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...THE...  
**UNION SEMINARY  
REVIEW**

OCTOBER—NOVEMBER, 1913.

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# THE UNION SEMINARY REVIEW

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VOL. XXV.      OCTOBER-NOVEMBER, 1913.      No. 1.

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DR. GIVENS BROWN STRICKLER.

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR THOMAS C. JOHNSON, D. D., LL. D.

Givens Brown Strickler was born April 25, 1840, at Strickler's Springs (now Wilson's Springs), Rockbridge County, Virginia, of a lineage marked for strength and character. He was a son of Joseph Strickler and Mary Jane Brown, his wife.

Joseph Strickler was devoted to politics, and ambitious for his sons to take a leading part in the affairs of state. His grandfather—the first of his line in this country—was a minister of the Lutheran Church, a preacher of considerable power, who had migrated from Holland into this new world.

Mary Jane Brown Strickler was a comely woman, full of energy, firm in the discipline of her family, and pious. She early began the religious training of her children in the best fashion of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. To their great loss she died while her children were still young.

Givens Brown Strickler had two brothers, the younger of whom died early. The older brother, the eldest member of the family, was a youth of great parts. He was handsome and attractive in person and gifted in mind and heart. Dr. George Junkin wrote of this young man, Cyrus Strickler: He "was a very rare sample of superior talent, used in a most zealous and affectionate manner." His life was lost to his country and to the ministry in the first battle of Manassas.

The subject of this sketch had also two sisters, one of whom—Miss Virginia M. Strickler, of the Mary Baldwin Seminary—

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a woman of exceptional talent and character, survives him; the other preceded him long years ago to the grave.

It is thus clear that the primordial stuff of Givens Brown Strickler was excellent.

On the death of his mother, his maternal grandmother took him and his younger sister to her own home. Here his training was continued in much the same strain in which his mother had begun it. Perhaps it was somewhat more rigorous. In the primary country school he was a good student. Tradition also says that he was a champion wrestler and fighter—a tradition which he, once at least, refused to confirm or to deny. His further preparation for college was gotten from a private teacher, and in a newspaper office, in Lynchburg. Dr. J. B. Ramsay, his pastor in that town, would from time to time, make a survey of his work as a student and commend his progress.

He was early—probably as early as his fifteenth year—thrown upon his own resources. At about that age we find him working on a newspaper in Lynchburg—helping on one day and far into the night to prepare the paper, and, the next morning before the break of day, delivering it at the doors of the subscribers. He was engaged for several years in newspaper work, and regarded it as “very educating.”

Such was his preparation for Washington College, which he entered in 1859. Here he was a hard worker. He husbanded his time well, and was a highly successful student. He was a member of the Graham (now Graham-Lee) Literary Society; and, about the middle of the session, 1860-1861, is said to have been chosen by that Society to represent it in a public debate held in the College Chapel. The fact that he was chosen, not only over his own classmates but over the men of the higher classes, speaks eloquently of his power as a debater at that early date. Upon his entering the college his fellow students had dubbed him “Big Freshman.” He was blessed by finding in the college his gifted and consecrated older brother, who was very proud of him and of his achievements and delighted to write of them to his home folks. This praise was, it is presumed, quite a stimulus to Givens Brown Strickler.

Before he could complete his college career he heard the call to battle in behalf of his beloved state. He went out to war with the "Liberty Hall Volunteers," June 16, 1861. This company at first was under the command of Captain James J. White, one of the Professors of the college. "The company was assigned to the 4th Virginia Regiment in the Stonewall Brigade, and was successively commanded by Captains Henry Ruffner Morrison, Hugh A. White and Givens B. Strickler." It participated in a great many of the battles of the army of Northern Virginia up to Gettysburg, winning distinction on every field. Givens B. Strickler was enlisted as a sergeant of his gallant company. "Just before the Sharpsburg fight he became by successive promotion Captain of the company." Less than a year afterwards his career as a soldier was cut short by the capture of himself and his company at Gettysburg and his being carried as a prisoner of war to Fort McHenry, Fort Delaware, and Johnson's Island.

His manner of life as a prisoner was characteristic of the man, as far as circumstances permitted. He wrote a journal covering a portion of the period—a very interesting journal. In the preface, dated July 3d, 1863, he says: "Having this day in a manner which will be referred to hereafter, become a prisoner of war in the hands of the United States forces, I have resolved to keep a record of such things as I shall deem of sufficient importance to be written down for future perusal. I have purposed also as a part of the plan of this register, to embody in it such comments and reflections upon passing events as may appear to me to be just and appropriate; and now, if the reading of what shall be recorded upon these pages, shall be a source of pleasure to any friend to whom I may grant this poor privilege, I will be most amply remunerated for my labor."

In this record he tells the circumstances, highly creditable to them, under which he and his troops were captured, the treatment they received at the hands of their immediate captors, their treatment by the provost guard, the chagrin and woe which he and his fellow prisoners suffered as reports came of the repulse of the Confederate Army, "of the death of Armistead, the wounding of Garnett and Kemper and the almost complete

annihilation of Picquett's splendid division." "I know not," Captain Strickler writes, "with what grace the hitherto invincible army of Northern Virginia bore this defeat; I know not with what feelings those veteran soldiers, victors on many a well fought field, retraced their steps toward the Potomac; but, doubtless, they were not half so bitter as those I experienced as I beheld the wild exultations and extravagant boasts of the jubilant foe, as they marched large bodies of my countrymen from the battlefield, as trophies of the triumph of their arms. I thought I would willingly give my life's blood to wash out that blot upon the flag of my country."

He tells, in this record, of the "prisoners being carried from Gettysburg to Fort McHenry, so memorable for its filth, to Fort Delaware, without vermin but so remarkable for the cruelty and meanness shown the prisoners that he left it with less reluctance than any other place in which it had ever been his fortune to sojourn." He tells of the officers "being carried at length to Johnson's Island, on Lake Erie, near Sandusky, Ohio—tells of the weariness of the marches, the discomfort of the railway journies in box cars, or of voyages in a filthy ship, or steamer, employed in getting the prisoners to these places—tells of what he saw or failed to see on the way—tells of the bearing of the people toward the prisoners—tells all this with a sense of the danger of being partisan, with the desire to be fair, and yet often in words that would have pierced as so many sword thrusts the Northern ear. He tells how the hope and courage of his fellow prisoners of war kept alive, tells of their confidence that their country would conquer or suffer annihilation—tells all this in sentences that generally have the balance and impressiveness characteristic of his style in his mature life.

The monotony of the prison life in Johnson's Island left little to record, save what history the prisoners could make for themselves. The latter portion of the book in which Captain Strickler recorded the aforementioned facts is taken up with letters written to him by some of his room-mates while in prison, with verses thrown off by some of his companions or other patriots of the day, with the outlines of arguments used in debate and outlines of orations and sermons. The writers of the letters

evidently had asked to be allowed the privilege of inscribing severally a letter to him in the record book. These letters contain tributes of high praise to him—well-deserved praise, no doubt, for they praised him for the traits for which he was afterwards so generally admired. The prisoners in "block fifteen," his block, formed a literary club and conducted frequent debates, delivered orations, read poems. Captain Strickler appears to have been ordinarily on the winning side in his debates. Criticisms of some of those speeches have been preserved. The official critic of the Club writes on one occasion, "The deep, sonorous tones of his voice, his well-rounded and powerful periods, and his clear and convincing arguments, almost make one believe that Clay or Webster is among us again." Another writes of the same occasion; "I would give all I have and all I ever expect to have for Capt. Strickler's voice. Its very tones almost carry conviction to the heart." On another occasion the official critic concludes his criticism thus: "Therefore, as your critic I . . . pronounce Capt. Strickler the most accomplished rhetorician, the most skillful master of the art of elocution, the best speaker, the nearest approach to the orator in the club. The Captain is a student by nature, and as a consequence his impromptu efforts fall far short of those on which he has bestowed time and attention."

He set himself, as has been indicated, to still more serious work. We have from this young Captain in prison, prayer-meeting talks, a thanksgiving address, and sermons, one of them repeated. Thus he was endeavoring to do good to those about him, and to educate himself. Tradition says that he exerted the finest sort of influence on his fellow prisoners.

On the return of peace he came back to Virginia; and upon the opening of Washington College under the Presidency of General Lee, began the completion of his academical education, 1865-1867. He was graduated with distinction in every branch necessary for an A. B. degree except mathematics, from which he asked to be excused on the double ground that he had much work and that he had no taste for the study of that science. He won the orator's medal in his literary society in the course of this period. Better than all this he had developed and main-

tained a character of an exalted sort. Dr. Milton W. Humphreys of the University of Virginia, after narrating several incidents illustrative of Captain Strickler's excellence of character while a student in Washington College, writes, in a letter to Dr. Moore, these remarkable words: "Whether it is possible or not for a man to be 'without sin,' I do not know, but if it is, such was G. B. Strickler," words which Dr. Strickler would have salted, of course. Mr. Humphreys and Captain Strickler were rivals for college distinctions—the two men of outstanding mark in the student body of their day—a fact that gives additional force to these words. At the close of the session of 1867 Captain Strickler was made Assistant Professor of Latin in Washington College, and served in this capacity for one year.

Under the influence of Captain Samuel McCorkle, his Sunday School teacher, and of Dr. J. B. Ramsay, his pastor, Captain Strickler had, after a period of profound conviction, given himself to God, while yet a youth in Lynchburg, had set his face toward the ministry, and had kept that aim steadily before him thenceforth.

In 1868 he entered Union Theological Seminary as a student, where he completed the course in two years, winning golden opinions on the part of the Professors, as to his character and abilities.

He was licensed to preach the everlasting Gospel by Montgomery Presbytery, Sept. 2, 1870, and May 19, 1871, he was ordained by Lexington Presbytery as pastor of Tinkling Spring Church in Augusta County.

Here he labored happily and efficiently for thirteen years. Following his judgment of what was best for this people, and following, instinctively, perhaps, also the line of development easiest for, and most congenial to himself, he became a great doctrinal preacher. His charge was not in the lime-light, but he came there to have a reputation spread throughout all the borders of our Church and far beyond. He came to be regarded as a doctrinal preacher to the people without a superior in the country. Do your work better than anybody else, taught Emerson, and people will beat a path to your shop, be it in the depths of a Sahara, to get of that work for themselves. There

came at length an epidemic of calls for Dr. Strickler. (Washington and Lee University had conferred the degree of Doctor of Divinity upon him in 1878. And it may be added here by way of anticipation that in 1894 Davidson College made him a Doctor of Laws.) The calls came from St. Joseph, from Louisville, from Atlanta and from other places. The call to Atlanta came with power. He decided to leave Tinkling Spring—his first love and a charge within which he had made many of his strongest and most endearing friendships.

Early in his Tinkling Spring pastorate—in 1871—Mr. Strickler married Miss Mary Francis Moore, a daughter of Mr. Nathan G. Moore, of Fancy Hill, Rockbridge County, Virginia. She at once became a most efficient help-mate. She assumed almost all the burdens connected with the conduct of their home. She even managed the little farm connected with the manse at Tinkling Spring. Her husband was allowed to give himself to pastoral work, to preaching and to study. Down to her death, June 25, 1905, she was his tireless, faithful and efficient helper. She deserves a large measure of praise in any sketch of her distinguished husband's career, no matter how brief that sketch may be. From 1883 to 1890 Dr. Strickler served the Central Presbyterian Church of Atlanta as pastor. He was in his prime as a great preacher. He exercised a great ministry, and came to be regarded as the leading citizen of his city. His own people responded nobly to his efforts and he was happy in them. His ministerial brethren of the Southern Presbyterian Church of the city virtually made him their stated teacher in Theology. Thus his influence and effectiveness for good were vastly heightened. The church at large recognized fittingly his great ability to serve it in varied capacities. He was made Moderator of the General Assembly in 1887, and was appointed by that Assembly as Chairman of the Committee then named to confer with a like committee of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. concerning the possibility of organic union. Thenceforward he was to serve on many committees to which work of far-reaching importance in the life of the church was to be committed. From 1887 for many years he was associated with Drs. Barnett and Summey in the publication of the Southern

Presbyterian Quarterly. In 1883 he was elected to the Chair of Church History in his *Alma Mater*, this Seminary. Dr. Dabney urged him strongly to accept the call. He seems to have canvassed the matter with a degree of earnestness. But the call did not appeal strongly to him. He has been heard to say somewhat bluntly that he never felt that he knew how to teach history, that his tastes had never led him to study extensively in that direction. After the death of Dr. Thomas E. Peck, in 1893, he was fixed upon more and more for the Chair of Systematic Theology in this Seminary. It required a wrench to break away from his great work in Atlanta, but he came to regard this call as one he should accept. Hence he appeared at Hampden-Sidney in the year 1896, began the work of his chair with great distinction, and continued to the end of his life, to expound and enforce the principles of the Reformed Theology with an ability unsurpassed in the whole Church. He enjoyed this period of work very greatly. He told his son during his last days, that he loved his work here, loved the students, loved his colleagues, loved the place, and felt that if he could only get back into his study chair once more, he would recover.

During all this period, by his occasional articles, by his services on committees of the first importance to the life and well-being of the Church, by his presence and effectiveness in our Church courts, he did additional and exceedingly valuable service to the cause of truth in the ecclesiastical sphere; and, in virtue of his influence as Rector of Washington and Lee University from 1899 on, did great service to the cause of secular education.

Toward the end of May last (1913), in Laurens, South Carolina, where he stopped over on his way home from a meeting of our General Assembly in Atlanta, to visit his daughter, Mrs. C. F. Rankin, he was taken ill. Acute indigestion was followed by uremia and that was followed by another fearful disorder. Attended, after the preliminary illness, by his gifted son, Dr. Cyrus W. Strickler, and skilled nurses, he made at length some apparent progress toward recovery, was carried to Atlanta and given the best attention which the medical faculty and the

hospitals of that city could afford. His recuperation did not proceed beyond a certain point. At length his physicians decided that in order to his permanent and entire recovery an operation was necessary. The operation was performed, he seemed to get on well. But about the time that those in charge expected to let him upon his feet, he was seized with a congestion of the lungs, and, when that was relieved, his heart failed. He was gathered unto the fathers—he was taken to be with his Master—Monday night, August 4, ult.\*

Truly a prince and a great man in Israel is fallen. Let us recall him as far as we are able:

The most of us are acquainted with his personal appearance: Approximately six feet tall, with well proportioned frame, comfortably, but not grossly clothed with flesh, he had a face and head indicative of intellect, of imperturable sturdiness, of energy and of will power generally. He had fine gray eyes, the eyes of a man of intellect but eyes which well conveyed the varied emotions of his soul, and lent generally an aspect of mildness, beneficence and excellence to a face otherwise severe.

Few of us have thought often of him as a soldier in civil warfare. He never got out his gray, nor rattled his sword. Those who came to know him only in later years, learned from others than himself of his soldier's record. But you who knew him as a soldier of Christ can easily imagine him as a determined and stark, and sagacious, if unassuming, fighter. In his record of the capture of Gettysburg he tells of some soldiers as proposing, after many exhausting and desperate hours, to raise the white flag, and of an officer's declaring that he would shoot down the first man that should dare raise such a flag. He does not say who that officer was. One can easily believe, naturally believes from all the circumstances narrated, that Captain Strickler was that very officer. At any rate it is perfectly clear from his narrative that he approved of that officer's attitude. At-

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\*To Dr. and Mrs. Strickler were born seven children—Mrs. C. F. Rankin, of Laurens, South Carolina, Dr. Cyrus W. Strickler, of Atlanta, Georgia; Miss Mary Strickler, Mrs. George H. Denny, of the University of Alabama; Mrs. R. K. Timmons, of Lawton, Oklahoma; and Givens and Dabney Strickler, who died in their infancy.

torney William A. Anderson, for a time a member of the same company, has written:

"The impression produced on my mind, from what I saw, and still more from what I heard from those who witnessed his conduct under fire, was that he was remarkable, even among the brave men who were his comrades, for the coolness and dauntless intrepidity with which he bore himself upon the field of battle."

The most outstanding of his mental characteristics was, as most of us will say, the logical. Irrefragable logic was a factor of the most of his sermons, addresses and debates. Grant the correctness of his premises and he would sweep you with him in argument, with irresistible force. Before the Pan-Presbyterian Alliance in Washington he read a paper on the Form of Church Government. Reading was not his forte. He did not enjoy the delivery of that paper. He was not widely heard by the audience, but those who heard him said: "That paper is chain logic." So it was with most of his work. His conclusions came out of his premises.

Dr. Strickler is to be remembered as a rhetorician and an orator. Some of us may have thought little of this aspect of the man. But how many imperfect sentences do you remember to have heard fall from his lips? How many false similes? How many illustrations illy adapted to his purpose, or unhandsomely carried out? How many imperfect paragraphs? How many loosely jointed productions as wholes? Of some able men's sermons, one can say they are talks. Which of Dr. Strickler's sermons, which you can recall does the word talk seem to fit? Were they not all finished products in their literary form? There was nothing stilted about them, but in their finish they have the quality of fine orations. Their matter was generally so important, their truth so impressive and their form in such perfect art, so simple, clear and direct that little thought was given by you to it. His work in its form was an illustration *artis celantis artem*.

His delivery was often not far from the model of the highest oratory. His persuasive and convincing presence, his splendid voice—a perfect servant of his mind and heart in his efforts

to convince and to persuade— his intellectual and his emotive powers gave him a near approach to the real orator of the first class.

It was as a preacher that Dr. Strickler first loomed large on the visions of men. Before he had been long in his Tinkling Spring pastorate he had come to be recognized as a great doctrinal preacher. He was a great student—a student of subjects. He would take a doctrinal common-place, simple or profound, from the Scripture, roll it over in his mind, develop it under the control of logical order of the first water, write out the development in carefully chosen, easily understood, concrete and impressive phraseology; he would fix the thought and largely the phraseology in mind; then, with his impressive personality, rich voice, capable of expressing so many varieties and shades of feeling, and of carrying every grade of conviction from the merely probable to the absolutely certain, he would deliver, with quiet but great energy, this matured product. To the great mass of his hearers he seemed to suck subjects dry, to say the last word worth saying concerning them and to be absolutely convincing. This was generally true whether the subjects on which he discoursed were simple or profound and difficult or of ordinary comprehension.

The most cautious critic would perhaps pronounce him the greatest preacher of doctrine to the people which our Church has possessed in its life, and without a superior perhaps in our wide country in his own day. There was an originality, a breadth and depth and a titanic power about his great theological master, Dr. Dabney, that made him, at times, at least, a greater preacher to preachers. Both Dr. Moses D. Hoge, and Dr. B. M. Palmer were more many-sided, and more the masters of the pathetic. Thornwall had a wider range and a superior brilliance and splendor; but as a purveyor of doctrine to the people, Dr. Strickler was the equal of the best of them. His one published book, a book of sermons, helps to bear out these allegations.

He was great not only as a preacher but as a pastor. He directed his people wisely. His churches were full of enterprise and well-directed enterprise. He knew how to value the begin-

nings of movements and how to quash those he disapproved. There was a movement beginning once among the women of his church of which he disapproved. Word was brought of the matter. He betook himself to the room where they were gathered. They began to set forth their scheme of endeavor. He simply shook his head. He did not open his mouth. It was enough for the greater portion of the gathering that their great pastor disapproved. The scheme fell to the ground. He was the master of impressive silence as well as impressive speech. This he used sometimes in pastoral work.

Dr. Strickler was great as a propagator of Presbyterianism. Several of the younger and vigorous churches of Atlanta are monuments to his wisdom and skill as a propagator. He was given to training choice young men of his congregation for Christian work—for leading in prayer, for Sunday School and other forms of Christian work. These young men went out, as encouraged to do so, to neighborhoods where Sunday Schools were needed, and organized such schools. Out of some of these schools vigorous churches have grown. Even here in the Seminary he went out in this sort of work. The efficiency of the eldership of the Ginter Park Presbyterian Church is due in a considerable part, it may be, to Dr. Strickler's weekly study of the Sunday School lesson with the members of the session and others and his schooling them in leading in prayer. He may not, after all, have started a great number of churches; but he conceived of a most effective method of extending the church; he had the liberality of spirit to advocate colonization at the cost of the mother church; and as he had opportunity, he put the method into application. The general imitation of his example on the part of our ministers would soon result not only in tripling the number of the churches but in increasing greatly the efficiency of the membership.

Dr. Strickler was a pre-eminently great teacher of the Reformed Theology. He gave himself to inventing no new statement of any old truth; but accepting the old truth in its old forms he exhibited unrivalled skill in expounding, defending, and impressing this theology as set forth in the Westminster Standards—that rugged and massive system of Christian

truth which so perfectly matched his own character, which indeed had moulded his own character. His penetrating insight, his keen power of analysis, his logical method, his capacity to convey doctrinal truth on profound subjects in simple terms—long cultivated in his preaching of doctrine to the people—his satisfaction with the system he taught, his love for it, his set purpose to hold and defend and further the faith once delivered to the saints combined to make him the greatest injector of that system into the minds of men of the last two decades in our Church. He made his mark on the men who set under him, indelibly. All his great powers—his massive and powerful intellect, his quiet but dynamic affections, and his vigorous, sturdy, unbending will, his prudence and the whole weight of his character were called into service in this last great segment of his labors, and with the finest effect.

He was great as a friend. He was not a demonstrative man. He did not seem to court friendships; but when men were thrown with him, they found him affable, interesting, lovable, quietly affectionate and helpful. Notwithstanding his preoccupation in important studies, he made friends and many of them in every community in which he lived. He had, along with his other excellencies, a certain courtliness of manner toward both men and women whom he respected, which drew out a ready and warm response on their part toward him. His cheery words to his sick friends were invaluable to them. One who was supposed to have one foot in the grave more than a dozen years ago, recalls how he was encouraged by his kindly smile and his great persuasive voice as he said: "Oh you will get well and do years of effective work, I hope." It was so much more heartening than the average greeting: "You look ill, you ought to quit work and take care of yourself." Thus he drew men to him, while his simplicity of character, his generous estimate of his fellows, and his sweet Christian disposition moved him strongly to them.

He was a great and trusted leader. True, he did not always carry the measures which he advocated, neither did Admiral Coligni, nor General Robt. E. Lee. True also, he did not try to organize a party, and some times met, singlehanded, a well

organized party when by a little effort he could have had a party in compact organization to back him. But in a day when forces antagonistic to his beliefs were powerful, when the drift of the age was against his views, making his fight in a singularly simple and direct way, he had the ear of a great multitude of his brethren. They were ready to follow him. Who has been more trusted this last score years amongst us? What other individual has had more largely the ear of the Church? He helped to shape the policies of the Church in many critical situations, and did it with a loyalty to the truth as he saw the truth, and with a sturdy, Christian gentleness not often excelled.

Nor was he leader without victories to his credit—ecclesiastical victories and civil victories. He rarely stepped out into the civil sphere to battle save by his ballot but on occasions he did. It will be recalled that, when the recent Constitutional Convention was in session and when there was a movement in the Convention to make a large reduction of interest on all State bonds held by educational institutions, although the State had encouraged these institutions to purchase these bonds as yielding a steady and fair income, there was a gathering of the representatives of these institutions, on a certain evening, to present the cause of the institutions before a large committee of the Convention. There were many distinguished men gathered to defend the rights of the institutions. There were many able speeches made before that committee. A sagacious onlooker has said, that speech after speech was made and no appearance of conviction came over the faces of the eminent committeemen, but that at length, late at night, Dr. Strickler spoke—argued for our educational institutions, and that as he argued a change came over the faces of those gentlemen; and that he, the onlooker, felt that the cause of the educational institutions would triumph, as it did.

With all his great gifts, and after all the distinguished honor done him, he was one of the most modest and humble of men.

In fine, Dr. Strickler was a simple follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. And when we think of his having passed the period of his earthly probation, this, after all, is the thought of him of supremely comforting character. Neither his great natural

parts, nor his education and culture, nor his soldierly qualities, nor his rhetorical and oratorical powers, nor his logic nor his abilities as a preacher, nor his capacities as a theological instructor, nor his aptitude for friendship, nor his powers as a leader, brilliant as all these were, could give us any solid comfort at such a time, apart from the thought of his faith—like that of any simple believer's—in the Lord Christ, the only Saviour of sinful man.

After services in his church—the old Central church in Atlanta—and the conveyance of his mortal remains to this spot, appropriate services were held in this chapel on the 7th of August; and then his body was laid beside that of his beloved consort in the Seminary plot in beautiful Hollywood, there to await the last Great Day.

“Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth. Yea; saith the Spirit, for they do rest from their labors; and their works do follow with them.”

To God eternal, immortal, invisible, who raised Givens B. Strickler up and sent him to serve the Church and the world be praise therefor forever and ever.