

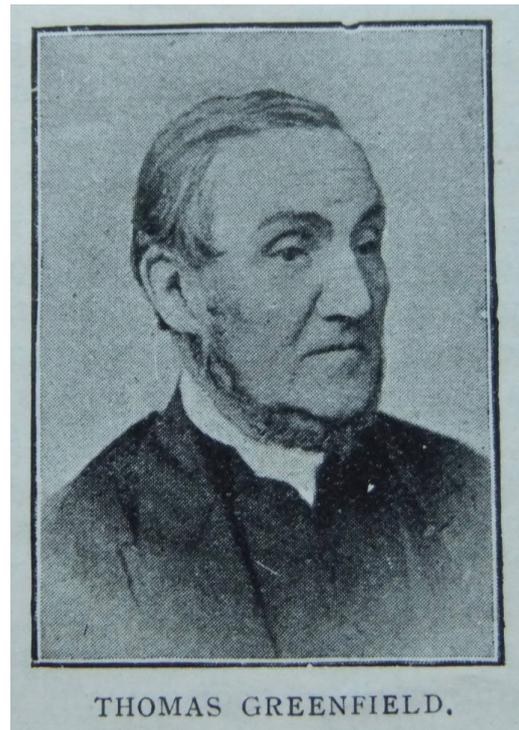
Transcription of article in the Christian Messenger by Joseph Ritson in a series 'Preachers of Thirty Years Ago'

During my probation, which began nearly forty years ago, I heard a great deal about Thomas Greenfield. He was then within ten years of superannuation, but still in the hey-day of his wonderful ministry. That ministry was in many ways unique. It did not belong to the popular order, attracting admiring and excited crowds. There was absolutely nothing sensational about it. It was the ministry of a man who knew his text-book as few men even of that day could pretend to know it. Thomas Greenfield had read many books, but they nearly all bore on the study of the Bible. In a very real sense he was a man of one book. Then one learned that he was a wonderful Greek scholar, whose expositions were not a little indebted for their breadth and insight to a singular familiarity with New Testament Greek. A knowledge of Greek among our ministers of that day was not unknown; but it was not often of the thoroughness which characterised that of Thomas Greenfield. It was the more remarkable in

that this man was self-taught. His exact knowledge of the sacred tongues had been acquired while pursuing the thousand and one activities of a circuit minister, a superintendent, and a family man who must often have had to study his lexicon while rocking the cradle.

But nobody could move about among the Northern ministers of our church at that day without discovering that Thomas Greenfield was a preachers' preacher. It was counted a privilege to "sit under" him on any occasion. Such occasions were somewhat rare in the case of the ministers who had themselves to be constantly preaching in their own stations; but when Greenfield had to appear at an Association or District Meeting he was sure to have a select audience, fit and not few. The preachers listened to him with delight; and this not merely because his sermons were full of meat and insight and learning lightly carried. All these attracted his ministerial brethren. But they delighted in him not least for his quaint, pawky humour. They treasured his sayings, repeated some of his sallies, and humorous asides, and vainly endeavoured to reproduce the inimitable style in which these were delivered. They all loved and honoured the old man, and believed his like was not to be found in any church in the land. And they were quite right. He had no fellow. He had been made in a school that turned out original preachers who were full of individuality. But he had had a school of his own, and had somehow graduated amid conditions which his brethren had failed similarly to improve.

Hence when Greenfield was appointed as missionary deputation to my Circuit in, perhaps, my second year of probation, I was delighted with the prospect of meeting him. Missionary rounds were missionary rounds at that time. They had not yet lost their early fragrance and interest. At some of them, too, a good deal of money was raised. I remember carrying home the money produced by my first missionary meeting. This meeting was at a colliery village where we had a powerful society and one that did well for missions. I found the money a very heavy bagful that night, and I was not untroubled with visions of some robber attacking me. It was not quite so serious an undertaking as I



had about the same time when I carried £1,000 mostly in sovereigns in a black bag to pay off the mortgage on the circuit chapel. That enormous sum had been raised by a prolonged circuit effort organised with supreme ability by Rev. Robert Clemitson. An expert thief would have seen at once by the look of the bag what it contained. But I managed my journey to the Scottish border in safety. The missionary bag, however, was quite heavy enough. It was at a subsequent period that Thomas Greenfield attended the same meeting. A service was arranged in the afternoon – an unusual thing in those days - in order that the people might hear a sermon from the famous preacher who served as deputation. There was a good congregation. Shankhouse would muster a fine congregation even for an ordinary week-night service. I recall with what interest I studied the preacher as he conducted the service. A little above the middle height, compactly built, and with a scholar's stoop, he was a fine specimen of the Primitive Methodist preacher of the early days. Not with quite such an emphasis on the physical as many of the "fathers," perhaps; more severe in aspect, but bearing in every line of him the stamp of the Methodist preacher. There was nothing noticeable in the voice which had some deep notes in it, and was used for the most part in a quiet conversational tone. Reverent and devout in manner, the preacher somehow suggested the reality of eternal things. You felt that they were *the* realities to him. The Scriptures were read in the tone of one who knew them intimately, and with nuances of expression full of significance and suggestion. Prayer was intimate, homely speech with One who was unmistakably present and whose courts were ever familiar, and who was the Infinitely holy Father.

The sermon was based on I Corinthians x,13, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." It was a fine exposition of the passage, full of quaint turns of expression and pervaded by a deep spiritual tone. All the qualities I had been led to expect were there, and not least the sly, pawky humour for which the preacher was especially famous. Anything meretricious, anything other than solid and genuine this man could not abide. He was full of a grand simplicity, but he would measure a man up in a wonderfully shrewd fashion. The sham would be seen through in a moment; and a man's characteristics would be hit off in some quaint phrase. Of a popular and famous preacher he pithily remarked, "He cannot sit his eggs." It was a singularly accurate description. The fact was that the brother in question, though undeniably a most able and remarkable man had to achieve his results by intuition, by a tour de force rather than by patient, plodding and prolonged effort.

Then throughout the sermon we were made conscious of the fact that Thomas Greenfield was a teacher. Exposition was his forte. He loved the Bible, and had devoted to it the study of a lifetime. He loved indeed all sacred learning, and having learned he delighted to impart to others. His volume of Expositions of the Epistle to the Romans, and the sermons and sermonettes he contributed to the magazines and Review, reveal this characteristic. His spiritual insight pierced to the heart of the sacred text, and he made the meaning singularly luminous. For the appreciation of his rare gifts he needed a suitable audience, and in all his circuits were a few who sat with the utmost delight under his ministry and drank in his teaching week by week almost with the greediness of the epicure. It was marrow and fatness to their souls, and no preacher in the whole world was like Greenfield to them.

The speech that evening at the Missionary meeting was a wonderful effort. Perhaps effort is not the right word, so easy, so spontaneous was the whole deliverance. The uniqueness of Christianity as a missionary religion was the theme, and the speaker was able to give free play to the humorous side of his nature. The people were delighted and of the many missionary speeches heard in those early

days this is among the few that are remembered. Perhaps it owed something to its quality of unexpectedness. We had thought of the man as so pre-eminently a preacher - grave, dignified, albeit quaint – that one scarcely anticipated an address so full of almost rollicking fun.

I recall one occasion during that week on which Mr. Greenfield unbosomed himself in regard to books and readings in a delightful way. He had been reading Shakespeare. It is significant of much that he apparently had not made acquaintance with the great poet and dramatist till late in life. With what wonder and admiration Mr. Greenfield referred to Shakespeare's knowledge of human nature.

It was in a pretty hard school that Thomas Greenfield was made. To pursue his favourite studies and acquire so much solid learning, and at the same time do with diligence and conscientiousness the work of a travelling preacher, meant enormous toil and incessant sacrifice. He was a gracious and kindly old man, and withal one of the finest saints our Church has produced. To this day his influence lingers, sweet and helpful, in the scene of his toils.

References

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