

Henry Venn



Biography

An old Russian proverb says: 'He who lives in the past loses one eye; but he who forgets the past loses both eyes.' This is the first of a regular column over the next few months giving short biographies of some great evangelical leaders of the past.

Henry Venn is little-known nowadays. His story is not dramatic, but in his time he was much used by Christ and he has some useful lessons for us in 1997.

He was born at Barnes in Surrey in 1724. All his male ancestors back to the Reformation had been ministers in the Church of England.

Schools in those days were set up by anybody who wanted to start one. They were private, deregulated and uninspected. As a result, Venn was educated at home until he was 12, then he went to some of these fee-paying schools, ending up at Cambridge University when he was 17. Here he won a scholarship which kept him in tuition until he was 25.

Hanging up his bat

Now I didn't know that cricket existed as early as the 1730s, but it is recorded that at the end of a cricket match between Surrey and All England, he threw down his bat and made it clear he would never need it again. And why? He explained that he was to be ordained on the next Lord's Day, and as a pastor there would be no time for such diversions. So you can see that he intended to take his Christianity seriously.

In fact, his religious zeal was astonishing. He had set times for prayer and meditation. He kept a spiritual diary about the state of his soul. He preached regularly. He fasted. He gave out tracts. He held regularly family prayers.

False assurance

After four years in the ministry like this, he received a letter from the Countess of Huntingdon who told him in no uncertain terms that he was not really a Christian. It was like a bolt from the blue!

She told him that he had 'zeal without knowledge', and that he was teaching the false idea that holiness and self-denial will save us by influencing God to accept us on the basis of our own religious efforts.

Then the Countess told him that the gospel required him to regard his own holiness as filthy rags and that only Christ could save him and give him real righteousness.

He was 33 years old when he came into full gospel light. Immediately his preaching changed. No longer would he tell people to be holy in order to be right with God. He preached Christ alone.

His son tells us that he also gave up Arminianism in favour of Calvinism. As you know, Arminianism emphasises the ability of free will to choose Christ. Venn had read no books on the subject, but he knew that his own heart was deceitful and desperately wicked, and it was that which destroyed his confidence in man's free will. From then on, he elevated the grace of God, not the power of free will.

To Huddersfield

Two years later, he took a cut in salary to become Church of England minister of Huddersfield. By then (1759), Huddersfield was already a manufacturing town, and to Henry Venn belongs the distinction, as the Dictionary of the Christian Church puts it, 'to shake the whole town to its very core using the lever of the gospel'.

(The only comparisons are McCheyne in Dundee and Baxter in Kidderminster.)

George Whitefield wrote to the Countess of Huntingdon and told her that her letter to Venn had not been wasted. So note how important a well-timed letter can be.

Magnetic preaching

Venn became part of the amazing evangelical awakening of the 1700s. Like a magnet, he attracted hearers. The church was packed for every service. Whitefield preached his last sermon in England from Venn's pulpit before crossing to America.

People walked to Huddersfield from the surrounding villages and many could not get into the church. One observer commented that as Venn warmed to his theme, it seemed as though he would fall out of his pulpit. Apparently sometimes he seemed to jump.

It was evidently powerful and uncompromising preaching. During an average week, he also preached eight or ten sermons in the villages nearby.

On one occasion, two educated men decided to go and see what all the fuss was about. They came and after the service walked almost all the 15 miles back to Leeds in silence, before one man said: 'I can't stand this.' And with tears, he asked the Lord for salvation. That man had been experiencing conviction of sin after hearing the gospel in Venn's church. And so did thousands of others in the Huddersfield area.

50 years after Venn had gone, his grandson visited Huddersfield and found a large number of people, then in their 80s, who had come to Christ during Venn's ministry.

Ill health

But sadly, after 12 years of enormous effort, Venn developed the symptoms of tuberculosis, coughing and spitting blood.

He was now 47. His wife had died when he was 44 and there were five children. What a choice! Should he work himself into the grave and leave the children as orphans, or not?

The decision to leave Huddersfield saved his life. Much to his own surprise, he recovered from TB while continuing as Church of England minister at Yelling, a vicarage 12 miles from Cambridge.

He lived for another 26 years. It was in this time that most of his letters were written. You can be sure that if you read his letters, or even some of them, you will give yourself a spiritual tonic.

One interesting thing about him is revealed by Charles Simeon. Venn made it a rule never to speak unkindly about any other Christian. He did do it once, and the next day prayed publicly for the forgiveness of this awful sin.

He died in 1797, aged 73.

From the life of Henry Venn you can see how easy it is to go to church and act the Christian without being converted. You can even be zealous, go in for fasting, self-denial, and much more, and yet be far from Christ.

At length, when Venn had become a real Christian, he had the distinction of being used by Christ to influence a whole town in 12 years of non-stop ministry. As Whitefield wrote of him: 'He was a son of thunder.'

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