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### HARVEST OF THE AGE

A DISTINGUISHING feature of the Bible Student movement was its insistence that the early 20th century was to witness a "Harvest of the Age", a period during which the sum total of all Christian evangelical work effected during the two thousand years of Christian history would head up into a climax heralding the fact that the Second Advent, so fervently anticipated by many ministers and laymen of every denomination during the 19th century, had now become reality. There was, however, a fundamental difference. The old-time orthodox view of the event looked for a humanly visible appearance of the returned Christ in the upper skies with attendant angels, coming to earth to conduct a twenty-four hour Day of Judgment, in which dead and living are to be summoned before him to be adjudged worthy of everlasting life or everlasting punishment - in older times the terrors of a fiery Hell, although this aspect was becoming increasingly rejected in the present. The Bible Student position was that the Advent covers a period, that its initial stage is one in which the returned Christ is present, although unseen, overruling the actions and affairs of men so that the powers of this world will, by the ordained time, yield to his rule and from then on this world will be under his benevolent administration. This was the vision, and when compared with the more sombre and even terrifying outlook on things theological which it was set to challenge there is small wonder at the zeal and energy with which the early converts set about proclaiming the message, nor the interest aroused and the acceptance it received. "Good tidings of great joy" they insisted, and so it was. The salient principle, that none - whether unbeliever, unreached heathen, or reprobate - could be eternally lost without first being brought to a full "knowledge of

the truth", to use the New Testament phrase, thus solving all the enigmas of those who in this world have died without even hearing of the means of eternal life, had been widely discussed in Christian circles for half a century past. It was left to Charles Russell to point out that this precisely is the purpose of the coming Millennium and because of his conviction that the Millennium was at the doors he was bound to lead this worldwide proclamation.

So, in the year 1903, Pastor Russell landed at Southampton to commence a series of visits in which he became as widely known here as in his native America. (His first visit in 1891 was a preliminary one to "get the feel of the country", so to speak.) There was a sizeable number of enthusiasts waiting to greet him. The principal London church, which had existed since 1883, now numbering some 400, were his hosts as at his 1891 visit, and there was the younger Forest Gate church of about 125. These between them arranged the first London Bible Students convention, a function which has continued more or less without intermission since; on this initial occasion the attendance at the five sessions started at 400 and reached a maximum at the last session of 800. After a short trip in Scandinavia the Pastor returned to visit Glasgow, where the comparatively small church there had gathered a thousand interested people to hear him. (This established their fortunes; within the next eight years their church membership had increased to 500.) Of the fifty or so other local churches which had by now been established in the UK he was able to visit seven and address public meetings with audiences up to 600. A final visit to London to find, in conjunction with Jesse Hemery, a more convenient London office for the expanding work, in succession to the existing one at Gipsy Lane, Forest Gate, duly acquired and opened at 24 Eversholt Street, Kings Cross, in central London, and he was away.

This set the pattern for the next ten years. In 1905 he sent one of his co-workers, M. L. McPhail, to conduct the first of what became known as "pilgrim visits" throughout the country. The function of a "pilgrim", always a mature brother in the Faith, was to visit each local church on a planned route, stay with them one or two days, conduct meetings of the church at

which features of the Faith could be more fully discussed, address a public meeting if such had been arranged, and put them in touch with other adjacent churches of whose existence they had not heretofore been aware. This was the commencement of a close acquaintanceship and co-operation between local churches which has always been characteristic of the movement. The members regarded each other as brethren in Christ and in fact this word "brethren" became a common and much-used descriptive epithet. In this particular instance McPhail was able thus to visit forty-eight of the seventy churches existing at that time, ranging from Brighton, Portsmouth and St Leonards on the South Coast, through Chatham, Maidstone and Sevenoaks in Kent, to Greenock, Glasgow and Dundee in the Scottish lowlands, with Belfast and Dublin in Ireland. During the next few years more pilgrims followed, Benjamin Barton in 1906, A. E. Williamson in 1907 and 1908, and Frank Draper in 1911, by which time the number of individual churches had increased to at least 120.

In all of this the UK brethren had by no means been idle. During the seven years 1903-1909, still not much more than 3500 strong, they had distributed by hand more than twenty million large four-page folders and twenty-seven thousand volumes of "Studies in the Scriptures". Much of this work had been done by individual brethren; the institution of Saturday afternoon "tracting efforts" whereby parties freed from daily occupational obligations gathered to distribute folders and tracts door-to-door over a prescribed area, leaving the seed thus sown either to bear fruit or wither by the wayside, as the case might be, became a practice which subsisted through the years. There was always the element of light relief, as for instance when a somewhat surly-looking individual, taking the proffered tract, demanded "What are you, Socialists?". "No, Bible Students!" "H'm, just as bad!" The work was onerous, the tracts were not like those of modern times, a few inches each way in size, but were the dimensions of newspapers and relatively heavy to carry in quantity. The younger members of the fraternity adapted their bicycles (cars were few and not possessed by many in those days and certainly not by teenagers) to carry the heavy weights of tracts; thus loaded they pedalled

their way somewhat uncertainly at imminent danger to life and limb to strategic points from which the distributors would replenish their stocks from time to time. The writer distinctly remembers, when thus loaded, coming a cropper on the tramlines in the Old Kent Road, South London, on one such occasion at a much later date, with considerable damage to the bike and some to the rider. What happened to the tracts is not remembered.

An appreciable part of this activity was carried on by colporteurs, a term meaning an itinerant distributor of religious literature. From time to time, various brethren in a position so to do, gave themselves to this work, travelling from town to town and calling on householders to introduce what by this time was being called "the Truth". The ordinary literature was free but a nominal charge of one shilling (5p today) was made for the "Divine Plan" which for a clothbound book of 350 pages was not bad even in those days; this was to avoid frivolous acceptances and give some assurance that the book would be valued and used. In the earlier years, 1887 to 1903, there was not so much of this in evidence. C. H. Houston of Edinburgh travelled fairly extensively in Scotland and on one occasion disposed of 420 volumes in fourteen days. By 1900 there were four colporteurs in regular service and in that year a quarter of a million books and tracts were placed in thirty-nine towns. In 1901 that output was doubled and in 1902 attained 700,000. But the real day of the colporteurs was from 1910 onwards, when public awareness of the Bible Students was becoming general and the generally more or less Christian outlook of people in general facilitated acceptance and a hearing ear. The visits of the Pastor to this country and the public meetings addressed by him were evoking much public interest and the itinerant colporteurs found much to encourage them in their work, self-sacrificing though it was. Going from town to town, they had to find lodgings where they could, sometimes, but not always, with brethren of like faith. More often, when in country districts, they did find themselves at times like the Master they served, having nowhere to lay their heads. When it is realised that between 1910 and 1915 the brethren of this country had succeeded in distributing fifty-four million pamphlets and

three-quarters of a million volumes of "Scripture Studies" one has to accept that the achievement meant sheer devotion to what was universally accepted as the work of Harvest - the Harvest of the Age.

Much of the work of these colporteurs is of necessity incapable of being put on record. They served, in the main, largely in the background, rarely able to attach themselves to a regular meeting and only able to fellowship with their brethren when operating in a town where a meeting existed; the nature of their calling meant that in the main they worked in areas where there were no meetings. It was largely in consequence of their endeavours that new groups were formed and regular meetings commenced. The colporteurs were of all types and from every strata of society, having this one thing in common, the burning passion to give themselves to the proclamation of the Gospel of the Kingdom. There was Archibald Rock, ex-military man, still erect and stiff as a ram-rod, who could be seen in the period 1907-1916 in the towns and villages of South-East England and the Home Counties. There was his brother Robert, converted prize-fighter, still bearing physical signs of that life, who could chill the blood with occasional reminiscences of his victories and defeats in the prize ring and experiences on the more seamy side of London life - yet now as gentle as a child and utterly persuasive as he went from door to door with tracts and books. Down in the far South-West was Mabel Coombes, a diminutive semi-crippled lady of uncertain age and the heart of a lion. Until sheer old age compelled her to stop, she dragged herself from door to door and more than one group in Devon and Cornwall owed its inception to her labours. And when she could do no more she retired uncomplainingly to an old peoples' home and went quietly to meet her Lord in 1951. Lily Blake, not very tall, looking as if a puff of wind would blow her away, trudged from door to door in central England through rain and shine, unperturbed and quietly confident. Her irrepressible sense of humour came to the top when she recounted how on one occasion the Rector of the parish had warned his flock in his parish magazine to "beware a little lady with a silver tongue who is going from house to house in the village seeking to interest people in Millennial Dawn". For ever afterwards Lily

was referred to among the brethren as "the little lady with the silver tongue". Albert Lloyd, whose origin was a bit of a mystery - he used to say that he was born in the gutter and brought up in the gutter - brought his natural exuberance of spirit to bear upon his work in the North of England, as for example when upon one occasion, receiving no answer to his knock but feeling certain that there was someone inside, and noticing a butcher's cart in the road, he reasoned that the butcher would soon be calling. He rapped again and called through the letter-box "Meat! Meat!" and sure enough the lady came. "Oh, I thought you were the butcher!" "So I am, madam, and here it is. Meat in due season, for the household of faith." Whether the lady recognised the Scriptural allusion is not recorded, but at any rate Albert disposed of another Divine Plan. Victoria Wright, statuesque and every inch a lady, impressed all upon whom she called with her reasoned and dispassionate exposition of the Divine Plan. Thomas Stracy worked the South Coast and half a dozen groups in Southern England owed their inauguration to his work. And despite the discomforts and hazards, the colporteurs maintained a serene happiness which stemmed from the fact that they were preaching a happy gospel. The Lollards of the Middle Ages were known in their time as "God's glee men" because they went about with happy faces singing praises to God. The colporteurs were something like that. They had a message for all who would listen, a message of hope and happiness, good tidings of great joy for all people, and it had to shine out from their faces. In these later more prosaic times it must be difficult for anyone who never knew those days to visualise the spirit of spontaneous joy which animated these who went out with the news of earth's coming glory.

In 1894 there was one colporteur in full time service, in 1900 there were four. By 1913 there were ninety-three, and every part of the country was being covered. The modest book depot which had been started in North London in 1891 under the supervision of Thomas Hart, one of the elders, had long since been outgrown by successive moves, first to Forest Gate and then to Eversholt Street; by 1911 it was in more commodious premises at Craven Terrace, Paddington, and the demands of the colporteurs for more and more supplies were taxing even

the facilities. A major portion of the 130,000 volumes of "Scripture Studies" which went out in that year were placed by the efforts of the colporteurs, not to speak of several millions of pamphlets on various subjects which also went into the hands of the public.

It was inevitable that the fervour of the brethren, coupled with their steadily increasing numbers, should begin to call for the holding of conventions in the principal cities, usually lasting several days and at a public holiday time, at which the tenets of the Faith could be expounded from the platform coupled with exhortations to Christian living and reflections on the signs of the times in connection with proclaimed expectations of the imminent Millennium. Such conventions remained, and still remain, a feature of the fellowship. After the memorable London and Glasgow conventions associated with Brother Russell's second visit to this country in 1903 the pattern was set; national conventions were held year by year in London and Glasgow, and, commencing in 1907, Manchester, which by then boasted more than three hundred members with a considerable number of small groups located in adjacent towns. What had by now become an accepted feature of church life in the growing community was maintained by similar conventions in 1908 and 1909, and thus the ground was laid for what was probably the most momentous year in the history of the movement - 1910.

1910 became legendary. It was the year of the Royal Albert Hall meetings at which Brother Russell, on his fifth visit to England, caught the imagination of the British public. Nothing like it had ever been seen before; nothing like it was ever seen again. The conventions of that year were associated with public meetings attended by thousands of people, and the brethren caught the infection. Public meetings there had been previously, from 1908 onwards, in cities like Bristol, where Brother Russell spoke to a thousand people on "The Overthrow of Satan's Empire", at St Andrews Hall, Glasgow, to nearly five thousand on "The Return from Hell", and in four or five other cities with a combined attendance of eight thousand. It was in 1908 that a somewhat humorous episode occurred when A. E. Williamson, one of Brother Russell's colleagues accompanying him, was

giving a similar public lecture at Otley. Otley was a small mining village not far from Bradford, and in the early 1900s six Methodist ministers and lay preachers in the vicinity had all accepted the Truth and commenced a group. This, coupled with the visit of the American preacher, evoked the villagers' interest, and the local reporter, making the usual enquiries appropriate to his calling, misheard the appellation "Millennial Dawnists" as "Aluminium Dawnists", by which name the brethren at Otley were, locally, for a long time subsequently known.

This activity continued throughout 1908 when Brother Russell addressed three thousand at Manchester after the Manchester brethren had distributed 150,000 leaflets advertising the meeting, another two thousand in the City Hall, Glasgow, twenty-five hundred in Edinburgh and twelve hundred in London. All this was only a "run-up" to the most eventful year of public meetings the brethren were to know.

In May of 1910 a party of American brethren arrived in England with Brother Russell - his fifth visit - for the purpose of conducting a planned series of public meetings all over the country commencing with the Royal Albert Hall in London. The party was preceded by one of his co-workers, G. C. Driscoll, who was also an official of the USA Press Association; his presence was for the purpose of enlisting the co-operation of the British Press. A month later the main party, which had been on the Continent, arrived and were met by a hundred brethren of the London community, headed by one of its most active elders, John Gentle. The church had put out three-quarters of a million large four-page leaflets advertising the Albert Hall meetings and were ready for the fray.

The first meeting at the Albert Hall was on May 8. Seven thousand five hundred people packed the auditorium to hear Brother Russell. The occasion was a sombre one, for King Edward VII had died the previous day and the nation was in mourning. The advertised subject was "The Great Hereafter" and the mood of the people was to listen.

The Chairman of the meeting was Brother (Colonel) Sawyer, a bluff old soldier who had known the Truth for a number of years and had the habit, in private conversation, of



referring to Brother Russell as "the Archbishop" and to Jesse Hemery, now manager of the London literature depot, as "the Bishop of London". After the opening hymn he introduced the speaker, "Pastor Russell, of Brooklyn Tabernacle, New York, a well-known preacher of the Gospel, and author of 'Studies in the Scriptures'". Pastor Russell, he said "magnified and illuminated the majestic Plan of God, the mind and purpose of God in creation, the fall, the redemption, the restoration, perfection and salvation of the human race, through the name and merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ".

Before commencing his address, the Pastor referred to the death of the King the previous day, and expressed his sympathy. He suggested that as a mark of respect his hearers should stand silently for a minute. The entire concourse rose in their seats and stood, quietly, until the voice of the Pastor was heard upraised in prayer, and then, the tones of the great organ pealing what was said to be the deceased King's favourite hymn, "Nearer, my God, to thee".

Only then did Pastor Russell commence his discourse, to which the vast audience listened with marked attention. At its end, and after the closing prayer and the benediction, the audience started for the doors. Their progress was suddenly arrested. The organist, Brother Thomas Stracy, commenced to render the "Dead March in Saul", a final tribute to the late King. The entire concourse stood still with bowed heads until the music died away, and then, as it was recorded at the time, remained still "in a silence so profound that it was necessary to pronounce the benediction again in order to disperse them". So ended the most momentous witness to the coming Kingdom that has ever been known in the history of the movement.

Two more meetings were held in the Albert Hall on the two following Sundays, with attendances of 6000 and 5000 respectively, to hear the Pastor speak on "Millennial Refreshing" and "The Overthrow of Satan's Empire".

Five months later he returned to England to address a second series of Albert Hall meetings. The response was equal to that of the first occasion. For three Sundays in succession he faced increasing audiences; 4000 to hear "God's Message to the Jews", 6000 for "God's Message to Christendom", and 7600 for

"The Great White Throne". Public interest was such that nearly seven hundred British newspapers carried reports of the meetings, quoting his words at greater or lesser length. It was obvious that something more had to be done and so six further meetings were advertised for local areas in London; the Pastor addressed these at Acton Baths, Alexandra Palace, Bermondsey Town Hall, East Ham Town Hall, and Woolwich Town Hall. The attendances at these local meetings ranged between six hundred to twelve hundred at each venue.

All this activity gave reason for holding a national convention of the brethren in London, which, in order to accommodate the numbers who would be attending, was held in Whitefield's Old Tabernacle in City Road, Central London. Here Pastor Russell addressed the conventioners from the pulpit in which both George Whitefield and John Wesley had preached in the 18th century.

The rest of the country was not neglected. Between these two sets of meetings Brother Russell toured the country, meeting with enthusiastic responses both from the brethren and the public at each place he visited. A convention at Glasgow mustered five hundred brethren and over 3000 at the public meeting; Manchester, now a rapidly growing community, contributed four hundred brethren and two public meetings of over one thousand at each. Some half dozen other Midland cities together with Belfast and Dublin were visited with public meetings at each place, and so a memorable year came to its close.

One of the consequences of the 1910 meetings was the onset of the "newspaper work". The noticeable increase of public interest in the message and work of Pastor Russell soon brought the daily Press to the doorstep and it was indicated that the British newspaper world would by no means be averse to featuring his sermons in their columns. The consequence was that a syndicate was set up with an office in the Strand, London, fulfilling the function of receiving the sermons as they were preached in USA or England, and distributing them to every daily and weekly newspaper in the scheme. Commencing in 1910, by the end of 1911 no less than three hundred national dailies and provincial weeklies were publishing the sermons at

length as a regular feature and the combined number of copies of such papers reached a maximum of twelve millions annually which implied that virtually every newspaper reader in the country came into contact with the message. Many thousands of enquiries were received in the London office in consequence. The onset of the 1914 war with its paper shortages began to limit the scale of this witness, but it continued during the ensuing ten years in diminishing volume, eventually developing into a system whereby local churches and individuals found local paper editors who were willing to accept news and details of their activities and special functions for their columns and this practice continued for many years thereafter.

It is impossible to say how many people thus received and believed the message without avowedly throwing in their lot with the Bible Students. The number of known active members of the movement bears no relation to the number of those who believed, attended meetings when they could, and carried the vision with them to the end of their days. Workers in later years frequently came into contact with such, who had the "Scripture Studies" on their bookshelves and still avowed belief. The fruits of the Harvest were by no means confined to those who became "members of the brethren". There were many thousands of others.

The euphoria created by these events was now to give rise to a significant proposal. The London Church was the largest and most influential in the country. It comprised eight mutually independent self-governing churches in various parts of the Metropolis. Brother Russell was now to suggest that they combined forces to establish an impressive congregation in an appropriate building in Central London – and so events moved forward to the opening of the London Tabernacle.



A. Tsit



W. Knox



J. Edgar



W. Johnston



D. Morrison



A. Kirkwood



E. Mackenzie



J. Wilson

GLASGOW



A. Raynor



W. Drinkwater



A. Hodson

NOTTINGHAM



— Ward



— Glass



S. Smith



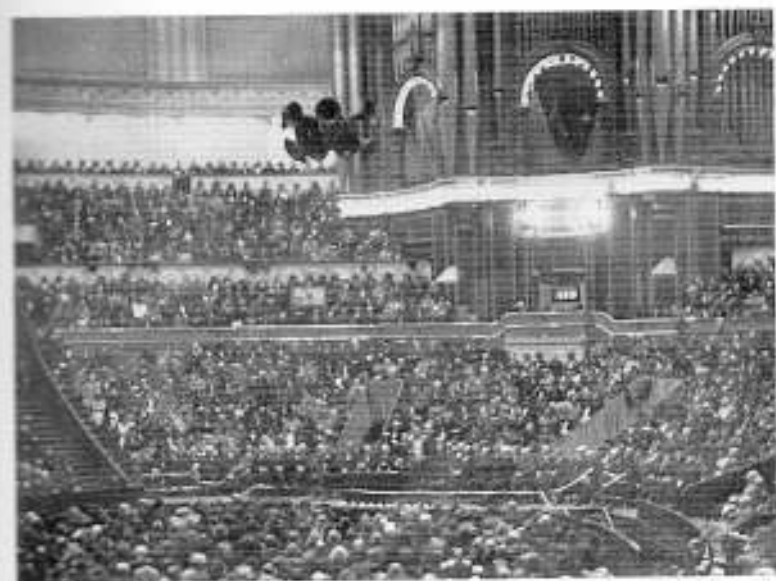
— Gates

MANCHESTER

SOME ELDERS OF PROVINCIAL CITIES CIRCA. 1910



Royal Albert Hall, London



Pastor Russell preaching at the Royal Albert Hall,  
May 8, 1910



