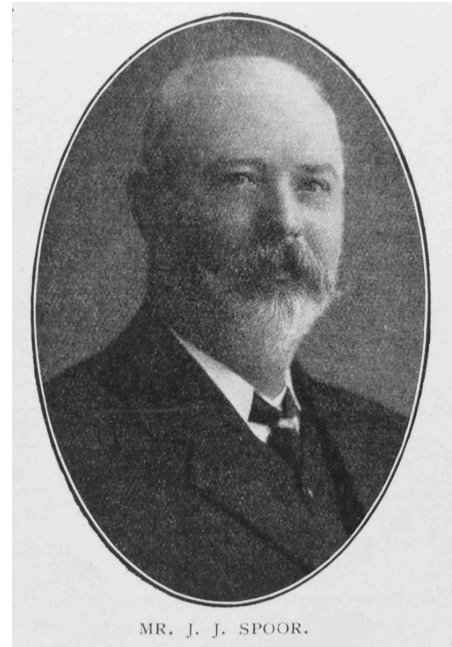


J.J. Spoor of Bishop Auckland

Transcription of article published in the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* by Northerner in the series
"Some of our Stalwarts"

OUR stalwarts are first of all builders of their own churches. Through the years they have given their time and strength to the work of making Primitive Methodism strong and prosperous in their own neighbourhood. They have borne the burden and heat of the day. Year in and year out they have toiled, now in one office, now in another. For these prophets have not been without honour in their own country. They won the confidence of their brethren, their friends and neighbours by character and service; so that whenever there was an office to be filled or a duty to be done of a special kind the minds of the brethren and sisters turned instinctively to the local stalwart. In all important projects the stalwart is a leader. Is there a chapel to be built, or a debt removed, a new site to be secured, or a new departure to be made? The stalwart must lead. And how much our cause in a thousand places scattered over the country owes to such leadership! While we trace the feebleness of many societies to the lack of leadership the strength of others is distinctly traceable to some man of outstanding character and ability who is a true leader of men; to whom others instinctively look up, and who is ever ready to take occasion by the hand for the advancement of the Kingdom of God.



The stalwart to be limned in these pages is of this type. Mr. John Joseph Spoor, familiarly known in the North as J.J. Spoor or Joe Spoor, has been a distinguished leader in the forward movements of our Church in Witton Park in Bishop Auckland and in Witton-le-Wear. He has the qualities essential for work of this kind—vision, initiative, courage, and a certain restless activity which is ever on the look out for new worlds to conquer for Christ and Primitive Methodism. Born at Witton Park, near Bishop Auckland, in 1852, he had the unspeakable advantage of a singularly noble religious heritage. His father, Benjamin Spoor, came to Witton Park from Walker, near Newcastle-on-Tyne, about 1840, and was one of the founders of Primitive Methodism there. Beginning as an iron-worker, he soon entered business with his brother, Mr. Ferdinand Spoor. The brothers Spoor were originally brought to Witton Park by Mr. John Vaughan, the founder of Bolckow Vaughan and Co., and the ironworks there commenced gradually became, in conjunction with the works at Middlesbrough, one of the greatest iron industries in the North of England. Our stalwart's father, Benjamin Spoor, was a remarkable man—devout, intelligent, deeply spiritual, and of that rarely magnetic type which always commands great influence. Years after his death the writer found the neighbourhood and the society so pervaded with the fragrance of his personality that it almost seemed as if he were still present in the flesh. There seemed a mystic presence abroad that linked the present with the past. As local preacher, class leader, Sunday School teacher, Benjamin Spoor did a splendid work. Out of his young men's class especially came many valuable workers, the most distinguished of whom is Professor Witton Davis, M.A., D.D., D.Ph. Mr. Benjamin Spoor's premature death was a sad blow to his family and the Church.

The influence of such a father was a great thing and his memory after his loss was a rich heritage to all his family, and not least to the subject of this sketch. The restless activity of young "Joe Spoor" was in boyhood expended often in mischief. His pranks were endless, and if annoying to their victims would only now be recalled with amusement. If ever our

friend writes his autobiography he ought to record some of these practical jokes of his early years. Educated first at the village school and then at Belvidere Academy, Bishop Auckland, Mr. Spoor's schooldays were not without some startling, not to say romantic, adventures, but this is not the place to record them.

Organist at fifteen years of age his passionate love of music found expression in the choir of the little chapel. At seventeen he was converted, and the restless energy which had so often sought expression in mischief found a new outlet in Christian service. At nineteen he began to preach, and at twenty was recommended for the ministry. One sometimes wonders what would have been his place in our ministry if he had accepted the call. One need not speculate, for it was certain to have been a foremost position in the ranks of our ministry that his remarkable gifts would have secured him. But while the call of the Church was clear enough it did not seem to him that the same could be said in regard to the Divine call. When the question hung in the balance he attended the District Meeting at Durham at which the Rev. Henry Yooll was ordained. The service, and especially the address to the candidate, made a deep impression on Mr. Spoor's mind, and he vowed that if converts were given him at his next service he would take that as an evidence of the Divine call. Few indeed would approve of such a method of deciding this question to-day; but it would not be thought at all improper at that time. If he had not been accustomed to have converts one might have thought the less of this test; but at that time he almost invariably saw people converted after preaching on a Sunday evening. The writer knows well the colliery village where Mr. Spoor had to preach the following Sunday evening, and can see in imagination the little chapel. Alas! it was never a live society, and rarely a fruitful field for the sower of the good seed of the Kingdom. There were no converts that night and the young man decided that he was not called of God to the ministry. The decision, if it deprived the ministry of a brilliant ornament, gave the laity one of the most devoted and popular workers in the North of England.



As a local preacher Mr. Spoor has always been marked by ability, fluency and fervour. He has a good presence, an excellent voice which is well managed, and a winning and attractive style. His sermons are well prepared; he is a good thinker, and having read widely always gives the impression of being well abreast of the times. There is nothing musty about his discourses: in conception, arrangement, argument and illustration they are fresh, individual, and essentially modern. It is not surprising that he is popular both in his own circuits and in others further afield. It is not every local preacher of more than forty years' standing who can say he has never missed an appointment. Mr. Spoor's abounding vitality, geniality, kindliness, and generosity of nature have made him a favourite over a wide area. He has often been a speaker at the Monday night meetings of District Meetings, which is everywhere the hall mark of ability and distinction; and at Preachers' Association meetings also he has taken his share of speeches at the public meeting. Frederick W. Robertson, Henry Ward Beecher, Butler, and in earlier years, Dr. Cook, all had a share in moulding his intellectual life.

Yet with all this activity abroad Mr. Spoor has ever been a stalwart at home. The stalwart can be relied on to be at his post; to be brave when others faint; to be generous though others turn niggardly; to hold up the hands of the minister, to cheer and encourage him in his projects for the advancement of the cause; and to be the strength and joy of his fellow worshippers. He shames the indifferent, is a goad to the stingy, and a thorn in the sides of all the lazy.

As Sunday School teacher, superintendent of the Sunday School, class leader, circuit steward, Mr. J.J. Spoor has toiled year in and year out in connection with the three churches with which he has been associated in the Bishop Auckland circuit. After he left Witton Park to reside in Bishop Auckland, on commencing business there on his own account and adding that of heating and lighting engineer to that of ironmonger, he still counted himself a Witton Parker and remained deeply interested in the cause there. As a trustee of the new chapel he gave constant and generous help, and had the joy of seeing erected one of the prettiest and most commodious chapels to be found anywhere in the district. At Witton-le-Wear, where he has resided for the last eight years, he became at once a pillar of strength to the little country cause; and taking charge of a young people's society class, conducted his members through a course of study in Dr. Peake's book "Christianity: its Nature," Horne's "Free Church History," and Dr. Peake's "Hebrews."



But it was at Bishop Auckland, with which he was longest and most intimately associated, that his finest work was done. The old Tenters Street chapel knew him and his good wife (nee Miss Marion Graham) through the early years of their wedded life. They were devoted in their attachment to the cause, and indefatigable in the promotion of all its interests. They kept open house for the ministers, and did their utmost for their comfort and welfare. They had the joy, after long toiling, of seeing the debt cleared off, and then forthwith began to think of a forward move. To have even one man in a church with an eye to progress is a great thing, especially if he possesses outlook and initiative; and having got a difficulty out of the way, is ready to organise a move forward. To the policy of folding arms Mr. Spoor was resolutely opposed. He perceived, and happily in this he was not alone, that Bishop Auckland was fast developing in the direction away from Tenters Street, and that if Primitive Methodism was to develop it must be by the opening of a new cause in that quarter. A site in all respects ideal was unoccupied; but the fact that it belonged to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners was not promising. A correspondence was opened, but went on for some months without any result. Objection was urged by the Commissioners that the site was too near the hospital, and that the singing would disturb the inmates. It was not difficult to see that this was not the real ground of objection, but this made the difficulty none the more easy of removal. Seeing that present methods had been exhausted, Mr. Spoor determined to try a new method. He would "beard the lion in his den, the Douglas in his hall." He went to London and interviewed the Secretary of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. The gentleman had a formidable title, but that did not deter Mr. Spoor. He explained to the Secretary that the objections that had been alleged against the site were purely imaginary; that the patients would be glad of such a ministry as this, if indeed they could hear it; but if this were really held to be a serious matter he would engage to have double windows inserted. The claims of the community were urged when the question of price came to be discussed, and this argument was regarded as so conclusive that the price ultimately accepted was one-third of the value. The final instructions were that Mr. Spoor must get an architect to prepare a block plan, which was to be forwarded to the Secretary and marked "Private." Mr. Spoor telegraphed the architect, Mr. T.C. Davidson, to visit Bishop Auckland. Mr. Davidson arrived that very night, and at Mr. Spoor's office the plan was prepared and despatched before bedtime to London. Within three days a reply came offering the site for £500. The transaction was completed without delay, and so we came into possession of the most magnificent site in the town, and in a neighbourhood where no chapel or church existed. The church erected on this commanding site was in every way worthy of it and of our cause. Its cost was £7,500, and on it to-day there is only a debt of £1,800. A commodious manse has since been built beside the church at a cost of £1,100, on which there is now a debt of £700.

It goes without saying that Mr. J.J. Spoor has not been without honour among his brethren. We have already mentioned the fact that he is to-day, as he has been long, the circuit steward of the Bishop Auckland Circuit. How often he has been at District Meeting and Conference we do not know. He has been District missionary treasurer, also Centenary treasurer, and at the expiration of his term of office was complimented by a well-known minister as the most methodical



CENTRAL CHURCH, BISHOP AUCKLAND

and accurate treasurer that had ever come under his observation. or the ordinary routine of official business, in—say, a Conference—he has no great taste. He likes to be doing something, and anything of the nature of red-tape is not at all in his line. If there is a discussion on the work of God he will waken up and have something to say, but otherwise he will be a silent member of the Conference as a rule. On occasion he can speak with effect, and the business of his own circuit will ever have for him the deepest interest.

Our friend has known what it was to pass thrice at least through deep waters. His second wife, Mrs. Leathley, seconded him splendidly in all his work, and her death after a brief illness was a crushing blow. But sorrow has not narrowed but widened his sympathies, and he is probably to-day more keenly interested in the interests of the larger Kingdom of God than ever he was. His daughter, the late Mrs. Sharpe, was also suddenly smitten down in the prime of her young womanhood, and the wound this occasioned was of no ordinary kind. Happily his only son, Ben, survives, and is an exceptionally popular local preacher in the Bishop Auckland circuit, and an advocate of the Independent Labour Party of recognised ability and popularity. We should be surprised if he did not ere long find its way into Parliament.

As a delegate to the Ecumenical Conference at Toronto Mr. Spoor had an opportunity of studying American Methodism and especially Canadian life at close quarters. He travelled right across the continent, visited the Rockies, and had some romantic adventures. He has since paid a second visit to the Dominion, frequently preaching.

He has occasionally exercised his literary gifts, notably in a most interesting sketch in the “Aldersgate” of his old friend Professor Witton Davis. When visiting Niagara he was inspired to pen a poem of six verses which came to him under the inspiration of that stupendous sight. They somehow got into the hands of the editor of the local paper, who forthwith printed them with some eulogistic references. We have space only for a couple of verses. Written impromptu, they certainly indicate that Mr. Spoor has something of the poetic gift.

“Oh, Niagara, Niagara,
Of rivers all supreme,
Resplendent thine apparel,
Of white and blue and green;
Merciless, yet glorious,
Placid, yet uproarious,
O’er every foe victorious,
In thy passage to the sea.

Oh, Niagara, Niagara,
What varied moods are thine,
Changing, ever changing,
Yet onward all the time.
One moment dark and frowning,
The next in gladness bounding,
Making space resounding
With a music all thine own."

There may not be here the careful technique of the studied artist, but the lines reveal the fact that if their author had given himself to the study of the poet's art he might have achieved a good deal.

Just over sixty years of "age, our friend is still strong and vigorous, and did his day's tramp fasting in the Western wilds with an endurance many a younger man would have envied, and envied not less the repast the famished traveller polished off in the shack on the mountain side where he found shelter and hospitality. May his bow abide in strength and his shadow never grow less. May he be spared yet many years to preach the glorious Evangel, and to carry forward the work of his father to yet more glorious triumphs.

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1913/466