

Joseph Harbottle, A Nineteenth-Century Pastor.

“Farewell, my friends belov’d,
Time passes fleetly;
When moments are improv’d,
Time passes sweetly.
In Jesus we are one;
When our few years are gone
Before the shining throne
We’ll meet in glory.”

THAT is the last hymn in the Revised Baptist Church Hymnal, to which edition it was added. A note says: “This hymn is widely used among Baptist Churches in the North as a closing hymn for services and Association Meetings. The writer was minister of Accrington Church early in the nineteenth century.”

This minister, Joseph Harbottle, who died in 1864, just seventy-five years ago, affords an interesting picture of ministerial life and tempo of the age. With his time for study, the pursuit of hobbies, and the deepening of friendship, he is an enviable figure for the present generation.

For consider, this man during his forty years’ ministry served in turn three churches which were neighbours. His district was Accrington, and he never had to quit. Perhaps he was not famous as men count fame, but he laboured faithfully in the work to which he believed God had called him, and gained a place of real influence in the district. That influence abides. In many a Northern chapel and school Harbottle’s portrait still hangs as testimony. The cumulative effect of such a life has proved to be more enduring than that of many eloquent and much-travelled orators of his own day. Indeed, in the present re-consideration of the ministerial system this factor of the influence of the lives and personalities of the men who stick it is not receiving its due weight. And if it be said that to-day’s pace does not give the same chance to personality, the *raison d’être* of the ministry in the modern world ceases to exist. For its ultimate justification is in the contact of friendship, and there is something wrong where this is not possible. Either the pace or the personality must be changed. Or both.

Joseph Harbottle’s mother bore an honoured Baptist name—that of Angus. His father was the Baptist minister at the ancient church at Tottlebank for forty-three years. It was during his ministry that this church, with a handful of members, sent five young men into the ministry. Joseph was born on September

25th, 1798. He was converted at fifteen and baptised as a believer when twenty-one. From childhood he had diligently studied the classics and Hebrew, so that in early manhood he was an accomplished scholar. Eventually, few men in England had at that time a more complete knowledge of the Hebrew language. And, as we shall see, perhaps even the latest aspirant in Semitics in Regent's Park College could trace his descent back to this Northern minister.

In 1822 he went to Horton College to take the classical department in training candidates for the ministry. But ill-health prevented the pursuit of this work, and his Principal, Dr. Steadman, who had the highest opinion of his ability, recommended him to the Church at Accrington. After an extended trial, in accordance with contemporary practice, he accepted a unanimous invitation to the pastorate of the Church which now worships in Cannon Street. The work was hard, but the young minister saw it through, and in time the tide turned. In one year sixty members were added, and later a new building was erected in the Blackburn Road.

Harbottle was a bachelor, and lived alone in his own house. Ladies were not allowed about the place, so the cleaning was surreptitiously done in his absence. As he moved among the people of Accrington he came to be regarded affectionately by all classes of the community. Dr. Angus, who became Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, and then President of Regent's Park College, knew him well at this time, and says that all the people in the place spoke of him with reverence. Some remarked on his conscientiousness, others were attracted by his simplicity, a third class found in him a faithful, tender friend, and some smiled at what seemed his odd ways.

The North suffered from trade depressions even in those days, and Harbottle, though his stipend was little more than eighty pounds a year, was always foremost in the work of relief. He formulated a scheme for assistance together with local tradesmen, and many are the stories of his appearance when touring the district with a hired man and an ass laden with provisions for distribution.

For a number of years he instructed men for the Christian ministry. Among these were Joseph Angus, mentioned above, and Henry Dunkley, who became Editor of the *Manchester Examiner and Times*. The former has told how Harbottle would sit in the high-backed Lancashire rocking-chair before the drowsy fire, "the fire slept, and the chair barely moved, but eye, lip and mind were all alive! He rigorously demanded the jots and tittles of the verbs, and roots must be dug for and carefully presented."

In those days, too, there was time not only for learning,

but even for recreation and hobbies, too. Was there not, for instance, his telescope, revealing the then little-known wonders of the stellar world? Did not friends marvel at his microscope as it threw light on the progress of the tadpole into the frog? Were there not, also, long country walks, and quiet evenings spent in book-binding? Above all, there were the *sortes Harbottleianae*, "in virtue of which," says Dr. Angus, "we were challenged to open the Hebrew Bible anywhere—in Job or Hosea, even—and to find any verse which he should fail to translate. The deep craft of this arrangement was in the end revealed; for as soon as we could read the Hebrew intelligently, he ceased to show off his power of rendering it into English."

In 1841 there was opened at Accrington a new college for ministerial training. Harbottle was appointed to the classical side of the work. But he did not relinquish oversight of the Church until the college was closed in 1849. He then went a short distance along the road to the New Lane Church, Oswaldtwistle. Here he laboured for fourteen years with eminent success. He then returned to foster a new cause in Accrington, at Barnes Street, and he was minister there at his death.

The tribute given by Accrington to this Baptist minister at his funeral was commensurate in its degree with that given by London to Spurgeon. All the shops were closed, and great crowds lined the streets. To the burial at Tottlebank came Free Churchmen from all parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire.

Among the Free Churches—and particularly the Congregational and Baptist—a major part of the responsibility for a Church's success or otherwise rests upon the minister. This is not a matter of opinion. It is a matter of fact. It may or may not be right in principle, but in practice it is so. The time has come for a searching re-examination, by both Churches and ministers alike, of the best disposition of the minister's time and gifts. It is still personality that counts with personalities. And the greatest need of the modern world—which the Church ought to be eager to supply, at least through its minister—is friendship. And friendship takes time. And the impact of personality upon a district takes years, not just two or three, either. This should be remembered when ease of movement seems to be aimed at, rather than the accomplishment of solid work. The life of a pastor such as Joseph Harbottle reminds us of some of the fundamental elements in true ministerial success—diligence, faithfulness, friendship. They might be summed up in "sticking it." And as for disposition of time and gifts—well, he didn't spend (is that the right word?) much time on committees.

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