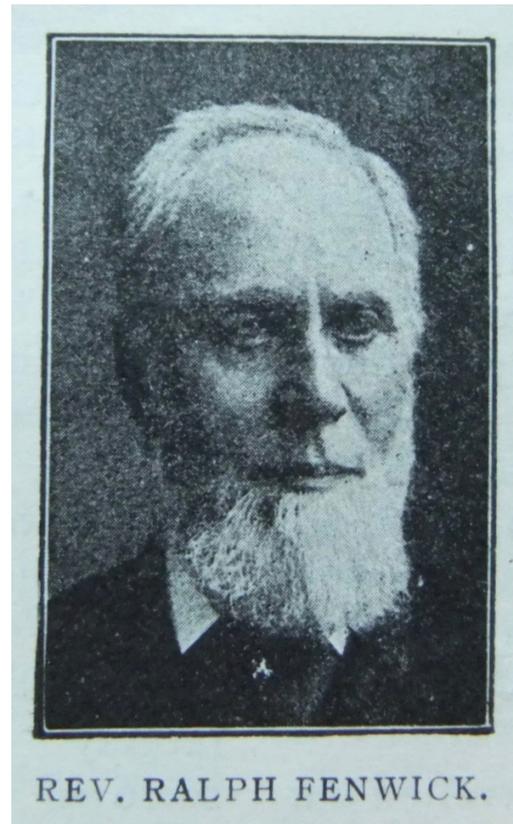


Transcription of article in the Christian Messenger by Joseph Ritson in a series 'Preachers of Thirty Years Ago'

RALPH FENWICK was one of the great preachers of the denomination thirty years ago. I heard him frequently in my boyhood, as he travelled in my native Circuit of Allendale, and regularly stayed at my father's house. I recall his tall and slightly angular form, his mellow voice, his conversational style, his striking and original sermons. He was one of those preachers who impressed people very differently. To some he was an inspired prophet, to others nothing at all out of the common. These last seemed to think him lazy, and perhaps he was in some aspects "essentially lazy," if I may quote the caustic saying of James Austen Bastow, of Bible Dictionary fame. But this alleged dislike of exertion was due to a certain constitutional apathy that at times afflicted this remarkable man. Certainly he had worked hard at his books in his time. He had read widely, and had managed to equip himself respectably from the educational point of view. What wonderful sermons he preached in the regular course of his ministry.

Quite early he was recognised as exceptionally able in the pulpit and on the platform. At district meetings he was sure to have a prominent appointment and a place among the speakers on the Monday night. He travelled famous Circuits such as Sunderland, Newcastle, South Shields. Allendale at that time was regarded as one of the most desirable Circuits in the great Northern District, and as affording a pleasant and healthful change from the strain of a big town Circuit. At that period we had Henry Phillips, Colin Campbell McKechnie, and Ralph Fenwick in succession, all notable men who afterwards attained to the Presidency. They presented a striking variety.

Henry Phillips was a fine type of the English gentleman, who won the hearts of the Dales-men from end to end. He was neither a great thinker nor a philosopher, but always had about him a fine flavour of culture, and was moreover a grand preacher in his way. It may be doubted whether he ever wrote a sermon in his life; but the naturalness, the fine humanness of his discourses and their spirituality made them memorable. He was a rare sower of the seed of the kingdom. Colin Campbell McKechnie was the philosopher, the thinker, the orator in the best sense of that much abused word. The last man to be taken for a revivalist by the casual observer, he yet had in him reserves of Celtic fervour and enthusiasm that made him the hero of great revivals that still bear his name. He reaped where Phillips had sown, and a truly magnificent harvest it was. Ralph Fenwick was a blend of the philosophical and rhetorical. He could coin memorable phrases, and many of his sermons possessed great literary beauty. He, too, was great in a revival. Few men in our ministry at that period had seen such remarkable revivals, and it is a pity that he never committed his wonderful reminiscences to print. In some of the "protracted meetings" he held in Allendale quite extraordinary things happened.



On one occasion at Whiteley Shield, when pressed to attend the revival service, a certain man excused himself on the ground that he must visit a friend who was to lend him a screw key he needed to repair a harmonium, I think it was. Mr. Fenwick inquired of the man if he would go supposing a tool were forthcoming. The reply was in the affirmative, because it seemed evident no tool could be furnished. Mr. Fenwick drew from his pocket the very tool required. The man was staggered, and literally trembled with astonishment and awe. The instrument was repaired, and the man went to the service and was soundly converted.

There was in Mr. Fenwick's sermons a searching quality which, though unaccompanied by great excitement, was singularly effective in arresting men and bringing them to decision. But sometimes the preacher rose to extraordinary heights of passion and impressiveness, and one marvelled how the unconverted dared to leave the chapel unsaved. I became his colleague in the Crook Circuit at the conclusion of my probation, and though I was never privileged to hear him preach I was made familiar with the impression produced by his remarkable sermons. He was a clever sermon builder. His homiletical outlines were often singularly happy and arresting. But there was a massiveness about his discourses that gave them weight with the thoughtful hearer. They often possessed, too, a certain pawky humour which, blended with intellectual and spiritual insight, delighted his audiences, and caused them to quote his sayings afterwards. He did not possess the steady flow of speech of Henry Phillips, nor the rare literary flavour, the Celtic flashes and fervour combined with philosophic breadth of McKechnie, but in his own order he was as great a preacher as either of them, and perhaps more reliable in his regular ministry. His failures or comparative failures would be more rare than theirs. His great occasions might not equal Mr. McKechnie's, but the level was better sustained. In the homes of the people all these men were greatly beloved. Perhaps there Henry Phillips was *facile princeps*. People at first sight of him were afraid of him. The idea of entertaining this grand gentleman filled them with nervous trepidation. But in a few minutes he placed them completely at their ease. His gentlemanliness was of so true a type, he was so genial, so considerate, so extraordinarily afraid of giving trouble, and so extremely and unaffectedly grateful for any kindness received, that all fear soon departed from his hosts and hostesses, and they were his admiring slaves for ever.

Of all the ministers who ever travelled our Circuit, I think Henry Phillips was the most beloved. McKechnie had also a fine tact in the home, and carried, as my mother said, a "large oil bottle." He knew how to put himself into sympathetic relation with all sorts of people, but his high intellectuality gave him with some a certain aloofness.

Mr. Fenwick, in the home, was genial and interesting. He would put himself to any amount of trouble in cases of sickness, and having a *penchant* for doctoring he often made himself invaluable. On occasion he could assume a magisterial air, and was now and then, perhaps, just a trifle too conscious of his intellectual superiority, which tended to alienate younger men. But it was a privilege to have him in the home, and the memory of his presence, like that of the other two men just referred to, is still a benediction.

Mr. Fenwick used to tell a good story about the appearance of his portrait in the "Large Magazine." Most ministers regard the appearance of their portraits in the magazine as a very important affair, and quite naturally desire to secure the best likeness possible. When the occasion arrived in Mr. Fenwick's case he was stationed in Weardale, and there were no photographers in the Circuit. It was very inconvenient to make a special journey to some distant town merely for the sake of sitting for a photograph. Mr. Fenwick was not without photographs, but of the two in his possession, neither was quite satisfactory. Each had its good points: the one, for example, gave an excellent

representation of the head and face, but the body was badly posed. The other was defective in facial presentation but had a well posed physique. The Bookroom wrote again and again. At length the message became so urgent, that something must be done. Seizing the two photographs Mr. Fenwick cut off the two heads, and transposed them. It was this composite affair of the good head and good body which ultimately appeared in the magazine, and the result was quite successful.

As a superintendent of large and influential Circuits, Ralph Fenwick early distinguished himself in administration, and it was no surprise when he was appointed Vice-Book Steward. He filled the office creditably, and if he did not quite come up to the expectations of his friends neither did he fulfil the predictions of his less friendly critics. A certain irritability, which probably had its origin largely in physical causes and great sorrows, marred his usefulness somewhat in his later ministry. Few at that period would have dreamed that he would live to so great an age. He must have been nearly ninety when he died; yet he was several times completely laid aside by nervous prostration during the last twenty years of his ministry. But his knowledge of the laws of health stood him in good stead, and he knew when to arrest the drain on his nervous energy. It is as a preacher he is remembered to-day, and a fisher of men of remarkable skill and deftness. He once found a lot of men gathered round a standing engine when on his way to a country appointment. The men were baffled with the thing which had got out of order. Mr. Fenwick took the job in hand, set the engine going, and got the men to attend the service afterwards. He was wise in winning souls and many will be the crown of his rejoicing in the day of the Lord.

References

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