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M.E. Aubrey, "John Howard Shakespeare, 1857-1928," Baptist Quarterly 17.3 (July 1957): 99-108.

John Howard Shakespeare, 1857-1928

An address delivered at a service in St. Mary's Church, Norwich, to commemorate the centenary of his birth.

WE are here to pay a tribute of gratitude and affection to the memory of a truly great man, who would have reached eminence in many walks of life. He chose the Baptist ministry, and his denomination in this country and overseas owes him an immeasurable debt.

This is not an occasion for any exhaustive biographical account of what Dr. Shakespeare was and achieved. That would take a book. We must be content with a brief and inadequate appraisal of the influence of a full and immensely fruitful life. But it is now 74 years ago since he began his notable ministry in Norwich. Memories are short and few of us can go back so far. It is surely well to recount a few of the outstanding facts, that those of us who belong to a later generation may realize what sort of man he was whom God gave to be our leader, and the measure of his accomplishment. In the memoirs of Sir Geoffrey Shakespeare, his distinguished son, *Let Candles be brought in,* there is a beautiful and moving chapter, telling of his father and something of the work he did, which is worth reading many times.

Shakespeare described himself in his book, *The Churches at the Cross-roads,* a noble plea for the closer union of the Churches, and especially of the Free Churches, as having been reared "a Baptist of the Baptists, a dissenter of the dissenters." He confesses that as a child he was surprised that any intelligent person could be anything else. The idea of attending a church of another denomination never entered the minds of those among whom he was brought up. In his home novels were banned and, outside the Bible, his boyhood's reading was mainly confined to John Bunyan. "The chapel was the be-all and the end-all of everything." His father was a Baptist minister and so was his grandfather who worked in a village, like Goldsmith's parson, "on forty pounds a year." Dr. Shakespeare himself described the little meeting-house, the walls of which he could almost span with his outstretched arms, as "holy ground," so real and intense had been the worship there. But even in the

"sweet and saintly" spirit of his devout mother, no thought of Christian unity seemed to exist.

He tells us that the influence of Joseph Parker and Hugh Price Hughes gave him a new breadth of view and quickly he responded to it.

He began work as a youth with an insurance company. Maybe that was why, many years later, with the help of strong laymen, he caused to be founded the Baptist Insurance Company, which now gives good service to nearly all our Baptist churches. He sat a Civil Service examination and failed, not for lack of ability, but because his fingers, when he tried to write his answers, would not hold the pen and he sent in an almost blank paper. Some of us may be cheered to know that such a thing could happen to a man of such mental power. It consoled me when I read it! What the Civil Service lost, our ministry gained. How many of us ascribe our setbacks to the will of God? Shakespeare did. The hand of the Lord was in it. He was too much a realist to doubt his capacity. The failure meant that God was leading him somewhere else.

He had joined a London church and been baptized. Now he set his face to the Christian ministry. He entered Regent's Park College. As a student he had a distinguished career, with high honours, and in the London University M.A. examination came fourth in all England. He was invited, as a student, to St. Mary's Church, Norwich, to fill temporarily the gap left by the death of its minister, George Gould. His work and personality created such an impression that very soon he was asked unanimously to undertake the charge. Thus he entered into a great succession, following Kinghorn and Brock as well as Gould, a succession greatly maintained until this present time. His preaching was eloquent, dramatic, intensely evangelical and marked with great power. Around him was a company of fine laymen. The names of George White, Hewlett, Jewson, Harry Gould, Willis, Culley, ring bells still.

He threw himself into the religious life of the city and organized a united Free Church mission under the lead of Hugh Price Hughes. Its success made him realize what the churches in unity could do. Thus was born the vision that was to beckon and guide him through many years.

POWERFUL LEADERSHIP

When Dr. Booth, the secretary of the Baptist Union, resigned in 1898, Baptists turned to the young Norwich minister and he was appointed to the vacant post by the Assembly with unanimity. He had already given proof of his quality in a striking address on church extension.

The Union has now come to take a large place in the life of the denomination and of the Christian world. It is difficult for

anyone who knows it today to realize how completely different the picture was then. It was housed in three rather dingy rooms in the old Baptist Mission House. It had no home of its own. It was poorly regarded even by some of the great men of the Mission House who viewed with doubt, and perhaps even a little resentment (for even missionary statesmen are human), the energetic actions of the young secretary who led the Union into a larger place in the thought and life of the churches.

It is not easy now to imagine the obstacles in his way. The denomination had been split in two by a controversy which caused its most illustrious minister, Spurgeon, to sever his connection and that of his church with the Union. He had died six years before, but his followers were many and the feud had gone on. Feelings had been embittered, not so much among the great leaders such as Spurgeon and Archibald Brown on one side and Clifford, McLaren, and Richard Glover on the other, for they always kept a high regard for one another, but among lesser men whose partizanship outran their Christianity. Happily those days are past. Spurgeon's College and his great church are again within the Baptist Union. But Shakespeare had to walk warily during his whole term of office. It has been said that, if he had been secretary when the trouble first arose, his conciliatory statesmanship would have made short work of it. Be that as it may, it cannot be doubted that, as no other man, he fostered the work of healing and, before he left office, the breach had been largely mended. His powerful leadership, personality and persuasiveness drew about him practically all the leading ministers and laymen in our churches, and he converted a denomination, in which the "dissidence of dissent," an independency that at times approached isolationism, was almost a fetish among large sections, into a united and harmonious instrument for combined action in furthering the purposes of the Kingdom of God.

He did it, not by weak compliance with disgruntled and mistrustful adversaries but by bold action, the results of which nobody could gainsay. He won over devoted friends of Spurgeon like John Wilson, Cuff, Gange, Hiley, Greenwood and many others who stood beside him and gave him full-hearted support. They realized his devotion, caught his vision and, with laymen like George White, Herbert Marnham, John Horsfall and John Chivers, marched with him.

Triumph followed triumph. He gave the denomination a new self-respect and confidence. His burning spirit shone like a beacon. When he spoke it was with mastery of his subject and of his audience. I heard him first when my father took me, as a boy, of about sixteen, to Cardiff to hear him and John Clifford speak for the Twentieth Century Fund Appeal. The impression is vivid still of his fine presence, his advocacy and his intensity.

That fund of over a quarter of a million pounds was a daring venture. Baptists had never before attempted anything on such a scale in the home field. They were a bit staggered by their own temerity and could hardly believe it. But they confounded the faint-hearted prophets and surprised themselves. Shakespeare's first big battle had been won. The fund was there, the Church House was built, first steps taken toward evangelisation and church extension, the more worthy maintenance of the ministry, the help in a very limited way of aged ministers and widows, and the encouragement by special scholarships of students seeking to equip themselves by advanced studies for the ministry. To us, all that may look far-off and unexciting, for we have grown used to such appeals and even larger funds. But then it seemed tremendous, and it was. In my own experience I know what it is to persuade a body like the Baptist Union Council to launch out in big efforts. When we got £300,000 for the Superannuation Fund I was warned by business men that, under prevailing conditions, more than half that amount was impossible. When we called for a million pounds in the grim thirties, just before the last war, even men like Dr. Reaveley Glover made speeches urging that we should make it only a hundred thousand. Quite a lot of folk thought it madness but we overshot the mark by more than a hundred thousand pounds. Persuading people to ask for money is a grim business even now, and after many successes. But Shakespeare had to start from nothing—with no victories behind him. God only knows what it must have cost him in toil and trouble. It meant sweat and blood.

A few years later the Sustentation Fund followed. Another quarter of a million pounds was oversubscribed. Its main significance was not in the money raised, but in the use Shakespeare made of it to raise the whole conception and standard of our ministry. He realized that he could not appeal to the laymen of the denomination to accept responsibility for the better support of the ministry without doing more to ensure that it should be adequate for its task. A scheme for ministerial recognition and settlement was put forward. Then the rain descended and the winds blew! It looked for a time as if the gale might not be weathered. There were objections to everything in the scheme, the idea of tests for ministerial candidates, of time-limits on pastorates to avoid the difficulties of good men outstaying their usefulness, of conditions of efficiency for grants-in-aid, of the appointment of General Superintendents as helpers and advisers of the churches and ministers. To some people these last-named seemed likely to be pompous and prelatical personages ruling the churches with iron hands. It looks a bit amusing after all these years, but fears were real. It needed almost endless discussion and negotiation before the scheme was approved. Shakespeare's patience was sorely tried, but when the lightnings

had blazed and the thunders rolled he was still there, on his course. But it had needed all his skill to bring his ship home.

Mention of lightning reminds me of an incident when he invited me to attend a meeting for organizing one of his campaigns. The question arose as to what the leaders in each section of the country might be called. They might be "agents," "leaders," "representatives," "captains" or what not. I saw him look at me, and with the temerity of youth I suggested that, as it was to be a "lightning" campaign we might call them "conductors." The meeting laughed but I don't think he forgave my flippancy for a bit, for these matters were very serious. We finally called them "commissioners," a very good name.

In God's providence he got his scheme and the collections through in time. Its provisions look scanty now but it meant a great deal then. It ensured a minimum stipend of £160 a year. When I left the Union that had risen to double the amount, and under Dr. Payne's fine guidance it has gone to £450 and may soon be £500. Even that is less than £10-a-week wages at which many manual workers would rebel. But with the outbreak of the first world war the assurance even of so small a stipend was a great matter.

That war showed another side of Shakespeare. The old army organization had no place for Free Church chaplains other than Wesleyan Methodists. He asked that some be appointed. Turned down at first, with Lloyd George's help he secured an interview with the formidable Kitchener, then Secretary of State for War. I should like to have been there. The upshot of it was that Kitchener found his match and gave way. A note (says Sir Geoffrey Shakespeare) was afterwards found on his desk: "Find out who these Baptists are." I have heard that another note was found on his desk: "Baptists—a sect of the Jews." If it is true (and I do not know the authority) I am sure it must have been written before the interview, for Shakespeare would not have left him with any such illusion!

Shakespeare had an officer son in the army in whom he had an immense pride, a bold, adventurous young Cambridge undergraduate. He used to attend the church of which I was minister. As he is to speak after me I will not be tempted to say more about him. But it is no wonder his father was interested in the welfare of soldiers and provided chaplains for them and a fine Institute in Aldershot. The chaplaincy work then begun assumed large proportions in the first world war, and even larger in the second when numbers swelled again, and it still goes on. Of the United Navy and Army Board for chaplaincy services Shakespeare became the first Chairman.

The first war over, he turned again to denominational fund raising. This time it was a United Fund shared with the Baptist Missionary Society. Again the quarter-million mark was passed.

Part of the interest of it is that women came in for the first time otherwise than as money-raisers. Shakespeare had encouraged and helped to organize the Baptist Women's League and one of the objects of the new fund was to found and equip a college for the training of deaconesses.

UNIFYING WORK

In 1905 he wrote a book on *Baptist and Congregational Pioneers*. In fifty years the world has moved on and I think he himself would regard it as a little out of date. But it is still a rewarding book to read for the account it gives of Free Church beginnings and for its glowing spirit. The soul of Nonconformity breathes in it. Let me give the lines from Lowell with which it ends.

True freedom is to share
All the chains our brothers wear,
And with heart and hand to be
Earnest to make others free.
They are slaves who fear to speak
For the fallen and the weak:
They are slaves who will not choose
Hatred, scoffing and abuse
Rather than in silence shrink
From the truth they needs must think:
They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three.

That was his own spirit. As a young minister attending the Baptist Union Assembly, I can well remember him standing up in a critical gathering, in which it was plain that many had parted from him on the issue of Church unity and feared the way he was taking. Even the authority and prestige of John Clifford was on the other side, though no two men more honoured one another. Quietly but emphatically he ended his brief speech with the words: "I have chosen my path and I will stay in it." He was ready, like Athanasius, to stand alone against the whole world—a real Baptist!

In 1905 with Dr. Prestridge, of Louisville, Kentucky, he took steps to found the Baptist World Alliance, drafting its constitution and himself becoming its first European secretary. It has brought together the Baptists of the world. Last year's World Congress in London will be fresh in the minds of many readers. It was the ninth to be held and drew our people from all over the world.

In widening circles his unifying work went on. The compulsion of his soul did not stop at Baptists of Britain and the world. The evangelical fervour in his blood made intolerable the narrowness and rivalries he detected in the churches with the consequent waste

of resources and man-power. He became the apostle of Free Church unity. One of his greatest speeches was made in Norwich Guild Hall before the National Free Church Council. Following the line of his book, *The Free Churches at the Cross-roads,* it was a strident call to us to close our ranks, in face of moral, social and religious problems challenging churches and nation.

The appeal did not fall on utterly deaf ears, but the difficulties were great—traditionalism, denominational vested interests and self-satisfaction, questions of property. All showed up as excuses, but, as Shakespeare himself realized, there was also a firm core of denominational conviction, though he felt that this should not be an insuperable hindrance to the plan for one Free Church in England. It would have many autonomous parts yet be knit together by a common faith, in a fellowship transcending differences, and in the evangelistic task of taking Christ's Gospel to men. A divided Church, he held, could not save a broken world, which needed the healing touch. The task was urgent. He was scornful of those whose rule was "hasten slowly." The Churches were never likely to move too fast, and were rather in danger of being left behind like a lone, lost straggler in the onward march of mankind. He would not be told it was an impossible goal. The Church is always called to an impossible task, he declared.

The time was not ripe. He was disappointed to have to accept the way of federation rather than of union, and a loose federation at that. Yet out of his eagerness the Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches was born, later to be merged with a reconstituted Free Church Council.

Looking back I cannot help feeling that the Free Churches have missed the way and the hour and taken a wrong turning. We seem no nearer Free Church unity than we were then. I fear something went out of the Free Church movement when the Federal Council ceased to be as a body directly representative of the Churches. There has been a lowering of tone and vigour. Most certainly we are very far from making our unity in Christ and in His service as effective as they ought to be, and I for one lament it. There were some who thought Shakespeare erred by trying to force the pace. I think they were wrong so far as Free Church unity is in question. We ought to have been readier, bolder, more willing for sacrifice, more eager to find life by losing it. We may have lost the golden hour and not find such another for generations. Be that as it may, my conviction is that of our leader we may say, if he made mistakes, "The light that led astray was light from heaven." To him the great aim was the Kingdom of God through the service of Christ's one holy Church.

Later, the vision became wider still. The gulf between the Free Churches and the Church of England was a challenge to the idea

of oneness in Christ. Could something not be done to bridge it? The *Appeal to all Christian People* of the Lambeth Conference of 1920 provided the occasion for an attempt to bring the Established Church and Nonconformists closer together. Many conferences were held. I was young, but Shakespeare was after the young men, and, by no means unwilling, I was pressed to attend meetings at Oxford, London, Mürren and Maloja in Switzerland, and other places. We foregathered sometimes with distinguished visitors even from America, but usually with dignitaries, scholars and laymen of the Church of England, to see how we might grow together. I have heard all this described as a waste of time. It was not. I do not regret a minute of it. We gave what we could and learned a great deal, and we were conscious of a Presence and a fellowship that brought us something forever. We were pathfinders or at least explorers. Others will come along and tread again the almost lost trails and go further.

Shakespeare did not live to see the British Council of Churches or the World Council of Churches, but he was one of the forerunners.

Of all the pathfinders none served with more zeal and patient labour than he. He never shirked or faltered when opposed. He was unwearied in trying to bring people together, in seeking to reconcile points of view, in striving to find common ground. Many leading Anglicans were with us and we had men like Jowett, Garvie, Selbie and Charles Brown. Friendships sprang up. The way opened to better feelings, understanding and more concerted action.

Now there has come a pause in conversations and negotiations. Was Shakespeare too sanguine? I think he was. Had he been at Oxford or Cambridge he might have realized better the ingrained strength of some ecclesiastical prejudices and the hold of the Anglo-Catholic section of the Established Church. His brotherly heart seemed unable to understand that anything could come in the way of that drawing together of Christians that to him looked so natural and right. He underestimated stubborn difficulties and paid, in the event, a heavy price for his optimism.

In his own denomination he found hesitation, timidity, mistrust, though I never heard him speak himself one disloyal word. There came upon him a deep cloud of disappointment accentuated by the poor health from which he suffered, for he was always highly-strung, nervous and tense.

I was deeply saddened the last time he called me into his room at the Church House, not long before he resigned, when he said to me, "It is quite hopeless. The Anglicans will never give up their view of the Apostolical succession." It was not the remark itself, but the finality of the way in which he said it, for it seemed to gather up years of disillusionment and frustration. Ill, worn out by his

labours and by consuming fires in his own heart, unable to do anything by halves and fighting almost to the last, allowance must be made for his depression. He had not reached the goal to which he aspired, but he had fought better than he knew. None who went with him in those years of struggle could ever think meanly of him. His light kindled the lamps in us and, if they flicker, they have not gone out. He had the respect and honour of us all.

My memories play about him. I think of his personal kindness to a young student when I came to London for the Baptist Union Scholarship interview. I was asked what line of theological study I wished to pursue, and replied that I was interested in apologetics. Old Dr. Richard Glover was there and growled at me (perhaps to try me out), "Young man, do you think the Bible needs to be apologised for?" I was astonished and was about to reply that I did not see what that had to do with it, but Shakespeare got in first, and with Greenhough, sat on him rather heavily and extricated me from an awkward situation. He much wanted me to become minister of his church at Highgate, which Rushbrooke had just left, and said he would become a deacon if I went, but nevertheless approved my choice of Leicester, and shared the ordination service with Principal Selbie. His encouragement was unfailing. When he came down to Cambridge to stay with John Chivers, he came to St. Andrew's Street on Sunday, and there was always a kindly comment on the services. We played golf on the Monday—I remember he didn't like losing! I recall how once he suddenly decided to stay over the Sunday instead of returning on Saturday, and how he telephoned on Saturday morning for his silk hat to be sent down—an interesting little sidelight on his punctiliousness, his own sense of personal dignity and the manners of those days. Tall, straight, with a fine presence, a face rather drawn and worn, but to me always full of kindness, I see him still and cherish the picture. His intensity made some people afraid of him. They thought him autocratic, but the Union needed an autocrat in those days. His drawing power was immense and he got things done. Clerks in the office dared not look up as he passed through. If one did he would be over to say, "What are you doing now?" If he could be stern with others, he was sternest of all with himself. He hardly ever relaxed, but there was always a welcome and a cheering word for any man he thought was doing his best, and he could be delightful company.

I was privileged to see him from time to time when his life drew to its end. The storms were over. He was rather helpless and tired, yet his eyes shone as I spoke to him of the work, and he was content and happy in the love and care of Mrs. Shakespeare, who at ninety-five years of age is still with us, the devoted helper who spared and gave him to his work and, in the background, sustained him in his constant labours with her gracious companionship and

counsel. The affection and the successes of his children were a happiness and a source of pride.

I think it was Mrs. Shakespeare who first told me he wanted me to succeed him. His approval of my appointment gave me confidence and joy. To those who knew him well he was not only a man of many parts, transcendent gifts and strength of character, but also a lovable, consecrated servant of our people, a great-hearted son of the Church of Christ and a humble follower of his Lord. Whatever others may say or think, nothing will ever shake my own conviction that he was of the true apostolical succession of the ministers ordained of Christ.

"Many years ago," he wrote once, "I learned the secret of rest in my public life, and since then I have cared for one thing only, that my plans and purposes should be after the mind and will of God." Nobly he discharged his trust. We follow after. We reap where he sowed. He laboured and we have entered into his labours.

M. E. AUBREY

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