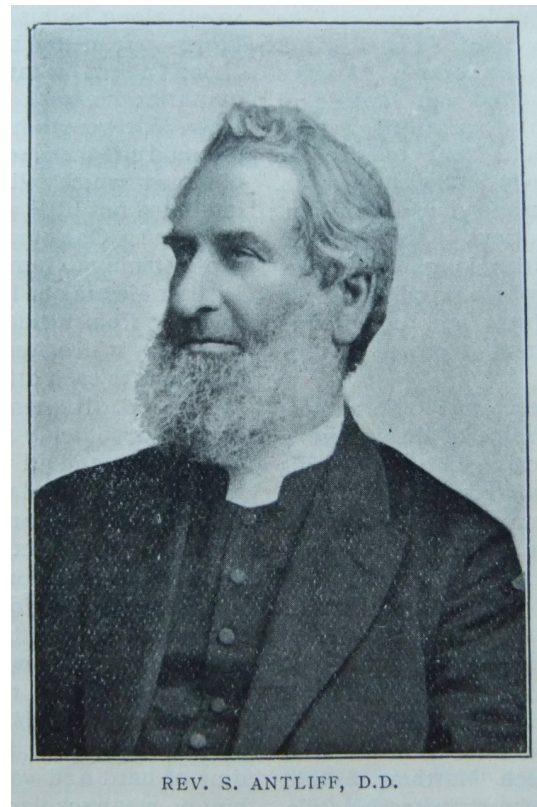


Transcription of article in the Christian Messenger by A. Lewis Humphries, M.A., in a series 'Preachers of Thirty Years Ago'

THIS debt which the villages of England owe to Methodism has been expounded almost to the point of weariness, and often with insufficient recognition of the counter-obligation under which Methodism - and, not least, Primitive Methodism - is laid to her village societies. We wonder how many of our big towns, with their aggregated churches, could lay claim to the distinction which belongs to the little Primitive Methodist "cause" at Cauntton in Nottinghamshire. Our chronicles only just overleap a century, yet during that comparatively brief period a village lying in a sleepy hollow about six miles from Newark has furnished for the ministry of our Church three men who all held high Connexional office, and were called in turn to the Chair of the Conference. The Antliffs, William and Samuel, and William Cutts - the trio in question - were all reared at Cauntton. Of the two Antliffs it is the merest



truism to say that they were men of unusual distinction. Gifted with a physical presence which would have attracted notice in any assembly, they had also intellectual and spiritual qualities which placed them among the greatest men God has given to our Church. Samuel Antliff, born in 1823 - ten years after his brother William - was cast in a large mould. His massive, well-poised head, crowned in his later years with wavy locks of silver-grey, lent dignity to his bearing and compelled a respect which closer acquaintance served but to deepen into reverence. If Primitive Methodism had indulged in an order of bishops, he would have passed by sheer force of natural fitness to the episcopal chair. As it was, he, without hearing the name, fulfilled in the old Nottingham District the functions of a bishop. He had all the gifts which make for leadership. To power in the pulpit and eloquence on the platform he added a largeness of outlook and a capacity for affairs which made him a great Connexional statesman. He thought imperially. The Primitive Methodist Church lay very near to his heart, and his natural sagacity was linked with an imagination which constituted him not only a wise administrator but a courageous pioneer of new developments.

Under the rule which then existed he was debarred from a seat in Conference until he had served twenty years in the ministry. But on his first appearance in our annual assembly he pleaded for the erection of a school at which the sons of prosperous Primitive Methodists might receive secondary education free from the peril of being enticed from the Church of their parents. Elmfield College was the outcome of that appeal. In his brain, too, was conceived the Connexional Insurance Company, whilst it was during his tenure of office as General Missionary Secretary that missions were opened in West and South Africa, and Primitive Methodism started its contribution to the salvation of the heathen world. Facts like these testify to Samuel Antliff's vision and courage.

Yet it is his distinction as a preacher and platform orator that at the moment we are most anxious to record. In the days of his strength, he was a veritable "master of assemblies" There are some who

still speak of a District Meeting held at Chesterfield – the last before the division of the old Nottingham District - which was made memorable by the speech which he delivered at the great public meeting. Rising after nine o'clock in an atmosphere that was superheated and vitiated, he felt reluctant to speak at all. The audience, however, was not to be denied, and yielding to pressure he went on to recite the story of the early sufferings and triumphs of Primitive Methodism in that part of Derbyshire. As if under the spell of a wizard his listeners hung upon his words, forgetting all about their discomfort and the lateness of the hour until, in spite of repeated calls to "go on," he brought his speech to a close. Samuel Antliff had all the gifts of a natural orator. A voice clear, agreeably modulated and capable of taking on the tones of deep feeling, a keen perception of the points that tell and a capacity to marshal them in logical array, a power of lucid expression and vivid description, a mastery over the emotions of his hearers so that he could call up either laughter or tears - these were the gifts which, kindled by the passion of his earnestness and conviction, made Dr. Antliff so great a power on the public platform.

And what of his preaching? There too, the same gifts, though some of them were a little more restrained, came into play. His strength in preaching was constituted in part by the simplicity and purity of his language. What a master of Anglo-Saxon he was! Those strong and simple elements in our language which were dear to John Bright, formed also the staple of Dr. Antliff's speech. Without ever descending into slang or compromising the dignity of his message by the least approach to vulgarity, he spoke so that simple minds understood what he meant, and the lucidity upon which Matthew Arnold once descanted always characterised his style.

On one occasion when Dr. Antliff had as his colleague a young minister who, whilst fairly well educated, was sedulously cultivating clearness of expression as a characteristic of his written and spoken word, the difference between them was summed up by a simple farm-labourer, who said he could understand "the old Doctor" well enough, but the young preacher was "a bit too high larnt " for him. Dr. Antliff was never "too high larnt " for his hearers. Depth in his thought never meant mistiness in his speech. Moreover, his theme was always practical and evangelical. No one competent to judge could, in listening to him, have doubted that he was a Methodist, for it was religious experience that he sought both to expound and to create, though he was careful also to instruct the conscience, and the ethical side of religious duty was oftentimes very plainly enforced. Dr. Antliff had the evangelical passion. How wonderfully this came out in his prayers! It seems to me, as I recall him, that we have had few men who were able to lead the devotions of a congregation as he could. Beginning in quiet, reverent tones, he gathered force and passion as the tide of intercession rose, until those who listened were swept along by his earnest pleading, and all hearts were melted before God.

And, again, what a master of Scriptural quotation he was! How ready the words of Holy Writ were to his tongue, and how aptly he could cite them, so that the almost complete blindness which fell to his lot in later years interfered but little with his conduct of public worship! One of my latest memories of him is of listening to him while as Chairman of the District Meeting he led our devotions, weaving together from memory a chain of Scriptural passages which were simply perfect in their relevance to each other and in their combined impression. It seems strange that one whose mind was so richly stored and who could so easily command all his powers and resources when once he stood upon his feet, should have had in the early years of his ministry a time of comparative ineffectiveness such as made the young preacher wonder whether he had not mistaken his vocation. Some allowance must be made for his youth, for he was only seventeen years old when he was thrust into "the work." What wonder if the raw youth from the village knew not his powers nor felt at ease in his calling! But

that season passed. By dint of hard and varied study such as made him no mean scholar, by the patient discipline, not without drudgery, of all his gifts, Samuel Antliff came to self-realisation and to mastery of his work. We like to recall him, as we and all who came close to him, knew him - a man of commanding gifts and wise outlook, but not less impressive by reason of a goodness profound and yet genially human. We repeat, as our sober conviction, that in gifts and character Samuel Antliff was one of the greatest men God has vouchsafed to our Church.

References

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