

✓
ANNALS
OF THE
AMERICAN PULPIT;
OR
COMMEMORATIVE NOTICES
OF
DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN CLERGYMEN
OF
VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS,
FROM THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTRY TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE.
WITH HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS.
✓
BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

VOLUME III.

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tion of Christianity, and especially in the extension of the Presbyterian Church, in the West, it is not easy to estimate; while his students, in the early days of Tennessee, filled all the learned professions, and were almost the only teachers, for several years, in the infant settlements of the West and South-west.

The portrait of Dr. Doak is preserved in the library of Washington College. The contour of his face bears a strong resemblance to that of John Knox; and the strong points of character in the two men were strikingly similar.

I am, dear Sir,

Very respectfully yours,

J. G. M. RAMSEY.

JOHN BLAIR SMITH, D. D.*

1778—1799.

JOHN BLAIR SMITH was the fourth son of the Rev. Robert Smith, D. D., and was born at Pequca, Lancaster County, Pa., June 12, 1756. He received his name from a maternal uncle,—his mother being a sister of the Rev. Messrs. Samuel and John Blair. In very early life, he evinced a great thirst for knowledge, and an uncommon facility at acquiring it. At the age of fourteen, he became, under the most watchful and faithful parental training, hopefully a subject of renewing grace; and at sixteen was admitted to the Junior class in the College of New Jersey. During his whole college course, though he was naturally of a cheerful and social turn, his conduct as a Christian was always worthy of his profession, and his improvement in the various branches of study worthy of his acknowledged talents, and answerable to the high hopes which his earlier developments had awakened. He was graduated under Dr. Witherspoon in 1773, and was one of a class of twenty-nine, fourteen of whom became ministers of the Gospel, and three Governors of States.

An elder brother, Samuel Stanhope Smith, having become the head of the rising institution in Prince Edward County, Va., under the care of the Presbytery of Hanover, and also in 1775 been installed pastor of the Churches of Cumberland and Briery in Prince Edward,—the subject of this notice went, at his suggestion, in the early part of 1776, to join his brother as an assistant teacher, and at the same time to prosecute his theological studies under his direction. Having previously joined the Newcastle Presbytery, he transferred his relation from that to the Presbytery of Hanover on the 18th of June, 1777; and having gone through his several trials, was licensed to preach by the latter Body, at Tinkling Spring, on the 29th of April, 1778. He was ordained by the same Presbytery at Prince Edward Court House, on the 26th of October, 1779. At the same meeting of Presbytery, (October 28,) his brother, having received an invitation to the chair of Moral Philosophy in the College of New Jersey, asked leave to resign the Presidency of Hampden Sidney College, and also his pastoral charge; both which requests were granted. John Blair Smith was

*Assemb. Miss. Mag., 1805.—Foote's Sketches of Va., 1st Series.—Life of Rev. Dr. Ashbel Green.—MSS. from Archibald Alexander, D. D., and William Hill, D. D.

immediately appointed to succeed him as President of the College; and in the spring of the next year, (1780,) he became his successor also in the pastoral office.

About this time Mr. Smith was united in marriage with Elizabeth, daughter of Colonel John Nash, of Templeton, Prince Edward County,—a lady distinguished alike for her accomplishments and her piety. They had six children,—five sons and one daughter. One of the sons, (Robert,) entered the ministry, and for some time served the Church in Snow Hill, Md., where he died in 1824.

Though Mr. Smith, from the time he appeared in the pulpit, attracted much attention as a preacher, yet he was by no means at first so popular as his brother who had preceded him: before he left the State, however, he is said to have been at once more attractive and powerful than any other clergyman in Virginia from the time of Samuel Davies. But the earlier years of his ministry were much less distinguished for zeal and activity than those that followed. The times were most adverse to the progress of religion, and the success of ministerial labour. The State, and that very part of it, had been invaded by the British; and the minds of the people were occupied chiefly about their own safety, and their country's independence. Mr. Smith was an earnest patriot, and withal was a man of great activity and courage. The College suffered much in consequence of the war. Its resources were exhausted; and the youth who should have been pursuing their classical studies were hurried off to the army.

After the Peace, it was some time before religion and literature began to revive. The Methodists, about this time, began to pass through Virginia, and by their great zeal attracted no inconsiderable attention. In some places the members of the Presbyterian Church were induced in considerable numbers to join their Society. About the year 1786 or 1787, they came within the bounds of Mr. Smith's congregations, and were probably the means (so says Dr. Alexander) of giving a fresh impulse to both his religious feelings and his public ministrations. Instead of condemning what in them he disapproved, he endeavoured to imitate what he considered praiseworthy; and from this time he exhibited a degree of ardour, which had never been witnessed in him before. He preached with a power and frequency which, by the Divine blessing, soon began to produce visible effects. An extensive revival of religion ensued, which spread through the College, and the whole adjacent country. Mr. Smith entered into the work with such glowing zeal, and his preaching was so eloquent and powerful, that he was continually urged to extend his labours, and to places more and more remote from his residence. By this means, he was so often called away from the College, that some of his friends thought that he was less attentive to his duties there than could be desired; and this was felt the more, as the institution, being without funds, depended for its support on the fees of the students. He himself also was of the opinion that his first duty was to preach the Gospel; and as there seemed to be on every side a great demand for preaching, he determined to resign his office as President of the College, and give himself wholly to the appropriate work of a minister. This resolution he carried into effect in the year 1789; and, at the same time, bought a small farm in the neighbourhood of the College, and went to live upon it.

But Mr. Smith's own congregations began at length to feel that his numerous engagements abroad were hardly compatible with a proper attention to his pastoral duties at home. Meanwhile, owing to a great lack of domestic economy, he had become not a little embarrassed in his financial concerns; and the salary which he received from his congregations was not sufficient to meet the current expenses of his family. These circumstances prepared the way for his removal to another field of labour.

In April, 1791, he was appointed by his Presbytery one of the Commissioners to attend the General Assembly at Philadelphia. During the meeting of the Assembly, he was invited to preach in the Third, or Pine Street, Presbyterian Church, which was then vacant, and looking out for a pastor. So acceptable was his preaching that the congregation were called together, and made out a unanimous call for him, before he left the city, which he conditionally agreed to accept. When the circumstance became known to his own people, who regarded him with an affection amounting almost to idolatry,—they were greatly distressed, and threw every obstacle they could in the way of his removal; but they found it impossible to divert him from his purpose. He accordingly resigned his pastoral charge, removed to Philadelphia in the autumn following, and was installed over his new charge in December.

Shortly after Mr. Smith's settlement in Philadelphia, he became a member of an Association consisting of several of the most prominent clergymen of the city, designed to prevent the spread of infidel principles through the medium of certain newspapers. One article of his at least, over the signature of A. B., was published in a newspaper, which was followed by a pamphlet from Dr. Ashbel Green, full of scathing satire, that terminated the controversy, and, for the time being, arrested the evil.

In 1795, the degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred upon him by the College of New Jersey. In the same year, Union College, at Schenectady, N. Y., was founded; and Dr. Smith was chosen its President. He accepted the appointment, and for three years presided over the infant institution with great credit and success. He then returned to his former charge in Philadelphia, and was formally reinstated among them in May, 1799.

The following extract of a letter from Dr. Smith to Major Morton, of Prince Edward County, Va., which is in my possession, discloses the reason of this last change:—

“I suppose that my return to my former charge in Philadelphia will excite some surprise amongst my friends. However, it can be explained upon a very natural principle, without ascribing it to fickleness of mind. It is simply because I prefer being Pastor of a Congregation before being President of a College, and think myself better qualified for the former than the latter; and because I have regained that health and strength, the want of which only prevented me from staying in Philadelphia when I was there. It is true that I shall run a great risk in the present circumstances and prospects of the city; but it is equally true that my post would have been there, and I should have had my chance with the other citizens, if the want of health had not compelled me to remove.

“The Trustees of the College have accepted my resignation in a manner very respectful to me, and have directed that my portrait be taken and preserved in their Hall. They insist upon my staying till after the Commencement, next May, though I wish to go about the beginning of April.”

On his return to Philadelphia, he was cordially greeted, not only by his own congregation, who had parted with him most reluctantly, but by a large portion of the intelligent and excellent people of the city. But their joy was destined soon to be turned into mourning. About the middle of August, he was attacked by the yellow fever, and died on the 22d of the month,—one of the first victims of that terrible pestilence. He died in perfect tranquillity,—in a manner worthy of his Christian life and his Christian hopes. A Sermon was preached on the occasion of his death by his relative, the Rev. Dr. Samuel Blair.

Dr. Smith's only acknowledged publication was a Sermon entitled "The enlargement of Christ's Kingdom, the object of a Christian's prayers and exertions,"—delivered in the Dutch Church in Albany before the Northern Missionary Society in the State of New York, 1797.

FROM THE REV. WILLIAM HILL, D. D.

WINCHESTER, Va., June 15, 1848.

Rev. and dear Sir: My opportunities of acquaintance with Dr. John Blair Smith were confined to the period of his residence in Virginia—the period, however, in which he performed his greatest work, and earned his brightest laurels. I was a student at Hampden Sidney College, while he was its President; and, owing to some peculiar circumstances, was brought into nearer relations with him than were almost any of my college cotemporaries. I had an opportunity of marking his whole course from that time until he left the State.

My most interesting recollections of him have respect to the great Revival of religion that commenced in Hampden Sidney College in 1787, which was instrumentally sustained and carried forward chiefly by his efforts. Though he had always been an earnest and eloquent preacher, the commencement of that revival evidently gave a fresh impulse to his spirit, and a greatly increased fervour and power to his ministrations. He showed, from the very beginning, that his heart was in it, and that nothing that it was in his power to do for its promotion would be omitted. The most violent opposition was raised against it by a large part of the college students, and those who were known to be in an anxious state of mind were derided as miserable fanatics; but Dr. Smith immediately frowned the opposition into silence, and threw around the serious students the protection of his influence and authority. His preaching was marked by a clearness, directness, pungency, and tenderness withal, that the most hardened found it difficult to resist. Immense congregations would hang upon his lips in breathless silence, except as the silence would be interrupted by an occasional deep sigh. If he observed in his audience the least sign of undue excitement,—anything not perfectly consistent with the decorum due to the services of God's House, he would instantly pause and say,—“You must compose your feelings, Brethren—God is not the author of confusion, but of peace in all his churches.” And sometimes, on such occasions, he would give out a verse or two of some hymn for the people to sing, till perfect silence was restored, and then would go on with his discourse. When this came to be understood, all tendencies to noisy demonstration were suppressed; though it not unfrequently happened that when the congregation was dismissed, several would be seen remaining in their seats, because, from the overpowering effects of distress or joy, they were unable to rise until their friends came to their assistance.

Dr. Smith was unusually careful in avoiding hasty admissions to the church. He urged upon the consideration of those who were hopeful converts the importance of the most close and diligent self-scrutiny, and the great danger of becoming fixed on a false foundation. He required of them generally a probation of several

months, and sometimes of a year or more, before being received as communicants. No anxious seats or inquiring meetings were used or thought of in those days; though no opportunity was suffered to pass unimproved for earnest and faithful conversation in private.

Dr. Smith had but a slender frame, and a feeble constitution; and his exertions, especially during the revival, were much greater than his strength would warrant. Not unfrequently he would go into the pulpit, and preach with wonderful animation and power, when his friends thought that he ought to be in his bed. On one occasion, he ruptured a blood-vessel, and fell in his pulpit, and had to be taken out and carried home. At another time, as he was preaching in a private house, and standing by a large open window, the same thing occurred again, and putting his head out of the window, he discharged such a quantity of blood that all who were present supposed that they had heard him preach for the last time. After this, he was urged by his physicians and friends to quit preaching altogether; but in a few weeks he had resumed his accustomed labours as if nothing had happened. The buoyancy of his spirit, and the all-absorbing interest which he felt in his work, gave to his feeble frame a sort of recuperative power, that made the passage a very short one back from a near approach to the grave to the fresh and vigorous discharge of his ministerial duties.

Notwithstanding Dr. Smith was earnestly devoted to his work as a minister of the Gospel, his influence was deeply felt also as a patriot and a citizen. When the war of the Revolution spread terror and agitation through the region in which he lived, and interrupted the regular exercises of the College, instead of finding an apology in his profession for remaining inactive at home, he raised a company of volunteers from among his students and the youth of his congregations, and with sword in hand marched at their head as Captain, joined the army, and performed a tour of military duty, in pursuit of the British legions who were carrying desolation through the sea-ports and lower counties of Virginia. He subsequently set out with a view to join a company of volunteers to assist General Morgan in a probable encounter with Cornwallis; but when he overtook the company, his feet were blistered by travelling, and he was, not without great difficulty, persuaded by Colonel Martin, one of his elders, to abandon the expedition and return home.

But Dr. Smith exerted an important influence in the civil concerns of the State also, especially as connected with the interests of religion. When the Legislature, in 1776, abolished the establishment of the Church of England in the State, they, at the same time, passed an Act, incorporating the Episcopal Clergy, and giving them a right to the glebes and churches which had been procured by a tax upon the inhabitants in general, including Dissenters of every description as well as Episcopalians,—notwithstanding the Bill of Rights had said—"The rights of conscience and the free exercise of religion shall be secured to all the citizens of the State, and no preference shall be given to one sect over any other." Another bill was introduced, but not yet passed, to extend the privileges of the Act of Toleration, as passed by William and Mary, to the State of Virginia. Dr. Smith framed a remonstrance against those Acts, which he induced the Presbytery of Hanover to adopt and send to the Legislature. It was a very able State paper, and had the effect of preventing any further proceedings in regard to the Act of Toleration, though the other Act remained in force a few years longer, until public sentiment loudly demanded and finally secured its repeal.

Another great excitement was raised in Virginia by a bill which was introduced in the Legislature, in the year 1784, for a general assessment of all the inhabitants of the State, to raise money for the support of religion in the State, leaving it to the different parishes to decide what denomination of Christians it should go to support. This bill was to be submitted to the voters. The inhabitants of the Eastern Counties, where the predilection was generally for the

old establishment, were much in favour of this plan of assessment, and its operation in respect to them would have been nearly the same thing as the re-establishment of the Episcopal Church; whereas, in the upper counties, where the Dissenters were more numerous, and much divided into sects, it would only generate contention, and open a door for electioneering and intrigue. Then, too, each sect that was excluded from the assessment, would have to support its own minister, and pay the assessment besides. This, it was urged, would displease more persons than the former establishment, would encourage a spirit of intolerance, and would array the different denominations in a spirit of bitter hostility against each other.

Patrick Henry, who was at this time a member of the Legislature, was a strenuous advocate of the assessment, and it was confidently expected, as well from the wonderful power of his eloquence as from the general character of the Body, that the Bill would pass into a Law.

The subject now became one of intense interest, especially among Presbyterians, who were nearly unanimous in their opposition to the plan;—though Mr. Graham, a man of much distinction among them, favoured it. Dr. Smith, having succeeded in procuring what he deemed a suitable memorial to the Legislature, was appointed, with two others, to present it, and defend the side which it espoused; though it was generally regarded as a most unpromising, not to say hopeless, movement. It turned out that the conflict was almost entirely between Smith and Henry; and the result was that the assessment bill was defeated by a majority of three votes.

It is well known that our great Virginia Orator was originally opposed to the adoption of the Federal Constitution. When that noble instrument was submitted to the consideration of the people, Patrick Henry offered himself as a candidate for Representative of Prince Edward County in the State Convention; and he appointed a day to meet the people of the County at the Court House, to show the defects of the Constitution, and the grounds on which he opposed it. The Court House is not a half hour's walk from the College. Dr. Smith, who was an earnest friend of the Constitution, had made his arrangements to be present at the meeting, and defend it against his attacks; but, being called away at that hour to visit a sick person, he employed a young man who lived in his family, remarkable alike for memory, for shrewdness, and for the use of his pen, to take down Mr. Henry's speech in shorthand for his (Dr. Smith's) benefit. Within a week or two from that time, there was to be a public exhibition in the College Hall—an occasion which was always sure to draw together a large assembly. When the day arrived, Patrick Henry, who lived in the neighbourhood, came with the rest, little dreaming of the rod that was prepared for him. One of the best speakers among the students came forward upon the stage, and delivered Henry's philippic against the Constitution, almost exactly as he had himself delivered it, at the Court House. Another immediately followed with a speech prepared by Dr. Smith, in which he had put forth all his energies, in *defence* of the Constitution. There was no intimation given that the two speeches were not written by the individuals who had pronounced them. Henry was not a little annoyed by the procedure, and at the close of the exercises gave Dr. Smith to understand, in no equivocal terms, that he felt that an unfair advantage had been taken of him. Dr. Smith contended that he had no cause for complaint, unless his speech had been unfairly represented; and in that case, he declared himself ready to make any amends in his power. Henry said *that* was not the ground of his complaint; for the young man had certainly taken his speech down with great accuracy; but he thought it was indelicate and improper that he should be placed in such circumstances before that audience, without any intimation having previously been given him of what was intended. Dr. Smith replied that Colonel Henry knew it was his intention to have replied to him,

when he spoke at the Court House, but was providentially prevented; that he had then spoken for public effect, and his speech became public property; that all that he could reasonably require was that it should be fairly reported; and if that had been done, he could not see that he had any just reason for complaint. Henry, however, was not at all satisfied, broke off all intercourse with him from that time, and would never hear him preach afterwards, though he had previously been one of his constant hearers.*

Leaving it to others to speak in regard to Dr. Smith after he left Virginia, I will only add that

I am very respectfully and truly yours,

WILLIAM HILL.

FROM THE REV. ELIPHALET NOTT, D. D.

UNION COLLEGE, April 10, 1857.

Dear Sir: My acquaintance with Dr. John Blair Smith was short; my reminiscences of him are therefore few, but precious—for they are reminiscences of a wise and good man;—of a man who, during our too short acquaintance, ever treated me as a son;—whose counsels gave a new direction to my opinions on Church organization; and whose efforts determined the ultimate field of my labours.

I came from the State of Connecticut in the summer of 1795, on a mission to the “new settlements” in Western New York, which could hardly be said to extend beyond Rome. Almost all beyond Rome—much this side of it—was wilderness.

My training had been in the Orthodox Congregational Church—my sympathies were with it; and so were my opinions in regard to Church government. And it was my purpose, and I deemed it to be my duty, to extend its influence, and to form churches to be in the same ecclesiastical connection, and under the same form of government.

In passing through Schenectady, I stopped over night at a public house opposite the Academy building, then occupied by the College, and learned that there was to be a prayer meeting or lecture there that evening. I felt it my duty to attend it, and was solicited to preach by Dr. Smith, then President of Union College, who, after sermon, invited me to his house to spend the night. He inquired concerning my views, and objects, and theatre of action. Having told him, he said to me,—“The Orthodox Churches of New England hold substantially the same faith as the Presbyterian, of which the Shorter Catechism is the common symbol. Now this being the case, is it wise, is it Christian, to divide the sparse population holding the same faith, already scattered, and to be hereafter scattered, over this vast new territory, into two distinct ecclesiastical organizations, and thus prevent each from enjoying those means of grace which both might much sooner enjoy but for such division? Would it not be better for the entire Church that these two divisions should make mutual concessions, and thus effect a common organization on an accommodation plan, with a view to meet the condition of communities so situated?”

The arguments employed by Dr. Smith were deemed conclusive by me, gave a new direction to my efforts, and led, through the influence of other Congregationalists whom I induced to co-operate, to the formation of those numerous Presbyterian Churches on this “accommodation plan,” of which, though the plan has been abandoned, the fruits remain to the present day.

* Dr. Archibald Alexander expressed to me the opinion that Dr. Smith's treatment of Patrick Henry on this occasion was not such as his character and standing entitled him to.

My fixed purpose was, when I came into the State of New York, to settle in the country. From this purpose Dr. Smith availed himself of every opportunity that presented to dissuade me. He urged on me the consideration of the fact that the Apostles always sought the great cities as centres of influence. He urged my settlement in the First, then the only, Presbyterian Church in Albany; and it was owing to his untiring exertions that I was finally settled in that city.

Coming as I did from Connecticut, where the discourses of the clergy were, for the most part, argumentative, written discourses, and read calmly and deliberately from the pulpit, the impassioned and extemporaneous efforts of Dr. Smith filled me alike with admiration and amazement. His addresses to the hopes of Christians were most cheering,—his appeals to the conscience of sinners, terrific. He was the dispenser of the consolations of the Gospel to the righteous, the Boanerges of the Law to the wicked. He was ever ready, ever willing, to preach, and always commanded the rapt attention of the audience he addressed. His preparations for the pulpit were meditation and prayer. He seldom wrote his sermons—at most he wrote only a few brief hints on a slip of paper, which, as he rose in the pulpit, he placed under the thumb of his left hand, in which he held a small pocket Bible, which he raised instinctively to meet his eye, when he came to a new topic of discourse. Whether he read the hints written, when he so raised the Bible, or whether it was merely a habit necessary to the free workings of his mind, it would seem, was uncertain; for, on one occasion, when delivering an impassioned passage, the little brief slipped from beneath the thumb which held it, sailed away, and finally lodged on the floor of the middle aisle. Not the least embarrassed by this incident, the Doctor tore a small piece from a newspaper in his pocket, placed it under his thumb in the little pocket Bible in his left hand, and went on with his discourse, raising the Bible to his eye as frequently as before, and gathering from it apparently the same inspiration.

In private life, Dr. Smith was remarkable for his hospitality and conversational powers. His opinions on Slavery were substantially those of Washington, Jefferson, and other distinguished contemporary statesmen at the South. But though he spoke of it freely in conversation, and seemed to anticipate the divisions which it has since occasioned in the Church, I do not recollect to have ever heard him allude to it in the pulpit, where he seemed to know nothing but Christ and Him crucified.

He informed me that, during the prevalence of that terrible epidemic,—the yellow fever, in Philadelphia, in 1793, he remained in the city, kept his church open, and preached every Sabbath, and to audiences such as he had never addressed before.

He left his charge in Philadelphia chiefly on account of ill health, and under the promise, if he ever recovered his health, to return to them again. He did recover his health, and fulfilled his promise by returning to his former charge; but he returned there to die. There rest his ashes, and thence his sainted spirit ascended to his God. Though he left no published works of consequence, as memorials of his worth, behind him, his memory yet lives on earth, and will live honoured, and revered, and loved, by all who knew him, among whom are none who remember him with greater affection and veneration than the writer of this brief memorial.

Very truly yours,

ELIPHALET NOTT.