

Chapter 5

Second Year in the Ministry Appointed to Luzerne Circuit – Alone

At this Conference the Luzerne circuit and Wilkes-Barre mission were again separated, as before. Wilkes-Barre and Ransom, or Garner's Ferry, being added to the new territory we had taken up before Conference, in Wyoming County – and Wyoming mission and Luzerne circuit were now constituted. I was now appointed to Luzerne circuit as preacher in charge – and alone. It was unusual to appoint an unordained minister in charge, yet it was done occasionally. It was done in this case.

When I returned home from conference, I had forty dollars left of my one hundred dollars salary – thirty-two of which I now paid on my horse and buggy. The first of April we moved into the house of Mr. Andrew Keen,¹ on the turnpike leading from Berwick to Hazleton – five miles from Berwick. Mr. Keen and family, though not members of church, proved to be very kind neighbors to us. Our first quarterly meeting was held in the Mifflin church, May 11, 1860. Rev. Philip Wagoner, Presiding Elder, was present. At this meeting the unfinished work of our former meeting broke out anew. Wagoner left on Monday, but I continued the meeting for some time with good success – resulting in a number of conversions.

This only aroused the persecuting spirit again, and they threatened to rotten-egg us if we did not close the meeting. I saw where one egg apparently aimed at the pulpit through the window, no doubt at me, missed its mark and struck the side of the church – doing no harm, but leaving an ugly mark that could be seen for a long time. One evening while the brother who had the care of my horse was at church with his family, some ungodly person or persons turned my horse out of the stable, stole one of my buggy wheels, and concealed it in a large wheat field – and it was not found until harvest when the grain was cut. But a well-to-do citizen who felt disgusted at such conduct, though not a member of any church, furnished me with a wheel until mine was found – and said if it was not found in due time he would get me a new one. With all this opposition we continued the meeting until we thought the work was done for the time.

That spring I made a very narrow escape from drowning, while a brother was taking me across the river in a foot boat from the Centreville to the Mifflin appointment, as the water was very high and swift. Also once during the winter, while crossing at Mifflinville on the ice in a sleigh at a funeral, the ice broke into cakes behind the hindmost sled in the procession and could not be crossed again.

¹ Andrew Keen lived in Nescopeck township, along what is now PA 93.

We had a camp meeting in August on the old ground at which Rev. Alexander Longsdorf² presided. The number of tents was considerably increased over the previous year, and there were three tents on the ground from the Columbia circuit – there being no camp on that circuit that year. The prospects for a good camp were very encouraging, but on Friday afternoon and night it rained most powerfully and we were almost flooded out. On Saturday it cleared up, but the ground was so full of water that to the close of the meeting a large stream flowed through the altar, under the preachers' stand, and into the creek in the rear of the camp ground. The wet and mud operated quite materially against the success of the meeting, yet a few were converted. And I continued the meeting in the church nearby, for some time, during which a number were added to the church – among whom was a practicing physician.

I commenced my protracted meetings early in the fall. The first one was held in a private, but vacant, house owned by brother Santee near the turnpike. At this meeting good was accomplished. After I closed my meeting, a brother of a sister denomination held a meeting in the same house with some success. But by some means he incurred the ill will of the boys, who made up their minds to stop the meeting – which they finally accomplished. One night after meeting, when the people had all returned to their homes, these boys broke every window glass and sash in the lower story of the house. The friends nailed the windows shut with boards and continued the meeting. But a few evenings later the boys carried the stove out of the house, threw it down the road, and broke it to pieces – and they were obliged to close the meeting as it was too cold to hold meeting without fire. That brother never preached there again, but is now preaching in the west. I had no trouble during my meeting.

I preached in the Pike school house near this appointment every two weeks on Sabbath afternoon. One Sabbath I noticed an old man present for the first time, though I was slightly acquainted with him. I preached a very plain, practical sermon from the text in I John 5:21, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." This man had grown grey-headed in the old church which stood nearby, and appeared very much interested in the sermon – and we had a good meeting. After preaching I sang a chorus then in common use

Say brother, will you meet me,
 Say brother, will you meet me,
 Say brother, will you meet me,
 On Canaan's happy shore?
 By the grace of God, I'll meet you,
 By the grace of God, I'll meet you,
 By the grace of God, I'll meet you,
 On Canaan's happy shore.

² Alexander Longsdorf (1813-1877) entered the ministry in 1838 and retired in 1872. Currently serving Buffalo circuit in Union County, he had been superintendent of Susquehanna District 1854-57.

and closed the meeting.

On Monday this old man walked two miles to my house to tell me that he was very much pleased with my sermon. “But,” he said, “you lied before you was done with your meeting.” “How so?” “Why, when you sang that chorus.” “No, I did not.” “Yes, you did. You said ‘By the grace of God, I’ll meet you’ and you don’t know whether you will meet or not in heaven.” “Why if we are Christians, we have the promise of meeting there – without a doubt.” “Yes, but you don’t know whether you are a Christian or not.” “Yes, I do.” “No, you can’t know until you die.” “Yes, we can know it now

Job says, ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth.’

John says, ‘We know that we have passed from death unto life.’

Paul says, ‘We have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry Abba Father. The spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.’”

By this time he was on his feet and at the door to leave, and only said, “Yes, yes, you are only a young man – yet, I am an old man and know better. Good-bye.” And he left, but never came to hear me preach again. What a pity, that men should grow grey-headed in the church and yet know so little about religion. Paul says, “If any man have not the spirit of Christ he is none of his” – and can a man “have the spirit of Christ” or enjoy the “witness of the spirit” and yet not know it – be unconscious of the fact? I think not. From this meeting I went from appointment to appointment, holding meetings until conference. I had more or less success at all my meetings, but do not remember the number of conversions – and I have no record of them.

In the fall a brother of another denomination held a meeting in a small but very wicked town – on account of which it was called “Hell-town.” The proper name of the place, I think, was Ringtown.³ The meeting was held in a school house. After the meeting had been in progress for some time, he came some twenty miles for me to assist him. He said he had a good meeting, with bright prospects and three at the altar. I went with him, but to me the prospects were not so cheering. The congregation was small, manifested no interest, and the three at the altar were but small children. I preached in the evening as best I could to the few who were present, and after preaching invited any who wished to become Christians to present themselves at the altar of prayer and thereby make manifest their desire – and we would pray with and for them and direct them to the “Lamb of God” by imparting to them such instructions as their cases might require. The three came forward as usual, but I saw at once that there was no seriousness on their part – no interest.

When I knelt at the altar to instruct and encourage the penitents, I discovered that some person or persons had taken the pains to cover the bench quite thick with

³ The Evangelicals erected a church building in Ringtown in 1870, and the congregation has been part of the East Pennsylvania Conference since the state-wide 1970 United Methodist reorganization.

pepper and salt. The salt, I suppose, was intended for the sheep, and the pepper was evidently intended to make them sneeze – and so to make things lively, and perhaps to get into their eyes and make the tears flow more freely. How thoughtful on their part. But I wiped it off carefully with my handkerchief, so it made no disturbance and but a few found out – and the perpetrators, no doubt, were disappointed.

When we got to the house where we lodged, I informed the brother that he might do as he thought best – but as for me, I was going home as I could see no good in the meeting. There was no sincerity, and he might as well close it. The next day I left. He continued the meetings a few evenings and then closed – just as I expected, nothing being accomplished. I had been at too many meetings to be deceived in that way.

During this year a young man, who had the ministry in view and was away at school preparing himself for the work, returned to his parents, who lived on my circuit, to spend his vacation. During his vacation he made several attempts at preaching, but failed every time in his efforts. He attempted to preach one Sabbath evening near his home to a large congregation, but failed in his effort as usual and felt very much mortified. On Monday he came to me very much discouraged, seeking comfort and advice. He said, “I feel that I am called of God to preach the Gospel, and I believe if God calls a man to the ministry he will tell him what to say. He need but open his mouth and God will fill it – so he can enter the pulpit, pray, open the Bible, and take any verse as a text his eye may light upon and preach it. And if he cannot do that he is not called of God to the ministry. I have tried it several times and failed every time, yet I cannot doubt my call to the ministry. Now, what do you think about it?”

I replied, “It is just right; you ought to fail every time. You remind me of two little girls of whom I read quite recently. They were about the same size and age. They attended the same school and were quite similarly circumstanced in life. The one was always ready to recite her lessons, and could recite them well. The other could never recite well. So one evening on their way home from school, the one said to the other, ‘How does it come that you can always recite your lessons so well, and I can never recite mine?’ The other replied, ‘Do you pray?’ She said, ‘No, I never pray.’ ‘Well I do – I always ask God to help me say my lessons,’ was the reply. ‘Well,’ replied the other, ‘then I will pray too.’ The next day the little girls went to school as usual. The one recited her lessons well, as she always did – but the other could not recite hers at all. So in the evening on the way home she said to her schoolmate again, ‘Why could not I recite my lessons today?’ The other inquired, ‘Did you pray?’ ‘Yes, I prayed this time – yet I could not recite.’ ‘But did you study?’ ‘O no – I prayed this time, so I did not study.’ ‘Well you must study and pray both, then you can recite your lessons,’ was the reply.”

Now I said “God helps them that help themselves. You must study and pray both, and then you can preach. And unless you do that, you will – and should – fail every time.” He took my advice and became quite an able minister of the Gospel.

A most shocking occurrence took place at the hotel this winter, two miles out the pike from where we lived. The young people from the neighborhood had a large dance, or ball, at the hotel. During the evening one of the dancers, a young lady with whom I had a slight acquaintance, fell forward against her partner to the floor – apparently dead. She was taken up in an unconscious state and carried to an adjoining room, where she remained in that condition for twenty-four hours – when she recovered consciousness, but was sick for some time, and finally recovered fully. But strange to say, it made no interruption in the dance – but it was continued all night, with that lady lying in the house in that condition, hardly knowing whether she was dead or alive. O the terrible effects of sin. How it hardens the heart, destroys man’s finer feelings, and prepares him for every evil work.

Here on Good Friday, I saw a large barn, with its contents, burned to the ground – the work of an incendiary. Ungodly wretch, to commit such a crime.

We had a pleasant and successful year. I closed my labors on the circuit about the first of March, having preached twenty funeral sermons and three hundred and ninety seven sermons in all on the charge – and married one couple. Among the members of the Davis church was the David Davis family, which was our principal stopping place. I baptized the nineteenth child in this family. It was the third child by his second wife. This was a very fine Christian family, and three of his sons are ministers of the gospel – one of whom received his license to preach the same time I did mine. For this year’s labors I received one hundred and eleven dollars salary. I paid twenty dollars house rent, got my buggy repaired, and had nothing left.

Conference met this spring in Glen Rock, York County, March 1861. Bishop Joseph Long presided. Thus ended my second year on the circuit, and my second year in the ministry. Two years being the limit, I went to conference knowing that I would be obliged to move. But O, where? None could tell.