

ARTHUR SKEVINGTON WOOD

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I have just heard of the homecall of Dr Arthur Skevington Wood a few weeks ago.

This remarkable man was a Methodist and evangelical which is not usually the style of a Methodist. He was also a teacher of the Second Coming which again is rare in the Methodist Church. He faithfully preached the Gospel without discourse into modern examples. He was an author of books about Wesley and Methodism, Pentecost, Evangelism, The Signs of the Times and What the Bible says about God. He was a brilliant scholar and became a tutor at Cliff College in 1970 eventually became the Principal (1977-1983).



He was a humble, self-effacing and compassionate man.

At the age of eleven, he gave his life to Christ as a result of a CSSM Mission in North Yorkshire and his conversion came on the sands of Whitby. At a Methodist Group Fellowship, he was introduced to the subject of God's grace at a communion service. Thereafter, he always made much of the importance of the Communion Service.

He became an avid reader of the lives of John Wesley and his brother, Charles, Thomas a Kempis and Jeremy Taylor and so decided that he could not be half a Christian. Later, he was interested in the work of Martin Luther and other Reformers.

John Skevington (1815-1845) was a Methodist minister in New Zealand. Thomas Skevington (1827-1901) was employed in the lace industry in Nottingham and a local preacher. These men were Arthur's great grandfather and great uncle respectively.

His grandfather, John, married Mary Cooper in July 1877 and they had a daughter May (1885-1970) who married a local preacher and schoolmaster, William Arthur Wood (1886-1964). They had one child, Arthur, who was born in Ashbourne, Derbyshire on 21 January 1916. While still a baby, Arthur moved with his parents to Yarm in North Yorkshire where William was a school teacher and eventually became headmaster at Yarm Grammar School.

Although Arthur was taught privately at first, (1921-1926) he entered this school in 1927 and developed a passion for books. Here he came across Cliff College when students from that college visited Yarm. He took an interest in their work and methods.

He graduated in 1933 a year after he had decided that he could not be half a Christian. Needing to find a job, he contemplated going into commerce. He went to Lewis's in Leeds to train to be a manager. But he became increasingly aware of spiritual needs around him and the desire to preach the Gospel and, after two years in business, he could no longer resist the call and, in 1936, he began his theological training at Wesley College, Headingley, Leeds.

One godly influence in his student days was the Rev Dr Howard Watkin-Jones who was fascinated by Christian history and there was also the Very Reverend Hugh Watt, Principal of New College, Edinburgh, who suggested that Arthur's work for his doctorate should be an account of the life of Thomas Haweis (1734-1820). He studied at New College from 1948-1951 where he earned his doctorate.

Haweis was born in Cornwall and was a Church of England minister and a leader of the evangelism. He expounded the grace of God and that salvation was in Christ and not in the Church, deeds or rituals.

Arthur was taken up with the work of John Wesley (1703-1791) who was an Anglican and the founder of Methodism which, in its early days, was very evangelical. Wesley emphasised justification by faith and travelled the country on horseback with open air preaching. He was persecuted for his faith and controversy ensued because Methodists were not ordained.

Dr Wood admired another Anglican, Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667), who wrote evangelical works during the Oliver Cromwell years. He was Chaplain to Charles 1 and imprisoned for being a Royalist.

William Grimshaw (1708-1763) of Haworth was also an interest. Charles Wesley's hymn Thanks be to God, whose truth and power was written in memory of Grimshaw. At the Evangelical Library in 1963 Dr Wood gave the Annual Lecture inspired by Grimshaw with the text, 'For I am determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.'

It is pity that Christians today do not adhere to this truth but define fellowship as getting to know you. The corresponding verse is 'Hereafter we know no one after the flesh.'

Martin Luther was a German monk who lived from 1483 to 1546. He was a professor of theology and a campaigner for the Protestant Reformation. The Pope excommunicated him for his insistence that salvation is a free gift of God's grace and that salvation was not in the Church.

Wood was now on the circuit for preaching among Methodist churches. This began in 1940 in the Glasgow Parkhead and Burnbank District until 1943. His preaching was always expository.

Arthur was awarded his BA from London University in 1941.

On 1 January 1943, he married Mary Fearnley who was born in 1913 at Leigh in Lancashire. They had met four years earlier at a Christian Endeavour Conference and she proved to be a tower of strength to her husband-to-be for over fifty years.

He remained in Scotland but travelled to the Midlands and elsewhere to preach. In 1945, he took an interest in the work of local preachers and this meant he began to train and prepare them for the ministry following his appointment to the Connexional Committee for Local Preachers where Dr Wood was for six years. Thereafter, he took responsibility for the Paisley Central Hall from 1951 to 1957.

It was probably the largest Methodist congregation in Scotland.

Within months, his preaching centred around revival and sanctification, the life that pleases God. Tom Butler from Cliff College led a campaign in February 1952 resulting in seven men entering the ministry. A Cliff Fellowship within Paisley Hall commenced.

In 1954, another campaign on evangelism began. Adult baptisms followed and 67 new members were received into the church.

1955 saw the All Scotland Billy Graham Crusade in which Arthur Skevington Wood was deeply involved. He also supported further Billy Graham crusades.

The year 1955 was also the year that Dr Wood took part in a Methodist pulpit exchange with Rev Wilbur G Grose of Simpson Church, Minneapolis. In the USA, Dr Wood undertook many speaking engagements and there were many resultant conversions.

Back home in Britain, he spoke about American Christianity and Methodism and some of his articles were published. He had deep concerns about their lack of godliness and their wrong attitudes to the Lord's Day and that, after morning worship, the emphasis was on pleasure and fun. American churches had a social programme with fun and frivolity with the pursuit of entertainment and that was their priority. Worship and reverence for God was right for the Lord's Day but not to be immediately followed by the whole congregation stripping off to enjoy communal swimming.

'Methodism in the USA needs a revival,' wrote Dr Wood. He also wrote, 'The church can only be effective when the congregation are 100% sanctified.'

Worship and entertainment is establishing a hold in the UK at the expense of sanctification, reverence and godliness.

Of course, what he said was true but few would put this into practice.

The Methodist Conference stationed Dr Wood at Sunderland from 1957 to 1959 and his final circuit appointment was in York. In 1962, he joined the Movement for World Evangelisation to undertake world-wide preaching and teaching. This appointment lasted until 1970. In 1962, he spoke at the Keswick Convention for the first time which he did up to 1992 when Mary died. He was also a regular visitor to the Filey Convention.

After his retirement he was associated with the Wesley Fellowship which dealt with historical and theological matters. Skevington Wood became its first President. He was now living in Sheffield.

He was the Principal at Cliff College for seven years (1977-1983) until he retired in 1983. Both he and Mary were now not very fit both suffering from high blood pressure. Arthur was plagued with diabetes and also began to be cursed with Parkinson's disease.

After his retirement he was associated with the Wesley Fellowship which dealt with historical and theological matters. He was now living in Sheffield and became the Wesley Fellowship's first President although his health was in serious decline and remained so until his death.

He died about a year after Mary and in the same ward at the Royal Hallamshire Hospital, Sheffield on 28 January 1993. He was 77.

He was admired by many other Biblical scholars including Professor F F Bruce and Dr F A Tatford. He was loved by Lindsay Glegg of Filey fame and many others.

When he came to our Advent Testimony Meetings he would always quietly ask beforehand if I would chair the meetings at which he spoke. That does not make me out to be special for I certainly am not. It is just that Dr Wood appreciated that I said little and did not waste time or talk about myself as some irritating chairman do.

He had an amazing capacity for friendship. He depended on people for transport and neighbours helped him with DIY.

With his scholarly articles on history and Christians of the past, he could be a little too academic for some, but in his preaching his simplicity and clarity was immediate and appealing.

He said that the greatest victory in history was God's conquest over Satan through the Lord Jesus which is a victory we will share if we belong to Him. He spoke about the Lord's Second Coming by saying that we shall be eternal and immortal unable to perish or suffer. Death will be swallowed up for ever. Christ has conquered the grave and death and this victory is an accomplished fact. Christ died

for our sins... he was buried... he was raised to life... he appeared. This is not fiction; it is fact. Victory has been won but for us it is still something to be gained. Satan is a defeated foe. For us this victory is an enabling experience He is the Conqueror. The Lord said, ' I am coming back for you. I will not leave you bereft.' Victory is a stimulating hope. We can be delivered from the fear of death straight away. Because of this, our life is not a hopeless and tedious experience. We can face death with calm acceptance. Christ's victory is ours.

We quickly forget these great servants of God.

(1762)

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