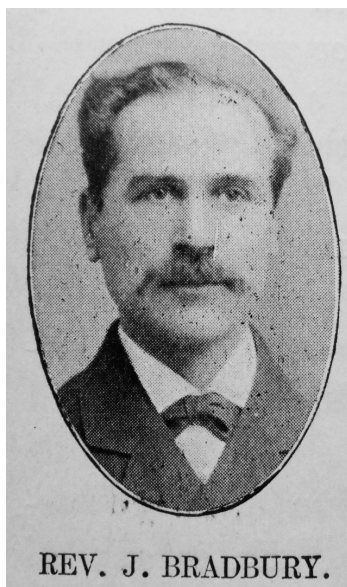
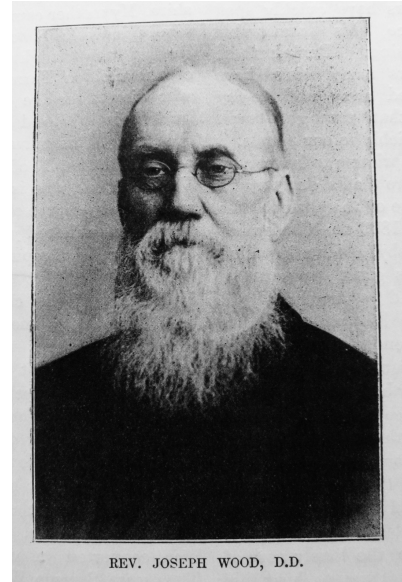


Dr. Joseph Wood
A Tribute

Transcription of Sketch in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Rev. John Bradbury (*One of his first students*)

In the galaxy of men who in later years have fashioned our Church, no name has a surer place than that of Joseph Wood. Seven years have quickly sped since his memorable passing. During these years many mists have rolled away, and to-day we see more clearly that, through Joseph Wood, God has given richly to our people.

How singularly appropriate was the scenery of his passing! For more than a quarter of a century he had been one of the personalities of our Conference. In 1899 the Conference was in session in Grimsby, a town in which Primitive Methodism has great strength and greater opportunity, and where Dr. Wood had done much of his best work. It was then this great soul ascended to God. For months ere he passed, around him could be seen "the aureole of death." But the vision of the coming Conference had buoyed him up, and by sheer strength of will he added to his days. Many shadows gathered around him in life's eventide. His day had been full of the light of joy and of triumph. With honour he had trodden the warrior's way. Now God called him to the lonely path of suffering. How pathetic it was to hear this soul, who had stood on Carmel, echoing the words of the man with whom he had much in common: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." As the vast multitude, from the North, East, West, and South, gathered around his bier, the God of Elijah gave the answer to his temporary despair, the answer by which Joseph Wood the glorified, would to-day have his loved Church live.



In the record of our ancestors we can often read God's intentions concerning our lives. Therefore, let me place on record the line from which Joseph Wood sprang. By the discovery of a few notes dictated but two months before his death, this I can do in his own words. "I was born in a lonely farmhouse, called, with several others, 'Morredge,' in the parish of Ipstones in North Staffordshire. My mother came of a very respectable family, indeed a historical family. She was one of the daughters of James Plant, of the Golden Farm, Bradnop, near Leek, who died at the age of ninety-two, and was buried in the old churchyard at Mount Pleasant. This graveyard is full of the dust of the Plant family of many generations. The Vicar of Leek, who is of the same family, has traced the pedigree of my mother's line back for several hundred years. My father hailed from a family of repute in North Derbyshire.

. . . . My earliest recollection of meetings is that of my father carrying me across fields and dykes to a meeting in a farm-house, called New Barn, where there had been Primitive Methodist preaching services for more than half a century, but are now discontinued. This farm was occupied by a family of the name of Clowes, whether relatives of William Clowes or not I cannot say.

. . . . I was sent to the Wesleyan Sunday School the only school in the village. In this Sunday School two remarkable young men, converted in a revival, were teachers. They were Samson Warrington and Thomas Willshaw. By their piety, example, and influence, there were sown the seeds of my subsequent consecration to God's service. Thomas Willshaw's career has been very extraordinary. From a theological class, which he called 'The Brunswick Class,' about eighty men have gone into the Wesleyan ministry, some of them being among the foremost men now in the Wesleyan ranks."

Let these facts be added: At the age of sixteen, Joseph Wood makes the great surrender of his life to Christ; two years later he is a prophet, forthtelling the good tidings of great joy; the people see the Lord God is with him, for he has the marks of gifts, grace and fruit; at twenty-one the call of the Church reaches him to devote his life to the ministry. Exceptionally bright business prospects were before him, and many friends sought to save him from such a decision. But Adolphus Beckerlegge made short work of these temptations. He faced the young, rising preacher with this alternative: If he did not enter the ministry the Lord would kill him and send him to hell. Who could resist such a warning? He came into line with the evident will of God. In 1851 he is in active ministry in Hull, and this is the popular question in the "Metropolis of Primitive Methodism": "Have you heard the young preacher at Clowes?"

From that day onwards our Church recognised that Joseph Wood was a man having authority, and not as the Scribes. He was destined to be a brilliant and powerful leader. He could not be hid. He had purpose, ambition, programme, passion. High ideals fascinated him. Such a man always bears a certain distinction. He has "the cathedral step." Abounding evidence exists that Joseph Wood worked from a vision: on the plain he strove to work out what he had seen on the mount. He hitched his waggon to a star! Though possessed of great natural ability, and enjoying a degree of culture few of our men enjoyed, he threw himself into his life's task with abandon and daring. He toiled with strong desire and zest for knowledge and power, for God and for men. From the dawn till the stars appeared, he sought to fulfil an all-round ministry. He trained not only brain, but heart, will, conscience; possessing unusual aptitude for fellowship with God, he never lost sacrificial sympathy for men. Passion blended with principle, and a strong ethical note was not silent in the speech that trembled with emotion.

Probably the greatest triumphs of Joseph Wood were achieved as circuit minister. In some of his circuits, notably in Hull and Grimsby, he had unparalleled success. Enter any of his old circuits, up to the time when his strength was unabated, and you hear stories of his mighty and uplifting ministry among the people. Evangelism, Reform, and a Revival of Reverence, were the conspicuous features of his ministry. He witnessed many a Pentecost, carried out numerous reforms, and invariably left the place his people called "chapel," the House of God, the living Church of worshipful spirits. It is not possible by figures to tabulate the success of a man in circuit work. The only test is, does the minister, on the whole, make God real and radiant to his people? If they forget his words, or disagree with his methods, do they feel they can never *forget him*? Does he pass into their lives, because he bears their sins and carries their sorrows? The man who can endure this test alone

succeeds. Joseph Wood, the Circuit minister, wears the crown, for he went this way, and bore, unmistakably, the print of the nails.

Of some aspects of his administrative work we may question their wisdom or success. He himself was first to admit the work of administration was to him irksome and uncongenial. But throughout his life much of this work came to his hands. He filled all district offices. He played a prominent part in the conception and organisation of our Sunday School Union. He was its first secretary, and by his skilful, consecrated, and courageous work, he put this movement on a living basis, and made possible its present usefulness. As Principal of our Manchester College he threw himself into his high duties with wholeheartedness, especially on the administrative side. Entering upon this work at a critical juncture in the history of the college, confronted by manifold difficulties of which I cannot here speak, burdened by enfeebled health and the weight of strenuous living, he yet succeeded in initiating not a few reforms, and laying the foundations for more. In the position of secretary to the committee for selecting candidates for the ministry he found opportunity for the realisation of some of his ideals for the ministry that is to be. No Connexional committee seemed complete without him. His long and varied experience is handed down to us in many decisions affecting the hymnology and the polity of our Church.

In Joseph Wood were many traits of a great critic. He must have written some hundreds of letters in criticism. He had a keen eye to detect the weakness of a method, a movement, or an argument, and he was unsparing in attack. For more than twenty years he was our leader in controversy. He had an Englishman's love of battle. As Browning's hero he might have confessed, "I was ever a fighter." Often he was charged with narrowness, especially in his famous crusade against the growing craze for pleasure in the Churches. But his narrowness was the outcome of strength, he acquired it by self-restraint and a holy jealousy for God. He saw many signs of spiritual decay, the most deadly was the making light of life's serious things. Knowing the King was coming to invite men to be His guests, he feared, unless a drastic assault was made on the tendency, that again would the tragic words be written, "They made light of it!" How he could play the part of the iconoclast! He broke in pieces the brazen serpent of Moses, and called it *Nehushtan*, a piece of brass! But not only against the ill did he rail, he unselfishly and resolutely strove for the good. He was not only a destroyer, but an upbuilder. He probably inspired and carried into the law of our Church more legislation than any man of the past generation.

Joseph Wood as debater will not soon be forgotten. On the floor of Conference he was a past master. He was our Rupert in debate. He was an expert in ironical reasoning, and loved to put his antagonist in the witness-box, and convict him out of his own mouth. In debate he had a certain distinction of style, the swift retort, native wit, conquering humour, and tenacious faith in his own contention. However much some differed from him in his judgments, and thought he erred in extravagance of language, none could doubt his honesty of purpose, or the brotherliness of his soul. In a certain conference a heated debate took place. The chief combatants were Wood v. Fowler. The president intervened with the remark: "We have had enough of this. Will Mr. Wood give out a verse?" With the utmost seriousness he announced the verse: "For me the Fowler spreads his net!" Needless to say Joseph Wood had gained another victory!

Thinking of him, and of his place in our history, I recall an estimate of him as preacher, given to me by the late Dr. Samuel Antliff: "Our Church has produced no greater preacher than Joseph Wood." He was first and last a preacher. His fine physique, his dignified demeanour, his surpassing reverence, his Johnsonian language, his literary grace, his unquestionable genuineness, and spiritual authority, compelled you to listen and give him the verdict. In his best days a solemn awe was on his congregations, spirit with spirit did meet, the light of God shone on his face, his voice rang with God's law, but quivered with God's Gospel, his personality was dominated by Christ, he had power with God and with men, and prevailed. This pulpit king knew, too, the art of prayer. He was our George Dawson at the altar. "Give us, O Thou Holy One, a better life, a better disposition," he prays. "Give us that generous and heroic nature by which we shall come to a fuller understanding of Thee. Our selfishness cannot interpret Thee. Make an end of sin. Thy reign will put a stop to all the evils in the land. Come and reign in all hearts, and in every world. For that kingdom we will work. In Thy presence may we rest." For a long, hard day of toil he nobly kept his vow; now to him, one of the bravest and best souls I have known, God gives His own eternal rest.

"O white-souled peasant of the olden time,
I thank God for thy story;
Memories of thee like bells of Christmas chime
And cheer our souls unfalteringly to climb
The stairs that lead to glory."

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1907/117