

'T. A-S.' AN APPRECIATION

By H. F. [Harry Foster]

AFTER forty years of active association with brother Austin-Sparks in the things of God, it fell to me to lead the praiseful funeral service on April 19th, when a large number gathered at Honor Oak to magnify the Lord for our brother's long life and fruitful service. During most of those years I have been a contributor to A Witness and A Testimony, so I have gratefully accepted the opportunity of writing a short appreciation of our brother and his work for God.

Those who are familiar with his books will recollect that one of them is entitled The School of Christ. The very words suggest his conception of what the Christian life is all about, for He taught that God's principal purpose for us all is directed towards eternity and directed to conforming us to the image of His Son. Brother Sparks was able to help so many of the disciples in Christ's school because throughout his many years of service he was ready to occupy the place of pupil as well as teacher.

His discipleship began when, at seventeen years of age, he walked dejectedly down a Glasgow street on a Sunday afternoon and stopped to listen to some young people witnessing in the open air. That very night he committed his life to the Saviour, and the next Sunday found himself standing with the same eager young Christians in their open-air meeting. He continued with them, and before long opened his mouth to speak some simple words of testimony, so entering on a life of preaching the Gospel which lasted for sixty-five years.

Those years were filled with many activities for God, but preaching was his greatest gift and his chief joy. He read widely in his desire for spiritual understanding, and above all he studied his Bible, always in an eager quest for the treasures new and old which can be found there by those who are instructed in the kingdom of heaven. One of his first choices for the supplementary hymn book which he prepared for use at the Honor Oak Christian Fellowship Centre was the hymn which carries [69/70] as its refrain Pastor John Robinson's famous reminder to the Mayflower pilgrims that "the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from His Word". How often we sang those inspiring words at the beginning of an Honor Oak Conference! And how often they proved true to the appreciative listeners!

Brother Sparks always set great store on "revelation", by which he meant not the original disclosure of truth by inspired writers of the Scriptures, but Spirit-given illumination and insight into what the Word really teaches. For this reason most of his books, and almost all the articles published in this magazine were transcriptions of spoken messages which had been given with some real sense of divine enabling:

they seemed to him to be more likely to have a spiritual impact if they came not only from studying but also from involvement in some practical situation. Probably his greatest helpfulness was when he was speaking of his own experiences, drawing lessons from what he had learned, not from study only, but from what had happened to him in Christ's school, where the Father treats His children with that chastening, or child-training, which alone can prepare them for true sonship according to the pattern of the perfect Son. He was often able to interpret to people the meaning of what they had been going through, showing them the significance and purpose of God's dealings with them.

Especially in his earlier years, brother Sparks used to lay great emphasis on the need for the inward application of the Cross to the life of the believer. He preached a Gospel of full salvation by simple faith in Christ's sacrifice, but he further stressed that the man who knows cleansing by the blood of Jesus should also allow the same Cross to work in the depths of his soul in order to release him from himself, and lead him into a less carnal and more spiritual walk with God. He himself had gone through a crisis of self-undoing by his acceptance of the Cross's verdict on his old nature, and had found this crisis to be the introduction into an altogether new enjoyment of Christ's life so great that he could only describe it as "an open heaven". In the church life of the people among whom he ministered he had also seen a striking transformation produced by this message of the Cross to the believer: it was no wonder, therefore, that he took every opportunity of affirming that there is no other way into the full experience of the will of God than by union with Christ in His death. Again and again he would revert to the teaching of Romans vi, not just as a favourite topic, but out of a conviction that such union was the sure means of knowing the power of Christ's resurrection.

The Cross is always painful, so we can appreciate that brother Sparks often found God's dealings with him hard to bear. Until 1950 he was frequently prostrate with pain, and unable to continue his work; yet again and again he was raised up, sometimes literally from a sick bed, and no one could fail to recognize the added spiritual impact which came from such a background. We prayed much for him during those years, but with no lasting relief, until he was able to have the surgical treatment which proved to be God's gracious means of answering our prayers, so that from then on he had a further twenty years of activity in many lands, and until his last illness was a remarkable example of how divine life can energize the mortal body.

For various reasons many other sufferings came into his life, but this was consistent with his own teaching that in the School of Christ one learns more by suffering than by study or listening to messages. If, however, the Cross involves suffering, it is also the secret of abundant grace, as he certainly proved. His last annual motto, prepared

for this year of 1971, was devoted to the theme of the sufficiency of God's grace. In November he wrote an editorial in this paper, recording the fact that for him 1970 had been a year of unusual pressure and difficulty. Perhaps as an onlooker I may be permitted to comment that in the eyes of those nearest to him it was also a year of new and fuller evidence of the grace of God, and that for my part I have been left with blessed memories of fellowship in conversation and prayer which could never have been possible between us without the triumph of divine grace. To God be the glory!

The Cross is not only painful; it is unifying. Brother Sparks believed and preached that by it the individual believer is not only led into an enlarging personal enjoyment of resurrection life, but also into a true integration into the fellowship of the Church which is Christ's body. He could never think of himself as an isolated Christian, nor of assemblies as isolated groups, but he tried to keep before him the divine purpose of redemption, which is the incorporation of all believers into vital membership of the one body. It has sometimes happened that Christians most anxious to express this oneness have yet contradicted its spirit by being betrayed into an attitude of superiority towards other Christians, so allowing themselves to be wrongly divided from their fellows in Christ. We here have had to confess our own failures in this respect, realizing that our very eagerness to be faithful to the Scriptural revelation of what the Church ought to be may have unintentionally produced something of a separateness among the people of God. If brother Sparks at times tended in this direction, he certainly moved farther and farther away from it as he came nearer to eternity, being growingly careful to show a proper appreciation of all true believers, whatever their connection.

He must have been tempted at times to move away from practical fellowship with the church here at Honor Oak, for perhaps we limited him and we occasionally irked him, but God gave him grace never to succumb to this understandable temptation: he stayed with us to the end, keeping the bond of fellowship intact, showing a loving interest in the coming generation, and taking his share with us in worship and prayer so long as he was physically able. We owe much to his prayers for us, and he was deeply appreciative of the prayer support which we were able to give him, especially in his conference ministries in many places. His last messages to the church, entrusted to me from his sick bed, were of great gratitude for our prayers. In the final days of great weakness, when he often seemed unable to cope with any other sort of communication, he never failed to give a whispered "Amen" when prayer was made, showing that when everything else was growing increasingly unreal, he could still respond to the great reality of prayer "in the name".

In fact, prayer had been his life, even more than preaching: in this matter he laid a foundation for the work and set a standard which by God's grace we will seek to

maintain. While he was still pastor of the local Baptist church he used every Tuesday to travel up to spend the lunchtime praying with his two colleagues, George Paterson and George Taylor, who both worked professionally in town at that time. After the church had moved into the present premises in 1926, first Mr. Paterson and then Mr. Taylor resigned their posts in order to be fully free for spiritual work, which left still more opportunity for the united prayer which became a prominent feature both of life in the church and also in the adjoining Guest House.

To brother Sparks prayer had many aspects as is shown by his book *In Touch with the Throne*. He set us an example of the prayer which is adoration, not requesting or interceding, but just offering to God the worship and love which are His due; he constantly stressed the importance of what he called "executive prayer", by which he meant not just wishful thinking with the tag of "Amen" at its end, but the bold claiming of God's promises in the name of the Lord; he introduced many of us to the reality of "prayer warfare", for he knew that only by getting to grips with the unseen enemies of God's will can the Church apply Christ's victory to actual situations. Because prayer is a battle he was sometimes saddened when our prayer meetings tended to flag, but he would rally us anew to the fight, and was always ready to rejoice when we seemed to break through into the victory of faith and to get "in touch with the throne".

Perhaps one of the earliest of his books can best give us a real clue to his whole life and ministry. It is called *The Centrality and Supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ*. This was where he began, and this was where he ended, for it became noticeable in his closing years that he lost interest in subjects and concentrated his attention on the person of Christ. Christ is central! None of us will claim always to have been "on centre", and he certainly made no such claim, but it was his life's objective and the aim of all his preaching and teaching to recognize that centrality and bow to that supremacy. At his funeral service there were hundreds who responded wholeheartedly to the suggestion that brother Sparks had helped them to get to know Christ in fuller and more satisfying ways. If anyone can make men realize something more of the worth and wonder of Christ, so that they love Him more and serve Him better, then such a one has not lived in vain. Many worldwide can truthfully say that through the spoken or written words of 'T. A-S.' this is what happened to them and, especially with those who first trusted Christ as Saviour through his ministry, they will be his rejoicing in the day of Jesus Christ. Moreover, some of the truths, which were by no means accepted when he proclaimed them years ago, have now become widely accepted among evangelical Christians, so it is possible that in the long run his ministry may prove to have been more fruitful than at the time appeared to himself or to others. It is the steward's business to be faithful, and that he sought to be: only the Master is competent to judge of his success.

The very first message which I heard him give in 1924 was an appeal to those present to press on towards the mark for the prize, and it concluded with a reference to the abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom which is promised in 2 Peter 1:11. Now, after forty-seven more years of the joys and trials of living for Christ, he has finished his course, and we trust that his entrance has indeed been rich and abundant. Although he has gone from us, his message still brings its challenge to us who are left behind, and although his lips are now silent, his prayers for us will still be answered.

There seemed something significant in the fact that he went to be with Christ immediately after the Easter holiday, for the closing service of our Easter Monday Conferences was always a highlight, as many who were present will agree. Brother Sparks could give long messages, and often did so, but his closing message then was invariably brief and to the point. The point was so often the Second Coming of Christ, and as we gathered in large numbers around the Lord's Table and concluded with a triumphant song about "The hope of the coming of the Lord", truly heaven came down and glory filled our souls. On this Easter Monday there was no such meeting, but early on the following morning our brother passed peacefully into the presence of Christ, to await there the moment when the hope will have become a glorious reality and we shall all together meet the Lord "in the air".

Brother Sparks' voice is no longer heard among us, but at the funeral service the voice of his Lord and ours seemed to ring through our halls, crying "Surely I come quickly!" As one man the whole concourse answered together: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." On this note we went out into the sunshine to lay our brother's body to rest and to sing triumphantly round his open grave: "One day He's coming, oh, glorious day!"