



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

Charles Graham . . . One of God's forgotten heroes



I wonder how many of our readers have ever heard of the name Charles Graham? He was a man who, from about 1770 until his death in 1824, preached the gospel in Irish and English to his fellow Irishmen from Kerry to Hillsborough, from Enniskillen to Newry. Because of his pioneering labours in Kerry, he became known as "The Apostle of Kerry." He was one of those Methodist heroes whose labours brought much blessing to thousands of Roman Catholics and Protestants in the 18th and 19th centuries.

We say kindly of him that he had little theological training. He was a stout Arminian and an opponent of that Calvinism which he witnessed in the dead Presbyterian church. Having read of his labours and sufferings for Christ and the lost souls of Ireland, I can easily bear with his opposition to Calvinism, that system of theology which I espouse. He was in spirit a Calvinist, irrespective of what he professed in the letter, for he ascribed all that he saw accomplished by his preaching to the grace of God alone. God's power rested upon the man. He was holy, humble and brave. The reading of the reprinted account of his life by W G Campbell, published in 1868, has been a joy and blessing and I must commend it to our readers.

Charles Graham was born in Tullinnagrackin, about two miles south of Sligo, on 20th August 1750. The state of religion in Ireland at that time was very dark indeed. The Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches were largely dead and had little impact upon the morals of the people. The Roman Catholic Church held sway over the largest portion of the island and its doctrines but added to the darkness. One Episcopalian cleric stated of the times: "Every sin might be practised with impunity; the country was degraded, ignorant, and corrupt; and after the celebration of divine worship (on the Sabbath), both in the Church and Roman Catholic chapel, away went all, accompanied by priest and parson, either to the chase or to the merry dance-ring."

Rev. Matthew Lanktree, a Methodist minister of the day, describes the times so:-- "Blasphemy, Sabbath-breaking, and drunkenness, were awfully predominant; party spirit, pitched battles, sanguinary conflicts, nocturnal devastations, and private murders, were the order of the day. At fairs and markets they fought like furies, until bloodshed and battery marked the conquest. The very amusements displayed equal barbarity. Song-singing, card-playing, and dancing were regarded as among the innocent things, but Sabbath-breaking was awfully prevalent, especially on patron days (alluding to days devoted to the patron saint of some well--such as 'Saint John's Well'). On those days drinking, riot, and every evil work abounded; but the wakes (that is, waking the dead) were the most profane, ludicrous and obscene. At one time a prayer for the repose of the dead; at another time a keen (Irish cry for the dead), sometimes rising to a wail by the mourning women,



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perhaps half drunk; and then the smoking, drinking, and jokes by the aged, while the young were allowed to revel in all manner of folly."

Charles Graham had a meagre education, staying at school long enough only to learn reading and writing and basic arithmetic. He later greatly regretted his limited education. He had little by way of spiritual knowledge. The death of his father while he was a teenager did slow him in his decadent ways for a time, but he soon cast off that restraint. He became involved with the sinful practices of his age and said of himself: "I might truly be called legion, for no chains could bind me."

He came into contact with some Methodists through attending a funeral. It was through this encounter that he was awakened. He tells of his state at that time. "I took my full swing of pleasure, and neither vows or good purposes could stand before the power of temptation. I regarded neither God, or man, or demon, or kindred, except my mother, who had often cause to weep over me. When I went abroad I seldom returned without a fight, and at different times my wickedness endangered my life."

That which he formerly delighted in now became a thing of dread and remorse. Thus he continued for a full fortnight in all the agony of woe. At length the hour of deliverance arrived. He went to Sligo, and heard the sweet sound of Gospel grace again, very likely from the same minister under whom he was awakened. In the middle of the sermon, while the preacher was directing the convinced penitent to the Lamb of God, faith sprang up in his heart. He says himself, "The Sun of Righteousness arose with healing in his wings." Joy and gladness filled his weary and heavy-laden spirit. He writes, "I believe on that occasion I received the justifying grace of God, for I felt my trouble dispersed like mist before the rising sun." This event took place on 17th March 1770, and in the twentieth year of his age.

Passing over the next few years we come to 1790 when, at the age of forty, he was appointed as a circuit preacher in the County of Kerry where there was little gospel light. He was now married and had two children. He lodged his family in Limerick with the local Methodists there and proceeded toward Kerry. On his first night in Kerry, he sought lodgings in a humble hotel in Castle Island about 10 miles from Tralee, the county town of Kerry. It was soon being broadcast that a 'false prophet' had arrived, and soon the local priest at the head of a mob came to the inn and demanded the expulsion of the preacher. This had to be done, of course, to please "his reverence"! Charles Graham was thus thrust out into the darkness in an area unknown to him. Thus began his labours for God in Kerry. Many were the assaults and attacks he endured for the gospel and the souls of the Roman Catholic people of the county of Kerry. Charles Graham was a fluent speaker of Irish and always found the common people ready and glad to listen to the gospel. It was only when stirred by the priests that he came under attack from them.

Hundreds of people were converted in the first year of his labours in Kerry, two hundred of whom were received into the Methodist Society while many more were placed on trial. Those were days when a mere 'profession' did not suffice to have a person recognised as a Christian, but consistent holy works were required to demonstrate the genuineness of conversion. He continued in Kerry for another year, extending his circuit. Again, hundreds were converted. In 1793, Charles Graham was appointed to the Enniskillen circuit. It was from this time that God was pleased to move in mighty power upon towns and villages so



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familiar to us who live in this area. It is thrilling to read of families, whose descendants still live amongst us here, being brought under the gospel of Christ; to read of towns such as Enniskillen, Clones, Brookeborough, Ballinamallard, Irvinestown, Trillick, Lisbellaw, Maguiresbridge, Derrygonnelly and districts around them, being moved by God in revival power.

This is a book that will bless the hearts of all who love the Lord and encourage those who long for His blessing to come again upon this land.

Next Month - Some of the happenings in Fermanagh and Tyrone in that time of revival blessing.

(Copies of the reprinted biography of Charles Graham are available from Mr. John Gowan, Bookseller, tel. 01365-341239, price £12 including postage within the United Kingdom.)