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L. H. MARSHALL'S MINISTRY IN LEICESTER 1930-1936

It is not often that a Free Church in Leicester has had a distinguished scholar as its pastor. One recalls the four-year ministry of William Carey at Harvey Lane Baptist Chapel at the end of the eighteenth century; Robert Hall, also at Harvey Lane; the Great Meeting House ministry of the Glasgow, Oxford and Harvard graduate, Dr R. F. Rattray, who became the first principal of Leicester University College; and the first attempts at preaching by Dr A. C. Underwood (Friar Lane Baptist Church), Dr Leslie Weatherhead (Saxby Street Methodist Church), and Professor H. H. Rowley (Melbourne Hall). But these are few in a significant urban community. It is, therefore, all the more notable that Laurance Henry Marshall, whose book, *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics* (1946), is still on the reading lists of many University Departments of Theology and of Baptist colleges, was the minister at Victoria Road Church in the city from 1930 to 1936.

Marshall's life and work have been lovingly, if briefly, depicted by his friend and fellow Baptist minister, Henry Bonser, in a memoir prefacing Marshall's posthumous book, *Rivals of the Christian Faith* (1954). Bonser covers well his colleague's birth and upbringing in Louth, Lincolnshire, his work as a pupil teacher, his call to the ministry which caused him to cancel his application to the Borough Road Training College, and his entry to Rawdon College, where in four years he completed arts and divinity degrees of the University of London. Bonser also gives fairly good coverage of his ministry at Prince's Gate, Liverpool (1911-1920), and Queen's Road, Coventry (1920-1925), and his call to the Chair of Practical Theology at McMaster University, then in Toronto (1925-1930). Subsequent to Marshall's ministry in Leicester, Bonser also comments upon the appointment as Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Rawdon College, his succession to the principalship there on the death of Dr Underwood in 1948, and his own death in office in 1953.

The pastorate at Victoria Road Church, however, is dismissed in two sentences, stating simply that he had responded to the call to return to England in 1930, and that, although it was a difficult period, Marshall 'declined to compromise with the spirit of the age and fully maintained the traditions of the church'.¹ The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to explore and explain more fully the contribution that Marshall made in a pastorate wedged between academic appointments.

Marshall's appointment at McMaster University had not been entirely happy. McMaster was a Baptist institution, so the governing body was mainly appointed by the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec, a Convention rent by squabbles between 'modernists' and a vociferous minority of fundamentalists. The latter group, headed by the Revd Dr T. T. Shields of Jarvis Street Baptist Church, Toronto, was opposed to Marshall from the beginning and, after a year in which

they had vilified him, attempted unsuccessfully to cancel his appointment at the Convention meetings in 1926. Marshall was able to make a valuable contribution to the teaching of New Testament studies,² but it was not surprising, therefore, that his thoughts began to turn to the possibility of returning to England.

During the summer of 1929 he crossed the Atlantic Ocean for a holiday, during which Marshall was engaged in some preaching appointments, one of which was at Victoria Road, Leicester, where he was well received. Reflecting upon the experience, he said that, 'I never contemplated any change when I came to England on a brief visit from Canada . . . and visiting Victoria Road Church, regarded myself purely as a holiday supply. But I left Leicester the following day with the strong feeling that I could and would abandon my work in Canada if any advance were made to me by the church'.³

Members at Victoria Road Church, on their part, had been most impressed with Marshall. A sub-committee appointed by the Church Council reported that:

From the time of his visit to us on the last Sunday in August his name has been referred to by many who heard him then and also when he visited us before he went to Canada. The Sub-Committee has, since then, been making enquiries from various sources as to previous pastorates and the College appointment, and letters were read from Dr Blomfield and reports on interviews with Mr Aubrey, Dr Townley Lord and others . . . From all the information thus obtained, they and we have every confidence in recommending him to the council, as in our opinion eminently fitted for the position.⁴

As a result Marshall was asked to allow his name to be submitted to the church as its future pastor and replied by cable that he was 'quite willing'.⁵

At the subsequent church meeting there was great delight. Miss Lindley said that 'on the occasion of Mr Marshall's visit she had been impressed by the "atmosphere" created by his presence'. Sydney Tyler, who had been Marshall's host, said that 'he had made a delightful impression in their home', and 'he had regarded him as a "great personality"'. He also described Mrs Marshall as 'a charming woman and knew she had a preference for residence in England'. Members at the meeting unanimously endorsed the Council's recommendation and Marshall was appointed.⁶

It is not difficult to see why Marshall was interested in the Victoria Road appointment. The church had been built up over three successful ministries since 1878. When John Greenhough, appointed in that year to a church which 'had been rent just previously by cruel divisions', retired after twenty-five years, the church magazine could record, 'By the mercy of God the Church had since been kept together in unity and peace. Diverse elements had been consolidated, its high reputation maintained and increased'.⁷ Peter Thomson's ministry from 1905 to 1914 was one of considerable achievement, though at first turbulent because of his committal to prison no less than eight times over refusal to pay the education rate levied under the terms of the Education Act 1902.⁸ Because of pressure on existing

facilities a special effort had been made to raise funds for Institute and Sunday School premises, which were built during 1910.⁹ When Thomson resigned, with much still to be done, a dismayed Council complained that 'our pastor's removal at this juncture will be a great calamity to Victoria Road and a distinct loss to the town and neighbourhood, where he has exerted a leading influence'.¹⁰ The ministry of Allan Ritchie (1917-1929), however, proved even happier. Ritchie was a man with 'delightful humour and genial ways' and possessed of a 'simple dignity', who 'had a passion for Christian unity'. At his farewell meeting, attended by Dr Cyril Bardsley, the Anglican Bishop of Leicester, who said that he was losing a personal friend, Ritchie responded that 'we shall have to break down those barriers if we are to put new life into the soul of England and hold up those sweeping waves of materialism that are breaking over the minds and souls of our people'.¹¹ Another attraction for Marshall was the apparently active membership of the church. 'Christian Endeavour', formed under Greenhough, encouraged its members to active work in the missions at Sanvey Gate and Harvey Lane. There was a very successful Young Men's Bible Class and a Mothers Meeting. The Institute built in 1910 was fully occupied on Sundays by the Sunday School. All these were 'energetically organised and run by church members'.¹²

Marshall was fortunate in having the support of the Church Council, members of which were aghast at a suggestion by a Miss Green at a church meeting that they might not have been loyal.¹³ He was particularly fortunate in having William Barton as church secretary. Barton, born and bred in Leicester, was a shoe-clicker then in his mid-fifties. His whole working life was spent with the footwear firm of Tomlinson & Riley, from which he was eventually to retire as a director. With only an elementary education at St John the Divine School, he was nevertheless intelligent and resourceful. He gained his early Baptist experience at York Street Baptist Mission, in the centre of Leicester, where his father had been secretary, but decided as a young man to attend 'that new place up the hill which is neither Church nor Chapel'.¹⁴ When Marshall complained about the 'high costs of removal by the Cunard line', it was Barton who secured from the Council the £200 needed to meet the cost.¹⁵ Barton continued to be his 'right hand man' throughout the six years of his ministry.

There can be no doubt that Victoria Road was congenial because it presented Marshall with a ready-made preaching centre. The church's position on a busy main road, on to which several tram and bus routes converged, encouraged the Church Council to feel that that was the main function of their place of worship. They were delighted to note, after Marshall had been there a year, an increase in attendance at services, 'which it was gratefully recognised to be due to the maintenance of a high level of the preaching'.¹⁶ One member of the Church Council, Harold Nickson, articulated the church's view that 'the main function of the ministry should be to build up Victoria Road as a preaching centre, and . . . whether Mr Marshall was known or not in regard to social work, pastoral work, or any other branches of

ministry, he was certainly known to be a preacher of outstanding eminence'.¹⁷

Marshall's preaching was eloquent, polished and challenging. Barton's daughter, Connie Bond, recalls that 'I saw and learnt enough of him to hold him in high esteem, and his sermons were *occasions!* . . . it took a remarkable man to fill Victoria Road and need chairs in the aisles. He was a prophet but no ranting orator'.¹⁸ Sermons were lengthy. People often commented that they were not out of church much before one o'clock, but they were so enthralled that they continued to attend. One sermon, preached on 22 May 1932 and subsequently published, took up eleven pages of print. It was on his perennial theme, the reasonableness of Christianity, with a text from Proverbs 30 - 'Give me neither poverty nor riches'. He related this to Aristotle's 'golden mean', stating that 'all the greatest social evils of our time are to be found in a concentrated form at the two extreme ends of the social scale'.¹⁹ This theme was to be developed further in *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics*.

It was mainly through Marshall's preaching that the church membership was increased in an age when Baptist membership nationally was in decline, to some extent the result of disillusionment caused by World War I and a period of severe depression, but also by 'the cultural shift to the cinema, the radio and more serious elementary schooling, hence away from a mass of church-organised leisure activities, the pleasure of listening to clerical oratory, and the mystique of the Sunday School'.²⁰ In England the Baptists declined from 408,029 in 1916 to 396,531 in 1936.²¹ In Leicestershire there was a decline from a membership of 10,140 in 1911 to 9,836 in 1936.²² The editor of the *East Midlands Baptist Association Year Book* for 1937-8 commented on a decline of 98 from the previous year's total that it was 'an improvement upon the previous year, since it shows a slower rate of decline . . . Would that some strong voice were raised to create alarm concerning the constant Decline of the Church, so far as it pertains to membership'.²³ Yet Victoria Road, which had 335 members in 1911, had 502 members in 1936, despite a severe 'pruning' of the roll in 1933, at Marshall's insistence, that had removed eighty names.²⁴

Marshall was inducted into the pastorate at Victoria Road by the Revd W. E. Blomfield BA DD, a former Principal of Rawdon College, who referred to the new minister as 'a keen and conscientious scholar, whose watchword from his earliest college years has been "thorough"'.²⁵ It might perhaps have been understandable if Marshall had confined himself to preaching but that thoroughness soon began to be applied in other fields too. During the early part of 1931 he delivered a series of lectures on Wednesday evenings on the 'Life and Character of St Paul'. He improved the distribution of the elements at the communion services by insisting on the provision of small individual metal plates for the bread, which were placed over the wine cups, believing that by so doing the services 'could be conducted in a quieter and more reverent atmosphere'.²⁶ He had a small committee of the Council to 'consider the question of musical services with him and as a start to try the

Lord's Prayer for a month sung or said and try to get our people to take a more active part in the litanies in use'.²⁷ There was even some consideration of the possibility of basing services on Tait Patterson's *Come and Worship* but, on observing its use in a church in Birmingham, Marshall had 'found the responses of the Congregation were not very marked',²⁸ and the matter was dropped. Marshall introduced social gatherings after the evening services, emphasizing that they afforded him the opportunity of getting in touch with the younger members of the evening congregation.²⁹

When Marshall had been at Victoria Road for five years he received a unanimous invitation from the Senate and Board of Governors of McMaster University to resume his work there. It was an offer that appealed. It was all the more attractive because, as he expressed to the Church Council, 'he was disappointed with the result of his five years' work, and he felt an inadequate response had been made to his efforts. The position in regard to the young people distressed him. He felt very much the lack of leaders . . . The losses we had sustained by death were not being made good. Viewing the prospects as a whole, he felt anything but hopeful. Indeed, it seemed to him, rather than progress, Victoria Road would decline, and frankly he did not want to be associated with failure'.³⁰

The Council regretted Marshall's feelings, but felt that the problems were part of the larger problem confronting the whole religious life of the country. In this they were partially correct. The Sunday School, which had had 381 pupils and 54 teachers in 1911, had only 60 pupils and 10 teachers in 1936.³¹ Between these years World War I had decimated the members of the Revd Peter Thomson's 'hugely successful Sunday afternoon Men's Meeting . . . so that it dwindled and died'.³² A generation of potential leaders lay under the poppy fields of Flanders, demoralizing many of those who had returned.

What particularly concerned Marshall, however, was that the majority of church members were little more than listeners to sermons. The problem manifested itself in several ways. In 1934 at a meeting of the church it was noted that 'out of the total membership of the Church only 81 exercised their right to nominate [for election to Council]'.³³ Marshall was sufficiently annoyed to make a point of giving a short address on 'church membership' at the next meeting of the church.³⁴ In appealing for more Sunday School teachers he was keen to enlarge the Sunday School, but there is no evidence that that took place.³⁵ Worst of all, even though congregations were large, the actual participation in the services was pathetic. Efforts to chant the Lord's Prayer had to be discontinued, and there was agreement that it should be said instead.³⁶ During 1932 there was some discussion about music in the services, and 'it was felt it would be most helpful if the congregation could be induced to join more in the singing of the hymns'. A deputation met with the organist and choirmaster, Ben Burrows DMus FRCO, a distinguished musician but a shy man, and found him amenable to suggestion and willing to try anything. We are not told what action was taken but 'it was generally felt that [following

innovations on the previous Sunday] there had been an improvement in the quality of the singing'.³⁷ It was, however, a recurring problem that was not helped by the physical circumstances within the building. Extensive galleries in effect divided the nave into two separate sound chambers, one above the other. The organ was housed in an enclosed chamber with only a small opening in the chancel wall as an outlet for the sound. The console itself was placed in the chancel, so that the organist was unaware of the congregation.³⁸

One suspects that Marshall's mid-week lectures were not entirely successful. After his series on St Paul, he planned to give a series on 'The Holy Scriptures in the light of modern knowledge' at fortnightly intervals during the autumn of 1932.³⁹ By the autumn of 1934 he had decided not to give a course of lectures, though he had other ideas for Wednesday evenings.⁴⁰ Even a fairly sophisticated congregation like Victoria Road's could not compare with divinity students at McMaster University.

Although Marshall's preaching attracted many new members to Victoria Road, the weekly collections did not keep pace with the influx. Each year during his ministry the offerings were reduced. The envelope scheme brought in £919 in 1932; by 1936 it was down to £818. The loose plate collections amounted to £523 in 1932; by 1936 they were down to £374. The income and expenditure accounts showed a surplus of £123 in 1933; by 1936 there was a deficit of £310. From 1934 there was a deficit in each year during the rest of the 1930s. It was only through letting rooms in the Institute building that the treasurer was able to make ends meet.⁴¹

The Bureau of Statistics of the League of Nations described Leicester in 1936 as 'the second most prosperous city in Europe' in terms of household income. Of fourteen new hosiery factories opened in Britain in 1933, eight were in Leicester. In many homes both husband and wife were fully employed.⁴² Even so, there were seldom less than 10,000 people unemployed in Leicester throughout this period, but few of the unemployed were Victoria Road members,⁴³ though there was a deficit in the Communion Fund of nearly ten pounds in 1936.⁴⁴

One is forced to conclude that the lowered income of the church stemmed from the death of wealthy givers and their replacement by less committed or less wealthy givers. Sydney Tyler, chairman of the Finance Committee at the time of Marshall's resignation, stated that 'in the future it would be increasingly necessary for dependance [*sic*] to be made on the smaller contributions of the many rather than upon the very liberal giving of a few individuals'.⁴⁵

While Marshall was fortunate in the stable secretaryship of William Barton, the church treasurership was subject to more change. During the interregnum following Ritchie's departure, the chair at church meetings had been taken by the then treasurer, H. W. Wilshere. By mid-1931, however, he was terminally ill, and was hastily succeeded by Arthur Ernest Hardy, a director of the footwear firm of Freeman, Hardy & Willis, a Sunday School teacher and already treasurer of the

Institute.⁴⁶ Hardy looked after the finances very capably until he resigned precipitately from both treasurership of the church and membership of the Council in early 1936, apparently for personal reasons.⁴⁷ Despite a friendship of more than forty years, Barton was unable to persuade him either to retract or to accept honorary life membership of the Council.⁴⁸ This left the treasurership in the hands of a three-man committee chaired by Sydney Tyler.⁴⁹

The Institute was a problem too. Founded to provide educational and recreational facilities for people with an attachment to the church, it was becoming increasingly secularized. Five years before Marshall's arrival it was commented that, in the men's section, there was even a 'decline in the number of [church] members connected with several of the organizations'.⁵⁰ A decade later the situation had become so serious that the Council ordered the closure of the Institute for a three-month period in order to effect a re-organization.⁵¹ Subsequently there was a greater insistence on church connections, it being stated that 'no-one unless a member of the Church or a registered member of one of its organisations should be eligible as a member of the Institute'.⁵² Unfortunately this accelerated the gradual drift away from use of the Institute facilities by more secularized young people.

Victoria Road Church had always supported missions in the poorer areas of Leicester, and members were proud of their support of the Harvey Lane Mission. In 1901 the area around Harvey Lane Baptist Chapel was becoming depopulated, and most of the members decided to found the Robert Hall Memorial Church in the developing Narborough Road area. All efforts to close down Harvey Lane failed, however, and a rump remained. Victoria Road, at the request of the Leicester Baptist Association, assumed responsibility in 1920, and Harvey Lane became a branch of the larger church. Although the old chapel was destroyed by fire in the following year, a Memorial Hall was built to replace it. From 1927 to 1930 the Reverend E. H. Dight was minister-in-charge. He was succeeded by Mr J. W. Morton, who became the honorary superintendent, assisted by a deaconess, Sister Hilda. Both resigned in 1932, in view of the city's plans to demolish two hundred houses in the immediate area; it was obvious that Harvey Lane was no longer viable, and the building was declared redundant.⁵³ It was inevitable, yet it must have seemed to Marshall that the church around him was in process of collapse.

For most of his time in Leicester Marshall chafed at the fact that so many members of the Council were of an older generation and some were unable at times to attend meetings. At the end of 1934 his frustrations rose to the surface: he 'felt the time had arrived when certain present members of the Council who had rendered faithful service, but had been prevented from attending the meetings for some time, should be elected as Life Members. This would create vacancies and give the church the opportunity of electing new members, who would render good service'.⁵⁴ His suggestions seem not to have been well-received, and a few months later he found himself expressing 'pleasure on the re-election of the old members of

the Council'. He was, however, genuinely delighted to welcome the election of Fred Chattell, 'who had done so much good work for the Scouts'.⁵⁵

Marshall found it difficult to focus the attention of these Council members of advanced age on the future. For instance, he recommended allowing card games and dancing on the Institute premises, especially for tennis club and choir socials, but the answer was negative on several occasions.⁵⁶ Not until 1935 was a resolution passed to the effect that 'at social evenings arranged under the auspices of the Institute dancing may be an item on the programme'. No such permission was granted for card games.⁵⁷

Marshall's proffered resignation from his pastorate was not accepted. There was much urging of him to remain. Subsequently, there was a church meeting, the outstanding feature of which 'was a highly spirited atmosphere; so perfectly unanimous was the feeling that a formal resolution was regarded as a superfluity, and the meeting closed with prayer by the Secretary [and they] dispersed hoping that their minister would reconsider'.⁵⁸ Marshall spent the whole month in 'a time of deep and intense conflict', and then replied that 'he had been greatly impressed by the revealing of a loyalty and a community of desire that he should remain, so much so that at long last he had decided that he would do so'.⁵⁹

The problems, however, remained and it was not long before another invitation came to Marshall, to become Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Rawdon College. This time there was no hesitation. He announced his intention of accepting the post at a meeting of the Council in June 1936, stressing that the decision was irrevocable, and stating that 'it was a strangely ironical thing that after he had obtained a . . . much happier state of affairs he should so soon be leaving'.⁶⁰ At a subsequent church meeting he 'expressed his appreciation for all that the church had meant to him during the six years of his ministry', and was assured in return that 'the Church will remember for long the years filled with deeply spiritual teaching and ministry and is very conscious that even in the separation there will yet remain a unity of the spirit . . . even the sure hope that not infrequently, in the corporate worship of the Church, we shall still be one'.⁶¹

For many years after Marshall's departure, his ministry at Victoria Road Church was looked upon as a 'golden age' in the life of the church. Never again was the church filled to capacity for Sunday services. It continued to decline until 1983, when the building was sold and the remainder of the congregation joined with members of the Charles Street Baptist Church to form a new United Baptist Church. Marshall himself was able at Rawdon College to fulfil his academic abilities, eventually completing a PhD degree at the University of London, and writing the books for which he is still remembered among scholars and ministers in training.

NOTES

1 L. H. Marshall, *Rivals of the Christian Faith*, 1954, p.6. 2 *ibid.* pp.10-13. See also, for further information, Charles M. Johnston, *McMaster*

- University: The Toronto Years*, Toronto 1976, pp.182f. Shields took up the fight on the strength of two letters from W. M. Robertson of Liverpool, who argued that Marshall was a dangerous modernist, because he had been 'trained in all the arts of the Germans' and had been minister of an open membership church. In fact, Marshall, though not a fundamentalist, was unquestionably orthodox in his Christian beliefs.
- 3 *Leicester Mail*, 2 October 1930. Although Victoria Road Church (VRC) was a Baptist institution in its theology, government, ministry, and membership of the Baptist Union, it was never referred to as such by name. See G. T. Rimmington, 'Victoria Road Church, Leicester: A Victorian Experiment in Ecumenicity', to be published in *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 1997. The style 'Church Council' was adopted in 1910 as a further attempt to underline the church's ecumenical character; other Baptist churches continued to have 'diaconates'.
 - 4 Leicestershire Record Office (hereafter LRO) N/B/179/65 (VRC Council Minutes), 11 November 1929.
 - 5 *ibid.*, 1 December 1929.
 - 6 LRO N/B/179/61 (VRC Minutes), 4 December 1929.
 - 7 Cutting from Church Magazine in LRO N/B/179/59.
 - 8 The education rate gave financial support to church schools, much to the annoyance of some Nonconformists. See G. T. Rimmington, 'Education, Politics and Society in Leicester 1833-1940', PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 1975, chapter 7. Church records make little mention of Thomson's committals to prison, but he is singled out for mention in Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1990*, 3rd edition, 1991, pp.123f.
 - 9 *Victoria Road Church History and Manual*, 1946, p.15.
 - 10 LRO N/B/179/64, 7 June 1914.
 - 11 *Leicester Mail*, 7 May 1929.
 - 12 Mrs C. I. Bond, *in lit.*
 - 13 LRO N/B/179/61, 2 October 1935.
 - 14 H. E. Barton, *in lit.*
 - 15 LRO N/B/179/65, 17 March 1930, 5 May 1930, 23 June 1930.
 - 16 *ibid.*, 31 August 1931.
 - 17 Mrs C. I. Bond, *in lit.*
 - 18 W. F. Stead (ed.), *Sermons of the Year 1932*, 1933, pp.297-307.
 - 19 LRO N/B/179/66, 23 September 1935.
 - 20 Hastings, *op.cit.*, p.268.
 - 21 *ibid.*, p.265.
 - 22 Figures taken from *East Midlands Baptist Association Year Books 1912 and 1936-7*.
 - 23 *EMBA Year Book*, 1936-7, p.21.
 - 24 LRO N/B/179/61, 30 May 1933, 27 June 1933.
 - 25 *Leicester Mail*, 2 October 1930.
 - 26 LRO N/B/179/65, 1 December 1930.
 - 27 *ibid.*, 26 January 1931.
 - 28 *ibid.*
 - 29 *ibid.*, 26 September 1932.
 - 30 *ibid.*, 15 July 1935.
 - 31 *EMBA Year Books*, 1912 and 1936-7.
 - 32 Mrs C. I. Bond, *in lit.*
 - 33 LRO N/B/179/61, 28 March 1934.
 - 34 *ibid.*, 11 April 1934.
 - 35 *ibid.*, 30 September 1931.
 - 36 LRO N/B/179/65, 2 March 1931.