SHOWERS OF BLESSING IN ULSTER

The Life and Ministry of W.P. Nicholson

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The turn of the 20th Century brought with it two decades of political and religious turmoil in Ulster: the Home Rule Bill, the signing of the Ulster Covenant, World War 1, the Easter Rebellion and eventually Partition. These events all had their toll on the Ulster population, especially the Great War; after the slaughter of the Somme, the very soul of Ulster was wounded. The sheer magnitude of the loss rocked Ulster as so many of her finest sons never returned to her shores. Families in all corners of the Province were never the same again; Ulster was in need of healing. For a people who feared God and cherished His Word the only way they could be healed was by hearing from Him.

With this vitally important task ahead God raised up a faithful servant, a minister of His Gospel. It was Robert Murray McCheyne who said “A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God”.

William Patteson Nicholson was that God prepared Gospel Minister. He was born just outside Bangor on the 3rd April 1876. In his youth his mother and father moved the family home to Belfast so that W.P. would have access to a better education. He was sent to the Model School in the north of the City. He went on to describe his time here, “I was taught clearly and quite often very painfully, but I learned all I needed”.

W.P. as he was more commonly known, was to develop from a very early age a great passion for sailing. If we remember that in those days there were no planes in the sky and...
only horse and carts on the roads, it was understandable how young boys would have had a love of ships with their majestic sails. W. P. describes his feelings at the time in his memoirs as follows, “I became restless and discontented and wanted to go to sea. I wanted to become a sailor. I played truant at school and spent my days around the docks looking at the ships and longing to be on one that was sailing far away”.

After much discussion and prayerful consideration his parents allowed him to leave school early and he used this opportunity to join the Naval Cadets. To W.P. this was a dream come true. He recalls how proud he was when he first put his uniform on with all its shinny buttons. At sea he was to learn discipline, hard work and responsibility. Indeed it was the type of experience that if it failed to break you then it would make you. W.P. referred to these formidable years by saying, “The regular work, the long hours, the fresh air and heavy lifting made you healthy if most unhappy”.

In his memoirs entitled “AN UNFORGETTABLE VOYAGE”, he recalls that while on a ship bound for South America the cargo went on fire and then the ship was caught in a bad storm. Their ship began to list and take in water. They toiled all night and became very cold, wet and exhausted. In their half frozen state they faced the terror of death. He told friends later, “If I ever prayed to God to save me I prayed that night. It wasn’t the watery grave I feared, it was the lake of fire”.

However, just like many who have prayed in the face of overwhelming danger, after the Lord has delivered them and they soon go back to their old ways, W. P. was no different as in his own words he said, “I continued in my sin and denied and blasphemed God”.

The old Puritan Richard Baxter said, “Death is only disarmed when the pleasures and the interests of the flesh are denied”.

This was a lesson W. P. was yet to learn and it is a lesson we all must learn as this is the first lesson that is taught in the School of Christ – the lesson of self-denial. Those who fail to learn this become self-deceivers and ultimately in the end, self-destroyers. W.P. gave us a very sobering thought on this matter when he penned these words, “If you think you can live in sin and die in peace and then go to heaven, you are being deceived. If you don’t accept Christ when you have a healthy body, what makes you think you will when you are dying? The greatest lie that has been believed by so many is that they will be able to make their peace with God tomorrow – tomorrow is eternity”.

What W.P. was saying was that tomorrow is too late, as tomorrow may never come for you or me. Today is when we have the opportunity to make our peace with God.

It wasn’t until he had been home in Ulster for three weeks that one Monday morning while waiting on his mother preparing breakfast that he describes his conviction of sin, “Suddenly and without warning a voice said to me ‘it’s now or never’”. He went on to explain how the sweat broke on his brow and he trembled all over with fear. In his heart he cried, “Lord I yield, I repent of all my sin and now accept Thee as my Saviour”.
Immediately, suddenly, powerfully and very consciously he was saved. He rose up from the chair that he had been sat on and went across the kitchen, “Mother” he declared, “I am saved”. His mother quickly responded asking, “When, where?” to which he replied, “Just here and now”. At first she was unable to speak and just hugged him. Her baby boy had not only come home to her but had come to Christ too.

Old Matthew Henry said, “Christ is not only our Saviour, but our very salvation”.

W.P. Nicholson while waiting for his breakfast had a visitation from God and was born again on Monday 22nd May 1899 at 8:30am. It is important to understand that no one ever gets saved by giving their heart to God, we are saved not by our giving but only as a result of God giving His only Son for our sin.

The great Reformer Martin Luther said that, “If salvation could be attained by hard work then surely horses and donkeys would be in heaven”.

That same day W.P. told as many people as he could that he had got saved and that from that moment forward he was living his life for Christ. When W.P. got converted, like so many of us, there was a honeymoon period. A time when peace and assurance were in abundance. This state continued for a while but then life did not go just as smoothly and in his memoirs he refers to this time as, “Sometimes doubting, sometimes trusting. Sometimes joyful, sometimes sad, sometimes up, but most of the time down”. He knew he was saved but he still felt plagued with sins of both the flesh and the spirit. Sins like jealously, malice and hatred; every time he would crush them they would rise up worse than ever before.
W.P. was learning a great lesson and that lesson was that while God’s promises us a safe landing He does not promise us a calm passage on the way there. What wonderful lessons we learn in the School of Christ.

Another very important fact for us to comprehend is that tempting times are also teaching times. A significant snare that W.P. was trapped in was the awful fear of man, for he was by nature a very shy man. He said that this fear had caused him to be ashamed to stand up for the Lord in public and in his memoirs he referred to himself as, “A sneak and a cowardly Christian”, a situation for which he despised himself. He attended every meeting but still felt something was lacking in his experience and even while he was present at prayer meetings he found that prayer was a real penance. W.P. existed in this lukewarm state for a period of about six months after he was saved. Even though he knew that he was a child of God he was aware that in so many areas of his life he continued to feel a slave to the Devil. He was committing sin and confessing it before the Throne of Grace, but he never got victory over it, however this was soon all to change.

After attending a convention in Belfast at which the speaker was the Rev. J. Stuart Holden, W.P. once again heard from heaven. This time it was through the voice of the preacher and W.P. was to surrender all for Jesus.

What was the lesson that W.P. had learned that had made the difference? He had learned that it wasn’t him that lived, but that it was Christ that lived in him. This may sound so simple but that night with W.P. it was so profound and it was what he needed to hear. He knew that the Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ had not only the power to cleanse him from all sin but to keep on cleansing him from all sin.
After the meeting he went for a walk along the shore and made an unconditional surrender and gave himself totally to the will of God. His prayer life that he once considered to be a real penance took on a whole new life. Gone also was the old fear of man that had been such a snare to him. When he eventually returned home his mother knew there had been a change and when he told her what had happened she was delighted for him. Her prayers had been answered as he had been brought to submission by the love of God.

As a result of that glorious night W.P. knew that he had greater things to do for God; for a time he felt that he could only witness to individuals however, soon he became led to hold a meeting. A cottage meeting was duly arranged to take place in a believer’s kitchen and which W.P. was scheduled to speak. This did not go according plan. When W.P. was about to speak he was unable to say anything, standing dumb in front of those gathered. Following the embarrassing moment a lady said to him, “Don’t worry Mr. Nicholson, you will do better next time”. The lesson W.P. learned from this experience was that the sermon that has been wept over is more acceptable than the sermon gloried over and this all important incident taught him that and was to remain in his thoughts throughout his life. Oh what precious lessons we learn in the School of Christ.

He was to continue to speak at these cottage meetings with his confidence growing all the time. So much so that on one occasion he actually invited someone to the meeting to hear him. They said, “I won’t go, but I will still hear you because you preach that loud that the whole village hears you”.

A. W. Tozer said, “preachers are not diplomats they are prophets, they are not there to offer a compromise they are there to give an ultimatum: - repent or perish”.
As the years went on this was to become the main characteristic of his ministry and earned him the nickname of ‘the tornado in the pulpit’.

The opportunity came for W.P. to go into full time service and he was accepted into the Bible Institute in Glasgow. His years there were both happy and fruitful. He recalled how many open-air meetings were held in Glasgow and of how many great preachers there were. During the summer he was sent to be assistant to Dr. Henry Montgomery in the Albert hall in Belfast and he referred to these days as glory days. He learned so much from the ministry of this Godly man.

When his days in the Glasgow Institute were approaching an end he began to seek the Lord for direction as to where he should serve Him. At first becoming involved in missions in Lanarkshire among the steel workers and coal miners. This was hard work but he loved it. The norm here was to erect a large tent and then take turns to preach in it. In his own words he said, “This would either cause a riot or revival”. He felt drawn to the people in Lanarkshire who were a rough and ready people but they were hard working and had a heart for God. Working among them proved to be the bedrock for his training, as it was while he was here that he developed his plain preaching. C.H. Spurgeon once said, “We have too much polite preaching and too many polite preachers”. W.P. must have heard him because while his preaching was many things, it certainly was not polite.

He was to take his plain preaching to both Australia and America. Trips to both these places proved to be extremely fruitful with many converts. Prior to his Australian trip W.P. married and his first child, a daughter was born. The thought of leaving them to travel to the other side of the world was
difficult decision for him, however he knew that this was the will of God for him so he set off in that confidence.

This circumstance reminds us of the words of an old poem that was also to become a hymn:- “Where He may lead me I will go, For I learned to trust Him so, So onward I go no doubt nor fear, For His lovely presence is always near, His divine will is sweet to me, Where He sends, that’s where I’ll be”.

Even in Australia W.P. was still in the School of Christ and he learned not so much as to how to preach, but why to preach. He explained this by saying, “God gave me a passion for souls and the passion for souls was greater than the passion to preach”. This was Nicholson’s secret strength. He cared more for the spiritual welfare of the people than he did about the act of preaching, even though he loved the preaching of God’s Word. He had a deep longing to see men saved and he did not care who they were.

By the start of the Great War in 1914, W.P. was a regular visitor to America and in fact it was there that the Lord placed him and kept him safe during those arduous years, ministering in the Moody Memorial Church in Chicago where he was loved for his trait of plain speaking.
It was in America that W.P. witnessed the power of preaching on an even greater scale as multitudes were saved through his simple but profound plain preaching of the Gospel. This was another lesson that he was never to forget:- the life giving power of God’s Word when it is opened up and presented to the people. There is nothing more powerful than the Word of God!

God’s plan always works according to His schedule and after the War W.P. began to make preparation to return to Ulster. During his absence Ireland had changed. Apart from the effects of the War on the population, the country was the stage for some dreadful sectarian tensions that it had not witnessed the like of for centuries and as for Ulster, the War had ravaged and wounded her very soul. Returning to Ulster in 1920 he found it on the very edge of civil war. In his memoirs he described his experience as follows, “When I arrived in Ulster I found the country terribly disturbed, there was a curfew and Belfast City was deserted”.

Belfast in 1920 looked to W.P. as a doomed city and he described how his eyes filled with tears as he gazed over the night sky to see large fires burning from one side of it to the other. There was a bleakness and dread that hung over Belfast and Ulster as a whole. Partition had not at this time been decided upon in the Westminster Parliament and no one knew what the future held. It was into this tense environment that W.P. arrived from his mission in America.
It was E.M. Bounds who said, “The Church is looking for better methods while the Lord is looking for better men”.

There are four things that a preacher needs to know.

1. He needs to know his God
2. He needs to know his Bible
3. He needs to know his times (the generation into which God has placed him)
4. He needs to know himself

With a sound knowledge of all four of these W.P. Nicholson was blessed in abundance and they were clear to see through his preaching.

Following his years of preparation it was into the midst of this environment that God sent W.P. to work. He was to take his first mission in the Albert Hall on the Shankill Road.

While the ensuing days were fruitful days they were also testing days. The Albert Hall was one of the largest auditoriums in Belfast in 1920 and to fill it in normal times was challenging enough but in an atmosphere of fear W.P. refers to this time by saying, “Those who came to the early meetings in the Albert Hall had to lie flat in tram-cars because of the bombs that were going off as they passed by. Even during the meetings, shots being fired outside could be heard frequently inside by those brave enough to attend the meetings”.

However God was to reward them for their faithfulness and despite the trouble the Albert Hall was crowded out every night. There are reports of hundreds not getting inside the Hall with some even trying three or four times before they were able to get to hear the preacher who was nicknamed “the tornado in the pulpit”.

W.P. Nicholson
The people loved him as he spoke in such simple terms but with such authority. Every word rolled off his tongue with a sense of thunder of command. There was a freshness about his preaching unlike too many today and there was a power with his preaching, a power that came with an anointing from Heaven.

Many who came were saved and they were mostly men. Hundreds of them were shipyard workers and like the steel workers and miners of Scotland they were drawn to Christ by his plain preaching. So Ulster’s showers of blessing began to fall in 1920 on the Shankill Road in Belfast. Those were the beginning of a new season of glory days, not only for Ulster but also for W.P. Nicholson.

A dislike he had was that for choirs and so much so that he called them, “The Devil’s War Office”. This resulted in him leading the singing himself. At first this was a difficult task and he was fearful as he could not tell one note from another. Speaking about the music book he said, “The wee black notes looked like starlings on the telegraph wires”. He discovered that the congregations were the choir and that they sang their hearts out for God. These meetings lasted for hours and in his own words he said, “When God brings revival you forget about time”.

On one of the meeting nights hundreds of shipyard workers arrived in a procession led by their chaplain. They were still dressed in their dungarees and many of them did not even stop to eat but went straight to the mission. This particular night became known as ‘the night of the big push’ when two hundred and fifty nine people were saved. The Nicholson Revival was under way.

There was evidence from the start that this was God’s Revival as restitution was seen to be made everywhere under deep conviction of sin.
Longstanding debts were paid and stolen tools were returned at such a rate that the shipyard had nowhere to put them. It was evident that lives were being transformed.

After this, missions were held in large towns all over Ulster. W.P. spent six weeks in the Maiden City. His time in Londonderry proved to be extremely fruitful with hundreds being won for the Saviour.

In Ballymena W.P. caused quite a storm as on every night of the mission windows were broken in the church building and by the time the meetings came to an end the cost to replace all the broken glass was seventy pounds; quite a sum of money in 1921. W.P. recalls in his memoirs that Ballymena was the most fruitful of all the missions. With hindsight it is clear to see why they were so intensely attacked; the Devil does not like it when his cage is getting rattled.

In May 1921 W.P. travelled to Portadown and with him came revival. Apart from hundreds of people being saved, the Christian Workers Union was formed and its Hall is still in use in the town today. It will not be long now until the hundredth anniversary of the Hall and over those years thousands have went through its doors to hear the Gospel preached.

In Newtownards the mission was held in the First Presbyterian Church where one elderly man recalled the power of God and reflected on how the preaching of W.P. Nicholson and the effects it had was not unlike what he had witnessed during the great revival of 1859. In fact all over the Provence people who were old enough to remember were likening what was happening to the great revival that swept Ulster during 1859 and the few years that followed.
Not only was Nicholson renowned for his plain preaching but also for his sharp wit. There was one occasion that the church he was speaking at in East Belfast was quite crowded when two ladies, one dressed all in yellow and the other all in black had moved too far along the aisle; looking at this situation from the platform, W.P. stepped to the front and said, “Would that old crow get out of the road so that the canary can get sitting down”. At this the crowd erupted in laughter.

At the same mission he was told (allegedly in confidence) that a man in the congregation was bad to his wife. W.P. stood up and just before the offering was collected he said that if he did not see a Ten Shilling Note in the collection basket he would tell everyone who it was that was ill-treating his wife. When the offering was lifted it was full of Ten Shilling Notes! The missionaries did well that year.

These missions continued throughout the 1920’s. It was a glorious time in Ulster as God had once again opened the windows of Heaven and poured out a blessing. For this work W.P. Nicholson was raised up and blessed by God with plain preaching. The words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 verse 26 come to mind when we think of W.P. - “For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called:…”

Nicholson was to have a long and fruitful ministry. In fact I would argue he was the most fruitful Evangelist in the history of Northern Ireland which is not yet a hundred years old. If Northern Ireland’s ‘birth certificate’ was the Ulster Covenant then the man called to perform its ‘baptism’ was W.P. Nicholson, a shy man who feared crowds. He preached more or less up to the very end of his life.

On the 18th September 1958 the Belfast Telegraph ran with the headline “Evangelist is Comfortable”. W.P. was eighty two years old and the years
of his fruitful labour were approaching an end. At the time of this headline he was very ill in hospital and was called to his rest a number of months later on 29th October 1959. He had been a patient in the Victoria Hospital in Cork when he passed away.

The eighty three year old firebrand was buried in Bangor following a funeral service in Hamilton Road Presbyterian Church in the town. The service was conducted by Rev. David Burke and the Scripture was read by Mr. Noel Grant. The service was closed with the words, “So we take leave of W.P. Nicholson until the morning and as we think of the influence that he had on his generation, when we consider the times that we now live in, we are constrained to cry:- God give us men, a time like this demands strongmen with great hearts, true faith and ready hands. Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy, men who possess opinions and a will: men who have honour, men who will not lie, men who stand before a demagogue and storm his treacherous flatteries without winking; tall men, sun crowned who live above the fog in public duty and in private thinking”.

GOD GIVE US SUCH MEN!