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ONE

"No, never!"

Every head turned; all eyes were fixed on the speaker in the gallery. It was a woman's voice, which made the words even more shocking.

In the spring of 1861, the annual meeting of the Methodist New Connexion was no place for a woman to speak her mind, but Catherine Booth could not restrain herself. She felt betrayed by the man who had drawn both her and her husband, William, into the reform-oriented denomination seven years before.

In 1854, the Reverend Dr. William Cooke had seen great potential in William and had encouraged the Booths to become part of the New Connexion work in London. Here, he assured them, was a place where Christians would be taught to honor Christ by letting their faith affect the everyday details of their lives.

Now this same man was interfering with their

dreams for revival meetings all across England. And he called it a compromise! Catherine saw it as a compromise with pious mediocrity and petty jealousy.

William had proven himself to be a very effective preacher, but for the past five years, Catherine had watched as opposition to him grew among some leaders in the denomination. It began when, after a series of meetings William held in Nottingham, P. J. Wright, the superintendent of the circuit, began to oppose his work. This was a serious development because the circuit system was the basis for the New Connexion's entire organizational framework.

Each circuit consisted of several groups of believers who lived within a single geographic area. Some groups had only a few members and met in a private home, while others were large enough to need their own church building. The members of each group prayed, studied, and worshiped together. They also held each other accountable for the spiritual quality of their daily lives. They were assisted by one or more ministers. If one circuit objected to William's methods, others might follow suit. Then where would he be able to preach?

William's evangelistic meetings were aggressively publicized in a society where holiness was usually associated with polite, sedate, private behavior. Lists of those who needed salvation or a renewed commitment to Christ were developed, and these people were prayed for by name in public meetings before the revival services began. Some of the people on these lists were civic leaders, successful businesspeople, or even prominent members of local churches. For them to be identified as

"sinners" was considered embarrassing, insulting, and perhaps slanderous.

Those who attended William's meetings were asked to make an immediate public commitment to Christ by coming forward and kneeling in front of all those in attendance. The meetings sometimes became very long as several appeals for a response were made. As the meetings grew longer, they often became very emotional, and this led to the charges that people were being forced into irresponsible decisions for Christ rather than being encouraged to make thoughtful and carefully considered ones. It was assumed by some leaders within the New Connexion that people who were coerced into following Christ would turn their backs on that decision.

During the meetings and the work that was done with new converts afterward, laypeople—both men and women—were assigned important duties that had formerly been performed only by ordained ministers.

The participation of women in the meetings was particularly controversial. Many Christian leaders believed that the Bible commanded women to keep silent in church or be carefully and constantly submissive to every man around them. It did not help the Booths' situation that Catherine had been a strong advocate for the unlimited involvement of women in all aspects of worship, teaching, and leadership in the church since before she married William.

Whatever the exact cause of Wright's opposition to William's preaching methods, it is clear that much of the problem was a simple matter of jealousy. William was such a dynamic speaker and drew such large crowds

that he made most of the other pastors in the New Connexion look very inadequate by comparison.

William and Catherine were committed to their approach to ministry, however, and served in several communities, including Gateshead, a town of fifty thousand, located just across the river Tyne from Newcastle, on the northeastern coast of England. By the summer of 1860, William had become quite ill. The combined pressures of pastoral duties and evangelistic endeavors were partly to blame. The stubborn unwillingness of New Connexion leaders to assign him to full-time evangelism added more stress. The attacks on Catherine because of her work at Gateshead and her outspoken advocacy for women in the church also weighed heavily on him. It took months for William to recover his health. During that time, Catherine took over virtually all his duties.[1]

Soon, her remarkable abilities were clear to all, and her fame as "the woman preacher" was spreading far beyond Gateshead. But this was a time when most Victorian women wore gloves, carried delicate fans, and kept their pretty mouths shut, at least in public. Catherine's strong opinions and great success as a preacher combined with William's uniquely powerful ministry soon had many leaders in the New Connexion whispering, "These independent Booths need curbing."

In December 1860, William returned to his work at Gateshead, and on Christmas Day, he and Catherine shared the preaching duties at Bethesda Chapel.[2]

During the first few months of 1861, Catherine began to regularly accept invitations to preach in public—and not just as a replacement for her ailing husband.

The last restraints on her role in their shared ministry were cast aside.

On March 5, 1861, William wrote a lengthy letter to the Reverend James Stacey, the retiring president of the New Connexion, pressing for reassignment to evangelism full-time.[3] The detailed plan showed how William's itinerant work could be supported by the denomination and would enhance their outreach efforts.

Catherine had grown very frustrated with New Connexion Methodism and was urging her husband to consider an independent ministry of some kind. But she was also willing to stay at Gateshead, so long as "the Lord's leading" was their first priority.[4] She also had some anxious thoughts about the future. She was now the mother of four young children. They had a good home and a settled income, but only so long as they remained in Gateshead. The membership of Bethesda Chapel had grown dramatically and the Sunday services were crowded, but Catherine was concerned about her husband's health, as well as her own.

Larger family issues troubled her. She worried about her parents, who lived far away in London. Her father was prone to wild swings of emotion and had struggled in the past with alcoholism. Then there was William's widowed mother, who still looked to her son for support.

As the New Connexion's annual conference convened in Liverpool that May, it was clear to William and Catherine that they had reached a turning point in their lives. They knew their own future would be one of the most hotly debated topics in the conference. With the

work at Gateshead prospering, no one disputed how much the whole denomination benefited from the Booths' ministry. As the conference began, William was ready to risk everything by forcing the issue of his assignment to full-time evangelistic work. "I'll make a strong plea for them to allow me to do the itinerant evangelism work and relinquish the circuit pastoral duties," he said.

"I'll be in the gallery praying for you," Catherine assured him.

All during the week, William waited for an opportunity to be heard. Finally, on Saturday, May 25, the question of the Booths' future was at last raised. It had already been a long week and the attendees were tired and fidgety. William's proposal was presented by the Reverend J. Stokoe, and carefully considered arguments were given in favor of it.

Then P. J. Wright and his supporters brought arguments against the proposal. The battle began. Frustrated voices were raised on both sides of the argument, but it was clear that many at the meeting were deeply angry with both of the Booths for their unwillingness to submit to the guidance of denominational leaders.

"His request is against all reason and authority," one minister stated flatly.

Another critic suggested that William's popularity was damaging the whole circuit system. His revival meetings could easily add hundreds of new coverts to a circuit, but neither he nor his wife was interested in staying in the area to help care for them. Worse still, many of the new believers were disappointed by the stale traditionalism of

the established churches. They were more interested in going to the next series of revival meetings in a nearby town than in working to build up the local circuit.

"He is taking the cream and leaving the skimmed milk for others," the man loudly complained.

As time passed, the discussion grew even more heated. Some argued that it was an insult to any pastor to bring in someone from the outside to conduct evangelistic services. Others vehemently denounced the emotional excesses of all revivalism. Speaker after speaker acknowledged that William possessed exceptional gifts but then went on to stubbornly argue that these gifts could be best used within a single circuit.

One speaker pointed to William's long illness during the preceding year and suggested that all the travel was "bad for him; bad for the circuit."

With the meeting rapidly deteriorating into an abusive shouting match between supporters and opponents of William and Catherine, Dr. Henry Crofts, president of the New Connexion, stopped the proceedings. Then he requested that the gallery be cleared so the discussion could take place "with closed doors."

All during the rancorous debate, Catherine and William had been exchanging glances—he from the conference floor below, she from the upper gallery. As Catherine stood to leave, she was overcome with disappointment and indignation at what she had heard and seen. At first she was carried slowly along by the press of people around her. She approached the outer hall and the stairs down to the main level of the hall.

She hesitated, lingering at the door to the stairs.

She couldn't bring herself to abandon William at such a crucial moment. A thought suddenly struck her: *He will look up for my support, and I won't be there.* Instead of leaving, she remained at the head of the stairs where she could still hear the proceedings. She could also still see much of the floor below, but those below could not easily see her.

William was given an opportunity to read his March letter to the Reverend James Stacey, but even his eloquence did not settle the issue.

Hoping to salvage something for the New Connexion and for William, Dr. Cooke, his old mentor, proposed a compromise amendment. "If Booth takes over the Newcastle circuit, couldn't he, by special arrangement with his officers, occasionally take time out for evangelistic work elsewhere?" He went on to suggest that William concentrate on his duties as a pastor, limit his evangelistic work, and refrain from holding revival meetings in other circuits without the consent of the ministers who oversaw them.

William's heart sank within him as the amendment was quickly passed by a large majority. All this had been tried before, and all of it had failed!

Suddenly, Catherine's frustration at the formalities of the conference, and her anger at the spiritual blindness of those who opposed her husband's mission to evangelize England, could no longer be contained. "No, never!" she loudly exclaimed.

As William sat quietly, his chin resting on his left hand, his right arm crossed in front of him, he heard Catherine's clear voice ringing out from above.

Bewilderment, dismay, and outrage registered on the faces around him. "Are the doors not closed?" cried Dr. Crofts. "Close the doors!"

Catherine quickly found herself taken firmly by the arm and ushered down the stairs. William quietly took up his hat and walked to the rear door of the hall. There he met Catherine and embraced her fiercely. Together they left the building.

Behind them, the hall erupted into chaos, while several voices shouted, "Order! Order!"

Strange as it may appear, William and Catherine were not quite done with the New Connexion. They yielded to an offer from Dr. Cooke to make William the superintendent of Newcastle circuit, one of the most important in the denomination.

But the die had been cast. Although no one expected it, before long the Booths would begin a journey that would lead to the founding of one of the great Christian organizations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But then few would have expected the widow's son to have entered the ministry in the first place.

TWO

On April 10, 1829, the piercing wail of a newborn baby broke out at 12 Norrintone Place, Sneinton, a suburb of Nottingham. William Booth had just made his entrance into the world. The Booth family lived in a six-room house made of red brick. William's mother, Mary, was Samuel Booth's second wife, and they shared their small space with William's sisters, Ann, Mary, and Emma.

The Booths kept to themselves. William's mother had grown up with an aunt and uncle in a rural cottage after her own mother died. She'd never been outgoing. She and her husband didn't enjoy socializing. One family friend described the Booths as "proud and reserved." But the Booths were quite strict about making sure their children attended church every week.

William's father was a builder. At times he made a good living, and he planned on making his only son a gentleman, which in British society would give him

prestige and easier access to good jobs. William was told that he would attend Mr. Biddulph's school to get the education and friendships needed to become a British gentleman.

Unfortunately, hard times had hit Nottingham and the surrounding villages. Because people were losing their jobs, William's father couldn't sell or rent the homes he was building. Without money to pay the bills he owed, Samuel Booth lost the houses he had built one by one. Eventually the Booths lost the mortgage on their own house.

There was no money to pay for William to continue going to school. In fact, the family had difficulty keeping food on the table. So rather than training to be a gentleman, thirteen-year-old William was apprenticed to a pawnbroker, Francis Eames, who lived and worked in Nottingham's Goose Gate section. Goose Gate was a horrible section of the city. People lived on the streets because they couldn't afford to rent even a small room. They struggled to find food to eat and clothes to wear.

While William's master, Mr. Eames, provided him with food and a place to sleep, he also worked William hard. Like most apprentices in his day, William received little pay for work that lasted from early morning to late evening. Instead of being paid well, he was supposed to be learning a business that would supply him with an income for life once he completed his apprenticeship.

William had been working for Mr. Eames for less than a year when he received word that his father, Samuel Booth, had died. "I had scarcely an income as an apprentice," William remembered, "and was so hard up

when my father died, that I could do next to nothing to assist my dear mother and sisters, which was the cause of no little humiliation and grief."[1]

But William had no other options. Until he was nineteen years old, he was obligated to work for Mr. Eames. Apprentices signed contracts with their masters which gave the masters total control over their lives for six or seven years. Those contracts didn't allow the apprentices to leave if they didn't like the situation. Runaway apprentices couldn't get other jobs and were doomed to a life of poverty. So fourteen-year-old William kept working for Mr. Eames and sent home what little money he could to help his mother and sisters.

Obviously William's pay wasn't enough to support the entire family, so his mother took a job running a small shop in Goose Gate, as well. She sold household wares to her customers. Between William's apprentice salary and his mother's earnings at the shop, they were able to keep their family together.

During these hard times, William's mother counseled him, "Be good, William, and all will be well." When William wrote about his youth, he left the impression that his mother was a strong Christian influence. He spoke very lovingly of her, praising her for what she had done for him and his sisters.

But at the time, William was more influenced by his friends. He wrote that his companions' "influence was anything but beneficial" and reported, "I went downhill morally, and the consequences might have been serious."[2]

William's work as a pawnbroker's apprentice gave

him firsthand opportunities to see the misery of the city's poor. He saw the desperation in people's eyes as they brought wedding rings, Sunday silk handkerchiefs, umbrellas, and printed shawls to the pawnshop. By exchanging their few belongings for cash, they hoped simply to stay alive and avoid eviction from their homes. Because the pawnbroker resold their belongings at a much higher price than he bought them for, few sellers were ever able to buy back their treasures.

Memories of children crying for bread on the streets of Nottingham stayed with William throughout his long life. One evening he saw ragged men and women smash windows to get into a bakery. Seconds later, they fled, their arms crammed with loaves of bread. William learned a lesson about how hunger led people to take desperate actions.

Between his friendships and his work, William might eventually have become just one more person exploiting poor people in their desperation. But a year after his father died, something happened that changed the direction of William's life. At fifteen years of age, William began attending the Broad Street Wesleyan Chapel, part of the Wesleyan Methodist Church.

During services, William became increasingly aware of his own sinfulness. The lay preacher Isaac Marsden stirred the teenage boy's heart by warning that souls die every minute. William could not recall the exact moment of his conversion—it may have been at a prayer meeting or it may have been in private—but he often recounted in vivid detail the night in 1844 when he was trudging home from a meeting on unpaved streets. Suddenly a

sense of spiritual exaltation flooded through his whole being. While the experience may not have been as dramatic as the New Testament account of Saul of Tarsus being blinded by a brilliant light on the Damascus Road, it was nonetheless real. William stood on the darkened street and he knew he must renounce sin and take care of wrongs he'd done to others.

The first thing he did after this experience was to gather a group of friends who had given him a silver pencil case in recognition of a favor they thought he had done for them. In reality, William hadn't done the favor they credited to him. He knew he had to make things right with these friends if he was serious about obeying Jesus, but it was not easy for him to do. He wrote, "Merely to return their gift would have been comparatively easy, but to confess the deception I had practised upon them was a humiliation to which for some days I could not bring myself."

After days of internal struggle, William Booth finally determined that he must make things right. Later he wrote, "I remember, as if it were but yesterday, . . .the finding of the young fellow I had chiefly wronged, the acknowledgment of my sin, the return of the pencil case—the instant rolling away from my heart of the guilty burden, the peace that came in its place, and the going forth to serve my God and my generation from that hour."[3]

Because of his contract, William continued to work for Mr. Eames in the pawnshop. But he understood that he had to change how he was using his free time or he would not be able to serve God. Increasingly he spent

every free moment in church and ministering to other people. "God shall have all there is of William Booth," he declared.

By the time he was seventeen, William was trying to follow in the footsteps of an American revivalist, James Caughey, whom he had seen hold revivals in Nottingham during 1846. William and his friend Will Sansom set out for the impoverished Meadow Platts neighborhood. According to Booth, "We used to take out a chair into the street, and one of us mounting it would give out a hymn, which we then sang with the help of, at the most, three or four people. Then I would talk to the people, and invite them to come with us to a meeting in one of the houses."[4] Lively songs and short messages led to conversions.

Young William Booth and his friend were not satisfied with simply holding meetings. They wanted to help God change people's lives. So they visited the sick and the converts whose names and addresses they had recorded. Often he didn't get home until midnight, and he didn't get as much sleep as he needed because he had to be at Mr. Eame's shop, ready to work, by 7:00 every morning. William acknowledged later that this schedule wore down his health, but he also learned through both the work he did and the mistakes he made. Much later, he wrote about those early efforts, "We had a miniature Salvation Army."

As their ministry continued, William Booth and Will Sansom became even closer friends. Booth compared their friendship to that of David and Jonathan in the Bible. But tragedy was all too near. Will Sansom suddenly became very ill, probably with tuberculosis. His family