

Robert Hawker D. D. One time Vicar of Charles Plymouth Part I

Robert Hawker, was born on 13 April 1753, in the city of Exeter, Devon. From this same city hailed Richard Hooker, the renowned defender of Anglicanism in the days of Elizabeth I, best remembered for his Ecclesiastical Polity. Also from the city came Sir Thomas Bodley founder of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Robert Hawker's father was a surgeon in Exeter. His grandfather was also a highly respected surgeon and aldermen of that same city.

Robert Hawker's father's name was Jacob, and died at the early age of 36. Robert was the only surviving child of the family, a sister had died in infancy. He seems to have been brought up by his mother, supported and assisted by two, I think, maiden aunts. One of these together with his mother took great interest in his education and taught him by heart many texts and portions of Scripture.

He later commented on the fact that his earliest education was geared and aimed at teaching him the fundamentals of Christianity. He criticized what he called the so called "refinements" of the time which believed progress was being made when books were produced with the sole purpose of teaching children to read from lesson books which made no mention of God or Christian teaching. "It was my happiness to have been taught my lessons in the first books of learning, which gathered all their lessons from the Scriptures."

We will see as we begin to look at his ministry how that throughout he always gave time to the teaching of children and to the preparing suitable books for their instruction in Christian things. John Williams his biographer wrote:

Several useful and instructive catechisms were also drawn up by him with this view, to bring children therein taught to an early acquaintance with the word of truth. How amiable does the man of first - rate talents, the scholar of deep erudition, the polemic divine appear, in condescending to prepare the first books of learning for infant children, to warn them against the delusions of error! Did ever the venerable Dr. Isaac Watts shine with more lustre, than when thus employed?

From study at home, he moved to the Endowed Grammar School at Exeter. Here he was taught Latin and Greek classics. He also studied Hebrew, and achieved a high proficiency in all three of these languages. Latin it is said is a very precise language enabling great accuracy of thought, and precision in the study of theology. Hebrew and Greek, the languages of the Old and New Testaments, enabling the expositor proficient in these languages to penetrate deeply into the meaning of the text. John Williams

described him as having a capacious and retentive mind and these are indeed great assets to the scholar and the preacher.

It seems clear from the makeup of his mind and character that he was destined for the work of the ministry. From his earliest days he appears to have felt the Lord preparing him for this work. However, his mother felt strongly that he should follow in his fathers and grandfather's profession, that is as a physician/ surgeon. Consequently, he was sent in the fullness of time to Plymouth under the direction of a highly regarded surgeon in that city, Dr. White. This gentleman later became an alderman of the city, and in the Providence of God, was used to obtain for Robert Hawker, the living of Charles Church which was to be the scene of his life's great work. His mother also at this time moved to Plymouth, his aunts kept up correspondence with him through letters.

John Williams makes this observation about one of his aunts letters.

A letter to him, from one of them, is still preserved by the family, of which I have been favoured with the perusal of and have made the following extracts, which I hope will not be unacceptable as it demonstrates his habits and pursuits when a youth. From this letter his aunt appears to have been a woman of a superior mind, clear in her judgment, sound in her principles, of deep perception, and well acquainted with men and things. Had Hippocrates been instructed in a Christian school, he could not have enjoined on his pupils a more wholesome counsel. After informing him that she had received, with pleasure, his letter, enclosing some poetical compositions, consisting of a fable, and a pastoral elegy which juvenile productions are now lost; she gives him this advice for his future practice, "Always to consider, that the life of the lowest individual is as dear to himself as that of the greatest personage, and therefore, not to be trifled with by the ignorance or inexperience of a weak or raw practitioner" – "A consideration," continues she, "which I fear is not always attended to by those called to be physicians. I rather say this to you, as you seem, in your last, to condemn (which I am much pleased with) that hasty and over-forward prescriptions of beginners. I hope you will never do so, until you are versed in the theoretic part; and then, when you come to launch out into practice, walk by that golden rule, of "doing unto others as you would wish to be done unto you." Deal with your patients by conscientious, not lucrative or vain – glorious views. Think that every life and every case that is committed to your care you must give an account of; which will lead a good man, (such as I wish my dear boy to be) not only to be careful in what he does, but also to implore the divine assistance to aid his endeavours, and think himself happy in being the instrument only of good to his fellow creatures."

She then refers him to Ecclesiasticus, in the Apocrypha, chapter 38:1 – 14, which speaks of the

honour due to physicians, and of their duty to "pray unto the Lord, that he would prosper that which they gave of ease, and remedy to prolong life."

This letter was dated June 11, 1770, when Robert Hawker was about 17 years old.

It is a very good indication of the excellent influences that were brought to bear upon him in the early stages of his life, and indeed remained with him throughout.

However, in spite of all this good influence he at this time remained unconverted. The memoirs relate a story of his throwing a "squib", a banger that is, into a church service, led by the Rev. Henry Tanner of Exeter. It is not known by his biographer whether this took place in Exeter, or whilst Henry Tanner was preaching in Plymouth. Later in life Robert Hawker, was to edit Henry Tanner's works and gave invaluable assistance in the frailty of his later years.

He was about 19 or 20 years old when he met and married Miss. Annie Raines. The wedding took place in Charles Church Plymouth on January 6th 1772. They were to be 45 years married, and had eight children. His wife predeceased him on April 17, 1817. One of his daughters died aged 32 in 1824. These losses affected him deeply but in spite of all his deepest sorrow he felt of his duty to preach in Charles church on the Lord's Day following his daughter's death.

Returning now to the events of his early life and his medical studies. These took him up to London where he spent time at St. Thomas's, and Guys, and other hospitals in the Capital. He later returned to Plymouth as an assistant surgeon to the Royal Marines. As he established himself as a Marine surgeon he objected to the practice of flogging then widely practiced in the Navy to ensure discipline. He was required as a Doctor to examine those condemned to be flogged to ascertain their fitness for enduring the sentence. He however did more than this, and if he could find a single good trait in the man's character, he was ready to stand advocate for him and to speak in his favour, as it is remarked, often with success. This readiness to stand by them endeared him to the common sailors. Again we may note that this characteristic to stand by ordinary people in trouble, continued throughout his life, and was a marked element in his latter ministry.

His biographer also adds:

His acquaintance with the world of military service, prepared him in subsequent life to write the

pleasing and interesting work which bears the title – "The Zion's Warrior, or Christian Soldiers Manual, in which the duties and occupations of the military life are spiritualized and improved." Though he might look forward to a promotion in his Britannic Majesty's service, the King of Kings was training him for a very different warfare, a far more important post of honour.

Williams p.14

After three years as a surgeon to the Royal Marines, he answered to the call of God, which we have seen he was conscious of from his earliest life, and entered the ministry of the Church of England.

At this time, he was married and the father of several children, nevertheless he left Plymouth to go up to Magdalene College, Oxford to study divinity. This was in May 27, 1778. However in the autumn of the same year he left the University to take up a short curacy at St. Martin's, near Looe in Cornwall. This appointment lasted three months. It became known that a curate was needed to serve alongside the Rev. John Bedford at Charles Church, Plymouth where he was well known, highly respected and where his family still lived. It was deemed to be the will of the Lord that he should return to Plymouth and take up this position.

In regard to his conversion it appears from his biographer that at this time he only possessed a "head knowledge" of the Gospel, and was not truly converted. Certainly according to Williams, he had no idea of the doctrines of grace, usually known as Calvinism. He did however gradually come to understanding, though perhaps a very indistinct understanding of Gospel truth. It is also significant to note that had he been preaching the full and doctrinally sound biblical view of the Gospel at this time he most likely would not have obtained the curacy of Charles Church, the scene of his later great usefulness. God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform

One of his early sermons as curate of Charles was published. This showed his ability, but sadly in it one finds no reference to the name of Jesus Christ. The title of the sermon was, "The Devout Soldier," based on Acts 10:7.

He was for six and a half years' curate, when on the death of the Rev. John Bedford 1784 he was appointed vicar.

Another sermon preached and published shortly after this, August 1785, begins to reveal a greater understanding of the Gospel. His text was in II Corinthians 6:4, "In all things approving ourselves as ministers of God." By all accounts by the time he preached this sermon he had experienced a saving knowledge of Christ.

His interest in Sunday schools

The modern Sunday School movement traces its origins to the work of Robert Raikes in Gloucester in 1780. Robert Hawker is clearly interested in this work and by August 1789 we see him actively advocating and supporting the setting up of Sunday Schools here in Plymouth.

Meets John Wesley and William Romaine

He entertained John Wesley at his table in this period and later opened up his pulpit to the Rev. William Romaine, the Calvinistic preacher. In the case of the latter Hawker his own afternoon sermon sought to moderate and distance himself from some of the Calvinistic sentiments espoused in Romaine's morning sermon.

There seems to be a reference to this incident in Hawker's autobiographical work, *Zion's Pilgrim*. Here he records somewhat cryptically an interview he had at this time with a "traveller" who visited him and who taught him more fully the Gospel of truth. Some maintain that this unnamed individual was William Romaine, while others have suggested that it was Romaine's successor at St Anne's, Blackfriars, London, Rev. Mr. Goode. It is certain the by 1803, when Hawker himself preached at St. Anne's Blackfriars, Robert Hawker himself was preaching the doctrines of grace.

The fuller light he received on the doctrines of the Gospel as we might expect improved his ministry considerably, and also deeply affected the way he spent his time.

Always an extremely sociable and amiable individual, this change in doctrine brought to an end, evening spent in playing chess or cards with friends. He lost friends, and even the hope of a large legacy from one of them, when this kind of socializing ceased. He became more attentive to the needs of the sick and aged in his flock. Weekly prayer meetings began to be held in the homes of the shut-ins. In these prayer meetings he began to expound the Word of God giving special emphasis to the poor or untaught in his congregation. (See Biography p.29)

Controversy with the minister of the Socinian/ Unitarian Meeting House.

Again as a result of his new appreciation of the doctrines of grace, he began to oppose the Unitarianism preached by a certain Mr. Porter of the above Chapel. This Chapel had

once been a Presbyterian Church but like others in that denomination about this time had descended into Unitarianism. Robert Hawker aware of the dangers of these views published a volume of sermons on the Divinity of Christ. For this he was awarded a Doctor of Divinity degree from the University of Edinburgh in 1792. The success of this volume resulted in the publication of a further volume this time on the Divinity and Work of the Holy Spirit in 1794.

Later that same year came a further significant volume, this time warning the public against the philosophies and ideas that lay behind the French Revolution. These sermons were an appeal to the people of England warning against any political revolution, to be attempted by tumult or clamour. In this work he clearly sets out the value of the British Constitution of 1688. He compares it to a fine old painting, an old master, which any meddling with would inevitably spoil and ruin it. (Proverbs 24:21) The British Constitution of 1698 he observed is a masterpiece of balance and good sense. His comments on this issue are as relevant today as they were back in the 18th century.

Though clearly a Tory in his politics he was not unmindful the practical needs of the poor. Perhaps we could call him a conservative after the style of Edmund Burke.

His concern for the needs of the poor was set down in a publication which he called, *Misericordia, or Compassion to the Sorrows of the Heart*.

Intended originally for an institution of that name, which he, about this time, established in Plymouth, and which still continues to pour its stream of active benevolence, where misery and want reside.(1831). But this useful little work was afterwards published, as the title page expresses it, " For the use of the sick and sorrowful of every description, forming a suitable companion for every sick – room." The Misericordia, from which this little work borrowed its name is a charitable institution, for the express purpose of relieving the wants of the forlorn and distressed stranger. In every large town there may be found numbers of this description, and not merely among such as come forward to public notice, by knocking at the door to ask alms; but much more so, in these retired haunts, where modest polity to often secretes itself from observation. "In such abodes of human woe," as testifies our worthy friend, "are sometimes discoverable beings of more real wretchedness than the imagination can well conceive; at once contending, amidst all the pressing necessities of nature, accompanied very often with sickness and pain, against every sorrow to which the heart of man is accessible; without a friend to console, and not un-frequently without any sense of religion to soften the severity of the gloom around. The first design of this institution is directed to supply the wants of the body – and the next is to the concerns of the soul. Not the wants of the body have the prior claim; but because,

when its wants are supplied, the mind is left to more freedom, and is better disposed also, it is presumed, to attend to the one thing needful.

In the preface of a later edition of this little book, the following additional note is made.

About this time, I was called upon daily to perform the last office in burying the dead, chiefly of soldiers, and to such numbers, that my mind was more than ordinarily arrested to inquire into the course of such great mortality. I found, but several transports, laden with troops for foreign service, I put into Catwater (the name of an inlet of the sea at Plymouth) for distress of weather; and a pestilential fever breaking out among the soldiery, they were constrained to bring them ashore; and a large barn afterwards, and thereafter called the Friary Hospital, in the parish of Charles, received them. Within the space of three months, more than 1000 died: the wives and children of many of them took refuge in Garrets and cellars in the town. Their distresses excited no small consideration. I availed myself of this general feeling, and instituted this charity, which I am pleased to say, continues now up to near 30 years.

Robert Hawker also in the year later edition of this work adds another moving footnote. He describes coming across a book on the second-hand bookstall. The book was marked with the name Patrick O' Connor. He recognized it as belonging previously the one of the survivors of this epidemic. He concluded that it had been sold by Patrick O'Connor to raise a few pence to buy bread for his family. In it was this pathetic note written by O'Conner at the height of his illness.

Patrick O' Connor, once of the famous City of Limerick, in the County of Kilkenny, and the kingdom of Ireland; but now dying of a broken heart, in Friars Hospital, Plymouth."

Concern for his own children growing up

It is remarkable that in all the activity of Robert Hawker's life he made time for his own children. He had eight children as noted above. On each of their birthdays he wrote to them a lengthy epistle, expressing his love for them, and offering advice and encouragement. Here are the opening words of one of them to his daughter Mary.

My dearest Mary, I greet in the Lord! I am just returned from the heavenly court, (indeed I am still there in spirit) where I have been to present in the arms of my faith my dear child to Him and His unceasing favour, from whom I first received her; leaving, at his throne, all that my poor heart could utter of supplications with thanksgiving, for all blessings spiritual, temporal, and eternal, for my dearest Mary; and that my God may supply all your need according to his riches

in glory by Christ Jesus.....

His concern however as we have already noted was not only for his own children. In 1798 the foundation stone was laid of a school- room which bore the name in stone over the door, "The Household of Faith." It partly received this title because when the foundation stone was laid he had not a guinea subscribed to pay for its completion.

It was designed as a place of prayer for use on Sundays at 9 AM on Wednesdays at 7:30 PM.

It was to be used as a school- room on week days.

A place of accommodation for a few orphan children.

A Sunday school on the Lord's Day.

Introduces a third Sunday service

Ever active he began to see the need of a third Sunday service. The main services of the Lord Day at that time in Charles Church took place in the morning and the afternoon. These were the formal and dignified Book of Common Prayer services with Sermon. These he would not alter but he saw the need of an extra evening service with a special emphasis towards the needs of those untaught in the things of God. This he based on the Anglican Lexicon passages of Scripture appointed for that day.

At some point in the service children of the Sunday school were called upon to read various texts out loud from these passages. He then went on to comment on the meaning of these texts and their application to our Christian lives.

It is said that these simple expositions formed the basis of his *Poor Man's Commentary*. A collection was taken up of the end of the evening service for the benefit of orphans in the parish.

Attacks upon his work

When going flat-out in the work of God, look out for attacks. Robert Hawker at this time was attacked by the Rev. R. Powhele of Manacan, Cornwall. He was accused of preaching illegally outside his parish and not only so but preaching unsound doctrine by which the Rev. Polewhele meant the doctrines of Sovereign Grace. Though to be fair

to the Rev. Polewhele in the second of his criticisms, he was attacking Robert Hawker's higher Calvinism. This controversy took up a great deal of Dr. Hawker's time as all controversies do and greatly disheartened the good man. Nevertheless, his work went on.

The Publication of Zion's Trumpet

This was a kind of theological miscellany in the form of a magazine which Dr. Hawker became a regular contributor to. In one of his articles he recommended the keeping of the Journal, which he himself did. Extracts from this journal can be seen in the biography p.p. 62 - 64

1802 the commencement of the Society for the Distribution of Gospel tracts.

Indefatigable individual as he was he set up a society giving the title, *The Great Western Society for the Dispersion of Religious Tracts to the Poor*. He himself being the sole committee, chairman, treasurer, secretary, and editor.

Preaches for the London Missionary Society

In the same. He was called to preach for the society and later incident into correspondence with the Rev. W. B. Johnson of Sierra Leone. I briefly mentioned this to illustrate his concern for missionary activity both at home and abroad. Also to illustrate the fact that his "high Calvinistic" thinking did not prevent him from engaging in missionary work abroad as some have contended.

This misunderstanding probably has arisen from his entering into controversy with the British and Foreign Bible Society because of his opposition to their policy of publishing Bibles for the mission field with the Apocrypha bound in them.

In much demand as a preacher

He was held in such high regard at this time that he began to get invitations to preach from far and wide. Often when it was heard that he was scheduled to preach in a certain church, such did the people crowd in, that damage was done to the furniture and fabric of the church buildings. Rails were broken and doors unhinged. One vicar

apologized to him that he could not invite him to preach because of the damage he feared enthusiastic crowds my do to his church premises.

Whilst traveling to these various locations, he stayed overnight in Inns or coaching houses. It was his practice, unusual even in those days, to invite the landlord and his family to join him in worship in the Inn each morning and evening of his stay.

The Poor Man's Commentary

In 1803 he commenced the first volume of his Poor Man's Commentary on the Bible. It first came out in "Penny Numbers" to make it accessible to the poor for whom it was intended. The Evangelical Magazine of 1803 described it as follows.

The commentary on the Bible for the poor in so cheap a form speaks much of the benevolence, as well as to the judgment of Dr. Hawker. The poor man, who either by his own industry or the benevolence of a friend possesses that inestimable treasure, a Bible, and who is anxious to understand sacred contents, and compare spiritual things with spiritual, will feel many obligations to this popular writer, whose plan comprises the following interesting particulars. 1. An introduction to every book, and the table of contents to each chapter. 2. References to other passages of Scripture, by way of illustration, with occasional elucidation's and remarks. 3. Reflections, at the close of each chapter, by way of improvement. It was said of two celebrated commentators, Cocceius and Grotius, that the one found Christ everywhere, and the other nowhere. Dr. Hawker is of the former school, and Jesus is the name, which she everywhere "delighted to honour;" so much so, that we fear in some instances, he has overlooked the primary and literal sense to introduce allegories, which can hardly be justified. He writes, however, his great modesty, and the general design is so God, and its tendency so excellent, that we earnestly hope we also will be spared to prosecute his design, and that he may be a standing blessing to the church, especially to its poorer members.

In his introduction, he reminds the reader of that which our Lord himself declared, John 5:46, "*Moses wrote of me;*" and charges them to place this motto by way of remembrance at the head of every book and every chapter of the writings of Moses. - "*Moses wrote of Christ.*" From this unquestionable authority, he believes we are warranted to say, whenever we open any of the writings of this distinguished servant of God, whether it be discovered by us or not, Jesus is here.

1808 further attacks upon his ministry

This time the attack came from a barrister, who wrote anonymously and attacked Robert Hawker's doctrine as leading to antinomianism and the undermining of public morality. Robert Hawker wrote a very full and extremely courteous refutation of the charges made against him. Undaunted by these attacks he went on in the same year to establish a Female Penitentiary in the city of Plymouth. The circumstances and help bring this about it was an insight into the times and the nature of the society Robert Hawker was called to minister in.

On a particular morning up for woman in deep distress came to his door, and sought his advice and assistance. She was a poor defenceless widow, the mother of an only daughter. Her child had been seduced from her, even before she had the consciousness of any danger, and for 15 months she had not only lost her, but notwithstanding all the vigilance of the most anxious enquiry, no traces could be found to discover her abode among any of the haunts of sin and wretchedness. On the very morning, I letter sent from the poor deluded young creature herself, gave the first information where she was, with an account of her dejection and wretchedness. In the first impulse of the moment, the distracted mother ran with the tidings to her minister; but her fear was that the persons who kept the house would not admit her to see her daughter. The benevolent pastor consented to accompany her to fetch home the wretched wanderer.

"I hastened," saith he, "with the poor mother to the place mentioned in her daughter's letter; and Oh! What a place it was! The very atmosphere of the place seems contaminated – several of the ruined inhabitants passed before me, as I went through one of the apartments. It is a circumstance perhaps but little known, but yet too true, that by far the greater part of those miserable outcasts of society, died at an earlier., Than that in which multitudes begin to enter life. We at length arrived (the poor afflicted mother and myself) at the sickroom of her poor child. As sickness preyed upon her too much to leave her alive to the full feelings, which her mother's presence and her own conscious heart would no doubt otherwise have called forth. Tenderness and affection on the part of the poor old woman was all but in the present state could be shown; and the object I had to accomplish, was to adopt the speediest method for the removal. But it was impossible in rescuing one am happy female from such a state of complicated misery, to behold the many left behind to perish; nay, till recollects the thousands continually hurried into this whirlpool of iniquity, but with a most painful sensation. The asylum for the reception of such poor deluded outcasts appeared in all its loveliness to my mind!

Eventually the Plymouth Asylum was opened.

