

Pulpit & People

**Essays in honour of William Still
on his 75th birthday**

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WILLIAM STILL:

a biographical introduction

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

William Still was born on the 8th of May 1911, in Aberdeen. Both of his parents, William and Helen Still came from the little fishing village of Gardenstown some forty miles north along the coast from Aberdeen.

His early Christian nurture took place within the context of the Salvation Army Corps, so that by the age of thirteen he was already a decided Christian, eager to find some sphere of service in the kingdom of God. But it was another twenty years before those early aspirations found their chief fulfilment when, in 1945, he was called to his first (and as time has now demonstrated, his only) pastoral charge of the Church of Scotland, Gilcomston South in Aberdeen.

Mr Still once briefly summarised the first half of his life in this way:

From the age of seven I suffered a series of set-backs in health which seemed by adolescence to confirm my inability to make anything of my life. I tried to work with my father in the fish trade at fourteen, turned to music at seventeen, to Christian service in the Salvation Army at twenty-three, and in six months was in a state of nervous exhaustion. Four years later, somewhat improved in health, I offered for Salvation Army work again, but was rejected on the grounds of health, and immediately decided that I must try to fulfil my, by then, clear call to divine service, elsewhere than in that branch of the Christian Church.

Now, after forty years of ministry in Aberdeen, it is possible for us to look back with him and recognise how characteristically God took one of the weak things of the world to show his own faithfulness and power (1 Cor. 1:18–2:5). Certainly, humanly speaking, had his life taken its intended course, the impact of his ministry would have been very different from what it has been.

Now in his late twenties — having left school at the age of thirteen — he entered the University of Aberdeen, and during the Second World War began his studies for the Church of Scotland ministry, at Christ's College. He then proceeded to Glasgow, as assistant minister to Dr William Fitch, in Springburn Hill Church in the Springburn area of the city. During his year as an assistant (about which there are numerous stories of almost legendary nature!) he was involved in a train accident. He was hospitalised for three months, and thereafter recuperated in Aberdeen. He had already been approached by the "vacancy committee" at Gilcomston South Church, but he had remembered the advice of one of his College Professors never to accept a call to his home town. So he had declined, gratefully but firmly. His recuperation

in his home town, however, led to the reversal of that decision. His record of how he changed his mind is intriguing:

It was while I was hipling about Aberdeen, first on two crutches, then on one, and on two sticks, then on one, that my maternal aunt Bella, recently widowed, came to the West Church of St Andrew with me one evening for the 7 o'clock service. It was an informal service, and the minister chatted with the people in the aisles afterwards. He saw me and asked what I was going to do. I said 'Erskine Blackburn of Holburn Central Church (who was interim moderator in the Vacancy) has asked if I will accept a call to Gilcomston South. What do you think?' He said 'I wouldn't. My assistant says, "Not even Saint Paul could do anything with that place"'. Later that evening, while waiting at the 'bus stop, my aunt asked me, 'What was the minister saying?' I told her. 'And what do you think of that?' she asked. Then, almost casually and with, as I recall it, a far-away tone in my voice and no sense of the dramatic, and certainly no sense of destiny, I replied, 'Maybe less than Paul will do'.

The call was later accepted. The West Church assistant minister had not been engaging in a piece of smart cynicism in his remarks about the condition of the Gilcomston South congregation, whose building stood almost directly across Union Street from the West Church itself. It was war-time. In the event, of the 600 names on the Congregational Roll, only 74 members and 2 adherents were to sign Mr Still's call. Earlier in the 'vacancy', between December 1943 and June 1945, discussions had taken place about the possibility of merging the congregation with another. Only 58 members had been present at the meeting which resolved to continue as a separate congregation, and of that number 18 had voted for union with another congregation, 14 for dissolving the congregation altogether, and only 26 for continuing! These were hardly encouraging statistics for a new minister. But William Still had received a profound sense of conviction that God was calling him to minister in this church. As he often later remarked, that conviction was to carry him through many discouragements, frustrations and disappointments, during the years of ministry which followed.

These past four decades of ministry at Gilcomston South have been notable for many reasons. In fact, this one lengthy ministry has, in several respects, been many ministries, as the congregation has grown in size and Christian maturity, and as its membership has changed over the years. Even the emphases in the pulpit and in the style of church life have developed. New avenues of service have opened up, and new burdens for prayer and concern. As Mr Still once wrote in a congregational letter:

No man and congregation can go on year after year doing the same things and keep alive unless there is not only change, but sequence, rhythm, and (we hope) progress towards solid spiritual achievement, that not only meets the need of our day, but points forward, prophetically, to the spiritual needs of tomorrow and to a new generation.

The first months of ministry, in the aftermath of the War, were marked by a flood of evangelistic activity. This partly coincided with a remarkable visit to Aberdeen by the then young and relatively

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unknown American evangelist, Billy Graham. Two meetings were held in the church in 1946, during one of which the following interchange took place:

I took the opening prayer When I returned to my seat in the choir pew, I found myself seated next to Billy. In his expansive human way he turned and put his arm round me and whispered, 'Will you come to America?' 'Just like that?' I asked. 'Yes' he said

But William Still did not go to America (either then, or later!). He did, however, throw all his energies into a series of Saturday night gatherings for young people, held in the church. These 'rallies' had everything: choirs, organ, piano, solos, testimonies, sermons! Hundreds crowded into the sanctuary and many dated their Christian beginnings from those meetings. Large numbers of military cadets were among them. People were 'falling into the Lord's lap like plums', Mr Still later wrote. Suddenly Gilcomston South seemed to have come to life; financially it began to prosper, and within a couple of years givings had quadrupled. From many points of view the new ministry was all that could have been hoped for. It seemed that, after all, a 'lesser than Paul' had managed to do something with Gilcomston South!

Parallel to this excitement, however, came a transformation in William Still's own thinking. As if by accident he had begun to do something during the Sunday services which — although he did not then know it — had first been done by the great preachers of the early church and of the Reformation. He had begun to preach in a consecutive and systematic way through the Bible. Even although he did not then recognise the precedent for what he was doing, he knew that there was a new depth and penetration in his preaching, and a character-forming power in God's word, which made these other services seem somewhat superficial by comparison. He became convinced that the work to which God was now calling him was the building of strong Christian character through the patient teaching and preaching of the whole word of God.

He took a radical decision. Abandoning the Saturday night 'rallies' he began a meeting for prayer instead. The effect was instantaneous and numerically dramatic. Between one Sunday evening and the next, the congregation at the evening service *dropped* by between two and three hundred. So upset were some people in the city that they accused him of driving the young people out of the church and into the cinemas on a Saturday night! His answer — which he wisely refrained from giving — was that there was nothing hindering them coming to pray. What better way for a Christian to spend the evening?

But Mr Still had stumbled on something which was to leave an indelible impression on him: even given personal differences over the wisdom or otherwise of this change, the challenge to become a man or woman of prayer, to share in the very nerve centre of the church's life.

is one from which many turn away in order to stand on more convenient ground. From that time until today, his ministry has been to smaller rather than larger congregations. From the beginning, or virtually the beginning of his ministry, he has set his heart on quality, even if it should be at the expense of quantity. The fact that the Gilcomston prayer meeting has continued to convene for two hours of prayer each Saturday night for forty years is a testimony to his commitment to that early principle.

This determination has been coupled with a commitment to another principle: the chief task of the pastor is to guard and tend his own flock. From the 1940's until now, Mr Still has consecrated his entire life to the people of his flock. Indeed as early as 1948 he wrote to them:

I have cut out every external activity and interest, and every moment of my time is solely devoted to the work of Gilcomston and the needs of its wider congregation (apart from such engagements beyond the bounds of the city as are approved). There is no part of me, or of my life, that I will withhold from the work that God has called me to, and I am determined that no mere form or convention will hinder me from giving the message in the church in a way that will be understood even by the most unlettered person.

This commitment has at times reached unusual lengths. When, in 1974, he actually *declined* the increasingly rare honour of the award of the degree of Doctor of Divinity from the University of Aberdeen, and was asked by a friend for the reason, he simply replied that he did not want his people to be having to call him 'Doctor' after so many years as 'plain Mr'. Perhaps there were other reasons, but he was resolved that nothing should ever divert him from his primary and all-demanding task of serving Jesus Christ by serving his people.

One of the chief features of William Still's life (and a feature which binds together the contributors to this *Festschrift*) has been his special care for young men and women during their student years — either at Aberdeen University, or through one or other of the Christian Union groups in the British Universities and Colleges. To hundreds of us he has been friend, pastor, example and encourager. To dozens of ministers, both in and beyond the Church of Scotland, he has been the *pastor pastorum*, the ministers' minister. Like Christ, the Chief-Shepherd, of whom he once wrote, 'He always had time for the individual . . . and always made them feel that they were worthy of his closest attention', William Still has cared for others. Those of us who have been the happy recipients of that care present to him in the following pages a small token of our affection and care for him, and our gratitude to God for his ministry to us and to all the people of God.