

## **DOCTOR ALEXANDER CARSON**

Most Baptists have heard of Alexander Carson but know little or nothing about the man and his ministry. Studying his life has been a journey of discovery finding out about the man who was known as the Lion Heart of Ulster. I have divided my address into three divisions, Carson The Man, Carson The Minister and Carson The Messenger.

### **CARSON THE MAN**

Alexander Carson was born in 1776/77, the eldest son of God fearing parents at Annahone near Stewartstown. By example and encouragement they nourished him in the things of God. Early in life he was taught the precepts and promises of God and could recite the Psalms from memory. This grounding in his formative years had a tremendous effect upon his life for good. Later in life he spoke of himself being in the line of Timothy because he had received such godly parenting. He often spoke of how much he valued his mother's instruction in exhorting him in the Christian faith and used her as an illustration to challenge all mothers to be faithful to their children in the things of God. It would appear that Alexander's parents had set him aside to serve the Lord in Christian ministry. They made the necessary sacrifices in order to send him to a classical school in a village nearby.

His educators would be the second set of people God would use to influence Alexander. In the village of Tullyhogue near Cookstown he was taught by Mr Peebles who schooled many other young men who would go on to become ministers of the Gospel. It is worth noting that on one occasion his father tried

to divert Alexander's attention from the field of learning, probably because the financial resources of his parents were limited and educating one of their children put considerable strain on the family purse strings. Alexander must have wanted to continue his education for he enlisted the support of his grandmother who spoke prophetically to his father William, - "My son don't interrupt the boy's studies for he may yet be a great man of Israel. I believe God has a great work for him to do."

Following his schooling Alexander enrolled as a student in Glasgow University studying Greek under Professor Young. He was a scholar of the highest order. He was a diligent student and when he was physically unable to write any more essays he would employ a fellow student to take down what he dictated. He spent himself physically and mentally throughout his university days. Although only 18 years of age Alexander graduated with the first honours in his large class. During his time at university he secured B. A. – M. A. and went on to do the necessary course in Divinity. Later in life he would receive honorary degrees of LLD conferred on him by two American colleges. It is believed that if Carson had remained a Presbyterian he would have become either Professor of Greek in the University of Glasgow or Professor of Moral Philosophy in Royal College, Belfast. His university education, nonetheless, would become a solid foundation for his future ministry.

The third person God used to shape Alexander's character was his wife. In 1798 Alexander married his life partner Margaret Leidy before his twenty-first birthday. She would have been turning 18 years old. She was the daughter of a rich and respected linen bleacher called George Leidy. Margaret was

to prove the mainstay throughout her husbands' ministry in Tobermore.

An example of her faithfulness to God and her husband is demonstrated by an encounter she had with her father. After Alexander had resigned from the Presbyterian ministry Mr Leidly was so concerned that he spent hours trying to change his mind. Alexander told him that if his wife did not agree wholeheartedly with him he would change his mind. Mr Leidly, with renewed hope, sat his daughter down and reminded her of all the comforts she would be giving up and the poverty they would face as a family if she did not change her husbands' mind. He told her that if she would not stop her husbands' madness he would not raise one finger to relieve them and assured her he was prepared to see his grandchildren starve. Having finished his speech his daughter's replied, "Father, God feeds the ravens when they cry unto him and I cannot believe that while we are striving to do his will, he will let the young Carson's starve." Margaret stood shoulder to shoulder with her husband. From that day on she became a stranger to her parents.

Margaret was mother to Alexander's thirteen children, two dying shortly after birth, stewardess of his house, and overseer of his farm. She managed and paid the servants. She even paid his tailors' bills. She did all this on the fluctuating income of £40 per annum, rent-free farm amounting to £10 per annum along with the rector's tithe and bog. To put this into context the rector James Spencer Knox received £350 per annum and the Presbyterian minister William Brown received £155 per annum. Margaret displayed all the graces of a virtuous wife of Proverbs 31, "Who can find a virtuous wife?"

For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life.” (Proverbs 31:10-12)

She was a woman of great intellectual ability. The story is told that Alexander and Margaret would sit around the fire in the evening when the eleven children were in bed and he would dictate to her his theological thoughts and then they would discuss them. She was his secretary and his sounding board and by all accounts she was equal to both tasks. Carson wrote in his prayer journal in January 1805, “I thank thee Lord for the wife thou hast given me, I have not to support her she supports and comforts me, had it been otherwise I know not what I would have done.”

Margaret died in 1844, seven months before her husband. Alexander was heart broken. Friends feared for his health. He would often stand on the hill looking towards the place she was buried. He was heard to say, “Would that her tomb was in my garden that I might visit every day! For although it is wrong to mourn on account of our friends when they are taken to heaven, still it is not sinful to weep for ourselves.” It may be truly said that, ‘When such friends part tis the survivor who dies.’ This world had no charms for him after Mrs Carson’s death. He desired life only because of his love for Christ and his kingdom.

The fourth and final person God used to influence Alexander was Robert Haldane, who along with his younger brother James would become the catalyst God would use to bring Alexander to Baptist convictions. They all travelled the same road of biblical discovery.

The Haldanes along with others had become alive to the unscriptural character of worldly churches and began organising churches upon the Bible only. They adopted congregational order and weekly communion throughout Scotland but were not Baptist.

However in the year 1807 James Haldane, the younger brother, after having sprinkled an infant, was asked a question by his six year old son, "Father did the child believe?" "No" said the surprised parent, "why do you ask such a question?" "Because father, I have read the whole New Testament and I find that all who were baptised believed. Did the child believe?" It was a simple argument but it was enough. The strange question haunted the mind of James. After a thorough examination of the Scriptures he renounced his former beliefs and was publicly immersed. His brother Robert shortly followed his example. After Robert Haldane was introduced to Alexander he was quick to recognise Carson's scholastic gifts. He advised and encouraged him in many of the controversial issues in which he became involved. Carson in many respects was a lonely man and because of his stand had few at the beginning to befriend him. Haldane's help in having many of Carson's works published in Edinburgh was indeed valuable. Such was the friendship that developed between Robert and Alexander that he name one of his sons Robert Haldane Carson.

### **CARSON THE MINISTER**

Having left college Alexander Carson was licensed by the Tyrone Presbytery to preach the Gospel in May 1797. This was

followed shortly by a unanimous call to the ministry in Tobermore Presbyterian Church becoming their minister on the 11<sup>th</sup> December 1798 at the age of twenty-one.

At the time of his induction into the ministry the church at large was in a state of spiritual decline. The Presbyterian Church was paralysed by the influence of secular patronage. The ministers of the Synod of Ulster became voluntary stipendiaries of the government. As a result the ministers soon stopped preaching against the evils and corruptions of their day. There were no evangelistic missions, nor were there any Sabbath Schools. The ministers spent more time cultivating their farms instead of preaching the Gospel. Regeneration and holiness of life was lost in the mist of liberalism. In many cases if a man desired to become a minister in the Presbyterian Church it did not depend on his allegiance to Christ but on his alliance with men of influence. The Westminster Confession of Faith had fallen into disrepute. Thomas Witherow wrote concerning the state of the church during the late 1700's 'There was ice in the pulpit, there was snow on the pew.'

Unfortunately the town of Tobermore was not behind her neighbours when it came to sin. Horse races, cockfights and other forms of sin were frequent and well attended by professing Christians. One day the fearless Carson rode his horse into the midst of the race goers and pleaded with his people to repent of their sinful ways.

Many who attended the church were introduced to the milk of false religion at an early age. They took communion as soon as they were able to repeat the Shorter Catechism. They paid a

regular stipend and owned their own pews. They thought as long as they did not commit a gross sin they had every right to the privileges of the church. Carson made up his mind that something had to be done to retrieve the situation. Those who professed faith but did not provide a faithful witness must be challenged concerning their sinful behaviour and if repentance was not forthcoming discipline would be exercised.

There were few allies to be found in the Presbytery or in the Synod concerning discipline in the church. The unwillingness of the Synod to rid the church of wolves in sheeps' clothing drove Carson to rethink his position on church government, leading him to become a Congregationalist.

He left on three main grounds: First, the impossibility to create or maintain a 'pure communion' within the framework of the Presbyterian system. Second, the prevalence of Arianism amongst his brother ministers and third, his discovery that congregationalism was the form of church government in the New Testament. This last decided the matter for him once and for all. Independency was the pattern laid down in Scripture.

He would write in his book 'Reasons for Leaving the Synod of Ulster,' the 'form of church government which leads us most to Scripture, and requires in church members the greatest acquaintance with them, is the most likely to be that of the New Testament. Now without an intimate acquaintance with the Bible, Independents cannot advance a step in church affairs ..... The Bible is their code of laws; they have no other confession or book of disciplines. They can do nothing without

it; it must be continually in their hand, the rulers rule only by the Word of God.'

Alexander severed his links with Presbyterianism in 1804 six years after he had been inducted into the ministry in Tobermore. It was not until 26<sup>th</sup> June 1805, however, that the Presbytery of Tyrone would declare Tobermore vacant.

While recognising the seriousness and consequences of his move Alexander made sure that his attitude toward those who differed from him would be that of Christian brotherly love. He wrote, 'The day I gave up my connection with the General Synod I gave up all that the world esteems ... a man is not apt, upon slight grounds to reason himself out of his living, his friends and his reputation. It will not be out of whim he will exchange ease for labour, respect for calumny, (slander) present competency for the naked promise of God. If classical Presbytery be in the New Testament, let its advocate come forward, and fairly refute my arguments. But let them not lose their temper, nor substitute railing for argument. Neither let them nibble round the surface of the subject, but let them enter into the essence of the debate ..... Christians of every denomination I love, and I will never I hope, withhold my hand or my countenance from any who, after impartial investigation, conscientiously differ from me.'

Thomas Witherow wrote this tribute, "Carson was a great strong-minded, lion-hearted man. Difficulties could not daunt him. He was not to be turned from what he considered the way of duty because of perils in the path. He took care to do what he thought was right, and left it to God to take care of the consequences.'



His decision left him without home, without salary and in many places without friends. Carson recorded in his prayer dairy on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1805, "As I go out like Abraham not knowing whether I go may the blessing of Abraham come upon me. Scan out my future lot and fix the bounds of my habitation. May I trust myself, my wife and little ones to thy providence. O Lord I know of all men I am naturally the most unfit for the perilous work to which thou hast called me. Lord hear thy servant on behalf of his dear relations.' For a young man with a wife and family hardship became a reality but a clear conscience before his Lord and Master was a soft pillow to sleep on.

It is believed that after his secession from the General Synod Alexander continued to preach for a number of years in the Tobermore Presbyterian church building to friend and foe until those who opposed him could no longer be restrained. A group from the party that opposed him arrived in the church building one Sunday morning determined to eject him from the pulpit. He asked them to let him finish his address then he would leave voluntarily. This they agreed to. After he had preached as he began to leave the building one of the deacons lifted the Bible and with a loud voice declared, "Let all who wish to follow the Bible come this way!" A good number of the congregation followed. Their stand for biblical truth that day was to be honoured by God in ways they could never have dreamt of. Gathering immediately in a nearby field sixteen men formed an independent church. Some folk point to 1809 as the date of the formation of the church. However there is an unpublished letter written by Dr Carson in 1819 in the name of the Church at Tubbermore and addressed through

James Buchanan Esq. to some people who had written to him from New York. In it Dr Carson states, "we met as a Church in May 1807". (Publ. Edward Fletcher NY, Benjamin Green London, 1851)

The fledgling church met in open fields and drafty barns before occupying a room near the old coopers forge in Main Street. It was not until 1814, however, almost ten years after his secession, that pastor and church found a home of their own. The old date stone in the vestry of the present Carson Memorial Church, which was erected on the site of the original meetinghouse, bears its silent testimony to what must have been for the saints of those days a great and joyful achievement. This building housed a church, which grew to over 500 members and at times Dr. Carson preached to a congregation of upwards of 1,000 souls in the open fields.

Approximately three to four years after Carson's secession a number of his congregation came under the teaching of Haldane preachers who came from Scotland preaching Baptist principles. Questions were being asked and answers were being sought as to who was right and who was wrong. Alexander was not well pleased with the influence the Haldane preachers were having on some of the church members concerning believers Baptism. Alexander was never a man to step back from controversy. George C. Moore, one of Carson's students, records the event thus: "The shepherd was immediately aroused! With eager grasp he clutched the shepherd's crook, determined to slay the invader." Carson said, "I thought I could demolish the arguments of those Baptist as easily as you crush a fly.' He undertook to do so promising his people answers in a few days which would forever silence the Baptist. Eventually after a month or so of

study he came to realize that his belief of Paedo-baptism was built upon a foundation of sand. The following Sunday morning he stood before his people and declared himself to be a Baptist. It was considered bad enough to be a Congregationalist, but to be a Baptist! If the former change was accounted 'foolishness' the latter, many thought, might well be the stuff of 'madness'.

Alexander by all accounts loved his people. It was said that he cared for them as a Father cares for his children. One Sunday a member of the church was publicly disciplined for some sin. Alexander went home and retired to his garden where he thought no eye could see him. One of the deacons had come to see him and found his Pastor stretched out on top of the ground weeping bitterly. The deacon asked what was wrong. Alexander replied, "Is it any wonder that I weep when one of God's children is cut off from the church." His pastoral heart was heavy with sorrow for the erring member.

The account of his funeral recorded in the local paper proves that his people loved him. He died on Saturday 24th August 1844 aged 67. The local paper reported. 'Seldom if ever has it been our lot to witness so large or respectable a funeral or on an occurrence on which so much unaffected sorrow was evidenced. It was truly a day of mourning. The coffin was borne from Solitude to the churchyard gate, which is around two miles, by members of his congregation after which ministers of various congregations shouldered it to the grave; it was deposited in the same grave as his life's partner.'

One part of Alexander's ministry can be summed up in the following statement, 'I anticipated the end, I counted the cost

and am daily paying installments.’ The other part of his ministry can be summed up in the following verse of Scripture, **“for those who honour me I will honour”** (1 Samuel 2:30)

### **CARSON THE MESSENGER**

What makes a theological genius great is that he can take the profound and make it simple. Alexander preached in a way that his congregation understood him. Thomas Witherow wrote concerning Carson’s gift of simplicity, ‘He was gifted with a rare power of reaching the understanding of the most ignorant. Even a child could carry the substance of his lecture home with it. I have often heard some stupid block into whose thick head it were a task indeed to hammer an idea, tell something that he heard from Carson, though he could not repeat a sentiment that he ever heard from any other man. Massive and original thoughts accompanied with illustrations drawn from familiar objects of life and couched in plain and simple style fell from the preacher’s lips at will and fastened on the hearer’s memory forever. Under such instructions no wonder that ordinary men became mighty in the Scriptures under such a minister even a clown could scarcely help growing wise.’ It is recorded that as a preacher he was remarkable. His manner was natural and graceful and his preaching was expository going through a book verse by verse. He believed what he preached. He would have preached about:

### **THE CONTENT OF GOD’S TESTIMONY (1John 5:11)**

**“And this is the testimony that God has given us eternal life and this life is in his Son”** (11) In God’s testimony we have

three outstanding truths. **(1)** That eternal life is a gift of God “And this is the testimony that God has given us eternal life” **(2)** That eternal life is only found through faith in Jesus Christ “and this life is in his Son” **(3)** That the gift of eternal life is a present possession. “And this is the testimony that God has given us eternal life and this life is in his Son” John underlines these truths when he writes in (12) “He who has the Son has life” Whoever believes in Jesus Christ has eternal life. Apart from Jesus Christ there is no eternal life.

### **THE CERTAINTY OF THE BELIEVER (1 John 5:12,13)**

(12,13) “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life ..... These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life,”

Sir James Simpson, the discoverer of chloroform, was asked upon his death bed, “Sir James what are your speculations?” Speculations” he replied, “I don’t have any speculations, I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep what I have committed to him until that day.” The apostle Paul assures of this when he wrote in (1 Corinthians 15:55-57) “O death where is your sting? O grave where is your victory? The sting of death is sin and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Death is not the end. It is only the beginning of living in the nearer presence of Jesus Christ.

### **THE CONDEMNATION OF THE UNBELIEVER (1 John 5:12)**

“he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”  
(12) The teaching of the Bible is logical. If you have the Son of

God you have life. If you do not have the Son of God you do not have life. The person who will not believe in Jesus Christ as the only way for salvation provokes God to deliver him or her over to eternal death. For the one who does not believe the testimony of God about his Son is calling God a liar.

Jesus said, "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life - and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Alexander Carson believed the gospel ahe preached and trusted in the Saviour he proclaimed and when the time came he was ready for life's final journey. On the 24th August 1844 he received his reward of grace from the hand of his Saviour and Lord. As one of the mainstays of the Baptist Missionary Society Carson was on one of his fund raising trips for them in Wales and England. On Friday the 16<sup>th</sup> August he was waiting at the dockside in Liverpool ready to embark on the night sailing to Belfast. When a clock rang out the hour he checked the time on his own watch. However being unconsciously too near the dock he lost his footing and fell down into the water, which was 25 feet deep. When he was rescued it was found that he had dislocated his shoulder. After his shoulder was reset he took the first available ferry crossing arriving at Belfast in a feverish condition and was taken to the home of Belfast pastor Robert Wilson. His son and son in law, Doctors Carson and Clarke, who lived in Coleraine, were sent for. They endeavored with other medical practioners to treat his condition. There was for a little time hope of his recovery during the week but early on Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> August he passed into the presence of his Lord, death resulting from a congestion of blood in one of his lungs.

During the final days he often requested the Bible to be read to him, "Read me some of the promises," he would ask, "they are my only support, they are the food I want." The lion-hearted defender of the truth of God, the faithful pastor of a unique church and the cherished friend of many, was an extraordinary man and yet he was an ordinary sinful man saved by the grace of God. He said shortly before his death "The Lord is God indeed! He is a great God and a good God! He is the God of Abraham of Isaac and of Jacob and he is my God!" Concerning his final hours G. C. Moore records that his mood bordered on ecstasy. Carson exclaimed, "To this truth I can certainly set my seal. Through many trials my way has lain, but the Lord has delivered me out of them all!" Alexander Carson's name will live on so long as there are men who will cherish truth and appreciate in their fellows a loyalty to its cause which neither material loss nor opposition can destroy.