

# Pablo Besson of Argentina.

A CHALLENGING PERSONALITY AND A DISTURBING INFLUENCE.

PABLO BESSON passes from audacious evangelical activity into passive history as the Baptist pioneer and hero of Argentina, a militant protagonist of aggressive evangelicalism and a valiant champion of religious liberty. He was born in Lods, Switzerland, on April 4th, 1848, into an atmosphere of ecclesiastical ferment caused chiefly by the leaven of Vinet's expositions of the principle of liberty of conscience. The key to the whole of Besson's career might be summed up in Vinet's teaching that "liberty is less a right than a duty"; and that he had to do "more than *claim* religious liberty, namely to *make use* of it."

The formative grace of God can be traced in his early preparation for the special work to which he was destined in Argentina. His father was an able, upright minister of the National Church of Switzerland, a stern disciplinarian who initiated his son into the meaning of the law and the consequences of disobedience. His godly mother, who was of Waldensian origin, unconsciously put iron into the blood and will of her son as she told of the sufferings and heroism of their noble ancestors. When Besson was flushed with the pride of success as a student, the recipient of honours and prizes, and of praises from parents and friends, it was a Christian in humble circumstances who quietly and affectionately revealed to him his need of something beyond himself. He told the story in later years. "I was proud of myself. I was relying on self-effort. I had not realised that I was a sinner who needed the grace of God and salvation through Christ. Our family servant told me of my self-righteousness and self-sufficiency, and that I had an inherited but not an experimental religion. She prayed with me and for me." The lad Besson was challenged and disturbed; God used that simple message to introduce him to a new experience and to give him a new but life-long viewpoint, though it was only afterwards under the tuition of Luthardt in the University of Leipsic that he gained a clear intellectual grasp of the stupendous truth of justification by faith. Under Godet in Neuchatel he assimilated the principle of liberty of conscience, which was destined so deeply to affect his career. Under Secretan his keen philosophical mind was developed, and Bovet

laid the foundations of his knowledge of Hebrew and its concomitants. In the Leipzig University Delitzsch and Tischendorf initiated him into the textual criticism of the Bible, and so prepared him to produce a Spanish version of the New Testament which will be an abiding contribution to evangelical scholarship in that language.

"By the grace of God," as he himself would insist, from the spiritual, moral and intellectual influences, there emerged a young man of challenging personality and disturbing activity. He entered the lists for "the great fight," and until body and mind were worn out he was consistently on the war-path. Error, injustice, wrong and sin received no diplomatic smiles or purring acquiescence from him. Criticism and controversy, tempered by fairness and justice, became second nature to him.

When twenty-two years of age he was ordained and then elected by communal vote to the pastorate of the National Church at Liniers. He has told us that it was very pleasing to the flesh to be a sort of lord of the parish. Once more he had to challenge himself and was so disturbed that he challenged and disturbed the National Church authorities, by resigning his charge because of the conviction that a State Church is incompatible with the true liberty of conscience. Thus it came about that he was one who, with Professor Godet and others, formed the Free Church of Neuchatel. In 1873 he became Pastor of a Presbyterian church in Lyons, France; and there challenged and disturbed the municipal authorities who had prohibited the sale of Bibles and the distribution of evangelical literature. He engaged in the forbidden colportage work and distributed tracts—and for so doing was imprisoned and fined. He was possessed of an aggressive missionary spirit, and refused to subject Christ's commission to a municipal prohibition.

Once more he had to challenge himself and then disturbed the Presbyterians of France and especially his friend the Rev. Leopold Monod, and his beloved and revered professor, Dr. F. Godet, by accepting baptism at the hands of the Rev. J. B. Cretin. He had become convinced that infant baptism is incompatible with liberty of conscience, and that the baptism of believers is the only baptism known to the New Testament. After working for some six years in the north of France under the auspices of the American Baptist Missionary Society, with Pastor Vincent as a colleague and Denain as his centre, he had to challenge himself again. Some members of one of his churches had emigrated to Argentina. Mathieu Floris wrote pathetic letters to his former pastor pleading with him to send someone out as teacher. Once more Besson obeyed his conscience and used his liberty by resigning from the Mission and from his

church. Without stipulating for salary or even the refund of his passage-money, he responded to the call from Argentina.

On his settlement in 1881 at Esperanza in the Province of Santa Fe, he discovered that those stalwart Baptist pioneers to whom he had come as their minister were suffering under serious civil disabilities. He first of all challenged and disturbed the local Roman Catholic clergy and the municipal authorities, then the provincial, and finally the national ecclesiastical and Governmental power.

Baptismal certificates, issued by the Roman Catholic Church for all Roman Catholics, by the Anglicans for the English, by the Presbyterians for the Scotch, by the Lutherans for the Danish and Germans, by the Methodist Episcopal Church (with State authority, if you please, as though it were the established church of the United States!) for North Americans, were the only legally valid birth certificates. The unchristened children of those hardy Baptists had no legal rights because they could produce no baptismal certificates. "The only proof of the birth of the children of Baptists is their existence," was the challenging assertion of the irate Besson, as he pressed the Government for the establishment of the civil registry of births.

He also found that in those districts there were only Roman Catholic cemeteries. Protestants were denied permission to bury their dead in these, and the ban was particularly strict as regards the burial of unchristened children. The fire of righteous indignation was set ablaze in Besson's inflammable soul after the death of Luisa Engler, whose father was one of the first he had baptised. It had already been stirred when the body of a Swiss Protestant was removed from the cemetery by order of the Roman Catholic priest and re-buried outside the wall. Others had to be buried in the street or the garden. A municipal decree now prohibited this. When Luisa died, Besson went to the mayor for a permit to have her buried in the cemetery, but was told to apply to the priest. This he refused to do, for he had gone before and been insulted. Then he disturbed the mayor by declaring that if he had the right to frame by-laws regarding the burial of the dead, it was his clear duty to grant permission to enter the cemetery.

Luisa was buried in her father's garden. With three of her brothers I was visiting her grave under the shade of a laurel tree in March, 1932. That grave will be historic. The eldest brother told me that he was a boy at the time, but he remembers Besson's impressive address and the arrival of the police to arrest his father. Besson mounted his horse and rode the twenty-seven miles to Santa Fe, sent challenging telegrams to the Buenos Aires papers and disturbed the provincial Governor by telling him :

"You will let us live in your country, but you will not let us die in it." Then began the great fight, during which he provided some of the ammunition for the legislators who carried through the measure for the municipalisation of the cemeteries.

In order to carry on this campaign more effectively, he moved to Buenos Aires. There, in addition to preaching in French, he started services in Spanish and organised the first Baptist Church in the city.

He next found that members of his church could not be legally married unless they were hypocritically converted into Roman Catholics, or pretended to be British, Germans, Danes or North Americans, and went through a marriage ceremony in a language they did not understand. He supplied the Solicitor-general, Dr. Edward Costa, and the ministers of Justice, Doctors Posse and Wilde, with several of the definite cases which, notwithstanding tremendous clerical opposition, forced the Government to establish civil registration in 1888.

He was on the first Committee in Buenos Aires of the "Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals," and was no passive member. He challenged and disturbed the cruel persons—very many in those days—who in the most heartless way flogged underfed and overworked horses because they were unable to pull heavily-laden carts out of deep mud. With his membership medal in his hand he would caution the offenders, and if they persisted, would hand them over to the police in the name of the S.P.C.A.

He also challenged the underworld by becoming a member of the Anti-White Slave Traffic Committee. His activities were not confined to talk at the committee meetings. He rescued and helped some victims of that most nefarious combination of "vested interests." He told the writer of one poor girl who had been trapped and enslaved. Somehow her broken-hearted mother in Switzerland got to know of her whereabouts and wrote a pathetic letter to Besson. Without calculating what the consequences might be to his own good name, he unhesitatingly went to the "house," and asked to be shown to the room of the girl. Once there, he gave her her mother's letter, and it broke her down. She confessed that she wanted to leave and get home if only she could. "There is no time like the present," insisted Besson, and suggested that she leave with him right away, never to return. He took her to an understanding Christian woman who mothered her for a few days. He secured a passage for her and commended her to the care of the captain of the steamer, and she arrived safely home. Grateful letters came from mother and daughter. She told him of her happy marriage, and that she owed her salvation, her self-respect, and her happiness to him. Great

tear-drops rolled down the furrowed cheeks of the old warrior as we read that letter together.

He challenged and disturbed more than one meeting of Socialists when they were discussing religion, but especially one. "The existence of God," and "Marriage," were the subjects advertised. Besson attended. The lecturer denied the existence of God, and advocated "free love," a sort of communism of women, or rather that all women should be the common property of men. When he had finished, Don Pablo asked permission to say something. He was introduced by the lecturer as a friend and a champion of liberty. After telling why he believed in God, he took up the other very delicate matter, and made a rather improper suggestion concerning the lecturer's beautiful daughter, whom he knew to be her father's idol. The father became furious, and declared that Besson had insulted his daughter and himself. The Baptist admitted that he had insulted the Socialist, but silenced him, and carried most of the audience with him, as he told the irate lecturer that by the logic of his own theory he was making precisely this proposal with regard to every other father's daughter. That settled it; candour and courage won, and they remained good friends.

Don Pablo challenged and disturbed newly-arrived missionaries in many ways. In the early days he wanted to find out whether they would make good, and so invited them to luncheon with him at a cheap restaurant. The table-cloth had wine and soup stains; the spoons and forks were greasy; the soup had been the rendezvous of many flies; perhaps the remains of a slug would be discovered in the boiled cabbage; the people around looked unwashed and some of them were even malodorous; the floor was the common spittoon; and each course cost only five centavos, about one English penny in those days. Now, if a raw recruit could go through the menu without signs of squeamishness, Besson reckoned he would make good. The writer stood the test, perhaps because a friend had prepared him for it!

He loved to test the theology of the new arrival or the student. He would pose as a heretic at times in order to draw out the unsuspecting novice. He had some posers which he delighted to use to the confusion of a visitor. If he discovered what he considered heresy he would be unsparing in his criticism and untiring in his efforts to get the erring person to accept his point of view.

He was a prolific but fragmentary writer in newspapers and periodicals, mostly in the early days, on civil registration, religious liberty and kindred subjects, and in later years on dis-establishment, ecclesiastical patronage, and a variety of historical

subjects. No one knew the National Library better than he, and no reader spent more time there. Students and politicians were in the habit of consulting him when engaged in research, and he never failed them. He had a remarkable grasp of history and a prodigious memory for dates. Besson was the earliest evangelical preacher in many of the provincial towns of Argentina. Known by his writings, he was invited by Liberals and Freemasons as well as by isolated Protestants to give addresses in public halls. His fiery denunciations of error and wrong-doing; his keen, unsparing criticism of what he considered mistaken policies and systems; the resistless logic of his arguments; and his impassioned appeal for civil reforms and especially for unconditional surrender to Christ were challenging and disturbing wherever he spoke. In his own church many of his sermons were polemic. At one time or another he has exposed most of the errors of Rome and of materialistic philosophy. He knew the origins of all the heresies and could use his knowledge to purpose; nevertheless he was anything but a "heresy hunter." His was a positive life, certain of its own moorings and therefore not easily swept away by any false doctrines, no matter how attractive and plausible their first appearance.

His preaching was at its best when he dealt with the grace of God, the atonement of Christ, justification by faith, and the new birth. Two of his spiritual sons, four spiritual grandsons, and one spiritual great-grandson are pastors of Baptist churches.

For years he was a weekly visitor to the leper hospital. Armed with newspapers, illustrated magazines and evangelical literature, dressed in the white tunic provided by the hospital to avoid contagion, he would bear his message of salvation and comfort to these most hopeless of living mortals.

In 1905 he married the widow of the late Rev. George Graham, the first English Baptist missionary in Argentina. She was a consecrated, missionary-hearted, home-loving lady who exercised a calming and restraining influence on the impassioned controversialist, and she surrounded him with the home comforts and attentions so sadly lacking in his bachelor years. Although Don Pablo was parsimonious as regards his personal needs and comfort, he was generous to the needy and the work of the Lord. "I save in order to have more to give," he remonstrated when expostulated with for not attending better to his own comfort. He left by will to the Baptist Mission a substantial sum of money which had come to him by inheritance, and this is to form the "Pablo Besson Building Loan Fund."

When on July 26th, 1931, the jubilee of his arrival in Buenos Aires on July 25th, 1881, was celebrated by a great demonstration of love and esteem in the Swiss Hall, his reply was uniquely

characteristic. "Thank you, thank you and thank you," he exclaimed with a trembling voice. "I am afraid you have been saying too much about the man and not enough about His Saviour Jesus Christ. I am just a poor sinner—a miserable sinner, saved by the grace of God and the merits of Jesus Christ."

As age crept on and every organ of his vigorous system was wearing out, when even his brilliant mind became at times clouded, he still challenged weakness and death. But this was a losing battle, and he knew it. "The Apostle Paul dreaded that he might get where I am, a useless tool cast away on the rubbish heap. I am useless. I am not worth anything. What a good thing that salvation is not by works! What kind of works could I do now that would bring me salvation? What a blessing it is that all is by grace." Such were the sentiments he expressed in one of his last conversations with the writer.

On December 30th, 1932, his soul passed on, and the body it had left behind was reverently laid to rest by a large company of his brethren and friends, in a shady nook of the British Cemetery, Buenos Aires, on the evening of the last day of the year.

Yes, Don Pablo Besson, an apostle of and fearless fighter for liberty, truth and righteousness, preacher of the kernel of the Gospel, friend of missionaries, helper of the needy, comforter of the afflicted, was a challenging personality and a disturbing influence! Surely he was Christ-like in these two characteristics, for Christ's life and teaching were, and are, challenging and disturbing.

ROBERT F. ELDER.

"PROVIDED ALWAYS that no form of worldly amusement such as Billiards Chess Draughts Dominoes or Dice nor games of chance such as Card playing shall be allowed on the said premises."—*Extract from the trust deed of a Baptist Church sealed only twenty years ago!*