

C O N C E R N I N G

DR. J A M E S C O O P E R.

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PETER DAVIDSON

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Many people find benefit from the reading of biographies. The activist no doubt will speak slightly of this pursuit, as a waste of time. "Let us look to the present and forget the past" he will exclaim. "Biography like history is bunk".

For my own part I would endorse Dr Johnson's statement, that, "the biographical part of literature is what I love most". Then I would echo Robertson Nicoll's words: "I have for years read every biography I could lay my hands on and not one has failed to teach me something."

You will understand my curiosity then, when within a very brief period of time the name "Cooper" was mentioned in various conversations. An old minister spoke of Cooper's influence on him when he studied in Glasgow University. Soon afterwards I read of "Cooper" in Augustus Muir's "John White" in connection with Union negotiations. Then when I went to Aberdeen, the late Dr PD Lawrence of Rubislaw spoke to me in almost reverential tones about "Cooper of the East Kirk" and various old members in my own congregation prided themselves in having been baptised by Dr Cooper. I was not content until I learnt something of this man, and I lay before you some of the facts I have gleaned. Some of them will be of interest in view of our present discussions on meaningful worship: our multilateral talks and kindred themes. I have on occasion strayed into byways, not immediately related, to our theme but which I hope will add a little seasoning to the whole dish.

Who then was this "Cooper" and what was his contribution to the Church of Scotland ?

Will you imagine a meeting of Aberdeen Presbytery of the Church of Scotland in 1882 in Greyfriars Church. A young man has been summoned before the Court to answer various

charges. He has been accused by eleven office-bearers out of the Kirk Session of twenty-six elders of believing in Transubstantiation - entertaining a desire to change the position of the pulpit - of varying the sequence of acts of public worship - of using a Litany in Sunday School - of using a prayer desk and a reading desk "thereby wasting precious time" - of giving Communion to the sick - of professing a desire to revive the Christian Year - of holding a Christmas Service for children and practising for it - of intending to have a brass band at the service and "a far more serious complaint of magnifying the Ministry and the Sacraments". Truly "the book" was being thrown at James Cooper the 36 year-old minister.

In order to understand this situation it is necessary to review the state of the Church in 1882 in respect of its architecture and its worship.

Cooper was born three years after the Disruption, so when he went to his first charge in Broughty Ferry, and later to Aberdeen, little change had taken place in attitudes, though a number of younger men and a few of the older were trying to waft the breeze of change. Even so, the description of architecture and worship as in the 1850's was still fairly accurate. Many churches had degenerated into a shocking uncouthness. The celebration of the ordinances of worship had become slipshod and slovenly. From the end of the 18th century to well into the 19th, "Church services had sunk to what was probably the baldest and rudest in Christendom" (Dr Story). Religious Puritanism having gripped Scotland in the days of Cromwell held her grasp for two centuries. We owe much to the Puritans, but the initial desire for simplicity and for spiritual reality had faded into a morass of neglect for the beauty of life. A church was mainly a place to hold people, and nothing more, and in many cases there was nothing to distinguish the buildings as specifically Christian. Indeed, a bowl from the Manse was used for Baptism and at Communion the Minister's kitchen table was carried into the church. Ornamentation was kept at bay and innovations were feared as the weapons of the devil.

As for the services, they were generally devoid of taste. The prayers, the first of which not infrequently lasted for thirty minutes and more ... was a long trek over the field

of orthodoxy, and the long sermons repetition of the subject of the prayers. We must admit that the prayers were not without unconscious humour, like the approach of the minister from the West of Scotland who exclaimed, "O hearer of prayer Thou art like a mouse in a drystane dyke; - aye keekin' oot at us from holes and crannies - bur we canna see Thee" ...or the minister from the North East who in giving thanks for a good harvest expressed gratitude in these words, "All, Lord, is safely gathered in except for a few fields between here and Stonehaven - and they're no' worth mentioning".

It was not until 1865 that the General Assembly ordered ministers to read the Holy Scriptures during Divine Service, a practice which until then was almost universally neglected. Even after this "enjoinment" there was opposition. An elderly friend of Cooper, was for a long time, held in disdain by his congregation for reading from the Bible in that it revealed his laziness during the week in regard to the preparation of a sermon. He was just "puttin' by the time that should have been used for the preaching" !

When Cooper appeared before the Presbytery this was the prevailing atmosphere of worship - or non-worship. There were signs, however, of a shiver in the crust of tradition. Robert Lee of Greyfriars, Edinburgh, an older man than Cooper, died in 1868 after suffering a stroke, at least precipitated by his treatment by Edinburgh Presbytery, following his attempts to reform worship, the articles of the Faith and for introducing an organ into his church. Cooper was at one with him regarding worship. If Lee had been spared, however, they would have disagreed on interpretation of the faith, Lee being a liberal and Cooper adhering to the more conservative group within the church in respect of the creeds. It is interesting to note that some of the complaints of the younger men have a familiar sound. I quote : "The older generation are in possession and look with disfavour on anything symptomatic of change".

We now ask what contribution did Cooper make towards the revival of meaningful worship. To discover this we must place his courageous work in the East St Nicholas Church against the background of the prevailing slackness and prejudice.

At his Induction Social in the crowded Music Hall he intimated that St Mary's Chapel, which had been turned into a Session House, would be re-opened as a place of worship and a weekly service resumed. The first service was held on Ascension Day; Cooper's service and sermon was on the Ascension of Our Lord and this caused a flutter in ecclesiastical dove cotes. Anxiety increased when he commenced a daily service in St Mary's. He had the "Collieson Aisle" (which had been turned into a storeroom) set aside for the solemnisation of marriages. Choir practices were instituted. When in his first charge in Broughty Ferry he had the distinction - or at that time, infamy - of being the first to reintroduce Holy Week Services ... This practice he continued in Aberdeen and he records in his diary a few years later, "I am struck at the attendance of working folks at the Holy Week Services".

For those of us who may feel sad at the response our people make to this heartsearching Season of the Christian Year, Cooper's biographer's comments may provide some solace! He writes, "Holy Week will never be as popular as Christmas is popular: the world will not rob us of its solemnity as it has so much degraded the joy of the Nativity: even the religious prefer to rejoice with Christ rather than follow the way of His sorrows".

Dr Cooper was dismissed by some as a medievalist. His views on Communion contributed to this opinion. He was certainly what we call "High Church" in his doctrine of the Sacraments; with him many ministers will sympathise with his outcry against what he termed "clinical" Communion...the twice-yearly invasion of "absent friends". His chief desire was for the restoration of the "primitive" custom of frequent celebrations. He said "Amen" to Calvin's statement that "each week at least the Table of the Lord ought to be spread for the company of Christians" and in his address to the General Assembly in 1917 when, as Moderator, Cooper exclaimed: "One would think sometimes we were ordained not to give our fellow servants their meat in due season but to withhold it from them".

Cooper's interest in the reforming of worship practice was second to his desire for the reformation of the faith based on the Creeds, and a longing for Church Unity. To

Cooper the need for union was dictated not by economic considerations: not even the thought that a united Church could make a better witness. After all, the last-named is but a product of unity. His desire for re-union was based on the Saviour's prayer "that they should be one". He would have agreed with Karl Barth, "Homesickness for the one church is genuine and legitimate only in so far as it is a disquietude at the fact that we have lost and forgotten Christ and with Him have lost the unity of the Church".

The entrancing vision of One Flock, One Shepherd which dawned early on Dr Cooper's youth commanded his devotion throughout his life. He was in consequence unwearied and undaunted in advocacy of church reunion both nationally and internationally. On this subject, however, as on others, he was in advance of his contemporaries. He gave consistent support to the movement for the obliteration of Presbyterian divisions in Scotland (though he proved to be a thorn in the flesh of the majority of the members of the Union Committee of One Hundred by his insistence on demanding adherence to the ancient historic creeds). In the matter of reunion, however, he looked further afield. "Nothing," he said, "which looked ultimately less than complete and corporate reunion in truth and peace of the whole Body of Christ's visible Church ought to approve itself to any Christian".

He believed that union with Episcopalians could be achieved without unfaithfulness to the principals of either side. "A merely Presbyterian Church could not unite the Scottish people". He maintained that those who had adhered to Episcopacy at the Revolution Settlement did not separate themselves from the Church of Scotland. They were driven out largely for political reasons which had lost their force long ago.

It was not from any uncertainty regarding a Presbyterian Ministry that his views arose. There was, in his view, no incompatibility between the two systems. He pointed out that while the Episcopate of 1610 subsisted, the Courts of the Church remained in operation, and that even in the unhappy years after 1660, they were not, with one exception, interrupted. He claimed that bishops would assist and not injure our system, and that our Courts would improve the present episcopal system. "Such an Episcopate as I

desiderate," he said, "would not be the prejudice but the crown and completion of our system, adding among other things, both dignity and power to her Courts, giving what we so sorely need, a continuous executive, supplying a more elastic system on ministration to the people". In his view there was no hope of restoring the visible unity on earth of the Church of God without coming to terms with Episcopacy.

These views, of course, in the 19th century, raised much opposition and brought forth the rumour that Cooper had been secretly ordained as a Roman Catholic priest and was a secret agent of Rome within the Kirk of Scotland !

Running parallel to his desire for reformation of worship, and faith based on the Scripture and the Catholic Creeds and his vision of the One Church was his great concern for youth and the other aspects of ministry. His head may have been in the heavens but his feet were firmly planted on the earth.

When Cooper arrived in Aberdeen the East Kirk of St Nicholas had a large congregation and according to distances in the 19th century, a scattered one. It was not a wealthy congregation. Cooper's biographer writes "the city rank and fashion gravitated by tradition to that which met for worship in the West Church, the nave of old St Nicholas". The parish itself was poor and crowded. "It was such a parish and such a congregation as should spend much money and cannot easily find much to spend" ... the domestic and interior finance was always a difficulty and Cooper was never very successful in solving this problem. (In this matter, at least, he is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh !)

He immediately set about a reformation of the Sunday School claiming that it was the primary task of the pastoral office. "Christ said, 'Feed my lambs' before he said, 'Feed my sheep', " Cooper remarked to the Kirk Session. In addition to conducting the weekly worship of the Sunday School he was a pioneer in instituting fortnightly Training Classes for Sunday School teachers. These classes were for prayer as well as for preparation, for he desired the ministry to be accepted as a Ministry of Prayer as well as of Word and Sacrament. He felt the Church was lacking in its corporate prayer life. By his efforts the Sunday School staff rose from twenty seven to fifty five: additional Bible Classes

were required as numbers increased. In the realm of Christian Education he was in advance of his day. In 1885 he writes, "Instead of having an Education Committee with only the Training Colleges to look after, and a Sunday School nibbling at a little part of a great subject we should have ONE great Committee on Religious Instruction to attend to the WHOLE question." Cooper's plan was not adopted until a generation after he wrote this.

Another "innovation" which was not accepted with general approval was the formation of a Young Women's Guild named after St Margaret. The aim of the Guild was threefold:

- a) to assist the members to live a deeper spiritual life,
- b) to encourage the members to give more real and sustained help and support to the ministers in parochial work, and
- c) to create a bond of sympathy in each other's work however varied may be the duties of the members.

It was a matter of lasting pride to Cooper that his Guild of St Margaret anticipated the founding of the Women's Guild Movement a few years later. In "Life and Work" of May 1884, the work of the Guild is given in some detail. "It ran the Mission's School and provided a choir for the Mission Church Service: painted and refurnished the Parish Room: conducted a children's work party as well as having one of its own: visited the sick and cooked for them : provided a weekly dinner for poor children. The membership totalled 85". The members certainly endeavoured to live up to their motto: "Love and serve one another, watch and pray."

As the years went on, Cooper was accepted as one of the Aberdeen "notables". Many of his ideas regarding the order of worship were accepted though few could go all the way with him. His complete dedication to the office of the ministry: his love for his people: his involvement with youth (which included a chaplaincy to the O.T.C) overcame initial opposition. Although a stickler for the Creeds and ritual, he was never starchy. He had a great fund of humour and was delighted one day when he was, for the only time in his life, accused of irreverence. It is on record that owing to a chronic catarrhal condition, he wore a skull cap in the pulpit. He records in his diary with glee how a little girl came up to him and angrily knocked it off and rebuked him

for wearing it in church.

After seventeen years in Aberdeen he was appointed to the Chair of Ecclesiastical History at Glasgow and departed to the sorrow of most of the citizens and to the delight of a few.

The large attendance in the East Kirk in his later years there were not due to his preaching but to his influence. His sermons were too doctrinal for the common palate. In doctrine he was a staunch supporter of the Westminster Confession of Faith without any relaxation to liberal thought, not because he approved of all its views. He opposed a motion to relax a Formula in the 1900 Assembly for he believed the Confession of Faith was a formal link with the Catholic Church and that any tampering would "leave the Church open to all Unitarians and sceptics who want a leisurely literary life".

Cooper took a great interest in Assembly matters and served on several committees with distinction. His definite views proved a nuisance on occasion, as on the Union Committee, when it was only after much persuasion that he was willing to move a little from insisting that the united Church should maintain a pre-Union relation with the State in respect of complete Establishment. As a member of Assembly he opposed the 1907 Parliament Act which legalised the marriage of a man to his deceased wife's sister. He claimed (and at that time he was legally correct) that ministers could not be allowed to celebrate such marriages as they were contrary to the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Church could not at the time depart from the Confession without permission of Parliament.

The Presbytery of Glasgow had found competent a motion to order ministers to "obtemper the law" of the State in this matter. Cooper appealed against the motion. The appeal was heard by the Synod who decided unanimously in Cooper's favour. Cooper's views were defeated in the Assembly of 1910 when an Act was passed amending the degree of acceptance of the Westminster Confession of Faith and also clarifying the position of ministers in respects of "The Deceased Sisters Marriage Act". Cooper recorded his dissent.

The length of this article does not permit elaboration of Cooper's work among the Territorials at the outbreak of the First World War. The spirit of the man is clearly visible in the fact that in 1914 he was 68 years of age and with

a will set out to minister to the "Terriers". His courageous spirit is also revealed by the fact that he married for the first time and, of course, the only time at the age of 66 years ! His pastoral interest in his Glasgow students makes inspiring reading: how he took but a token fee from the poor students; how he watched over his students' health and pursuits at a time when there was a great academic gulf fixed between a professor and his students; his work in "The Church Service Society" and School Board.

In 1917 he was elected Moderator of the General Assembly. I wonder if he quaked in his shoes as he awaited his election, for as a younger man he had risen in the Assembly to protest at the nomination of a certain Dr Cunningham who, in his "History", had made certain remarks which had riled Cooper.

Cooper died in 1922 at the age of 76 and those who agreed with his views as well as those who did not, declared "a prince had fallen in Israel". The young man who appeared before the august Presbytery of Aberdeen in 1882 passed to his rest loved by all who knew him well.

What does his life teach us ? It is an encouragement to us when we think we are passing through dark days in the Church. There have been darker days and Cooper lived through them. The Divine Light shone and scattered some of the gloom. Let us keep our sense of proportion. While the Church has frail human members and ministers may we always remember that we have an all-sufficient Lord of the Church : while we work and pray we must not be like Uzzah - afraid for the Ark of the Lord.

Cooper's example bids us stand fast by our convictions even when we find ourselves in the minority, and it may be a party of one. His courage should inspire all our efforts to make worship real, though we must make sure our new or altered services glorify God and are not merely to "entertain". We should remember that the traditionalists deserve consideration also. Yesterday's innovation is today's accepted practice and tomorrow's outworn creed.

When we realise the methods in worship 100 years ago we should not be too disheartened by the pessimists who decry our services today. When I hear my brother ministers moan about the dullness of services I wonder where they obtained their knowledge ... on holiday - six Sundays in the year?

I have experienced dull services and, no doubt, conducted dull ones. I found my "holiday" churches had services of a high standard. After all, if the music is faulty and the singing off-key ... well, if it is the best that people can offer, the Lord will accept it as such. If the sermon on occasion is rather dull - as an old minister once said to me as a student, "When you see a clerical collar in the pew just say to yourself, 'There's a man who knows what it is not to have much time for preparation'."

My quest to learn more about the man "Cooper" has resulted in obtaining a picture of one of the uncanonised saints of the Universal Church.

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"T H E E" and "T H O U" v "Y O U"

A Response

"In connection with your editorial in the Spring (1989) issue of "The Record", the following may be of interest.

In April I attended the Annual Retreat of the Fellowship of Dunkeld, and noted that of the ten members sharing the leading of our devotional exercises, nine used "Thee" and one "You".

Personally, I have never seen the issue as a vital one, and even question the zeal of one school of practice which suggests the use of "You" is essential in our days !"

D.C. MacF.

["Worship Now" - Book II, published by The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, July 1989, has both forms. If the practice is more widespread than is suggested in some quarters, could there be further "Responses" ? They might help those amongst our number who feel that the use of both forms should be actively encouraged - Ed]