

For the Christian Observer.

A Saint of the Greenbrier Valley: The Late Michael Henry Bittinger.

BY REV. THOMAS C. JOHNSON, D. D.

Michael Henry Bittinger was born October 14, 1826, in Georgetown, which is now West Washington, District of Columbia, of highly worthy ancestry. He was the son of "Old John Bittinger," the honest merchant of Georgetown, and Mary Coskery, his wife. John Bittinger was the son of Joseph Bittinger and his wife, who had been a Miss Baugher, daughter of a Lutheran minister and a representative of a family which has enjoyed signal honors in the history of American Lutheranism. Joseph Bittinger was the son of Nicholas Bittinger, a captain in the Revolutionary War, who fought under Washington, and received special mention for gallantry in the battle of Monmouth, New Jersey. Nicholas Bittinger was the son of Adam Bittinger, who had emigrated from Alsace, in France, and had settled in Pennsylvania in the early part of the eighteenth century. Michael Henry Bittinger was thus of excellent lineage on his father's side. His mother, Mary Coskery, was a daughter of Michael Coskery, born in Ireland in 1761, and Margaret Stoner, his wife, born in Pennsylvania, in the same year. She was a lady of unusual refinement and culture. Her children were largely indebted to their mother for the purity and gentleness and Christliness of character for which they were distinctly marked. To her influence it was largely due that three of them became ministers of the Gospel, viz.: Rev. E. C. Bittinger, D. D., of the United States Navy; Rev. B. F. Bittinger, D. D., for more than fifty years pastor of the Westminster Presbyterian church in Washington city, and still living, in the eighty-ninth year of his age, and the subject of this paper.

At the age of seventeen Michael Henry Bittinger united with the Bridge Street Presbyterian church, Georgetown. For a time he contemplated entering on a commercial life along with an older brother, Joseph. But Joseph died in his twenty-second year; Michael Henry soon after abandoned the idea of a mercantile life, and began preparation for the Gospel ministry. He was prepared for college by Rev. James McVear, entered Princeton in 1846, was graduated thence in 1849, entered the Princeton Theological Seminary, and was graduated from that institution in 1852, meantime having taken the additional degree of Master of Arts in Princeton College.

The Presbytery of New Brunswick licensed him to preach the Gospel April 28, 1852. From that date till 1856 he labored as a licentiate, serving as stated supply at Pearisburg, Va., Montgomery Presbytery, 1853-1855. In July, 1855, he was invited to take charge of the Centerville church in what is now Monroe county, West Virginia. He was ordained to the ministry May, 1856, at Point Pleasant by the Presbytery of Greenbrier.

The Centerville church included the outlying congregations of River View, near the present railroad village of Lowell, in Summers county, and Rich Creek—a field which, with the exception of the end near Lowell he continued to serve all the subsequent years of his active ministry. During this long period he preached not only at the meeting places of the congregations named, but frequently at Shanklin's Ferry, Crump's Bottoms, Mouth of Greenbrier and other points not a few.

This field was one in which hardships were inevitable. Many of his people lived in narrow valleys. They were widely scattered, reaching fifteen miles from his home, at Centerville, in one direction, and seven or eight miles in the opposite direction. The field was of varying width, in some portions, approximately fifteen miles, and at other portions much narrower. In the winter the roads were bad and the creeks high at times, at other times ice-covered. Some of his people were quite "well-off," but the most of them were small farmers, village shop-keepers and artisans. His membership was never numerous and his salary always small. He and his family must have lived meagerly at times, particularly during the war and Reconstruction periods. The people of his flock were almost to a man devoted to the Confederacy. The Union people frequently came in and spoiled some of them of their stores of grain, meats and all movable property. Their families came close to absolute want at times, and so must he and his have done.

He had the happiness, however, of knowing that he was laboring amongst a people of great, if rugged, worth. As good human stuff was found in his field as was to be found in the world, men and women who might not be the easiest to mold, but would carry well a good impression once made—people hospitable, industrious, frugal, thrifty, interested in character building and in religion, who loved him for the Gospel he preached and the simple Christian life he lived, as he well deserved to be loved.

If at first many of them looked raw and crude to him, he, report says, looked equally raw and crude from another point of view to them. He was city-

born and city-bred, and showed a degree of ignorance and impracticalness in regard to country life that served as the subject of kindly gossip around many firesides.

In spite, however, of his early want of practical aptitudes for ordinary country occupations and his people's want of very considerable book culture, they soon learned to love him, trust him and admire him. They respected him in his own sphere. He was a diligent and learned preacher. He carried beaten oil into the pulpit. They saw that they could trust his teaching. That teaching was suffused, too, with tenderness. He loved the Gospel which he preached, and the people to whom he preached it. He preached with a faith that appeared to be unwavering. He was pre-eminently a man of a simple child-like faith. His people saw him going



Rev. Michael Henry Bittinger.

out, also, sympathetically to all classes, rejoicing with those that rejoiced and weeping with those that wept. He was not a fussy pastor, but a faithful one. Where he thought he was needed he was to be found, doing quietly the thing he thought ought to be done. He knew the children of his flock by name, and loved them with almost fatherly tenderness and they loved him.

Because of the crying needs and in order to maintain his family, he sometimes added to his services as preacher and pastor those of teacher of the youth of his charge and such other young people as chose to profit by his teaching and, in this capacity, did an incalculable service to some of the brightest of the young people of the section.

As the years passed, he became the most potent single factor for character-making, secular and religious, amongst all denominations within the bounds of his extensive parish. Capt. Charles Vawter, long the head of the celebrated Miller School in Albemarle county, Virginia, in presenting a book to Mr. Bittinger not many years before his death, wrote in it this inscription: "To Rev. M. H. Bittinger, my father's and mother's friend, and the man to whom, next to them, under God, I owe most in the formation of my life and character." Rev. Price Gwynn, for years a highly useful minister in the Synod of Virginia, and later in that of North Carolina, writes of Mr. Bittinger: "I think he was the best and most useful man that I ever knew. I know of no man who has left such a record behind him, all things considered. In judging of his life, it is necessary to remember the character of his field of labor. A man's life is great according to obstacles he encounters and successfully overcomes, as well as the volume of work accomplished. From both points of view his life was marvelous. The most remarkable quality of his work was his abiding character." These expressions are out of hearts of love, and the latter of them was penned on occasion of his death; but it is not doubted that many others who enjoyed his ministry in one or more of these generations which it covered would say things of the same purport and quite as strong.

Dr. William McKibbin, President of Lane Theological Seminary, Cincinnati, Ohio, who spent certain summers within the limits of Mr. Bittinger's congregation, writes in the following strain: "My summer visits to the Larew's brought me into his circle of friends, and he soon won my heart. I re-

garded him as a great man, in all the elements in character and service which are of abiding value. His simple spontaneity, warm and deep religious spirit, bound up with a fine sense of humor, and a kindly interest in everybody, with that patriarchal bearing which seemed to make him indeed a father to the whole community, made him a figure of rare attractiveness. His faithful and tender preaching of the Gospel and his constant ministry to his people made him a builder of men and women of a Christ-like stature. I was in different parts of his parish . . . I met people everywhere, of all creeds and no creeds, but all recognized him as a true man of God, and shepherd of souls. He had so impressed himself upon the successive generations who had grown up under his ministry, that it seemed to me that he was the most potent factor in creating that strong and sterling religious character which marks the people of Greenville and the region round about."

Truly, Mr. Bittinger wielded a blessed influence for good in his region. His life work may well be named along with that of the effective men of his Presbytery. Old Father McElhenny did a much wider work. He was more facile, more magnetic, more aggressive, more popular, but not so much of a scholar, not a whit more trusted. It may well be doubted whether he stamped so permanent an impression upon any of his congregations as Mr. Bittinger stamped upon his. Dr. S. R. Houston was more impressive in work, manner and address. It may be doubted whether his work on his own people was more abiding or more thoroughly helpful. Dr. M. L. Lacy was a giant in the Presbytery and, had he held any one pastorate for a comparable length of time, might have surpassed every other man in the body in moulding power. He was a logical, powerful, noble preacher. He had vast respect for his Brother Bittinger's work and character. Dr. J. C. Barr, Rev. J. C. Brown, and Rev. Jas. Leps were all men of consecration, strength and influence. Mr. Bittinger was their worthy compeer.

Mr. Bittinger had the aid of a good helpmate in his long pastorate. April 13, 1858, he had married Miss Martha Robinson Moffett, of Rockbridge county, Virginia, a woman refined and gentle, lenient in matters indifferent, and firm where principles were at stake, a woman of practical abilities, who proved herself a devoted wife, a faithful, loving and wise mother, a capable homemaker, a sympathetic neighbor and effective co-adjutor in pastoral work. She was spared to him fifty-three years, preceding him to the grave by only about fifteen months. From the shock of her loss he never rallied. Though attacked by no apparent disease, his people saw that he would soon follow her to the grave.

February 22, 1913, worn out by the services and sorrows, the sacrifices and toils of more than eighty-six years, having served the same congregation for three generations in joy and sorrow, he fell asleep.

In the old Centerville church in which he had so often preached the Gospel, in the presence of a large company of sorrowing people, the funeral services were held. A considerable number of his brother presbyters had gathered to do him honor. They conducted the services, after which his body was carried by the elders of his church, the most of whom were the grandsons of his first officers, to its resting place beside the body of his beloved wife.

There were born to Mr. and Mrs. Bittinger three sons and three daughters, all of whom grew to adult life. Of these, three survive, the Rev. John Baugher Bittinger, pastor of the Rich Valley and Saltville churches in Smythe county, Virginia; Mrs. Robert Arnett, of Greenville, West Virginia, and Mr. Henry E. Bittinger, of Washington, D. C.

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Young People's Societies

BY REV. WM. M. ANDERSON, D. D.

"SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT."

Prayer Meeting Topic

For the Week Beginning June 8, 1913.

I Peter 3:8-18.

If the instruction given by Peter in this passage is followed out by those who believe in the Gospel, it will greatly promote peace. Christians should agree on the essentials and on everything else where agreement is possible; and they should agree to disagree on other points. They should talk peace; think peace; plan for peace. The tongue has begun many a war. The tongue is responsible for many a fight.

Peter teaches that goodness will lead to peace. God has promised to take care of the good. Sin and Satan delight in war, and strife is evidence of his presence and influence. Believers should live so as to keep down strife and talk against it. A strong, pure good man can overcome the hurtful influence of a lie told against him.

The Hebrew word for peace (shalom) which is so familiar in the eastern salaam, is derived from a root which means perfect, full, complete. This gives us one notion of peace, "quietness comes from fullness." The olive is the emblem of peace in the