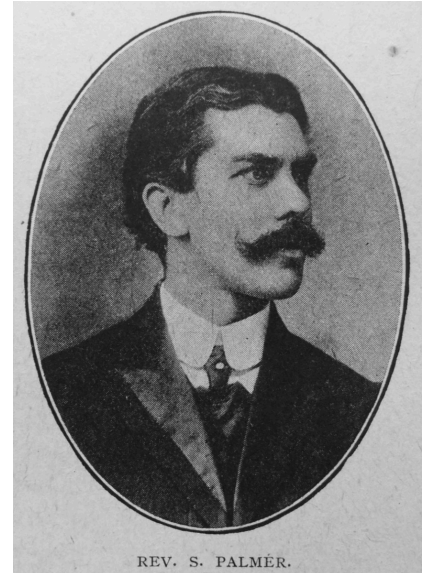


My Testimony

Transcription of article published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Rev. Samuel Palmer

MY first acquaintance with Primitive Methodism was between the ages of nine and ten. I had come up from a tiny Kentish village called Twitton, about four miles from Sevenoaks, to Plumstead, in South-East London. From India, where both parents died, I was sent to England to be cared for by my grandmother. It was her death that occasioned my removal to the charge of an aunt in Plumstead. I was entered as a scholar at Robert Street, and passed through the school, until, when I left for scenes more strenuous, I was the teacher of the young men's class. The personalities who first made their impression upon me, and whose faces I can see clearly as I write, were Brothers William Cutter, the superintendent, and Henry Arnould, one of my teachers. The first was a moulder in Woolwich Arsenal, and the second a builder in partnership with his brothers. They appealed to my boyish heart by the way in which, whenever they met me, they led me to believe that it was a real pleasure to see me. Wherever I met them, in the street or at the school treat in a field near Shooters' Hill, I could run to them without any feeling of barriers between us. This perfect goodwill between the boy and his Sunday school teachers was, I am sure, the beginning of my secret desire to be a Christian. I have not met a man who could turn his conversation with a boy in a religious direction so quickly and so naturally as could my old teacher Henry Arnould. The last time that I saw him alive was at the Southport Conference in 1909. The moment my eyes met his the intervening years melted away, and again I was a boy in his class. The resurgence of memories coupled with an inexpressible pleasure at seeing him were so strong that both breathing and speech were for the time being very difficult.



The first minister of whom I have a distinct recollection was the Rev. Josiah Turley. He was preceded by the Rev. J.P. Langham, of whom as a boy I have but a hazy idea. I can remember his legitimate indignation on one occasion, when he and others in a meeting were left in total darkness through a few boys, of whom the writer was one, having discovered the location of the gas-meter. Thirty-two years ago the Robert Street School officials believed in and practised the principles of the League of Young Worshipers long before the league was born. Every Sunday morning we were marched up from the school below to the chapel above. The boys sat together on the preacher's right hand, and the girls on his left. The side *opposite* that on which we sat was as remote in our experience as the Antipodes themselves. Even up to early manhood for me to sit except on the preacher's right hand, in the gallery, was an undreamed-of thing. Thus persist the habits of our childhood. Mr. Turley had a florid style that appealed to me. I recall the sheer wonder with which I regarded the accuracy and vivid colour of his speech. He was particularly strong too in geography and topography. I remember at this distance a course of sermons that he preached on the "Journeyings of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan." He depicted Moses until I could see him sitting in the gallery on my side of the church. But Mr. Turley was an angler for souls, and was splendidly seconded in this work by his wife. In a special mission at Robert Street conducted, by the minister and his wife I was converted,

between the ages of fourteen and fifteen. Mrs. Turley was the immediate agent. For long the desire to be a Christian had been in my heart, a secret known only to God and myself. By this time I belonged to a gang of lads, numbering not less than twenty-four. We were regular in our attendance at chapel, and were often a thorn in the flesh to those who lived in houses adjacent. Our leader was nicknamed "Nacker," and we were always ready for mischief, and even horseplay. Our physical energies found vent in paper-chasing, boxing, and football. We were fast becoming a peril to ourselves, and a menace to others. And then came this strong, godly woman, and with a persistence that was splendid held on to us, until one memorable night twelve of us walked out of the pews into the inquiry room. It was the break-up of the gang. For me it was the first important decision of life. I can trace the widening stream of my life as it has flowed, by the grace of God, through the intervening years until now, to that act of youthful self-surrender in the vestry of Robert Street Chapel, Plumstead. Given the right woman, and her influence over lads in the early adolescent period is subtle, powerful, and good. She will win them to God and goodness where many men fail. The spiritual husbandmen through whose gracious tillage the latent seed of religion in my soul grew into the blade, and the blade into the ear, were William Cutter, Henry Arnould, and the Rev. J. Turley and his wife. To them my debt of gratitude must always be an incalculable one.

After the first flush of wondrous joy that accompanied my conscious decision for Christ, there followed a relapse, and a period of great depression, that lasted about two years. The thought of death haunted me day and night. If I saw a funeral *cortège* approaching, I would make off along some by-street if that were possible. In Powis Street, Woolwich, and in the Plumstead Road, were undertakers' shops, into which you could look from the door, and see the coffins in course of construction. I avoided those shops as I would a plague spot. That a lad of sixteen or seventeen could undergo such a mental torture on account of the fear of death would be incredible to me were it not my own experience. I never communicated the knowledge of my terrible struggle to anybody; I disclose it now for the first time. I fought it with prayer simple and persistent, and in the end God gave me the victory. By temperament I am reserved, and throughout life have made my decisions alone, asking for little advice from anybody. This habit has great disadvantages; I believe that from early years it has been fostered by the fact that my parents died young, and I have never known the tenderness of a mother's love, or the support of a father's discipline. I have had to stand alone. Life's circumstances have driven me to much introspection. That early experience referred to above was typical of much to follow, but through it I can say sincerely that prayer from being an instinct of the soul became a life habit.

Between sixteen and seventeen I had a second conversion, that was witnessed to by no external act like the first, but which was responsible for linking my religious experience with what was then a *crude belief* in providential leading. Through faith and continuous reflection the belief has become clearer with the years. Of necessity the belief in Divine guidance in youth is entirely of faith. In middle life, if we are honest with ourselves, it is a conclusion from premises supplied by experience. If my first conversion was succeeded by a period of depression my second was followed by a period of *prolonged doubt*, singularly enough, of about the same duration too. I had to fight long and hard for the elementary belief in God Himself. By this time I was serving my apprenticeship to the pattern-making in Woolwich Arsenal, and had come into very friendly relations with an intelligent and clean-living man who was a Freethinker. My doubts within were reinforced by the attitude of my friend without. Now came another personality into my life, Mr. Thomas Polkinghorn, a blacksmith by trade, and the best local preacher on the Plumstead Circuit plan. He was a great reader, a man of true

Christian character, and a real friend of young men eager for Christian service. In height he stood six feet four, was a warm admirer of Dr. Parker, and went always to hear him preach on Christmas Day and Good Friday. It was in his company that I first heard the great preacher in the City Temple. Doubt seemed never to come near my friend. There he stood a tower of imperturbable orthodoxy. He helped me to the conquest of doubt less by argument than by the atmosphere of confident assurance that emanated from him. It is strange how we pass in youth from the moulding touch of one personality to that of another, according to the need of our developing consciousness. Surely in all this there is the clear evidence of an all-wise God. During the period prior to my great decision my Sunday school teachers, two in particular, influenced me. Then came the minister and his wife, whose impression upon the lonely lad was sharp and deep. And next there was the manly and reassuring influence of Brother Thomas Polkinghorn. As through contact with Christ virtue entered into the woman who "had an issue of blood twelve years", so I am sure that into my character there has passed wondrous virtue from these choice souls whom I have named. I am debtor to a multitude besides, but these five mightily aided me to give my heart into Christ's safe keeping.

References

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