

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

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

SAMUEL ANTLIFF was called to be a Connexional, statesman and church builder. This was his fore-ordained contribution to the progress of the world. Providence, which raised up the Primitive Methodist community to do a great and needed work, gave to it this man—as it has given other useful men—to be a “a chosen vessel” for the fulfilment of the Divine purpose. Samuel Antliff had a genius for affairs. Other forms of capacity were not wanting. His intellectual powers were considerable, and in the early days of his ministry he was regarded by many of his brethren, we are told, as “a prodigy of learning.” It was the opinion of Mr. Joshua Rouse (no mean judge, as those who knew the shrewd, erudite old Probationers’ Examiner will understand) that had he given himself up to learning, he might have become an eminent scholar. His gifts as a speaker made a profound impression in every place where he laboured, and attracted notice far beyond the limits of his own denomination.

It is not generally known, perhaps, that early in his career, approaches were made to him by an important Congregational Church, and that the pulpit filled for so long and with such distinction by Dr. Samuel Cox was first offered to, and declined by Samuel Antliff. He had a legal mind also, and his aptitude for points of law, together with his insight and facility in dealing with knotty cases of discipline, suggested sometimes the thought that a successful lawyer had been lost in him.

But while he was thus variously endowed, the leadership of men and the governance and upbuilding of the *Ecclesia* were his vocation. He thought on large and prescient lines. For the details of local work he did not always seem so well fitted; there were more assiduous and successful pastoral visitors than he. But he “had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.” His vision was of a Primitive Methodist Church growing ever stronger, more stable, more fruitful, rising towards larger achievements, becoming a potent force in the moralising of the nation, and a commanding factor in the evangelising of the world. He valued power, but he valued it as a means to this noble end. It was easy to see that the man was greater than any position he filled; and that he brought to his official life, from the smallest local court to the floor of the Conference, the spirit of a true *Episcopos*.

When, after long waiting, under the old rigorous rule, he at length became eligible for Conference, he went there on business bent. Seeing the danger there was of the children of prosperous Primitive Methodists drifting from the church of their fathers, unless the influence of the denomination were maintained in their education, he urged the necessity of a Connexional Secondary School. And as men listened to his cogent and strenuous reasoning, both in debate and on the platform, the word went round, “He’ll get his school.” So it proved: Elmfield College was established, Samuel Antliff becoming its first secretary. So also, when he became General Missionary Secretary, the missionary enthusiasts of the Norwich District, who had long been praying and pleading for a Primitive Methodist Missionary enterprise to the heathen, felt that the hour of hope had come and the man, and said, “We shall have our African Mission now.” These are a few instances out of a number. Samuel Antliff was ever thinking and planning for his denomination. He was, in the best sense, *a great churchman*. The type is not too common. Its most illustrious living example amongst us to-day is a munificent and honoured layman—Sir William P. Hartley.

Of the preacher no less than of the poet the old saying is true, "*Nascitur non fit*." Samuel Antliff was a born speaker. It is open to question whether, in a church like ours, his fine gifts of administration and initiative could have come to their opportunity, if there had not been at their service an eloquent and forceful tongue. "Set my father on his feet anywhere," said his younger daughter, in her humorous way, "and he will talk." Once, when he was giving a lecture that, upon a previous delivery had been reported and printed, the Doctor thought that, for once, he would read from the printed page. The audience sat stolid. "Talk to us," cried the minister, the eccentric John Thomas Neale. The speaker took the hint, and soon the old spell was upon the delighted people. We remember finding him one week night painfully trying (younger readers may not know that he became nearly blind) to decipher the notes of a sermon. We took the earlier part of the service. The Doctor announced his text, and, owing to his imperfect preparation, got through his points in seven minutes. "Now, Doctor," we mentally said, "you are done." But not he! Striking off upon a suggestion from his last point, he improvised a helpful, stirring talk for twenty-five minutes, and soon had his hearers responding. Certainly some of the Doctor's discourses did duty often, especially in the later years of failing sight. But the freshness of the preacher's spirit kept the sermons fresh, and to the end he maintained his grip; in the last months of his life we heard sermons from him full of fire and power. "What immense force the Doctor put into it to-night!" said to us the Derby First Circuit Steward, the sainted and revered John Lesson. What, in his last address at the Metropolitan Tabernacle the Doctor said, the people found, "My locks are white, but my heart is young!"

What a *raconteur* he was! Could any-one tell a story quite like the Doctor; with such happiness of phrasing, such dramatic instinct, such mimetic power? One night, after he had been telling missionary incidents to a village audience, including a number of open-mouthed, open eyed boys and girls, a gifted minister said, "Bless me, how simply and easily the old Doctor got hold of that company! Just the right thing, too! I wish some more of us could do it!"

But there were loftier gifts than these. The preacher could "reason of sin, of righteousness and of judgment to come" till the sinner "trembled" and yielded. And he could urge experimental godliness till the secrets "of all hearts" seemed to be "revealed." From a service of his the late Rev. William Dent went out so deeply moved that—he wrote to say—he had forthwith gone to an unconverted man, and pleaded with him till he had yielded himself to Christ.

And crowning these gifts was the power of prevailing intercession. Samuel Antliff was mighty in prayer. Beginning in low and measured tones, he would gradually kindle and rise until, as in impassioned tones and melting language he pleaded, all hearts were subdued and borne into the very presence of God. Now that he has gone from us to

"Where, beyond these voices, there is peace,"

perhaps, for many, the most vivid and precious memory of the Doctor will be of his prayers.

In his public and official life, as in the exigencies of debate, he was assisted by his natural (and, it may also have been, cultivated), *sang froid*. What a cool hand he was! We have seen him, in the early passages of a paper to which he had presently to speak, with his hand covering his face, his attitude studious, but really taking forty winks; rousing himself, however, in time to hear enough to suggest a line of thought. When, on one occasion, certain loquacious officials had been laying down the law with regard to the capabilities and virtues to be desiderated in ministers, the Doctor quietly got up and agreed with it all.

“But, you see, brethren,” he said, “if you got a minister combining in himself all these many and varied excellencies, he would be almost as good as a local preacher.” “And there was a great calm.”

Could any but a very level-headed and self-contained speaker have managed to accomplish what he did upon that last American visit, when, with neck swathed in bandages, owing to the carbuncle that eventually ended fatally, and unable to move his head, he delivered a lecture on “The Pleasures of Life”?

Like all men built for leadership, Samuel Antliff possessed great force of character and strength of will. As was sometimes the case with able men in the early days of the Connexion, he had to pay the penalty of strength and gifts in being at times appointed to work up decayed and almost bankrupt stations. “But,” he said to the writer, “I am so constituted that difficulties do not cast me down, but make me rise, and fetch the best out of me.” It might be said of him, both as a circuit minister and a Connexional official, that he

“Never turned his back, but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break.”

In one of his circuits, an avalanche of anxiety seemed to accumulate upon him. Arriving home from a special engagement he found his brother and other influential persons at his house for the consideration of a painful case for investigation and discipline. He wisely insisted that he must first take rest. The next day the committee met for their sorrowful task. This was one of a number of moral disasters at the time that seemed to threaten an important circuit with ruin. But, he afterwards related, “I went on with my work, and I talked to the Lord about it, and He came to our help, and sent a revival.” That year of gloom and storm ended by being the most successful of his term.

When, through failing sight, he could no longer read his lessons or his hymns, he used, with the assistance of his devoted daughter, to memorise them, that he might adequately discharge his duties in conducting Divine worship. A ministerial acquaintance, coming upon the circuit, and hearing of this, questioned us upon the subject, and exclaimed as he heard, “He’s an old hero.” So he assuredly was. Many men would have found in such an infirmity, conjoined with advancing years, a reason for retirement, but the Doctor’s indomitable power of will carried him through, and in the active service and responsibility of the ministry he remained until his death.

Other aspects of his life and work, including some instances of his gifts of wit and humour, will form the subject of a concluding article.

References

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