated such changes from the damp, inclement weather of the north to a sunnier climate. While he was in Cornwall, a most remarkable work of revival sprang up, doubtless preparing the way for his future ministry some years hence. But at this time, this was all hidden from God's servant. In the meantime, he accepted charges in Leeds, England, and Coatbridge, Scotland.

In spite of every effort on his part to husband the strength of his beloved partner, Anna succumbed to the tubercular complaint which had threatened her all fourteen years of her married life. Left with six small children, Robert Aitken sought another helpmeet.

Wilhemina Day MacDowell Grant had often sat under Robert's ministry and admired and respected this ardent man of God. She was a woman of great intellect and spiritual prowess. Her lineage, on both sides of her family, could be traced back to Edward III. The Grants of Arndilly were known throughout the north of Scotland for their godliness and evangelical fervor. And so it is not surprising that Wilhemina gladly left a beautiful estate on the banks of the Spey, to share with her husband what the world would deem a lower sphere of service. Many a humble servant of God found fellowship under their spacious roof. Considered by some as rather stern, because she spurned softness and ease “as savoring of the world which she had renounced,” Mrs. Aitken bore for thirty-four years the cares of the manse in an obscure pastorate in Cornwall.

Three children were born of this second marriage. One of these died in early infancy, and four children of the first wife, inheriting their mother's consumptive tendency, did not live beyond the early thirties. Canon Hay Aitken, son the later marriage, became a much revered vicar and evangelist in the Church of England.

It is not surprising that, having lost several children, the Aitkens should be alarmed at the failing health of their youngest daughter. Mrs. Aitken took the initiative and, leaving Coatbridge accompanied by the girl, went again to Cornwall. There she got in touch with the Bishop of Exeter to find out if there was an opening in the Church in that part of the country for her husband. The only available parish was a new one in the midst of a mining community; here there was neither church, school, nor vicarage. But God had

His hand on this dear child of His who longed to serve Him when and where he could bring greatest glory to His Name.

Upon his arrival, the whole prospect of the place appeared so utterly bleak to Robert Aitken that he wrote to the Bishop declining the offer. He was influenced, however, to reconsider his decision by a resident in those parts, who believed that a revival would visit this area through Aitken, the man of God's own choosing. So the move was made, and the family made their temporary residence in a small cottage while the church and vicarage were in the process of being built.

One day, the new vicar approached a group of off-shift miners lounging at the roadside corner not far distant from the desolate moorland site designed for the future church building. He startled them with the command, “Now lads, go and get your picks and shovels and come and help me to build a church.” Incredulous at fist, they soon saw he meant business and, compelled by the earnestness of the man and his indefinable manner of authority, they meekly obeyed his command. Soon a temporary church was built, a more permanent edifice following in due course.

This desolate parish was Pendeen, the home and mission-field of this “prophet” for the remaining years of his life. What rivers of living water flowed to distant spots from this oasis in the spiritual desert! A short letter written to a friend reveals Robert's state of mind at this time:

“For several months, I have been exercised about my position here. It is quite true that some good is doing. But the fearful state of the Church, and the godless state of the clergy, and the thousands of souls weekly dropped into Hell without any adequate effort either being made, or likely to be made, to enlighten and save them, have so depressed me that the horrible reality has almost bereft me of reason.

“Here I am possessed of a Gospel which is an amply sufficient antidote to all the miseries of time, and against all the horrors of eternity – and what am I doing in the midst of a perishing world? I am shut up in the most remote corner of the great spiritual wilderness, bound down by a system to my isolated locality and weeping my strength away over evils which I cannot even attempt to remedy, mourning without hope over the certain damnation of unnumbered millions, who have souls as precious and as immoral as my own. God help me, for I am more than mad; I am stricken with an anguish of soul which knows no change but its own increase. I have only one semblance of relief, and that is in tears and prayers. And, after all, they only increase the burden.”

In the meantime, Robert Aitken had come to the end of this spiritual quest, and he relates his soul's intense search for God, in another letter to a