

## WILLIAM STILL (1911–1997), MINISTER OF GILCOMSTON SOUTH CHURCH, ABERDEEN, 1945–1997

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‘**K**now ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen in Israel this day?’ (2 Sam. 3:38). David’s poignant words on the death of Abner will have come instinctively to the minds of many Christians throughout the world on hearing of the death, on 30 July of this year, of William Still, minister of Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen.

Ill-health in the last two years had increasingly limited Mr Still’s ministry to preaching on Sundays, and on 8 May of this year, the date of his eighty-sixth birthday, he demitted the pastoral charge of the congregation he had served with unstinting devotion for fifty-two years.

The fruit of his ministry in the university city of Aberdeen has spread, both in personal influence and in prayer, to the ends of the earth in the multitude of spiritual sons and daughters who constitute his true children (he remained single throughout his life). His example of biblical ministry has been a beacon to guide and encourage countless gospel ministers; his deep pastoral love for his own congregation, his commitment to shaping a truly Christian fellowship, his investment of profound personal care and prayer in the lives of countless people – students who sat under his ministry while at college, as well as many others – and, in addition, the penetrating insights of his writings – these constitute his spiritual legacy. Yet even those who will miss him most keenly will recognise a fittingness in the fact that the close of his pastoral ministry and the end of his earthly life have been divinely synchronised – for Christ’s people in Gilcomston South were, in a profound sense, his life. Having demitted his pastoral charge he has now been, in words he frequently recalled from his earlier days in The Salvation Army, ‘promoted to glory’.

The story of Mr Still’s life has been recorded in various places.<sup>1</sup> It is a

<sup>1</sup> Chiefly in his autobiographical *Dying to Live* (Christian Focus) and, more briefly in the introduction to *The Letters of William Still* (Banner of Truth Trust). His own multi-volume *The Gilcomston Story* chronicles his ministry in detail.

remarkable tale of childhood and teens dogged by weakness that at times was almost crippling – and from which he was rescued only by the intervention of a Glasgow physician. The narrative continues in the struggles of a sensitive, musically gifted, and at times lonely youngster who longed to serve Christ, somehow; in the disappointments of unfulfilled training for service in The Salvation Army. It develops into the story of a young man whose formal schooling was cut short at thirteen returning in his twenties to study in Aberdeen University in order to prepare for the Christian ministry; of a drifting arrested by God’s providence. Then, in 1945, came the call to be minister of Gilcomston South Church on the main street of his home town – apparently answering the prayers of a woman who had been interceding that God would send ‘someone out of the ordinary’ to preach Christ in the city. So began a ministry which was truly ‘out of the ordinary’ and would not end until five decades later.

Mr Still believed that, in some senses, this one lengthy ministry was really several ministries. Certainly it passed through various stages. In the post-war years there were bright and busy evangelistic meetings with large numbers of converts ‘falling into the Lord’s hands like plums’, as he put it. Then came the first revolution: he ‘stumbled’ on expository preaching as on successive Sundays he found himself, as if by accident, preaching consecutively through a portion of Romans. As he began to see the effect of such preaching he sensed that here was a wiser, richer, more fruitful and more lasting way in which true Christian character would be built; now he must go deeper. The extravagances came to an end; extensive corporate prayer on Saturday nights became the order of the day – and would remain so throughout the years. The apostolic model: ‘prayer and . . . the ministry of the word’ (*Acts* 6:4) became the staple diet of congregational life.

Other developments, spiritual and practical, were inevitably to follow the intense searching of Scripture. One, to which he returned again and again, was what he called ‘the three dimensions of the cross’ – the multi-faceted significance of Christ’s death to deal with sins (their guilt), sin (its power) and Satan (our enemy), a theme which he embodied in his seminal book *Towards Spiritual Maturity*.<sup>2</sup> The third of these dimensions became a regular refrain in his teaching. Seeking to avoid all obsessiveness with Satan (a *defeated* foe, as he never tired of saying), Mr Still nevertheless urged Christians to recognise the ongoing power and subtlety of his activity. Later,

<sup>2</sup> Currently published by Christian Focus, and also printed in William Still, *Collected Writings* (Rutherford House), vol. 2: Studies in the Christian Life, pp. 1–38.

the second element would come into a fuller and richer role in his ministry as he came increasingly to understand and appreciate the believer's union with Christ in his death and resurrection and its ongoing implications for Christian experience.

William Still came to his ministry as a child of some of the dominant influences of the evangelical world of the mid-twentieth century: the theology of The Salvation Army, the general ethos of *The Scofield Reference Bible*, and the emphases of the older quasi higher-life type Bible teachers. But he continued to find the light of Scripture breaking into and reshaping his thinking – and as he did so, he drew the congregation through the experience with him! – until his theology became increasingly moulded by Scripture and distinctively Reformed in character. He preached (and wrote) his way through the entire Bible several times. And it is doubtful if any living minister has so lovingly and enthusiastically read the chapters of the Westminster Assembly's *Confession of Faith* to his congregation the way Mr Still frequently did. Certainly few others will have read with such enthusiasm so much of John Owen's writings (as well as portions of John Murray's commentary on Romans) to the teenagers and students who at various times and in different places sat under his ministry!

In this covenant theology Mr Still found a doctrinal resting-place and focus for his growing convictions on the nature of the life of the church: God's covenant people, whose children might be reared 'in faith, not fear' (the title of one of his most widely-read booklets), living together in a fellowship of 'almost domestic simplicity' (so that the only formal gatherings of the congregation were for prayer, worship and mid-week Bible study). The 'unstarching of the church' was the expressive and penetrating metaphor he called in to service to describe this radical simplifying of congregational life.

There was an underside and an inside to this; a costliness of a deep, private and poignant kind, occasionally unveiled to those he loved best. He knew intimately the apostolic principle that 'death works in us, but life in you' (2 Cor. 4:12). The public fruit of this, however, emerged in his sheer and dogged enthusiasm for the truth of the gospel, expressed in the context of a melting sense of the love of God in Christ. To an exceptional degree he communicated in his public ministry that light was still breaking forth from God's word into his own life. This emerged too in the long hours of personal ministry and counselling in which he engaged, giving himself to people in a way that made each of them feel that he or she really mattered to him, and therefore to the Lord – because they did, intensely. He had an abundant measure of the gift of discerning in the raw material of an individual's life

what God's grace might make of them. And all this was set within the context of a life of prayerful communion with his Lord.

Mr Still's stature as a leader was evidenced in his ability to call forth the loyalty of men who were very disparate. Hundreds of his fellow-ministers in the United Kingdom and far beyond looked to him. The Crieff Fellowship which he founded over twenty-five years ago, originally as a gathering of around twenty of his friends, grew over the years to have an invitation list of hundreds – and yet it remained an *invitation* list; this, he insisted, was simply a gathering of his friends. With manifestly God-given grace and strength he presided over it for the last time in January of this year – as one visitor noted, like an ancient patriarch among his children.

In his Minister's Letter in the *Gilcomston Record* for January 1948, Mr Still wrote:

There is no part of me, or of my life, that I will withhold from the work that God has called me to.

It was a mark of his evident commitment to Christ that he could pen such words; it has been a wonderful evidence of God's grace that he remained so faithful to them. Half a century later, in his last public address, given to the Presbytery of Aberdeen on its acceptance of his demission from his pastoral charge, he said:

I am not afraid to step aside and let the work go on and grow and expand in days to come, long after I have gone. And it affords me the greatest satisfaction possible to see the living Church of Jesus Christ going on from generation to generation incorporating – and this is the important thing – the youth, the children . . . oh that the Church, the real Church of Jesus Christ will endure and go on from generation to generation! Glory to God.

Those who knew Mr Still well personally will recognise that these paragraphs do not begin adequately to express the many-sidedness of his life and work, or what it was like actually to sit under his ministry and to be cared for and pastored by him. Perhaps, therefore, a few words of a more personal nature may be added without intruding into this brief tribute.

I first came to hear Mr Still preach when I was seventeen. For three decades thereafter he taught and exemplified for me the grace of God in the gospel of Christ and, for all the age gap, made me his friend. He invested loving care, prayer and time in my life in a manner and to a depth which it would be impossible to describe. There was, at various times, counsellor,

encourager, comforter and cautioner. He cared for and loved my family; he sorrowed with us in our griefs and rejoiced in our joys; he seemed to take more delight than we ourselves did in any hint of fruitfulness, success or honour we experienced. And he always sought to think the best of us.

Perhaps the most touching thing of all for me personally was to witness the way his being seemed to melt with a mixture of humble incredulity and thankful gratitude to the Lord whenever we tried to express to him what his life and ministry had meant to us. What was especially remarkable about all this is how the same quality of love could have been showered on so many others. Yet it was; we knew it, as did they. It would grieve him, I know, if I did not immediately add that this was all of grace. But it was also very evidently of grace. He had clearly learned from the Lord Jesus how to love many with the same love which was simultaneously completely individualised.

Perhaps I can say nothing more telling about Mr Still than that since his death every time I have thought of how he now contemplates the face of the Lord Jesus Christ a further thought has immediately and instinctively followed: How glorious that Saviour must be who can and does recreate his grace so lovingly in such frail humanity!

William Still was a burning and a shining light. Those who knew him best will inevitably feel that they will not see his like again, and sense an unrepayable debt for the privilege of receiving his ministry and the Christ-centred affection of his pastoral care. He walked with God and has entered into his rest in the Saviour whom he trusted and loved; his works will follow him. He was, indeed, a prince and a great man.

### The Sound Christian

The sound Christian, in a sound sense, bears some resemblance to the Divinity in his sufficiency: and the more treasure he has, the more is he like God; for such a soul is elevated above the creature, and placed in a higher orbit, which storms and tempests cannot reach. Nay, a soul whose conversation is in heaven, hath no dependence upon, nor intercourse with the creature, in order to complete his felicity; no more than the sun needs the glimmering light of the stars to make day. I might also add, that herein is the Christian's resemblance to the infinite Jehovah, because he has a principle of motion within himself, and not from without; for as God is a free Agent — as he himself is the sole cause of his own actions — so in a sense do the saints act from an inward principle. Hence those Scripture expressions, of a man's spirit making him willing; and of the heart smiting a man, or witnessing for him, or with him. Wicked men are dead; but grace is a principle of life, and resembles the Author of it: 'for that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.' The decayed liberty of the will is in part restored by grace; and so far as the soul is spiritual, the soul of a saint is a flame of fire ascending to and acting for God.

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## NEWS & COMMENT

### Funeral Service of Mr Still

On 4 August 1997, a company of over six hundred people gathered in Gilcomston South Church of Scotland, Aberdeen, to share in the funeral service of the Rev. William Still. The service was movingly led by the Revs. James and George Philip, men whose lives and ministries have been inseparably connected with that of William Still from his early days in Gilcomston.

The entering into God's nearer presence of William Still marks the passing of an era in the life of the Church in Scotland, and especially of the Church of Scotland. For over fifty years Mr Still pioneered a single-minded commitment to systematic, expository preaching and congregational prayer which made Gilcomston a beacon of Reformed evangelical Christianity in Scotland.

Such bare comments, however, do not begin to do justice to a man whose very life breathed the grace and love of God. No one who ever met William Still, received his counsel, or sat under his ministry, could have escaped the sheer Christlikeness of his life. The real passion of his life was his preoccupation with the majestic glory of God and the unfathomable, electing love of God in Christ.

For all the remarkable insights of his prolific preaching and writing ministry, William Still will be remembered best as a Christian who loved his Saviour. Most notably in his opening prayers of worship on the Lord's Day, his whole soul was absorbed with his God, and all who worshipped were led by him into the uncharted depths of God's glory. It was remarkably appropriate that the two hymns sung at the funeral service, both chosen by Mr Still, were 'Now thank we all our God' and 'Jesus the very thought of Thee', hymns which beautifully expressed the inner

essence of this dear servant of God.

At the interment, the Rev. Sandy Tait spoke of how the mantle of William Still had now passed to his many children in the faith. May the God of all grace equip us to take up that mantle and wear it with the faithfulness, fearlessness, love and passion that so marked the life of this much-esteemed servant of Christ.

### A Glimpse of Brazil

Ian Hamilton and Maurice Roberts flew out to speak at two conferences in Brazil during the month of June. For both men this was a first visit to a land which they had previously known only from afar. The long plane journey was abundantly compensated for by the kindness shown them by the Christian who looked after them so affectionately upon their arrival. Each year conferences are organised by the Puritan Project, a ministry aimed at educating pastors and leaders in the Brazilian churches by introducing them to the theology and principles of Puritan religion. The two venues were Recife in the north (where there is a Presbyterian theological college whose early academic staff included Princeton and Scottish connections) and Aguas de Lindola, not far from the vast city of Sao Paulo. The speakers were encouraged to discover several titles by Dr Lloyd-Jones, A. W. Pink and other Reformed authors in Portuguese and a healthy programme of translation work proceeding steadily to place the best books into the hands of Brazilian Christians. We were delighted to meet here Mr and Mrs Bill Barkley and Mr Richard Denham, all of whom have spent many years in Brazil promoting Reformed literature work. The book table did a brisk trade and all the volumes carried across the Atlantic by the two Scottish preachers quickly vanished!

First impressions suggest that the young are attending evangelical churches in Brazil in greater numbers than are commonly seen in Britain. Of the six hundred or so in the morning service at a Recife Presbyterian church the majority seemed to be made up of young people. We were informed that there would be more there in the evening service. It was very evident that