

The Witness

May 1966

Alfred Mace was one of a group of distinguished persons, men of outstanding calibre in spirit and mind, who engaged in the ministry of the Word of God, both in evangelism and teaching, round about the turn of the century, and into the twentieth century period. Such names occur to one as Walter Scott, Charles Hickman, Russell Elliott, W. W. Fereday and Harold St. John - all of them with close connections with Exclusive Brethren, though not all of the same group. There were other brethren of similar spirit who were not as prominent, but all of the above-mentioned persons became known over a wide area because of their public ministry.

Mace was a preacher with a punch - and this is hardly surprising, for his father, Jem Mace, had been a prize-fighter who became heavy-weight champion of the world in his day, and was, we believe, the last prize-fighter to fight with bare fists. Alfred was born in Norwich on 30th January, 1854. He might have followed his

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## Alfred Mace

father's footsteps, but for the fact of his conversion at the age of 15 under the preaching of William Carter, a converted chimney-sweep who had become a well-known evangelist and was much used in leading souls to Christ about that time.

After he left school, young Alfred went into business with a wholesale jewellery firm in Hatton Garden, London, with whom he stayed for seven years. During those years he spent much of his spare time preaching the gospel, and he was frequently found engaged in witness among the poorer people in London streets. Street-corner preaching helped to develop the latent gift of the young man, and as he learned more of the truth of God through the teaching of older men, he responded to this with avidity. It was not long before he was in demand further afield, and began to request time from his work to allow for the necessary travelling. So busy did he become in the work of preaching that, when

21 years of age, he decided to devote all his time to the work of the Lord.

It was a real step of faith on the part of Alfred Mace when he gave his whole time to the service of the Word; but he never had any regrets, and in later years said that if he had thought for a moment that the Lord did not want him in His service, he would have returned to business life at once. It was in 1875 that he began to work in a full-time capacity, so that he thus served for the long period of 69 years until his Homecall in 1944. Mace was greatly used in the conversion of men and women to Christ, and in his earlier years had many occasions when he preached to congregations amounting to 1,000 or 1,500 people assembled together for the meetings.

During these early years Mace was associated with Exclusive Brethren. He went overseas to Canada and the United States, and there engaged in service in collaboration with Lord Adalbert Cecil, a son of the second Marquis of Exeter. W. Blair Neatby says of him: 'His adherence to the Brethren had caused some sensation at the first. This was far from having spoilt him, and he was always marked by a particularly unobtrusive bearing, by an extreme simplicity and unworldliness in all his habits, and by great devotion to his work of itinerant evangelisation' (*A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, p.313). Cecil was drowned in 1889, in his 48th year, when engaged in his well-loved ministry. His loss was felt keenly among all who knew him, for he was a man greatly beloved. Lord Cecil and Alfred Mace were a complete contrast in personality, the bluff Mace labouring happily with the retiring Adalbert Cecil. It is a well-known fact that in those years of service in Canada in the 1880's, they were sometimes referred to as 'Mr. Cecil and Lord Mace' - we hope not really to the detriment of either servant of the Lord!

It was in that period that the two evangelists sought to bring pressure to bear upon F. W. Grant, who was somewhat of an independent thinker as well as an acknowledged leader. Walter Scott, writing of the Grant division, commented that Cecil and Mace were both of them 'men ministerially unfitted for such work' as the proceedings for discipline in Montreal. Mace remained in fellowship with Exclusive Brethren, being still with the 'Raven' group in 1906. In November, 1906, however, a conference was held at Devonshire House, Bishopsgate, London, when some 700 brethren came together from both the Open and Exclusive assemblies to discuss the possibility of a coming together of separated brethren. Among those who attended

were some leading brethren in the Raven fellowship including Messrs. Russell Elliott and Alfred Mace. Among the features of the conference was the reading of a lengthy printed letter from the former Grant assembly at Plainfield, New Jersey, and signed by F. C. Jennings and two other brothers. It stated: 'We will own no circle of less circumference than the whole Body of Christ as the limit of our fellowship; because we will own no association of assemblies . . . The key to the truth of God on this question has been to us this: Fellowship is not between assemblies as such, but between individual saints . . .'.

In a letter written by Alfred Mace the following January (29th January, 1907), he said: 'We decided to act upon New Testament principles as did brethren in the opening years of the past century, and to receive every godly member of Christ's Body irrespective of party or name. This, of course, compelled us to disregard the claims of any particular circle of saints as having any special recognition: indeed, the very fact of their being a circle of their own constituted them a sect, essentially'. This stand Mace maintained until his death, though in the first years of his break from Exclusivism he found a more congenial home in assemblies that were isolated independent meetings rather than those that were closer-knit in what was recognised as 'Open Brethren'. But Mace had recovered a fundamental of truth in his acknowledgement of the oneness of all saints in Christ, and he never ceased to rejoice in this position. More and more his rich ministry came to be valued among the open assemblies.

In 1916 Mace paid his first visit to the Antipodes, preaching in tents nightly throughout Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand. He remained in the Southern Hemisphere for more than six years, and saw much fruit for his labours. Many people were won for Christ in those years, the city of Sydney alone having a considerable number of souls converted to God, some of whom remain until this day. But Mace did not labour without opposition. He had been with Exclusive Brethren, and, so far as we know, held to the Household Baptism doctrine throughout his life. This brought him some criticism in Australia and elsewhere that was unfortunate. But Mace was a man with some largeness of heart and we have reason to believe that he never propagated his doctrine when moving among those who disagreed with it, nor would he have desired to have created discord when engaged in the important ministry of evangelism. The story is told that he was once invited to visit a

certain city and give an address on baptism, this being meant as a test of his views. The address he gave was couched in such words that all present found it acceptable as being truly an exposition of the truth of believer's baptism'.

Mace returned to Britain from Australia via the U.S.A. and spent about 3½ years in England. He then returned to the Antipodes, then back to England, while the rest of his days were spent in Canada and the U.S.A. His London ministry was memorable in many respects. Large crowds came together to listen to him when he spoke at The Grove, Ealing; or Carfax Hall, Clapham, and he was a regular visitor to such places as Eastbrook Hall, Waltham Abbey, where he would minister annually for a week or more. One might have heard him address the Aldersgate Street Prayer Meeting at the old Y.M.C.A. Some of his addresses were remarkable for their true insight and spiritual power. Who that heard him expounding John chapters 9 and 10 will ever forget it? An address can be recalled when he spoke with tremendous verve on John chapter 1, emphasising that the Lamb of God bore away 'the sin, *not* the sins, of the world'. That is, Christ dealt with the root problem. He spoke one day to an enthralled audience at the mid-day Prayer Meeting on Prov. 30. 4, linking it with Rom. 10. 6-9 – and he was then 70 years of age.

Mace was susceptible to small audiences; he did not like them. On one occasion when taking a series he said: 'I can't preach to a timber-yard. Go out and bring in something on two legs tomorrow'! His ability to carry his audience with him in an address meant that he left clear impressions of his teaching at the end of the meeting. He was a rapid speaker, and it was never easy to take down a verbatim account of his addresses. After one of his series of addresses in the city of Toronto in 1942, some of the addresses were revised and prepared for publication. They do not read well, however, compared with hearing the speaker. Mace's style (even after considerable and skilful revision for publication by some devoted brethren) tended to seem disjointed in print, whereas a listener would have had rather a different impression. Here will be found a record of his addresses on 'the three calls of Peter', on Genesis 22, on the Lord's baptism and temptation, on 1 Cor. 15, 51, and other messages delivered in those weeks.

When almost 90 Mace was thought the outstanding speaker at a conference held in Oakland, California; similar thoughts were expressed at the New Year 1944 when he spoke in Los Angeles. He became ill in 1944 and was unwell

for more than three months, showing much patience and always appreciating the faithful care of Mrs. Mace (his second wife) who had been his constant helpmeet for about thirty years. During his last week of illness while yet conscious, he spoke as if soliloquising, in a strong voice: 'Brethren' - a pause - 'Once a power for God, intelligent in His mind, devoted, Christ-like: men of standing and stalwart worth' - again a pause - 'As for myself, I have received much kindness at their hands' - he paused, while it is said his eyes seemed to be specially penetrating the beyond, and he shook his head - 'But what do I see today? Often bigotry, intolerance, unchristlikeness, unintelligence'. That was all he said, but Mrs. Mace and her sister both heard him, and afterwards his wife wrote: 'Each word came out so distinctly and thoughtfully that it seemed like a voice from God to us all to consider our ways and doings. I shall never forget its force, his intonations and measured sentences, slowly, firmly and full of meaning'. Such words coming from the death-bed of one who had served Christ for 70 years could not pass unconsidered - and their warning and challenge be heeded by all who hold dear the true spiritual life and witness of assemblies.

Alfred Mace was a friendly man. He enjoyed his visits in the homes of his friends. He might eat little before a meeting, but afterwards would relax, enjoy a good meal and a chat before retiring for the night. He valued his friends. On one occasion (and we believe it merely one of many such incidents) one of his friends was in acute financial need when a letter arrived: it was from Mace, enclosing a cheque which came as divine encouragement to the recipient.

He was interested in keeping fit, and carried round with him an elastic bedroom physical developer for daily use. He read widely, much more than most people realised. Seldom using stories in his addresses, yet his outlook can be gauged by advice he gave to one of his hosts in London: 'If you want to be accurate, read your Bible; if you want to be powerful, pray; if you want to be interesting, read widely'. Among his interests was that of occasionally writing poetry, and two of his poems have been included in *Choice Hymns of the Faith*, which is so greatly used among assemblies in Canada and the U.S.A. The one entitled 'Victory' (of which we quote the first three verses only) is typical of Mace's whole outlook:

*O lead me to the Man that died,  
Who all God's nature glorified;*

*Descending to the depths of woe;  
And for us vanquished ev'ry foe!*

*O lead me to the empty tomb,  
His death has robbed of all its gloom;  
He's ris'n! the Lord of life and peace,  
And holds me in His fond embrace.*

*O lead me up to heaven's height,  
To see the Lord enthroned in light;  
That gazing on His glory there,  
I may reflect His image here.*

Alfred Mace passed to be with Christ on September 9th, 1944, being then 90 years of age. He was laid to rest in Riverview Cemetery, Portland, Oregon. His was a strong-minded personality, yet a growing spirit of flexibility came to mark him with the years. He who might have been a fighter in the physical realm became a doughty warrior for Christ, and an ardent witness to the reality of the glorified Lord. He served his own generation faithfully, and has gone from the scene; his contemporaries have passed also into the Lord's presence. Yet there remains something quite distinctive in the impression left behind by the men of that group. They contributed something original to the life of the Church of their age. What have we captured of the permanent values of this special contribution? We need not covert Mace's virile platform manner, his rapid delivery or his occasional thumping of the rostrum: these were *incidentals*. What we may seek, however, is the ardent heart that sought after souls because he sought after his heavenly Master, and rejoiced in communion with Him. These are the things by which men live: they are the *essentials* for equipment for Christ's service today, as in every generation. And in his steadfast example, 'he, being dead, yet speaketh'.