

Alexander Balmain Bruce.

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THE strong well-knit figure, expressing in every line and movement both steadfast energy and sturdy self-reliance; the bearded face, wearing the calm look of a Rabbi who had entered into the Kingdom; the eyes of bluish grey, deeply sunken, which sometimes shot fire as he kindled in wrath against cant, or self-seeking, or pretentious incompetency; sometimes gleamed with humour over a merry quip; sometimes grew soft as he joined in a students' chorus, or sat and spoke of tender spiritual memories; the intent air of listening which made every speaker feel that his words were being most exactly weighed; the response, frank, honest, decisive, amazingly informed;—that is the first recollection of Dr. Bruce. As memory and judgment are exercised, there is recalled the man of unaffected greatness; the scholar of lifelong, dogged, untiring industry; the thinker whose freshness and breadth, insight and suggestiveness had made him pre-eminently the preacher's expositor; the gracious and tolerant spirit which beat within the most catholic-minded man in Scotland.

One of his own cardinal principles of life was that in the providential order a man's training and experience indicated his work, and the office he filled marked out its limits. Any reaching out after work or office which did not arise inevitably out of the duty God gave a man to do, he held to be the act of a self-seeking ambition, resulting in injury to the work and deterioration to the character of the man. Of that principle his own life was a signal illustration. Born in 1831, in Forgardenny, Perthshire, and nurtured in a home whose first interest was religion, influenced deeply and decisively by the godliness of his father, of whose wisdom, breadth of mind, and tender humanity he loved to speak, quickened to a devotion that never failed, by the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843, he naturally set his face towards that goal of a godly Scottish youth—the Christian ministry. But the atmosphere of thought and of life which he breathed as a student in Edinburgh blanched the convictions of his inexperienced piety. Strauss' *Life of Jesus* gave him knowledge which brought him acute mental

distress, and revolutionized his thinking. The massive men of unique gift who filled the chairs at the New College could do little to help him. Their minds had been strained and set either by ecclesiastical or by mystical inquiries, and young Bruce had to fight his way back step by step to a standing ground of faith in the verities of Christ. A time of great professors is not always a time of great students. Bruce found his teachers elsewhere. He told his students in Glasgow, with emotion, on the occasion of Carlyle's death, that he was his first prophet. He lovingly treasured the name of Robertson of Brighton as the man who made faith rational, and he gladly recalled the help which Oswald Dykes gave him when he came to Edinburgh, preaching with his persuasive voice the spiritual ideal. Out of these years of *Sturm und Drang* Bruce emerged with a distrust and dislike of a rigid dogmatism, and a mind set to the apologetic bias which it kept through all his life.

After three years of a wandering preacher's life, spent chiefly at Ancrum and at Lochwinnoch, he was settled in 1859 at Cardross. The congregation had acquired an unhappy notoriety, and it was distracted and embittered. Bruce soon healed its divisions, and by the freshness and fertility of his preaching gave it another repute. Here in long, quiet days he perfected his knowledge of the synoptic Gospels, and preached his good news to his folk with an ardent delight. His studies were afterwards (1871) published in the *Training of the Twelve*, and there are few manses or parsonages in which it is not a familiar book. In 1868 he was called to the Free East Church, Broughty Ferry, where he grew and deepened; and in 1874 his first opportunity came when he was appointed the Cunningham Lecturer. His studies naturally flowed out in the lectures on the Incarnation, afterwards published under the title of the *Humiliation of Christ*, which many think his weightiest contribution to theology. In 1875 he was elected Professor of Apologetics and New Testament Exegesis in the Free Church College, Glasgow, in succession to Principal Fairbairn, and Edinburgh University conferred on him his divinity

degree. His life course was now marked out for him, and with a buoyant and untiring steadfastness, although twice threatened with broken health, he walked in it to the last.

His life expressed itself in three directions—in the work of his Chair, in the service of the Church, and in his contributions to Theological literature. The first two may be briefly spoken of; the last is the more important here. The note of his work in the Chair was thoroughness. His faultless knowledge, his mastery of German scholarship (although he never was in Germany), his sympathetic understanding of the attacks on the faith, his own rigour with himself resulting in a constant succession of fresh lectures, and in a scrupulous attention to the work sent in by students, and, above all, his absorbing passion for the New Testament, made his class an inspiration. There are always the non-susceptible in every class, but there are few who did not find his lectures both a liberation and a stimulant, and there are many to whom they were the line of light and truth. Many of the class had come from the spell of Professor Edward Caird, and they found only another master to revere. The request, with which he so gladly complied, to deliver courses of lectures to men who were in the ministry, and the reception given him at the meeting of the Glasgow College Association, less than a year ago, when he stood and spoke to reverencing men on 'The Preacher with Opened Lips,' indicated the deep indebtedness men felt to one who was a true master in Israel.

He was a loyal son of the Free Church, with a fervid admiration for Dr. Chalmers, and a belief that Chalmers saw more deeply into the necessities of church life and work than any other man of this century. All his energies in his service of the Church were bent towards essential ends. It was typical of him that he sent £100 of his salary as Gifford Lecturer to the Glasgow Church Planting Fund. He was not an ecclesiastic, and he had none of the gifts that make a man a politic leader of assemblies. He was alien in spirit to the 'body' who finds his delight in a committee. He could not understand the gleam of joy which floods some men's faces as they frame an overture. He was convinced that Disestablishment was a righteous issue, but he was even more strongly convinced that the methods of its advocacy gave the Free Church a needless unpopularity, and

injured greater causes. So he gave his time to the 'Readjustment of Agencies,' in the hope of releasing men and congregations from the embittering position of that heart-breaking competition and needless waste so common in over-churched Scotland. He became convener of the 'Strangers' Committee,' which attempted to prevent that lapsing of members of the Church which meant so often drifting away from Christ. He gave his strength to the advancement of the music of the Church, making his mark on the *Free Church Hymn Book*, and in years of patient service, successfully crowned by the issue of the *Hymnary*, making towards a common praise in our Scottish Presbyterian Churches. His unwearied advocacy of instrumental music brought him a long-delayed but abundant harvest in the end. It was a matter of unfeigned regret to many, and perhaps now a pathetic sorrow to most, that he was not raised to the Moderator's Chair. His was only a prophet's reward.

It was in his contributions to Theological literature that he revealed and expressed himself most fully. A list of his works declares both his tireless industry and the nature of his contribution. He was an exegetical apologete. He came nearest to a dogmatic utterance in the *Humiliation of Christ*, but even there the apologete finally prevails. In his *Miraculous Element in the Gospels*, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ*, *The Chief End of Revelation*, *The Kingdom of God*, *Apologetics*, the point of view is that of stating Christianity defensively. In the *Training of the Twelve*, *The Christianity of Paul*, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, the exegete has still the same troubled and ever-anxious inquirer in view. Even in the *Galilean Gospel* and *With Open Face*, he is thinking of men who have not accepted Christ because they have not understood Him; and the Primer at the close of *With Open Face* was misjudged by those who did not know the sincere desire Bruce had to let Christ in His simple beauty be known, assured that none who so knew Him would stop short of His unsearchable riches. It was a fitting close to this splendid series (perhaps a sign that his work was done) that he should be called to deliver the Gifford Lectures to the University of Glasgow on the *Providential Order of the World*, in which the apologete summed up his argument, and should expound the Synoptics in the Expositor's Greek New Testament, in which the exegete poured forth the treasure of all his years.

Dr. Bruce had only one subject. That was the glory, *i.e.* the character, of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. In every word he wrote he was either expounding that theme, and applying it, or defending it. He did not make much use of the Old Testament, seldom even preaching from it. He did not search Christian experience, although no one could be more tender to its needs. He was not greatly concerned with the Church and the sacraments, or with eschatology. He did not give the prominence to the Holy Spirit some desired, although, as may be seen in his lectures on Paul, his doctrine was full, clear, scriptural. He was held by the fact of the revelation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ—that Lord whose personality and work are detailed in the Gospels. To make mechanical interpretations impossible, to prevent Christ becoming a synonym for a mere saving machine, to set forth His humanity and Divinity, to show His wisdom, graciousness, moral loveliness, perfect knowledge of God and of man, was his constant endeavour. He never wearied speaking of the depth, the power, the poetry, the pathos, the charm both of Christ's words and of His deeds. And of all deeds, as his students well knew, the deed of redemption was greatest of all.

That central topic affected both his manner of treatment and the comparative values he had in theology. He confined himself largely to the Synoptics, not because he did not value the Gospel of John. There were some pages of it which he ranked as the most precious in the Scriptures. But much of it was not evidence for him of that Lord whose face he sought to set free from the grave-clothes of a mechanical theology. He studied Paul not for himself, but rather as a human document, a witness whose experience and testimony might reveal the mind of Christ. His passion for the Epistle to the Hebrews was due to the fact that its author had grasped the pre-eminence of Christ and the true issues of His life and work. Bruce, at times at least, was like Browning's 'Lazarus,'

Witless of the size, the sum,
The value in proportion of all things

that did not directly touch Jesus. And as he had his values in evidence, he had his values in presentation and argument. Christ's person and work must be shown to be 'worthy of all acceptance,' *i.e.* reasonable; for faith with Bruce was only reason in its highest act. Therefore it was that

while he himself accepted loyally the mysteries of the Kingdom, he was always standing in the porch, setting forth what could not be denied, appealing to men by the ethical rather than by the doctrinal, and leading men up through stages of spiritual growth to the acceptance of the stupendous truths which make up the secret of God. And in this, he believed, he had the mind of Christ, and followed His example.

Three very marked features of his teaching were due to this absorption in his central topic. They had very manifest consequences in his life and work, but there is only space to mention them here. One of these was his insistence on the winsomeness of Jesus, and the joy He brought to mankind. Another, which some thought to be in violent contrast, was his sense of Christ's moral severity. His ethical approach to Christ, his clear understanding that, although the gospel was good news, glad tidings of the grace of God, yet Pharisaism, cant, hypocrisy, double dealing, self-seeking, insincerity in any form, covetousness, sloth, and pride were deeply abhorrent to God, and alien to Christ, made him ruthless in his scorn for men who preached a high doctrine and lived a low life. The third was his sense of the liberty wherewith Christ has made men free. All legalism in worship, in creed, in custom, in the following of tradition, in any narrow conception of duty, in any bigotry of Church or institution, he viewed with a certain native impatience. In his preaching, in his friendships and fellowships, in his helpfulness to so many who had been almost driven out of the Church by a rigid and legal doctrine, all these issues of his conception of the mind of Christ were plainly evidenced.

It is easy to see, although it pained and vexed himself, why suspicion, in certain quarters, began to shake its head, and why at last it broke into clamour in the Church Courts. To some who had passed through the controversy over the methods of historical criticism, without learning that faith in Christ was something better than faith in a book; to others whose gospel was a set of cast-iron doctrines, or a certain definite narrow experience; to those who, while patient in spirit, were fearful of the boldness with which he wrote, and without understanding of his aim; and to others who looked askance at some of the theological company he kept, Bruce's statements seemed reckless, or irreverent, or insufficient, or even indicative of a

lack of faith in the Divinity and Atonement of Christ. His book on *The Kingdom of God*, in which he set in order the teaching of the Synoptics, with prophetic foresight of the problems, yet to trouble the Church, as to the knowledge and self-consciousness of Jesus, roused fears which have not yet been allayed. Perhaps the *Modern Church*, a weekly religious paper, in which he sought to bring together men of all schools of thought, did more than was guessed at the time to deepen the hostility. The College Committee were called in, and as a result of their inquiries, a gentle admonition was given to Bruce at the Assembly; but in the pathetic and impressive, and in passages, eloquent speech in which he defended himself, with its reference to the years of his early struggles, its great declaration of the ideal of the Church set before him by Jesus (to which he attributed some impatience with the real), its clear note of loyalty, and its wise and gracious statement of his position, he so changed men's minds, that any subsequent uneasiness became little more than a murmur from Glenelg.

As a preacher, although lacking both in the rhetorical and oratorical gifts, and unable or unwilling to use the adjunct of illustration, and devoid of that fluent energy which makes for popularity, he always found his audience. He gave his services freely, especially to his former students, and there are few churches in Scotland he did not visit, excepting in the north; and in England and America his was a greatly desired voice. As a friend he was beloved by many with a peculiarly ardent affection. In many homes his visit is a tradition to be treasured by old and young. In his own home, where all his welcome was echoed by his wife, his *bon-homie*, his deep personal interest, his large-hearted humanity made a feast. Who could not but honour and love a man of fearless transparent honesty, of inspiring faith, of large and catholic sympathies, devoid of all pretence, or affectation, or sham dignity, free from all vulgar ambitions or self-seeking (although naturally willing, like all

strong men, to use place and power), always kindly and helpful, as companionable as a boy, and as considerate as a wise and deeply-leavened Christian heart can be?

May I crave room to say one brief word about his personal piety? Anyone who has lived with him knows its depth and tenderness. It sometimes happens that a younger man is disappointed, even to heart-sickness, when he comes near men who have been all his life honoured names to him. An egregious vanity about silver hair, or a sunny smile, or a pithy power of phrase; an incredible egoism, which makes its words and works the centre of all thought; a love of the rich which is near akin to tuft-hunting; a desire for small pre-eminences; a most extravagant opinion of service; all these have disappointed and pained. To live with Dr. Bruce was to live under the power of the mind of Christ. Let me cite two things in proof. Anyone who sat near his desk might have seen a line of single letters written boldly on a slip of paper before him. What were they? They were the first letters of a sentence of prayer. *O s. o. T. l. a. T. t.* ('O send out Thy light and Thy truth') was a favourite line. His custom was to rise early, and as he began his work he wrote out some such appeal to God, and as the hours passed he lifted his eyes and murmured his prayer for help. A man, he once said, was not Christ's, who did not pray without ceasing. When I saw him on his dying bed, and death had left on him only the beautiful, he spoke of the Kingdom of God. It has been said that he was somewhat hopeless of the outlook. Nothing could be further from the truth. For as he spoke of his old students, calling a long roll of names dear to him, his face lightened as he heard of their fidelity, and zeal, and joy in the service, and he said, 'I have no doubt changes are coming which you younger men must unflinchingly face, new problems are being stated, which may trouble your spirits, but He has not left Himself without witness,—Jesus shall reign.' His benediction with uplifted hand was that of one ready to depart.