

## Rev. William Graham

### Transcription of obituary published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by John Hallam

THE Sunderland District has suffered a great loss in the death of the Rev. WILLIAM GRAHAM. While the Connexion generally knew him and acknowledged his worth, it is specially in the North that the loss of him is something unspeakable, an irreparable calamity.

He was born on November 16, 1835, near Netherby, in Cumberland, and close to the dividing line between Scotland and England. There is some probability that he was a descendant of the famous Netherby clan, once freebooters, and in later days formidable rivals to the great families in the neighbourhood.

Adversity overtook Mr. Graham's father, who was a miller, and the son spent some years of his early life with two uncles in Liverpool, and elsewhere in Lancashire, during which time he went to school and received the greater part of his education. At ten years of age he returned to Cumberland, his parents having located at the village of Little Broughton. At this early age he went to work in the West Cumberland coal-mines, but this work was not in harmony with his tastes and inclinations. He shrank from the coarseness of his companions, and was far more at home in the Baptist Chapel and Sunday-school, which he frequented.

When he was seventeen years of age he went one evening to a missionary meeting at the neighbouring village of Great Broughton. Here he came under the earnestness and unction of the late Rev. Joseph Spoor, who was on the platform. As William Graham listened to the spiritual fervour of this ambassador of Christ, his own soul received the baptism of fire, and either that night or soon after, he gave himself to Christ and joined our Church. Under the same influences, and at the same time, another of his acquaintances took the same course, and became a fellow-worker with him and a creditable brother minister—the Rev. John Snaith.

It was quite in harmony with the aggressive spirit and methods of Primitive Methodism thirty years ago that the conversion of a few young men like Mr. Graham should lead to the formation of a society in their own village of Little Broughton. The house of the Grahams was opened for religious services, of which the main supporters were Mr. Graham, his eldest brother John, now a minister in Kansas, and John Snaith.

The Whitehaven Circuit at that time covered a considerable section of Cumberland, and Joseph Spoor, W.E. Parker, now a highly-valued layman in Manchester, and other travelling preachers, made their home with the Grahams when preaching at the village. In contact with such men, William Graham's spiritual nature received inspiration and strength, and, acting under their advice, he made his choice of books, studied hard, and his mental and intellectual culture rapidly advanced. As an instance of early dogged resolution, it may be said that in going to and from work, he mastered Lennie's English Grammar, and in this spirit he sought to remedy the defects of his early education, At this time the Calvinian controversy was at its height, and the conversation and controversy of religious men turned on unconditional election and reprobation, final perseverance,

irresistible grace, &c. In such a school were fostered his love of theological studies, his comprehensive grasp of thought and his quick intellectual activity.

His efforts in the position of class-leader and local preacher soon revealed that he was above the common run of men, It says a great deal for him that the late Rev. Moses Lupton recommended him for the ministry in the Sunderland Circuit in 1858. Mr. Lupton had a high ideal of the Christian ministry in general, and knew well the special requirements of our own. He did not think any kind of man would make a Primitive Methodist travelling preacher. He also knew the Sunderland Circuit well. It was considered at that time the stronghold of our Church in the North. Its membership numbered 1,500, of which 300 were connected with Flag-lane Chapel, where a large congregation composed of men of good social position, fine culture, and varied reading, together with hard-handed artisans, sturdy pilots, and bluff seamen attended. 'The rich and the poor met together.' Mr. Graham's first text before this congregation was, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,' revealing on that occasion a power which became strongly marked in him in later years—the power of adapting himself to positions which he was obliged to occupy. It was a fitting text with which to commence his ministry. His career in Sunderland for two years, and on to the end of his life, showed that Mr. Lupton had not mistaken his man.

After his first station he travelled successively in the Alston, Whitby, Barnard Castle, Lowick, and Haltwhistle Circuits. In Haltwhistle he met Miss Cowan, the lady whom he married. Their union was but brief, for in his next circuit, Shildon, she died. She was in many respects an admirable woman, active, energetic, high-spirited, kind, generous to all. They loved each other warmly, and when she died, the desire of his eyes had gone, and he underwent a severe struggle, being tempted to think there was no good left for him in the universe, but an unexpected visit from Mr. Gilmore rendered him help and comfort. From Shildon he went to Crook, and in 1878 he accepted an invitation from the Sunderland First Circuit.

Two years previously it had been divided for the second time since Mr. Graham had been a probationer in it. The last division, while beneficial in its ultimate issues, was disastrous in its immediate results. Our old veteran minister in this district, Rev. T. Southron, had grappled bravely with the first effects, but the circuit had not recovered from the shock of the disruption when Mr. Graham entered it. Its chapel properties needed judicious management. Some were without congregations, but not without debts. Others were crumbling to decay, and yet mortgaged. Some were held on antiquated titles, involving endless legal requirements, others on no title at all, but, passing strange, with mortgage deeds. There were new properties with small and disheartened churches and prospective new chapels to build. Undaunted by such a network of difficult situations, he entered on his work. How manfully he discharged his duties, how arduously by day and by night he laboured, how bravely he overcame difficulties, and how successfully he extricated trustees and churches from heavy liabilities is well known to the Sunderland people and generously acknowledged by them. Through the whole of this circuit the name of William Graham is deeply revered, and is to very many 'like ointment poured forth.'

For the second time he went to Haltwhistle, but it was not the same place to him. His wife had gone, and nothing filled the vacancy. Health failed him, and he would not take that complete rest which might have prolonged his days. For the last few months he never preached in Haltwhistle

Chapel without help in the service. The change to the sea air of North Shields produced no improvement. Slowly but surely he became paler and weaker, and we saw that he was slipping away from us. Yet unrelenting he went on to the end, preaching at times till he laid his arms over the book-board, and said, 'I cannot go on any longer, will one of you come and finish?' In his latest days his consciousness was clouded. At times he spoke but little or not at all, A fortnight before his death, as I closed a prayer in which I had interwoven some of his own recent expressions with a view to strike a vein in his consciousness, I heard him say in his own old way, as I rose from my knees, 'That's good.' On the Saturday before his departure, on my entering the room and asking him if he knew me, he said, 'Yes, Hallam.' To my next words: 'I hope you are trusting in the great mercy of God,' he responded with a feeble, child-like 'Yes,' and a similar reply was given when I added, 'You are trusting only in the great Saviour whom you have so often preached to others?' Some of his friends would have liked fuller testimony towards the last, but his evidence was his life rather than his death. On the morning of January 12, 1886, he had fallen asleep, and for some days every one seemed to repeat to his neighbour—'Graham's dead.'

To most of those who read this memoir his striking physique will be well known—a man tall, broad-shouldered, well-formed, and well-knit; face sallow and with a measure of reserve, yet expressive also of frankness; an intellectual brow, head covered with dark brown hair, which in early manhood changed to silvery gray. The greatest power of his face was felt by all to be in his eye, which contributed to his often dreamy and imaginative look, but which also, when even the man seemed otherwise in repose, told of restless and intense mental activity. He seldom dressed in clerical attire, often the opposite, and his whole bearing was dignified and expressive.

From his youth Mr. Graham was a resolute student, not only in theology, as we have indicated, but also in poetry and philosophy, Milton and Spenser, Shakespeare and Tennyson, with others of kindred character, had been read and studied by him. The problems of being and of life were ever to him insoluble mysteries, and he found his refuge in the Hamiltonian philosophy, with its important doctrine of the Conditioned. He held that the mind of man is powerless to know God and the universe—God is unknown and unknowable; that it is for man to exercise faith when reason reaches its limits, and hence in conversation, when he had led on 'to the confines of the immensities and eternities he would suddenly stop,' and we felt that 'this powerful intellect was baffled.' After a pause he would often add, 'After all, the truest wisdom is to have faith in God.'

To our friend nature was as great a teacher as books. He loved her in all her moods and was highly susceptible to her influences. He was fond of long walks with company or solitary rambles in the fields and glens and woods, over the rocks and hills and by river and brook. 'Nature was not dead matter nor a set of blind forces, but a "thing of fathomless and myriad-mooded life."' To him Christ was present in nature as the spring of all the gladness that breathed through it. The Love which bore the agony of the cross was the same beating through the heart of the world. God was ever around him as a Living Presence, the Inspirer and Guide of his life.'

To the multitude who heard him for the first time, Mr. Graham was not a great preacher. He was not eloquent; he was no declaimer. To use his own description of Mr. Linton in Heatherfield, "he never sought to wrap himself in a mantle of rhetorical spangles or to dazzle the fancy of his hearers by fine sentiment or brilliant images, as some orators do, reminding one of a street

conjurer throwing gilded balls before a crowd at a fair.' He was slow in utterance; he often struggled to get hold of what was under his text till it seemed like bringing something up from the vasty deeps, but while some grew impatient, others waited, knowing that it would probably be a very precious pearl of truth. He presented truth rather than controverted opinions and errors. He had a deep reverence for scripture, but without tendency to narrowness or bigotry. He was strongly argumentative, but not unfrequently imagination or passion would burst out in form which stirred the blood of his audience, and evoked subdued murmurs of assent such as the pulpit too seldom elicits. Even those who did not fully understand him, nor see clearly whither he was leading them, felt that before them stood a man real in his convictions and good in his purposes.

The last time I heard him preach was a few months before he died and when he was weak. The text was: 'And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the Mount Sion, and with Him a hundred forty and four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder; and I heard the voice of harpers, harping with their harps, and they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts and the elders; and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand which were redeemed from the earth.' Springtime and the sweet songs of birds represented that great harmony of all things to which God was leading us. The heavenly song could only be sung, however, under a real recognition of God (the Father's name in the forehead), and a practical experience of the redemptive work of Christ as the slain Lamb. This great harmony is possible because God exists. This sermon was a beautiful close to his ministry to me, but 'He being dead yet speaketh.'

As a disciplinarian, Mr. Graham displayed kindness and tact in dealing with the work and difficulties of Church life. He was fairly acquainted with Connexional rule, but he understood very clearly the genius of our Connexional life and institutions, which is something higher than any mere knowledge of rules. He had a wonderful aptitude for dealing with the disputes common amongst even religious men, often turning difficult corners with them, and thus leading them upon quite different ground to that which they wished to tread. He was always prepared to hear the other side of a question from that which he himself took. Mr. J. Boddy of Shildon, speaking of his excellent management of their circuit, says among other things: 'He was an honest opponent if at any time you differed from him in opinion.' But he could be moved to resistance, especially if his indignation was roused by anything mean and dastardly. But it was only a summer storm of wrath, and was quickly followed by the compunctions of a generous nature fearful of forming an unkind estimate of any one.

Out of the pulpit and away from official meetings he exerted a still more powerful influence in the homes of the people. Rich and poor were equally glad to see him, and the genial and generous humanity of his nature fell in with the humours and likings of his people. He dearly loved a chat with the ladies upon anything incident to their life, dress or fashion. To the housewife he was a welcome guest, as his mechanical genius would delight in examining the peculiarity of some new patent in sewing machines, in remedying some defect in lock, or door, or furniture, or in taking to pieces and cleaning some old clock, and setting 'old time' right. Children drew up to him and gazed at him with ever-varying expression of face, as he wove out of his imagination some marvellous story. The light in his eye rested kindly on young men and maidens, as he thought of the mystery of

their future, and many were his wise counsels to them. Senior ministers were proud of him and cherished his presence, but specially did younger preachers, students, and young men thinking of the ministry delight in hearing him and being with him. His breadth of view blending with a noble charity acted on them like a magnet. He was in sympathy with them and ever ready to advise and help. Very few men have the power of making such an impression for good upon their personal acquaintances, and the recompense of his life has been—friendship from all classes of our people.

The intellectual power, the administrative ability, and the social nature of our friend were subordinate to a moral character, which will ever bear the closest scrutiny. We are not prepared to say he was faultless, but in all sobriety we affirm that he was among the least faulty of his brethren, and that his faults had to be sought in order to be seen. He had a fine perception of righteousness and truth and an unswerving loyalty thereto. He believed that goodness was destined to become supreme, that there was more of it in men than we frequently admit, and he sought it in every man. He would check severe moral criticisms of character, and suggest the possibility of some higher and better motives than were being allowed. His was a life that made for peace on a Christian basis.

He was loyal to his church. He knew some of its defects, but he was also aware how its flexible constitution might meet existing and future conditions of the English people. He never forgot his obligations to it for its influence over his youth. He deeply revered our early preachers, though he believed in modifying methods. In the later months of his life he spent some time in one of our agricultural circuits, and he was troubled at finding some of the chapels in the villages closed; and had he been spared to us, he would probably have expressed a fear that, as a Connexion, we are in danger of losing our hold of such ground unless we seriously consider the matter, and take right action. His pen as well as his voice was at the service of his church. He was a frequent contributor to our Quarterly Review and the Magazines. His articles on Tennyson show his appreciation of the poets. His 'Intuitional Theory of Morals' is of great philosophic value, and his serial story of 'Heatherfield' in the Large Magazine for 1884, evoked, at least in the North, the greatest interest. It contains striking discussions on difficult theological and Church questions, and quaint descriptions of camp-meeting services, but it is specially remarkable as shewing Mr. Graham's power to delineate character, and his realisation of goodness in some very grotesque forms. It also shows how his soul was *en rapport* with nature in all her moods.

Mr. Graham was a man sure to come to the front in our Connexional life. For many years he sat on our District Committees. As Secretary to the Sunday School District Committee, his work was known for its thoroughness. He has been General Committee Delegate and Secretary to District Meetings, and in 1885 was elected as Chairman. He has done long and good service on the Examining Boards connected with candidates for the ministry, students at the late Sunderland Institute, and probationers. Very few men of his years in the ministry have been elected seven times as District Representative to Conference, where his integrity, his genial bearing, and his power in debate were ever welcomed. At the Tunstall Conference in 1884 he discharged the duties involved in the position of Journal Secretary in his usual efficient manner. Almost to the last did he fulfil his trust on the Hymnal Committee for the formation of a new Hymn Book, a work to which he devoted much close attention.

After his death letters of condolence came to his mother and friends, from committees and individuals in all parts of our Connexion. We must restrict the tributes to his memory among these correspondents. Mr. Boddy, of Shildon, says, 'He was a just man, and his ministry shall be blessed. I may safely say when he left our station he did not leave one to revile his name; he was loved and respected by all who knew him.'

When Mr. John Brown, of Lowick, who followed him very soon through the dark valley, heard of his death, he wept like a child. Referring to a minister of a certain church, he said, 'Mr. D. says he is astonished I am a Methodist, but to be a member of a church that can produce such men as William Graham, I consider the greatest honour of my life.'

One of his closest associates says, in the 'Primitive Methodist' newspaper: 'I have sustained the heaviest loss I have known since childhood. I have lost my friend, my brother, one that was more to me than either—my neighbour soul, who gave me inspiration, guidance, sympathy. He was strong and I was weak, and I clung to him as the ivy to the oak. When my feet were slipping and my heart was faint, he held me up and gave me courage.'

But the best testimony to the intellectual and moral worth of our friend was on the fifteenth of January, when fifty of his ministerial brethren preceded the hearse with his remains to Saville Street Chapel, North Shields, while a large body of laymen and friends followed. The devotional service was conducted by the Revs. T. Greenfield, B. Wild, W. Johnson, W. Bowe, J. Atkinson, J. Hallam, and J. Snaith, while the venerable Thomas Southron testified his esteem for our common friend by his presence on the platform. Under deep emotion Mr. Atkinson said, 'No gift do I feel to be of greater worth than the friendship of our departed friend. No finer intellect, no tenderer heart, no more generous nature, no gentler disposition did ever man that I have known possess. With no higher sense of honour, with no deeper or stronger conscientiousness, with no truer or livelier sympathy, with no more earnest desire to help others have I come in contact than I have found in my friend.' Well might strong men weep that day and those who shed no tears have their hearts strangely moved, for we could all say, 'Very pleasant hast thou been unto me; thy love to me was wonderful.'

He has gone from us, falling almost like a tower, but our hope is to meet again. His own words from 'Heatherfield' impress us: 'Great Death! What a harvest hast thou gathered in! What a world of Life dost thou conceal! for Life it must be. These minds must still exist. Their occupation, their condition, the society they keep? Death, thou hast no answer. We must wait till He who is thy Master and the Life indeed shall reveal it.'

---

## References

*Primitive Methodist Magazine* 1886/369