

John Clifford.¹

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JOHAN CLIFFORD was the hero of my youth. He captured me as he captured hundreds of young men. He was my "father in God." When I first came to Westbourne Park as a raw country youngster of fifteen, I should not have called myself a Christian, but his preaching gripped me. I recall, as if it were yesterday, the Sunday evening and the very spot where, as I walked down the gallery stairs after the service, the conviction suddenly came that I had made the great surrender and stood in a new relation to Jesus Christ. In this church he baptised me. I was a member here for several years. This place is to me holy ground. For nearly forty years John Clifford was my friend, and during that time I took no great decision without consulting him. It was on his advice that I studied two years in Germany before I entered the ministry—little he or I dreamed then what a providential preparation this would prove for the work that came to me after the war! He counselled me to accept the call given me by my brethren of all parts of the earth to become their Commissioner for Europe. I had to lead and administer their relief enterprise—the greatest thing the Baptists of the world ever did in common. (The fund itself amounted to a quarter of a million sterling.) I had to assist the spiritual work of our people in the war-torn lands, and above all, to defend their religious freedom and the religious freedom of all others wherever it was attacked or imperilled. As long as he lived, Dr. Clifford acted as chairman of our Advisory Committee, entering into the spirit of the enterprise and rejoicing that one of his "boys" was carrying on work so congenial to his own mind and heart—reconciling and healing work. In fact, for thirty of the forty years I knew him, I enjoyed Dr. Clifford's confidence in a degree rivalled by few and I think, outside his family, surpassed by none. And my revered friend remained my hero. Right on to this day there is for me a peculiar thrill in recalling anything in my life that had a parallel in his. I like to remember that his college—the Midland—was mine, his University of London mine. When my brethren called me to the presidency of the Baptist Union the consciousness of following

¹ This article reproduces notes of a speech delivered at Westbourne Park Chapel at a celebration of the centenary of John Clifford's birth. It is printed without revision.

him added to my gladness, and the same spontaneous and irrepres-
sible feeling lent its glow to my year of presidency of the National
Free Church Council. The joy of serving as General Secretary²
of the Baptist World Alliance is to me enhanced by the knowledge
that my hero was its first president, and that in strengthening the
sense of brotherhood throughout our world-communion I am
building on the foundations our Greatheart so well and truly laid.
Next to that of the Lord Christ, no personal influence has entered
into my life as deeply as that of John Clifford. I loved him, and
love him still, for surely, surely, I may adopt Tennyson's word :

I trust he lives in Thee, and there
I find him worthier to be loved.

It is impossible then for me in this church to speak without
emotion of one who to me means so much. How can I regard
John Clifford with detachment? I think the most difficult task
ever laid on me came when the Oxford University Press asked
me to write the article on him for that standard work, the
Dictionary of National Biography. To deal in bare facts, to
endeavour with cold impartiality to fix and describe his place in
the story of our time, to suppress the adjectives that affection
prompted, was not easy. Happily, my subject was in himself so
great that embroidery was superfluous. In sober truth he "belongs
to history." It is an apt demonstration of his assured place in
English life that his portrait was in the National Portrait Gallery
within a few months of his death. The rule is to admit no
portrait within ten years of the death of its original; exceptions
are only permitted in the case of men and women of unquestion-
able eminence. John Clifford's eminence admitted of no doubt.

Let me say of him first of all this: that he was among the
very foremost of British preachers. "There were giants in those
days"—pulpit giants, and not a few of them Baptists. Yet in our
communion a triumvirate stood aloof from the rest. It consisted
of Spurgeon, Maclaren and Clifford. I would not claim that
judged solely by published sermons John Clifford would be
admitted to the first rank. Personality is an indispensable element
in preaching. The immense energy held in leash, the winning
tenderness, the cumulative power of a closely-knit argument en-
forced by the gesture that needed to be seen, and the singularly
flexible voice that needed to be heard—the full effect of that
personality could not be mediated by cold type. Those who knew
him could read without much loss, because in effect we saw and
heard him as we read; but not all were thus privileged. But to

² This was the case when the address was delivered: in 1939 Dr.
Rushbrooke followed his hero in the higher office of President of the
Alliance.

hear him! I recall an evening when there sat next to me in the gallery a young Welsh student who had come to London for an examination. He listened to the preacher with rapt attention, and as the sermon closed he turned to me with flashing eyes and glowing face: "That's what I call *preaching*," he exclaimed, "and I heard Parker this morning and Liddon this afternoon!" The student was Thomas Phillips.

Dr. Clifford indeed held that a sermon was something to be spoken: he even gave utterance half seriously to the paradox that "a good sermon is never good literature." Yet his unhurried and carefully revised work is good literature. Archbishop Alexander of Armagh, himself a great writer, acknowledged his personal debt to John Clifford's "depth of thought mated with a singular majesty of expression."

What was distinctive in Clifford's preaching? I would answer: a certain prophetic quality. He saw all life from the point of view of one who everywhere discerned God at work. Never was a ministry of wider range. He left nothing outside his purview. The first sermon I heard from him was on the Sunday following the death of the Earl of Shaftesbury, and the subject was "Lord Shaftesbury, the typical Christian Socialist." Sermons dealt with the "New Democracy," with scientific conceptions of Evolution, with gambling, and other social evils, with the books that young people were reading. He shrank from nothing. John Clifford's titles were often "secular" in sound, but his preaching was never secular. Moral passion informed every utterance, and the sense of the living God permeated all. Touch what he would, he was concerned for souls and for that Kingdom of God which is "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." He might speak of topics the daily press was discussing, but how differently! His prophetic insight cast upon them the light of God. I remember once crossing Europe with Dr. T. R. Glover. Our train had passed through the Simplon tunnel to the Italian side, and we were skirting the shores of Lake Maggiore. Here are some of the loveliest views in Europe. I had seen them often—the beauty of mountains, of trees and flowers, the peaceful lake, the white-walled dwellings with their bright red roofs set in relief against the green hillsides and the blue water. I revelled in the outlook, but Dr. Glover was quite indifferent. When we returned over the same route he was explosive with enthusiasm. The difference was only this: it was a cloudy, dull day when we first passed through, but when we came back the sun shone in splendour and gave a new value to the scene. All the colours were vivid; a glory not seen before transfigured the scene that once was dull. That was the change John Clifford's preaching brought. Commonplace tasks and people were illumined

with new glory. Even the struggles of public life were to him no mere party scrimmage, but part and parcel of the mighty stirring of the Spirit of God. The term "secular" became meaningless. There were no limits to the authority and love of God in Christ:

It is from this point of view that John Clifford's public activities have to be judged. The "Nonconformist conscience" was the phrase of Price Hughes, and it was incarnate in John Clifford. With what energy he threw himself into public life! For years he was regarded as the leading platform speaker in the country. His influence was a governing factor in the overwhelming defeat of the Balfour Government that had made itself responsible for the inequitable Education Act of 1902. I leave aside the story of that famous struggle; it is familiar to you all. John Clifford's popular gifts—"popular" in the best sense, for he never played down to any audience—were then revealed to the whole English-speaking world. But what I emphasise is the spirit of the man amid all the fierce clashing of opinion. He had no dread of controversy; he was "ever a fighter," but how scrupulously fair! Not a shadow of personal bitterness! He always took care to state an opponent's position at its strongest, and in the opponent's own terms. He was careful to master his facts. I recall only one responsible attack on his veracity. It was made by the Anglo-Catholic leader, Lord Halifax, father of the present holder of the title; and I would not now refer to it even incidentally were it not that I am able to add that when Clifford's challenged statement was proved, the frank apology of Lord Halifax showed him to be no less an English gentleman than his opponent. For John Clifford was a gentleman; it was for truth and great causes that he fought. He used clean weapons: falsehood and meanness were to him alien and abhorrent. Magnanimous—that old fine word described the core of his personality even in controversy.

Magnanimous, utterly fair! How those qualities marked his attitude in international affairs. He strove to understand the other side. That is where we often fail. We see, for example, the dangers and evils of National Socialism in Germany—the militarisation, the overthrow of democracy, the cruel treatment of Jews. We don't acknowledge, as we ought, the responsibility resting on the victorious powers, including ourselves, for refusing the German democratic republic a square deal. We gave Adolph Hitler his chance. We are too ready to underline evils and remain silent about beneficial achievements. It is difficult to be just, and it is dangerous. To attempt it usually brings attack from both sides; but Clifford, radical as he was in outlook, startled us again and again by his attitude of resolute justice in dealing with international issues.

Yet make no mistake—he was English, intensely patriotic; read his book, *God's Greater Britain*, or think of the eloquence with which he was wont to appeal to the heroic chapters of his people's story. "God's Englishmen" meant as much to him as to John Milton. He loved his country. He gloried in the nobler elements of British life, but he did not deify his nation or his race. This church building was in danger of being wrecked by mob violence during the South African War. That war shocked the conscience of the man in whom conscience was ever king. Silence was impossible; he spoke out, to the hurt of the Church's finance—that was a comparatively slight matter, but also to the weakening of cherished friendships—that was far more, he felt that! John Clifford regarded war with horror and loathing. He was one of those who laboured to the very last day to avert the Great War. I know the inner story of the years of struggle by the band of British Christians led by the noble-hearted Quaker, Joseph Allen Baker. It included John Clifford, Lord Dickinson, the Dean of Worcester and others. Archbishop Davidson had a part. Newton Marshall, till his lamented death, was in with us, and for some years I was editor of the *Peacemaker*, the organ of the movement. When the war broke out we had gathered at a peace conference in Constance. The irony of it! The Great War was a veritable nightmare to Clifford. Had it been possible to wash his hands of responsibility he would gladly have done so, but conscience was king. He believed there are things worth dying for! He was not one whit less loyal to conviction in supporting his country in 1914, and lending his influence to maintain her cause, than when he refused support in the days of the South African struggle. He stood for the rights of conscientious objectors, but was himself a conscientious assenter. He did not accept the position that the use of military force is in no conditions justifiable, and he would not have endorsed a statement which appeared yesterday that "the soldier-saint is a contradiction in terms." The name of General Sir Henry Havelock is engraved on a foundation stone of this Westbourne Park Church. Those who understand what it cost such men as John Clifford to assent to war should know that he who dreads having to take such a tragic decision is of all men most concerned to exert his last ounce of strength and influence to suppress provocative speech or act, and positively to promote friendship. With all his heart he is constrained to work and pray that the grim necessity of supporting war may never be thrust upon him. "Give peace in our time, O Lord," ay, and give peace in the time of our children and our children's children!

Let a few words be devoted to John Clifford's wide and deep Christian outlook. He was the largest-hearted Christian I ever knew. Of course he was a Baptist. He allowed no doubt of that.

He spoke often of the day of his baptism as having brought a larger reinforcement of his inner life than any other one day of his life. He reckoned the ministry of this Baptist church a calling so high that no alternative career—not even that of the Member of Parliament he might easily have become—could compare with it. The supreme honour of his life he counted his election by his brethren of all lands as first president of the Baptist World Alliance. *A Baptist*, but what did that connote for him? It meant a personal self-committal to his Lord. It meant that he laid all the stress there. He felt himself a brother of all who shared that experience. And that immediacy of inner fellowship with his Lord made him free. To him the Church was the fraternal association of Christ's free people—a democracy, or rather a Christocracy. As free under Christ, the communion to which he gave his loyalty had no room for a priestly caste, and was not dependent on any body of officers, bishops or others. But here is the point: John Clifford was no narrow sectarian: he never unchurched any. He stood very near to his Free Church brethren; he co-operated gladly with many Anglicans; I have heard him again and again speak with high appreciation of Catholic saints. The unity of the universal church which includes all the faithful—he rejoiced in this. He was the highest of High Churchmen, but the universal church of his vision was far too great to be brought within the cramping restrictions of a single visible organisation. That was his essential criticism of proposals for the fusion of all the churches into organic union. This, to him, meant a lowering of the ideal, a limitation of freedom; it involved the imposition of creeds, it involved exclusions. "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." He held that when, with variety of interpretation but mutual love, men follow the truth as they see it in Jesus Christ, the unconstrained spiritual unity made manifest in a common quality of life amid variety of organisation, without legal or canonical regulation or authoritarian control, will prove the only true and full answer to the prayer of our Lord. If I may use a political figure, he thought of unity on the lines of the British Commonwealth of Nations, where the links are those of a common spirit, rather than on the lines of an authoritarian state where all the parts stand in precise and defined relation. He cared intensely for faith, little for creeds; a great deal for order provided that freedom remained unimpaired, but for "orders" nothing at all.

Here, as everywhere, John Clifford was the prophet of freedom and of democracy. Does that imply that he represented a lost cause? It is a searching question. Never were freedom and democracy challenged as they are to-day. They have collapsed over nearly the whole of Europe. When we ask why, the answer

is everywhere the same. The democracy of Britain and the Dominions and of the United States of America has been possible through the discipline of character which the Churches, and supremely the Free Churches, have furnished. Democracy cannot maintain itself except on the dual foundation of knowledge and character. It has fallen in Europe either from lack of knowledge—because the people were too ignorant and inexperienced for self-government; or from lack of character—because there was no vision of a common good, but only a confused struggle for sectional or class or party advantage. John Clifford stood for freedom and democracy. He believed in them intensely, but he knew freedom would be abused and self-government lost unless an informed and disciplined citizenship sustained both. Were he here I am convinced that he would reaffirm his faith in the common man, but he would call the common man, as he always did, to make himself in knowledge and in character worthy of freedom and capable of playing his part in a democratic state. And of one thing above all am I certain, that if he stood to-night where I stand, it would be to utter a ringing challenge, especially to the young men, to hold by freedom and democracy, and he would tell them that the one sure and adequate source of inspiration and power for free men and women is found in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus whom he loved in his youth and served through all the toil and joy, the conflict and the victory, of his glorious life.

J. H. RUSHBROOKE.