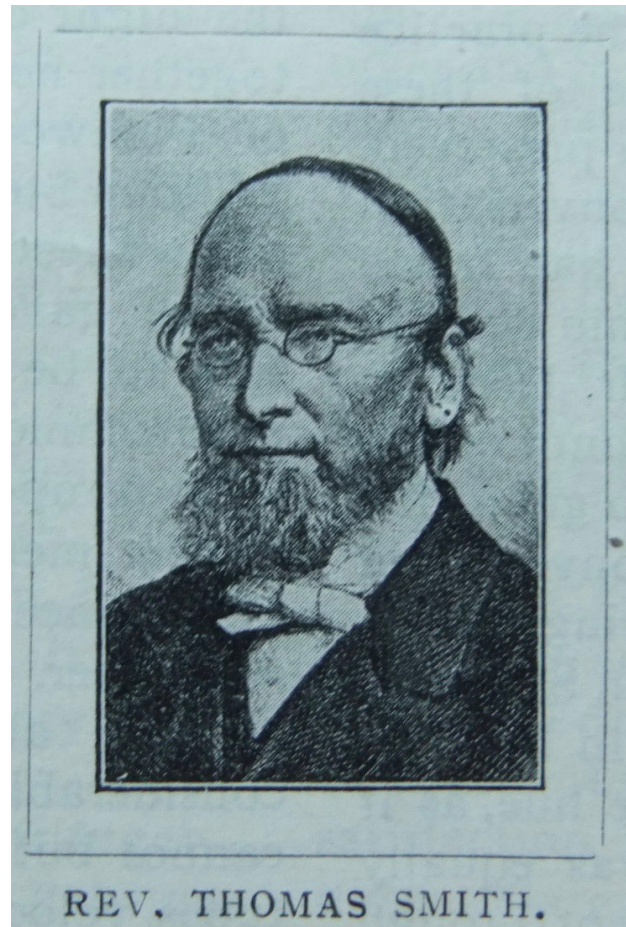


Transcription of article in the Christian Messenger by H. Bickerstaffe Kendall in a series 'Preachers of Thirty Years Ago'

I HAVE always felt that, as a young preacher, I was highly favoured in the superintendents I had "over me in the Lord." Taken in succession, they were: Thomas Smith, C.C. M'Kechie, Thomas Southron, John Atkinson, John Taylor, and Thomas Greenfield. Truly a goodly list! And the list might be enriched by adding the name of David Ingham, that sweet soul, who was superintendent of the Barton-on-Humber Circuit in '63-4, when I was "supply" for a few months. The men named were so different that any attempt to compare and class them would be futile. It is little use asking, when you are dealing with cathedrals of different styles, as men of strikingly varied endowments, who is the best man, or which is the best building. In a sense each is the best in some particular regard. It is, perhaps, but natural that I should have a very kindly recollection of the first on the list—Thomas Smith, who was afterwards, for twelve years, Governor of Elmfield. In 1864 he had, travelled thirty years and was the



superintendent of Newcastle-on-Tyne Circuit, which that year wished to "call out" a young man—almost an unprecedented event in the Circuit's history. I, a youth of twenty, was a candidate for the ministry. Those were the days when a candidate had some say in his own disposal. Wakefield and Patrington were, I believe, open to me, but I had a strong predilection for the North, perhaps because an uncle, Henry Kendall, had travelled there in the 'forties and 'fifties. But the men of the North are shrewd, and preferred to judge for themselves the young man's fitness before they engaged him. So it was stipulated that the young man should go down and preach two sermons in old Nelson St. on a given Sunday "with a view." Agreed! When I arrived in Newcastle on the Saturday, I found quite a formidable array of officials gathered to meet me at the house of Mr. William Stewart. There would be quite half-a-score present, including such men as George Charlton, W.B. Leighton, Peter Kidman, and Robert Foster, who was to be my fast friend for close upon half-a-century. It is a sobering reflection that, of all that company who sat down at the tea-table together that day, only two are left—the gracious hostess, and he who tells the story.

Now, I am well aware these personal reminiscences are trivial enough in themselves; they are given only because they lead up to the centre-piece. Thomas Smith is that central figure. That the youth was sitting amongst these hard-headed men that day, tolerably composed and hopeful, was all owing to him. Before journeying North I had received a letter from Mr. Smith to this effect: "Come trusting in God and in the people who will see and hear you, attempt nothing great, or beyond what is well within your powers. Choose the simplest subject you have. Do not let the fact I shall be hearing you give you any fear, either beforehand or at the time. I shall be your most sympathetic

hearer." He who wrote that letter knew the heart of youth. Elmfield was surely the fitting place for such a man. I followed Mr. Smith's instructions to the letter. For my morning's subject I chose the first sermon I ever made: "Our Father." Nor did I falter or break down, though Mr. Smith sat behind me. The ordeal over, I returned to Newcastle with seven sermons as my stock-in-trade, and remained three years in the Circuit.

That Thomas Smith had a head has, I think, been demonstrated. Further acquaintance has confirmed the assurance that it could be appealed to and trusted although, it must be admitted, there was a gravity about the man, and a temperamental aloofness and reserve, that some found it difficult to get beneath. When I heard from his own lips the story of his early life, I did not wonder at this. When little more than a child he had gone down the coal-pit as a hopper-lad and in the winter time never saw the light of the sun from one Sunday to another.

Though not a scholar in the technical sense he had read widely and to good purpose, and he still kept up his reading as opportunity served. He was all for an educated ministry, and was one of the leaders in the Sunderland district who formed the first Preachers' Association. He took an active part in its annual gatherings, and when the "Christian Ambassador" was started he was made associate-editor with Mr. M'Kechie.

To me, at this time, Mr. Smith seemed an extraordinarily well-informed man; so much so, that I made a point of drawing on his stores as much as I could, and began to jot down recollections of the conversations I had listened to and taken some small share in. Thescheme widened; for I soon found that, if Thomas Smith or William Dent could strike out thoughts worth preserving, the skilled mechanics and tradespeople of Newcastle, and the miners in the villages around I went to, could give me "wrinkles." Indeed, there was not a house one entered but something might be learned as well as imparted. The practice had its educational value. Some of these conversational jottings have been preserved. Amongst them I find notes of a conversation in which Messrs. Smith and Dent had borne the leading part. There is a graphic description of the impression made on Mr. Dent by John Oxtoby in Weardale, an account of the latter's methods, and an attempt to get at the secret of his power. Then the conversation turned on faith - the nature of saving faith - and such high matters. On a certain Saturday in January, 1866, Mr. Smith's talk in his own room took on a somewhat sombre hue, as it sometimes did; though, what was equally characteristic, the sombreness was shot through with something akin to humour—an almost pleased perception of the contrasts, the incongruities and the grotesqueries of life. He spoke of the connexion. Its history had never been written; perhaps could not be written. If Dickens had got hold of some of the material he would have worked up a romance that would have been more popular than "Pickwick" and would have outsold "Little Dorritt."

What shifts some of our men had been put to! He himself remembered when at — they lived in a miserable damp room under the chapel. When he wanted to sermonise he had to go into the pulpit of the chapel and use the book-board for a desk. In this same Circuit he had his moulting-time; for all his hair came off, and he had to wear a skull-cap under his hat, so that people did not know him. Mr. Smith's preaching seemed to me to be conversation glorified. He preached as he conversed—only more so. There was the same steady, uninterrupted flow of language, unimpassioned, but with the note of sincerity running through it; no word wrong or misplaced. I used to listen and wonder how he did it. Was this power of extemporisation a heaven-bestowed gift, or was it the reward of years of hard drill? So I wondered and still continue to wonder. Mr. Smith attached great importance to simplicity of style in pulpit address. In the first volume of the "Christian Ambassador" he has some wise words on this head, which it would be a pleasure to quote did space permit.

One notable night we spent together until the small hours stands out in memory. It was the night of November 13-14 1866. We sat together hour by hour, in the tower-chamber of Fernwood House, the residence of Mr. William Stewart. We had no artificial light, and we needed none, for, through our windows, which gave east and south and west, there was to be seen such a display of celestial pyrotechnics as seldom falls to the lot of man to look upon. It was the famous meteoric shower men of science had predicted would take place that night. Mr. Smith, as I remember, was greatly interested and moved by the august spectacle. He had paid considerable attention to astronomy, and I cannot but think that the distances, magnitudes, velocities and orderly movements with which astronomy is conversant made a strong appeal to him. In one of his published sermons there is a passage which seems to confirm this opinion. The passage runs:—" We look upon the firmament, and our eyes meet a blaze of splendour: the heavens are gemmed with innumerable stars, glittering against the dark background of the sky; yet no two stars are alike ; one star differeth from another star in glory. We are overwhelmed, alternately, with stupendous magnitude, unconceivable velocity, and immeasurable distance; yet in the moral sense of the word, the Scriptures are equally remarkable for the extent, variety and multiplicity of their subjects."

References

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