

Pioneers of Revival- Charles Clarke

Alexander Boddy-When the Fire Fell in Sunderland

In the early days of this century many earnest Christians met in small groups to pray for revival. Often their prayers were answered in outpourings of the Holy Spirit. In the USA, India, Germany, Holland, Scandinavia and Britain the Pentecostal blessing was accompanied with the gift of tongues and other spiritual phenomena. The reaction of other Christians generally was hostile, and the recipients found themselves isolated and ostracised. Then in Britain a friend and leader providentially appeared in the person of the vicar of All Saints, Sunderland: the Rev A. A. Boddy.

Alexander Boddy was a remarkable man in many ways. He was born in Manchester in 1854, the son of the rector of St Thomas' Church. He was trained as a solicitor and practised for a few years in Manchester. After an experience of spiritual quickening at a Keswick convention he heard the call to the ministry and prepared for ordination, taking LTh degree at Durham University. After being ordained by Bishop Lightfoot, he became his father's curate at Elwick.

From his earliest days, Alexander had a keen sense of adventure and a desire to see the world. When training to be a solicitor, he was given a shilling to buy his lunch. Out of this he saved sixpence and when he had accumulated enough he went to Paris to see the sights. He also made a canoe and paddled up the coast from the Tees to the Tyne and narrowly escaped drowning in a storm, being rescued by Sunderland fishermen. He reached home so bearded and bedraggled that the gardener thought he was a tramp and told him to clear off. His travels took him to many countries, and about every journey he wrote a book. He went to Russia and met the tzar and wrote a book for which he was made a member of the Imperial Geographical Society of Russia. For his book about his travels in Barbary he was made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. His visits to the Holy Land resulted in *Days of Galilee*, and a *Life of Christ*.

Marriage—and a Transformation

In 1886 Bishop Lightfoot sent Mr Boddy to take charge of All Saints', Sunderland, where the Vicar had taken to drink and emptied the church. James Pollock became his curate and together they planned a campaign to revive the church and bring back the congregation. James invited his sister Mary who was a trained singer to come and help.

Soon Alexander and Mary found they had much in common, chiefly because both had been spiritually quickened through Keswick, and therefore were both devoted to their Lord. In 1891 they were married and a transformation soon took place in the drab, neglected vicarage of All Saints'. In course of time a baby son, and then two daughters, arrived to make the vicarage jollier still. Jane Boddy (now Mother Joanna of the Community of the Resurrection, Grahamstown) describes life in the vicarage when she was a child:

My father loved his people and they loved him, for he never spared himself and was available day and night. There was a lot of drunkenness in our neighbourhood, and on Saturday nights my father used to go round the public houses and take drunken men home. The street just opposite the vicarage was worst and housed some very poor, low-class people, mostly a family in each room, sometimes more. The children played in the street and were practically always barefooted and in ragged clothing. There was a big public house called The Cambridge further down the street and father held open-air services outside it, often after evening service in the church.

The memories of All Saints' vicarage are of a very happy Christian home. We had simple morning and evening prayers and we loved going to church. My father was not a brilliant preacher, but his sermons were simple and practical and I love to see him in the pulpit where, as a child, I thought he had a halo round his head. Evensong was a favourite with the people and often the church wardens had to bring in extra chairs and forms to accommodate the people.

About 1906 Alexander and Mary Boddy became burdened for revival and invited a few keen young men to the vicarage for weekly meetings for prayer. Also news of the Welsh revival had reached the parish. Alexander felt he must to Wales to talk to Evan Roberts and try to persuade him to

come to Sunderland. Mr Roberts never came, but revival did, as we shall see.

Early in 1907 Mr Boddy heard of the revival in Norway and set off to see for himself. He met Pastor T. B. Barrett, the Methodist minister who had received baptism in the Holy Spirit so powerfully in America, and invited him to come to Sunderland. Here is an extract from Mr Barrett's Journal:

4 March 1907. On Saturday evening Pastor A. A. Boddy from England spoke. He is a minister of the Established Church and is come here to pray with us for the fullness of the Holy Spirit. He spoke at all three meetings and read aloud the names of some members of his church who had especially desired the prayers of the assemblies. They were assembled for prayer in England at the same time as us last night.

Of the visit Mr Boddy wrote: 'My four days in Christiana (Oslo) can never be forgotten. I stood with Evan Roberts in Tonypany, but have never witnessed such scenes as those in Norway.'

To the Keswick convention in 1907 he took a pamphlet he had written entitled *Pentecost for England*, and thousands were distributed. The message of the pamphlet was that in many places in the world God was baptising believers in the Holy Spirit with the same signs as occurred in the New Testament and that this was the revival they had prayed for for so long. It was a plea that this move of the Spirit should be accepted and encouraged and promoted. His plea fell on deaf ears. The leaders of the church generally made no response at all.

The in September 1907 T. B. Barrett came to Sunderland. He arrived on a Saturday and that evening the first prayer meeting was held in the vestry. Next day he preached in the evening service, which was followed by an after meeting which lasted till four the next morning and the first three members of All Saints' were filled with the Spirit and 'spoke with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.'

Joint Ministry

Donald Gee says: 'Meetings were held in the large parish hall every afternoon and evening with a waiting meeting in the vestry after each service which usually continued far into the early morning. Added to those who had previously gathered at Sunderland for these special meetings there now began to come a steady stream from various sections of the Christian church. The meetings grew continually in number and influence.

In the vicarage T. B. Barrett's presence and ministry soon bore remarkable fruit. The vicar and his wife both received the baptism in the Spirit and spoke in tongues. Mrs Boddy developed an effective ministry to match her husband's leadership, the Lord often using her to heal the sick by the laying-on of hands. Fourteen-year-old Jane gives us this account of the blessing that transformed her life:

One evening . . . I was busy with my homework and Pastor Barrett came into the room and asked me to go and have a talk . . . I was just fourteen at the time and very much interested in all that was going on. Pastor Barrett had a short beard and very kind eyes; I thought him very like our Lord.

He was obviously a man of God and immediately began to talk to me about receiving the Holy Spirit. He asked me whether I wanted to be filled with the Spirit and I said I did. Then he said that if I knew there was £5 in the bank for me and was give a cheque for that amount what would I do? I said I would go at once and get the cheque cashed. So he explained that our Lord wanted me to be filled with the Spirit, but *I must accept* the gift. Then we knelt down and he laid hands on me and prayed. Immediately I felt fire going through me and I began to speak in another tongue. I was unaware of anything for some time, except the presence of our Lord, but when at last I looked up my father and mother were kneeling there and a couple of other visitors also. One of the visitors had been a missionary in China and said that I was speaking Chinese. She interpreted what I said. This experience had a profound effect on my life.

Two results followed the visit of Mr Barrett. One was that constant stream of seekers continued to come to the Sunderland vicarage. Many received the baptism in the Spirit, including Smith Wigglesworth and the Jeffrey brothers. Others received the encouragement and ministry

they needed to walk in the Spirit. The second result was the reaction of opposition from Christian leaders that followed the outpouring. But the less said about that the better.

Donald Gee says: ‘Mr and Mrs Boddy were immovable in their conviction that the work was of God and were ready to help and receive all who came seeking the promise of the Father. Those were busy days for an already busy parish minister and the vicarage became a hallowed spot for many a visitor. It must surely have been in the providence of God that at that time the Bishop of Durham was the saintly Handley G. Moule; for no ecclesiastical hindrances were raised to these remarkable scenes in connection with a parish church in his diocese. Two lady secretaries kindly handled the immense amount of correspondence that now began to pour in from all over the world, and made this their special ministry.’

‘Heavenly Choir’

This reviving work continued by the holding of annual Whitsun conventions of a Pentecostal nature in the large parish hall. These gatherings were maintained for seven successive years until the outbreak of the first world war in 1914. The speakers were mostly Pentecostal leaders from many parts of the world, including some outstanding Lutheran pastors from Germany.

Jane Boddy recalls that ‘the singing was always impressive and often led by the Welsh contingent. On the wall of the platform was an enormous text, stretching right across, with the words “fervent in spirit” in very bold lettering, and the impression one got all the way through was of tremendous fervour and power.

‘No reporters were allowed and those present always seemed to be of one mind, and all desiring to be filled with the Spirit. At times I remember hearing what some people called “the heavenly choir”. It started during a time of prayer, very softly, by one or two voices; other joined in and the voices rose higher and higher until it seemed as though the angels were joining in. There were no words, just glorious harmonies. It rose and fell for some time and gradually died away, leaving a profound silence with many deeply touched and weeping.’ So for seven years Sunderland became the Pentecostal mecca in Britain to which flocked, year by year,

those hungry for spiritual renewal. Here the young men who were to become Pentecostal leaders received their spiritual baptism and returned home endued with power. One of these young men, afterwards to become a notable preacher and author, was Stanley Frodsham.

Mr Boddy now became the editor of the first magazine of Pentecostal revival in Britain. It was called *Confidence* and for many years it spread the news of the movement to all parts of the world. Through this ministry he used his natural gift for writing to teach and edify those coming into blessing. 'A rare anointing rested on those early issues,' says Donald Gee, 'they must have been edited and sent forth with much prayer from the little group at Sunderland.'

When the war came Mr Boddy went to France for a time to minister to the troops. After the war the Pentecostal groups began to be organised outside the life of the main Christian denominations, and Alexander Boddy dropped into the background. His daughter says: 'My father told me that considerable pressure had been brought to bear on him to start a Pentecostal movement, but he was firm in his allegiance to the Church of England and felt he could not conscientiously leave it; also that he was too old.'

In 1922 he left Sunderland and became vicar of Pitlington, five miles from Durham. Until he was well over seventy he still vigorously exercised a powerful parish ministry. He died there in 1930 at the age of seventy-six.