

# Tabernacles :

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE TITLE.

THE Great Fire of London destroyed many parish churches. For official worship a few buildings used by the new Non-conforming ministers were seized, but these were chiefly outside the City. Therefore, whereas a general law enacted that all future buildings within the walls must be in brick or stone, leave was given to put up temporary wooden buildings for worship. To that Biblical age it was obvious to call them Tabernacles. As the churches designed by Christopher Wren arose, these Tabernacles disappeared.

George Whitefield initiated open-air preaching, and did much on Moorfields. His Dissenting admirers did not see why he should be stopped by bad weather, so in 1741 they procured a piece of land adjoining, and put up a huge wooden shed for the winter. Again it was obvious to call this a Tabernacle. The success was so great that when he left the promoters engaged Cennick, Adams, Jenkins, Howell Harris, Seagrave, Humphreys and others to carry on the work.

Now, Whitefield had arranged with Cennick to conduct a school for colliers' children at Kingswood, near Bristol. This flourished so well that he also gathered a Society of adults. So in March, 1741, Whitefield began arranging for a Tabernacle there, and presently warned him to take care of building too large or too handsome. Cennick laid what was called the "foundation stone," which seems to imply more than a wooden structure as at Moorfields.

Within twelve years the movement was so great that further advances were made. At Norwich, James Wheatley gathered two thousand converts, for whom a temporary Tabernacle was erected on Timber Hill, till a chapel was erected, larger than the city had seen, where Whitefield conducted a three weeks' mission. Whitefield laid a stone at Bristol in Penn Street for a Tabernacle which he opened on November 25th, 1753. And the Moorfields shed had done so well that the same year it was replaced by a brick building eighty feet square, which surrounded it on every side. When the wooden cocoon was taken to pieces, the name Tabernacle was transferred to the permanent structure. Thus the term lost its Biblical connotation of a temporary wooden structure, and came to mean a huge place for the worship of Calvinistic dissenters.

When John Campbell from Dundee and Kilmarnock came to Moorfields, a train was laid along which the fire flashed to Scotland. Two rich laymen, the Haldanes, began preaching in 1797 and 1798, eagerly backed by Campbell. They decided to repeat Whitefield's methods, and Rowland Hill opened in the Circus at Leith Street, Edinburgh, where James Haldane was ordained in February, 1799. The Tabernacle on Leith Walk replaced the Circus in 1801, able to hold 3,200 people with its two galleries. Within a few years they had Tabernacles in Glasgow, Dundee, Perth, Thurso, Wick, Dunkeld and Dumfries. Robert Haldane wrote that "the general idea affixed to the houses called Tabernacles is that of large places of worship, where as great variety as possible is kept up in preaching, by employing different ministers, in order to excite and maintain attention to the Gospel, especially in such as are living in open neglect of religion." In three of these Tabernacles he employed tutors who within nine years trained nearly three hundred evangelists.

Seven years later the Haldanes became Baptist, and when Andrew Fuller preached for the B.M.S. in Leith Walk and other Tabernacles, Baptists became acquainted at first hand with the name, and were familiarised with the idea of enormous preaching places, contrasting with the tiny meeting-houses erected for the two or three hundred members.

In 1827, James Wells of Alton, in Hampshire, began open-air preaching, especially in Westminster Broadway, Rochester Row and Prince's Place. He gathered a church of twenty, and organised on a high Calvinist basis. However illogical it may appear, preaching on such lines did have a wonderful appeal. Webb Street in Bermondsey was soon outgrown, and he obtained the Borough Road Tabernacle, built originally for John Church. This he rebuilt in 1838, and thus English hyper-Calvinist Baptists came to dwell in a Tabernacle.

Next year, John Campbell celebrated at the Moorfields Tabernacle the Centenary of Whitefield's apostolic labours. James Wells had to enlarge his place in 1850, and he styled it the Surrey Tabernacle. It became the London centre for those Baptists who fell out of touch with the main body, exaggerating the views of Keach and Gill. While the successive Baptist Associations ignored him, as he did them, he obtained a commanding position, and was in request all over the country.

Soon afterwards, Spurgeon came to the same district. New Park Street could by no means hold the people he attracted. He experimented in Exeter Hall, then in a huge music-hall in the Zoological Gardens near at hand. It proved that the young preacher could attract ten or twelve thousand people here

steadily. So it was soon decided to build a new Tabernacle for his use.

The architect was practical enough to copy internally the design of the music-hall, with two tiers of galleries, and platform. Outside he thought of four turrets, perhaps inspired by the Strict chapel on Gower Street, but these were never erected. The frontage was on the model of the Royal Exchange and the British Museum, so that the pastor could describe it as "a Grecian place of worship." The motto on the architect's plans was "Metropolitan," which afforded an obvious title to distinguish it from the neighbouring Surrey Tabernacle which James Wells was crowding. While the new place was rising, Spurgeon paid his annual visit to preach at the Moorfields Tabernacle, where John Campbell was carrying on a City Mission.

In August 1860, before the new building was really finished, Campbell came to a preliminary meeting, and chaffed Spurgeon about the title. In his reply he gave yet another turn to the meaning, as involving a doctrine. "We have not come to the Temple state here, we are now passing through the Tabernacle state. We believe this building to be temporary, and only meant for the time that we are in the wilderness without a visible King. We do firmly believe in the real and personal reign of our Lord Jesus Christ, for which we devoutly wait. That is the reason why our new house of prayer is called a Tabernacle, not a Temple." It is not recorded whether James Wells accepted this implication five years later, when he opened a new Surrey Tabernacle on Wansey Street. Joseph Parker had probably forgotten it in 1874 when he occupied a new City Temple. John Campbell had then passed away, and the new Whitefield's Tabernacle on the old site was in what was unkindly described as "Dissenters' Gothic."

Under the Metropolitan Tabernacle were many classrooms, primarily for training students exactly as Haldane had done. Here they heard Spurgeon propound that Greek was the sacred tongue, the Baptist's tongue; that every Baptist should be Grecian—never Gothic; that the five points of Calvinism were the angles of the gospel, five great lamps to irradiate the cross; that this Tabernacle was only the beginning, and the dark county of Surrey must be covered with places of worship. So "Tabernacle" came to mean a chapel with a Greek front in Surrey, occupied by a Spurgeon's man. Croydon, Battersea Park, South Lee, Dulwich, Peckham, show how well his hopes were fulfilled; while county bounds were burst, so that Woolwich and Tunbridge Wells put up Tabernacles never meant to be temporary. Across the river, older places at Highgate, Shoreditch and Barking made new homes, while the sons of Levi pitched at

Burdett Road, Enfield, Barking Road, Poplar, Shepherd's Bush, Uxbridge Road and Walthamstow.

Nor did the Tabernacle move round the Metropolitan area alone. The original Moorfields was now quite eclipsed; the Surrey Tabernacle was sold to the Jews with its Grecian front complete. But many buildings with the architecture and the principles of Spurgeon are now lit up by the Southern Cross.

W. T. WHITLEY.

*Charles Brown*, by Henry Cook, M.A. (Kingsgate Press, 2s. 6d.)

Our forefathers delighted in full-length biographies in which the subject was usually lost in a maze of unimportant detail. In its modest length this excellently written volume goes to the other extreme. Charles Brown stands out on every page and much of the record is in his own words, but we wish the publishers could have given the author another twenty or thirty pages.

Ferne Park is one of the outstanding churches of the last fifty years, with its membership that reached over twelve hundred, and its fine record of missionary giving and service. Speaking at his farewell meeting, Dr. Brown said: "It is you who have made this ministry—not I who have made this church." But that was Dr. Brown's characteristically gracious modesty. He was surrounded by able and hard-working colleagues on the diaconate: nevertheless, in the human sense, the church was made by him. He gave the people the Word of Life, they knew that when he stood before them he came from the presence of his Lord: no wonder that in the pulpit he mounted up with wings.

Dr. Brown's life is an inspiration, and we are grateful to his loyal and able colleague for this tribute so affectionately told.