

Revivals And Church History :: The Labours of John Cennick, 1739-1755

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Once more an Anglican paved the way for the Brethren. At the terrible period of the Day of Blood one Brother, named Cennick, fled from Bohemia to England; and now, about a hundred years later, his descendant, John Cennick, was to play a great part in the revival of the Brethren's Church. For all that, John Cennick, in the days of his youth, does not appear to have known very much about his ecclesiastical descent. He was born (1718) and brought up at Reading, and was nursed from first to last in the Anglican fold. He was baptized at St. Lawrence Church; attended service twice a day with his mother; was confirmed and took the Communion; and, finally, at a service in the Church, while the psalms were being read, he passed through that critical experience in life to which we commonly give the name "conversion." For us, therefore, the point to notice is that John Cennick was truly converted to God, and was fully assured of his own salvation before he had met either Moravians or Methodists, and before he even knew, in all probability, that such people as the Moravians existed. We must not ascribe his conversion to Moravian influence. If we seek for human influence at all let us give the honour to his mother; but the real truth appears to be that what John Wesley learned from Boehler, John Cennick learned by direct communion with God. His spiritual experience was as deep and true as Wesley's. He had been, like Wesley, in the castle of Giant Despair, and had sought, like Wesley, to attain salvation by attending the ordinances of the Church. He had knelt in prayer nine times a day; he had watched; he had fasted; he had given money to the poor; he had almost gone mad in his terror of death and of the judgment day; and, finally, without any human aid, in his pew at St. Lawrence Church, he heard, he tells us, the voice of Jesus saying, "I am thy salvation," and there and then his heart danced for joy and his dying soul revived.

At that time, as far as I can discover, he had not even heard of the Oxford Methodists; but a few months later he heard strange news of Wesley's Oxford comrade, Charles Kinchin. The occasion was a private card party at Reading. John Cennick was asked to take a hand, and refused. For this he was regarded as a prig, and a young fellow in the company remarked, "There is just such a stupid religious fellow at Oxford, one Kinchin." Forthwith, at the earliest opportunity, John Cennick set off on foot for Oxford, to seek out the "stupid religious fellow"; found him sallying out of his room to breakfast; was introduced by Kinchin to the Wesleys; ran up to London, called at James Hutton's, and there met George Whitefield; fell on the great preacher's neck and kissed him; and was thus drawn into the stream of the Evangelical Revival at the very period in English history when Wesley and Whitefield first began preaching in the open air. He was soon a Methodist preacher himself {1739.}. At Kingswood, near Bristol, John Wesley opened a charity school for the children of colliers; and now he gave Cennick the post of head master, and authorized him also to visit the sick and to expound the Scriptures in public. The preacher's mantle soon fell on Cennick's shoulders. At a service held under a sycamore tree, the appointed preacher, Sammy Wather, was late; the crowd asked Cennick to take his place; and Cennick, after consulting the Lot, preached his first sermon in the open air. For the next eighteen months he now acted, like Maxfield and Humphreys, as one of Wesley's first lay assistant preachers; and as long as he was under Wesley's influence he preached in Wesley's sensational style, with strange sensational results. At the services the people conducted themselves like maniacs. Some foamed at the mouth and tore themselves in hellish agonies. Some suffered from swollen tongues and swollen necks. Some sweated enormously, and broke out in blasphemous language. At one service, held in the Kingswood schoolroom, the place became a pandemonium; and Cennick himself confessed with horror that the room was like the habitation of lost spirits. Outside a thunderstorm was raging; inside a storm of yells and roars. One woman declared that her name was Satan; another was Beelzebub; and a third was Legion. And certainly they were all behaving now like folk possessed with demons. From end to end of the room they raced, bawling and roaring at the top of their voices.

"The devil will have me," shrieked one. "I am his servant. I am damned."

"My sins can never be pardoned," said another. "I am gone, gone for ever."

"That fearful thunder," moaned a third, "is raised by the devil; in this storm he will bear me to hell."

A young man, named Sommers, roared like a dragon, and seven strong men could hardly hold him down.

"Ten thousand devils," he roared, "millions, millions of devils are about me."

"Bring Mr. Cennick! Bring Mr. Cennick!" was heard on every side; and when Mr. Cennick was brought they wanted to tear him in pieces.

At this early stage in the great Revival exhibitions of this frantic nature were fairly common in England; and John Wesley, so far from being shocked, regarded the kicks and groans of the people as signs that the Holy Spirit was convicting sinners of their sin. At first Cennick himself had the same opinion; but before very long his common sense came to his rescue. He differed with Wesley on the point; he differed with him also on the doctrine of predestination; he differed with him, thirdly, on the doctrine of Christian perfection; and the upshot of the quarrel that Wesley dismissed John Cennick from his service.

As soon, however, as Cennick was free, he joined forces, first with Howell Harris, and then with Whitefield; and entered on that evangelistic campaign which was soon to bring him into close touch with the Brethren. For five years he was now engaged in preaching in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire {1740-5.}; and wherever he went he addressed great crowds and was attacked by furious mobs. At Upton-Cheyny the villagers armed themselves with a horn, a drum, and a few brass pans, made the echoes ring with their horrible din, and knocked the preachers on the head with the pans; a genius put a cat in a cage, and brought some dogs to bark at it; and others hit Cennick on the nose and hurled dead dogs at his head. At Swindon--where Cennick and Harris preached in a place called the Grove--some rascals fired muskets over their heads, held the muzzles close up to their faces, and made them as black as tinkers; and others brought the local fire-engine and drenched them with dirty water from the ditches. At Exeter a huge mob stormed the building, stripped some of the women of their clothing, stamped upon them in the open street, and rolled them naked in the gutters. At Stratton, a village not far from Swindon, the mob--an army two miles in length--hacked at the horses' legs, trampled the Cennickers under their feet, and battered Cennick till his shoulders were black and blue. At Langley the farmers ducked him in the village pond. At Foxham, Farmer Lee opposed him; and immediately, so the story ran, a mad dog bit all the farmer's pigs. At Broadstock Abbey an ingenious shepherd dressed up his dog as a preacher, called it Cennick, and speedily sickened and died; and the Squire of Broadstock, who had sworn in his wrath to cut off the legs of all Cennickers who walked through his fields of green peas, fell down and broke his neck. If these vulgar incidents did not teach a lesson they would hardly be worth recording; but the real lesson they teach us is that in those days the people of Wiltshire were in a benighted condition, and that Cennick was the man who led the revival there. As he rode on his mission from village to village, and from town to town, he was acting, not as a wild free-lance, but as the assistant of George Whitefield; and if it is fair to judge of his style by the sermons that have been preserved, he never said a word in those sermons that would not pass muster in most evangelical pulpits to-day. He never attacked the doctrines of the Church of England; he spoke of the Church as "our Church"; and he constantly backed up his arguments by appeals to passages in the Book of Common Prayer. In spite of his lack of University training he was no illiterate ignoramus. The more he knew of the Wiltshire villagers the more convinced he became that what they required was religious education. For their benefit, therefore, he now prepared some simple manuals of instruction: a "Treatise on the Holy Ghost," an "Exhortation to Steadfastness," a "Short Catechism for the Instruction of Youth," a volume of hymns entitled "A New Hymnbook," a second entitled "Sacred Hymns for the Children of God in the Day of their Pilgrimage," and a third entitled "Sacred Hymns for the Use of Religious Societies." What sort of manuals, it may be asked, did Cennick provide? I have read them carefully; and have come to the conclusion that though Cennick was neither a learned theologian nor an original religious thinker, he was fairly well up in his subject. For example, in his "Short Catechism" he shows a ready knowledge of the Bible and a clear understanding of the evangelical position; and in his "Treatise on the Holy Ghost" he quotes at length, not only from the Scriptures and the Prayer-book, but also from Augustine, Athanasius, Tertullian, Chrysostom, Calvin, Luther, Ridley, Hooper, and other Church Fathers and Protestant Divines. He was more than a popular preacher. He was a thorough and competent teacher. He made his head-quarters at the village of Tytherton, near Chippenham (Oct. 25, 1742); there, along with Whitefield, Howell Harris and others, he met his exhorters and stewards in conference; and meanwhile he established also religious societies at Bath, Brinkworth, Foxham, Malmesbury, and many other villages.

At last, exactly like Ingham in Yorkshire, he found that he had too many irons in the fire, and determined to hand his societies over to the care of the Moravian Church. He had met James Hutton, Zinzendorf, Spangenberg, Boehler, and other Moravians in London, and the more he knew of these men the more profoundly convinced he became that the picture of the Brethren painted by John Wesley in his Journal was no better than a malicious falsehood. At every point in his evidence, which lies before me in his private diary and letters, John Cennick, to put the matter bluntly, gives John Wesley the lie. He denied that the Brethren practised guile; he found them uncommonly open and sincere. He denied that they were Antinomians, who despised good works; he found them excellent characters. He denied that they were narrow-minded bigots, who would never acknowledge themselves to be in the wrong; he found them remarkably tolerant and broad-minded. At this period, in fact, he had so high an opinion of the Brethren that he thought they alone were fitted to reconcile Wesley and Whitefield; and on one occasion he persuaded some Moravians, Wesleyans and Calvinists to join in a united I

ove-feast at Whitefield's Tabernacle, and sing a common confession of faith {Nov. 4th, 1744.}.¹¹⁹ John Cennick was a man of the Moravian type. The very qualities in the Brethren that offended Wesley won the love of Cennick. He loved the way they spoke of Christ; he loved their "Blood and Wounds Theology"; and when he read the "Litany of the Wounds of Jesus," he actually, instead of being disgusted, shed tears of joy. For these reasons, therefore, Cennick went to London, consulted the Brethren in Fetter Lane, and besought them to undertake the care of his Wiltshire societies. The result was the same as in Yorkshire. As long as the request came from Cennick alone the Brethren turned a deaf ear. But the need in Wiltshire was increasing. The spirit of disorder was growing rampant. At Bath and Bristol his converts were quarrelling; at Swindon a young woman went into fits and described them as signs of the New Birth; and a young man named Jonathan Wildboar, who had been burned in the hand for stealing linen, paraded the country showing his wound as a proof of his devotion to Christ. For these follies Cennick knew only one cure; and that cure was the "apostolic discipline" of the Brethren. He called his stewards together to a conference at Tytherton; the stewards drew up a petition; the Brethren yielded; some workers came down {Dec. 18th, 1745.}; and thus, at the request of the people themselves, the Moravians began their work in the West of England.

If the Brethren had now been desirous of Church extension, they would, of course, have turned Cennick's societies into Moravian congregations. But the policy they now pursued in the West was a repetition of their suicidal policy in Yorkshire. Instead of forming a number of independent congregations, they centralized the work at Tytherton, and compelled the other societies to wait in patience. At Bristol, then the second town in the kingdom, the good people had to wait ten years (1755); at Kingswood, twelve years (1757); at Bath, twenty years (1765); at Malmesbury, twenty-five years (1770); at Devonport, twenty-six years (1771); and the other societies had to wait so long that finally they lost their patience, and died of exhaustion and neglect.

As soon as Cennick, however, had left his societies in the care of the Brethren {1746.}, he set off on a tour to Germany, spent three months at Herrnhag, was received as a member, returned a Moravian, and then entered on his great campaign in Ireland. He began in Dublin, and took the city by storm. For a year or so some pious people, led by Benjamin La Trobe, a Baptist student, had been in the habit of meeting for singing and prayer; and now, with these as a nucleus, Cennick began preaching in a Baptist Hall at Skinner's Alley. It was John Cennick, and not John Wesley, who began the Evangelical Revival in Ireland. He was working in Dublin for more than a year before Wesley arrived on the scene. The city was the hunting ground for many sects; the Bradilonians and Muggletonians were in full force; the Unitarians exerted a widespread influence; and the bold way in which Cennick exalted the Divinity of Christ was welcomed like a pulse of fresh air. The first Sunday the people were turned away in hundreds. The hall in Skinner's Alley was crowded out. The majority of his hearers were Catholics. The windows of the hall had to be removed, and the people were in their places day after day three hours before the time. On Sundays the roofs of the surrounding houses were black with the waiting throng; every window and wall became a sitting; and Cennick himself had to climb through a window and crawl on the heads of the people to the pulpit. "If you make any stay in this town," wrote a Carmelite priest, in his Irish zeal, "you will make as many conversions as St. Francis Xavier among the wild Pagans. God preserve you!" At Christmas Cennick forgot his manners, attacked the Church of Rome in offensive language, and aroused the just indignation of the Catholic priests.

"I curse and blaspheme," he said, "all the gods in heaven, but the Babe that lay in Mary's lap, the Babe that lay in swaddling clothes."

The quick-witted Irish jumped with joy at the phrase. From that moment Cennick was known as "Swaddling John";¹²⁰ and his name was introduced into comic songs at the music-halls. As he walked through the streets he had now to be guarded by an escort of friendly soldiers; and the mob, ten or fifteen thousand in number, pelted him with dirt, stones and bricks. At one service, says the local diary, "near 2,000 stones were thrown against Brothers Cennick and La Trobe, of which, however, not one did hit them." Father Duggan denounced him in a pamphlet entitled "The Lady's Letter to Mr. Cennick"; Father Lyons assured his flock that Cennick was the devil in human form; and others passed from hand to hand a pamphlet, written by Gilbert Tennent, denouncing the Moravians as dangerous and immoral teachers.

At this interesting point, when Cennick's name was on every lip, John Wesley paid his first visit to Dublin {August, 1747.}. For Cennick Wesley entertained a thorough contempt. He called him in his Journal "that weak man, John Cennick"; he accused him of having ruined the society at Kingswood; he was disgusted when he heard that he had become a Moravian; and now he turned him out of Skinner's Alley by the simple process of negotiating privately with the owner of the property, and buying the building over Cennick's head. At one stroke the cause in Skinner's Alley passed over into Methodist hands; and the pulpit in which Cennick had preached to thousands was now occupied by John Wesley and his assistants. From that blow the Brethren's cause in Dublin never fully recovered. For a long time they were unable to find another building, and had to content themselves with meetings in private houses; but at last they hired a smaller building in Big Brother Lane,¹²¹ near St. Patrick's Cathedral; two German Brethren, John Toeltschig and Bryzelius, came over to organiz

the work; Peter Boehler, two years later, "settled" the congregation; and thus was established, in a modest way, that small community of Moravians whose descendants worship there to the present day.

Meanwhile John Cennick was ploughing another field. For some years he was busily engaged--first as an authorized lay evangelist and then as an ordained Moravian minister--in preaching and founding religious societies in Cos. Antrim, Down, Derry, Armagh, Tyrone, Cavan, Monaghan, and Donegal {1748-55.}; and his influence in Ulster was just as great as the influence of Whitefield in England. He opened his Ulster campaign at Ballymena. At first he was fiercely opposed. As the rebellion of the young Pretender had been only recently quashed, the people were rather suspicious of new comers. The Pretender himself was supposed to be still at large, and the orthodox Presbyterians denounced Cennick as a Covenanter, a rebel, a spy, a rogue, a Jesuit, a plotter, a supporter of the Pretender, and a paid agent of the Pope. Again and again he was accused of Popery; and one Doffin, "a vagabond and wicked fellow," swore before the Ballymena magistrates that, seven years before, he had seen Cennick in the Isle of Man, and that there the preacher had fled from the arm of the law. As Cennick was pronouncing the benediction at the close of a service in the market-place at Ballymena, he was publicly assaulted by Captain Adair, the Lord of the Manor; and the Captain, whose blood was inflamed with whisky, struck the preacher with his whip, attempted to run him through with his sword, and then instructed his footman to knock him down. At another service, in a field near Ballymena, two captains of militia had provided a band of drummers, and the drummers drummed as only Irishmen can. The young preacher was summoned to take the oath of allegiance and abjuration. But Cennick, like many Moravians, objected to taking an oath. The scene was the bar-parlour of a Ballymena hotel. There sat the justices, Captain Adair and O'Neil of Shane's Castle; and there sat Cennick, the meek Moravian, with a few friends to support him. The more punch the two gentlemen put away the more pious and patriotic they became. For the second time Adair lost his self-control. He called Cennick a rascal, a rogue, and a Jesuit; he drank damnation to all his principles; he asked him why he would not swear and then get absolution from the Pope; and both gentlemen informed our hero that if he refused to take the oath they would clap him in Carrickfergus Gaol that very night. As Cennick, however, still held to his point, they were compelled at last to let him out on bail; and Cennick soon after appealed for protection to Dr. Rider, Bishop of Down and Connor. The good Bishop was a broad-minded man.

"Mr. Cennick," he said, "you shall have fair play in my diocese."

In vain the clergy complained to the Bishop that Cennick was emptying their pulpits. The Bishop had a stinging answer ready.

"Preach what Cennick preaches," he said, "preach Christ crucified, and then the people will not have to go to Cennick to hear the Gospel."

The good Bishop's words are instructive. At that time the Gospel which Cennick preached was still a strange thing in Ulster; and Cennick was welcomed as a true revival preacher. At Ballee and Ballynahone he addressed a crowd of ten thousand. At Moneymore the Presbyterians begged him to be their minister. At Ballynahone the Catholics promised that if he would only pitch his tent there they would never go to Mass again. At Lisnamara, the rector invited him to preach in the parish church. At New Mills the people rushed out from their cabins, barred his way, offered him milk, and besought him, saying, "If you cannot stop to preach, at least come into our houses to pray." At Glenavy the road was lined with a cheering multitude for full two miles. At Castle Dawson, Mr. Justice Downey, the local clergyman, and some other gentry, kissed him in public in the barrack yard. As he galloped along the country roads, the farm labourers in the fields would call out after him, "There goes Swaddling Jack"; he was known all over Ulster as "the preacher"; his fame ran on before him like a herald; Count Zinzendorf called him "Paul Revived"; and his memory lingers down to the present day.

For Cennick, of course, was more than a popular orator. As he was now a minister of the Brethren's Church, he considered it his duty, wherever possible, to build chapels, to organize congregations, and to introduce Moravian books and customs; and in this work he had the assistance of La Trobe, Symms, Caries, Cooke, Wade, Knight, Brampton, Pugh, Brown, Thorne, Hill, Watson, and a host of other Brethren whose names need not be mentioned. I have not mentioned the foregoing list for nothing. It shows that most of Cennick's assistants were not Germans, but Englishmen or Irishmen; and the people could not raise the objection that the Brethren were suspicious foreigners. At this time, in fact, the strength of the Brethren was enormous. At the close of his work, John Cennick himself had built ten chapels, and established two hundred and twenty religious societies. Around Lough Neagh the Brethren lay like locusts; and the work here was divided into four districts. At the north-east corner they had four societies, with chapels at Ballymena, Gloonen, and Grogan, and a growing cause at Doagh; at the north-west corner, a society at Lisnamara, established later as a congregation at Gracefield; at the south-west corner, in Co. Armagh, three chapels were being built; and at the south-east corner, they had several societies, and had built, or were building, chapels at Ballinderry, Glenavy, and Kilwarlin.

At this distance of time the Brethren's work in Ulster has about it a certain glamour of romance. But in reality the conditions were far from attractive. It is hard for us to realize now how poor those Irish people were. They lived in hovels made of loose sods, with no chimneys; they shared their wretched rooms with hens and pigs; and toiling all day in a damp atmosphere, they earned their bread by weaving and spinning. The Brethren themselves were little better off. At Gloonen, a small village near Gracehill, the Brethren of the first Lough Neagh district made their headquarters in a cottage consisting of two rooms and two small "closets"; and this modest abode of one story was known in the neighbourhood as "The Great House at Gloonen." Again, at a Conference held in Gracehill, the Brethren, being pinched for money, solemnly passed a resolution never to drink tea more than once a day.

And yet there is little to show to-day for these heroic labours. If the visitor goes to Ulster now and endeavours to trace the footsteps of Cennick, he will find it almost impossible to realize how great the power of the Brethren was in those palmier days. At Gracehill, near Ballymena, he will find the remains of a settlement. At Ballymena itself, now a growing town, he will find to his surprise that the Brethren's cause has ceased to exist. At Gracefield, Ballinderry, and Kilwarlin--where once Cennick preached to thousands--he will find but feeble, struggling congregations. At Gloonen the people will show him "Cennick's Well"; at Kilwarlin he may stand under "Cennick's Tree"; and at Portmore, near Lough Beg, he will see the ruins of the old church, where Jeremy Taylor wrote his "Holy Living and Holy Dying," and where Cennick slept many a night. At Drumargan (Armagh), he will find a barn that was once a Moravian Chapel, and a small farmhouse that was once a Sisters' House; and at Arva (Co. Cavan), he may stand on a hillock, still called "Mount Waugh," in memory of Joseph Waugh, a Moravian minister. For the rest, however, the work has collapsed; and Cennick's two hundred and twenty societies have left not a rack behind.

For this decline there were three causes. The first was financial. At the very time when the Brethren in Ulster had obtained a firm hold upon the affections of the people the Moravian Church was passing through a financial crisis; and thus, when money would have been most useful, money was not to be had. The second was the bad system of management. Again, as in Yorkshire and Wiltshire, the Brethren pursued the system of centralization; built a settlement at Gracehill, and made the other congregations dependent on Gracehill, just as the Yorkshire congregations were dependent on Fulneck. The third cause was the early death of Cennick himself. At the height of his powers he broke down in body and in mind; and, worn out with many labours, he became the victim of mental depression. For some time the conviction had been stealing upon him that his work in this world was over; and in a letter to John de Watteville, who had twice inspected the Irish work, he said, "I think I have finished with the North of Ireland. If I stay here much longer I fear I shall damage His work." At length, as he rode from Holyhead to London, he was taken seriously ill; and arrived at Fetter Lane in a state of high fever and exhaustion. For a week he lay delirious and rambling, in the room which is now used as the Vestry of the Moravian Chapel; and there, at the early age of thirty-six, he died {July 4th, 1755.}. If the true success is to labour, Cennick was successful; but if success is measured by visible results, he ended his brief and brilliant career in tragedy, failure and gloom. Of all the great preachers of the eighteenth century, not one was superior to him in beauty of character. By the poor in Ireland he was almost worshipped. He was often attacked and unjustly accused; but he never attacked in return. We search his diary and letters in vain for one single trace of bitter feeling. He was inferior to John Wesley in organizing skill, and inferior to Whitefield in dramatic power; but in devotion, in simplicity, and in command over his audience he was equal to either. At the present time he is chiefly known in this country as the author of the well-known grace before meat, "Be present at our table, Lord"; and some of his hymns, such as "Children of the Heavenly King," and "Ere I sleep, for every favour," are now regarded as classics. His position in the Moravian Church was peculiar. Of all the English Brethren he did the most to extend the cause of the Moravian Church in the United Kingdom, and no fewer than fifteen congregations owed their existence, directly or indirectly, to his efforts; and yet, despite his shining gifts, he was never promoted to any position of special responsibility or honour. He was never placed in sole charge of a congregation; and he was not made superintendent of the work in Ireland. As a soldier in the ranks he began; as a soldier in the ranks he died. He had one blemish in his character. He was far too fond, like most of the Brethren, of overdrawn sentimental language. If a man could read Zinzendorf's "Litany of the Wounds of Jesus," and then shed tears of joy, as Cennick tells us he did himself, there must have been an unhealthy taint in his blood. He was present at Herrnhag at the Sifting-Time, and does not appear to have been shocked. In time his sentimentalism made him morbid. As he had a wife and two children dependent on him, he had no right to long for an early death; and yet he wrote the words in his pocket-book:--

Now, Lord, at peace with Thee and all below, Let me depart, and to Thy Kingdom go.

For this blemish, however, he was more to be pitied than blamed. It was partly the result of ill-health and overwork; and, on the whole, it was merely a trifle when set beside that winsome grace, that unselfish zeal, that modest devotion, and that sunny piety, which charmed alike the Wiltshire peasants, the Papist boys of Dublin, and the humble weavers and spinners of the North of Ireland.¹²²

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