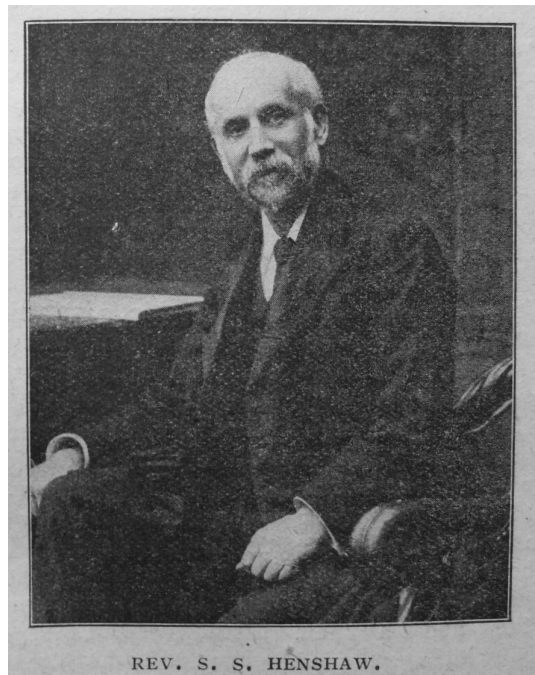


## My Testimony

### Transcription of article published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Rev. S.S. Henshaw

FROM the time that I was able to walk I was taken by my mother to Primitive Methodist preaching services that were held in a cottage. The cottage was one of a row of similar cottages, and it was the centre of religious light and instruction for the neighbourhood. It contained four rooms, two on the ground floor and two upstairs. The walls were whitewashed and quite unadorned. The rooms were heated by fires in open grates. They were seated with plain benches without backs, and lighted with tallow candles. A Sunday school was conducted in them. The preaching services were held in the largest room—which was very small—on the ground floor. The preacher stood in a corner behind a chair, on which was fixed a book-rest for the Bible. There was no instrument of music, no choir. Everything was very simple and very homely, although amongst the people there was plenty of genuine, fervent piety. It was to the Sunday evening



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services that we went. I was often honoured by sitting on the hearth in winter time near the fire. I can remember the preachers well. If I were an artist, I could reproduce their features and gestures. With my hand in mother's as we passed along the road to service and then back home again, I remember I would ask her childish questions about birds, flowers, trees, the rain, the snow, the sky, the stars; and the dear, good soul would try to answer me and to lift my childish thoughts to God.

Then there came to me a great trouble. In my tenth year my mother died. Oh! the vastness of the loss and the bitterness of the grief it occasioned me! My heart was broken, and I mourned for her many days, weeks, and months, and would not be comforted. I feel the sob of the sorrow even now as I write of it. I used to wonder if in heaven she knew about her boy. Her image was enshrined in the sanctuary of his soul, and her influence was ever present with him, and was a chief factor in the formation of his life and character. Thank God, my Sunday school teachers mothered me! They were working men, for the most part—miners, who after a week of hard toil, gave their Sabbaths to the difficult but delightful task of training young minds in the knowledge of truth and the fear of God. They were men without any great literary gifts or accomplishments, of course. Some of them were men of strong intellectual grip, shrewd common-sense, remarkable spiritual illumination and insight, and of rare Christian experience. Good books they regarded as a precious heritage. Above all, they loved and studied the Bible. Kind and good, their sympathy and long-suffering never failed. With brave persistence they bore the indifference and naughtiness of their pupils, and sought—not without ingenuity and skill, and not without success—to make them obedient and loyal followers of their Lord.

I had two sets of Sunday school teachers. The first in the cottage at Lings Row, near Chesterfield, to which I have already referred; the second in the Band Room, Speedwell Terrace, Staveley, North East

Derbyshire. We removed to Staveley when I was about twelve years of age. Singularly enough, the Band Room—so called, I believe, from its having been the place where a brass band held its practices—was just a cottage too, but with all the inner walls and bedchambers removed, so that it was, comparatively speaking spacious and magnificent.

I am afraid that I was not generally regarded as a particularly good boy. I inherited a fair share of human nature. The element of mischief was pretty strong in me. I was rollicking, roguish, full of liveliness, laughter, fun, delighting in all sorts of mirth, jokes, pranks; always ready to join any jovial band of adventurers in some daring expedition or another. I was fond of sports, cricket being my favourite pastime. I had no innate objection to settling a point of honour with a fellow by fighting him. I was often blamed and punished for things I had never done. Sometimes in a fit of anger my poor father would lay the stick heavily upon my shoulders. Whenever I suffered innocently in this way, I always vowed, and generally managed to take, sweet revenge on my false accusers.

Right in the midst of this waywardness, there would come to me moments of serious thought, and of spiritual awakening. I was conscious of going wrong, of being on the downward track. I desired to follow the foot-steps of the good men and women around me. Sometimes the fear of death and hell would torture me. One Sunday there was the funeral of a Sunday school scholar. The elder scholars were requested to meet in front of the house of the dead scholar's parents to sing a suitable hymn before the friends started for the cemetery, as was the custom. I was so possessed with the fear of death and the future that I dared not go with my comrades to the funeral. I made excuses and went alone for a stroll along the quiet country lanes instead.

At last I found deliverance. The crisis came, with all its blessed and fruitful issues. A series of revival services were being held in the Band Room. There was excitement among the young folk. It affected the gang to which I belonged. We attended the meetings. I had been there every night during the week, but all the while was fortifying the castle of my soul against the storming forces of the Gospel. On the Friday evening, however, I was compelled to capitulate. The speaker was a layman—earnest and practical. He expounded the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah. His subject was the Cross. As he unfolded in a simple, telling way the story of Calvary, the great and solemn truth that Jesus died for me was borne in upon the mind. I was awestruck, and humbled and ashamed that I should have treated such a loving Saviour so ill. When an appeal was made to those of the audience who wished to become disciples of Him Who had suffered for our sins, as a sign of their willingness to go up to the penitents' form, that was placed right in front of all the congregation, I was ready. Bashful, nervous, awkward, determined, I walked straight for the goal, and knelt there with other lads of my own age. Good men knelt beside us and put their hands upon our heads or their arms about our necks and talked to us of the love of God and showed us the ways of eternal life.

Some of the penitents entered the Kingdom and rejoiced in its liberty and peace, but not I. I was still outside the gate, and did not share the secret of their triumph. Counsels of comfort, hope and cheer were given to me, and I was not discouraged. One man described his own conversion to us. Leaving God's House much in the state in which I was leaving it, he took the Bible and went into his chamber, and did not leave it again until the struggle of his soul ended in victory. His example afforded me guidance. Returning home, our people had gone to bed. Instead of retiring at once, I decided to read the Bible and pray alternately. I read in the Psalms, then in the Prophets, praying at intervals. Finally I

turned to the New Testament, and opened the Gospel of Matthew at the account given of Christ walking on the sea, and of Peter attempting the same. (Matt. xiv. 22-33.)

The scene gripped the imagination. I appeared to realise it with as much reality and vividness as though it was actually passing before me. The interest reached its climax with Peter's sinking in the sea, his cry for help, the instant response and gracious deliverance—Christ saving him from his peril—at the same time administering a gentle rebuke: "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" That was enough. The work was done. Difficulties were dissolved. My redemption was sealed. It was as though Christ stood bending over me, His compassionate eyes searching me through; the rebuke originally addressed to Peter being spoken to me with an infinite tenderness of tone that thrilled my whole being. Oh the visions, the raptures, the ecstasies of that hour! A heavenly glory wrapped me round. I was reborn into a new life and a new world. I praised God with new, glad songs. It was a grand night, still and undisturbed. Innumerable stars were shining in the firmament. I stood long at the bedroom window looking out into the deep, starlit spaces, and musing about God, heaven, angels, the white-robed multitudes, especially thinking of my mother, and wishing I could somehow let her know what had happened. Thus, in the sixteenth year of my age, and on my father's hearth, to speak after the fashion of John Bunyan, I set out on my journey to the celestial city.

The high ecstasies speedily subsided. On the morrow I descended from the serene, radiant heights, and began to tread a dark and lonely path. I was flung into a strange conflict, which lasted a fortnight. Two long, dreary weeks I was battling with questions that went to the root of things. Unbelief furiously assailed me. Doubts were suggested on all things sacred and divine. I suffered terrible depressions of spirit, but I stuck to the religious services, to private prayer and the society of Christian friends, and presently the clouds lifted. I was as one who emerged out of the gloom of winter into the splendours of spring. The converts were kept busy. Open-air processions, cottage prayer-meetings, revival services, and love-feasts were among the orders of the day. I was soon set to speaking and preaching, and with a companion was sent to small places to conduct services. That companion has been a life-long friend—Mr. J. Martin, J.P., of Staveley, He has had a most honourable and distinguished career as a preacher of the Gospel, a leader of men, and a main pillar and chief support of the Church with which he was identified in his youth as scholar and convert. By and bye, the official processes for turning me into a local preacher began, and then followed all the years of privilege and blessing that I have been permitted to enjoy. Mark Rutherford in his autobiography, declares that his conversion at fourteen made no difference to him. As far as my companions and I were concerned, the change was obvious, striking, infinite. We became kind, courteous, spiritually-minded, anxious to do good. Conversion made not only a transformation in our characters, but a revolution in the life of the neighbourhood. The inhabitants had less to fear from the aggressions of mischievous gangs of youths. Surely by the power of God a miracle had been wrought! Yea, many miracles and the effects were immediate and abiding.

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## References

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