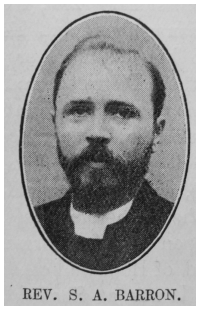
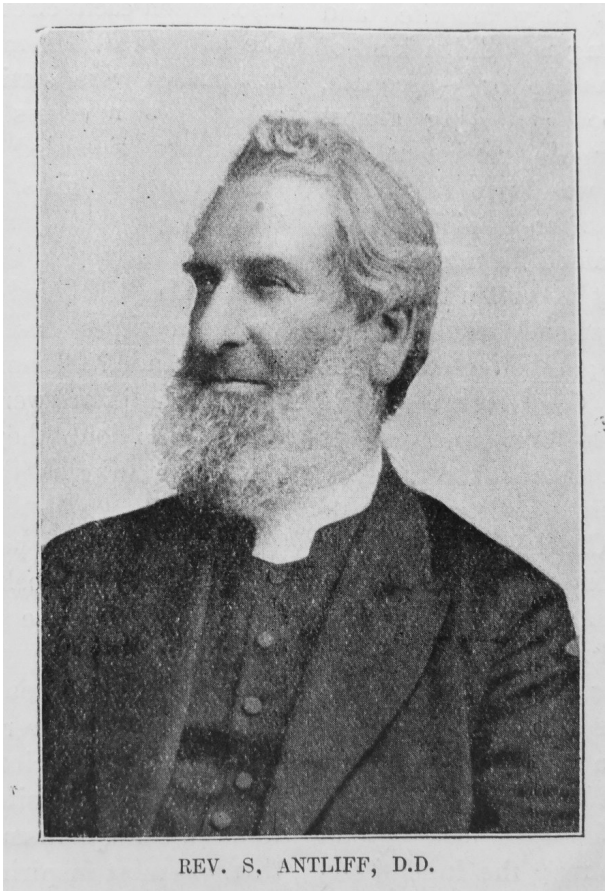
Rev. Samuel Antliff, D.D. - 'First Article'

Transcription of an article by Rev. S.A. Barron


REV. S. A. BARRON.

It is not easy to realise that more than seventeen years have gone since the remarkable man whose name appears at the head of this article was taken from us. We vividly recall the sense of deep personal loss that his passing brought to us; and the almost dismayed feeling with which we thought of the absence of "that good grey head," that penetrating mind, and that Nestor-like wisdom from our denominational councils. "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!" was the feeling of many hearts on that day in February, 1892, when in the quiet churchyard at Wilne, near Derby, we laid him to rest. The expression may be permitted to stand. It is no reflection upon other good and great men bestowed by Providence upon our Church to say that Samuel Antliff's place has not, in all ways, been filled. But as "the flying days pass by," his memory tends to become a somewhat vague tradition. An impressionist sketch of "the Doctor" by one of his last colleagues may, therefore, be of some interest and value.

Samuel Antliff was "a man of mighty mould." He had a fine presence. Of medium height, but seeming taller, the aquiline features, massive head, piercing eye (until affliction dimmed its lustre), strong frame, and dignified bearing gave an immediate sense of distinction. The writer remembers when a child seeing him at an outdoor demonstration; and though too young then to understand anything of his name and fame, hovering round him as he sat on the waggon shafts waiting his turn, to steal furtive glances at the striking looking stranger. Nor did his appearance give a misleading impression. Samuel Antliff was a king amongst men; born for counsel and for captaincy; a most effective and popular preacher, lecturer and platform orator; an ecclesiastical statesman, who left a permanent mark upon the constitution and enterprises of his Church; a debater of unrivalled acuteness and dexterity; a worker of enormous staying power; and, above all, "a good minister of Jesus Christ," the flame of whose zeal burned steadily through half a century of ministerial toil, and never more brightly than in the last days. Many years ago, the late Joshua Rouse said in his homely way to the writer's father, "Sammy Antliff is a big man, and they cannot make him into a little one. They find fault with him, and run him down. But if any knotty question comes up in a District Meeting, they all want to know what Antliff thinks about it. He's a great man."


REV. S. ANTLIFF, D.D.

As is widely known, Samuel Antliff was one of two eminent brothers, who, along with the late venerable William Cutts, another of our

foremost men, hailed from the Nottinghamshire village of Caunton. Dr. William Antliff we never met, and cannot attempt to describe. It has been said by those who knew them both, that while Samuel was the abler in some respects, William was the superior in oratorical fire and force. But it were an ungrateful task to so contrast them as to disparage either. Both were great and revered ministers; both attained high Connexional position; both passed the Presidential chair. Of his indebtedness to his elder brother, Samuel never ceased gratefully to speak. William had been in the ministry for some years, and had made many acquisitions in knowledge and culture before, in 1841, Samuel's ministry began.

In early study and reading the elder brother was the younger's mentor and guide. We have seen a few of Samuel's exercises in those far-off days, with his brother's corrections and notes. To his brother, and later, to Mr. Joshua Rouse previously referred to, Samuel Antliff owed much of his first intellectual quickening and direction. In the later time, he himself became a most accurate, and even finished speaker. To hear Dr. Samuel Antliff in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, or on the floor of the Conference, no one could have told that he had not been trained in boyhood to the exactitudes of English speech. But we were interested in noticing, occasionally, in meetings in his own circuit, when he had lost himself in the passion of some personal appeal to his hearers, how the accent of his youth would reappear. The constructions never went wrong, but now and then we said to ourselves, "These are the vowel qualities of the Caunton days."

The career of Samuel Antliff belongs to what our Connexional historian has suggestively called "the middle period of our history." Of this period he was one of the typical and conspicuous figures. A glance at his predecessors in District prominence may help to give the setting for his own work. The names of mark in the old Nottingham District in that earlier time were those of Thomas Morgan and John Brownson. There were others whose names became memorable, but these were the official leaders. Both must have been remarkable men. Thomas Morgan was "in labours abundant." His spiritual passion, his missionary zeal, his pulpit power, his wise management, and his amazing energy, sent up his stations everywhere. Throughout the District, and, indeed, the Connexion, his name was as ointment. He was an enthusiastic Temperance worker, and in the early days of teetotalism, when prejudice was rife, and public buildings difficult to secure, the Bethel premises, Sheffield, were thrown open by Mr. Morgan and his officials, for Band of Hope and other Temperance meetings. It was at Sheffield, in 1848, that Thomas Morgan finished his course. When he came to Sheffield and took the roll of the large circuit, he wrote on the cover of the book:— "If all these members should get to heaven, how very grand that would be!" He himself was one of the first to go. Stricken by mortal malady, he died exclaiming, "I believe, I believe." The funeral service, attended by many thousands, was conducted by his two young colleagues, Samuel Antliff and William Cutts. His dust, along with that of the first Mrs. William Jefferson, and other worthy Primitive Methodists, lies in the front of the Bethel Chapel, amidst the din and dinginess of Central Sheffield, from which it is to be hoped it will one day be removed to the beautiful God's acre in the City Road, now a far more suitable resting place.

John Brownson, a man of a different type, was not less consecrated and distinguished. A fine administrator, the way in which he kept the books of his circuit, and the minutes of his District, would now be creditable to any minister. He built the Curzon Street Chapel, Leicester; and the recent Jubilee celebrations of this sanctuary have revived memories of a name that in Leicester and other towns is held in reverence. One of our senior officials said recently,. "Mr. Brownson was my ideal of a

Christian minister." He was a good preacher, and withal, of most gentlemanly address; able to fill with credit any position; and is said to have been the first Primitive Methodist minister in Leicester ever invited to occupy a Wesleyan Methodist pulpit. His death in 1861 coincided with Samuel Antliff's attainment of the twenty years' service qualification then required for ministerial delegation to Conference. Samuel Antliff, John Dickenson, William Cutts and Thomas Roberts succeeded to the positions and influence of leaders like Thomas Morgan and John Brownson, and the noble tradition of their earnestness and power.

Perhaps another name should be added to these as contributing to the preparation of Samuel Antliff's career. We have heard the statement made that he imitated Dr. Jabez Bunting. This can hardly be true, for he cannot have seen much of the great Wesleyan statesman. And we who have access to Dr. Gregory's "Sidelights on the Conflicts of Methodism" know more of the proceedings and utterances of Dr. Bunting in Conference than Samuel Antliff can have done. But he was undoubtedly an admirer of Dr. Bunting. We have heard him describe a service in Leicester conducted by the Doctor, which evidently greatly impressed him. Of course there were great differences; Bunting was a Tory, Antliff a Liberal. But there were temperamental affinities between the two men; each was born to be a leader; and the impression made by the older man upon the imagination of the younger probably had its influence upon his ideals and his course.

Now it has been averred of the District management of Samuel Antliff, as later, of his missionary administration, that it was marked by rigour to the point of harshness, and that, while he had himself the excellence of the giant's strength, he did not always remember that

"It is tyrannous
To use it like a giant."

And now that we are writing about him, it is well that this question of the spirit of his leadership should be fairly and frankly faced.

That some dissatisfaction and criticism should have been caused by the group of strong men who, half a century ago, by the weight of their ability and moral force, ruled the Nottingham District, will not excite surprise. Danton said, and to his cost proved, that "he who meddles with the government of men" will awaken hostilities. At bottom, the controversy was not merely with the men, but with the system they inherited and represented. Permitting as it did a kind of joint District chairmanship or episcopate, with an influence upon stationing almost amounting to a power of preferment and patronage, the system was open to abuses, and readily lent itself to the suspicion of interested motive and biassed feeling.

On the other hand, it is certain that many wise and useful arrangements resulted from it, and many stations got better conditions under it, than, under the present system, they could have obtained for themselves. It is safe, for instance, to say that the appointment to the Loughborough Circuit in the fifties, of the brilliant Charles Henry Boden and the faithful John Eckersley, which turned a forlorn hope into a splendid and abiding success, would not have been possible now. Loughborough, with its empty chapels and jeopardised properties, would have been placed on the "Unsupplied" list; and some "stickit" brother would have been assigned by Conference a task beyond his powers, and sent to read the funeral service. That present-day somewhat haphazard methods do sometimes carry a heavy *per contra* account of infelicity is, unhappily, too evident. The difference between the earlier

and the later system is really the age-long issue between Authority and Freedom. In these days, Freedom is altogether in the ascendant in more churches than ours: so much go, indeed, that some of the phenomena of modern Nonconformity provoke the query as to whether often in the “Free Churches” there is not too much “Freedom” and too little “Church.”

The problem of District stationing in those far-off days must frequently have been exceedingly complex. The ministry was but imperfectly trained, the stations incompletely developed. There were the stronger centres to maintain; the weaker to foster. There were the more capable men whom all clamoured for to be placed to advantage, and the less acceptable brethren to be treated with consideration. The young men needed to be brought forward; the ageing men to be preserved from unkind neglect. In those pre-Equalisation Fund days also, when each circuit was responsible for the allowances for minister’s children upon it, families were stationed as well as men, and the slenderness of the household was sometimes regarded as compensatory for slenderness of gifts. Amidst so many conflicting questions, and all dependent, after all, upon the vote of the full District Meeting, is it to be wondered at that heart-burnings were sometimes caused, and errors of judgment made? Samuel Anitliff and his official coadjutors were but human and fallible, and no doubt they sometimes blundered; but the wonder is that, on the whole, they did so well.

Speaking from personal experience, we find it difficult to believe that Samuel Antliff was ever otherwise than conscientious and charitable. To the writer he was the essence of kindness. No young minister could have had a kinder, a fairer, a more reasonable and appreciative superintendent. In him there was nothing inquisitorial, or “nattering” — to use a colloquialism. And there was much that was most inspiring. We have heard the Doctor’s side of some things in which he occasioned criticism, and the general conclusion reached was this: devoted himself, he expected devotion in others, for the ministry was not a profession or a livelihood, but a vocation. Where devotion was wanting, he felt that the cause of God must be protected, and he could be severe. But where he found fidelity, he was most gladly ready to encourage it.

Samuel Antliff needs no apologia: “His works do follow him,” but we feel it due to a great memory to give this grateful testimony to the goodness and the truth we ever found in him.

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1909/469