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rivers of His grace

the jubilee story of belgrave heights

"PRAISE HIM FOR HIS GRACE AND FAVOUR"

Introduction

Origins are always fascinating to the enquiring mind, and the early springs from which the now mighty Keswick Convention stream flows, is no exception. Canon T.D. Harford-Battersby, a vicar of St. John's Keswick made the following entry in his journal on September 15, 1873:

"At this moment I am feeling much inward struggle and questioning about this 'higher Christian life' which is so much talked of and written about ... I feel that I am dishonouring God, and am wretched myself by living as I do: and that I must either go backwards or forwards, reaching out towards the light and the glory which my blessed Saviour holds out to me, or falling back more and more into worldliness and sin .. a great prize is before me; shall I not seek after it? Is it not worth every possible effort to attain to? God reveal to me the secret of this 'more excellent way', and enable me to walk in it now and always. Amen."

The following year his prayer was answered as he discerned the difference between 'seeking' and 'resting' faith. He said to himself — "I WILL rest in Him"

Two years later in 1875 the first convention was held at Keswick. Canon Harford-Battersby subsequently stated his early experience of the victorious life of faith in the following terms:

"I got a revelation of Christ to my soul, so extraordinary, glorious and precious that from that day it illuminated my life. I found He was all I wanted. I shall never forget it; the day and hour are present with me. "How it humbled me, and yet what peace it brought."

The message preached at Keswick in those early days is the same as that proclaimed annually at Belgrave Heights.

It is addressed to a perennial personal need, of which all true Christians are aware in varying degrees. It is need for replenishment of spiritual life, a new endowment of power for victory over inborn sin, and a closer walk with the Lord.

The Convention is never an end in itself; it is a means to an end. Those who attend may learn the secret of the inflow and the outflow. Before God's people are ready to be channels of blessing to others, they must know what it is to be in living contact with the Source of continuous supply themselves.

At Keswick thousands have tapped the springs of Living Water, and in turn have become life-giving streams for the refreshment of a parched and desolate world. That is why the Convention has been closely identified with world evangelisation, and has been so blessed by God to call out workers into the Lord's Vineyard.

I.

A Faithful Sower and a Seed that grew

Years ago, and far away in the deep south of Tasmania, a fellowship meeting was about to begin in the vestry of an old church.

Rather diffidently, the organist asked: "Could we sing tonight "Was there ever kindest Shepherd?" — and might we use the tune Rev. George Grubb taught us when he was in Australia?"

He went on to explain how, in the Mission conducted by the preacher (with a somewhat earthly name, but heavenly influence) the good seed had been sown in his life, to its infinite enrichment. After that, "Mr. Grubb's hymn" became almost a theme song in that circle of praise.

A trivial incident, certainly. Yes, but indicative throughout Australia, of similar evidences of Mr. Grubb's fruitful ministry, all good omens, surely, of what was to lie beyond the new door so soon to open on the Twentieth Century.

Before Mr. Grubb returned to England, he formed in Geelong, Victoria, a Convention for the nurture of Christians (many of them newly converted at his meetings). This was carried on from year to year and was surely the seed of the great Convention movement.

A Fiery Prophet and a Singer of renown

The Twentieth Century door duly opened. In our religious life it was marked by a great Simultaneous Mission, sponsored by all the churches, and led by Dr. R. A. Torrey with Mr. Charles Alexander as song leader.

Dr. Torrey had fiery eloquence and an uncompromising message. His clear-cut face, with white hair and trim white beard, had a rock-like quality (albeit when talking intimately, or addressing a school, "the face of the rock was fair"). Charles Alexander was relaxed and genial and equipped with the mingled charm and ability that seemed to draw pure melody from the lips of those who followed his beat in songs as old as Zion and as new as the century. He and Dr. Torrey were like a combination of "thunder and dew".

Many were born into new life under the dynamic preaching of Dr. Torrey. Among them was the efficient manager of the Federal Hotel (then unlicensed), Mr. Hervey Perceval Smith, a man of vision with journalistic and business forcefulness and drive.

Transformed through this experience, Mr. Smith immediately became active in open-air and missionary work, a large room at the Federal Hotel becoming a gathering place for the building up of Christians in their most holy faith.

Gradually, a wider vision was vouchsafed. Why not have organised gatherings "for the deepening of spiritual life" during Christmas and New Year periods?

Under Mr. Smith's leadership, from 1909, at pleasant, pastoral Eltham, and other centres, conventions were held annually.

II.

Blest be the Hand that guided

Evangelists and Bible Teachers from at home and abroad were used of God, and the hunger for His Word steadily grew.

Another great Simultaneous Mission, this time headed by Dr. Wilbur Chapman and the already well-loved Charles Alexander resulted in a rich harvest of disciples.

The main meetings were held in the Exhibition Building, which was crowded, night after night. There was no amplification in those days, yet (and it seems like a miracle) Dr. Chapman, like Dr. Torrey before him, could be heard clearly at the very back of the huge building.

While Dr. Chapman never minimised the facts of sin and judgment his main emphasis was on the beauty of Christ and the immense privilege of belonging to Him. Earnestness and compassion were in every tone of his voice. What parent who heard it, could ever forget his plea: "How can I go to my father and the lad be not with me?" What young convert, hearing his final counselling, but would remember, amid storms and tempests, the certainty of "Christ in the vessel"? His message was fraught with the richness, "the singing and the gold" of the Christian life.

Years and years afterwards, friend after friend made at Conventions would testify: "I was brought in at the Chapman-Alexander Mission".

More teachers came and went, and there was being born in many earnest hearts a sense of guidance towards "something vast", in this sphere of Christian education.

But not, alas, before a catastrophic interruption — the First World War — with its ordeal, agony and heart-break! Through it all, the work went steadily, prayerfully on.

At last came the year 1918 — and peace — and the slow approach to normality.

Upwey-on-the-Uplands

Here let us take the words of Mr. J. H. Robinson, one of the Upwey pioneers. He first recalls the Bible Classes being held in homes under the leadership of such men as Rev. C. H. Nash, Mr. John Southey, Dr. Stewart MacColl and others. He goes on:

"Whilst Norman Baker and I were unable to proceed to China, owing to the war, we were conducting evangelistic meetings with the Melbourne City Mission. On the final night of the mission at Richmond, we were kept busy dealing with enquirers until the last tram left. My colleague decided to walk home, while I went into the City to the Federal Hotel where Mr. H. P. Smith was the manager.

Since I had no luggage, the night-porter eyed me suspiciously but when he learned I had money to pay and knew Mr. Smith, he agreed to give me a bed and check with the manager in the morning about the mysterious late-comer.

Very early next morning, Mr. Smith came to my room and then invited me to join him and Mrs. Smith at morning tea. This gave me the opportunity I had been waiting for, to tell him of a proposal to hold a Convention at Upwey and of the need for a leader. Many friends had been urging me to go ahead with this.

Imagine my joy when Mr. Smith said: "*What can we do to help?*" They were uncertain at first about Upwey, but in view of the restful surroundings, nearness to Melbourne, the sympathetic attitude of local Christians and the practical interest of Mr. John Griffiths, one of Melbourne's leading Merchants and a prominent Anglican, they decided to go up to investigate. They were favourably impressed, and a month later, some houses were booked for what was to be the *First Upwey Convention*.

It began in a small way. (Note this, you who attend Conventions in your hundreds, in these days!) There were 57 in house parties and about 100 attending meetings on main holidays! The Boys' Camp under the leadership of Hudson Southwell (one of the founders of the Borneo Evangelical Mission) and Cyril Edwards appeared the following year, and later, Dr. Del Rees led this with about 20 attending.

Mr. Robinson recalls too, the stirring open-air meetings each evening at the railway station led by Evangelist Norman Lumsden assisted by Mr. Jack Neilson; the vigorous early morning prayer meetings, and the contribution of those who conducted house-parties. Mrs. F. Digby Lawson, one of the "House Mothers" at the first "Upwey" has only missed one Convention since and is now in her 95th year.

(As a parenthesis in this history, here is a snapshot from the memory of Mr. and Mrs. Silversmith: "Our first house for the Convention meetings was at Tecoma, and we often saw Mr. H. P. Smith riding his bicycle to Belgrave for stores!!)

Spiritual Growth and Broadening Vision

In the first years, the Union Church at Upwey was used for the meetings, but as numbers grew, it was decided to erect a marquee and "move in". Another little picture from the memory book of the Silversmiths, gives this brief vivid scene:

... "The marquee rocked and leaked, the poles swaying in the wind, the kerosene lanterns flickering and shaking, and everybody wondering if the whole thing would collapse on our heads. When the rain came down, the umbrellas went up!

... "In the early days, the little "Puffing Billy" train was filled with singing friends as the engine panted through the hills. Truly this movement was saturated with praise."

In 1930 the Convention was moved a few hundred yards along the same street to a five-acre block purchased by the Council to meet the need of increasing attendances. A larger marquee gave place almost immediately to a permanent Auditorium with open sides and blinds, which was designed by *Mr. Alex Eggleston*, a member of the Council who served the Convention for many years as Honorary Architect. This provided accommodation for about 1300.

Thither each year came the Christian pilgrims of every denomination, the giant motto confronting them — *ALL ONE IN CHRIST JESUS*. From the open sides, they could see the green-brown loveliness of the bush, breathe in its pungent scents, and catch the notes of the bell-birds chiming in with their fervent praise to the Lord of Creation.

Then, before the platform, there were the great banks of choicest flowers, a little reminiscent, one has thought, of the veil of the temple of old, with its blue and purple and gold — all given and arranged by dedicated hands.

Deep thanksgiving wells up in many hearts in recollecting all that "Upwey" meant in administering, sustaining and overcoming grace in the shattering years that followed. There was the great Depression, when carking care and oppressive fears threatened to undermine love and trust. No wonder "Stayed upon Jehovah" rang out so often, as faith was victorious and shabby clothes and plain food ceased to be of paramount importance.

The Second World War came in 1939, and again in this trial by fire, Upwey had its ministry, many learning to say (not without a sob):

"Peace, perfect peace — with loved ones far away?

In Jesu's keeping we are safe, and they".

The War ended, and all seemed set for an assured and steady development at Upwey. But was that to be?

III.

Onward to Belgrave Heights

It was in 1946, that, like a bolt from the blue, there came a notice intimating that the Convention site (now 7½ acres) would be needed for extensions to the Higher Elementary School, on the adjoining block.

What followed, if there were space for details, could read as a perfect idyll of the Guidance of God.

There were negotiations with men; there was pleading with God, and there were, inevitably, moments when puzzled and baffled faith could only hold on. And then, there came the glorious realisation that the Hand of God was beckoning onward to a new, higher, larger area.

In 1950 the Convention moved four miles to *BELGRAVE HEIGHTS*, where a 20-acre site of ideal contour, formerly used as Golf Links, had been secured. The Auditorium was dismantled and re-erected with certain interior improvements, just in time for the 1950/51 Convention.

Council members and architect could supply an interesting chapter on the vicissitudes and coincidences and co-ordination of faith and work that made this possible, in a period when both building materials and builders were in short supply. Through it all, they saw the hand of the Lord and rejoiced in the voluntary help given by so many of our experienced men.

"Many Dwelling-places"

In the vicinity of the new grounds there were large areas of relatively inexpensive land available for sale. This gave impetus to what has become a distinctive feature of the Belgrave Heights Convention. Many churches and organizations have purchased their own land and established permanent Camp Buildings for the accommodation of members attending the Convention. This had commenced in a small way at Upwey where the Church Missionary Society's League of Youth and a group now known as the Gospel and Missionary Fellowship had established camps on small blocks. It is noteworthy that one of the founders of the League of Youth Camp was Rev. Alfred Stanway, now Bishop of Tanzania.

With splendid scope for development along this desirable line at Belgrave Heights, there are today some fifteen large properties, including the official camps of most of the denominations — thus providing for the accommodation needs in an area where furnished houses are not readily available.

There is also the typical Australian house, in its bush setting — Convention Lodge — where visiting speakers receive hospitality under the gracious guidance of the wives of Council members.

In 1957, the Auditorium was enlarged with seating accommodation for 1,925.

Bible Instruction and Missionary Zeal

From the beginning of the Convention at Upwey the missionary influence was strong, the meetings being held under the trees at "Forest Park", Mr. John Griffiths' country residence. Of those attending the first Convention in addition to Mr. J.H. Robinson and Mr. Norman Baker, the following went out as missionaries: Dr. Del Rees (China), Messrs. Hudson and Howard Southwell (Borneo & Australian Aborigines), Misses Minnie and Effie Varley (Nigeria), Eileen Jordan (China), Misses Dora and Minnie Aitken (Solomon Is. and China) and Mr. George Aitken (Borneo).

In the succeeding years hundreds of others have gone forth from the Convention to the mission fields of the world.

The custom of an annual *Melbourne Bible Institute* Meeting goes back to Upwey days. This enables those attending the Convention to learn of the valuable training available there for missionary service.

In 1928, the Convention undertook the full support, through the missionary offering of Mr. J. Howard Kitchen (C.I.M.) and in 1929 of Miss Jessie Taffs (E.G.M.) who were known as "Upwey Missionaries". In 1940, the practice was discontinued and since then the Missionary Fund has been disbursed on a broader basis to benefit a large number of Missionary Societies. During the first visit of Mr. J. O. Sanders in 1939, his challenging address at the Council's request, on missionary giving, led to an immediate increase in the missionary offering from £350 to £1600, and with further teaching on this subject, the annual offering has risen to an average of £5000.

Some Honoured Names in Speech and Leadership

In listing such servants of God, it is always possible that some beloved name may be omitted, but included among those whose ministry has been richly blessed are Dr. D. S. MacColl ("the beloved physician"), Rev. C. N. Lack, Rev. C. H. Nash, Mr. Frank Varley, Mr. T. Graham. As the Convention work developed, Dr. Northcote Deck, Rev. S. Beckingham, Dr. C. J. Rolls, Dr. Rowland V. Bingham, Pastor Wm. Mallis and Mr. W. L. Wright gave rich and acceptable teaching.

In more recent years many will gratefully remember the visits of Rev. Hugh Paton, Canon T. C. Hammond, Principal G. H. Morling, Archdeacon H. S. Begbie, Rev. John G. Ridley, Archbishop Loane, Rev. J. Graham Miller and Dr. Leon Morris.

Visiting speakers from overseas whose ministry has been much appreciated, include such well-known names as Dr. J. Graham Scroggie, Rev. George Duncan, Bishop A. Stanway, Dr. Paul Rees, Dr. Larry Love, Rev. John Pritchard and Dr. J. Sidlow Baxter.

The signal contribution of Mr. Nash must receive special attention. He was buoyantly part of the movement from the prime of life and vigorous

manhood to old age and mellow vintage. Not only did he give the Bible Readings each year during the first decade, but shared in this important ministry at intervals for twenty-five years. He gave a clear, searching message at the Convention soon after his *90th birthday*, and was the last survivor of the original Council. He was a master teacher, and could deal with great Scriptural doctrines magnificently.

The continued leadership of men raised by God is a call for special gratitude. The name of *Mr. H. P. Smith* stands out at the commencement. A permanent Convention Council was formed during 1922-23 Convention, with *Mr. John Griffiths*, Chairman, *Mr. F. Varley*, Hon. Treasurer, and *Mr. H. P. Smith*, Hon. Secretary.

Dr. J. J. Kitchen, Australasian Home Director of the China Inland Mission for many years, was appointed Chairman of the Council in 1926 and chaired Convention meetings for almost 20 years. Dr. Kitchen presided over large public gatherings with dignity, punctuality, originality, brevity and well-controlled humour, matched with spiritual discernment. He was also a capable administrative chairman, and one always knew that meetings under his wise guidance would be well directed.

Mr. W. L. Wright, a business man and lay preacher with a deep knowledge of the Convention message, was another Council and Executive member whose association with the meetings continued for half a life-time. For many years a Deputy Chairman, he was also Treasurer for 27 years, and gave his services unstintingly in this office.

Mr. J. O. Sanders, whilst Home Director for Australia of the China Inland Mission, succeeded Dr. Kitchen as Chairman, both of Council and Convention meetings. His experienced leadership was greatly valued for about five years, until his appointment as General Director of the C.I.M.

Mr. Alfred E. Coombe, a business man, has, during the past 14 years, devoted his time and talents to the many and varied responsibilities which, of necessity, are part of this office. Mr. Coombe has been ably supported by two Deputy Chairmen, *Mr. Leonard E. Buck* and *Mr. J. Harold McCracken*, whilst the present Hon. Treasurer is *Mr. Ridley Kitchen*, a son of Dr. Kitchen. Others who have assisted as treasurers include *Mr. W. M. Pollard*, *Mr. L. E. Topp* and *Mr. C. G. Sandland*.

For many years, the singing of joyfully confident hymns which has always been part of the Convention, was led by *Mr. C. H. (Harry) Dyer*, a converted opera singer, whose beaming countenance was a veritable benediction. Widely known as "Hallelujah Dyer", he once received a letter addressed: "C. H. Dyer, Hallelujah Grocer, Melbourne". Others have followed Mr. Dyer in this important ministry.

Children attending the Convention with their parents have always been specially catered for, and in 1954 a smaller Hall was erected for their meetings, which for many years have been conducted by a team from the *Children's Special Service Mission*.

EASTER Convention – and Country Outreach

A further development of great significance is the annual Easter Convention. Within two years of the removal to Belgrave Heights and the speedy establishment of so many associated Camps, there came a clear demand for meetings at Easter. These were commenced in 1953 and catered primarily for young people, the morning Bible Studies being conducted with Group discussions led by competent tutors. The popularity of the Easter Convention was remarkable and, after four years, the increasing numbers made it necessary for the Bible Studies to be conducted from the platform only.

Attendances have continued to grow each year – 3600 were present at one Easter meeting – and it is estimated that well over half of those attending do not come at Christmas.

To many, these gatherings have been peculiarly inspiring. One remembers a warm Easter morning when the surplus multitude sat down in companies on the green grass outside the auditorium and the look of deep receptiveness on the faces was strangely reminiscent of scenes in far-off Galilee.

There was a day, too, when relentless rain streamed down like an iron curtain, and the company was “shut in” to an absorbed hearing of the Word.... Another visitor remembers a still, mild April noon, when there was such a consciousness of a moving of the Spirit, that counsellors were called together for what was to come, and on that Easter night, young men and women came quietly, eagerly to the foot of the Cross, to receive forgiveness and new life from the Risen Christ.

And the Country Outreach?

The Associated Conventions held in country areas where rural conditions and distance create problems for attending the central Convention, were an important outreach. These commenced in a very natural way in 1932 when those attending from two country centres, desired to share the Convention blessing with others, and proceeded to organise on similar lines.... By 1941, four of these Conventions were established at Kerang, Warracknabeal, Shepparton and Portland. To encourage this development further, the Council inaugurated what was called the *Upwey Extension Movement*, with an Organising Secretary, *Mr. Arthur Pocklington*, who at the same time was appointed to assist Mr. Smith in the general work on the Convention. Many new Conventions were held in country districts and the blessing extended. Mr. Pocklington was appointed Convention Secretary after the Home-call of Mr. Smith during the 1947-48 Convention.

IV.

The Graham Crusade, 1959

Evangelism and Christian nurture go hand-in-hand. As Christians in previous years had the thrill and stimulus of other great missionaries, there has been in our day the inspiration (soon to be repeated, please God) of the Graham Crusade, with its gathering-in of new followers of Jesus Christ. The Graham story scintillates with choice gleams from countless lives experiencing the miracles of grace. Belgrave Heights Convention has been for them a place of initiation into Christian living, and the speakers have proved veritable preceptors guiding them into Christ-like practice.

Rivers of His Grace

While the Jubilee Convention is an occasion of rejoicing and deep thanksgiving, it may well be an opportunity for self-examination and rededication. On the human side, there have been, inevitably, many mistakes, but on the Divine side, there has ever been the copious flow of the cleansing, renewing rivers of His grace.

Volumes could be written telling of individual experiences, of clarion calls to service answered with: “Here am I”!; or moral victories won, of power from on High to do the apparently impossible.

The Jubilee is celebrated in strangely puzzling and portentous times, but our hope is in God, and our whole-hearted prayer is that He will pour out on our sinful, needy world the life-giving streams of *Revival*.

So, with calm confidence, face we the future,
Serving Thee, Lord, whose goodwill placed us here.
By the lamp of Thy Word, keep the path plain before us,
Grant us our fathers' faith, Master most dear,
That we may faithfully serve in Thy kingdom,
Certain Thine infinite grace will avail,
Singing assuredly, hearts lifted up to Thee:
“Of all Thy good promises – *NOT ONE SHALL FAIL*”.