

Rev. Henry Kirk

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The REV. HENRY KIRK, who died at Bradford, January 17, 1891, aged thirty-three years, was born on Christmas Day, 1857, at Caistor, Lincolnshire. His mother was left a widow in humble circumstances when Henry was quite young. The education he received was necessarily limited. As a boy he was steady, thoughtful and winning. There were signs of considerable strength of mind and force of character at this early period of his life. While very young he began to earn his own living and help his mother. At the age of twelve years he left his home, then at Laceby, alone, for the town of Grimsby. Ere he reached the town, though not a decided Christian, Henry turned into the churchyard, and on his knees asked God to take care of him and guide his steps to the right place, and direct his future life. He sought and found employment with a very highly-respected gentleman in the clothier business, who was a member of the Society of Friends. Henry was taken into the house. He soon won the confidence of the master, and was treated as a son. In matters of important responsibility he was greatly trusted. He showed considerable aptitude for business, and would have succeeded in it. His employer urged him to remain with him, and made him a very generous offer, but he left all for the service of God in the work of the ministry.

Soon after going to Grimsby he was one Sunday passing one of our chapels, the one in Victoria-street, where he heard singing in the Sunday-school. He went to the door and listened, when a young man opening the door pressed him to enter. He did so, and thenceforward attended regularly as a scholar. It was in this school one Sunday afternoon in September, 1871, that a great work of conversion to God broke out, and thirty or more of the teachers and elder scholars were made subjects of saving grace. Amongst the number Henry was one, He joined the society at Victoria-street, with the majority who were then saved, and remained stedfast in their faith and profession. Some became local preachers, class leaders, Sunday-school teachers, town councillors, &c., and one at least a travelling preacher. To Henry the memory of those happy days, and the friendships formed there have at times been a source of great comfort and joy through the years which have since followed. From this period of his life there is only one testimony. Mr. J. Gray, Grimsby, writes: 'We have spent together many hours in closest intimacy, and I feel I have lost a friend indeed.'

Mr. Councillor G. Doughty, Grimsby, says: 'Those who have known him in varied circumstances, as I have, feel they have lost a true friend, the church a faithful and industrious minister, the world a true Christian; for he was a bright and shining light.'

From his conversion the distinguishing features of his character were clearly seen and recognised. His religious experience was real, decisive, and nobly maintained, which impressed the more thoughtful that in him there were elements of great usefulness to be developed. In due order he was made a local preacher. A few extracts from a diary he kept will show his spirit and earnestness: 'In August, 1874, I became a teacher in the Sabbath-school. This was a grand work in which I delighted. I was always happy in my class amongst my scholars.' Afterwards he refers to his work as a public speaker, as follows: 'I have seen some little results, but not much—this I regret. . . There is just one instance of the power of prayer: many times did I speak to a wicked young man and pray for him. I was often tempted to give him up; until at length I and others made up our minds to be very importunate at the throne of grace on his behalf. One night while praying I thought he was going to die, and it seemed to be spoken to me, "Go and tell him," and so I did. Shortly after he was converted, and is now a very earnest young man, a teacher in the school, and also on the prayer leaders' plan.'

His next entry is: 'I believe I received the blessing of entire sanctification on Thursday evening, May 18, 1876. After seeking, waiting, wrestling a long time, at last it came; and I was overwhelmed with power and glory. I felt the full assurance, and returned home rejoicing.'

After much persuasion, prayer, and mental conflict which helped to give a permanent character to his work, he yielded to the wish of friends to give himself to the work of the ministry, and under the superintendency of the Rev. P. Milson, was duly recommended by the Quarterly Meeting of the Grimsby First circuit.

On passing the preliminary examination, he entered the Sunderland Institute under the governorship of the Rev. Dr. W. Antliff. He was then nineteen years of age, and though from lack of early education he had to face peculiar difficulties, he passed through the college with much credit, taking honourable rank with the other students. At the close of their brief collegiate training, it was with regret that he and his fellow-students parted company for different parts of their Master's vineyard; but friendships were formed which continued, and will be renewed and perpetuated in heaven. Those who were with him at Sunderland, write as follows: 'I have seen very little of him since we parted at the Institute, in 1878, but during that year I saw a great deal of him as we sat next to each other in the class-room. I was pleased to learn of his increasing success, and to find that God was honouring him in his work, and that he was rising from year to year in the esteem of his brethren. When in Sunderland we all loved him.'—Rev. J. Forster.

'Mr. Kirk and I have been close friends ever since we met together at Sunderland, nearly fourteen years ago. For several years it was our lot to labour on neighbouring circuits. His death comes to us as a personal loss. His death is also a loss to the Connexion, for, had his life been spared and his health good, with his exceptional gifts as an able minister of the New Testament, sooner or later he would have attained to very great eminence in our denomination, and he would have reached and influenced thousands'—Rev. W. Barker.

'Poor Henry! can it be true that I have never to look on his face again, nor hear his voice again in this world? I seem as if I cannot realize it. You have, I am sure, lost a loving husband, and the Connexion a highly-gifted minister, and had he lived he would have taken a place in the front ranks of our ministry. But our loss is his gain. Earth is poorer, but heaven is richer. Look to Him, dear Mrs. Kirk, who is 'the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.' You have His sympathy, love and care; He will never leave you, nor forsake you. Yours is a great loss, but I pray that the Great Head of the church may sustain you in this your time of great need. I shall ever have loving memories of your husband, of our days together in college especially. I always found him very brotherly, ready to render anyone help that lay in his power. I feel I have lost both a friend and brother, and I shall live in hope of uniting with him by-and-by in the better country, where separations are unknown. May you realize in this hour of your great trial that your Heavenly Father comforteth you.'—Rev. J. W. Lisle.

Such are the beautiful and touching words of his college companions and lifelong ministerial friends.

He began his ministry at Rotherham, near Sheffield, spending three years of his probation there. The memory of these happy, successful years, with the kindness of the Rotherham circuit, never left him, but was an abiding inspiration. He was urgently requested to spend his fourth year, the concluding year of his probation, with them, but he declined to do so, and at the June Quarterly Meeting, 1881, the brethren expressed themselves as follows: 'That we, the officials of the Rotherham circuit, desire to place on record our high appreciation of the services of the Rev. H. Kirk, who for the past three years has laboured most efficiently and acceptably in our midst. We have learned to esteem him for his work's sake, and to love him for his geniality and Christian character, and most devoutly pray that the Great Head of the church may still

bless and prosper him in his work, and that he may long live to preach the Gospel and feed the flock of God.'—Robert Bryant.

Chesterfield, in Derbyshire, was his second circuit. There he finished his probation, married the eldest daughter of Rev. Parkinson Milson, and spent two additional years as a married preacher, making his term of service three years. In this station he was much loved and honoured, and left, though strongly invited to remain a fourth year. The Rev. J. Wenn, his superintendent on this station, says: 'His life was brief, but brilliant and useful.'

His next circuit was Leicester First, where he spent three of the happiest years of his life. The people held him in esteem such as not always falls to the lot of a minister, and the Leicester friends lived in his heart ever afterwards. During the latter part of his time in Leicester his health began to fail, but after some three months' rest he resumed his work, which he continued until about three months before his death, when increasing debility comgelled him to relinquish pulpit labours. On December 9, 1890, from this circuit came words of help and comfort when our dear departed brother was enduring great affliction. The briefest quotation will show the significance of such a communication to one in circumstances of pain and trial

'I am desired by the Quarterly Meeting of the Leicester First circuit, held at Belgrave Gate, to express the deep sympathy of all the brethren with you in your continued affliction, and consequent inability to do the work in which you have been so successful. The meeting was large, nearly every place in the circuit being represented, and the references to your weak and enfeebled state touched tender chords in the hearts of all present, and the motion to send you a line of Christian greeting and brotherly sympathy was carried with entire unanimity.'— Rev. F. Pickett.

In July, 1887, he came to Bradford Second circuit, an entire stranger to all except one person. Having recovered from the severe illness he endured toward the close of his ministry at Leicester, he came hoping that the change of locality might establish his health, and that he might regain his former strength. This, however, was not the case, though he took nearly the whole of his work, and his Master gave him the hearts of the people, to a degree of which he had no adequate idea. For many months his strength was failing, and he was a constant sufferer, scarcely knowing a day's freedom from weakness and pain. Still he hoped, longed, and prayed for a renewal of strength and health, yet always in submission to the will of God. What he, however, (and many others also) desired and prayed for was not, for the best reasons, granted. Dearly as he loved the Master's work on earth he had to leave it. He preached his last sermon on Sunday night, September 21, 1890, though little thinking that such was the case. He was taken ill on Monday and was unable to leave his house for many weeks, but came downstairs a few hours in the day, until a fortnight before his decease. He suffered very patiently, but found it very hard to resign his dearly-loved work, and the circuit with its friends and interests, especially his dear wife, who for months by day and by night sought to relieve and comfort him.

It is remarkable that though his aim in the pulpit was always to honour his Master and to bless and save men, yet in conversation with the Rev. G.P. Clarke, he spoke of the views he had of the awful responsibility of the Christian minister, and how faithfully and fervently he would preach in future, should his health be restored; but his Master willed that his work and life should close, and having been enabled to give up all, he longed for the nearer fellowship of Jesus without suffering and pain. To use his own words, 'It is better for me to die than live in this daily dying state.' Again, 'I have no fear of death's issues, but I dread the suffering connected with dying.' He did not dread to enter the heavenly land, but he had a painful crossing of 'death's cold flood.'

Once when his father-in-law spoke of the home above and its glories and fellowship, he replied, 'It's hard work getting there.' His sufferings were long and at times distressing until a day or two before he 'languished into life.' During a full week he was watched as dying, but his failing life for a time strangely ebbed and flowed. His feebleness was such, that much as his family would have desired it, no friend of the many who from love desired to see him, could do so; and those who attended him day and night had to be very cautious and gentle not to cause him pain. His consideration for those about him was remarkable, and he was keenly alive to all that passed about him to the last moment of his life.

Finally he asked to be lifted up, which being done, he took an affectionate leave of his sorrowing wife, then he laid his head upon the pillow and fell asleep without any sign of suffering or a shadow of pain crossing his features, but with a smile of heavenly content and sweetness. He now rests from his works, toils, and sufferings. Through infinite mercy he has finished his course, and obtained a good report. He is now a subject of the 'far better' state of being 'with the Lord.'

More than ordinary interest was taken in his interment. The Great Horton Chapel, Bradford, was crowded at 9.30 a.m. by those who from far and near desired to pay the last tribute of respect, and it was evident while the Revs. A. Jones, G.P. Clarke and J. Shaw went through the service, that the people felt that they had sustained a great loss. In Hull Spring Bank Cemetery, too, where the remains of our brother now rest, waiting the resurrection of the just, a large company assembled. The officials and friends of the Bradford Second circuit showed tender sympathy and great kindness, manifested in a variety of ways, to their minister and his wife in his affliction, in his death, and in his burial,

The deductions to be drawn from the brief history of Henry Kirk are: First, he was a good man. He was a good man in the truest sense of the word. His goodness did not consist in any special mannerism; he was good at heart; he was what he professed to be in deed and in truth—a real Christian man. The real secret of his power in prayer and preaching lay chiefly in this—at the centre of his being he was righteous. Dr. Joseph Wood says: 'He was the Lord's, body, soul, and spirit, and is now with the Lord, which is far better. He has left all who knew him the example of a splendid Christian character, and consecrated life.' He took the Bible for his guide, Christ for his Saviour, the Spirit of God for his Help and Comforter, and he lived and moved in the light and love of God.

Second. He was a good preacher. With him preaching was a passion. The love of Christ constrained him. He said what he thought fearlessly, for the good of man and the glory of God. In his preaching there was thought and power; such preaching is all too rare. His discourses were carefully prepared, but his chief preparation was himself. His peculiar distinction and power as a preacher consisted not in any special natural gift, but in what he was and the life he lived. If preaching is 'that rare speech of a man to his fellow-men whereby in their inmost hearts they know that he in his inmost heart believes,' then Henry Kirk had attained this rare acquirement in a marked and distinguished degree.

Third. A good and faithful preacher still generally shares the goodwill and affection of the people.

Inscrutable mystery hangs over such graves as those of our departed Brother Kirk's. Lives of nobleness and promise like his, blighted in the blossoming of their power, baffles thought. In every age and from every church men of distinction in early life have been summoned when just qualified for extensive usefulness here, to their eternal home.

This is our comfort and satisfaction, that in all bereavement, pain, and trouble, God has a wise and good hand. Henry has gone respected and beloved. Thirty-three years seems very brief, yet it all depends how we

measure life, whether by years or by deeds. To measure by deeds is difficult, but doubtless it is the proper way, 'He lives longest who lives best.' Therefore, in humility, submission, and confidence, let us resign ourselves to God. The will of God is best—best for him who has gone from us, and best for us who still remain. 'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord.'

References

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