

GREAT PREACHERS 1

ALEXANDER SMELLIE

David C F Wright, DD

Twenty miles south-east of Glasgow is the town of Carlisle where in the Original Secession Church from 1900 to 1923 was the minister, Dr Alexander Smellie, well known for his writings, one of which, *Men of the Covenant*, the story of the Scottish Church in the years of persecution ranks among the religious classics.

The name Smellie is unfortunate. It is pronounced Smiley

He was a very humble man, a son of the manse. He was born in Stranraer in 1857. Born and raised in a Godly home where it was considered presumptuous to claim assurance of salvation. When Dwight L Moody preached on the text 'one thing I know' (John 9.35) during his first visit to Edinburgh in 1874, and when coming down from the pulpit, he put his hand on Alexander's shoulder and said, "Do you know?". The young student replied, "I hope so". By the end of the meeting, he knew. Years later, Smellie would say that it took a man of God from America to speak to a Seceder boy eager to go into the ministry.

Later at the Keswick Convention, Alexander Smellie came under the ministry of Rev Evan Hopkins and said that God spoke to him through an Anglican evangelical and this to an Original Seceder!

Dr William Young Fullerton spoke of Smellie's native gifts, wide scholarship and deep devotion and that he was one of the greatest men of his day, fitted to stand in the front rank but chose to stay with his own people in the Original Secession Church of Scotland even when he was invited to high places in other churches.

When Smellie preached about the Lord Jesus his own face shone. Such an occasion was when he gave the Bible readings at Keswick in 1919 entitled *We beheld His Glory*. The Christian Press wrote after this series of readings, "We saw the Lord Jesus as we had never seen Him before—ininitely more beautiful and loving; and, like Thomas, we could only fall at His blessed feet in adoration and exclaim, 'My Lord and my God'".

Alexander Smellie's ministry at Keswick was confined to 1914 to 1922, cut short by a distressing disability.

Dr Stuart Holden wrote, "Brought up as he was in the strictest sect of Scottish Presbyterianism, his great gifts might have won for him a foremost place in any part of the church of God. But he knew something of the beautiful loyalty to his own father's memory which held him faithful to the Original Secession".

He would stand in the Keswick tent with one hand in the side pocket of his jacket with his open Bible on the desk without a note or extraneous help of any kind pouring forth the treasure of the Word of God which he both knew and loved. It was known that he wrote out his addresses word for word and memorised them and so his preaching was always clear and his presentation was always orderly and in a polished literary style. Such was his adoration of the Lord Jesus that audiences forgot the speaker and fastened their thoughts on the Lord Himself and no one can say a greater thing than that about any man.

When Smellie died in 1923, Dr William Graham Scroggie wrote, "He was, perhaps, the greatest devotional writer of his generation: and, by reason of the catholicity of his outlook, his spiritual penetration, the literary force and beauty of his style, together with the simplicity and profoundness of his thought, he was read in all sections of the Christian Church, and was loved as widely as he was read".

This is an example of his ministry:

A SUMMONS TO NEWNESS OF LIFE

REV. DR. ALEXANDER SMELLIE, MA, DD (Preached during World War I)

*Come, and let us return unto the Lord for He hath torn, and He will heal us; He hath smitten, and He will bind us up—
Hosea 6: 1.*

It is possible to interpret these familiar and haunting words from one of the tenderest books of the Old Testament in two entirely distinct and almost contradictory senses.

You may read in them—many of the scholars of today are reading in them—the expression of a superficial and totally insufficient sorrow for sin. It is the people of Israel who are speaking, a people who are shallow, careless and unreflective and self-satisfied. They have some little glimpse into their disobedience. They have some slight grief for the wounds they have inflicted upon their Lord. But the pain does not penetrate far or deeply. They know how they can regain a contented mind. “Come, and let us return unto the Lord,” they say to one another; “He hath torn, and He will heal us.” That is His way. That is His manner and habit. That is His *métier*, as poor Heine said when he lay dying in Paris. But whatever may have been the case with Heine, the men of Israel had no proper conception of the strange and blessed truth which they were announcing. They were glad that they had to do with a God who hated putting away, and who multiplied to pardon; glad that they had to do with Him, because, in fellowship with such a God, they could speedily settle the question of transgression and punishment; they could very readily get rid of their temporary vexations and annoyances; and then they would be free to revert to their accustomed selfishness and sin. That is the one interpretation; and you have only to study the vivid portrait which Hosea draws of those fickle and flippant citizens of Northern Israel, in order to see how much likelihood of truth there is in the interpretation.

And yet, beloved friends, I cannot bring myself to read the words in that way. I prefer what is the older view, that in them we are listening, not to the voices of disappointing people, but to the voice of the great-hearted, patient, and pleading prophet of God Himself. He knew too well the instabilities of his fellow-countrymen; but he knew still better the immeasurable love of his Lord; and out of this knowledge he pleads with them to put his Master really to the test. “Come,” he prays, “let us return unto Jehovah, for He hath torn, and He will heal; He hath smitten, and He will bind us up.”

When we regard the verse in this light, it becomes a summons to our own land, and to the Church in our land, and to every individual disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ among us. It is a call to repentance—a call that is as modern as it is ancient; a call that is being emphasised and underlined by the terrible sorrow and chastening through which we are passing in these days, a call to which we cannot pay heed too soon or too profoundly. I wish that we may listen to it tonight in its personal aspect and accent, as addressed to each one of ourselves. For, surely, it is only as the separate Christian is determined to get right with God, that the nation will be on the high road to the understanding and the abhorrence and the renunciation of its sins, and that the Church will be quick to shake itself from the dust and put on again its beautiful garments. It is we who have been wrong. It is we who have been turning away from our true Shepherd and our first love. It is we who must be rectified and led back once more. Do let us seclude ourselves from the crowd. Do let us feel that we are alone with God—the Lord whom we have grieved, but who is here to lead us afresh in the paths of righteousness for His Name’s sake.

He calls us to repentance. And what is repentance? In that Westminster Catechism, which left Westminster so soon after its birth to make its home in my own northern country, I have a definition of it: “Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God.” There is more in the answer, but that will be enough for our purpose. Repentance is my turning way from sin unto God. It is my facing right round, so that I am looking no longer hungrily and hankeringly towards those evil things and those questionable things which fascinated me before; so that the Lord, whom I have been forgetting and disobeying, is now my chief desire and my one delight.

Two main motives, the Catechism declares, lie at the back of this change of mind: a true sense of sin, and an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ. But I think you will agree with me when I say that, for the vast majority of us, the second of these motives is first, both in the order of time and in the order of influence. It is the sight of Him whom we have misunderstood and maligned—His character, His affection for us, His gift of His only begotten Son, His free and full redemption, His ability and His willingness to perform in each one of us that good work which He has begun; it is this vision of God which alters the entire trend of our lives, and which attracts us irresistibly, like a magnet, home to Him. Do not suppose, beloved, that there is no sense of sin. There is. In evangelical repentance it is keen; it is deep; it is permanent. But it follows, rather than precedes, our apprehension of God and His mercy. It comes when we recognise what sort of a God He is whom we have been neglecting and forsaking. Then we condemn ourselves. Then we abjure the thoughts we have been cherishing, and the ways in which we ran with greedy feet. He so loved me, and this is how I have recompensed Him—it is that which breaks me down; it is that which makes me ashamed; it is that which kindles the grief and hatred; it is that which shows me the exceeding sinfulness of my sin.

Oh, brothers and sisters, let us ask for ourselves a new, and an intimate, and a constraining, and a conquering disclosure of God. For then we shall repent in spirit and in truth.

Now, Hosea will help us to this disclosure. Nobody, I think, before the Lord Jesus Christ came, drew closer to God than the prophet Hosea did. He literally lived and moved and had his being in Him. Sons and daughters of the New Testament although we are, he will acquaint us with our God, that we may be at peace with Him.

This is one thing that Hosea says: God is near. It was his constant anxiety to awaken in his erring countrymen the belief that

they had not to travel any distance to find God; that He is at hand, that He was brooding over them already and waiting to bless them. "After two days will He revive us; in the third day He will raise us up"—so brief is the interval, so short is the journey, between us and our sins and God and His overflowing salvation. We need that message. The name of God is often on our lips; but actually He is at times little more to us than a vague rumour, an unfigured immensity, something exceedingly undefined and exceedingly remote. We are kept far off from Him by the feeling that we have to fit ourselves for the reception of His restoring mercy; there are moods and dispositions which we must cultivate, there are lessons which we must learn, there are pieties and righteousnesses which we must carry through. And then we are hindered also by the sight of the obstacles, invincible and insuperable obstacles we imagine them to be, which divide us from God. Our character is set, we say, in a groove which is unalterable. Our associations and our habits are fixed. The far country is not geographically far; it is spiritually far: and that is a gulf which is harder to bridge. "A lustful heart," Augustine said—and he knew what he was talking about—"a lustful heart is the far country." Ay, a lustful heart, or a sceptical intellect, or a worldly mind, or a sullen and violent temper: these are the things which seem to make the chasm between us and our God complete.

But no, Hosea says, God is near. He is not nebulous and vague, but more real than we ourselves, He does not exact any elaborate preparations and any attempted equivalents. He wants us just as we are, that He may do for us, and in us, from the beginning to the end, His own, work of rectification and renewal. He is not frightened by the trammels in which we have bound ourselves. Let us return to Him, let us trust Him, and the Lion of Judah will break every chain. God is near. Each one of us, here and now, can transact with Him.

There is another truth of which Hosea is even surer—that God is kind. He announces it with a singular wealth of gracious imagery. God, he affirms, is like the surgeon: His knife and His scalpel may wound us, but His one intention is to effect a cure—"He hath torn, and He will heal." He is like the fathers of our flesh; they corrected us, but no one wished us well half so unmistakably as they did—"He hath smitten, and He will bind us up." Or if you leave the world of men, Hosea says, for the world of nature, you will find parables there just as remarkable and just as winning, of the goodness of God. "His going forth is certain as the soft grey of the dawn," which prefigures the sunlight and the warmth of the day. "And He will come to us as the latter rain that watereth the earth," to assuage our thirst, to end our barrenness, to evoke our harvest. These are beautiful pictures of the chastening, and life-giving, and fruit-bearing love of God. And we who have Him painted for us by evangelists and apostles, as well as by the Old Testament prophet, can be more unassailably confident of their truth.

But Hosea is not content with 'announcing the fact of God's kindness in His words; he illustrates and commends it by his own example. You see how he identifies himself with the sinners he is persuading to repentance. You see how he puts his hand into theirs, He does not say, "Go you, and return"; he says, "Come, and let us return unto the Lord our God"—you with me, and I with you. It is only a step, only a true inclination of the soul; and the breach is at an end, and the Father is singing His song over His child who was dead but is alive again, who was lost but is found. That is Hosea's way, as it must be the way of all of us who desire to entice our brothers home to be forgiven. And, beloved, the men of Israel had simply to look up into the face of the prophet who talked with them in this fashion, to be convinced how very real it all was to him. This great-hearted, simple hearted, self-forgetting man, whose own home had been stripped and emptied, whose own home had been devastated by tragedy—his features carried peace stamped on them, and manifestly his heart was tuned to quiet and irrepressible melody. Why was that? It was because, morning and evening, he dwelt in the love of God. If anybody could prevail on other people to believe in that love, it was he.

Oh, but the Lord Jesus Christ is far better! He has become one of ourselves. He has been tempted in all points like as we are. He has taken our scarlet sin upon Him. He went to Calvary, and with great price He bought our redemption, and by His death He opened for us the new and living way of access to God. My brothers and sisters, it is Christ who says, Come, and let us return—you with me, and I with you." And when we go to God in His company, we shall be greeted with nothing but the loving-kindness of the Lord.

That God is near, and that He is kind—these are weighty motives to repentance; but Hosea adds something else—God is unlimited and illimitable. "Let us know," He counsels; "let us follow on to know the Lord." It is just as if he said, "There is no possibility of setting a boundary to His understanding, His power, and His grace. It may seem to you as if your case was altogether unprecedented; and you may feel as though, in all the generations of those who have sought and found Him, there never was a necessity to parallel yours. But that is not to deter you. There are surprises waiting for men and women in the Lord their God: His resources are not yet exhausted. Come and let us return to Him, and He will work a fresh miracle for us; let us follow on to know Him, and He will unveil novelties and ingenuities of wisdom, of compassion, and of renewal, which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no heart until now has been able to conceive.

The endlessness of God! The Bible is proof of it. Patriarchs tasted that He is good; but psalmists and prophets succeeded patriarchs, and their discoveries were vaster, and their witness nobler. When the old covenant reached its close, it looked as if it had left nothing untold; but then came the fulness of the time, and with the fulness of the time, our Lord and Saviour

Jesus Christ; and it appeared as if only at long length man had begun to know the Lord. The endlessness of God! Your life, my life, if God is ours and we are God's, are evidence of it. Secretum meum mihi, said Dante—"My secret remains with me." "To him," Christ promises—and it is a solitary and individual experience— "to him will I give of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and upon the stone a new name written, which no one knoweth but he that receiveth it."

The limitlessness of God—oh, brothers and sisters, do not let us, any of us, think that we are disqualified because the demand we have to make upon our Lord is an unequalled demand, or because our wanderings and sins are different from all previous wanderings and sins. The riches of God in Jesus Christ are unsearchable riches. Let us follow on to know the Lord.

God's nearness, God's kindness, God's limitlessness—these are ample incentives, these are appealing invitations to repentance I had a letter the other day from a friend, and in it a printed leaflet with these lines—

Absolutely tender, absolutely true;
Understanding all things, understanding you;
Infinitely loving, exquisitely near,
This is God our Father:
What have we to fear?

It is good tidings of great joy, and yet, beloved—and yet—we have something to fear. Not on His part, but on our part. The last word I have to say to-night is this: God is in serious and awful earnest, and some of us are scarcely in earnest at all.

Hosea, as I have hinted, had his private heartbreak, but he had his public heartbreak too, and it was this: that the repentance of Israel was too superficial, too facile—a fleeting emotion, a "goodness like a morning cloud, and as the dew that goeth early away." Many men are touched into momentary regrets, many men are moved and melted to tears, but the deep places of their souls and the strong currents of their daily lives are not changed.

I remember a shrewd sentence of William Guthrie, the Scots Covenanter: "Esau.grat his fill"—do you know the meaning of "grat"?—Esau wept his fill—"Esau grat his fill, but he never grat himself into repentance." There are such numbers of people of whom Esau is the representative; and I dare to say, these people are the despair even of the God of unfathomable power and infinite love. He can do nothing with them.

But, beloved, we are not Esaus. We are children, we are God's Jacobs, whom He has redeemed for Himself with the precious blood of His Son, and whom He has called unto His Kingdom by the almightiness of His Holy Spirit. God is near to us; God is kind to us; the God to whom we come is, as we are finding out, a limitless God. But do we all remember this: that He is also a holy God, and the heavens are not clean in His sight, and He charges His angels with folly. We long to see our country confessing its national sins. We long to see the Church in our land forsaking its bloodless Christianity, its worldly conformity, its selfish indifference toward the millions who are dying without God. But let us commence with ourselves. We return to the Lord because He bears and forbears and forgives; but let us recognise that we return to One who hates our sins with a perfect hatred. We come to Christ because Christ is the Lover of our souls; but do let us recognise and be very sure that we are coming to the Christ of Gethsemane and the Christ of Calvary, to whom those questionable things and those contaminating things which we have been tolerating, for which we have been making excuse, meant the bloody sweat and the accursed tree and the hiding of God's face. Coming back to such a Father, back to such a Saviour, we must abhor every sin; we must hate ourselves because of our traffic and our friendship with sin; and we must continually trust our Lord to keep us from tampering with sin any more. God is in serious earnest, and you and I have to be in serious earnest too.

Many, O Lord my God, are my infirmities; many they are, and great: but Thy medicine is mightier. Search me, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any way of wickedness in me, and lead me in the everlasting way. "Come, and let us return unto the Lord; for He hath torn, and He will heal us: He hath smitten, and He will bind us up.

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