

Joseph Wood, D.D.

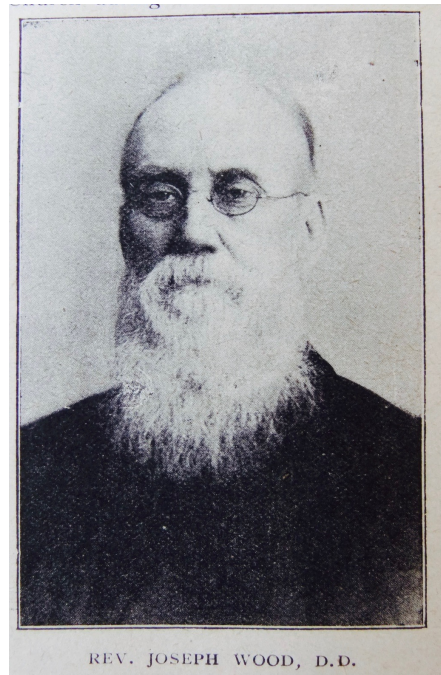
Transcription of an article in the Christian Messenger by Rev. R.W. Keightley

THE Primitive Methodists of to-day have "a goodly heritage," and it is our sacred duty to remember, with growing gratitude, our predecessors through whose labours we have been so greatly enriched. Among the many loyal souls who were conspicuous in our Church during the latter half of the last century, few, if any filled a larger place than Dr. Wood. His fruitful ministry dates from 1851, and it commenced in the circuit in which W. Clowes had recently died, and where his memorial (Clowes Chapel, Hull) was then in course of erection.

Dr. Wood was born in April, 1829, at Ipstones, North Staffordshire. His father was a farmer, and his mother a farmer's daughter. When Joseph was twelve years old the family removed to Monyash, in Derbyshire. He attended school until he was seventeen, and made such progress that his masters asked to be relieved of him, as they could teach him nothing more. His inclination was towards a business career, and his friends encouraged him in that direction. But he had already given himself to God, and a holy compulsion resulted in the crucifixion of his worldly aims and ambitions. His gifts and graces marked him out for the ministry, and in 1851, when twenty-two years of age, he became the fourth minister on the Hull East Circuit, where the four years of his probation were spent. We have heard those who knew him then describe him as tall, but boyish looking, with a red face, and long limbs extending below his trousers, leaving a large, gap between the work of the tailor and that of the shoemaker. Townspeople at first thought him very rustic, but as they listened to him they discovered grit, go, and gumption in abundance.

The stations on which he laboured after Hull East were Hull West, Swinefleet, Doncaster, Driffield, Scarborough, Filey Branch, Louth, Grimsby, Hull II., Leeds III., Nottingham I., and Sheffield V. From 1875 to 1882 he was the agent of the Sunday School Union, and from 1889 to 1893 he was the Principal and Tutor of the Theological Institute. His active ministry covered forty-three years. In 1879 he was the Secretary of Conference, and three years later its President. In the latter year the Conference appointed a committee "to consider whether it is desirable to revise and enlarge the existing hymn-book or to prepare and publish another," and of that committee he was the Convener, for which post his knowledge and love of hymnology pre-eminently fitted him.

Such, in bald outline, is the story of Dr. Wood's official career, but who can read into it all it means of exacting duty and exhausting toil? Pastoral work, when sympathetically done, makes heavy demands on time and strength. The tasks of administration are not all easy, and some of them are very painful. Chapel debts, now happily disappearing, were heavy and oppressive until recent years. To maintain a front place as preacher and public speaker always involves close application to reading



and study. The passion for souls is a consuming fire. These things Dr. Wood well knew, and he joyfully met their demands.

Dr. Wood was a great man. In the matter of inches Nature dealt with him liberally, and in intellectual gifts she was not less lavish. He possessed a clear and melodious voice, which was very pleasant to hear. By dint of hard and persistent toil he acquired vast stores of learning, and he was especially well read in Methodist theology and history. In pulpit manner he was natural and dignified. In 1876 he became "M.A.," and in 1890 "D.D.," which honours he carried with modesty and grace.

Outside circuit work his greatest task was the organisation of our Sunday School Union. For seven years he devoted his time and strength to this work. His successors in that office found an organisation already in existence. Dr. Wood had it to create. He did not perfect it, 'tis true, nor is it yet perfect, but it is now recognised as one of the most vitally important sections of our organised church life. Our historian, the late Rev. H.B. Kendall, B.A., has recorded that "no department of our church life has yielded better results, and its history has been one of steady expansion and evergrowing usefulness." Catechumen classes and District Sunday School Committees were among its early fruits. Examinations for teachers and scholars, and Triennial Sunday School Conferences came later. And now our Young People's Department has under its direction the Society of Christian Endeavour, with its Reading Union, Holiday Tours, and its own Magazine. Temperance and Band of Hope work is under its control. Nor may we forget the Young People's Missionary Society, and the Bible and Prayer Union. Truly this is a great achievement.

Exigencies of space forbid more than a mere mention of Dr. Wood's share in the preparation of our Church Hymnal, which experts declare to be the best in existence. His four years in the role of Principal and Tutor of the Theological institution, now the Hartley College, were marked by unremitting toil and by loving devotion to the mental and moral interests of the students. Failing health in Mrs. Wood compelled him to seek relief from the responsibilities of the office a year earlier than was generally anticipated.

Dr. Wood was a man of moods. He could soar to great heights of exultation and eloquence, and he could occasionally descend into the abyss of depression. The peaks and valleys of his Derbyshire home had their counterpart in his life. He was very outspoken, but that was because he felt keenly, and compromise and half measures were not to his liking. He possessed an unflinching fund of humour, and loved a merry joke. In a letter he received from a circuit he had recently left occurred the statement that "the new broom (his successor) was sweeping clean." He replied thus: "But it's the old one that knows where the muck is." Speaking at a Synod public meeting, he referred to the advantages possessed by Anglicans as compared with ourselves. "They have," said he, "their ancient cathedrals and venerable churches, access to the great universities, untold material wealth, and high social prestige, but we'll preach them any day!" During a luncheon adjournment of the Hymnal Committee, the conversation turned on the question of remuneration for literary work. One member said he doubted whether any of them had written so much for nothing as he, and instantly there came from Dr. Wood the retort: "Perhaps nobody has written so much with nothing in it!" And all enjoyed the fun.

The last five years of his life were spent in Grimsby, where he had many friends. He passed away while the Conference of 1899 was in session within half a mile of his home. For his burial the Conference adjourned its sittings in order to accompany the mortal part of him to its last resting-place. Neither before nor since have the Primitive Methodists of Grimsby witnessed, and taken part in, such a large funeral assembly. The memory of such illustrious men should be kept green and fragrant in the days that are yet to be, and it is well that all our young people should know in what a godly and noble succession they stand, and how worthily their fathers kept the faith.

References

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