

Dr. John J. De Boer

*A Burning and A Shining Light*

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A tower is fallen! a star is set!

Alas, alas! for Celin.

**W**ORDS from the Fourth Gospel are peculiarly appropriate this morning: "Ye sent unto John, and he bare witness unto the truth. \* \* \* He was a burning and a shining light, and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light." "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world that I should bear witness unto the truth." Like his Master, Dr. John J. De Boer bore witness unto the truth. For all too brief a season we rejoiced in his light, but we know that in the Church Triumphant that light continues to shine with a luster more rare than earth can ever know. "What shadows we are, and what shadows we pursue!" exclaimed Edmund Burke in the course of an address on the floor of the House of Commons when informed of the sudden death of a bitter political opponent. So it often seems to us all, but we who are Christians are convinced that we are not merely shadows but lights reflecting for a season the Light of the World—and one such light was John J. De Boer.

During more than a quarter of a century Dr. De Boer was my friend, and as our lives at best are swifter than a weaver's shuttle a quarter of a century is a long time to have known a friend upon this planet. As college student, as college instructor, as divinity student, as missionary of the Cross, as wise administrator of the affairs of a great educational institution John J. DeBoer progressed from strength to strength as the years passed. In many respects time wrought its changes for he grew constantly in wisdom and insight, in intellectual power and spiritual awareness. But there were important qualities in his nature which did not change. Always he was amicable and understanding, approachable and sympathetic, gentle and considerate. Always he placed first things first and last things last. As a burning and a shining light he shone with steadfastness unto the end.

I shall be able this morning to speak of but few of the realms of activity in which Dr. De Boer was unusual. First of all, he was an unusual student. There are hundreds of thousands of students in our colleges and universities today but many of them simply prove that enrolling a young man in a school does not necessarily number him among the choice intellects of our time. H. G. Wells cynically observes in "The World and Mr. Clifford," "The only good thing I have ever heard in defense of a university gown is that it is better than a tail-coat for cleansing chalk off a black-board, and even for that a pad of velvet is better." In John De Boer, however, his college, his seminary, and his universities possessed not only a superior student but also a scholar—and few men may truly be called scholars. Nevertheless, this distinction did not

separate him from the common life of mankind. Within the cloistered halls of learning he ever heard the still, sad music of humanity. It is also noteworthy that his theology never impeded the expression of his religion, and his wide knowledge, constantly growing from more to more, did not dim his reverence for the personality of every brother for whom Christ died. Of such a scholar we may well say with Mohammed that his ink is more sacred than the blood of the martyr. To love God with all one's mind is a far more exacting requirement than to love God with all one's heart or with all one's soul or with all one's strength, and when the Church finds a man of extraordinary intellectual attainments placing those attainments at the disposal of the Kingdom of Christ the Church should grapple that man to her very soul with hoops of steel. Paul was undoubtedly right when he wrote, "Not many wise, not many noble are called," but I do not think he was precisely gloating over that somewhat dismal fact. Had there been more of the wise and the noble in the church at Corinth that church would not have sunk to so sad a state—a state which could scarcely be termed a state of grace. So we should be grateful for the scholars in our churches, and grateful for all who diligently search and interpret the Scriptures and the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, especially if, like Dr. De Boer, they remain men of simplicity of soul.

Consider also the uncontested fact that Dr. De Boer was an unusual missionary. Few born teachers and exceptional scholars dedicate their lives to Christian service in the Orient. I recall with vividness the day Dr. De Boer informed me

that he had been appointed to join our mission in India. I was surprised and slightly disappointed for I had long assumed that he was headed straight for a chair in one of our seminaries. Upon reflection, however, it appeared altogether right that he should go where men are more profoundly concerned with the problems of religion than anywhere else in the world. "Of course," says E. Stanley Jones in his latest book, "Along the Indian Road," "India has had her skeptics too, but, on the whole, she journeys with her face at an angle—toward the Sky. Or perhaps it would be truer to say that India journeys with her eyes half-closed, looking within to gain Self-realization, the God within. But whether she looks at the Sky for a transcendent God, or looks within for an immanent God, she is looking for God." To a land where men are looking for God with an intensity of quest quite unknown in America we should send the most sagacious and the most discerning of our Christian ambassadors. Among these Dr. De Boer quickly won a place. He was not "a machine for converting the heathen," nor did he "hand tracts to the untractable." His approach to the non-Christian was utterly unlike that of a missionary I know who once said to a Mohamadan as he handed him a copy of the New Testament, "Here's a book that will knock the bottom out of your religion." He did not subscribe to the belligerent methods of those who consider it their mission ruthlessly to tear down what for ages has been deemed sacred by other seekers after truth. He remembered that the Holy Spirit is always courteous as well as insistent. He realized that the messenger of Christ has no warrant to stalk with hob-nailed boots and clanking

spurs into the citadel of a man's soul, and that if he does he will not win for his Master the allegiance of that soul.

While in India Dr. De Boer formed many friendships, not the least of which was a friendship with Mahatma Gandhi, far the most eminent Indian of our generation and one who will be revered generations hence. Western minds do not easily comprehend the complexities of so strange a personality as that of Gandhi. It is therefore the more interesting to note the sympathetic understanding of the man by one who was reared in the hyper-Calvinistic atmosphere of the Christian Reformed Church, who by inheritance and training might well have been expected to repudiate Gandhi and all his works. Gandhi is not regarded as one who desires greatly to contribute to the success of the Christian missionaries in India, and he certainly does not call himself a Christian, but Dr. De Boer told me that upon one occasion the Indian leader said to him, "I should count it the highest honor of my life if I were to be thought of as a disciple of Jesus." Truly, when John De Boer was in India a burning and a shining light was there bearing witness unto the truth.

Finally, Dr. De Boer was unusual in his human relationships. Although he was quite at home in the pursuit of the best thought of his day he did not forget that often, as Emerson observed, "God builds his temple in the heart on the ruins of churches and religions." The Christian fellowship was more important to him than cathedrals, and he never forsook the living waters of that fellowship for "the lethal waters of an abstract theology." The secret of his radiant spirit lay in the fact that



he knew that he had passed from death unto life because he loved the brotherhood. In his thought that brotherhood was not limited to the mature of mind and heart. He remembered that little children are a part of the brotherhood. He once wrote me concerning the children's hour in his home in India, and more than one children's hour in America will remain a tender memory to his children and mine. Were you to venture into the Celestial City this afternoon you might find Dr. De Boer among the doctors, but I think you would be more likely to find him where Francis Thompson said he would find the Master Himself: "I shall find Him in the nurseries of heaven."

When John Galsworthy died Mrs. Galsworthy sent out cards in acknowledgement of letters of condolence on which were inscribed Galsworthy's own lines:

God, I am traveling out to death's sea,  
I, who exulted in sunshine and laughter  
Dreamed not of dying—death is such a waste  
of me.

The death of John J. De Boer seems to us the tragic waste of a superb life. But a burning and a shining light that bears witness to the truth cannot be wasted, and never can be extinguished. So as today, together with her precious children in India and her brilliant son in America, we commend to the Father of lights our dear friend without whose constant love and companionship Dr. Boer could not have scaled so great a height of Christian achievement we thank God and take courage.

#### **PRAYER**

Father, in thy gracious keeping  
Leave we now thy servant sleeping.