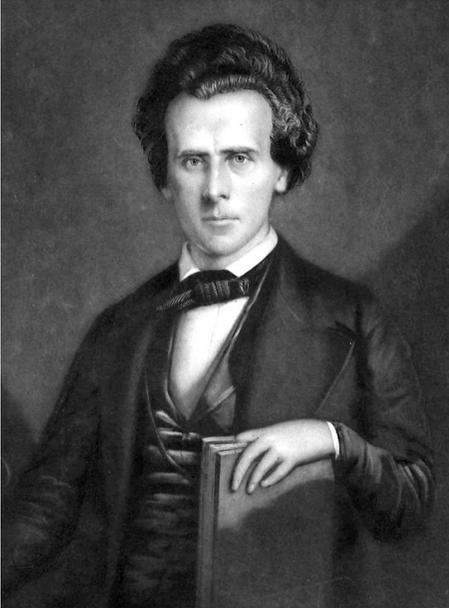


An 1840 Letter Between Itinerants

Rev. David Shields to Rev. William H. Elliott



Rev. David Shields

Editor's Note: below is a transcript of a previously unpublished letter from Rev. David Shields to Rev. William H. Elliott, in the possession of Elliott's great-great-grandson, Ned Donoghue. It offers an interesting window into the mind and heart of a 19th century Methodist itinerant. David Shields (1813-1851) was a native of Ireland, where he converted to Christ and Methodism, and first became a local preacher. In 1836, he immigrated to America, settling in Philadelphia, and was received into the Philadelphia Conference as an itinerant preacher in 1838. At the time that he wrote the letter, Shields was appointed to the Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, Circuit.

A later historian wrote, "Of David Shields it was said he was brilliant, but meteoric, and his latter days were not pleasant, as should become a man of his calling." He took ill and died while serving Philadelphia's Salem ME Church in 1851, just 38 years old.²⁸ The editor is grateful to Mr. Donoghue for bringing the letter to his attention, and for transcribing it. The letter folds over to form both the letter and the envelope, and on the cover is Elliott's address and the postmark of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. Some punctuation has been supplied to aid readability.

²⁸Philadelphia Conference Minutes (1852), 15; and C. Howard Peters, *The Story of One Hundred Years of Methodism in Phoenixville, 1826-1926* (1926), 21.

Rev. Wm. H. Elliott
Mauch Chunk, Pa

Phoenixville Oct. 7th 1840

My dear Bro[ther]

I received yours on the 1st inst., and was pleased to learn that you still enjoy the precious blessing of health and prize it. I was going to class it with wisdom and say it is beyond all price. I pray God that you may long enjoy it. I was glad also to hear of precious seasons you had at the Camp Meeting, and the warm reception you met with from the Preachers. They present rather a contrast to the Jersey Preachers. A number of the Brethren from our conference went to their Camp Meeting and I assure you that we met with a cold reception. It appeared to me they were jealous. Well, be it so in my heart, I pity the Preacher or Preachers who will be cold and indifferent to the Brethren who are labouring for the same glorious end, viz, "To reform the Continent and spread scriptural Holiness throughout these lands." Traveling a little in Jersey during my indisposition [did] much to please me, but I must say, much to displease me, and I am glad I am in the Phila[delphia] Conference.

I can enter into your feelings when you remark [about] the Divine Condescension of God in Saving such poor Sinners, and employing us to "save poor souls out of the fire and snatch them from the verge of Hell."²⁹ The reflection is sufficient to overwhelm us with astonishment & gratitude. May we make full proof of our Ministry, and faithfully perform the great work which our Lord & Master has given us to do, that when he shall appear we may receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away – Glory be to God for such precious promises & such cheering prospects. They are sufficient to rouse our dormant zeal & urge us to greater diligence. There is another cord [sic] you touched which vibrates through my heart. "The languishing State of Zion." Often with a sorrowful heart I exclaim, "Let the time to favour Zion, yea the set time, soon come, for thy servants take pleasure in her stones and favour the

²⁹Shields is quoting from a hymn by Charles Wesley, "Give Me the Faith Which Can Remove."

dust thereof.”³⁰ I am happy to inform you we had some intimations of good at our public Prayer Meeting last evening. We had a few penitents who seemed to be earnestly engaged for pardoning Mercy. I trust, I hope, I pray for greater displays of the Mercy & goodness of God.

From your letter I learn that you have appointed the time for holding your extra Meeting and request me to come to your help a week after your commencement. It will afford me pleasure to do so if in my power. After your meeting commences, I wish you to write me an account. There is one obstacle I fear will stand in the way. We are building a church in Charlestown Village.³¹ In a few weeks it will be dedicated & I calculate to hold a Protracted Meeting to commence at the dedication but I cannot say how long it will continue; but as you intend to hold yours two or three weeks, probably mine shall be over. I will make no appointment with you in reference to coming down until I see you, and as you mentioned Bro[ther] Neill, I know if he can he will accompany me. He is well and is very highly prized on the Circuit.³²

As it regards the state of my health, I have cause to rejoice that I am recovering daily. My friends tell me I am beginning to look better than before I took unwell. Last Sunday I was able to preach three times and felt no unusual fatigue after the services of the day closed. One advantage, if no other, I reap from my recent sickness: I have learned to be more calm and of course I speak with greater ease to myself. But is there not truth in the saying of Dr. Young, when speaking of Redemption and its invaluable blessing, “On such a subject it would be impious to be cool.” I trust in God. I shall never settle down as a cold, lifeless Methodist Preacher [*torn, illegible*] God [*torn – help me?*]

Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart
with boundless charity divine
So shall I all my strength exert
And love them with a zeal like thine,
And lead them to thy open side
The sheep for whom their shepherd died.³³

³⁰Shields is somewhat loosely quoting from Psalm 102:13-14.

³¹The Methodist society in Charlestown, Chester County, began about 1830; the church that was built in 1840 is still standing and serving the people today.

³²That would be Rev. Thomas Neill, who was then serving the Radnor Circuit.

³³These are also lines from the hymn, “Give Me the Faith Which Can Remove.”



The Charlestown Methodist Church, photographed in the mid-20th century. Shields' letter mentions its erection and planned dedication.

Your friends are all [*torn, illegible*] and I assure you, you are not forgotten [*torn*] end. I know they will be much gratified if I can so arrange it with you as to procure your help when we commence our Meeting in this place. My sheet will soon be full. I must therefore close commending you to the care of the Great head of the Church, who is able to make you perfect, establish, strengthen [and] settle you. To him be Glory & dominion forever & ever. Amen. I remain

Dear Bro[ther]. Yours Affectionately
In the Gospel of Grace.

David Shields