

# JIREH CHAPEL, LEWES, EAST SUSSEX

James North

The 18th Century in England was a period of great religious awakening within the Church of God. Along with this great religious activity there was, no doubt, a great deal of profession of religion without the experience of it in personal salvation. Following the harvest there must be the winnowing, and it was at such a time as this that God raised up William Huntington to undertake the winnowing of souls, to "take forth the precious from the vile" (Jeremiah 15:19). William Romaine, one of the leaders of the Evangelical Party within the Church of England, observed that God raises up such men as John Bunyan and William Huntington but once in a century.<sup>1</sup>

Amongst those who appear to have made a profession of salvation without the true experience of "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21), was one called Jenkin Jenkins. We have very little knowledge of his origins but we do know that he was a native of Wales, being later dubbed "The Welsh Ambassador" by William Huntington. He passed through the Countess of Huntington's College at Trevecca<sup>2</sup> and was installed as the minister of the Independent Chapel in the Cliffe, Lewes. The Countess had patronage of this chapel, it belonging to her Connexion. It would appear that he became minister in about 1782 whilst still in a state of unregeneracy. Huntington, in his funeral sermon for Jenkin, tells us: "His empty profession, and his assumption of the ministry, seemed to lie heavier upon his mind than all his other sins; conscious he was, that, in preaching gospel doctrines so high, and being destitute of the grace of faith, he must have led many to presume; and not a few of those he laboured to undeceive, succeeding with some, whilst others stood their ground to his sorrow; and some who styled him their spiritual father, while he remained in a state of nature, but despised him when he became a partaker of grace."<sup>3</sup> Huntington also tells us that he went to preach at Maresfield, a village to the north of Lewes on June 26th, 1792. Jenkins was in

the congregation and the Word of God was effectually applied to his heart. "He appeared to me to be broken in spirit, humbled, mortified, meekened, softened and contrite to the last degree."<sup>4</sup> He was called by God's grace out of darkness into the light and liberty of the Gospel.

On his return to Cliffe Chapel, Jenkins commenced preaching the (true) Gospel. His change of preaching produced a rift within the congregation. "The tone of his preaching, becoming somewhat in opposition to the polite and moderate Calvinism practised by the Countess' Connexion, the trustees of the Cliffe Chapel felt obliged to terminate Jenkins' appointment and Jenkins subsequently left, some of the congregation choosing to go with him."<sup>5</sup>

In 1804, land was purchased from a Mr Attreall for the sum of £420. Huntington helped Jenkins raise the monies required for the building of a new chapel, which was built in 1805 at a cost of £2330-4s-1d. The chapel was opened by Huntington on July 7th, he preaching from the text, 1 Kings 8:11: "So that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD had filled the house of the LORD." A second sermon was preached by Huntington the next day from the text, Matthew 5:8: "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God." The stone inscription which stood on the front wall of the chapel stated: "JIREH CHAPEL ERECTED BY J JENKINS MA WITH THE VOLUNTARY CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE CITIZENS OF ZION AD 1805." The chapel was owned by Jenkins until he placed it in trust on "the fourteenth day of May in the fortysixth year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord George the third"<sup>6</sup> (1806). The trustees are required to "permit the said chapel... to be used frequented and enjoyed at all times hereafter as a place of public worship for protestant dissenters of the calvinistic persuasion."<sup>7</sup> The minister is required by the trust deed to "maintain and preach the doctrines ordinarily received and admitted amongst protestant dissenters of the calvinistic persuasion and which doctrines are contained and delivered in the first second fifth sixth ninth tenth eleventh twelfth thirteenth seventeenth eighteenth nineteenth twentyfifth twenty-seventh and twentyeighth articles of the established Church of England taken and understood according to their true and genuine sense and interpretation."<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that, while the article concerning infant baptism is included, those concerning the deity of Christ and His sinless perfection are not.

Jenkins and Huntington maintained a regular correspondence over a number of years and their letters were later published in

*Living Testimonies and Contemplations on the God of Israel*, which was last published in 1933. Jenkin Jenkins died in 1810 aged 59. Huntington preached the funeral sermon on Sunday, 23rd September, from 1 Thessalonians 4:16. Huntington himself died in 1812 and was buried in the vault at the rear of the chapel. A contemporary record of the funeral exists in a letter addressed to Dr Thomas Hawies which records that Huntington was buried in absolute silence – no funeral service being read over his remains. (See *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God* – section: *Concerning Burial of the Dead*.<sup>9</sup>) Joseph Chamberlain of Leicester preached a funeral sermon in the evening.

Jenkins was succeeded by John Vinall in the pastorate. His call to the oversight came about in the following manner. "The managers of Jireh Chapel proposed that certain members of the congregation should engage in prayer, read a chapter of the Bible, and expound the same, if they felt they had a word of exhortation for the people. When my father was first invited to do so, he declined; but afterwards, on being more closely pressed, he consented, and read the 21st chapter of Matthew; but made no remarks until he came to these words: 'Son, go work today in my vineyard; he answered and said, I will not; but afterward he repented and went.' Having read them as a text, he closed the Bible, and forthwith opened his commission. Whilst reading, some of his hearers concluded that he had nothing to say, when, to their and other's astonishment, the Lord favoured him with such liberty and boldness as carried with it a manifestation of the power and presence of God. This, his first sermon, was delivered in September 1811; and from that time he preached constantly."<sup>10</sup> He was not officially ordained until March 13th, 1822, by Thomas Oxenham of the Independent Church at Welwyn. A church was formed in 1821 and the Church Minute Book (sadly no longer in existence) recorded: "At a meeting at Jireh Chapel in the Cliff, on the first day of February, 1821, it was, (amongst other things) resolved, That it was expedient to form a church. And that no person should be admitted into church fellowship, but such as could conscientiously subscribe to the following Articles of the Church of England, as recited in the Trust Deed of the said Chapel."<sup>11</sup>

Vinall appears to have exercised oversight of other congregations including Providence Chapel, Brighton, and Providence Chapel, Chichester. At his ordination, referred to above, it would appear that "he was not ordained over any congregation in

particular, but as a willing servant of Christ to labour where the Lord in his Providence shall call him."<sup>12</sup> He did actually exercise oversight at Jireh from 1811 to 1856. In 1826 the chapel was found to be too small and was enlarged at a cost of £995-7s-5½d and the seating was increased from 1000 to 1200.

A typical service at this time would have been as follows. The minister would have commenced the service with prayer and this would have been followed by the singing of a hymn composed by the Independent minister, Joseph Hart. The reading of Scripture and prayer would have been followed by a second hymn of Hart's, again announced by the clerk. This preceded the sermon which was both doctrinal and experimental. We are not sure how often the communion service was held but we do know that the church did not practise open communion. Persons wishing to partake of the Lord's Supper would first be interviewed by John Vinall and be issued with a communion card which they presented at the ordinance prior to participating.

With regard to baptism, the church has always been a paedobaptist congregation. the Baptismal Record is complete. It records that William Huntington undertook infant baptism and each of the ministers of the church have done likewise. The last recorded baptism was conducted by Rev Irfon Hughes, formerly of Wycliffe Chapel, Sheffield, prior to his departure for the USA.

A Sunday School was formed in 1858 and a hall built and opened in 1875 at a cost of £900. The Sunday School continued in use until about 1960.

Vinall retired in 1856, his son John Jnr. being appointed to succeed him. John Snr. had wanted his other son, Ebenezer, to succeed but this was against the wishes of the chapel managers. The result of this was that some of the congregation withdrew and commenced another Calvinistic meeting in Lewes, which continued until Ebenezer Vinall was called to the oversight of Regent Street Chapel in London. John Vinall Jnr. died suddenly in 1859 and his father followed him in 1860. John Vinall Snr. was buried in the vault at the rear of the chapel and his epitaph reads: "The Rev John Vinall, for more than forty-five years minister of this chapel, who departed this life March 3rd 1860, in the 78th year of his Age. One of the chief of sinners. By the grace of God, 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a Crown of Righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, But unto all them also that love His

appearing.' II Timothy 4:7,8." The funeral service was conducted by Rev John Grace of Brighton assisted by Matthew Welland.

Matthew Welland was pastor of the Independent Church at Bulkington, Warwickshire. He was invited to the oversight of Jireh in 1859 and continued in the pastorate until 1902. He died in 1910. The following years saw the church without a settled minister until 1916 when Rev J J Beddow, seceding from the Church of England, was called to the pastorate. He was succeeded by Leonard Atherton in 1921 who had been a Wycliffe Preacher with the Protestant Truth Society prior to his call to Lewes. He left Jireh in 1927 to enter the ministry of the Church of England. It would appear that from this time until the mid 1950's, the church passed through a very unhappy period when it was domineered by rather prominent deacons and trustees.

In 1933 Mr Herbert Moore was installed as the pastor against the wishes of the congregation by a majority vote of the trustees – the power of appointment of the minister being with the trustees. Mr Moore was from Grove Chapel, Camberwell, and remained in the ministry until his death in 1963. The church then continued without regular oversight until 1990 when the trustees recommended to the church and congregation that the present writer be invited to the oversight, which recommendation was accepted.

The congregation has been in decline since about the turn of the century, until there is now a mere handful that meet each Lord's Day. However, we believe that the Lord has not removed His candlestick for, "Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah" (Isaiah 1:9). In the last few years there have been many disappointments and reductions in the congregation by death, but the Lord has maintained the small nucleus by others coming from time to time to join us.

Our greatest struggle over the last few years has been with the chapel building itself. Built in 1805, extended in 1826 and being mainly of a timber construction, the chapel had started to rot from the ground upwards. It was declared unsafe in 1985, since when the congregation has been meeting, by kind permission, in the Christian Alliance Hall, Lewes. The great gale of 1987 caused a great deal of damage, nearly a third of the roof being blown away and half of one of the exterior walls collapsing, when a chimney stack blew down. As the chapel is a grade 1 listed building it could not be demolished but, after protracted negotiations with English Heritage, this body agreed to fund the essential external

repairs to the limit of 90% of the cost. These are now almost complete at a sum to-date of £235,000. The trustees have turned their attention to the restoration of the interior of the chapel which is fitted with the original Georgian box pews, deacons' grand pew, clerk's desk and 'Wine Glass' pulpit. A new floor is needed and English Heritage are insistent that all the box pews and fittings must be replaced in their original positions. The estimated cost of this restoration is expected to be in the region of £100,000-£150,000, and negotiations are currently taking place concerning the amount of funding which English Heritage will be able to provide. We know that it will not be at the same level as previously and probably only in the region of 40-50%, which leaves the trustees and church with a large amount to raise. This will, of course, not be done by any worldly means. Adjoining the chapel is the old Sunday School Hall, now lying derelict. Planning permission for a development on this site of a new church hall and group of elderly persons' flats was given on the 19th January this year. God willing, the hall should be built later in 1994.

The church is evangelical, Protestant and Calvinistic, but we refute the charge that we are hyper-calvinist. We support various mission agencies and societies such as the Trinitarian Bible Society, Christian Witness to Israel and the European Missionary Fellowship. Although a tiny congregation, we maintain weekly services both morning and evening on the Lord's Day. Christian Rallies are held on the fourth Saturday of every month in the Cliffe Church Hall and attendance at these meetings has been encouraging. The first half-day conference of the British Reformed Fellowship was hosted by the Jireh congregation in 1993 and another is planned for this year on the 23rd April, when Rev Ron Hanko is to address the subject of "Evangelical Religion."

For the future, we look to the Lord. "It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not" (Lamentations 3:22). John Newton's words are very precious to us as a congregation:

*His love in times past forbids me to think  
He'll leave me at last in trouble to sink;  
Whilst each Ebenezer I hold in review  
Confirms His good pleasure to help me quite through.*

## References

1. *Sinner Saved*, H Sant & G Ella, p3.
2. *The Celebrated Coalheaver*, 1871, p96.
3. *Last Fragments of Jenkin Jenkins*, 1825, p238.

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