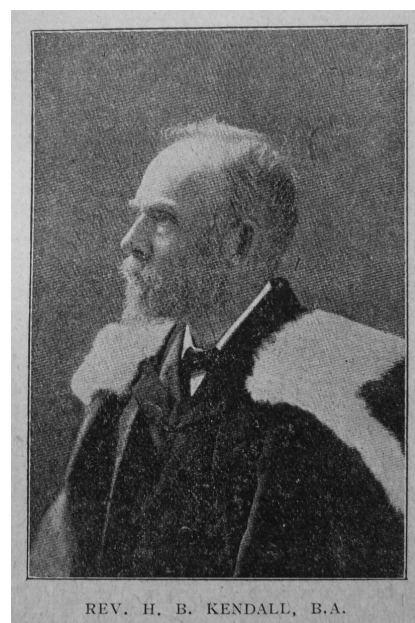


An Interview with the Rev. H. Bickerstaff Kendall, B.A.

Transcription of article published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Rev W. Bridge

IN the south-east corner of Bournemouth, known as Southbourne, is to be found quite a little colony of Primitive Methodist Ministers, their wives, widows and children. There are, for instance, the Rev. G. Doe, still hale and hearty, despite his eighty odd years, together with Mrs. and Miss Doe—the latter well-known to many by her writings. Here, too, are the widow and daughters of the late Rev. C. Portnall. The Rev. I. Dorricott is also now looked upon as almost a permanent resident, and as such has rendered, and is still rendering, splendid service to our new church at Arnewood Road. But chief among these devoted Primitive Methodists is the Rev. H. Bickerstaffe Kendall, B.A., a past President of our Church, the editor of our Connexional Magazines for the extended period of nine years, and now the devoted and beloved steward of the Arnewood Road Church, with the formation and early history of which his name and that of Mrs. Kendall will be inseparably associated.



On the instructions of the Editor of this Magazine, I betook myself to 39, Castlemain Avenue, and was delighted to find that, except for some throat trouble, Mr. Kendall, despite his seventy-two years, enjoys fairly good health, and is nearly always to be found in his place in the sanctuary, not once but twice every Sunday, and that even in the inclement weather of the past winter. Nor could any preacher wish for a more genial and sympathetic listener than he.

“Would you mind, Mr. Kendall, telling me—to use a familiar and time-honoured phrase something of your conversion and call to the ministry?”

“My conversion was very considered and deliberate. After hearing a sermon by the Rev. Charles Spivey, I went home and definitely gave myself to Jesus Christ. I at once informed my parents, and also told my companions. Shortly afterwards, we removed to Hull, whence after some three or four months’ study, and while still on trial as a local preacher, I was invited to Barton-on-Humber to serve under the sweet and saintly David Ingham as hired local preacher. While there I had invitations to enter the ministry from Patrington, Wakefield and Newcastle, circuits at that time possessing the power to call men to the ministry direct. Years later I learned that I had been invited to Newcastle on the recommendation of the Rev. Jeremiah Dodsworth. I remained at Newcastle from April, 1864, to 1867, in which year Thomas Smith became Governor of Elmfield College. Later superintendents were C. C. M’Kechnie, Thomas Southron, John Atkinson, John Taylor and Thomas Greenfield—a goodly list, men of mark and standing. Indeed, I have always considered myself highly favoured in my superintendents. They were so different from each other that any attempt to compare them would be futile. Each was strong in some individual direction. To revert to my call to Newcastle, the “canny” Tynesiders did not believe in taking a preacher on trust; so I had to go and preach trial sermons on the Sunday before the settlement was made. It was something of an ordeal to find oneself in the

company of such men as George Charlton, W. Leighton, Peter Kidman and Robert Foster. The latter, by the way became my fast friend for nearly fifty years.”

“And now could you tell me something of the years preceding your entry into the ministry—those formative years of early life?”

“I was always a bookish lad, and I suppose this was why I very early elected to be a printer. I had read of Caxton and his Westminster press, of Benjamin Franklin, and of the scholar-printers of the Renaissance, and so the fancy was born and grew. I became a printer in due course, and served five years to the trade. I daresay the life in a printer’s jobbing and weekly newspaper office did not quite come up to my roseate, childish expectations, yet the experience I gained as a printer and occasional reporter taught me a good deal that afterwards became useful. I learned how to correct proofs, to read with tolerable facility all kinds of handwriting, and how to prepare and see MSS. through the press. I was enabled, too, to save time by short-handing my sermons and taking full notes for university classes. So my five years of secular life were not lost, but were a sort of preparation for what was to come.”

“What men in Primitive Methodism, besides your superintendents stand out prominently in your memory?”

“Well, I can go a good way back. It is surprising how many years two lives can span. As a child I saw William Clowes; and my wife, happily spared to me, was baptised by him. I have listened to John Nelson when he was the guest of my father at Scotter. He was then a Methodist New Connexion minister. Amongst the I superannuated preachers who lived at Sunderland when I travelled there, were Sampson Turner, who began to travel in 1819, and Thomas Oliver, who, missioned Edinburgh. I buried John Lightfoot, and have listened to the admonitions of Moses Lupton. I have spoken from the same platform as John Petty, William Garner and Joseph Spoor.”

“What do you consider the most striking changes which have taken place in the Connexion and in the ministry since your entrance into the ministry in 1864?”

“The changes have been many and great. As regards, the ministry, when I entered it, the studies of the probationers were in a state of constant change, and not until my fourth year did we take a written examination. No marks were awarded, but the papers were graded as excellent, very good, good, moderate and bad. Our text-books included Pearson on The Creed, Whateley’s Logic, Watson’s Institutes, Wayland’s Moral Science, and a course on Ecclesiastical History.

“As to the Connexion, the greatest constitutional change was undoubtedly the breaking-down of the district barriers. Previous to that the Connexion was rather a federation of districts than a unified Church. There was a pronounced district atmosphere, and it was a mark of either great distinction or the opposite for a man to pass from one district to another. Districtism had its day, and served its purpose. It contributed to the upbuilding and enrichment of the Connexion. But the time came when Districtism was a hindrance to Connexional, solidarity. Beyond the limits of our boundaries our outlook was restricted, and our sympathies in danger of being contracted. Our isolation was the more complete, because in those early years of my ministry we had no newspaper representing the life and thought of the Connexion, and bringing to the front either the men who had ‘arrived’ or

were 'arriving!' Preachers were isolated, and a trip to London, or a cheap excursion to some distant Conference were beyond the range of one's purse or expectations. In this connection honour should be given to Mr. Hurd for founding the first denominational newspaper, *The Primitive Methodist*, under considerable difficulties, and in the face of a fair amount of official opposition. The first number appeared on June the 10th, 1868, and contained a long account of the death of the Venerable John Petty, a description of the opening of the Sunderland Conference, and a sketch of William Lister, its President, written by C. C. M'Kechnie. The influence of *The Primitive Methodist*, together with that of *The Primitive Methodist World*, which appeared later, did something to break down the isolation inherent in "Districtism," and so contributed to foster the Connexional spirit and the unity of the Church.

"Aloofness and isolation also characterised the relation of the Churches to each other. The Nonconformist Churches were separated as by bulkheads, and, like the Jews and the Samaritans, had few or no dealings with each other, and on the whole this was even truer of the relations of the Methodist Churches to each other, than of their relations to the other Non-conformist Churches. For instance, I was over three years in Newcastle without preaching for any church but our own, and that was the general attitude of the churches to each other. They all lived a sectional and isolated life. But a great change has gradually taken place, a change of which the Federation of the Free Churches is perhaps even more a symptom than a cause.

"The restriction of travel, the non-existence of a denominational newspaper, and the operation of the district system made the minister's life a much drabber thing than it is to-day, and necessitated much patient plodding and perseverance if he desired to achieve anything worth while."

"How does the Christian life of to-day and present-day preaching compare with the life and preaching of your early years?"

"Generalisations are risky things, and I must be careful. Remember, I can speak only of the old Hull District in which I was nurtured, and of the powerful Sunderland District, in which nearly all my ministry was spent. Each district, as I have hinted, had its own tastes, standards and ways of looking at things. But I can safely say those times were no better than these. If we will speak of 'the good old times,' we must go a good deal farther back than the early sixties to find them. I think our societies are morally purer and discipline less urgently called for. Taking the average, our congregations have advanced in intelligence and liberality. There is less acrimonious controversy, more charity and toleration, more brotherly love amongst preachers and people. No! I cannot say that religiously the condition of our churches sixty years ago was better than it is to-day. It would be a shame if it were.

"The same remark applies to preaching. There was no lack of good preaching in the days when C. C. M'Kechnie was giving his intellectual presentation of truth touched with emotion, and men listened with relish to Thomas Greenfield's rich expository discourses. But here also there has been a change in the character of preaching—not in its substance so much as in the mode of presentation. What was good for those days would scarcely meet our present ideas and requirements. We want truth personalised in Christ, and not clothed in abstract forms. As you may see by the *Primitive Pulpit*, edited by my father and Dr. W. Antliff, sermons were very methodically arranged—'packed like eggs

in a creel'—and were often very rhetorical. This method is having a lingering death, and the method of declaring plainly and forcibly positive truths guaranteed by experience is the method adapted to these times.

"You must remember further that in the time of which I am speaking, science was unfriendly to religion, and an aggressive agnosticism was afoot. Speaking generally, they were not flourishing, conquering days for the Churches. They were largely put on the defensive. In these respects we are living in better days. Science has wonderfully changed in its attitude to Christianity, and the revival of mysticism has done much to familiarise men with the presence of the supernatural. Moreover, the growth of the historical spirit has made the Bible a more living book to us, and enabled us to see more clearly God's hand in the world-process, as well as in individual experience."

"To what would you attribute this remarkable change?" I asked.

"To the fact that the *dogmatic* setting of truth has given place to its *historic* setting, the recognition that God works through history and experience, and through these also makes known His will to men. This modern conception of revelation has revolutionised the whole teaching and atmosphere of the Church, and there is no doubt that the change has been decidedly, preponderantly for good.

"As to constitutional reform, I would simplify the machinery of the Connexion to the utmost degree possible. There seems to be a real danger of our machinery becoming too vast, and too complicated and ponderous in its vastness. I often ask, 'Are we not now Committee-ed to death?' What a consumption of time it involves! What a drain on our finances!"

"What were your chief impressions of the Connexion during your presidential year?"

"Perhaps the greatest of all was that the true strength of the Church lay largely in the work and fidelity of men and women who live secluded from the public eye, and whose names are unknown beyond the limits of their own church or circuit."

Mr. Kendall, with characteristic modesty, had but little to say of his own distinguished literary and editorial work. But his long term as Editor of the Magazines, his work on *The Holborn Review*, the Editorship of which he has just resigned, after fourteen years' service, and his monumental work on the History of the Connexion will place his name high upon the roll of the most honoured and distinguished sons of our Church.

Ere we separated, Mr. Kendall said he would wish to express his gratitude to his Church for the unfailing kindness and brotherliness he has ever received at her hands. He was in the active ministry twenty-one years only, but during that time he never had to leave a circuit save on his own choice, and was never insulted in any official meeting. So far as his experience goes of the official life of our Church, the Conferential proportion of two laymen to one minister might be made four to one, and the result would be gain rather than loss. He believes that the interests of the Church are safer in the hands of the many than the few, for the rank and file will ever respond to the claims of justice and fairness.

Readers will join with the interviewer in the prayer that the declining days of our beloved brother and his wife may be bright with the radiant beauty which ever comes from a close and intimate fellowship with God.

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1917/