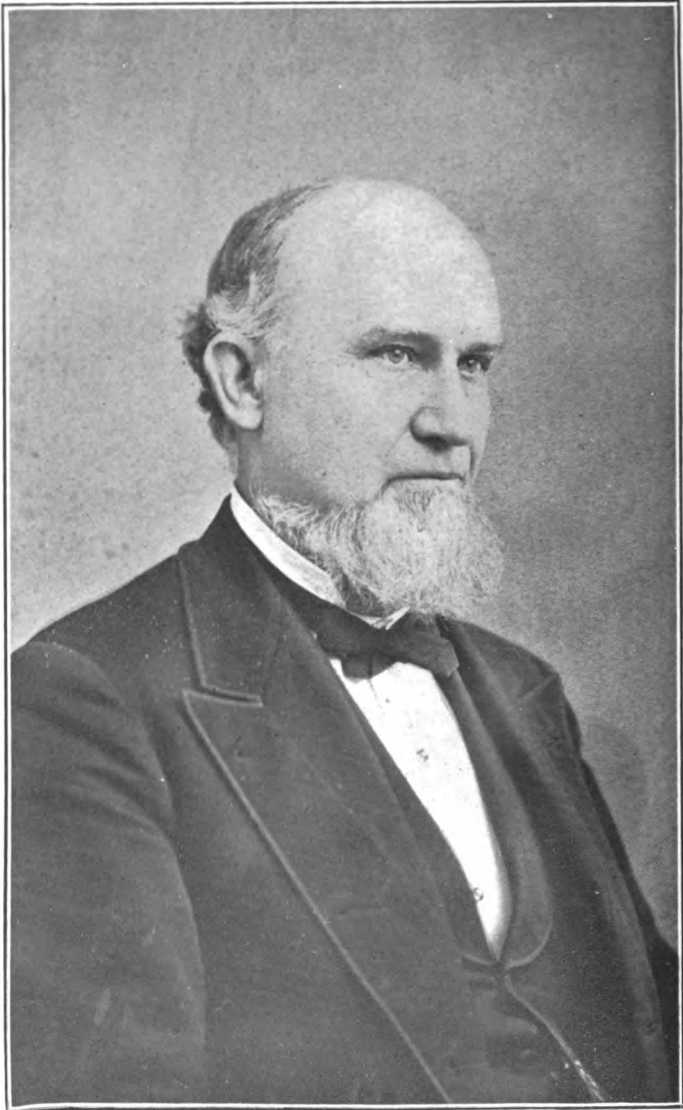


THE HISTORY
OF
PRESBYTERIANISM
IN
ARKANSAS

1828-1902

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REV. THOMAS RICE WELCH, D. D.

A Short Biographical Sketch of Rev. Thomas Rice Welch, D. D.

BY B. S. JOHNSON,
LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

It is well, amid the hurry and struggles of this life, that we stop, for a few moments, to look back and consider the lives of those who have passed away, in order to see the good they have done, the example they have set, and to appreciate its effect upon us individually, and upon the world at large. Retrospection can bring no other result than good, when we indulge in it from wise and proper motives. So, to-day, we are looking backward to the anniversary of the day when this honorable body—the first Presbyterian Synod of Arkansas—was organized and came into being. In doing so, it is but right and proper that we should recall the lives and deeds of those great and good men who took part in the beginning, and who actively assisted, as the years rolled by, in carrying on, perpetuating, and making more perfect, the works of those who began it.

We have been gladdened by the historical reviews of our beloved Church, and all its kindred organizations within the State of Arkansas, and by beautiful sketches of many of the noble men who have carried its standards, and presented the ever living word to a hungry people, during the last half century, which have been read before us. It would seem, then, that enough had been said, and that more could not be said. But the committee has placed upon me the pleasant duty of presenting to you a short sketch of the life of one who, for nearly a half century, was a member of this synod, and who, although not present at the organization of this body in 1852, nevertheless became one of its members shortly thereafter, and remained actively such until his death in 1886, a period of nearly forty years.

I know not why I have been selected to write a sketch of the life of the Rev. Dr. Welch, unless it be that, for nearly twenty years I sat beneath his teaching, met him daily in

all walks of life, admired his many noble qualities, and, under his teaching, became a member of this church, esteeming him as one of the best friends I had ever known. Be that as it may, the few words I can say will be words that give me pleasure in the saying, and, though dull and uninteresting they may be, they will nevertheless be the humble tribute of one who delights to honor his memory. It is, no doubt, a privilege which we all recognize, to pay some kind of tribute to the work of those who have lived and labored among us, and for us, and with us. To place flowers upon the grave, gives us a pleasure hard to analyze; sad and beautiful, it relieves the tension of the heart, and brings back memories that, after all, are consoling. Therefore, as we think to-day of the past, and look forward to the future, let us feel and remember that the lives that have gone are still before us, influencing us in our actions for good, as we journey onward.

Thomas Rice Welch was born at the home of his parents, in Jessamine County, State of Kentucky, on September 15, 1825. He quietly, suddenly—not, however, without warning—ceased from his labors in the city of Hamilton, Province of Ontario, Canada, on the evening of March 25, 1886. In the interval of a little more than three score years, were crowded the infancy, youth and manhood of an active life, which has left an impress which will be lasting in its effect upon the people of this community, and more enduring than falls to the lot of most men.

As to his ancestral lineage, he was descended from that sturdy, brave, staunch and intelligent Scotch-Irish race which has contributed so much, in our country, to the causes of liberty, religion and education. His paternal grandfather, John Welch, immigrated to this country from the north of Ireland, remained for a time in Virginia, but settled in Kentucky about the year 1790, having served as a soldier in the American army during a part of the Revolutionary War. He had three sons, the youngest of whom bore his name, and was the father of Dr. Welch. He resided at the old homestead, and is described, by those who knew him, as a hard working, thrifty Kentucky farmer, an honest, upright kind-hearted man. He died about 1843, when less than fifty years of age, and before Dr. Welch entered college.

Thomas Rice Welch was the fourth son in a family of five brothers and one sister. None of those brothers are now living, and his sister, too, has gone to her eternal rest. His mother was Betsey J. Rice, who survived her husband nearly thirty years, dying in 1872, in the county where she was born, and had spent her life—nearly seventy-five years. She was the daughter of Samuel Rice and Mary Moore, both of Virginia families, but among the earliest settlers of Kentucky. From this same family connection, sprung Dr. John H. Rice, the founder of the Union Theological Seminary, in Virginia; Dr. Benjamin H. Rice, an able minister, and brother-in-law of Dr. Archibald Alexander; also, Dr. Nathan L. Rice, whose renown as a pulpit orator, a theological teacher, and skillful ecclesiastical polemic, is yet fresh in memory.

Thomas Rice, brother of Dr. Welch's mother, for whom he was named, was a soldier in the war of 1812. After the close of that conflict, he became a Methodist minister, of considerable note in Kentucky. His namesake, during his childhood, was quite a favorite with him, and he was accustomed frequently to say to the subject of our sketch, "Tom, you will have to fill my place in the pulpit when I am gone." Such are the impressions made upon the mind of childhood, who can say what influence this quiet remark of a beloved relative may have had in moulding the future career of the then boisterous lad to whom it was addressed.

The paternal grandfather of Dr. Welch was an active ruling elder in our church, distinguished for his earnest christian devotion, and the record is made, concerning him, that the great object of his life was to promote the cause of Christ in the world.

It is often said that "Grace does not run in the blood;" but there is a sense in which this expression is untrue. We do not see why, if other things are the result of heredity, this, too, may not follow the same natural law. At the same time, the covenant promises made in the days of old, are, in their very terms, hereditary, descending from parents to children; and no doubt, in this case, the great and ever present christian devotion of the grandfather must have descended to the grandson.

From the freedom of the personal association of others with Dr. Welch, it was evident I am told that, for some rea-

son, his character was chiefly moulded by the influence of his mother, for whom he ever cherished a strong filial affection. This may have been due to the fact that his father died when he was but a boy, while he himself had nearly reached the age of fifty years at the time of his mother's death. It may have been, too, an illustration of what is claimed by some to be the law of hereditary descent—that intellectual force and bias are usually transmitted to the child from the mother, while moral tendencies commonly descend from the father. How true it is that then, as now, the mother was, and is, the arbiter of the life and the making of her boy. To her love, her fortitude, sacrifices and devotion, coupled with her virtues, are due the success and happiness of the after life of the child. When it is said that all history can be searched in vain for a truly great man who had a fool for his mother, is there any one, within his personal knowledge or observation, who can gainsay it?

Dr. Welch received his preparatory education at Bethel Academy, located at Knoxville, Ky. He entered Center College, at Danville, Ky., in May, 1844, and was graduated with the degree of A. B. in September, 1846. He was one of the comparatively few students who were privileged to enjoy the instruction, and fall under the magical personal influence of that prince of educators, Dr. John C. Young, who presided over that growing institution for twenty-seven years.

The plan of life formed by Dr. Welch previous to this period of his history, as stated by himself, was to obtain a classical education, study law, and make a name in the world in that profession. Having accomplished the first step, by the procurement of his diploma, his attention had turned to the next, and most of the year thereafter was spent in the study of law. Having, however, been admitted to the full communion of the church of his choice, his mind became impressed with the duty and privilege of preaching the gospel of Christ to his fellowmen. How little can we mortals know of the force and effect of the idle remark made by his christian uncle in years gone by! We judge cause by effect. Why may not these words have turned this learned man to the salvation of souls? Under the prompting of this impression, then, one year after he left college, he relinquished his

formerly cherished plans of studying law, and made preparation to enter upon a course of studies preparatory to what proved to be the chief work of his life. He immediately went to the Theological Seminary of Princeton, New Jersey, in the autumn of 1847, and there he remained until the spring of 1849. In September of 1849, he was licensed to preach the gospel, by the Presbytery of West Lexington. He then supplied the church at Warsaw, Ky., for one year, when he resumed his theological studies in New Albany Seminary, Indiana. On May 1, 1851, he received a certificate of graduation from that institution, and, on the 10th of the same month, landed at Helena, Ark., where his work in our State began. He was then but a licentiate. On April 11, 1852, he was ordained to follow the work of the gospel ministry, by the Presbytery of Arkansas, in Batesville.

During his residence at Helena, on May 21, 1855, he was married to Mrs. Margaret F. Henderson, who, after a happy married life of nearly thirty-one years, in the mysterious orderings of a Divine Providence, was left to mourn his loss, when, in a few short years after his death, she followed him. Dr. Welch remained at Helena until December, 1859, when he removed to Little Rock, taking charge of what is now known as the First Church, in which we are to-day holding our meeting, and in this church, uninterruptedly, joyously and cheerfully, loving and beloved, he labored as its honored pastor for over a quarter of a century. During all this period, he was not only faithful, devoted, and eminently successful as the pastor of the largest church within the bounds of our Synod, but he was regarded, by common consent, as the exponent of our denomination in all regions of the State, so that his influence was felt and exerted in behalf of true religion and a pure Presbyterianism, even in portions of the State where his voice was never heard.

It is a fact, well known to many of us, that, wherever a little band of struggling Presbyterians chanced to be thrown together, who, in their isolation, needed some one to counsel and encourage them, to assist in procuring the services of a minister, or in perfecting their organization, they applied to Dr. Welch, and never in vain. During his busiest years as a city pastor, in addition to his untold amount of anxious thought, extensive correspondence, and financial aid he was called upon to render, he advanced the general interests of

the church throughout the state of his adoption. Private interests, private feelings, never interfered with a call made upon him, and he was a force in organizing, encouraging and maintaining the organizations of the church throughout the state.

During the last ten years of his pastorate in Little Rock, he was called to bear testimony to the grace of the Divine Master in suffering, as well as in doing His work. By a series of painful maladies, he was subject to constant physical suffering. Although these were, for the most part, of such a nature as made but little permanent change in his outward appearance, yet they told, necessarily, upon his nervous system. With a few temporary seasons of rest, he remained at his post until firmly convinced, at last, of the necessity of seeking relief from his charge. Then, when his people at last realized his condition, at his suggestion, the Rev. R. B. Willis, now a member of this synod, was called as his assistant, and for several years assisted Dr. Welch in the pulpit and in his duties as pastor of this church.

After Dr. Willis left to undertake other and greater work, Dr. Welch still remained, faithful to the end. The members of this body, and especially of the First Church, then present, can well recall the perplexing silence and apparent hesitancy that followed when his final request was presented for his release from labor among us. He had been called to a professorship in a S. P. University at Clarksville, Tenn. He asked his people to permit him to go, but, wisely or unwisely, through a love and devotion that recognized no reason, they declined to do so. And, evidently devoted to his congregation, he accepted its declination, and resumed his work, which continued for several years thereafter. Then, again, when his health became very bad and threatening, he called upon his congregation to release him, and also made his application to presbytery to be discharged, that he might seek health in other lands and in other labors. While the presbytery could clearly see and fully appreciate the absolute necessity of granting his request, yet they seemed slow to take the formal action that was necessary. His congregation, after much discussion, and with deepest regret, saw the necessity, and gave their consent. The truth was, that many of us really felt that we could not do without him. I speak

for the older members forming the congregation of the First Church.

Having been released, he at once sought cure in the climate of Canada, hoping to restore his impaired health. He was appointed to the position of consul at Hamilton, Province of Ontario, by Mr. Cleveland's administration. He reported there bouyant and hopeful, and, when leaving, said "I believe, in that climate, my health will be restored, and, when it is, I shall resume my labors, either in some college of our church, or in some pastorate." Shortly after his appointment, he removed to Hamilton, and there officiated as representative of the United States government. It is needless to say that, ever faithful, energetic and conscientious, he filled that position to the perfect satisfaction of the government. His health gradually improved, and gave evidence that he would be restored, so that, in apparently renewed vigor, he was permitted, in March, to pay a brief visit to his friends in this city, where he had so long lived and labored, and, while here, he performed the marriage ceremony for one of the devoted members of his church, for which purpose he had especially returned.

From the scenes of his active life, he returned to his work at Hamilton. All seemed bright, hopeful and promising, and on March 25, 1886, a few days after his return, he spent the evening in cheerful conversation around his fireside, exhibiting, as we are told, unusual evidences of restoration to his former physical vigor and vivacity. Health seemed to be returning, and life looked brighter to him, as he thought of returning to the duties he loved so well. Retiring to rest a little while before some other members of his family, he suddenly, quietly and peacefully closed his eyes in that mysterious and eternal sleep, relieved from his earthly labors, nevermore to return—privileged thus to cross the narrow stream, as it were by a single step, from the modest life and pleasant surroundings of his earthly home, by the kindly ordering of the Master whom he had so long and faithfully served, delivered from a lingering and toilsome death through avenues of suffering. It is said by some that a sudden death is preferable to a lingering one; but, be this as it may, our friend was saved the suffering, and, as we firmly believe, fully and completely prepared, his spirit was taken to its eternal rest.

In passing, let me say that, during the Civil War, Dr. Welch, although firm and resolute in his principles, and confident as to his belief in the cause of his native section, remained steadfast at his post in the city of Little Rock, and, although the possession of this beautiful city passed into the hands of those who were contending against his section, he remained at his post, and ministered to both sides with the earnest spirit of the true christian he was. The good he did, the sympathy he gave to the distress and suffering of both friend and foe, the advice he was called upon for, and the helpful christian assistance he meted out to all, will never be known; but there are those among us who do know, and will testify to its greatness, its magnitude, and its loving and christian fortitude.

We need not go into the details of his work while pastor of the Little Rock church. This is a part of the history of that church, and the records of its session testify to its magnitude and influence, and one need but go over them to see the many, many familiar names of those who, through his ministry, have been brought to know and follow the blessed Master.

And now, having hastily traced this brief biographical sketch, this rapid survey of the life of our friend and pastor, the promptings of a fond personal attachment would suggest the indulgence in expressions of eulogy. But, repressing this natural tendency, I deem it more appropriate to present a few words upon the permanent ideas of which the life and service of our christian friend and brother may be regarded as the exponent. These ideas are taken bodily from the learned address of the Rev. I. J. Long, D. D., made upon this subject, and also from the address made by Rev. A. R. Kennedy, D. D., for a long time a member of this body.

The life of every individual, of anything like positive traits of character, may be viewed as the exponent of certain well defined ideas, of which he may be regarded as the devoted advocate. I therefore take up these traits of character briefly, in order that we may get Dr. Long's full understanding of them, in which I fully concur.

I.

The career of Dr. Welch, especially during the early ministry, was an emphatic expression of the true missionary

spirit. Soon after he entered upon his work as a preacher, he received an urgent call to labor in an old and comparatively flourishing church, located in one of the choice portions of the State of Kentucky. Here he could have resided among his own people, Kentuckians of more than usual culture, with perfectly easy work and ample salary; but from this he turned away, to cast his lot among the destitute and more needy portions of a frontier region, where he could expect but few of these attractive surroundings. Had he selected China or India as a field of his labor, his life of sacrifice would have received the instant admiration of his brethren. He would have gone forth to an easier work, in many of its aspects, and a surer compensation, secure in the sympathies, prayers and support of the whole Church. When he came to Arkansas, it was to effectually cut himself loose from all this, and, in the estimation of many of his immediate friends and brethren, we are told, he came to bury in obscurity the gifts and graces with which he was endowed by nature and human culture. But he found, in the wide and destitute regions of the State of Arkansas, a field in need of culture, whither few were disposed to come, and, leaving the easier work and more comfortable surroundings for those who seemed to covet them, he cast in his lot with the destitute and more isolated portions of the Master's vineyard.

In the exacting labors of such a field, opportunities for good and capacities for usefulness were rapidly developed and enlarged, which might have lain dormant for half a lifetime, under different surroundings. Coming as a licentiate, at first among strangers, and, to a great extent, cut off from association with his brethren, for more than eight years he stayed as the sole representative of the ministry of our Church in the eastern portion of the State, extending his work, by occasional visits, even to the western part of Mississippi, where we had no resident ministers. During those years, he was practically studying those lessons which afterward rendered him such a zealous and efficient manager of home mission work in his presbytery and synod. This deep devotion claims the careful consideration of members in our own time.

How many young ministers in the older and more settled portions of our church are now hovering around the

almost decaying fragments of churches well-nigh effete, whose influence would be multiplied a hundred-fold if they could only surrender their dreams of being called to some coveted place, so soon as vacated, and go out into the vast western field, in the wilderness, where God's word is rarely heard and never preached, carrying with them the genuine inspiration of the true missionary spirit.

II.

Another distinguished trait, of which Dr. Welch may be regarded as the true exponent, is what may be described as genuine self-respect—a spirit of true independence in the ministry. This self-respect and this independence was remarked and observed by all who came in contact with him. It is strange to what extent the remnants of form still linger in the minds of large numbers professing the Protestant faith. Sacerdotalism has yet its impress upon many. Probably on no other topic are these ideas more apparent than in the popular belief that often prevails as to the work of a public teacher of the church. To the minds of many, the term "preacher" suggests the idea of one who claims, in some way, to be better than others—who moves in a sphere of holiness, surrounded by some kind of atmosphere of peculiar sanctity, inspired with a spirit of consecration and devotion to the service of the Lord, which it would be wholly useless for others to expect to attain. His fitness for his work is measured by his acknowledged unfitness for anything else. Lack of common sense about all the ordinary affairs of human life, and gross ignorance of business principles, are evidence of his call to the ministry. We have only to refer to history to see how these ideas were inculcated into the masses, by those professors of religion long before the reformation, and how fixed and firm these opinions have become.

For his temporal support in his work, the preacher is to look largely to the donations of the charitably disposed. He is to be the recipient of these gifts as charity. His self-respect, if he has any, is to be wholly sunk. His personal independent character is to be stifled, until partially, if not wholly obliterated. Indeed, he is to be criticised, discussed and condemned, at the will and whim of every one

who chooses to express an opinion. He is looked upon as if he should be faultless, and he is treated as if he were a wrongdoer. Is it strange that, in the face of this, numbers of young men, endowed with true manly characters, should stand appalled, and turn away from such an uninviting prospect? Is it strange that we hear many a true, genuine christian preacher, in sorrow and disgust, say to himself, "I have made a mistake. I will seek some other calling."

Against this gross perversion of the truth and frightful source of incalculable injury to the church, the entire career of Dr. Welch was an emphatic standing protest. Naturally endowed with a fine business capacity, this was trained and developed, until he was justly regarded as an efficient and successful business manager, both in his private affairs and in his management of the affairs of the church. This, however, was by no means employed merely in furthering his own individual interests, but was freely devoted to advancing the interests of others, and especially to the practical management of the affairs of the church.

As a citizen, he took a deep and abiding interest in the welfare of the State, and in the material advancement of the community where his lot was cast. While eschewing all mere party claims, in all public enterprises of a legitimate character, he was an acknowledged leader. His mature judgment and eminently wise counsel were often sought by those having under their charge public measures for promoting the welfare of the community or of the state. But yet the claims of his private business and the demands of public welfare were ever held in subordination to his work as a preacher and pastor.

By skillful management of his business affairs he accumulated a private estate which placed him in comparatively easy circumstances, and greatly enhanced his power for doing good. Yet these things were never allowed to absorb his attention to the extent of interfering with his efficiency as a teacher in the Church, or his fidelity as a pastor. His salary as a minister, he properly regarded as compensation for services rendered. When the services were acceptably performed, he looked upon the amount solemnly promised as due, and its honest payment as the discharge of an obligation voluntarily assumed, and in no wise to be

received as a man born of a humble birth, and this truth he sought to impress on the minds of his people. As soon as the spiritual services had been faithfully rendered, he would frequently stand before his people as a benefactor, asking a promise of charity for their souls. In presenting questions of conscience before his people, he never failed to remind them of their duty and privilege in that regard.

In all these, and in a still other ways, his official career may be viewed as the exponent of true self-respect and genuine independence of character in the ministry, worthy of attention and imitation, especially by his younger brethren.

III.

Another prominent feature of Dr. Welch's work as a minister was his firm and fearless advocacy of the cause of sound christian education. During the early years of his ministry he was, perhaps, to some extent under the influence of the theory that the spirituality of the Church would forbid her even to manage the training of her own children. But, in his maturer years, he became, and continued to be, an earnest advocate of the importance and necessity of christian education as a part of the mission of the Church.

His own experience had taught him that a student might take a regular college course in institutions nominally christian, and yet not make a recitation in the Bible as such. When this matter was brought to his attention and arrested his thoughts, he soon reached the conclusion that the only difference that could be practically made between an infidel school and one avowedly christian, was by making the Bible a regular department of instruction, deserving at least equal attention with classics and mathematics. This conviction he did not hesitate boldly to avow on all proper occasions. He clearly saw that the theory before alluded to, although supported by the authority of honored and revered names in our Church, was yet practically a pernicious error, proving, when adopted, a serious drawback to the true efficiency of the Church. For if the children of the Church, during all those years when their characters are being molded for time and eternity, are subjected to the influence of a godless education, whether imparted under the state or