

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE LIFE OF DR. J.B. ROWELL

(1888-1973)

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Introduction

One hundred years ago James Bavin Rowell began his ministry as a preacher of the Gospel. An entry in his brother's diary on June 19th 1909 records James leaving again for college after a visit home: "dear James left for his calling today as a Wickliffe Preacher, a very great change having been wrought in Him." On February 2nd of the following year (1910) he received a letter of recommendation from his Church, the Strict and Particular Baptists stating "I am pleased to recommend Mr. J. B. Rowell to the notice of Strict Baptist Churches which he may visit in his journeys, whom such churches may receive into friendly intercourse as one professing Free Grace doctrines and desires to proclaim the truth as it is in Jesus.



Wickliffe Preachers 1912

James Rowell's ministry would later take him across the Atlantic to Canada where he would become known in Christian circles coast to coast both in Canada and America. His influence would soon spread around the world in the form of the printed page.

The story of James Rowell adds colour to the tapestry of Church History. It is one of perpetual motion, of warm and affectionate personal ministry, scholarly study and machine-like labour for the cause of Christ. The virtues which shone in him and the zeal that propelled his defense of the faith were the product of a profound sense of gratitude to his sovereign God.

Conversion

James was converted to Christ on 25th August 1907 as he sat at the back of the little chapel, disinterested and wondering what could possibly interest him there. He

came under "divine arrest" when words of Job 33:23 were read in his hearing; "Then he is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom."

At this time James was working as a baker in Watkins Commercial, Bournemouth, where he would hide behind the sacks of flour and "pour out my heart in prayer to God to save me from this awful language." God did save him from the profane language he was forced to listen to. He called him to a higher service. His call to the full-time ministry was confirmed in his own mind when his minister asked him to bring a message at Pon-

typridd, in Wales, after which the innkeeper's daughter came to Christ. In April 1909 James enrolled at Kensit Memorial College, the training college of the Protestant Truth Society (PTS). An article published in the society's periodical "The Churchman's Magazine" in 1969 speaks of James; "who just passed his 21st birthday, and coming from a godly background, he burned with zeal to prepare for Christian service and then to plunge without delay into the good fight of faith.

Christian Service Abroad

James entered the PTS at the height of the spirited Anglo-Catholic controversy. ¹This controversy and James' contact with it would shape and permeate the rest of his ministry. After leaving college he became a Wickliffe Preacher (preaching representatives of the PTS) and entered heart and soul into the struggle to maintain Protestantism in England. In the March 1912 edition of *The Churchman's Magazine* there was a feature article on James' unreserved zeal when he carried the idols out of St. Matthews Church

in Sheffield, arrived unannounced at the Archbishops door and made his unwell-comed protest. Another incident in Mertyr Tydfil, Wales, deserves mention. James and his preaching companions were rescued by police from an angry crowd of Irish Catholics who had come to Wales to work in the tin mines, and who were offended at the street preachers. James and his Wickliffe Preacher friends traveled through England, Scotland and Wales preaching the Gospel of free grace, salvation by faith alone in Christ.

Ambitious for greater service James sailed to Canada in January 1913. He had already enrolled in Brandon College, Manitoba, to study for his Bachelor of Theology. In addition to his family he left behind a young lady called Lucy, whom he would later marry. Lucy, like James, was brought up in a godly home. Her parents, Thomas (a draper) and Emily, his fiancée were married in 1882 in Spurgeon's Tabernacle, London.



Lucy Rowell

In writing from Brandon his letters across the Atlantic were often written in Pitman's Shorthand. James had learned it in after school classes with his mother and Lucy became proficient in it also working as a secretary in London. While in Manitoba many preaching opportunities opened up to James. In one such meeting a young boy called Alan McGinnis accepted Christ. Alan later became Major McGinnis of the Salvation Army in Victoria.

The War and After

In 1914 war broke out in Europe and Britain found itself embroiled in the con-

flict. Expatriates felt the need to return home and help in the war effort, and this was especially felt in the Dominion of Canada. On Monday 24th April 1916 there was a farewell banquet at Brandon before James left to enlist in Winnipeg on 26th. James passed his medical with, as his diary records "a 4 inch chest expansion" and proudly received his uniform. Private J. B.



11th Canadian Ambulance

Rowell (No.531784) arrived in Liverpool on May 30th with the 11th Canadian Field Ambulance Army Medical Corp, and made his way to Bramshott for encampment and training (see picture).

On Friday 11th August 1916 they disembarked at Le Havre, Northern France and were immediately on maneuvers. While training in England James had suffered from ill-health and the winter weather give no respite in the open trenches. As the rigours of war increased James found himself spending more and more time in the field hospital. Many of his diary entries for October and November of that year read "still in Hospital" or "still sick." On 9th April 1917 James was admitted to the hospital of the 12th Field Ambulance Unit. He left Calais on the "S.S. Antwerp" for England having been invalided home with Trench Mouth.

Back in England he was able to reunite with Lucy with whom he had kept in constant correspondence and a wedding day was immediately arranged for Thursday 26th April 1917. Since James was still a Private in the 11th Canadian Field Ambulance Unit, he would return "home" to Canada on a Hospital ship in April 1918, at war's end. Lucy left England in March 1918 on a civilian "bride ship" and arrived in Winnipeg before her new husband.

A Settled Pastorate

Back in Canada James was still plagued by ill-health and in the space of just one year two pastoral positions ended in disappointment; Vernon and Prince Rupert, in British Columbia. Despite the blessings of God in his ministry and growth in both works, the climate necessitated James return to England for Convalescence in January 1920. While home in England he received an invitation to return to British Columbia to pastor the Baptist Church in Kamloops, where the mountain climate was much dryer and amenable. On October 1st 1920 James left England again, together with his wife and son Hedley. The Baptist Church in Kamloops had been closed for six years during the war and considerable debt remained on the building.

There was no interest in reopening and when James arrived he was met with opposition. It was in Kamloops, however that the energy of this young pastor, now in his early thirties, was realized.

Pastor Rowell believed very much in the printed page, and no expense was spared in colourful promotional literature and gospel tracts. The Church resounded with his vibrant singing and his wife's contralto solos rejoiced the hearts of many. Topical messages and teaching charts gave an added visual interest and the Lord blessed the ministry with a steady growth in numbers. By April of 1924 the remainder of the debt on the building was finally cleared and the following year Pastor Rowell was able to record in his diary "we are having good services and a splendid spirit prevails in all departments of the work. Our prayer meetings are very helpful. We have an attendance between 20 and 30 each Wednesday night and there is a real sense of the Lord's presence."

During Pastor Rowell's tenure in Kamloops there was growing concern that theological Modernism was gaining influence in the Baptist Convention of Western Canada.

This came to a head in June 1927, with the forming of a new and conservative body called The Convention of Regular Baptists of British Columbia. Although his Kamloops congregation supported him in his protest against this modernism Pastor Rowell accepted a request from the new Convention to begin a work in Victoria, the capital of the province. At the request of four families Central Baptist Church was born.

With the new work on hand and the new convention getting established Pastor Rowell found his schedule stretched. He was elected President of the Convention in 1928 and again in 1935. Meanwhile the new congregation in Victoria was witnessing immediate growth. The corner stone of the new building on Pandora Ave. was laid on 29th March 1929 and the key was officially turned in the door on 31st August of the same year.

A Broader Work

Pastor Rowell's ambition for usefulness and breadth in ministry never waned. He reached out to the community in satellite Sunday Schools and meetings (Brentwood Bay, Luxton, Langford, Sidney, Duncan). A new radio ministry, and work with an orphanage that had opened in 1931. In all of this he managed to find time for studies to

complete his Bachelor degree (which was interrupted by the war in 1916) and then continue on to achieve a Doctor of Theology degree in 1936. The remainder of 1936 was spent in conferences across America and a trip to England and Scotland. Many conference opportunities opened up and in 1937 Dr. Rowell was invited by the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, to lecture on the subject of Divine Election. On that trip also he visited Wheaton College in Illinois and his travels took him further to a conference in Birmingham, Alabama. Different conferences up and down the west coast of America kept Dr. Rowell busy 1938-39, to the point that his health began to fail and he was forced to take a sabbatical to convalesce (February – July 1939). During this time of sickness Their Majesties The



J.B. Rowell with his family

King and Queen of England were visiting Victoria on a state visit. Dr. and Mrs. Rowell were honoured and deserving guests at a banquet held in the Empress Hotel on May 30th 1939.

When WWII broke out in September 1939 there was comparatively little disruption on the West coast of Canada. The ministry of Central Baptist Church continued very much as usual but with the added work of ministering to the many sailors who passed through the city. The defense of Protestantism continued also with the establishment of



Invited to meet the King and Queen on their visit to Victoria, in 1939

the Canadian Protestant League under T. T. Shields, in Toronto, 1941. Dr. Rowell was immediately involved and for many years was the President of the Victoria branch of the League. Rallies were organized across Canada and Dr. Rowell was busier than ever in his writing ministry. Much of Dr. Rowell's writing in opposition of Roman Catholicism began at this period and he was well equipped for this ministry. He was from the beginning a lover of books and had accumulated quite an extensive library. It was later reported that Dr. J. B. Rowell had the largest collection of books in Canada on Roman Catholicism outside of the Roman Catholic Church itself.

In 1931 Dr. Rowell had commenced a Bible School in Victoria. Each Tuesday evening he conducted college level courses. By 1945 this ministry had grown and others followed his example on the mainland. There was an increasing need for a centralized Bible College. Northwest Baptist Bible College was born in the Fall semester of 1945, with Dr. Rowell as the first President. For the first year the good Dr. left his pulpit ever Sunday night and boarded the over-night boat from Victoria inner harbor, arriving in Vancouver in time for Monday morning lectures at the new Port Coquitlam campus. He would leave on Wednesday to be back in Victoria for the evening

Prayer Meeting. Not surprisingly this heavy schedule proved too much for his fragile health and in the 1946 – 47 school year Dr. Rowell was forced to resign his position at the College to concentrate on his Church ministry at Central Baptist.

A Busy Retirement


However, Dr. J. B. Rowell continued to teach periodically at the College. By the late 1950's he had established himself as an authority on Roman Catholicism and was a frequent speaker at Bible conferences across the United States and Protestant rallies the length and breadth of Canada. In February 1958 Dr. Rowell received a request to relocate to Los Angeles. The request concerned a post of lecturer in the School from which he had received his Doctorate in 1936; The Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary. This offer was initially refused citing his desire to continue the pulpit ministry. But, after reflection, in October of that year Dr. Rowell decided it was indeed time to give up the pulpit and focus on the conferences and writing ministry.

The following years proved to be busy years for Dr. Rowell. In January 1961 John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as the first Catholic President of the United States and this aroused quite an interest among conservative Protestantism. Also, from 1962-1965 the Second Vatican Council sat in session. Nor did this pass unnoticed by conservative Christians. Part of Dr. Rowell's concern at this time was the invitation given by Rome to Protestants and Eastern Orthodox churches, to attend the sessions. If the Eastern Orthodox Churches accepted the invitation it would be the first time since the "The Great Schism" in 1154 that there would be official relations between the two Churches. Between 1961 and 1965 many letters passed between the Patriarchs of the Orthodox Church in Constantinople and the Pastor Emeritus of Central Baptist in Victoria.

Dr. Rowell published his Magnum Opus with Kregel Publications in 1963 entitled "Papal Infallibility." In 1966, again, with the same publishing house, he published "How to Lead Roman Catholics to Christ." During this time also Dr. Rowell continued a prolific writing ministry especially of Gospel

tracts. He had them translated into many other languages and distributed across the world, this in conjunction with his brother Andrew back home in England.

Final Days

By eighty years of age most men begin to relax and enjoy the slower pace of twilight years. Dr. Rowell, however saw no profit in such comforts. In 1970 he added to his writing with a further evangelistic endeavour; Dial-a-Thought. If one had called 386-6924 in Victoria in the early 70's he would have heard the 82 year-old voice of Dr. J. B. Rowell. This was the heart of his ministry, ministering to the hearts of needy souls in search of peace and stability. Dr. Rowell graduated to glory on June 24th 1973 as he wished to do; "telling the triumphs of his king." 

¹Anglo-Catholicism is a movement that sees the roots of the Anglican Church more in Roman Catholicism rather than Protestantism. In the mid-late 1800's Anglo-Catholicism saw a revival through the Oxford Movement and by the 1900's there were many in the Church of England, bringing in Idols and other Roman Catholic rituals.



First Car - circa 1921



A picture of J.B. Rowell from his military days.