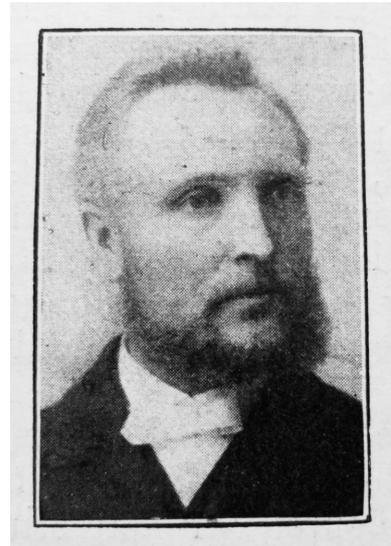


John Taylor

Transcription of Obituary in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by A.L. Humphries

In the passing of John Taylor to the higher life on May 12th, 1905, Primitive Methodism lost one of the most devoted and successful workers that have ever adorned its ministry. Death overtook him at Staveley, where nearly sixty-nine years before his eyes first opened to the light. This village, lying at the junction of Kentmere with the smaller valley that moves on towards Windermere, was the place wherein both the morning and the evening of his life were spent.

Mr. Taylor's father was a grocer, admired for the sterling genuineness of his character and, together with his wife, deeply attached to the Primitive Methodist cause in the village. Consequently their children grew up in a religious atmosphere, and it was not strange that, when only twelve years of age, John Taylor became "savourily acquainted with the truth as it is in Jesus."



He at once found employment in the Sunday School, and three years later was raised to the plan as a local preacher. In this way he laboured for several years, serving at the same time an apprenticeship at a bobbin-mill. God, however, was but training him for a wider sphere of usefulness. Among his papers we have found the copy of a letter written to the Rev. John Atkinson, who had already entered the ministry. In it he tells how, in the course of some protracted services held in the village, he received such a spiritual baptism as filled him with an ardent desire for the salvation of his fellow-men, and made him wishful to give himself up to "the glorious work." It was not without significance as to the nature of his future ministry that the prophetic call came to him under such circumstances. Accordingly when in May, 1857, he was invited to labour at Alston, under the superintendence of Moses Lupton, he went nothing doubting. The validity of his call was confirmed by a conversion at his first service, and he quickly gained the favour of the people. His very popularity, however, wrought injury to him. People eagerly followed him from place to place, and he, thinking it necessary that he should always furnish these vagrant listeners with a new sermon, found himself overtaxed. The strain, operating upon a highly-strung temperament, combined with the trouble incident to a first absence from home to produce deep despondency. "I could," says he, "neither study, pray, nor preach with liberty." In the end he returned home much against the will of his friends both at Alston and in his native circuit, who were all convinced that the ministry was his appointed sphere. He seems to have retained that conviction himself, but felt that the self-confidence which he lacked would be forthcoming if he received some further education. Accordingly for a time he studied at home, and then, largely through the good offices of Colin C. McKechnie, the way was opened in March, 1858, for him to enter Gainford Academy, near Darlington.

Mr. McKechnie at that time knew nothing of John Taylor from personal contact with him, but the story of his brief ministry at Alston must have reached Mr. McKechnie in the neighbouring circuit of Allendale, and convinced him of the young man's true fitness for ministerial service. In a letter full of

sage counsel Mr. McKechnie details to him the nature of the opening at Gainford, and in playful exaggeration tells him that if he fails to make the best use of this opportunity, he deserves "transportation to regions of hopeless barbarism." He threatens, moreover, to gibbet him in the "Christian Ambassador," "a magazine," he says, "which I hope you have the good sense to take and read."

The arrangement was that in return for tuition on the week-days, Mr. Taylor was to preach once each Sunday at the Congregational Church. The training thus provided did him so much good that when, in 1859, renewed advances were made to him to enter the ministry, the offer was accepted. Moses Lupton, his former superintendent, was anxious to secure his appointment to Whitehaven, and accordingly it was to that circuit that the Conference saw fit to station him. There he spent five years in all, the latter portion of the time being devoted to the Maryport Circuit which had been carved out of the larger one. He was in labours most abundant, going through the Cumberland villages like a flame of fire. His ready eloquence and evangelistic passion won for him the ears and hearts of the common people. Even then, like a modern Elijah, he had his times of despondency, but a saying of the Rev. T. Greenfield to him on one of these occasions, "A hero's crown, or a coward's grave!" often put new heart into him.

Removing from Maryport to Hexham he was united in marriage to Elizabeth Harryman, the daughter of a Cumbrian yeoman. Through all the course of his ministerial career Mrs. Taylor proved a true and valued helpmate, and she now in lonely widowhood survives to cherish the memory of that happy fellowship.

At the end of only one year at Hexham he removed to Brompton, being chosen to grapple with certain difficulties under which that circuit at the time was labouring. There he remained five happy and fruitful years, going thence to Durham, where an equally successful term of six years was spent. He subsequently laboured in Shildon, Newcastle (1st and 2nd Circuits), South Shields, and Chester-le-Street; In this last sphere his health broke down. Nature had generously dowered him with a noble presence and a strong physique, but linked with these was a finely-strung nervous temperament which he had inherited from his mother. Moreover it was not natural for John Taylor to spare himself. The frequent testimony of friends is that in his circuits he did the work of three men. In both the quality and quantity of his work he made huge demands upon his nervous strength. He could not endure to take part in a preaching service or a public meeting without, as he phrased it, "making it go," but this often meant that the next morning found him limp and spent. After passing warnings of this kind there came at length a more continuous breakdown, compelling him, to his own great grief, to seek superannuation at the Conference of 1892, the very assembly which received into the ministry his son, the Rev. J. Harryman Taylor, M.A. So "instead of the fathers shall be the children." There followed thirteen years of retirement quietly spent amid the scenes of his boyhood, where he watched with unflinching interest the various movements in our Church, in whose work he was no longer permitted actively to participate.

If we ask how we are to characterise the thirty-three years of his ministry, the answer is not far to seek. There was about it a noble simplicity. No small part of its strength lay in its concentration. John Taylor was, from first to last, a circuit minister. He steadfastly refused District office, and not once during his ministry, though frequently pressed to accept nomination, would he go as delegate to

Conference. Only once was he brought into connexion with our annual assembly, and that was when, as superintendent of South Shields Station, it became his duty to arrange for the Conference which met there in 1883. Few who attended that Conference will forget with what power he led the Camp Meeting procession on the Sunday afternoon, or how, when clamoured for by the audience towards the close of the great meeting on the Monday night, he, in a short speech of fiery and unpremeditated eloquence, supplied the climax to a magnificent meeting.

From such high places he as a rule shrank. He preferred to put his strength into his circuits. There he laboured without stint, caring for all the interests, spiritual and material, pastoral and administrative, which demanded his attention. The result was that every department flourished and the churches were edified. A typical instance of his all-round success is supplied by his record at Durham, where, during his six years' service the membership grew from 436 to 611 and the quarterly income of the circuit from £34 to £68, whilst the Connexional property increased by nearly £3,000. Truly did he prove himself a worker that needed not to be ashamed.

As a preacher he wielded great influence, possessing that indefinable quality called "unction," and moving his listeners to both laughter and tears. In preaching he owed much to a sympathetic environment in his congregation. Sermon production was never easy to him, though he laboured conscientiously at it, but when he came face to face with his congregation, then he kindled, and the glow of imagination and the play of emotion irradiated what he had brought with him from the study, and made it live. The power of his imagination made him specially apt in the delineation of Bible scenes and characters. Moreover he had singular readiness in seizing upon some passing incident and making it the vehicle of spiritual truth, the launch of a ship, for example, at Maryport, supplying him with the theme of an address the same evening, which was talked about years afterwards by those who heard it. His great natural gifts of expression, linked with a well-stored mind, made him a power upon the platform and in the pulpit. Moreover all his activities were fired with the passion to do good. Right through his ministry he did the work of an evangelist. His aim was to get men converted and to build up the Church of Christ.

But above all his manifold gifts there lay, as their crown, the graces of a strong and sanctified Christian character. John Taylor was manly to the very core. He loved righteousness and hated iniquity. Profoundly conscientious himself in all his actions, he viewed with an impatient scorn anything that savoured of meanness or appeared to lack straightforwardness. His nature was simple in its devotion to what he felt to be right. Moreover he was not only righteous but good. He exhibited a gracious and unselfish regard for others, which made him in different ways the helper of many, and gained for him in all his circuits a host of warm and attached friends. He lived not simply in the admiration but in the love of his people. We append a brief extract from two letters written by ministers who were both at different times his colleagues.

The Rev. John Day Thompson says: "He was a true, brave man, full of the most generous enthusiasm, and with wonderful power of appealing to the common heart."

The Rev. Henry Yooll writes: "He was a man greatly beloved for his high Christian character, sterling integrity, generous spirit, and the special unction that attended his fruitful ministry. I count it as one of the great joys of my life to have been one of his colleagues. His manly bearing, his keen sense of

right, his consideration for others, his abounding zeal, and spiritual fervour greatly impressed me, and I shall ever cherish his memory with profound esteem and affection.”

His body sleeps amid the rude forefathers of the hamlet, under the sod of a Westmoreland churchyard, but his spirit has joined the “choir invisible,” the elect company of “just men made perfect”.

References

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