

P. T. Thomson : Pioneer

GOD has given to our Baptist Churches in this country many leaders of outstanding gifts and courage. Not all of them have been appreciated as they should have been. They belonged to a relatively small religious community and worked within its limits. With a larger stage and a wider audience their abilities, the part they played and the contribution they made would have achieved an ampler recognition.

Peter Taylor Thomson, known to his friends simply as "P.T.", was one of them. He might have made his mark in any of several spheres. Rarely do we come across a personality so rich and many-sided. It was my privilege to know him at close quarters. From Oxford I went, still a raw student, at the end of my college years to Victoria Road Church, Leicester, to become his junior colleague. Until my marriage he and Mrs. Thomson opened their home to me. Of their truly wonderful kindness and helpfulness the half cannot be told. I would put it on record that my debt to them is immeasurable. Characteristically he insisted that I was not an assistant but an equal colleague, and he did all he could to give effect to his view. We presided alternately at Communion services, deacons' and church meetings. We shared the Sunday services, avoiding the danger of creating two congregations by never letting it be known in advance which of us would be preaching. At first, until I got to know the church members, we even visited together. He tried to persuade the Church Council to pay us equal stipends, but there quite rightly they put their foot down. Such an arrangement would have been unfair to him and embarrassing for me, as I pointed out when apologetically he told me. But his desire indicated the generosity of his character of which I was to see more and more.

When, under heavy pressure from denominational leaders, I left Leicester, after only eighteen months, for Cambridge, it was a hard thing to do and a disappointment to us both. He felt it was right and frankly said so. Without his encouragement I should never have gone.

Meanwhile I had learned from him a great deal. Having been brought up in a minister's home, where the claims of Christ and His Church were always paramount, I had had a good start, and was the better able to appreciate what I found in daily contact

with him, his eagerness and devotion to his ministry and the intense quality of his personal religion. Most memorable were his prayers at the family altar every morning, their range, freshness and beauty, the blend of reverence with intimacy. Those of us who heard his prayers in our Ministerial Recognition Committee, with and for the candidates who came before us, will know what I mean. He was essentially a man of prayer "dwelling in the high and holy place"—a phrase he loved to use.

Our conversations on church business and problems, on preaching and the conduct of services, with his insistence that I should try out my own ideas, and not let him have all his own way, were an immense stimulus and enlightenment. Between ourselves we discussed freely the people in our pastoral care and ways of helping them, with all the problems and disappointments involved. He could be heavily critical, and at times stern, but what impressed me most were the shrewdness of his almost uncanny insight into character (he never wore blinkers) and his large-hearted tolerance and sympathy. Tolerance may be only a sign of religious indefiniteness or moral indolence, an easy-going "What does it matter?" attitude. Thomson had none of that. His convictions were deep and clear cut. Two or three times he went to jail for them. As time went on some of his attitudes gradually changed and his sympathies widened as his personality mellowed. The man who resisted at a heavy cost the payment of rates, which subsidised denominational and sectarian teaching in schools, became eager for a fuller Christian fellowship among the Churches, stressed the greatness of the things they held in common and was restless under the heavy emphases in some quarters on distinctive principles and divergencies.

MANY-SIDED CHARACTER

On moral and social questions P.T. felt strongly and spoke with complete fearlessness. In Victoria Road he built up congregations which crowded that great church, a packed audience long before the service began every Sunday evening, and a men's meeting, with an enrolled membership of about twelve hundred, which filled the furthest galleries every Sunday afternoon.

His preaching was always carefully prepared. The sermons were constructed as they should be. They were rich in thought, for he was no mean theologian, and were clothed in beautiful language. He rarely departed from his manuscript. What he had written was his best and as such it had to be laid on the altar.

But his addresses to the men were never written. Rarely had he a note and here he was, I thought, most effective. He held that crowd in his hand and could do with them what he liked, swaying them to his mood. His brain was fertile in discovering subjects and he lit them up with reminiscence, experience, rollicking humour,

intense earnestness and even passion, and he scored every time. Would that those addresses had been taken down and published! He attacked roundly evils in national life and abuses in Leicester. Gambling was a specially favoured target. Once he described how he had laid a bet with a bookie in Leicester's main street and collected his winnings. A London paper got hold of the story and published a drawing of him doing so—a Baptist minister putting a shilling on a horse! This was without his knowledge, but the resemblance was close enough to show the artist had been briefed by someone who, at any rate, knew him by sight. One day he told me he was announcing an address on "A Week at backing Horses." The idea was to take a number of morning and evening papers and *in imagination* back, at a shilling a time, the horse selected by the greatest number of tipsters to win each race. We were to keep a careful record of winnings and losses and to show how foolish it was to throw away money. After talking it over we decided we had better spread the risk, so, instead of a week, it became "A Month at backing Horses"—a good thing too as it turned out. You can imagine those weeks: two respectable Baptist ministers buying racing editions and diligently studying the columns to decide where to lay our bets. The first fortnight it looked as if we couldn't lose. Nearly every horse was a winner. The greater his luck the more P.T. became depressed. He began to discuss whimsically what he should say, if we won. There was no going back. He had advertised the address and the date. We got immense fun out of it. The schoolboy in Thomson never died. We learned an appalling amount about racing and horses. Fortunately the tide turned against us in good time. In the second fortnight we lost handsomely—and became merry again. On the appointed day P.T. told the whole story to a huge convulsed audience drawn by the subject. The very run of "beginner's luck" helped to reinforce the moral that gambling is "a mug's game."

He had no illusions. Like his Master he too "knew what was in men," and still loved them. He was always helping. After one absence Mrs. Thomson arrived home to find P.T. had been entertaining a visitor, a jail-bird whom he put up for the night because, as he said, he was a jail-bird himself! His guest became a rather frequent visitor, especially whenever he came out of jail and needed money. Thomson introduced him to me. He transferred some of his affection, and later on did me the honour of calling on me in Cambridge, still hard up!

Out of the men's meeting grew the Victoria Road Church Institute, a fine block of buildings with a beautiful hall, rooms for smaller meetings, a restaurant, a very large billiard room, and other amenities. Membership of the Institute was confined to members of the church and the men's meeting, where a register was kept and

a minimum of attendances required to qualify. It provided remarkable series of lectures and concerts of high quality as well as recreational facilities. While Thomson was there it largely fulfilled its purpose, though we had disappointments. Some of our billiards enthusiasts preferred to spend the intervals between games in visiting the public house next door, while they were waiting for a table to be free again, rather than the Institute canteen or in watching others play. There were rules and appeals for loyalty, and his pioneering work, in spite of all, had its reward. He watched the business side closely and enjoyed doing so. Our Church treasurer was Sir Edward Wood, Leicester's leading citizen at the time, a merchant prince who took over a concern said to be in serious difficulties and turned it into the Freeman, Hardy and Willis that became one of the great businesses of the country. He used to consult Thomson about drawing up his balance sheet and accounts. Once, when they had been closeted together for a long time, he said to me: "If Mr. Thomson had gone into business instead of the ministry nothing on earth could have prevented him from being a millionaire." That was another facet of his many-sided character.

But he could equally well have succeeded as a literary critic or editor. His knowledge and judgment of books always astonished me. His range was remarkable. He knew all the great poets and novelists, was familiar with theologians, devotional writers, essayists and "belles lettres." But his main interest seemed to be history and the classics. Grote and Gibbon he knew well. He had a full well-furnished mind but never paraded the fact. He did not load his sermons with quotations. He rarely used them though a knowledgeable hearer would recognise apt phrases and allusions. It was different when he wrote. Looking through his admirable little book on *Christian Education in the Church*, with which the Baptist denomination has not yet caught up, I found quotations from Montaigne, L. P. Jacks, Froebel, *Punch*, Dr. Lyttelton, John Locke, Melancthon, Holmes, Quintilian, Wordsworth, Bushnell, Thackeray, Dickens, Plutarch, Spurgeon, Cicero, Seneca, Cope, Defoe, Samuel Butler, Shakespeare, R. L. Stevenson, Comenius, Wesley, A. B. Bruce, Birrell, Boswell, Walter Pater, Lytton, Carlyle, John Brown, Dostoievsky, Meredith, Galsworthy, Arnold of Rugby, John Clifford and many others. For the most part they are introduced so naturally, almost casually, that the reader hardly notices the wealth and erudition of the author's mind.

I wish I had space to deal with that book, with its insistence on the supreme importance of the Christian Education of the child in the earliest years of its life. Education is a whole-life process. He attacks the view often held or implied that a child's personality has no religious value until adolescence is reached. Christ contrasted the unconverted life on the one hand with the child-life on the

other. "The regenerating influence of the Spirit issues in the creation of the child-like heart; then is not the heart of the child *de facto* a temple of the Spirit?" This overturns theories of total depravity and demands a doctrine of original goodness as well as of original sin. The whole book is a fine, moving plea, which some day Baptists will appreciate. Again he was the pioneer, ahead of his time. We can only hope that his vision may be realised. He was tremendously in earnest about it. The man who had blazed a trail in work among men told me, late in his life, that, if he could have his time over again, he would give his energies to building up work among the young rather than among adults.

He had his own childlike side—a sense of wonder, a frank enjoyment of new things as well as old, and also a child's shyness.

The first came out in his delight in natural beauty, gardens, lakes, mountains and in lovely things like pictures and furniture. He could have made a fortune as an interior decorator. His taste was impeccable. He was fond of good music. He had a quite remarkable collection of Arundel prints and his enjoyment of literature had a keen aesthetic edge.

As for his diffidence, once, when we had been listening to an appeal of the "hearty religious" type, stressing the duty, among others, of shaking hands with strangers in church, he said to me when we were walking home: "If, when I was a lad in Glasgow, anyone had come and shaken my hand when I went into a strange church, I don't think I could ever have gone again." It was an invasion of the soul's solitude in religion. Perhaps he was wrong, but we ought to remember that many people are like that. He could not easily speak of the deepest things in him. You had to look closely to see the gold dust shining in the bed of the stream.

Perhaps for this reason he seemed to some people a little aloof. He did not mean to be. He did not seem to like much big companies but he was at home with "two or three." I spent part of a holiday with him once in Strathspey. He had a fine new car which he drove like Jehu. In his beloved Scotland all his boyish puck-like humour came bubbling out, his "Aberdeen stories" of Scottish thrift, his pawky remarks and sly digs. Suddenly he would say: "What's up here? Let's go and see." The pioneer instinct again. Round swung the car and we went tearing up some mountain track which usually ended in shooting butts on a moor or simply a moor, bare among the majestic hills. He would whizz round a corner and say, "Look!" and there was the surprise, a vast spread of deep purple heather, a lake and a castle, or he would make us get out of the car and look over a bank into a glorious valley, and there was Balmoral. Those of us who had the chance to know him well will always cherish the remembrance of that irrepressible gaiety which under right conditions showed itself.

His health from early middle age was never robust. This was an undoubted handicap. He had to seek treatment for chest trouble in Switzerland. Fortunately it proved effective and in spite of earlier fears, he reached his eighty-second year. No one would have dared to forecast that when he was forty. Had his strength matched his abilities, and allowed full scope to his burning spirit, he could have been one of the outstanding Free Church leaders of all time.

MINISTRIES

Born in Anstruther in "the Kingdom" (of Fife) in 1871, he was nurtured in the piety of a humble Baptist home. He knew and said how much he owed to parents and church. An early dedication to Christ's service was followed by a resolve to enter the ministry. At our Scottish Theological College in Glasgow and the University he did well. Then he took charge of the little church at Lochee, Dundee, but he was soon called to Blenheim Church, Leeds, where he spent ten happy years and found his wife in Miss Lily Clayton, whose care, help and companionship were to enrich and gladden his life. They were later to find much joy in their son and daughter, the former now in Australia. It seemed to me that he regarded his ministry in Leeds as the happiest work of his life, and that church always had a specially warm place in his heart.

His work in Leeds drew the notice of the denomination and, when a successor to J. G. Greenhough in Leicester was being sought, he was soon marked down. In spite of his close bonds and happy friendships in Yorkshire, in a church where he is still remembered with affection and gratitude, he felt it his duty to accept the invitation.

At Victoria Road he gathered a congregation of wide influence which comprised many of the civic and business leaders of the city. Reference has already been made of his work among men and his resistance to the Education Act of 1902, when he cheerfully suffered brief spells of imprisonment rather than pay the Education Rate. He celebrated the first by a notable address to his congregation on "Stone walls do not a prison make." He told me how, on one of these visits he secreted in his clothing a copy of Boëthius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. The warder, who had taken away his watch and money, asked him if he had brought anything else with him. Tapping his chest, where the book was hidden, he said: "Only the consolation of philosophy." The man, who was not expected to understand, grunted and went off, and P.T. spent his time happily reading his smuggled treasure. His going to jail did not please some of his friends and they protested, but his motives were understood and no man in Leicester was held in higher esteem.

In other ways he broke new ground. In days when the presence of women in pulpits was generally discountenanced, and often

resented, he boldly invited to his pulpit Catherine Booth, Annie S. Swan and Sister Hettie, who afterwards became Mrs. Rowntree Clifford.

It was in Leicester that his eager soul proved too much for the earthen vessel. He suffered two serious breakdowns, but he was undaunted and his achievement was immense.

After nine years he left Leicester to become minister of Heath Street Church, Hampstead. Looking back, I cannot help feeling that it was perhaps a mistake, though it may be he found the burden, carried alone, too great for his impaired health. In Leicester he had a great name and following. His words went out to the whole city. He counted for much. Hampstead meant a big change. In spite of its fine tradition, its devoted and delightful members, the church was situated where the kind of work for which he was best fitted had small chance, if any. Though he remained there for ten years, exercising a ministry which was appreciated by thoughtful hearers and making many friends, the old abounding and irresistible energy was less in evidence.

But that did not mean less devotion. He came to find his main interest in the work of the Baptist Union, to which he gave more and more of his time. I think he liked working with, and helping, his old junior colleague to whom his loyalty, service and friendship meant much.

After resigning his charge in Hampstead in 1924, he served for four years, in virtually an honorary capacity, as Baptist Union Commissioner for Education. His book, which I have mentioned, shows the line he took. He brought enthusiasm, insight and conviction to the task and many whom he inspired will remember with gratitude what he did. But it may be that, as a pioneer, he was too far ahead of those he sought to lead. To some he seemed to be rather in the clouds. His was the vision of a far country. They were more anxious to see "one step ahead" at a time. But not for a moment need we feel that his time and labour were wasted. He helped to create a new spirit and a deepened sense of responsibility.

When he relinquished that work he ministered for six years at Southport and then for eight years at two small churches in Buckinghamshire. He liked to call himself a country minister. Ill-health at last compelled him and Mrs. Thomson to give up their lovely home at Holmer Green, and they moved back to Harrogate in Yorkshire where they were near old friends and relatives and also close to Leeds, where they delighted to worship again at Blenheim.

Never demonstrative, P.T. was capable of deep feeling. He gave and won lasting affection. A few days before his last illness he expressed to Mrs. Thomson surprise that everyone in the hotel where they resided were so kind to him. "I don't understand it."

It is good to know that to his large, generous heart came the response that would please him best.

The mention of his generosity reminds me of a fact that may now be revealed, that his were the largest gifts I received from any minister to the Superannuation, Forward Movement and Victory Thanksgiving Funds.

SERVING THE UNION

The Baptist Union owes more to him than can easily be described. He was its President in 1939-1940. The outbreak of the Second World War made havoc of the programme and campaign he had planned. His service took an unexpected shape. He left us, however, one of the most memorable addresses delivered from the Chair. His subject was "The Historic Christ in the Life of Today." He began from the starting-point that "Human history has meaning and value above and beyond history." The prophetic note soon came. "Today the waters are in spate and they threaten to become a whirlpool in an orgy of brute force. Ancient landmarks may disappear overnight." We were soon to know how just was his warning. The address went on, closely reasoned, because of its compression not easy to follow, with a rare felicity of thought and phrase and a wealth of literary allusion, building up the background for the belief in "Christ the Conqueror" which was the Assembly's central theme that year. He dealt with Christ's view of the world, history, human relations and His work of atonement. He ended with an impassioned appeal to young ministers. "When you preach to the times they will know whether you are preaching from eternity. When you speak of the spirit of the age they will know whether you have a footing on the Rock of Ages. It is easy to tell whether a man's word is tethered to the Cross—God's final word of judgment and of justification both of Himself and of the sinner. They will know whether it is rose-water or blood with which your ministry is besprinkled. Your power to fortify them in any trouble, small or great, will depend on whether you have waded in shallows or breasted the swellings of Jordan. And whatever you have to say of the changing face of contemporary history, they will be most helped to know that all your philosophy and teaching grew out of the experience won at the foot of the Cross.

'Oh bring no price, for Grace is free,
To Paul, the Magdalene and me'."

There it is—"And me," the heart, the fountain, of his faith and life.

He had the right to address young ministers. He had been Chairman of the Union's Ministerial Committee for twenty-eight years and was to continue for six more. In these thirty-four years he did more than any other man to secure "the efficiency and effectiveness of our ministry" as the Council's resolution of thanks

put it. The list of ministers and probationers came to be esteemed throughout the denomination. This was not achieved easily. The first attempts of the Union to apply standards for admission to its accredited lists roused protests and resentments, now well-nigh forgotten. It was "largely due to his patience and unwearying labours that far-reaching changes have been brought about in such a way that they have commended themselves to the judgment of ministers and laymen throughout our churches."

During his chairmanship not only were rules and regulations as to standards of knowledge and character developed and enforced, but at least three requirements, that at first seemed contentious, were accepted and proved their worth—that a man should not be above forty years of age to qualify for the ministerial list; that he should be medically examined so that the appearance of his name would mean to the churches that the Union had assured itself that physically, as well as in other respects, he might be expected to carry the burden of the ministry; that the examinations for admission to the Probationers List should be of University standard.

An attempt was made in some quarters to resist the first of these, but it carried our ministers, who thought it unfair that men who took charge of churches late in life, sometimes after prospering in commercial careers, should be included with those who had devoted their whole lives to it.

The second was at first opposed even by certain of our colleges. We were greatly helped by Mr. Eric Pearce Gould, the eminent surgeon and our medical adviser, who saw to it that the physical examinations would be sympathetic as well as thorough, and that advice should be given to all candidates which would enable them to check, or have treated, any physical disabilities or slight abnormalities which might prove a handicap to them. In the result, the college that at first expressed its misgivings most strongly, subsequently wrote, in the light of experience, frankly and unreservedly withdrawing its opposition, expressed its sense of the value of the new rule and promised the full co-operation which, as a fact, it had already been loyally giving.

The third proviso saved the Committee from pressure to pass men on compassionate grounds because they had failed by a few marks to satisfy our own examiners. The verdict of university examiners was final.

The rule giving the Committee, subject to endorsement by the Council, power to make concessions in really exceptional cases, was generously interpreted, and it would be difficult to find any case in which real hardship was caused, but Thomson's firmness, combined with kindness and sympathy, enabled us to get around some awkward corners. I believe now it is generally agreed that the scheme has worked well.

Those who shared in the work of the committee under him can never forget the mingled strength and gentleness with which he helped us to sift the candidates, nor the tenderness and beauty of the prayers in which he commended them to the guidance and grace of God. His counsel and sympathy left their influence on many lives. Letters reached the Church House from men saying with what trepidation they had faced their interviews but that they had left feeling it had been a benediction, or words to that effect. His clear purpose and insight saved us from making many mistakes, and our ministry and the churches owe him a debt greater than they realise. He was, in this again, blazing a trail. It is not too much to say that, very largely through him, the insertion of a man's name in our ministerial list has come to be regarded, not as a casual or indifferent thing, but as a privilege and honour and therefore a challenge.

He spared no trouble and shirked no problem. When cases of difficulty arose he would come specially to the office, go with the greatest care through all the relevant papers, set out his considered judgment and even frequently, to save me trouble, himself draft or dictate the letter that in his view ought to be sent, and I hardly ever had to demur. This, of course, never prevented his acceptance of, and full loyalty to, a committee decision, which he never sought to set aside, though with a wry smile he might declare it was wrong, being based often on sympathy for an individual candidate rather than on a concern for the welfare and reputation of the ministry as a whole and the denomination. In time the committee came to appreciate his view that it is better to say "No" to a man before he has failed, than to remove his name later, or to see him struggling broken-heartedly to fulfil a vocation to which he was not really called. It was kindness in the long run even if it appeared a little hard-hearted. P.T. was anything but that. He was always looking ahead, anxious to save men from mistakes and disaster, jealous for the fair name of the ministry, "that it be not blamed."

His life drew to its close peacefully at Christmas time. On 28th December, 1952, the flame flickered and went out quietly to rise again where the lamps are burning before the throne of God.

Are there pioneers in heaven? "The Lamb who is in the midst of the throne shall lead them." That means movement, progress, and P. T. Thomson could never hang back.

" Fight on, fare ever
There as here."

We Baptists who knew and loved him have his epitaph written in our hearts—"He loved our people."

M. E. AUBREY.