

INDEFATIGABLE VETERAN

HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY OF
Abel Evans
A WELSH MORMON ELDER

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CHAPTER TWO

AN INTELLIGENT AND GIFTED YOUNG MAN

Throughout the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints people have converted in numerous manners and circumstances. Part of the Mormon belief is that the Holy Ghost is constantly ready to touch the heart of anyone who studies the doctrine and prays sincerely for a witness concerning the truthfulness of the message. Once individuals have received that witness they must accept baptism in order to be totally honest to the new belief. Most are converted gradually as they become acquainted with Mormon principles and practices, but occasionally the conversion is of a more dramatic nature. Probably few conversions, however, have been more dramatic than that of Abel Evans.

The Independents Debate the Mormons

In the April 1844 issue of *Y Bedyddiwr* the Reverend W. R. Davies again spewed forth his venom against the Latter-day Saints. "I shall give a brief account," he writes, "of their failure together with their success."¹ Davies devotes the first portion of his write-up to describing Mormon defeats in Georgetown and Twynnyrodyn (areas of Merthyr Tydfil), Dowlais (a town about two miles northeast of Merthyr

Tydfil), and finally Cefncoedycymer (a town about two miles northwest of Merthyr). These defeats had come at the hands of the Baptists, especially Dafydd Oliver, a member of the Zion Baptist chapel in Merthyr, and his minister, James Wilkins—ironically, James Wilkins’s son Henry would later convert to Mormonism.² In Cefncoedycymer a lame man by the name of Thomas Thomas “conversed with them and confounded them until they fled from there.” Davies then presents a fairly detailed account of the Mormons’ ensuing encounter with the Independents of the Bethesda Chapel:

After much failure they moved and camped near the men of the “sprinkle,” that is, the church of the Independents by the name of Bethesda, Merthyr. These heard that the Saints had come to their borders, and since they were aware that they [the Saints] had yet to recover from the wounds received from Oliver, nor had they strengthened their armies after the lame man had chased them from Cefn [Cefncoedycymer], an intelligent and gifted young man who was a member in Bethesda, a deacon in the Sunday School and a warrior from his youth, was selected to chase the Saints from their boundaries. A heated battle about the miracles took place; the Saints lost their ground as usual, and the Independents appeared victorious in the eyes of the public. His brethren were extremely proud to have such a young man of hope in their midst; and some believed that ere long he would rise to the same level in the army as his brother, Quick.³

The Mormons and the Independents agreed to continue their discussion in a few days. Davies describes the second encounter:

A second debate was scheduled to the end that the giant could completely eliminate the Saints. The battle came, but by the second campaign the Saints had come to understand their

weakness, and they had also come to understand wherein lay the great strength of their enemy. Consequently, the Saints moved the ground of the debate, and instead of defending miracles, they took hold of sprinkling babies, and the sprinklers were killed forthwith. He [the young man] fell silent, and what's more he went of his own free will with the Saints from the scene of the debate to the river and was baptized. ⁴

Let us attempt to fill in some of the blanks of the story as outlined by the Reverend Davies. The "intelligent and gifted young man" was Abel Evans. We can make that statement with conclusive certainty thanks to a list of Mormon converts kept by one Edward Roberts, a convert himself as of January 21, 1844, just a little over three weeks before the entry of the Samuel Evans family into the Mormon fold.⁵ Listening to the debate with great interest and justifiable pride was Abel Evans's father, Samuel Evans, who just two weeks earlier had buried his wife of thirty-two years. As he watched his son defend their beliefs in an open debate, Samuel may have reflected on a scene thirty-one years earlier, also at an Independent chapel, this one a hundred miles to the west of Merthyr Tydfil in the parish of Llanboidy, Carmarthenshire. It was here that he had taken Abel, his firstborn, to be christened. And for over three decades Samuel and his family had remained faithful to the beliefs of the Independents—baptism by sprinkling, the need for infant baptism, and the cessation of miracles after the early Apostles had died. His son had distinguished himself among the members of this Bethesda congregation, for it was he who was selected to represent them in a debate with a new group of religious extremists known as the Mormons. The first debate had gone entirely in his son's favor. The scene afterwards was no doubt one of great rejoicing and congratulations from father to son for his adeptness in steering the ship of the Independents through the choppy waters of

the miracles and their nonexistence in modern times. There was no reason to suppose that the outcome would be any different in the second debate, this one about baptism, its proper mode, and to whom it should be administered. With what horror Samuel must have watched as his son fell silent during the debate! This silence coincided with the moment in which Abel Evans came to the startling realization that the religious ground he had stood on for over a quarter of a century was no longer solid. Not only did he perceive that his beliefs were incorrect, but also he simultaneously accepted a substitute set of beliefs from a small group seen as crazy fanatics by his compatriots, a group whose numbers did not even reach a hundred, a group that had no building to meet in, and a group whose leader did not even speak Welsh. Furthermore, Abel was unwilling to engage in further discussion. He had made his decision—as unpopular with his family and fellow parishioners in the Bethesda Chapel as it would no



Bethesda Independent Chapel at Merthyr Tydfil

doubt be, he had decided to receive an immersion baptism at the hands of a Mormon elder. And why wait? There was no need to unnecessarily postpone a sudden change in the direction of his life once he had made up his mind. No, it would be that very night in the river.⁶

Confusion among the Independents

One can imagine the resulting scene of confusion among those faithful members of the Bethesda Chapel. One minute they were cheering on their defender with “Amens” and “Hallelujahs,” and the next they were gaping in disbelief as he disassociated himself from them, essentially bidding them an everlasting farewell, as he followed the Mormons down to the riverside. The most incredulous of all was no doubt the defender-turned-opponent’s father, Samuel Evans. Other fathers in similar circumstances were known to have disowned their sons without further discussion. Would Samuel succumb to such a tempting and dramatic act? The Reverend Davies furnishes the outcome to this family crisis:

This news traveled like a tremor through the camp of the sprinkle in Bethesda, and great was the distress of the fallen one’s father. His lament the next night at the meeting at Bethesda was extraordinary, and all he could do was wonder and ponder as to what had bewitched his son. But you will be even more surprised when I tell you that his father was seen the second night following the same path, and was buried in the water by the Saints; then another son and his sister, and great was the singing and the shouting that was and is heard in the camp of the Saints!! Here are four individuals of the sprinkle brought down, but no wonder—they had previously believed in the existence of sprinkling babies, something that never before existed. . . . I hope that this absurd event will serve a good purpose to open the eyes and convince the

minds of many of the men of the "basin." Had they been Baptists they would have won the battle.⁷

From the instant that Abel Evans let it be known that he would henceforth be associated with the Latter-day Saints his father and siblings were caught in a most awkward predicament. They could no longer continue their association with the Independents without suffering shame and embarrassment at the loss of their son and brother. At the subsequent meeting of the Independents they no doubt heard some harsh comments concerning the "tragedy" of their loved one. He had betrayed them all by going over with the enemy. But Samuel knew his son well; he had taught him carefully and helped to shape his thinking. Abel had a good mind and was highly respected by all who knew him. His sudden departure from three decades of religious training was certainly not based on a whim. He must have experienced something very strange and powerful to prompt him to abandon, from one minute to the next, his entire upbringing. Samuel and his other children who lived nearby must have demanded an explanation from Abel. At this point his persuasive powers came into full focus, and not only did he show them that he had not gone insane, but he also convinced them to do as he had done. Just four days after his own baptism Abel had the privilege of watching his father Samuel and his brother Evan be immersed in the river by a Mormon elder. And three days later his brother John and his sister Phoebe would follow suit.⁸ At this point the Independents at Bethesda Chapel had an even greater cause for remorse and mourning. An entire family, one of the stalwart families of the chapel, had joined the enemy! On the other hand the Latter-day Saints were celebrating and rejoicing as they became acquainted with their new brothers and sister in the gospel.

It was ironic that Abel Evans would triumph in the first debate with the Mormons about modern-day miracles. He

argued that the necessity for miracles had ceased in the days of the Apostles, but following his conversion he would eventually gain a reputation as one whose priesthood blessings had great force, yes, even a “miraculous” force.

