

Rev. Charles Brown, D.D. :

THE MAN AND THE MINISTER.

“**K**NOW ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel?” The death of Charles Brown has removed from our midst one of the best loved ministers and one of the greatest preachers of the early twentieth century. It is not easy to find just the right adjective to describe him as a preacher. He was popular in the sense that he was much liked and always drew a congregation, but not in the sense that there was anything cheap or meretricious in his preaching. He was admired, but not in the sense that his sermons were works of self-conscious art. He had indeed a sincerity that lifted him right above self-consciousness, and he spoke forth the truth as only the single-minded can.

Few are the preachers who can gather and maintain a four-figure congregation. The second Ferme Park Baptist Church, for his congregation outgrew their original building, seated 1260, and it was full with rarely a seat to spare twice a Sunday, Sunday by Sunday, year-in, year-out, for the twenty years in which I knew it, with the possible exception of a streaming-wet Sunday and the month of August in the days of family holidays. If you wanted a regular sitting, your name went on a waiting list, usually for seven months; while for a casual sitting one waited in one of the entries until seat-stewards, who knew well their area of pews, were told that Mrs. Blank could not come that Sunday and immediately filled her seat. If you were not in your place by 10.55, you risked losing it. For the monthly evening communion service the whole of the ground-floor of the church was full, and to the mention of this service in the notices Dr. Brown invariably added “And we invite all who love the Lord Jesus Christ to join with us.” This open invitation was Dr. Brown’s own act, originally questioned by some of the deacons but soon approved with conviction. Those who attended will remember the tones of his voice with the well-known sentences “We welcome into membership of this Church our friends (whom he mentioned by name) who come to us from the Church at Such-a-place” or “who join this church on profession of their faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and I extend to them on your behalf the right hand of fellowship”; and then as he returned to the table “I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you . . .”

Membership of Ferme Park was not of course hereditary, but members' children and children's children joined the church in due course, most of them graduating through the Sunday School. Dedication Services at which such children's children were first brought to the church gave him especial pleasure. "We do not baptise infants" he explained, "finding no warrant for the practice in Scripture," and having read (or recited) how Jesus had laid His hands upon the young children and blessed them, he suited his action to the word. Similarly the baptism of children's children was a source of profound joy and for one such girl, his baptismal text was "I thank God . . . when I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded, in thee also." A boy might get the more stirring charge "Thou therefore my son be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Those who attended his occasional courses for young believers are unlikely to forget them. After explaining the scriptural origin and present-day meaning of church ordinances and wording, he expounded the phrases used by Paul to describe the members of the Christian Church, such as "called to be saints."

Charles Brown's children's sermons were a joy not only to the children but to the grown-ups too. Having a quiverful of children himself, he knew exactly how to talk to children, spicing his serious words with an occasional sally and thrust that went home. In one address he had occasion to remark "Of course teasing is good for girls," and, noticing the looks we who were brothers gave to our sisters, he added "and even better for boys." His talks on *The Pilgrim's Progress* (subsequently published as *The Wonderful Journey* and *The Children on the King's Highway*) we discussed at home week by week both in retrospect and in anticipation, and it was a real grief to us that we had moved to London too late to hear the talks he gave on *The Holy War*.

There was a directness in Dr. Brown's sermons as of a teacher speaking to his friends. Theology was there but never obtruded; Biblical Scholarship was there but never paraded; an up-to-date awareness of politics was implicit; and he spoke to the hearts and needs of people he knew. He was amused when folk told him they "had heard him preach that sermon" on such a date. He replied that they must be mistaken, only to be assured that the hearer always noted beside a verse the date on which she heard it used as the text of a sermon, with the initials of the preacher. "Ah!" Dr. Brown would say; "you may have heard me preach from that text before, but not to-day's sermon, for I wrote that on Friday. I always destroy sermons after the occasion for which they were prepared." There were times when he preached the same sermon twice. He found that on the Sunday

of the annual exchange of Free Church pulpits, some of his flock deserted Ferme Park to hear Charles Brown a second time, so, urging his congregation to support the visiting minister, he mentioned that he would preach the same sermon in the evening. So too, when Dr. Arthur Dakin came to be his Co-pastor, they agreed that each should preach once a Sunday at Ferme Park and once at Campsbourne (originally a mission and subsequently a branch of the Church) and that each should repeat his morning sermon at the evening service. So closely were Ferme Park and Campsbourne related that it proved quite impossible to separate their membership and for the Baptist statistics the churches had to be bracketed with one set of figures for the membership roll. Those who did not understand suggested that this was to give a fictitiously impressive figure for the size of the church, but the plain fact was that numbers of church workers were so much members both at Ferme Park and at Campsbourne that it was quite impossible to rule that they belonged to one and not to the other.

Dr. Brown's character studies, particularly of Old Testament prophets, were of entrancing interest. He kept abreast of Biblical scholarship though not accepting all new claims. "What does it matter," he once asked his congregation, "if the Higher Critics say that David did not write many of the Psalms, so long as they leave us the 23rd and 51st?" Speaking of the walk to Emmaus he quoted the little known suggestion that the second disciple was the wife of Cleopas. I remember his quoting from Proverbs "Where no oxen are, clean is the crib" and expounding it thus: "You can keep your house immaculately tidy if you have no children; but it's not worth it."

References to current politics were fearless, never partisan, and only occasionally revealed "which side he was on." Those whose memories take them back to the two elections of 1910 will remember that most of the Liberal posters mentioned Free Trade and Home Rule. Hearing that one of the senior deacons, a life-long Liberal, could neither bring himself to vote for Home Rule nor for the Conservative Party, Charles Brown preached on the duty of voting and added "I would rather a man voted on the wrong side than that he did not vote at all." Was it about the same time that, quoting the text over the Royal Exchange "The earth is the Lord's," he commented "and the apostrophe comes before the 's'?" He spoke with deep feeling of the resignation of Augustine Birrell after the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 and of the defeat of Sir John Simon (now Lord Simon) at Spen Valley in 1918. "I see no cause for rejoicing at the defeat of a good man, and I cannot think the House of Commons the richer for the accession of Horatio Bottomley and the loss of Mr.

Asquith and Sir John Simon." The side wall of his house was covered with Liberal posters during the 1910 elections, and he defended this freedom. In the pulpit he was a preacher and not a politician but at 17, Dickenson Road, he was a citizen with all a citizen's rights and duties. During the 1914-18 war I heard Charles Brown say "I'm afraid . . . (a very well-known figure) does not always tell the truth; and when a man doesn't tell the truth it does knock the bottom out of things." My last memory of a political utterance in the pulpit was about 1920 during the Irish troubles. The Lord Mayor of Cork was in gaol and, further to embarrass the British Government, went on hunger-strike. The Government, much harassed and exasperated, refused to release him and, as he seemed likely to die, much was said of the government's responsibility. "That foolish man killing himself in Cork Gaol" was Charles Brown's sane comment.

To his Church Dr. Brown was like the beloved father of a large family. He laid down inflexible rules. There was no raffle at a Church bazaar; there was no dancing on Church premises; there were no Saturday meetings on Church premises. If a deputy organist chose an unfamiliar tune, Dr. Brown would interpose before the choir commenced the singing: "I do not think we know that tune," and the choir quickly told the organist which tune we did know. Dr. Brown was at his happiest at the Old Scholars' Reunion, which always finished with Family Prayers conducted by himself; and at the Sunday School treat, at one of which I saw him enjoying a ride on the Roundabout. When Ferme Park Brotherhood marched to a neighbouring Church for a united service, there was Charles Brown marching at their head.

My last reminiscence is of a Sunday School Anniversary and seeing Dr. Brown suddenly leave the pulpit. He returned in a minute or two leading a stranger up to sit beside him. The church was packed and during the service a blind man had groped his way in and was bewilderedly seeking a place. There was no visible place empty save the long pulpit seat. It was characteristic of the spontaneity of Charles Brown's tenderness.

How much more might be written! There are few men of this century of whom an almost Boswellian life would be more worth-while. Dr. Brown exemplified at its best the great tradition of Liberal Free Church Minister as our parents and grandparents knew it, and we who knew him are thankful that we had that privilege and rejoice in our memories of him and his message.

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