

“Blest Be the Tie That Binds”

By ROBERT D. KALIS

THE DAY of the great meeting finally arrived. John Fawcett had been counting the days in anticipation of hearing the renowned George Whitefield preach. There were not many joyous occasions for young John. Just three years earlier, when only twelve years of age, John had been left an orphan. That sorrow was made worse by his being apprenticed for six years to a tailor, thereby losing all hope of obtaining an education. Since then he had to labor like a slave for fourteen hours every day. One of his few joys was to read *Pilgrim's Progress* stealthily by candle-light on the floor of his attic room. Hiding the gleam of the candle under a “bushel” lest his master discover that he was not sleeping, John Fawcett literally devoured Bunyan's allegory. His entire Christian experience had its roots in this classic.

Now John was fifteen years old and anxious to start the pilgrim's journey to the celestial city. The established church had not touched the area of Yorkshire around Bradford and Wainsgate where he lived. Only the Baptists sent an occasional itinerant preacher to the area. But, at last, John Fawcett would have the op-

portunity to hear a real, genuine preacher.

Early in the day the people began arriving. They came from every direction. John watched in open-mouthed wonder as they gathered. Never in his life had he seen so many people. By the time the evangelist arrived, about twenty thousand had gathered in the open field where the service was to be held.

But now John's attention was riveted on the evangelist. He came on horseback and seemed to tower above all around him. No sooner had he dismounted from his horse than he assembled and mounted his portable pulpit. A murmur swept over the multitude like a breeze over a field of ripened wheat. Then everything else faded into obscurity as Rev. George Whitefield lifted his commanding voice to invoke God's blessing on the great gathering. Next he led the congregation in several well-known hymns and finally announced his text. It was John 3:14, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” Whitefield vividly pictured how every man, woman, and child present in that vast audience had been bitten by the fiery venomous serpent of sin.

They were doomed to die. Already the poison had begun its deadly work. Unless something was done they must all soon perish. But something had been done! God had sent His Son to be lifted up on that cruel cross.

Now the anointed preacher took his listeners to the cross. He showed them the suffering Savior. There they saw the One who had become a curse for them. They seemed to hear Him call: “Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.”

Then the invitation was given. All over the field there was a response. Many came to the cross and there looked to the One who alone could cure the fiery sting of sin. Christ had been lifted up that day, and now He was drawing many unto Himself.

John Fawcett was among those that came to the cross that day. “As long as life remains,” he later testified, “I shall remember both the text and the sermon.” That day the ties that bound him to his burden of sin were loosed. New ties which united him to his Savior superseded those which bound him to the tailor-master. Making his way with difficulty to the famous preacher, John confided to him his consecration and desire to preach the gospel some

day. It was one of the great moments of John's life when Mr. Whitefield gave him his blessing.

How different life was now! Although three years of apprenticeship still remained, John was aware that he had a new Master. Now there was liberty. There was hope—a light at the end of that long tunnel. Every spare moment was redeemed. The Bible became a new book to him. He joined the small group which worshipped in private homes in Bradford. Nor was he backward in testifying and sharing his blessings in these meetings. Several visiting ministers urged him to preach in surrounding villages as he had opportunity. No longer did time drag for John. Before he could realize it, he had completed his apprenticeship and was able to give himself to the work of God. As the old tie was snapped, a new tie was forged. At the age of eighteen John married a fine Christian girl five years older than himself, and happily they served their heavenly Master together.

In 1763, the group of believers at Wainsgate (described as a few straggling houses on a bald hill) asked him to be their pastor. There was little to be pastor of. A small, horribly dark and damp chapel with no furnishings except a few stools was all they had to start with. Gladly he accepted the invitation, and there in Wainsgate, Yorkshire, on July 31, 1765, John Fawcett was ordained to the ministry.

There was no parsonage for the minister and his wife in the first years there, and so they were forced to "board round" the congregation. They stayed a short time with each of the families that had enough room to squeeze them in for a time. This intimate

contact with the people revealed that the new minister was a true pastor. His genuine goodness and interest in the welfare of his flock quickly won their devotion. Soon it was necessary to build a balcony in the chapel to accommodate the new believers. Despite the lack of privacy in those early years, John and Mary Fawcett succeeded in bringing four children into the world in five years. After settling in their own home, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the family on the meager salary of less than two hundred dollars per year. The church offered a twenty-five-percent raise to the pastor if he would take it in wool and potatoes.

About this time an invitation came from Carter's Lane Baptist Church in London. Dr. Gill, their pastor, was old and incapacitated, so they were looking for a candidate to fill that position. It seemed the chance of a lifetime. Accordingly, Mr. Fawcett journeyed to London, preached his sermon, captivated his listeners with his simple exposition of the Scriptures, and returned home with the call in his pocket to fill that influential pulpit. His wife, Mary, was in accord that they should go.

When it was announced at Wainsgate that their pastor was leaving, consternation filled the hearts of the congregation. It seemed there never could be anyone who would fill the place of their beloved friend and pastor. Nevertheless, arrangements went forward. The date was set, and finally the farewell meeting was held. Amongst many tears the farewell sermon was preached.

All too soon for the congregation, the evil day arrived. The Fawcetts' belongings were carefully loaded onto six or seven

wagons for the trip to London. Finally, the last box of books was loaded onto the wagon. The children were set in their places, and John and Mary began the last round of "goodbyes." Most of the congregation was there, and many were weeping. Finally, overcome by the grief of their flock, John and Mary sat down on a packing case and wept bitterly. Looking up at last, Mrs. Fawcett said, "Oh, John, John, I cannot bear this. I know not how to go!" "Nor I, either," said the good man; "nor will we go. Unload the wagons and put everything in the place it was before."

Quickly the news spread through the crowd. The pastor would stay after all. Sorrow was turned into joy, tears to laughter. Pastor and flock were bound together with stronger ties than ever before. A letter was sent at once to the church in London explaining the situation. For the next Sunday service Pastor Fawcett preached from Luke 12:15, "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." He preached from deep experience and finished his sermon with the hymn written at midnight the night before for the occasion. It was the birth of the well-known parting hymn:

*Best by the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.*

The story of this hymn greatly enriches its third stanza:

*We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.*

More than ever before, Mr. Fawcett fed and guarded his flock. A new church seating six hundred was built at Hebden Bridge, just a few miles from

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Wainsgate. There Mr. Fawcett opened a day school for the neighborhood children and a training school for young preachers, and there he enjoyed considerable fame in his later years as a result of his writings. His *Essay on Anger* became a favorite of King George III who offered Mr. Fawcett any benefit he could confer. The offer was declined with the statement that "he lived among his own people, enjoyed their love: God had blessed his labors among them, and he needed nothing which even a King could supply."

For fifty-four years Mr. and Mrs. Fawcett served the congregation,

first at Wainsgate and then at Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire. In 1816 at the age of seventy-six, health failed for John Fawcett. It was decided that he should give up his pastoral work. A grand meeting was arranged. Friends and co-workers from more than a half-century of ministry gathered to pay tribute to the "good soldier of Jesus Christ." Many arose to call him blessed. Ministers and friends alike seemed to have the presentiment that they would "see his face no more." The climax of the grand meeting was reached when Mr. Fawcett, after being helped to the pulpit, read his text to the hushed audience. With a tremulous voice thick with emotion, he read from Joshua 23:14, "I am this day

going the way of all the earth." Before the brief sermon ended, the entire congregation seemed to be transported to the very gates of the celestial city, and there perceived such glories that they began to envy pastor and friend.

Soon after the memorable meeting, the earthly ties that had been so strong were superseded by the heavenly ties that were first formed sixty-two years before in the field where George Whitefield preached. On July 25, 1817, John Fawcett in his seventy-eighth year went to be forever with the Lord.

*When we asunder part,
It gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart,
And hope to meet again.*