George Bennett - A Character Study
In the series 'Pen Portraits of Prominent Primitive Methodists'

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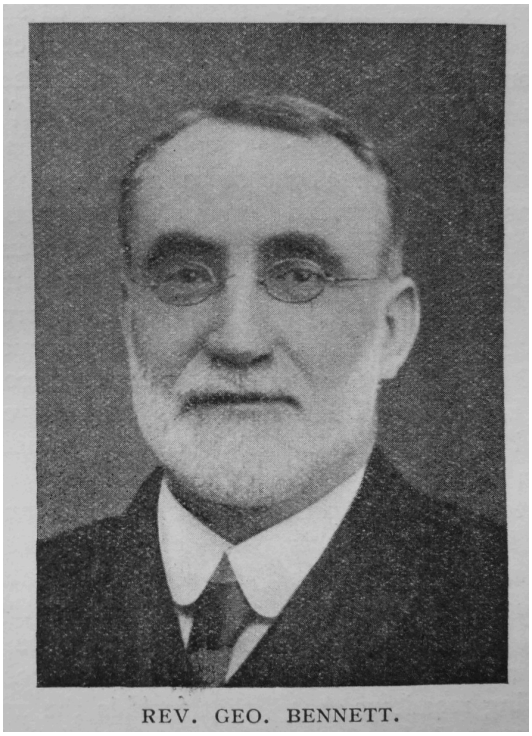
"He cometh unto you with a tale which holdeth children from their play, and old men from the chimney-corner."
—SIR PHILIP SIDNEY, *In Praise of Poesy*.

"A man he seems of cheerful yesterdays, And confident to-morrows."
WORDSWORTH, *The Excursion*.


REV. GEO. BENNETT.

" HORNE," said John Burns one day to the pastor of Whitefield's Tabernacle, "whatever else you do, try hard to keep men sunny!'' A magnificent ideal—the attainment thereof more to be desired than much fine gold. For although man has learnt many things, he has not learnt how to avoid sorrow. So that he who enables his fellows to take up their burdens with a lighter heart and a more hopeful spirit, because, with cheery smile and helpful word, he has tarried with them a moment on the eternal road, is not least among the sons of men.

"To keep men sunny!" What, then, of the children? "It is not necessary," you reply, "the sunlight plays about them always." Ah, me! I would that you were right. The shadows of life gather early, and there is no sorrow in all God's world so poignant as the grief of a little child. And he who can assuage it—who has the power to bring the smile back, glistening through the tears—who can make the young folks radiant and joyous with the hope and promise of future days, is not only a philosopher, but a magician—-the magician with a golden wand.

There is possibly no man in Primitive Methodism who wields this wand with such charming effect as the gifted subject of my sketch; and he has the crowning qualification for the successful accomplishment of his legerdemain—a heart that has not yet grown old. George Bennett still retains his youthfulness, his buoyancy and freshness, though the dust from off the road of life has long since settled in his hair. The spirit of the mere romancer sinks dejectedly at the first streaks of grey; a man of Mr. Bennett's stamp is undaunted by either the calendar or the mirror. For him, knowing many things and loving all, the best is even yet to be. There is, however, nothing about him of that insensate folly, "a frivolity particular to fifty"; valid interests keep him young. Love diffused, love of action and of the highest kind of chivalry preserves his freshness; and the love of children is to him as the wine of life. Ponce de Leon sought with the wrong compass the fountain of eternal youth. Not of water is this fountain, and on no mariner's chart. Not eternal, but still a fountain of youth, it springs

from the buoyant heart, is replenished from the fertile mind. George Bennett is in the secret, and it has won him love and joy and troops of friends.

In one of his moral essays Pope speaks of a “soft dean” who never mentioned hell to “ears polite.” According to the *Guardian* of 31st March, 1713, this “soft dean” appears to have been a certain Whitehall divine, “who once concluded a sermon preached before the profligate court of Charles II. by reminding his hearers that if they did not vouchsafe to give their lives a new turn, abandon their irregular appetites, and live up to the precepts of the Gospel, they might expect to receive their reward in a place which he did not deem it good manners to mention to that artistocratic and well-bred audience.” All men, however, have not been either so fastidious or fearful of giving offence to their patrons as Pope’s sycophantic dean, and there are abundant examples of preachers who have possibly erred in the other extreme. Yet these were surely the lesser sinners. Even the thunderings of Hugh Peters, the fanatical chaplain of the army of the Parliament, were preferable to sophistries of the fawning placeman of the Restoration, who “toned down” his message lest it should shock the artistic susceptibilities of my Lord Rochester or offend the delicate ears of Barbara Villiers.

Coming nearer home—to the history of our own Church, I mean—we are, I suppose, fairly well agreed that in their preaching of the Word, our fathers gave due prominence to what the old Puritans called “the four great last things ’’—death and judgment, heaven and and hell. And in doing so—in adopting methods so eminently calculated to startle depraved, benighted men and women out of the appalling lethargy in which they slumbered, the pioneers of Primitive Methodism assuredly did well. But in adopting an attitude of gloomy severity towards the children who came to them they just as certainly did ill. Not that those who gathered immediately around the founders of our Church were by any means the worst offenders in this respect. In what may be termed the “middle ages” of our Connexional history the habit of terrorising the young folks by holding up to them, and that continually, the probability of an early death, the loneliness and shadow of the grave, the horrors of the pit, and the tortures of lost souls, would seem to have been almost universally prevalent. And the practice died hard. As a result of it I have, when a child, passed many a night of black, unspeakable terror and I am not yet forty years of age.

Before me is a bound copy of “The Primitive Methodist Children’s Magazine” for the year 1850. The gloomy note pervading the whole volume is struck on the title page, which bears the following lugubrious and depressing quotation from the Book of Lamentations: “It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth.” The first forty pages contain eight or nine short pieces, among which we have the harrowing details of a child of twelve being burnt to death; the swift carrying off by cholera of two boys and their father; a saddening description of the sufferings and death of a girl of fourteen from consumption; three pages devoted to an article entitled, “Ananias and Sapphira struck dead from lying,” and a long account of Joseph in prison. The rest of the book is mainly devoted to the recounting of the untimely death of children from various other causes, the details of moneys enterprise and verses raised for missionary of the following order:—

“I pluck’d my last rose and let fall a tear,
For I thought to myself, ’Tis the last;
And my garden began to look wretchedly drear,
For both flowers and leaves faded fast.”

As the written, so in those days, was the spoken word. Yet anything more dissimilar from the methods of our gifted Sunday School Secretary were indeed difficult to imagine. . . “Tis not dying for a faith that’s so hard, Master Harry,” said Dick Steele to young Henry Esmond, “ ’tis living up to it that’s difficult.” And Mr. Bennett’s message to the young people of Primitive Methodism is charged with a high-souled incentive to years of glorious service in the Christian warfare rather than the anticipation of premature decay. “The King of Love my Shepherd is,” is a theme infinitely more to his liking than the story of the she-bear of Samaria; he rejoices, not in a gospel of gloom, but a gospel of grace.

An accomplished man of letters, with a turn for paradox, said recently that the men who really read seldom talk of books; they give results. Personally I do not think this statement altogether squares with the facts of common experience. A man who loves books will speak of them familiarly—even tenderly—as a man of other tastes would of his flowers, his horses, or his dogs. But what I suppose this writer really to mean is, that on all “its lawful occasions,” the full mind will show itself to be full, and that quite apart from any direct reference either to books or authors.

This is peculiarly, even conspicuously, descriptive of the Sunday School Secretary. He is a master of pure and delicate English—colloquial English—nevertheless, with nothing in the language to suggest the book in breeches, or any pretension to illimitable lore. Yet his speeches and addresses are always rich in literary allusion—studded with the roses of Parnassus and many another delicate blossom, which tell of roamings in old-world gardens and glowing meadows that are redolent of “Maytime and the cheerful dawn.”

A fine thing finely said instantly becomes familiar, and has henceforth a sort of dateless excellence. Though it may have been said three hundred years ago, it is as modern as yesterday; though it may have been said yesterday, it has the trick of seeming to have been always in our keeping. The secret of that “dateless excellence “ is possessed by George Bennett. One is always hearing something from his lips which nobody but he would have been likely to say, or say so well—some delightful thought presented in a way that is never out of fashion on a theme that is ever new, though the ages grow old.

His “style” is that. of the full-informed but witty and urbane talker, rather than that of the professional speechmaker with his parade of apparatus, his canons known and named only by himself. Contributed without apparent effort, we get from him in turn the mingled reminiscence of much travel, bits of character study, periods of kindly criticism, with now and then a swift, mordant thrust at the Philistines, or a touch of pure light comedy. Sometimes it is a touch of sparkling gossip, characterised by a variety and inconsecutiveness which are the essence of its charm. It is not the gossip of Mayfair, however; yet even the butterflies of fashion have not a more airy touch than he. There are many kinds of weapons in his armoury— a flashing humour, a kindly persuasiveness, a polished diction, with, in reserve not often to be brought out, a wit almost scornful in its touch. He can be instructive without becoming pedantic; pours out his knowledge but does not lecture; charms and amuses, but never plays the clown.

Yet there is nothing slipshod in Mr. Bennett’s methods of thought or speech. Precisely the contrary. There is abundant evidence of the desire as well as the ability to execute with delicacy and distinction, of the possession of a conscience that forbids the artist to let anything go from the studio

without the last refining touch. There is the instinctive avoidance of the crude and the commonplace, and over all, the indications of a continually maturing power.

It is this magic of unforced talk, this flexibility of sympathy turning swiftly from one aspect of the human spectacle to another, touching easily and widely on all, that are the chief elements in Mr. Bennett's equipment as a public speaker. A rare achievement too is the ease with which he utilises his varied themes in a manner perfectly suited to the mood demanded—brocaded deftly when ornament is needed, but mainly in a smooth, supple texture of words that ripple into light and shadow like the play of sunshine on the bare arm of an athlete. And he has, moreover, what Dean Swift, who possibly had little enough of either, called two of the very noblest attributes—sweetness and light.

And so, George Bennett goes forward —easily "holding his own." There is nothing pleasanter than to follow the advance of a quiet, unobtrusive, talented man—to watch his star tranquilly increase while the sky is often streaked with meteoric lights that flash and expire, with rockets that climb the heavens to apotheosize into sticks. One has often witnessed the glorification and swift oblivion of many an impassioned seeker of the *mot juste*; many an apostle of the crude and barbaric that has had his day and gone his way. Meantime, George Bennett, in his old easy mastery of the fit word and the well-poised phrase, with its haunting cadence, continues to delight his audiences, and to be everywhere received with a welcome that never tires.

There is just one other phase of Mr. Bennett's many-sided character to which I had intended making an extended reference—but space forbids. I will content myself, therefore, with saying that it is surely no mean tribute to the versatility of a man whose ministerial work lies specifically among the children of our Church that he should also be the editor of such a vigorous, up-to-date journal as the *Primitive Methodist Leader*. That he exercises his prerogatives with the reputed severity of Lord Morley of Blackburn, who in his journalistic days is said to have edited everything with a big, blue pencil and a rod of iron, is hardly likely. But what is tolerably certain is that the ablest pens in the Connexion are at the disposal of the *Leader*, and that, not least, because of the compelling charm of the man who sits in the editor's chair.

References

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