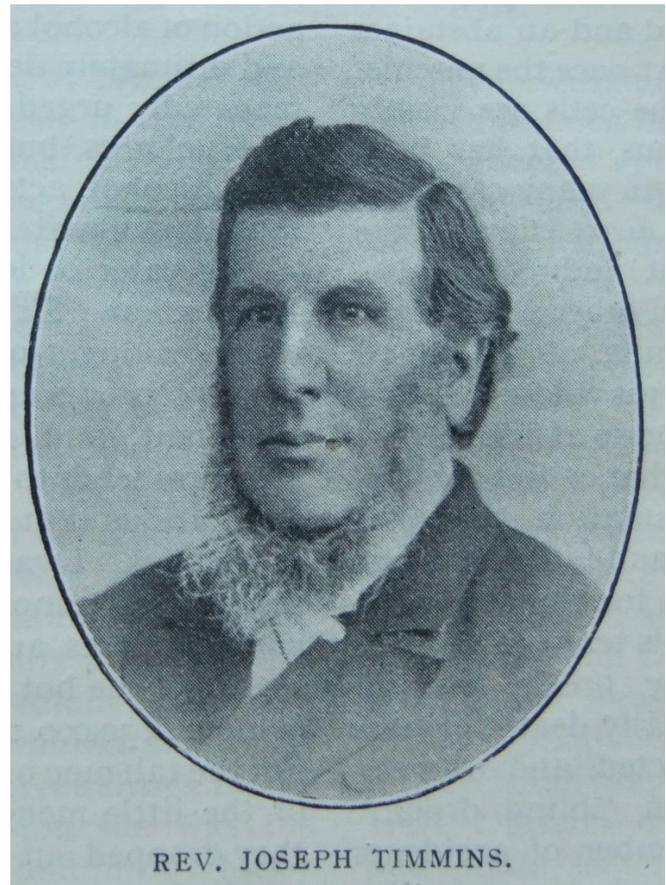


Transcription of article in the Christian Messenger by 'One of his Colleagues' in a series 'Preachers of Thirty Years Ago'

THE Primitive Methodist ministry has included several different schools of preaching, each of which has had its own distinguishing characteristics standing out in contrast to those of other schools. There was, for instance, the Northern school - philosophical, even metaphysical, running to argument and rejoicing in the rendering of reasons. Then there was the Black Country school - oratorical and flowery - with its appeal to sentiment, its periods and perorations. There were other schools, of course. East Anglia had its special type of preaching. The Southern counties produced a pulpit fashion of their own. It is not for us to say that any one school rendered better service than another; indeed it would probably be found that each one made its own particular contribution to the necessities of the times and was complementary to every other, and, for its own sake, needed in the upbuilding of our church.



The subject of this short paper, the Rev. Joseph Timmins, was thirty years ago one of the best known of many celebrated men who formed what we have termed the Black Country school. A Staffordshire man by birth, he spent the greater part of a long ministry in the old Tunstall District, and he was true to type. The writer was privileged to spend a term under his superintendency. Well does he remember his first interview with his new overseer. Joseph Timmins was a man of strong and striking appearance. He was of average stature and squarely built - a "buirdly man," he would have been called in the higher reaches of the land. His face was massive and his eye was keen. It must be admitted that, to a stranger, his manner might seem a little overbearing. It seemed, indeed, to the writer to have that quality at the commencement of the interview referred to. He will confess that his first impression was that in coming to his new Circuit he had entered into a relationship in which he would need to be upon the defensive more than might be pleasant. However he was ready for anything which might turn up, for he had already remembered that, to some supers of those days, superintendency was superintendency, and he had been "put up to a thing or two." It is one of his rewards for attempting this article that he can have the pleasure of placing it on record that this first interview resulted in a mutual understanding of such a nature that, during all the years of association that followed, there was scarce a jarring note between him and a colleague from whom he differed greatly, both in point of age, of ideals, and of opinions on most matters. He can testify that under a somewhat hard exterior and a demeanour not always gracious there was a kind heart. Unfortunately this discovery was not so quickly made by every one as by himself. His superintendent supplied a much better illustration of the *fortitor in re* than of the *suavitor in modo*. This was true of

his conduct of Circuit business, and in the town where we worked together he encountered a spirit of independence, one might almost say truculence, with which he sometimes came into conflict. Fortunately time was on his side, and gradually officials and members as well as the outside public came to understand the new minister better, and the day arrived when resistance gave place to esteem.

As a preacher, Joseph Timmins had a style which, while it conformed to type, had many individual peculiarities. As an anniversary preacher he for a long time enjoyed great popularity, especially in the Midlands and Yorkshire and Lancashire. Few men of the time were instrumental in raising more money for trusts and Sunday schools by preaching and lecturing. He was able to turn to good account the excitement of a great occasion; indeed there is no unkindness in the assertion that such excitement appeared essential to the realisation of the best that was in him as a pulpit and platform speaker. He drew inspiration from the sight of crowded pews, the spectacle of throngs gathered in the open air. On the other hand a small congregation seemed to depress him in every way. And it cannot be contended that he was equally successful with the few as with the many. Everyone knows how hard it is to be oratorical when audiences are small and listless. Under these circumstances your famous orator; sometimes has a very hard pull through indeed, and his hearers are not always ignorant of the fact.

When the conditions served, Joseph Timmins could be wonderfully effective. He had great powers of appeal to the emotions, and he was not without a certain gift of broad and homely humour. When he "had liberty," smiles and tears followed each other on the faces of his hearers as sunshine and shower alternate in April. As we write, the memory of such an occasion is to the front. It was a camp meeting. The text was Ps. xlvj, "There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of our God." It was such a text as the preacher loved, in that it gave him opportunity to exercise his powers of description. He had a way of piling figure upon figure, his own fervour and that of the congregation reaching a higher level with each succeeding metaphor. There was great shouting that day as the beauty and the fulness of that river were described. It was a river that never dried. It brought fruitfulness wherever it flowed. Its waters were without money and without price. It flowed there and it flowed then. It came from under the Throne and it flowed for all who would avail themselves of its crystal abundance. Truly the sermon would not have printed well. It contained nothing that was new or profound, but, as a camp meeting discourse to the very people gathered to hear it, the address could hardly have been bettered. It was a triumph of declamation, of appeal and of adaptation.

Among the peculiarities of which a faithful scribe would write in describing the preaching of Joseph Timmins was a curious habit of holding arguments with himself on behalf of an imaginary questioner or opponent. "But Mr. Timmins—" he would commence, and then the question or objection would be stated and "Mr. Timmins " would return reply which, of course, answered the question or triumphed over the objection most completely. Sometimes the effect of this method was a little quaint, even a little amusing on occasion. He had a great custom, too, of referring by name to the town in which he happened to be preaching when enforcing a point, and at times local patriotism was aroused to take a defensive attitude.

Methods of this kind, of course gave to the preaching of our friend a degree of individuality which made his sermons unforgettable. Contrary to one's expectation, they did not prevent these sermons from being wonderfully used in the saving of men, and the preacher had the joy of adding many to the church. He was intensely orthodox—even for that day—having a profound contempt for the methods and conclusions of the higher criticism and an equally strong aversion to any explanation of

the creation which did not commence with a confession that the work was done in six twenty-four hour days. Hence his preaching was intensely dogmatic, and this fact, where it did not arouse opposition, tended to increase its power over the hearer. The man who is certain has a great advantage; and Mr. Timmins was always certain. He knew where he stood and his hearers knew, too.

Thus his pulpit utterances were always strong and uncompromising.

The same may be said of his lectures and speeches. He was great as a temperance advocate, as well he might be, for his earlier years were filled with suffering because of strong drink. He would denounce the drink and those who made or sold it in unmeasured terms. Hardly less emphatic, at one period of his life, was his antagonism to the use of tobacco. In this, however, he greatly changed. Indeed, he became in later years a devotee, if not a worshipper, at the shrine of St. Nicotinus. Is it Emerson who points out that a desire to be consistent may become a snare and hold us from our best?

So much for Joseph Timmins as a preacher of thirty years ago. Had the Editor of the MESSENGER only asked for reminiscences of the man as a man, this article might have been indefinitely increased in length, and many interesting paragraphs could be written concerning him. He took great interest in medical matters, and even essayed the treatment of certain cases with, it is said, surprising success. He enjoyed the advantage of some private means, and was liberal in its diffusion, so that many a poor person blessed his name. The writer, as already confessed, joined him with some misgiving, but parted from him with a very real regret. Joseph Timmins was intensely human, and, take him for all in all, a man to be remembered with pleasure and affection.

References

Christian Messenger 1913/267