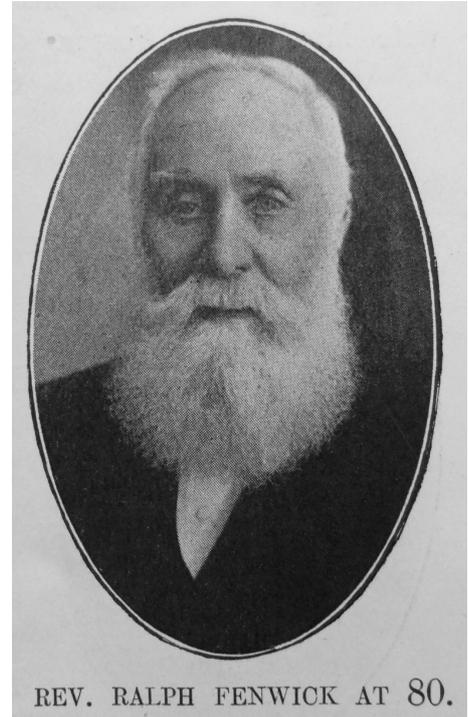


Our Departed Leaders
Rev. Ralph Fenwick

Transcription of Sketch in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Rev. R. Clemitson

At the beginning of the second half of the last century there was coming to the front in the old Sunderland District, a group of remarkable men - men of large mental calibre, great initiative and evangelistic fervour. It would not be difficult to characterise each man, but space forbids, and we content ourselves with the bare mention of a few of their names:- McKechnie, Greenfield, Hebbron, Phillips, Smith, Spoor, Southron, Peter Clarke, William Fulton; and last but not least - Ralph Fenwick. At the same time there were coming into prominence a number of laymen equally remarkable. With such men at the head of affairs, it is no surprise that the District took a leading position in our church; that here was formed the first Ministerial Association, and that at Sunderland, in 1868, was opened our first Theological Institute. Entering the ministry ten years before the opening of the Institute, I have a vivid recollection of the interest taken then in young men on probation. Each probationer was placed under the tuition and guidance of a senior minister, and correspondence classes formed. The writer, for instance, was placed under the care of the Rev. T. Greenfield - a born teacher - and put through a course of English and Greek.*



Books too were presented. to probationers by the Association. I have by me Butler's "Analogy," Wayland's "Moral Science," and Watson's "Theological Institutes," given in 1860, by the members of the Preachers' Association, that "by the diligent use of them he may become a more efficient minister of the New Testament."

In all these movements Mr. Fenwick took a leading part. He was a skilled and much appreciated examiner of probationers and candidates for the ministry, and when the old Infirmary was taken over to be converted into the Theological Institute, he became a trustee. There were giants in those days, and he was of them.

Mr. Fenwick was born at Lanchester, in the County of Durham, October 5th, 1819, his parents removing shortly afterwards to Easington Lane. We know little of his father, except that he died shortly after the birth of his son. His mother was a good woman with considerable force of character, and did her best for her child. When the call came to enter the ministry and Mr. Fenwick was diffident, his mother, knowing him to be "a lad o' pairts," urged him to go, and had the joy of seeing him occupy a highly honourable position. Most of the schooling he got was by attending the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist Sunday Schools. Before he was eight, he was employed to sweep the waggon way, and at an early age became a colliery engineman. In this capacity he developed considerable mechanical genius, an adroit use of which he once made in after years. On a visit to Stanhope, and staying with the foreman of certain quarries, the engine went wrong and the work was stopped. He inspected it, and told the men he would put it right if they would promise to come to the service at night. Glad to get the work done they accepted the terms. The

engine was put right, the men came to the service, Mr. Fenwick preached one of his rousing sermons, and several of them gave their hearts to God. But we are anticipating.

When about seventeen years old, he and a companion of the name of Bruce Smith went to a Sabbath evening service in the old Primitive Methodist School-room, Easington Lane, just to see what was going on. One was taken and the other left: Smith became a tea and wine merchant in Sunderland; young Fenwick was so impressed that he yielded himself to God at the after service, and became a Primitive Methodist minister. He could do nothing by halves. His was what Mr. Moody called a "tremendous conversion." It was a great moral transformation and begat a mental thirst which remained with him until the end. He became at once a Sunday School teacher, and then a local preacher. He became a flame of fire, visiting the adjacent villages and preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ. Revivals broke out, and we have it from his own lips that at least seven hundred conversions took place. He took great interest in the erection of the first chapel at Easington Lane, and became a trustee.

In 1844 he received a call from the Ripon Station, and accepting it, began his ministry, Ripon was followed by Carlisle, Brompton, Darlington, North Shields, Hexham, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Sunderland, Allendale, South Shields, Westgate, Middlesbrough, Crook, Balham, Hartlepool. Some of these were amongst the largest and most important stations in the North. In Sunderland, for instance, he had a station with 2,500 members, with five colleagues under him, and covering ground now occupied by five or six stations. At the same time he was secretary to all the District Committees. He was a doughty champion of the Faith, and on several occasions had successful encounters with its opponents. .

At the close of his probation he took to wife Miss Alice Foster, daughter of Mr. George Foster, of Ripon, a member of the Deed Poll. She was all that could be desired in a minister's wife. In 1880 he became General Book Steward. His five years there were amongst the most successful the Book Room has had. It was during his term of office that our present admirable Hymnal was in course of preparation. It was published in the January after he had left the Book Room. In 1885 he was elected President of Conference at Reading.

While he rendered efficient service in his official positions, his chief work, that in which he most excelled, was the ministry of the Word. Gifted with a fine presence, a clear flexible voice, a mind of no ordinary power, a style at once graceful and effective, he was one of the most able and successful ministers our church has had. His was a fine blend of the intellectual and the emotional, and appealed alike to men cultured and otherwise. No one who heard, for instance, his sermons on the Parables, could ever forget them.

His social qualities were hardly less distinguished than his preaching ability. To see him surrounded by a few like-minded ministers or laymen, to listen to his wit and wisdom, to hear him give, in his own graphic style, some of the rich stories he had in his repertory, was a treat indeed.

He was proud, but it was of a kind which guards a man's honour, prevents undue liberties, but does not lead him to look down on his fellow men. He was sensitive too. He appreciated the good opinion of his friends, and sometimes rose in anger at the ill-will of his enemies. But neither praise nor blame deflected him from the line of duty.

After an exceptionally active and fruitful ministry of forty-four years he was superannuated by the Conference of 1888: or as our Presbyterian friends better put it, became a minister *emeritus* – “One who has been honourably discharged from public service or duty.” He had secured a house in Eversley Place, Heaton, Newcastle on-Tyne, and resided there during the remainder of his life.

So long as he was able he attended the Leighton Memorial Church, and took occasional services. But for a long time he has been confined to his room and to his bed. And, great as a preacher and administrator, he was equally great in his patient endurance of a long and painful affliction. He quietly “fell on sleep,” February 27th, 1907, at the great age of eighty-seven. On March 4th, an impressive memorial service was held in the Leighton Memorial Church, conducted by the Rev. W.A. French, assisted by the Revs. G. Emmett, G. Armstrong, and J. Young. The Rev. J. Hallam, representing the General Committee, delivered a fine tribute to the character and worth of the deceased, followed by a few words of appreciation by the Rev. R. Clemitson. His remains were laid to rest in the Jesmond New Cemetery, in the presence of a large concourse of friends from far and near.

Mrs. Fenwick predeceased him by fifteen years. Over twenty years ago they secured as servant Miss Margaret E. Lowrey (Meggie) and when Mrs. Fenwick died she became house keeper. Her work is beyond praise. She devoted time, strength, interest, and, for years, practically imprisoned herself for the good of the venerable old man. Nothing was spared that she could do for him. And when some time ago she became Mrs. Watson, she still remained with him, and brought in her husband’s added help. Next to herself nothing could be finer and more acceptable than the aid rendered by Mr. Watson. Nor must the care and attention of the minister, the Rev. W.A. French, be overlooked. He rendered unstinted help to Mr. Fenwick in many ways.

We have all sympathy with his son and daughter left behind, and with her who has been his ministering angel for so long. But the feeling uppermost is one of thankfulness for a life so long continued and so filled with large and noble service. Instead of mourning in such a case, we feel more inclined to join in the *Te Deum Laudamus* or to sing:

“For all Thy saints, who from their labours rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy name, O Jesus, be for ever blest,
Hallelujah !”

*In after years when the writer had indulged a little in metaphysics, and Locke, Hamilton, and Mansel, had come under purview, he offered his old tutor the loan of Mansel’s “Limits of Religious Thought.” This prince of expositors opened a line of thinking Mr. Greenfield had not troubled himself with. But he read the book, and on handing it back said: “I have added a new article to my creed; *I believe in the incapacity of the human mind.*” Characteristic!

References

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