

# A Story of Providence\*

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The history of the Gospel Tabernacle Church for the past quarter of a century divides itself into seven sections.

## I. The Causes That Led Up To This Work

These involve a brief reference to the personal history of the senior pastor. Thirty-one years ago he received a profound spiritual blessing in the midst of an ambitious and half consecrated ministry. The baptism of the Holy Spirit that followed, awakened in this heart an intense longing for the salvation of souls and simpler methods of reaching the masses with the Gospel. After attempting for several years to accomplish this purpose in a fashionable Presbyterian church in a western city, during which something was accomplished, but much was hindered by the social exclusiveness and the conventional religious methods about him, he accepted a call to the city of New York in 1880, with the explicit understanding on the part of his new church officers that they should unite with him in a popular religious movement to reach the unchurched masses. After an experience of two years in this city church pastorate, marked by unbroken harmony between himself and his church, and much spiritual blessing every way, he became convinced of the impossibility of reaching the masses by the old conventional church methods, and determined, after much prayerful consideration, to retire from his pastorate and begin an evangelistic campaign along undenominational lines and by simple methods of church work and life, on the principle of a free church without pew rents, where all classes and denominations would be equally welcome.

Two incidents occurred which hastened his decision at that time. One was his own experience of divine healing, after years of physical weakness and suffering. Another was his being led to accept for himself the doctrine of baptism by immersion, which, while not demanding his ecclesiastical separation from his brethren, by joining a close communion Baptist church, yet made it embarrassing for him to continue to act as a Presbyterian pastor. In consequence of this decision he quietly announced to his congregation his purpose, and at the same time requested them not to follow him or leave upon him the odium of having broken up the church to which he had ministered. The parting was most friendly and the Church has continued to prosper along the old lines until this day. The following Monday morning he announced his resignation to the New York Presbytery and was released by a kindly resolution, on motion of Dr. Howard Crosby, seconded by Dr. John Hall, who both expressed much affection, and the hope of his early return to the church of his fathers. It is pleasant to look back to a crisis of so

much importance, passed without any strain whatever. As he left the Presbytery that morning a beloved brother expressed to him his sympathy and best wishes, but added, "you will never succeed without keeping work under the auspices of the Presbyterian church." He felt, however, much freer and much stronger in simple dependence upon God alone. It was a cutting of every earthly cable of dependence, and one of the oldest friends of his life, a distinguished minister, who twenty years later came back to his fellowship and help, wrote to him in those early days, that had made the mistake of his life. That morning the elders of his church called at his home to express to his wife their profound sympathy, and they remarked, as they condoled with her, that "they felt as though they were attending his funeral," and it is possible she may also have felt that he might as well be dead.

## II. The Transition Days

The new work was immediately started by a Sabbath afternoon meeting in a cheap hall in the vicinity, at which he announced through the press an address on the spiritual needs of the city and the masses, and invited all in sympathy with an aggressive spiritual movement to come. There was an encouraging attendance, and the first step was taken by calling a meeting for conference and prayer during the week on the part of all who were willing to help. It might be added, that the secular press gave a wide advertisement to the new movement and the reporters wanted to know how he expected the work to be supported. His answer was, "that just as in business, anything that was worth succeeding always found people enough to sustain it, so in the work of God if anything was worth doing God would see that it was supported." In this spirit he announced at the meeting, above referred to, that trusting in God alone to supply the means and the workers, he would not personally ask any man to join the movement, or to give a dollar to it. During these years God has graciously supplied both the workers and the means and honored the simple trust with which it was begun. On the appointed day the meeting for Conference and Prayer was held in that cold and cheerless dance hall, and as we huddled around a little stove, there were just seven of us and as we opened God's word for His message it was this, "This is the work of the Lord unto Zerubabel, Not my might, nor my power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts. For who hath despised the day of small things."

So the work started and only two of those seven are here today, but they are here to bear witness that the word of the Lord has not failed.

The next Sabbath evening, evangelistic services were begun in the old hall, and the first convert was saved and is still a member of this church. The week evening services were held in the pastor's house, and were attended by the workers and converts, their chief purpose being the teaching and training of the little flock. At first there had been no thought of forming a church, but simply the carrying on of an evangelistic work, leaving the converts free to join various churches. But a conversation with Dr. Judson at this time first suggested the idea of an independent church. He asked the pastor what he intended to do with his converts, and being told, "I expect to send them to you and other ministers to look after them," the good Dr. replied, "I have enough children of my own to nurse and don't want any of yours. The mother is always the best nurse of her own children."

The matter was taken to God in prayer and soon the little flock was clamoring for a church home. Some wanted to be baptised, all wanted the Lord's Supper and none wanted to be sent away, so it came to pass that a little church of less than twenty members was organized, with not enough men to go round and fill the various offices, so that some of our first trustees had to be "elect ladies."

### **III. The Work at Eighth Avenue and Twenty-Third St.**

The evangelistic meetings had been removed in the meanwhile to a larger place, and under circumstances for which this brief summary allows no time to give details, the first large popular service was held in the Academy of Music. At the opening meeting we received valuable assistance from Dr. George F. Pentecost and Mr. Stebbins. Later the meetings were removed to Steinway Hall, and still later to Abbey's Park Theatre, where large crowds continually came, and the saving power of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit were continually manifested. It should be added that Rev E.W. Oakes had at the very beginning volunteered his services and for a considerable time rendered efficient help in the evangelistic and other services. The rental of these large buildings was expensive, and for the first few months the pastor stood alone in trusting God for the supply of these needs. But after the organization of the little church, the members asked the privilege of taking hold with liberal hands and self-sacrificing love, and a system of weekly offerings was begun, which up to the present has supplied the financial resources of the work. So bold was the faith of the little company that within two months after the organization of the church, they dared to undertake the lease of the Grand Opera Hall, Eighth Avenue and Twenty-third Street, at a rental of \$2,000 a year, and they nobly met it from the beginning. For a considerable time this commodious hall became the headquarters of our work, and a regular Sunday morning and evening service, with meetings every night in the week, except Saturday, was started. The hall was filled from the beginning on Sunday evenings, and the work of salvation went steadily on. This hall was pastor's office, auditorium, printing house, Sunday School room, and almost everything that the needs of the work required. The Friday meeting, for special testimony and teaching in connection with divine healing was also organized here, and has never ceased for the past twenty-four years to be a centre of deep and even world-wide blessing. During the ensuing summer a splendid evangelistic work was carried on in a large Gospel tent on Twenty-third Street, on the site now occupied by the Chelsea apartment house. During this year more than three hundred souls were led to Christ in the tent and most of them united with the church. These were days of great blessing. Services were held every night in the week and our young people had no trouble about settling the question of amusement, for they wanted no better recreation than a Gospel meeting. They were accustomed to go out on Saturdays in little bands and scatter invitations to the services so that the following Sunday the meetings were crowded with multitudes of souls, who were unconnected with any church. One cannot look back on those days of blessing without tears of grateful memory and loving appreciation of the noble workers who gave themselves wholly to this work. It is a great joy that this fruitful field has not been allowed to pass into neglect, but is still occupied so faithfully and successfully by the Eighth Avenue Gospel Mission, under the direction of our dear sister, Miss Wray.

## **IV. Our First Tabernacle**

The time had now come when we began to feel the need of a permanent home, and to watch and pray for the Lord's leading regarding a tabernacle building. Our first idea was an extremely cheap edifice of corrugated iron, costing from \$1,000 to \$2,000, and holding a large audience on one floor. For this purpose four lots were secured on Thirty-second Street, on the site now occupied by the new Pennsylvania Railroad station, with connecting lot, entering from Eighth Avenue. A payment was made on this property, but the property was afterwards lost, chiefly through the dishonesty of a wicked attorney, who had been entrusted with a considerable sum of money for the purpose of making a payment on the property and absconded. Soon after our attention was directed to a better location on Twenty-third Street, near Sixth Avenue, an old Armory building, but at that time unoccupied. This, we found could be leased for a moderate sum, and while rude and plain, would accommodate a large crowd and was in the very best location in the heart of the city. After much prayer, we felt led to enter into an arrangement with the proprietor, but before the lease was signed he sent us word that a theatrical company had appeared at the last moment and offered him a lease for the property, the amount we had agreed to give, and a promise to expend nearly a hundred thousand dollars in improving the property, for the purpose of the exhibiting a religious drama, known as Passion Play, a representation of the crucifixion of Christ. His partners insisted upon his accepting this larger offer, and as the papers were not signed, we were helpless.

The morning after this a good woman, a member of the church, called upon the pastor and asked "if he had heard the good news." He was at a loss to understand how this could be good news, but she proceeded to explain to him that the Lord had sent these people to fix up this old ruined building for us, as we were poor and without means, and that just as soon as it was all ready, she added, "see if He does not give it to us." This was a little staggering at first, but this is exactly what came to pass. After waiting a few months, while this company expended \$75,000 in making a little gem of the old Armory, and all in ecclesiastical style for a religious play, with seven golden candle sticks for lamps and decorations to match, the city authorities refused to allow them to perform this sacrilegious play, and as the building was unsuited for a worldly performance they could not use it for ordinary theatrical purposes. The result was the company broke down, the president committed suicide, his partner was burned out the same week, and the owner let us have the building at the same rental that he had offered it several months before, with all the improvements thrown in. It is needless to say that we entered this little sanctuary on Twenty-third Street with awed and thankful hearts and that we felt that nothing was too hard to claim from our Almighty Master. For three years He permitted us to work and worship in that place, the old Twenty-third Street Tabernacle. It was there that the Christian Alliance was organized and our first conventions held, and all the things which have since been vouchsafed to us in our home and foreign work inaugurated. This became a great evangelistic centre. The doors were always open every night in the week, and the one business of the church was to seek and save the lost.

## **V. The Beginning of Our Institutional Work**

Before this time the work of divine healing had taken quiet, but powerful hold of the hearts of many of our people, and the pastor was led in the very first year of the work to announce the opening of a home on Thirty-fourth Street, near where the Manhattan Opera House now stands. A few days after this purpose was formed, a gentleman contributed \$2,000, quite unsolicited, and this enabled us to begin the work of Berachah. Many delightful parlor meetings were held in that home and many Christian men and women from other churches were attracted to the work by this deeper spiritual teaching and intense life and power. A year later a generous friend, who is still with us, contributed a larger sum toward the purchase of a permanent home on Twenty-third Street, for the Berachah work, where again God was pleased to manifest His presence for many years in healing and blessing. A little later one of the workers in Berachah invested a few thousand dollars in building lots up town for the Lord. Within a year the value of these lots had multiplied so rapidly that they were sold at a large profit, which, with the amount already contributed, enabled us to purchase our next Berachah Home, Sixty-first Street and Park Avenue. Still later, when the present Tabernacle was building, this property was disposed of and the larger building, 250 West Forty-fourth Street, was erected for the work of Berachah.

Shortly after the work was begun a number of the young men converted in the meetings offered themselves for missionary work, and requested some regular means of Bible teaching and training for their work. The result of this was the beginning of the Missionary Training School, which has since grown so rapidly and of which another paper has given us the fuller and deeply interested details.

The spirit of rescue work was always predominant among our people. One result of this was the forming of various missions. One of the earliest was Twenty-seventh Street Midnight Mission, and later Berachah, West Twenty-second Street, both under the direction of Mrs. Henry Naylor, now Mrs. Henck.

From the very beginning the work of publication had a prominent place. Our first periodical was "The Word, Work and World," a monthly, followed later by the "Christian Alliance," which afterwards became "The Christian and Missionary Alliance," and has been published as a weekly journal, with a large circulation, for about eighteen years. Various publications were added from time to time, and the printing press has been as widely used in the Alliance work as any other agency.

The consecration of many young lives to the missionary field led very soon to a call for some foreign missionary agency. As long ago as 1884 several independent missionaries went out from the Tabernacle to the Soudan, but the unsatisfactory results of that movement showed the necessity of a thoroughly organized society, and in 1887, just twenty years ago, the first definite steps were taken for the organization of our present missionary work, first under the name of International Missionary Alliance, and now the Christian and Missionary Alliance. The results of this movement and its world-wide extent have been fully described in one of the special papers of this series.

From an early date many Christian friends were attracted from all parts of the country to visit the work in the Tabernacle, and became deeply interested and much blessed, and they expressed an earnest desire that the same truths might be proclaimed and the same blessing communicated to other parts of the land. The result was many invitations to hold conventions and conferences in various cities and summer resorts. One of the earliest of these was the Old Orchard Convention. Others followed in many places. The pastor became increasingly embarrassed by the strong personal aspect, which these meetings necessarily had, and feeling that if the work was to be recognized as his work in any special or exclusive sense, it could never have God's fullest blessing, or the most lasting influence, he earnestly advised the forming of some society which would take away this personal character from the meetings and conventions, and make all the workers equal partners in this new spiritual movement. It was this that led to the founding of the Christian Alliance in the year 1887 at Old Orchard, Maine, for the purpose of uniting Christians of various denominations in a common testimony for the fullness of Jesus as our Saviour, Sanctifier, Healer and Coming King. This society was afterwards united with the missionary branch of the work and now they together form the Christian and Missionary Alliance, which God has been pleased to use for a much wider work than any single church could ever have accomplished, but which the Gospel Tabernacle Church should never cease to regard as one of her many spiritual children.

## **VI. The Second Tabernacle**

After three years of blessed work in the old Twenty-third Street Tabernacle, an opportunity offered to purchase a large and valuable church property, known as the Hepworth Tabernacle on Madison Avenue and Forty-fifth Street, at an extremely low price, and on very easy terms. A cash payment of only a few thousand dollars was required and the interest on the mortgage was no greater than we were paying out for rent, and the building was large, commodious and central. Besides, it brought us into a new neighborhood, and added to us a new constituency. Here we continued to work four years longer, but we gradually found that the neighborhood was entirely too fashionable for the simple Gospel work to which God had called us, and it was somewhat difficult to draw the masses to our meetings. To offset this we spent our summers in Gospel tent work occupying for two seasons the vacant lot still used for tent work on Fifty-sixth Street and Broadway. The conviction gradually fastened itself upon us that God would have us settle permanently on a more popular thoroughfare and within reach of the masses, especially on the West side, where our work had begun. In 1888 the Madison Avenue Tabernacle was sold at a considerable advance on the price paid for it, and the present site was purchased along with the adjoining site on Forty-fourth Street for Berachah Home. A joint arrangement was made for adding the rear portion of the Berachah lot to the Tabernacle property, while Berachah built and used the upper floors and the Tabernacle the ground floor of this rear lot. This gave to us sufficient capacity for our present commodious building, and steps were immediately taken for the erection of the present Tabernacle. The congregation meanwhile worshipped in Wendell Hall, Forty-fifth Street, near Ninth Avenue.

## VII. Our Present and Third Tabernacle

We had now compassed the city, having really moved entirely round in a circle from Caledonian Hall to the Academy of Music, thence to Twenty-third Street Tabernacle, thence to Forty-fifth Street and Madison Avenue, and finally back to Eighth Avenue. It was with great rejoicing that the corner stone was laid in the fall of 1889 and the work committed to the ownership and blessing of our God. The entire building was a triumph of architectural skill, in bringing the largest possible accommodations out of the smallest space, including an auditorium holding over a thousand persons, with three chapels affording room for several hundred more, a store on the street from our publication work, a Training Institute on Eighth Avenue with accommodations for forty persons, and the home of Forty-fourth Street, with accommodations for nearly one hundred.

At length, in May, 1889, the buildings were dedicated to God in connection with a large convention, gathered from various parts of the United States and Canada. The financing of these buildings was a task whose difficulty can only be understood by one or two, who were permitted to stand in the place of responsibility during those trying months. Their experience, if it could be told, would be a story of divine providence and simple trust, that could not fail to fill all hearts with wonder and praise. If the rules that control this commemoration service permitted, it would be a pleasure to mention, at least, one honored name in this connection, but to God alone be all the praise.

The early years of our work in the new Tabernacle will never be forgotten by the few who still survive. The principal services were our evangelistic meetings, which for a long time were held every night in the week and constantly gathered in the sinful and the sad, and brought new testimonies continually of salvation and blessing. We were greatly aided in this evangelistic movement by a beloved brother, who, with his dear wife, has gone to be with Christ some years ago. We refer to Mr. Burke, our Gospel singer, whose efficient leadership of our chorus choir and earnest devoted work for the salvation of souls and the service of praise can never be forgotten. The Tabernacle was crowded on Sunday evenings from year to year, and well filled most of the week nights, while the Sunday morning service was at first much smaller and was slowly built up to its present importance.

Meanwhile the growth of the Alliance movement in all parts of the country and the world demanded more and more of the senior pastor's time, both in official work and the visitation of our numerous conventions throughout the country. In those days we had no field workers as now, and the burden of convention work fell chiefly upon him. It was his privilege in this connection to visit from year to year the principal cities of the United States and Canada, holding conventions and organizing the work where it was practicable. This necessitated additional help in the Tabernacle work and led to the calling of our beloved brother, Dr. Wilson as associate pastor, along with Mr. Funk, who acted in this capacity from the beginning, but whose duties largely confined him to the Missionary Training Institute, and left him only a little time for church work. Dr. Wilson will give in his own words the story of his precious and fruitful ministry amongst us, nor are we permitted, by the restraint properly imposed upon us at this meeting, to give

adequate expression to the appreciation and love which his character and labors have called forth from us all. For the same reason we are constrained to be silent also regarding the quiet, but ever faithful and efficient ministries of Pastor Funk. It is not out of place, however, to mention another quiet ministry, which, during the past ten years, has grown more and more helpful in connection with the Tabernacle, namely, the little four o'clock meeting and its beloved and venerable leader, who is one of the little company of not more than a dozen now living who have been with us from the beginning.

During these years the Tabernacle became the scene of many wonderful gatherings, especially our Alliance conventions. Here also have been heard the voices of many of God's honored servants, including such names as Henry Varley, Pastor Stockmeyer, Hudson Taylor, Dr. Guinness, F.B. Meyer, Andrew Murray, Dr. Scofield, Mrs. Baxter, Mrs. Brodie, Frances Willard, and many more.

The increasing needs of the Alliance work had been making such inroads upon Dr. Wilson's time that the need was deeply felt for a pastor who could give his whole time exclusively to the Tabernacle work. For this purpose Rev. Milton M. Bales was called as associate pastor in the year 1901, and for three years faithfully ministered in this place and was honored by the Master, leading many souls to Christ and many others into the fullness of the Spirit. At length promotion came to him also, and he too was added to the increasing list of the Field Superintendents of the Alliance, and once more the church was called to pray for an under-shepherd. This need was finally met by the call of the Tabernacle to Rev. F. E. Marsh of Sunderland, England, our present Acting Pastor, whose work amongst us began in November, 1905, and is still being continued in manifold labors and increasing blessing.

The recent history of the Tabernacle is too near to form good material for the historian's task. It will suffice to say that the year recently closed has been, spiritually and financially, one of the most prosperous and successful in the history of the church, and the time seems again at hand, when, with a great increase in the value of our property and the need for a building more fully adapted to the various departments of our Sunday School, church and convention work, we may be called once more to move forward and change our local habitation.

It will be sufficient, therefore, to sum up in a few general remarks the leading lessons which God has been emphasizing in the story of the Gospel Tabernacle.

1. The work has always been pre-eminently evangelistic, the salvation of souls has ever been, and we trust will ever be, its supreme business. It was born in this atmosphere and without it, it will languish and decay.
2. It has always been a free church and its financial and social methods have aimed to conform to the principles of God's Word and the Apostolic Church. The system of pew rents has been abjured, and all classes have been equally welcome and all seats free. Religious entertainments have been studiously avoided, whether with or without

admission fees, and our people taught to give voluntarily for the support of God's work on principle only. Before commencing this work, the pastor was often told by his former officers that a free church never could be sustained in New York City. The success of the Tabernacle is a sufficient answer and this church is a monument of God's blessing on Scriptural methods of church finance.

3. The Tabernacle has always stood for the deepest spirituality and the highest standard of Christian faith and life. While not demanding a deep experience as a condition of membership for God's little ones, it has aimed to lead them on into all the fullness of Christ, and we thank God, above almost every blessing, for the sweet and holy lives which He has linked with us in this blessed fellowship. Many of them have gone to be with Christ, many of them are with us still, but we believe that after all the most potent force of our work has been the godliness of its little flock.

4. The Tabernacle has aimed to combine in the work of a Christian congregation all the gifts and ministries of the Apostolic Church. Not only have we the work of the evangelist, but the deeper teaching of God's Word, the training of Christian workers, the ministry of healing, the work of the pastor, and the great work of foreign missions, besides all those loving ministrations to the poor, the sick and the destitute, which constitute the sweet credentials of a Christ-like ministry. We have given a place for the ministry of women, we have had no more beautiful department in all our work than the training of the King's children, and there is scarcely any line of Christian activity in which our people have not some part. We believe today that more of our members are engaged in the various charities and rescue missions of New York City than ever in the work of the Tabernacle church, and there is scarcely a religious movement in the community in which some of them have not a part.

5. Perhaps the supreme glory of the Tabernacle work has been that which has already been fully referred to, its relation to the evangelization of the world. Hundreds of its members have become foreign missionaries, and perhaps there is no church on earth that has so large a proportion and so large an aggregation of its actual communicants on the mission field, while the gifts of its people to foreign missions are much greater than their contributions to their own church work.

6. The spirit of sacrifice, especially in giving to God, has been from the beginning a striking feature of our work. In the very beginning of the work a beloved sister brought her bank book, with the accumulated savings of her life, amounting to more than a thousand dollars and insisted on giving them for the needs of the work in the days of its poverty and trial. Another dear woman brought \$500 which she had saved for her funeral and laid it at the Master's feet. Again and again has the story been repeated of the poor woman in the Gospels that gave her all. Humble house workers, with moderate wages, have actually undertaken the support of a foreign missionary, and for years it was true of a single Bible class in our Sunday school, consisting of working girls, that it contributed more for foreign missions than many of the wealthiest churches in the land, actually supporting five missionaries at one time on the foreign field.

7. Perhaps the most significant feature of the Tabernacle work is the one that would be the most difficult to describe, namely, its silent, indirect influence in stimulating faith in God and earnest, aggressive work for our fellowmen among other Christian organizations as well as individuals. Like the salt and like the light, its pervading power has been stealing silently through human hearts and only the final day will measure the value and fruition of that "sweet savor of Christ" which has gone forth through its humble and consecrated people to the uttermost parts of the earth.

8. Above all else the aim and call of the Gospel Tabernacle has been to exalt and glorify the Lord Jesus Christ, and to write high above all human names, on the hearts of men and the pages of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century, the name which has always been its motto and its glory--Jesus only.

9. And finally, it has been its constant aim to witness to His personal coming and God grant that some glorious day it may be its high honor to welcome back our King.

And to Him of whom and for whom and by whom are all things, be the glory, both now and forever. Amen.