Vic's Pics

BOOKS EVERY METHODIST PREACHER SHOULD OWN

By Dr. Vic Reasoner, President, Southern Methodist College

The rest of this survey will focus on the leading theologian of the Southern Methodist Church. Thomas O. Summers (1812-1882) was born in England. His father died when he was a year old. After his mother died, when he was six, he was raised by his grandmother until her death when he was seven. He was then raised by a great-aunt who was a staunch Calvinist. However, he sometimes slipped off to visit the Methodist chapel, which displeased her greatly. She died when he was sixteen. He immigrated to the United States in 1830.

He rejected the God of Calvinism and for a while struggled with unbelief. He frequently heard Methodist sermons, but they did not discuss the questions which agitated his mind. He consulted Calvinistic ministers, but they told him the secret counsel of God was a mystery. He would play the devil's advocate among the Methodists, taking the Calvinistic position. On one occasion a Methodist lady gave him a copy of Clarke's commentary on Romans. As he read Clarke's comments on Romans 8-9 he was transported with joy. He had found the key which opened the mysteries of the Bible and it was a new book to him.

He began to attend the Methodist class meetings regularly and began seeking God for the new birth. On January 16, 1833 he was born again. There was great rejoicing in the class meeting when he testified to his experience. His class leader judged the Lord had a work for him to do. A year later the class leader told Thomas that he believed from the time Thomas had started attending the society that God would call him into ministry. Soon after that Thomas was granted a license to preach at the quarterly conference, which recommended that he be admitted on trial to the annual conference. In 1835 the Baltimore Conference admitted him on trial and assigned him a circuit in Virginia. He later ministered in Texas, Alabama, where he married a lady from Tuscaloosa, and in Charleston, SC.

The following year he attended the Louisville Convention where the Methodist Episcopal Church split. He believed the southern church was the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States because he believed the northern church had violated the Methodist constitution by defrocking Bishop James O. Andrew.

In 1855 Dr. Summers moved to Nashville to become the editor of the Southern Methodist Publishing House. In 1872 he found his office, library, journal, and unpublished manuscripts all in ashes when the northern army passed through Nashville and burned the publishing house. He wrote in his diary, "The Lord would not have permitted so great a calamity to happen to me, if he had not intended to overrule it for good; so I submit without murmuring."

While continuing as editor, in 1874 he began serving part-time as Professor of Systematic Theology at Vanderbilt University, a newly established university in Nashville which was started as a Methodist institution. By 1878, he became Dean of the Biblical Department at Vanderbilt University.

It was reported that Summers knew the Articles of Religion, Wesley, Watson, and Fletcher by heart. Anything not in line was instantly picked up by his editorial eye. His biographer reported, "Where the truth was involved, he knew no man after the flesh. Truth was dearer to him than friendship, and if occasion had called for it he would have stood for it against the world." Yet he possessed...
a good sense of humor and was loved by all denominations. He had a catholic spirit. On occasion he preached for Baptist and Presbyterian congregations in Nashville and they delighted in his ministry. Yet it was reported that they had to endure some good-natured ribbing about immersion and predestination.

Dr. Summers and his wife had three daughters and one son. He enjoyed his children and they worshiped him. Yet all three daughters died prematurely; two died as a result of tragic accidents. He never failed to remember them in his diary on the anniversaries of their deaths, but his faith sustained him.

As his life drew to a close, he spoke frequently about heaven. Shortly before his death, he feebly ascended the pulpit at First Baptist Church in East Nashville. He leaned on the pulpit and discoursed on the city of God in a way that melted every heart. A Baptist lady recalled, "We all cried and felt an indescribable awe as the old Doctor stood there before us looking so pale and so feeble, and talked so sweetly and longingly of heaven."

When the General Conference met in 1882, he was once again elected as secretary. He did well the first day, then left the conference slipping into a side room. There he lingered. As he heard the songs of Zion sung from the conference, he rallied, half lifted his hands, and spoke these final words: "Faith, faith, faith!"

Dr. Summers wrote commentaries on the four Gospels, Acts, and Romans, as well as a spate of other books. His two-volume, Systematic Theology, published in 1888 after his death, is essentially a commentary on the Methodist Articles of Religion. I particularly value his treatment of the atonement in Book 1, Part 3, chapters 1-6. By this time John Miley had published The Atonement in Christ (1876), which advocated the governmental view of the atonement which had been developed much earlier by Hugo Grothus. Summers refutes this view.

However, Miley went on to publish his Systematic Theology (1893). It marked a turning point in Methodist theology away from original Methodist doctrine. Robert Chiles wrote Theological Transition in American Methodism 1790-1935, in which he compared the theology of Richard Watson with that of John Miley. Chiles calls this transition "from free grace to free will." Miley’s theology was last reprinted in 1989. Unfortunately, Sumner’s theology was never reprinted. It is hard to find, but we have it on the college website as a free download.

However, the classic statement of Methodist theology came from William Burt Pope. His three-volume Compendium of Christian Theology was published in 1881. It is out of print, but available in electronic format on the college website.