

JAMES HALL BROOKES

by Timothy Demy

In the years between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the dawning of the twentieth century, premillennialism—and especially dispensationalism—grew significantly in American religious thought and culture. Much of this early growth came as a result of the preaching, teaching, and publications of Presbyterian minister James Hall Brookes (1830-1897). From his pulpit in St. Louis, his participation in the annual Niagara Bible Conference, and his prolific pen that produced religious best-sellers, Brookes became a nationally recognized proponent of dispensational premillennialism and the pre-trib rapture. Brookes was one of the first to prominently teach the pre-trib rapture in this country and most likely should be viewed as the father of Christ's "any-moment" return in America. Throughout his life and ministry, Brookes maintained a love of and devotion to biblical exposition, and he coupled this with great personal integrity and spirituality.

Brookes was born February 27, 1830, in Pulaski, Tennessee. In June 1833 his father, a Presbyterian minister, died of cholera contracted in his rounds of pastoral visitation. Young James endured a childhood filled with financial uncertainty and loneliness, yet out of this background he developed a character marked by determination and compassion. His childhood diaries reflect a serious spirituality and sensitivity and a strong commitment to religious development.

As a young man Brookes was several times offered the opportunity of a free education, including an appointment to the U. S. Military Academy at West Point. Each offer was graciously acknowledged but declined by James because he believed he should pay his own way through college. Working as a country schoolmaster and saving his money, Brookes finally acquired sufficient funds to begin college at age twenty-one. He entered Miami University at Oxford, Ohio, and was admitted to the junior class because of academic abilities and prior training. During his last year as an undergraduate, Brookes undertook additional studies at Union Presbyterian Seminary at Oxford, in order to better equip himself for ministerial training at Princeton. He graduated from Miami University in 1853 and entered Princeton Theological Seminary, intent on pursuing the ministry and again refusing all offers of financial assistance

PASTOR

Brookes' seminary studies lasted less than a year due to an unexpected call to return to Ohio to serve as pastor of the First Presbyterian church in Dayton, Ohio. He enthusiastically accepted the call, ending his formal education to embark on a forty-year pastoral ministry (He received the honorary degree Doctor of Divinity from the University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri and Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri in 1860 and 1864 respectively.) On February 14, 1854, Brookes was granted a license to preach by the Presbytery of Oxford, Ohio, and two months later, on April 20, he was ordained and installed as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Dayton. Just twelve days later he married Susan Oliver, a young lady with whom he had fallen in love during his college years.

Throughout his pastoral years, Brookes was an extremely popular preacher and pastor. In February 1858, he received a call from the Second Presbyterian Church of St. Louis, and he moved there and quickly filled the church to capacity. Rather than enlarging the present facilities, he encouraged the church to begin a second work, which eventually was to become the Sixteenth and Walnut Street Presbyterian Church.

When the Civil War broke out Brookes was in Europe receiving medical treatment for vocal problems but he quickly returned to his congregation where throughout the war years he ministered as a Southerner in a border state. Although he had sympathies with the South, he opposed secession and steadfastly refused to use his pulpit to enter into political controversy or commentary. As the war continued he was adamant in his refusal to pray for victory for either side. This refusal distressed some Southerners in his congregation and in July 1864, upon learning of their displeasure, Brookes immediately resigned. The day after his resignation a delegation from the church asked him to pastor the church which had been started earlier at Sixteenth and Walnut Streets. Brookes accepted this call and remained at the church (which later moved and became the Washington and Compton Avenue Presbyterian Church) until 1894 when he entered an emeritus status. Even to this day, Brookes' legacy as a Bible teacher is remembered through a Bible Institute bearing his name in St. Louis, Brookes Bible Institute. He died on Easter morning, April 18, 1897, leaving a pastoral legacy of compassion, dedication, and proclamation that would long endure.

AUTHOR AND EDITOR

Although he was well-known as a preacher, it was largely through his writings and conference ministry that Brookes gained national recognition. Beginning his writing career by authoring tracts for wounded Civil War soldiers, he went on to pen more than 200 tracts and 16 books. In the early 1870s he published *Maranatha*, a massive volume on eschatology that was to be one of his most popular works. Other books on prophecy included *Israel and the Church*, *Bible Reading on the Second Coming*, and *Till He Come* (later retitled *I Am Coming*).

In 1875, Brookes began to edit a monthly periodical called *The Truth or Testimony for Christ* that eventually had a circulation of more than 40,000. He continued to serve as the editor until his death, and through this publication he encouraged Christians in evangelism, issues of daily sanctification, Bible study, and the study of prophecy. After his death, the periodical merged with *The Watchword* and became known as *The Watchword and Truth*; however, it was the pretribulational journal *Our Hope*, first published by A. C. Gaebelein in 1894 and enthusiastically endorsed by Brookes, which ultimately came to be seen as the ideological successor to *The Truth*.

BIBLE CONFERENCE LEADER

During all of his years of ministry, Brookes was an active participant in denominational and interdenominational events. He was a regular speaker at Bible conferences, Y.M.C.A. meetings, and prophecy conferences and in 1875 was one of the founders and president of an annual conference that eventually became known as the Niagara Bible Conference. This annual event at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada,

became the premier conference for Bible students in the latter years of the nineteenth century. During its existence, the conference was interdenominational and premillennial. It was staunchly pretribulational in perspective until pretribulational and posttribulational controversy broke into the open after the death of Brookes. Doctrinal controversy, location uncertainties, and the death of Brookes led to its decline, and in 1900 the final conference was held. Throughout its years, Brookes had been the undisputed leader and through his efforts premillennialism and dispensationalism was widely disseminated across denominational boundaries within conservative Protestantism.

PREMILLENNIAL PERSPECTIVE

Brookes was one of the most prominent and fervent students of prophecy of his era. In an 1896 article in *The Truth*, "How I Became a Premillennialist," Brookes claimed he came to his premillennial eschatology through his own reading and study of Revelation and Daniel after entering the pastorate and after many years of the neglect of prophecy. This independent study, along with some influence in the years after the Civil War from Plymouth Brethren, provided the historical background of his beliefs. Brookes denied that he was the direct recipient of Plymouth Brethren eschatology, although he did acknowledge an appreciation of their eschatological enthusiasm. As early as 1871, Brookes was publishing and teaching views similar to dispensationalism. By 1874 his system was well-developed, and it was Brookes who would introduce C. I. Scofield to the teachings of dispensational premillennialism. It would be through Scofield and his study Bible that Brookes would have his most lasting influence.

Brookes was well-versed in the eschatological options within premillennialism and argued against both a partial rapture theory and posttribulationalism. He refused to set dates for the rapture and held to a strong doctrine of the Lord's return and imminence. "How thrilling the thought, that the first of these startling events, the coming of Christ for the saints, may occur at any hour" (*Maranatha*, 540). He was very much aware of the charge by uninformed critics that dispensationalists taught more than one way of salvation, and he adamantly rebutted it in writing, "It is needless to remind any ordinary reader of the sacred Scriptures that from the opening verses of Genesis, down to Malachi, the Spirit is brought into view in creation, providence, and redemption, and that all who are saved were quickened into life through His divine power and grace, as they are now" (*Israel and the Church*, 38).

Throughout his life Brookes was a pious and humble servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was a respected preacher and teacher of the Bible who gained national prominence and influence. He sought to consistently interpret and apply biblical truth and prophetic principles realizing that proper biblical interpretations have consequences not only for doctrine, but for daily living and the hope of His coming.

Bibliography

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