

INTRODUCING

Rev Charles Strong & The Australian Church

Brief Biography

Charles Strong was born on September 26, 1844 at Dailly, Ayrshire (Scotland). His early education was at the village school and then at Academies in Ayr and Glasgow. He commenced studying at Glasgow University when he was fifteen years old. The method of instruction differed from that in English universities. Professors engaged in dialogue with their students and there was less emphasis on rote learning. Strong's democratic outlook, his extensive knowledge, his pleasure in the interconnection of ideas and sense of logic are attributed, in part, to his studies at the university. He completed his MA course in 1862-3. Then he entered the Divinity course which he completed in 1866-7. In 1868 he was ordained. Four years later he married Janet Julia Fullarton Denniston. She was a well-educated woman who shared his interests and supported him throughout his ministry. Strong was minister of the Scots Church in Melbourne from 1875 to 1883 and of the Australian Church from 1885 until his death on 12 February 1942.

Ministry - Scots Church

The congregation of the Scots Church in Melbourne flourished under Strong's leadership. Among the many people he attracted to church services were non-Presbyterians and people who were previously not interested in religion. He set up several groups for discussion of literary, religious and social topics. He was highly regarded by community and church leaders, as well as by working class people who respected his sincerity and concern for social justice. He taught his congregation that there was little value in religion without service to the neighbor in need and was at the forefront of efforts to draw attention to problems in the slum areas of Melbourne. He was an active member of the Australian Health Society which promoted guidelines for good health, was president of the Convalescents Aid Society and secretary of the Society for the Promotion of Morality. He was also involved with efforts to improve housing in slums and in giving support to unmarried mothers.

Although he was known to be a liberal in theological and social matters, this did not arouse any conflict until 1877. In that year an anonymous pamphlet appeared in which concern was expressed about the preaching of false doctrines, the mocking of orthodoxy and the denial of the supernatural elements in Christianity. Although Strong was the target of these accusations, he was not named in the pamphlet. However, from that time he was under suspicion of heresy. His article on the Atonement, a scholarly description of the development of this doctrine, was published in 1880. It raised concerns about his radical views which some regarded as heretical. Strong resigned in August 1881 but was persuaded to take six months leave and then to serve the congregation for a further twelve months. It appears that he was driven out of the Presbyterian Church by a small group of his colleagues. The main complaint against him was that he failed to emphasize sufficiently certain points of doctrine which his accusers considered to be essential. Although there was no examination of the charges brought against him, he was officially

declared not to be a minister of the Presbyterian Church in November 1883. He then left for a visit to Scotland.

Strong's Theology

Strong's "social views" and attempts at reforming society were intrinsic to his religious perspective. He rejected the idea that religion was not concerned with matters of everyday life, with social welfare or with economics. He regarded with disdain the idea that religion was mainly concerned with the preparation for life after death, with salvation and damnation, preaching and praying, services and sacraments, the Bible, and vestments. He believed that the first task of the church was to preach "freedom, justice, peace, charity, compassion and reconciliation". It should condemn everything that was contrary to the Gospel. The mission of the church was not to attract more people but to change the world. For him social issues were also spiritual issues. Religion was interconnected with consideration of social problems and action to bring about solutions.

Ministry - The Australian Church

Upon his return to Victoria in October 1884, Strong was approached by a group of friends and supporters who asked him to preach for them during the next twelve months in a hall which they would hire. In November 1885 a new church was constituted and Strong was asked to be its first minister. Although involved in the formulation of its aims and objectives, Strong made it clear that he was not the founder of the "Australian Church". In a review after the first year, it was noted that attendance at services had been about a thousand each Sunday and large sums of money had been donated for a church building. The principles and basic ideas of the church were published for the information of the public. The Australian Church aimed to be "a comprehensive Church, whose bond of union is the spiritual and the practical rather than creeds or ecclesiastical forms". The imposition of theologies and interpretation of the Gospel from the past was seen to hinder both minister and congregation. Membership of the church required "sympathy with the general spirit and aims of the society, the honest effort to carry into modern life and thought the religion of Reason and Love and contribution to the funds of the society according to ability". The notion of a church that was non-dogmatic, inclusive and tolerant was not new. It was one of the important ideas of the liberal religious movement of nineteenth century Scotland and England.

Strong organized the social work of this new Church. It included aid for children, a creche for the children of working mothers (led by Mrs Strong) and a Working Men's Club. He set up societies for the discussion of literature and music, and the Religious Science Club. He also maintained a strong interest in the value and significance of religions other than Christianity.

The establishment of the Australian Church did not result in a movement of secession from traditional churches. Australian Churches were set up in Newcastle, Lucknow and Sydney but they did not last long. By 1905 the Australian Church in Melbourne was the only one.

The Australia Church- after 1900

The depression in the 1890s and the departure of some of the wealthy members of the congregation meant that financial support for the Church was reduced. Attendance at services was still about one thousand. The societies formed to discuss economic, literary, social and religious problems attracted people who were not associated with the congregation. The major problem was the debt on the church building. This appeared to be solved when a group of four men bought the building and leased it back to the congregation. However, lack of funds continued to be a problem and attendance at services gradually declined. Eventually, the departure of numerous families from the city meant that there was no longer a reliable source of income for the church. Strong resigned from the congregation on October 6, 1913 thereby leaving its members and its management committee free to make decisions about the future of the church. When all seemed lost, the bequest of a large sum of money enabled the church to continue to pay the minister and in due course to purchase a smaller building.

Strong's interest in world peace and his views on peaceful means of settling international problems made him unpopular during 1914-1918 and resulted in the resignation of many members of his congregation. His opposition to war and to a proposal by the Australian Government in 1917 to conscript Australians for service in overseas countries aroused the disapproval of friends and supporters. The press in Melbourne also attacked him for the first time in his career.

A renovated church was purchased in 1922. However, the congregation did not flourish. Old members died and Strong's calls to "social duty and responsibility" did not appeal to young people who thought that the church did not show enough interest in present-day matters. This was in spite of the fact that Strong and his congregation were very much involved in addressing the needs of society. They were active in their support for peace, quick to support a campaign to assist victims of the Spanish Civil War and among the first to help Jewish refugees from Germany and Eastern Europe. Members of the congregation were made aware of the need for justice for Australian Aboriginal people. They were active in promoting reform in prisons and abolition of capital punishment. Strong was at the forefront of moves to provide for mentally handicapped children.

The depression of 1930-1933 was a very difficult time. Numbers declined and so did the financial support. This state of affairs continued during the years that followed. After Strong's death, Rev Mervyn Plumb accepted the call to become minister of the church in January 1943 and remained in that position until October 1950. On July 10, 1955 the final service of the Australian Church took place.

It was decided that the establishment of a trust would be an appropriate memorial to Strong. The church building and the organ were sold and after payment of debts, the remaining money was paid to the Charles Strong (Australian Church) Memorial Trust. On February 3, 1957 the Australian Church was dissolved. It was the enduring interest of Strong in non-Christian religions as worthy of respect and serious study that led to the decision to make the primary object of the Trust 'the sympathetic study of religions other than Christianity'.

Source:

CR Badger, 1971

The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church

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