

Griffith John

by Gordon Cooke

Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches (EFCC), UK



On the dust jacket of his biography* of Griffith John, Noel Gibbard describes his subject as “by any reckoning a spiritual giant,” “a legend in his own lifetime,” “a man of tremendous energy that was sustained by his uncomplicated and powerful faith,” and a man whose “master passion was to spread the Christian message.” Such a man surely deserves the title “Congregational Worthy,” and our careful attention.

Griffith John was born on December 14th, 1831, in Swansea, South Wales. He was brought up a Congregationalist, and at the age of eight was admitted to full membership of his church, Ebenezer Independent Chapel. He was led to apply for membership, having seen his older sister join the church, and consequently questioning himself about his own spiritual condition. Examination by the church deacons followed, and even at such a young age they were convinced of evidence of grace in the young Griffith’s heart. That young faith knew many severe tests. Cholera epidemics which were a constant threat in South Wales at that time claimed both his parents, but that same faith was strengthened by his regular learning of Scripture passages. By the age of fourteen he had delivered his first sermon at a prayer meeting, and two years later he was preaching regularly, and marked out as a young man upon whom God was powerfully at work.

Preparing for service

He furthered his studies at Brecon Congregational College, where he began to really feel challenged about serving the Lord in Madagascar, on one occasion being convinced that God was speaking personally to him through the words of Isaiah 6:8, where the prophet hears the question, “Whom shall I send?” He offered himself for service to the London Missionary Society in March, 1853, and to equip himself better for the work there, entered Bedford College in January, 1854. It soon became clear however, that the door to Madagascar was closing, and so the LMS directors suggested China to him. Griffith John accepted, in the belief that it was God’s will – “I cannot say I was sorry; I cannot say I was glad.” In April, 1855, he was ordained, and the same month married Margaret Jane Griffiths, the daughter of a former missionary to Madagascar. The next month they sailed for China, arriving four months later, where Griffith John was to serve for over 55 years.

Accomplishments in China

Reading of his accomplishments in China fairly takes our breath away. He immersed himself so completely in the language and culture of the land that he was preaching in the open air

within a year, and later was able to debate even with Confucian scholars. From his base, first at Shanghai (1855-61) and then particularly Hankow (1861-1912), he became well known for his extensive missionary journeys into the Chinese interior – journeys that sometimes stretched to 3,000 miles or more, braving crowds that were often hostile due to the intrusion of the imperial powers in Chinese affairs. Having said that, there were occasions when he only escaped by telling the mob that he was an “Englishman” – a hard thing for a true patriotic Welshman to have to utter! During those journeys, he set up numerous mission stations and truly deserves the title “the apostle to central China.” Like the Apostle Paul before him, he had a burning desire to take the Gospel to places that had never heard its sound before (Romans 15:20).

In many areas of the land he was not only the first Protestant Missionary, but also set up schools, hospitals and training colleges. He was also a fervent anti-opium campaigner. But although he made notable contributions in each of these areas, it was as a preacher of the Gospel that he would want to be remembered. Important as these other matters were, and unlike even some of his contemporaries, he would let nothing get in the way of preaching, convinced, as he was, that it is God’s way. He once said about his work in China: “We are here, not to develop the resources of the country, not for the advancement of civilisation; but to do battle with the power of darkness, to save men from sin, and to conquer China for Christ.”

He was a powerful and eloquent preacher, and crowds of Chinese would gather to hear him. Coupled with this was his desire to put the Scriptures in the hands of the people he preached to, and to this end, he translated the New Testament and a great part of the Old into Mandarin, and the New Testament into Wen-li, as well as authoring popular tracts and pamphlets. He was also notably successful in training and mentoring numerous Chinese evangelists.

Times of trial

But Griffith John was no “plaster saint.” He knew times of great trial, particularly in the loss of infant children, and especially when his soul-mate died after a long period of weakness in 1873. At such a time he wrote: “The truths of the Gospel seemed to be losing their grasp on my heart. My heart was becoming as hard as stone. Whilst logically assenting to the truths which I preach, my heart seemed to repel as fire, the lie to them all.” At such a time, he strengthened himself with the reminder of God’s governance of the world, and that God was not only infinitely wise, but loving to the same degree. We would do well to learn from him.

Summing up, Griffith John was a man of determination which stemmed from human resolution and superhuman faith. He believed in the Gospel, and in the God of the Gospel. He was a man of prayer, but also of determination, a determination that occasionally bordered on stubbornness. In a day marked by so much short-termism in missionary endeavour, it is interesting to note that during a career spanning almost 60 years, John left China only three times, returning finally to England in January of 1912, where he died six months later. The millions of Christians in China today are an eloquent testimony to the quality of the foundations laid by men like Griffith John.

* Griffith John, Apostle to Central China by Noel Gibbard, is published by Bryntirion Press, price £8.95

(Published in the series, 'Congregational Worthies' in Congregational Concern, Magazine of the EFCC. Used with permission)