

## John Clifford.

IN the year 1858, at the age of twenty-two, John Clifford became Minister of the Baptist Church worshipping in the Tabernacle in Praed Street, Paddington. The building had been erected in 1816 on a leasehold tenure. The church numbered a little over sixty. The young minister at once made his mark and the church grew rapidly. From the first it was institutional in character—probably, it has been said, the first in London. The very simple discovery was made that there are seven days in the week, and that the worship on Sunday can be supplemented by the use of the church premises on the other days. Coming to London in the middle of the last century from a church life which must have been mainly concerned with Sunday services and Sunday Schools, John Clifford recognized that there was work which, if not according to a strict interpretation spiritual, was yet essentially religious, and should not be ignored if life was to be lived at its fullest and its best, both in this world and as a preparation for the next. He simply ignored the distinction so markedly drawn between the sacred and the secular.

In 1877 Westbourne Park Chapel was opened and a new church begun, which was indeed but a continuation and enlargement of the old, for until the lease of the Praed Street premises expired the two churches were regarded as one.

In 1915 the active ministry closed, but there were eight years—an Indian summer—before, amid his brethren of the Baptist Union, he passed peacefully away in the Council Chamber of the Baptist Church House. The full story is told in Marchant's *Life*. The task of the present writer is to give his impressions of the man he knew from about 1880 until the close, more than forty years later.

A friend recently remarked that the first anniversary sermon, preached in 1859, might have been preached ten years ago. A glance at the sermon confirms this judgment. It is wonderfully mature for a young man of twenty-three. Here are a few sentences:—

“This work of endeavouring to save men is one requiring continuous and considerable personal preparation for its wise and efficient execution. The mere existence of the desire to spread Christianity, however ardently it may burn, is not enough.

There must be a daily acquisition of power over our hearts. The desire to save souls must show itself first in personal discipline, then in training others, and then in helping the needy. They who are kings at home in their own hearts have the best title to rule their brethren."

These few sentences, and more could be quoted to the same effect, may give the impression that they were addressed to a clerical meeting. That they were addressed to a church marks the unclerical character of the preacher towards the ministerial office. The pulpit and the pew are one in office. They must not be severed. The personal religion demanded of the man in the pulpit is equally demanded of the man in the pew. Gifts vary but the demand remains constant.

Still, we are dealing with an exceptional man of outstanding qualities. In the first place, what were the preaching characteristics? Action is an adjunct of oratory, in spite of Dr. Johnson's dictum that "action can have no effect on reasonable minds." There have, however, been great preachers, such as Newman, Pusey and Spurgeon, who spoke with little action or none. John Clifford did not belong to this group. Any number of instances for and against could be cited. There is the story of the Scotch unbeliever who regularly attended divine service and gave as his reason, "I like to see and hear a man earnest once a week about anything." John Morley, who, in religious matters, was a sceptic, confessed his liking for unction. If this quality of earnestness is, as undoubtedly it is, of supreme importance, the question of action or no action is of secondary consideration. After all the style is the man. In John Clifford's style action played an important part. He preached with his body as well as with his head. The former was as active as the latter. The sermon came visibly from the whole man. The internal fires glowed through the whole frame. The spirit spoke not through the mouth only, but in the glance of the eye, the poise of the head, the gesture of hand and arm. Every action displayed exuberant vitality.

One writer of an obituary notice at the time of John Clifford's passing, himself a great preacher with a strange eventful history, denied that his subject was a great preacher. It is doubtful whether practisers of a great art are themselves good critics of it. The present writer has had a large experience of his subject's preaching, spread over many years, and does not hesitate to pit his judgment against that quoted. He who can appeal from the platform (for Westbourne Park has no pulpit and that at Praed Street was likened to an egg-cup) for two generations to countless numbers of all sorts and conditions of people, capture their interest and permanently influence their

lives, so that they look back to his preaching as turning events in their religious history, cannot be described as otherwise than great. It is too readily forgotten that sermons vary as much as the pictures in a gallery. Their character more than that of any other public utterance is determined by that of the preacher. Their effect must be immediate or they are almost null. The volumes of readable sermons can be numbered on the fingers. The quality of a sermon loses its magnetism in print. Permanent literature must have a creative power. The preacher is an interpreter and not a creator. His lessons are set. He has to explain them. His creations are the lives enriched and ennobled by his urge and passion. The effect of a sermon derives from the service of which it is a part. The preacher creates an atmosphere by his personality. John Clifford always came from the vestry to the platform with the aspect of a man consumed with an urgent purpose. There was always, until the last few years when sight failed, a sheaf of notes (frequently newspaper cuttings) ready for use when the moment came. It is not generally known that he had a system of shorthand the use of which was not obvious to those who listened. We are told that Dr. Chalmers was similarly furnished. John Clifford exulted, as he was entitled, in preaching strength. Like John Wesley it had a physically bracing effect. He disliked intensely preaching to empty pews; "Dead wood," he called them. Had he failed in getting congregations, he would have devoted his gifts to some other line of life. It is a commonplace that the response of an audience is part of the speaker's inspiration. He possessed what has been described as "the prescience of the eve." He always knew the time of day and those who heard felt that he knew it. The currents of the time did not pass him unheeded. One Sunday evening he commenced his sermon by repeating a fragment of a conversation he had overheard while walking to the chapel. Some boys were discussing where they should go. One suggested such and such a church. "No!" said one of the boys, "he never knows what he is driving at." The subject of the sermon was often based on subjects present in men's minds by the occurrences of the week, the passing of some one notable in public life, political, literary, scientific or religious. They were all channels through which divine grace and character might be mediated, for teaching, for exhortation. The topic of the moment is the preacher's opportunity.

Before the commencement of his London career John Clifford had determined to acquire university training. He became an external student of the University of London and gained degrees in Arts, Science and Law. He does not appear to have considered a degree in divinity, and in the technical

sense of the word he was not a theologian. Perhaps this omission was the point of the adverse criticism quoted above. In the specialized meaning of the word there is little theology in his sermons. The practical side of preaching appealed to him more than the speculative. He had a thorough grasp of the Bible as a whole and knew enough of speculative theology to recognize where his strength lay. He was generous to modern Biblical scholarship and accepted generally its results, but his business was the salvation of souls. To this end he strenuously trained all his preaching power. Like all men who achieve results he concentrated terribly. Religion was no casual affair but the real business of life. Perhaps of his university work that for the science degree influenced him most. It was pertinent to the time in which he was most active. Darwin, Huxley and others were dominant factors in those days, and were regarded as undermining the fabric of religious faith. There are facts and facts. John Clifford found his in God and Christ, and clung to them as fundamental and permanent. But he did not quarrel with these scientific protagonists. He utilized their ideas and theories for his purposes as he did all that occupied the mind of man in the current affairs of the day, and spent no time over the controversy between science and religion. He was in no danger of collision with theories and speculation, nor with the sure results of patient investigation, for his temper was essentially undogmatic. You were urged to think for yourself and not blindly to accept any teaching. He had studied the wooing note and the value of stimulating heart and mind by suggestion. He must have imbibed early and incorporated fully the principles (too long to quote here) laid down for all time by Robertson of Brighton as the basis of his teaching. He proclaimed vehemently the truth he held but did not want tacit acceptance. His mind was unclerical. Each listener must use his brains and work out the problem for himself, not only theoretically but practically. "Grasp my principles, not my rules," said Robertson. Ideas must be worked out in life. "Every attempt in a sermon," says Coleridge, "to cause emotion except as the consequence of an impression made on the reason or the understanding or the will I hold to be fanatical." John Clifford's preaching conformed to this standard. One constantly heard from his lips—"Do you see my point? Have you got it? Work it out for yourself." A lady who came to Westbourne Park from a distant part of London said that she felt tired after the sermon as she had been compelled to listen to every word. There was no padding.

During a social hour at one of the Baptist Union Assemblies three ministers were overheard talking "shop," as ministers

will. One of them said that his difficulty with sermons was that of finding subjects. One of the other two offered to make good the deficiency. Whereupon the man in want took out his notebook and we will hope returned to his church better equipped. A similar difficulty could never have confronted John Clifford. He was no recluse. The throbbing pulsating world around, with its many problems, never ceased to afford topics to which eternal truth could be related. No one was ever more thoroughly alive to all the movements of the time. And this carried him from the platform in his own chapel to the public platform outside. Westbourne Park has always been hospitable to men and women of all varieties of thought, and the announcement that its minister was to speak on some public question outside was certain to attract an audience. One characteristic of his public utterances was the speed with which he got up steam. He went straight to the heart of the subject and lost no time over preliminaries. From this vantage ground he spoke, not merely to those of his own denomination, but to thousands outside. He never played with a subject. You always knew where to find him. His interest in the public questions of the day was intense. He was a Free Churchman and therefore on the advanced side in politics. In later years he drew no distinction between Liberal and Labour. A candidate's personal character determined his choice. "I love Dr. Clifford," said someone, "but I hate his politics." This was to put the matter strongly, but the antipathy to his opinions melted on personal acquaintance. He himself once sat on a committee dealing with a public matter and found himself next to a well-known Member of Parliament, who was and still is a prominent Anglo-Catholic. "I found him," said Clifford, "a charming fellow." Differences, whether religious or political, never soured his temper or blinded him to the good qualities of his opponents. The one great matter on which he showed the sharpest temper was the growth of clericalism. How far he saw this as part of the historical process it is now impossible to say. In this matter he was setting himself against a tide flowing strongly the way he could not go. The claims of Rome, the signs of reaction in the Anglican Church, even some in his own denomination, were things to be fought with all one's vigour. Accordingly he had not much sympathy with proposals for church union. His career coincided with the time when the centrifugal forces in the churches had spent their strength after some three hundred years of violent activity. He saw the centripetal forces, now dominant, beginning to assert themselves, and considering all the factors he was dubious of the value of reunion. He was no sacerdotalist, and to Anglo-Catholicism he was distinctly antipathetic. He was

unable to see the possibility of harmonising ideals and methods of a Catholic character with the principles of nonconformity. For him, certain characteristics of the Middle Ages had no attraction. He went straight back to the New Testament for what he held to be first principles. However natural the development of the Catholic Church on the lines of Imperial Rome, it had lost in the process, as he saw it, the simplicity of the early church and with the simplicity its spirit. He agreed with the dictum of John Robinson of Leyden—"We are not one over another, but one with another." He spoke of himself as "one of your teachers," and those who worked with him knew that he regarded himself as merely *primus inter pares*.

A few more personal touches will not be out of place. He was admirable as the chairman of a committee, certainly imperious, and if bearing fools, patient only up to a point which however had to be reached quickly. A former member of the deacons' court writes of his experience "when after we had spent much time floundering about a subject the Doctor would with a few cogent phrases reduce the whole of our confused observations to clarity, and lay before us in a way that not even a fool could mistake the various alternatives at our disposal. I have never met his equal for that."

At a London Baptist Association meeting at Ealing he came armed with a Blue Book just issued, and made that the subject of his address. At a church meeting at Westbourne Park it was Froude's *Erasmus*, then just published, that furnished the topic. He was always and on principle up to date.

To those who became church members his question was, "And what work are you proposing to take up?"

Unlike Dr. Chalmers he had plenty of small talk and at a church meeting spoke to as many as possible and never forgot to ask for the absent, for whom his memory was remarkable.

"One of the many advantages of coming to London," wrote Dr. Charles Brown recently, "was a frequent opportunity of meeting Doctor Clifford. There was a fraternal of ministers and Clifford rarely missed its monthly meetings. It was there one learned how approachable he was, how unconscious of his greatness, how large and simple-hearted, and how fervent in spirit, and how overflowing in mirth and gaiety."

He was a great reader of poetry, especially the Victorian, and he devoured biographies. He was great at cuttings from newspapers. Were they not good ammunition for controversy? Returning from a holiday he would from the platform read to the chapel-keeper (or Mrs. Clifford), who was stationed at the other end of the building, so as to test whether his voice had suffered from disuse. It is well known that every building has

its own acoustic properties. Clifford found that his voice carried better at Westbourne Park if directed to the third column to the right as he faced the congregation. He was an excellent listener, like Dale of Birmingham, really anxious to know what other people had to say. At public meetings he could generally be seen taking notes, well aware that even from the poorest minds, and the less able of speakers, something can be gleaned.

At a church meeting a member who did not usually speak foolishly fell below his level. When the meeting was over and those present were dispersing, a few gathered round the Doctor to comment on the speech. "Well, if you were doubtful of the wisdom, why didn't you get up and prevent it?"

Perhaps the contemporary minister with whom he had most affinity was Dale of Birmingham. He regarded him as the "ideal chief of modern nonconformity." Without ignoring the differences, and they were obvious, the points of contact were significant. Both stressed the claims of the intellect and the necessity for strenuous thought. "Spiritual truth in the intellect and spiritual life in the heart." Neither flinched from taking a line of his own. Of Dale it was said that he "drives in his nails so hard that he splits the wood." There was the same driving force in the other. Dale thought that all church members should be active in service. This was one of Clifford's strongest points. Dale was hostile to the notion that the function of the church was confined to the diffusion of religious knowledge and the cultivation of religious emotion. The church must be sympathetic to, and curious about, the forces surging outside. Enough has already been said to indicate his contemporary's attitude in this matter. Of Dale it has been said that it was "his habit to make the acquaintance of those from whom he differed." Clifford had the same habit. Like Dale he believed that a "purely destructive criticism does more harm than good." In 1887 Dale wrote, "I have no confidence in the possibility of any scheme for drawing us all into the Establishment." Clifford's view was precisely the same. Dale did not approve of the dominion of the Church over the State. Similarly Clifford held that the Church had to deal with men individually rather than in the mass. Finally Dale regarded the ministry as a vocation and not a profession. "It is one of the disservices inflicted on Christianity," says Clifford, "that the ministry has been converted into a profession, and thereby robbed of much of its legitimate influence upon the life and thought of the world." Both recognized the value of the occasional occupancy of the pulpit by those engaged in other walks of life and therefore with other experiences.

The outstanding quality in Clifford's make-up was will-

power. He made himself what he was. There were many more gifted than he but they lacked the enabling quality. Next to will-power was tenacity. He held on. Further, energy was a strong characteristic. Those not members of his church or denomination, who saw him only on the platform, knew but half the man. Of course he was a fighter. His was an age of liberation and he was cut out for a leader. Will, tenacity, energy—these are great elements of character and to these must be added humility of spirit. Those nearest in association knew this, as outsiders may not have done. He was great on the public platform. He was greater still as a church pastor, and still greater as a wise counsellor to those in doubt or trouble. And those who joined in prayer led by him learnt something of the inner heart of the man.

The passing years shroud in oblivion most of those from whose characters flow formative influences in the lives of those they touch. The Muse of History omits more than she records. In a few years all who knew John Clifford will have vanished from the scene. His name may become the shadow of a shade. But the impress of his character on those who came under his spell will be a continuing and fertilizing stream of tendency, effort and achievement.

W. S. STROUD.

*Freedom in Jamaica*, by Ernest A. Payne, B.A., B.D., B.Litt.  
(Carey Press, 1s. 6d. net.)

The sub-title is "Some Chapters in the Story of the Baptist Missionary Society," and the chapters are thrilling. No one can read of Knibb and Burchell and their colleagues without being deeply stirred. By their passionate advocacy of the slaves and their unfaltering exposure of slavery, they did much to arouse the Christian Church and influence national policy. Mr. Payne describes the struggle for emancipation as "a dramatic one, full of excitement and gallantry, and at times of tragedy." He has studied the available material with care, and with true perspective has woven much of historical value into his pages. The book is opportunely issued on the threshold of the Centenary of Emancipation, and should prove of real service, especially to those concerned with Missionary Study Circles and Young People's organisations.