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Benjamin Evans of Scarborough 1803—1871

BENJAMIN EVANS was born at Bilston in Staffordshire on May 13th, 1803. He was converted in his youth and became a member of the Baptist church in his native town. At the age of twenty he entered Horton College, Bradford (later Rawdon Baptist College), as a candidate for the Baptist ministry. He was called to the pastorate of Ebenezer Baptist chapel, Scarborough, in 1826. In this place, where he was to embark on a " course of public and private usefulness "[1] which lasted throughout his whole life, he married in 1828, Sarah Hill, the daughter of one of his deacons — " an earnest Christian whose whole life was devoted to ministering to the happiness of others ".[2]

In the period of transition which followed the Representation of the People Act, 1832, Evans, fervent in his convictions as a Baptist Dissenter, was to become a prominent advocate of civil and religious liberty both in Scarborough and in the nation generally.

In 1830 he engaged in an intense and protracted contest with the authorities of the Established Church in Scarborough on the question of levying a church-rate. During the struggle to free the Dissenters of Scarborough from being forced to pay the rate — proposed in the first instance for enclosing Christ Church, Scarborough, and paying sums due on account of that church — Evans wrote a handbill which resulted in an attendance of about five-six hundred rate-payers at the vestry meeting on August 28th, 1830. At this meeting he read a letter from J. Wilkes, Esq., M.P., Secretary to the Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty, in whose opinion the proposed measure was illegal — for in a matter which was " not essential to public worship " it was necessary for a majority decision by parishioners assembled at the vestry to sanction the laying of a church rate.[3] Attempts to lay a rate upon the Scarborough parish were to be contested three times by Evans and to him belongs the honour that since he went to the town a church-rate has never been levied on the people of Scarborough.

Thoughts on the Claims of Dissenters and Church Reform, written by Evans in 1834, manifests a progressive political and social outlook — in the author the fruit of a conservative devotion to the faith. He asked for " A legal Register of Births, Marriages, and Deaths "[4] and an " exemption from all compulsatory support to the Established Church " — he objected to Establishments on principle.[5] He requested leave for Dissenters to inter their dead without submitting to the Burial Service of the Establishment.[6]

Referring to the exclusion of Dissenters from the Universities, Evans said that the desire of Dissenters to have this stigma removed would be in proportion to their realisation of the value of the advantages of which they were deprived. He noted the practical encouragement given to the increase of knowledge and education through the forming of institutions by Dissenters.

After the passing of the Marriage and Registration Bill in 1836, the Vicar of Scarborough, in a circular letter warned his parishioners that having examined the register book and found no evidence " that the children had been made Christians ", in the event of death he would refuse them Christian burial.[7] This circular was signed by six of the local clergy. Evans wrote and published a reply and two other letters to the Vicar. " These pamphlets were, by request of the Member for Finsbury, circulated in the House of Commons & produced a great impression on the minds of many honourable members, resulting in a request that a petition, calling the attention of the Government to the spirit of the clergy, might be presented. This was done & the conduct of ' the Seven Champions of Yorkshire ' went round the press."[8]

In 1826 Evans had found the strength of the Dissenting body in Scarborough very weak. Yet, before long, under his capable leadership, as noted in the church-rates controversy, it was in a position to determine a course of action. The Baptists " elevated by his powerful hand, from their hitherto insignificant position, took first-class rank in Scarborough ".[9]

Something of the abiding usefulness of Evans was brought home to me when I visited the Scarborough public library. Part of the library was once the Mechanics' Institute of which Evans was a founder, secretary and of which he frequently held the office of president. He delivered the first lecture to the Institute and (wrote B. H. Evans in 1872) " bore for many years before it was established on its present firm footing nearly the whole weight of its affairs ".[10]

The value of Mechanics' Institutes when there were no public libraries and facilities for the education of the working-class adult were not officially provided needs little emphasis.[11] From the Minutes of the Scarborough Mechanics & Literary Institute we have some insight of Evans' contribution to this movement. The Scarborough Institute was formed on November 12th, 1830, and in February, 1831, received from Evans eight volumes towards the building up of a library. Subsequently Evans gave lectures to the Institute on the local history and antiquities of Scarborough[12] (1840); on " Man in Relation to the Present & Future " (1856) and on " Wickcliffe " (1857). By 1869 the library of the Institute was considered to be the Corporation Library. We read in *The Scarborough Mercury* (January 2nd, 1869) that Dr. Evans gave to the Corporation Library " a further donation of eight volumes, including a

scarce [copy] of Coles' sketches of Scarborough, published in 1822".

It is necessary to mention Evans' contribution to the activities of the Society for the Protection & Extension of Civil & Religious Liberty, the Society for the Liberating of Religion from State Patronage & Control[13] (later the anti-State Church Association), the Anti-Corn Law League, and the Financial and Parliamentary Reform Association. Many of his activities on behalf of these societies were through the medium of the radical press of which, in the mid-nineteenth century, he was an outstanding pioneer. (See K. R. Short, "Benjamin Evans, D.D. & The Radical Press, 1826-71", *Baptist Quarterly*, vol. XIX (1961-1962), pp. 243-253).

Something of the impact of Evans' work in this field can be seen in the centenary publication of *The Scarborough Mercury*, by M. Whittaker, published in 1955. Referring to the Labour Party's *New Times*, published in 1927, there is the following comment, "More in the tradition of the Rev. Mr. Evans' broadsheets of a century earlier but with less of their fire, it had no pretensions to be a newspaper in the modern sense."

As K. R. Short rightly suspects, Evans was one of the first editors of *The Burgess* — from 1835-1836 and 1840 — an organ of the Scarborough Society for the Protection & Extension of Civil & Religious Liberty. Again in 1836-1837 Evans was "well to the fore" in the production of the Liberal-Radical newspaper *The Chronicle* which was to offset the Tory paper *The Scarborough Herald & General Advertiser*.[14]

As a minister of Jesus Christ Evans was dedicated to the service of "the best of Masters"[15] and there can be no doubt that an inner life of devotion and prayer was the main-spring of an outer life of selfless action. H. Dowson[16] tells us that the activity upon which the "diligent pastor" engaged "would appal a young minister of the present day" — "four sermons, five prayer-meetings, & three classes each week" required "intense mental energy and continued application". Of Evans' value as a minister Dowson says that he was "distinguished by fidelity and consistency" and that his preaching was effective & evangelical. To the doctrine of salvation by grace, he continues, Evans was always attached. "Sound on the atonement, he was never carried away by new phases of thought and doctrine; he remained to the close, faithful to the truth, conviction and conscience."

Apart from his extensive work at Scarborough, through the agency of the East & North Riding Association of Baptist churches (of which he was the founder and secretary, a moderator and generally author of the annual circular letter) and later the Yorkshire Association, Evans contributed to the extension of Christ's kingdom and his popularity and influence spread throughout the denomination and further afield. In 1843 Evans submitted to the East and North

Riding Association a petition against Sir James Graham's amended clauses of the Factories Bill. This was adopted by the Association and presented to the House of Commons by C. Hindley Esq.[17] A new bill without these clauses was proposed a year later. This is one of the many incidents on which Evans left his impress through the work of this Association. In 1832 he had been involved in a resolution of the Association to withold support from M.P.s who would not commit themselves to the cause of the immediate emancipation of Negro slaves in the West Indies. Later, in 1840, in vol. III, of the *Northern Baptist,* we hear of Evans addressing and presiding at meetings on behalf of the Jamaican and African Mission at which William Knibb was present.

The latter gives some indication of the service which Evans rendered to the B.M.S., of which until his death he remained a committee member and of which he was the District and Corresponding Secretary for the East Riding of Yorkshire. In the *Seventy-sixth Annual Report of the Baptist Missionary Society* (1856-57) we read the following resolution, " 'That the name of the Rev. B. Evans, D.D., of Scarborough, be placed on the list of Honorary Members of the Committee, he having rendered important services to the Society.' "

Much space would be required to detail Evans' contribution to various periodicals[18] and societies. With regard to the latter, " he was for forty years the secretary of the local branch of the Religious Tract Society which was re-formed through his efforts ".[19] Among the denominational societies to which he gave his support were the Baptist Tract Society, the Baptist Irish Society, the Bible Translation Society,[20] the Society for the Education of Ministers' Children,[21] the Yorkshire Baptist Aged Ministers' Society and the National Society for Aged and Infirm Baptist Ministers. The British & Irish Home Mission was aided by him and he was a Trustee of " Psalms & Hymns ".[22]

Particularly worthy of note is the impact of Evans on a community of Flemish Christians in Brussels and his agency in sending a student from Horton Academy to proclaim the Gospel at Memel, in Prussia (now Lithuania).[23] He learned of the religiously destitute condition of British sailors in the latter port from the son of the Rev. W. Hague, founder of the Baptist community in Scarborough, and was aided in the matter by the typical financial generosity of his father-in-law. With regard to the former, Evans on a private visit to Brussels, following a breakdown in health, met certain Christians. They, having sought and obtained discussions with him, after prayer, asked him to baptize them by immersion. Evans, himself, in his pamphlet, *Belgium: Its Religious State,* gives an interesting account of how he was the agent used by God for founding the first Baptist church in a country in which, he said, Romanism

flourished " in all its pomp and wordliness " (p. 1). It appears that the circumstances of these brethren and those of Evans himself rendered delay in their baptism unavoidable. The expulsion of American Baptist agents from France prevented Evans connecting the movement in Belgium with that in France. Oncken of Hamburg responded to the call and arrangements were made for brethren from Berlin and Hamburg to visit the Belgian community. The delay in the intimation of these arrangements, however, and the increasing anxiety of the Flemings had prompted Evans to communicate the circumstances to his friend and ministerial brother, H. Dowson, of Bradford, who undertook the task. (See *Belgium: Its Religious State,* p. 12). In *The Baptist Handbook* for 1872, p. 215, we read that from this effort " sprang the present large & flourishing Baptist Church in that important town ".

Of further results from Evans' activities in Brussels and with regard to Memel there is little evidence. Dr. E. A. Payne informs me that there has been " very little continuous Baptist work in Belgium ". From Dr. M. W. Dewar I learned of the existence in Brussels of a Flemish speaking community of Baptists, possibly spiritual descendants of the Flemish brethren here mentioned. Memel, in Lithuania, is part of the U.S.S.R. and detailed information may be hard to obtain. In his *History of the Baptists,* p. 205-7, R. G. Torbet noted the influence of Baptists from Memel on the growth of the denomination in the U.S.S.R.

The many published pamphlets of Evans, particularly, perhaps, those of a historical or doctrinal nature, merit separate note together with his outstanding work on *The Early English Baptists,* which led Champlin Burrage in his *Early English Dissenters* (1912), to describe Evans as " much the ablest of the early English Baptist historical writers " with " the mind of a true historian ".

With regard to further activities by Evans one might note, for example, that in Scarborough he was an officer of the Lancastrian & Infant Schools; aided in the establishment of the Building & Investment Society, and in the formation of committee for the Palestine Exploration Fund of which he was secretary and in founding the Archaelogical Society of which he was for twenty years the honorary secretary. Similarly, he was on the committee of the Scarborough Philosophical Society to which he gave books and geological specimens.[24] His interest in geology is evident in his correspondence with the President of the University of Rochester, U.S.A., Dr. Anderson, as can be seen in the Martin Brewer Anderson Papers, housed in the Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester, U.S.A. (No. 100/1859.)

From the latter university, in 1857, though his major historical and literary publication *The Early English Baptists* was not to appear until some years later, Evans received an honorary Doctor-

ate in Divinity. In a letter to Dr. Anderson, Evans acknowledged the degree and the confidence of " the Gentlemen of the Faculty ... in my moral and literary character ". (Martin Brewer Anderson Papers, No. 10/1857.)

By this time the influence of Evans and his work had become widely diffused, a formal recognition by the denomination, on the national level, being evident in the following year in Evans' occupation of the Chair at the General Assembly of the Baptist Union.

Although in the ensuing years we have an occasional glimpse of Evans engaged in personal activity, he was evidently working under great physical duress. These last years, not least in his assistance in the formation of the Baptist College at Bury (later Manchester Baptist College) and his responsibility therein for teaching Church History, show something of his tremendous determination to be of service.

Ebenezer Baptist church, Scarborough, over which he had ministered since 1826 (having been prevailed upon four times not to resign and for which he had relinquished the possibility of a metropolitan chapel) was irreparably weakened by Evans' retirement from the pastorate, the dissension with regard to open communion being no longer subject to the respect and love which the united congregation had for their pastor. Soon after his resignation was accepted forty-one members withdrew from the church and ultimately formed a new church. This was the genesis of Albermarle Baptist church, Scarborough, " in connection with and for the expansion of the Baptist denomination ", " on a more liberal basis ". (" Minutes of Albermarle Baptist church, Scarborough ", 1863-1864.)

On April 6th, 1871, " the beloved pastor ", as he is described on the memorial stone in Scarborough cemetery, suddenly, but peacefully, passed away while conversing in his library with his son-in-law.

Evans remains a clear example of a man of literary and moral worth and a Christian with definite convictions whose faith was alive and practical, courageous and sacrificial, consuming and all-embracing. He lived a full Christian life. Its impact may be overshadowed by the passing years and the impress of others, nevertheless — " ' Ferat qui meriet Palmam.' ".[25, 26]

NOTES

Deceased ", " Evans, Benj., D.D. of Scarborough ", by B. H. Evans. A
[1] *Baptist Handbook for 1872,* pp. 213-8, " Memoirs of Baptist Ministers principle guiding source throughout this article.

[2] Scarborough cemetery memorial stone.

[3] *A Statement of the Proceedings in Opposition of an Attempt to lay Two Rates upon the Inhabitants of Scarborough,* etc., 1831, ascribed to B. Evans by Bristol Baptist College Library copy and contents.

[4] Evans believed marriage to be basically a civil contract. The legal register was of Baptism, i.e. infant. Hence, to Baptists excluded from its benefits, a vital principle was involved. In 1836 there was some relief in the Marriage & Registration Act. Evans could not conceive why atheists, deists and schismatics should be obliged by the Church to support what they believed to be wrong.

[5] Evans' opinions were based on the premise at the basis of his convictions as a Baptist and Dissenter—that the Church and State are separate entities.

[6] Burial Acts, 1853-1879, gave allotments to Dissenters.

[7] *Baptist Handbook, 1872,* pp. 213-18.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Founded by Dr. Birkbeck in Scotland, these institutions spread quickly throughout industrial England and provided a vital and necessary education for the new industrial society.

[12] In 1837, Evans edited the 3rd edition of T. Hinderwell's *The History and Antiquities of Scarborough,* preceded by a Memoir of Hinderwell by Evans.

[13] *Baptist Handbook, 1872,* pp. 213-19. Evans " always remained one of its most active members of council ".

[14] M. Whittaker's *The Scarborough Mercury,* centenary review.

[15] *An Address delivered to the Students of the Baptist Theological Institution,* Bury, 6th July, 1870, Prefatory Note.

[16] *The Freeman,* 21st April, 1871, " In Memoriam ".

[17] Sir James Graham, Home Secretary under Peel. His Factories Bill of 1843 included educational clauses for factory children, whose hours were to be regulated. The Dissenters objected to Anglican supervision.

[18] See K. R. Short, *The Baptist Quarterly,* Vol. XIX, pp. 243-53.

[19] *Baptist Handbook, 1872,* pp. 213-18.

[20] Formed in 1840 and apparently a breakaway, following a disagreement with regard to the translation of the word *baptizo,* from the British & Foreign Bible Society.

[21] Founded by Evans, under auspices of B.U. He died its honoured President, *Baptist Handbook, 1872,* pp. 213-18.

[22] *Ibid.* Evans was an impromptu hymn writer. Some were published.

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] Report of the Scarborough Philosophical Society, 1830.

[25] " Let him carry the palm who deserves it." Quoted in *The Scarborough Mercury,* 18th April, 1857, in a letter from " A Friend ", on the pleasure which the conferring of an honorary D.D. on Evans had given to his " numerous friends ".

[26] Comprehensive source of this article is my thesis on " Dr. Benjamin Evans of Scarborough—1803-1871: His Influence, Local, National and International ", in the Library of the University of Leeds.

CHRISTINE PAINE