

## **BIBLE CHRISTIANS**

The Bible Christian Church began in a small group of farmhouses in North Cornwall and North Devon due to the leadership of a Wesleyan Methodist local preacher, William O'Bryan from Luxulyan in Mid Cornwall. The Wesleyan Methodist Church had become firmly established in the South West as a result of frequent visits to the area by John Wesley with Taunton, Plymouth and Exeter as the main centres.

William O'Bryan was born on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1778 at Gunwen Farm, Luxulyan and became a Wesleyan local preacher at the age of 17. A preaching evangelist, he established many new Methodist societies in scores of towns and villages and commended his converts to the local Wesleyan Methodist churches, only to find that the Wesleyans refused to accept them because they were former members of the Anglican Church.

In 1810, O'Bryan candidated for the Wesleyan Methodist ministry but was turned down. This only made him more determined than ever to continue his evangelism. Hearing that there was no Methodist preaching in Newquay, he went there, founded a Methodist society and at his own expense built a chapel only to find himself expelled from the Wesleyan Methodist Church for "indiscipline."

He continued to hold meetings in his home and elsewhere before moving to the edge of Bodmin Moor where he had considerable success, enlisting several women as assistant preachers and getting these new societies accepted by the Wesleyan Methodist Church. He was accepted back into the Wesleyan Methodist Church and once again offered himself for the itinerant ministry and was again turned down. Then a new Superintendent Minister of the St Austell Circuit expelled him from the Wesleyan Methodist Church for not attending his local class meeting for 3 weeks – a decision that was challenged by several circuit officers and church members. O'Bryan appealed against this decision at the Quarterly Meeting of the St Austell Circuit at Poundstock in September 1815. A compromise was suggested but this was strongly rejected by the Superintendent Minister who was totally opposed to O'Bryan's evangelism.

On 9<sup>th</sup> October, 1815, O'Bryan held a preaching service at the home of John and Mary Thorne at Lake Farm, Shebbear at which 22 people were enrolled as Class members – the Bible Christian Connexion had been born. At the first Quarterly meeting held on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1816, it was recorded that the Connexion had 11 societies and 237 members. John Thorne, son of John and Mary, was chosen by O'Bryan to be his regular helper. By the end of 1816, the Bible Christians had nearly 600 members and had assumed the usual pattern of Methodist organisation as laid down by John Wesley.

O'Bryan's followers were known locally in Devon and Cornwall as "Free Willers, Shining Lights, Ranters, Bryanites and Thornites. The name Bible Christian was first used in August 1816 but the term Bryanites was widely used for more than 50 years.

In 1817, the large Shebbear Circuit was divided and a new circuit based on Truro was created under the leadership of John Boyle.

The first Annual Conference of the Bible Christians was held in 1819 at O'Bryan's house in Launceston. 16 male and 14 female preachers attended. O'Bryan was elected President and James Thorne, Secretary. The minutes of the first Conference record 12 Circuits and a membership of over 2,000. Female ministers were appointed and for some years the Bible Christians were the only Methodist church to employ female ministers.

The influence of the Bible Christians spread rapidly – to Chatham in Kent in 1820 [through a preacher from Plymouth Dock], to Somerset in 1821, the Scilly Isles in 1821, Monmouthshire and the Channel Islands in 1823, the Isle of Wight in 1824 and a Mission in Northumberland in 1824 opened by Mary Werrey.

In the next few years, differences about the government of the Bible Christian Connexion developed between O'Bryan and Thorne largely due to O'Bryan giving himself too much power. Matters came to a head at the 1828 Conference where the preachers drafted a new Constitution making the Conference the focus of government and asked O'Bryan to take charge of a Circuit [of his own choice]. The preachers also expressed concern over growing debts within the Connexion and queried the amount of O'Bryan's personal expenses. O'Bryan stepped down as President and William Mason was elected in his place. Discontent continued and at the 1829 Conference held at Lake Farm, O'Bryan walked out and with a small group of supporters founded the Armenian Bible Christians. A small circuit of 7 preachers and about 700 members was established in Cornwall but no records survive for this circuit.

O'Bryan eventually decided to emigrate to America and his small group of followers was allowed to rejoin the Bible Christians in 1835. No ill will was felt towards O'Bryan who was always welcomed on his frequent visits to England. He died in New York on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1868 at the age of 90.

The Bible Christians celebrated their Golden Jubilee at Exeter in 1865 and the minutes of the Conference record 750 chapels, 2,000 itinerant and local preachers, 26,000 members, 40,000 Sunday School scholars and 8,000 Sunday School teachers.