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Harold Primrose Barker

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'It's as good as a half-holiday to see you', remarked a tall gentleman in giving a warm handshake to another visitor to the Yeovil Conference in the autumn, early in the days of the Second World War. It was Harold P. Barker, always an unforgettable figure, whether with reference to his physical presence or his attractive personality. The subject of this paper was evangelist, teacher, author – a man singularly well read for the busy, travelling life he led.

Harold Barker was born on 10th August 1869, his father being William Barker, a much-used evangelist who had been greatly blessed in his ministry in Cornwall, London and the Home Counties. The son once referred to his father as being 'a flaming evangelist'; and it was in such an atmosphere that the young Harold grew up. These were the days when the family was with Exclusive Brethren, William Barker being one of a group which included Alfred S. Rouse and the publisher W. H. Broom, who met and ministered the Word at the meeting room at 346 Goswell Road, London, N. In 1890 William Barker was amongst those who raised certain issues with F. E. Raven, questioning some of his doctrines.

Harold was to have studied medicine but deafness prevented this, an infirmity which steadily grew worse as he advanced in years – though he once told the writer that he did not really mind, as he did not have to trouble to listen to much that went on around him which might have taken undue time! As a young man he was led of God into a full-time ministry, so that for more than 50 years he served the Lord in this capacity. Always a man who thought for himself, Harold Baker {sic} did not by any means accept everything that he heard, and many popular clichés were rejected on the grounds that they did not accurately convey the truth of God.

In the Exclusive division of 1908, he sided with the assembly at Glanton, so that from that time he had broken with the narrow Exclusivism of the party now to be known as the 'London Party' – though not by its adherents of course! During his time among Glanton assemblies, his sympathies – always wide – grew steadily more liberal in matters of Christian fellowship, so that his eventual association with the 'open' assemblies, though gradual, was to him a matter of conviction. Perhaps one of the deciding factors in his change was his conviction of the Scriptural nature of the principle of the independence of the local church, its autonomy, as opposed to the Exclusive practice of close-knit, federated companies of Christians.

Though essentially a leader, H. P. B. – as he was known to his intimates – was never other than gracious, his charm of personality always breaking through into every relationship he formed. Here was no insipid, vague pleasantness, but the discerning love Paul desired for his Philippian converts (Phil. 1. 9). He was like Barnabas, an encourager of the Lord's people; and ever on the look-out for young men who showed good promise of becoming useful in Christ's service. These he would fasten upon and seek to give them all the help of which he was capable, to encourage them into an intelligent and active ministry along the lines of the gift they showed.

In the early 1920's, a meeting for young men was held in an Express Dairy restaurant in Aldersgate Street, in the City of London. Every Friday crowds of young fellows would congregate, first to enjoy fellowship over the tea-table, and then to hear the ministry of

the Word from some of the most gifted teachers who then were associated with Glanton brethren. Among the leaders present was Harold Barker as frequently as possible. He and the rest of the conveners would sit at different tables and chat with the young men, answering questions, though often asking them questions too, to draw them out, get to know them and their mode of thinking. On those informal occasions, Harold Barker always shone. Those sessions at Aldersgate Street left their mark on many young men who today are pillars in local churches.

Much to the chagrin of some of his friends, H. P. B. was a lover of the Moffatt translation of {187} the New Testament. Moffatt was based on the Von Soden Greek text, and Barker had a high regard for the work of Von Soden, which he transferred to its more-or-less English equivalent in Moffatt. He realized that many scholars had lost confidence in Von Soden's immense and intricate critical apparatus, but, in a letter dated 10th February 1937, he said: 'To my mind, for a mere man to produce such an enormous mass of references without plenty of mistakes would be a miracle! ... For my own part, I think the evidence adduced by Von Soden is often convincing.' And so he held to his affection for Moffatt, understanding fully, as he did, that Moffatt did not follow Von Soden slavishly.

His use of Moffatt in writing or his public ministry was never overdone, and often refreshing; though a letter we once saw from J. T. Mawson to another person referred to his wish that 'dear Harold' would not use Moffatt!

In his earlier years Harold Barker had given much time to evangelism in the West Indian islands, where he experienced remarkable blessing, and he always had a special interest in Jamaica and the West Indies as a whole. His wife was a Miss Mais, of a family well-known in Christian circles in Jamaica; a lady who was one with her husband through all his far-flung ministry. He engaged over many years in a travelling ministry, visiting Canada, the United States, and many parts of Europe. His service in the British Isles took him much from his home, and he could be found almost anywhere in the United Kingdom, from time to time.

He was a master of illustration, taking great pains to write down, file, and keep track of the many ideas that occurred to him. His stories might be actual experiences of his own, or they could have been carefully culled from other sources – very carefully this would be, for H. P. B. was never satisfied with less than the best. We have known him to have manufactured stories or incidents, though usually they would be based upon something he had seen, heard or experienced. His gospel addresses were always models for the interest-value they contained. The congregation never knew what fascinating item they might next listen to in the course of any of his talks. For this reason too, even when elderly he could always appeal to the young – and children would listen to him with rapt attention.

The fact was, Harold Barker was interested in *life*, and his stories were never used for padding or for any other effect than the profit of his hearers. It was the same with his ministry: his titles would capture attention even before the address began. 'The Three Circles and the One Centre' was an address on worship based on the incident of the cleansing of the ten lepers (Luke 17. 11–19). 'A Sleepless Night and its Result' was a gospel message based upon Esther 6. 1. What thoughts might be conjured up by such titles as 'A Democratic Prince and his untimely End', 'The King's Return', and other intriguing captions. This was a consistent characteristic of the ministry of H. P. B.

On one occasion he gave an address at the Glasgow Half Yearly Meetings on 'The Dangers of Old Age', giving as his reason the fact that he had recently attained his seventieth birthday and was therefore qualified so to speak – which he did, with considerable effect, to a crowded meeting in the Christian Institute. He was a regular visitor to the

larger annual conferences. Once, in the great days of the Reading Conference in October, Harold Barker was the closing speaker at one of the evening sessions. The opening address had been a remarkable exposition from the Epistle to the Ephesians by Harold St. John, which was followed by an address by another speaker on Redemption. When H. P. B. rose to speak, he told the large gathering that they had quite enough that evening to carry away with them, so he proposed merely 'to put the plum in the suet pudding' by telling them a story. With inimitable charm, he told a long story that took nearly fifteen minutes to relate, but its point was plain, and very pertinent to the occasion. It was just the right finish to a wonderful meeting – but only a man as big mentally as Harold Barker would have acted as he then did.

William Barker had edited a monthly magazine called *Simple Testimony*, and after his death H. P. B. became editor. This continued until 1925, when he became joint editor, with P. T. Shorey, of *Marching Orders*. They carried on this magazine until 1936, when Mr. Barker was invited to contribute a regular page of Answers to Questions in *The Harvester*. This feature continued until his death, and it became widely known for the breadth of vision and understanding that always marked it. In addition to this editorial work, for many years Harold Barker compiled *Cheering Words Calendar*, which was published by the Central Bible Truth Depot. It had rather a special 'flavour' among tear-off calendars, and enjoyed a wide circulation. Those who knew Mr. Barker, usually loved him and they valued this contribution to their household life.

From the early days at South Park Chapel, Seven Kings, he was a regular visitor to minister {188} the Word of God. He would sometimes have a week or so there, for what he called an 'internal mission', when he addressed himself particularly to the needs of Christians. It is in their hymn-book, *Spiritual Songs*, that a few of his hymns can be found (cf. Nos. 405, 406, 408, 429). One of these (429) is a wedding hymn. It is, however, 408 that specially attracts us, with its ascription of praise to Christ in the opening verse:

*Soon the saints, in glory singing,
Will with joy exalt the Lamb;
All in heaven, their tribute bringing
Loud His glorious worth proclaim;
Every voice, with gladness ringing,
Raising high the Saviour's name.*

Harold Barker was a voluminous writer, whether in his editorial capacity, in articles for other magazines (he wrote many for this magazine), or in gospel tracts. Some of his articles were later published in booklet form, one being a valuable study of Matt. 18. 20, through which he showed its real significance and challenge. His books included *Christ in the Minor Prophets*, *Christ's Vicar*, *Review and Reward*, and one on Faith Healing. Perhaps the most influential of his writings may have been his important booklet *Why I Abandoned Exclusivism*. This was a revealing appraisal of the whole system of Exclusivism, and ran into a number of printings, one edition being enriched by annotations from Harold St. John.

His letters were gems of fine thought and clear expression, mingled with constant humour. He loved to poke fun at his friends when writing them, and he could be relied upon to stimulate them always in right directions. In writing a fellow-minister on a certain topic, he said, 'Now for your "tilt". It was quite exciting; but the excitement died down when I perceived that I can agree with pretty well all that you write! ... So I am afraid you must find a doughtier warrior on whom to try the weight of your atomic bomb(s), for,

as for me, I am an ally!' It was always the same – his winning nature made you give special respect to what he said.

At all times, H. P. B. possessed a balanced judgment. His outlook was so sane, his feet always firmly planted on earth, however high he might lead the people of God in his Christ-exalting ministry. He allowed nothing to turn him aside from what he knew to be God's will for his life and service. And this was true until he finished his course. During 1950 he showed signs of decline, and friends meeting him would notice that his upright bearing gave place to a stoop, he really began to look old. It was in March 1952 the writer last met him, making a special trip to the Foreign Missions Club to bid him farewell, before he went to join his wife in Jamaica. Even then, when with signs of age upon him he was still forward-looking, speaking of his hope to return eventually to Britain to continue his ministry.

On 31st March 1952 a small party of old friends saw him off from Paddington Station as he started his long journey. Only a few days after his arrival, he was out walking with his daughter Mrs. Robertson, when he collapsed and died, well on in his 83rd year. In the obituary note written by P. T. Shorey that appeared in *The Witness* for June 1952, he said, among many other things: 'Outstanding among H. P. B's personal characteristics were complete devotion to his Lord; reverence for the Holy Scriptures; love for the Lord's people; a strong desire to bring together groups and individuals who had been scattered by mistaken loyalty to strong-minded men who pressed certain doctrinal interpretations; great courage; clearness of thought and utterance and a remarkable gift of apt illustration'. All this is true, and much more. Harold Primrose Barker was one of the princes among the people of God. His gentleness and consideration for the simplest Christian was a lovely element in his life. All who knew him held him in deep affection. By his influence, and by his writings, his work continues today. May we all seek to follow Christ as diligently and closely as did dear H. P. B. – the reward will be sure.

TOUCHSTONE.