

William Edwin Sangster Biography

by W.E. Sangster

W.E. Sangster's life was marked by a passionate commitment to Methodism, innovative preaching, and a deep concern for spiritual renewal amidst societal challenges.

Scripture: Matthew 5:16, Romans 12:11, 1 Corinthians 15:58, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Ephesians 6:19, Philippians 3:14, Colossians 3:23, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, 2 Timothy 4:7, 1 Peter 4:10

Topics: "Evangelism", "Spiritual Leadership"

Description

W.E. Sangster, a dedicated Methodist preacher, was deeply impacted by the gospel of Jesus Christ from a young age and devoted his life to recovering Methodist conviction and expression. Throughout his ministry, he fearlessly innovated in preaching and administration, even during the challenging times of World War II, providing refuge for hundreds of thousands in his church's basement. As the leader of the Methodist Conference of Great Britain, Sangster relentlessly drove the agenda of evangelism and spiritual deepening, equipping his people to invite others to faith and experience a profound immersion in God's love and neighborly compassion. Despite facing a debilitating illness, Sangster continued to inspire through his writings, lectures, and unwavering passion for sharing the message of salvation.

Transcript

1900 -- 1960

Never taken to a place of worship for the first eight years of his life, Sangster found his way into an inner-city London Methodist mission where he happily attended Sunday School for years. When he was twelve a sensitive teacher gently asked him if he wanted to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. "I spluttered out my little prayer", he wrote years later. "It had one merit. I meant it."

From that moment the gospel of Jesus Christ absorbed Sangster for life. Subordinate only to it was an obsession with recovering Methodist conviction and expression. Never possessed of a sectarian spirit, never a denominational chauvinist, he yet believed ardently that Methodism's uniquenesses were essential to the spiritual health of Britain and to the well-being of the church catholic.

Military service followed, then studies in theology (with distinction in philosophy), and finally ordination. Short-term pastorates in Wales and northern England exposed him as a daring innovator and startling preacher. Never afraid of (apparent) failure, he was willing to try anything to reach the indifferent and the hostile. (Church-attendance in Britain had peaked in 1898, declining every year thereafter.) His first book,

God Does Guide Us, paved the way for the second, Methodism Can Be Born Again. Now his alarm, even horror, at the careless squandering of the Wesleyan heritage was evident as he pleaded with his people and sought to draw them to the wellsprings of their denomination.

The outbreak of World War II found him senior minister at Westminster Central Hall, the "cathedral" of Methodism. The sanctuary, seating 3000, was full morning and evening for the next 16 years as Sangster customarily preached 30 to 45 minutes. As deep and sturdy below ground as Central Hall was capacious above, its basement became an air-raid shelter as soon as the German assault began. The first night was indescribable as thousands squeezed in, high-born and low, adult and infant, sober and drunk, clean and lousy. Equally adept at administration and preaching, Sangster quickly laid out the cavernous cellar in sandbagged "streets" so as to afford minimal privacy to those who particularly needed it. Sunday services continued upstairs in the sanctuary. A red light in the pulpit warned that an air-raid was imminent. Usually he chose to ignore it. If it were drawn to his attention he would pause and say quietly, "Those of a nervous disposition may leave now" -- and resume the service. While his wife sought to feed the hordes who appeared nightly, he assisted and comforted them until midnight, then "retired" to work until 2:00 a.m. on his Ph.D thesis for London University. (The degree was awarded in 1943.) As space in the below-ground shelter was scarce, he and his family lived at great risk -- a Times reporter interviewed him for his obituary! -- for five years on the hazardous ground floor. They slept nightly in the men's washroom amidst the sound of incessant drips and the malodorous smells. By war's end 450,000 people had found refuge in the church-basement.

In 1949 Sangster was elected president of the Methodist Conference of Great Britain. The denomination's leader now, he announced the twofold agenda he would drive relentlessly: evangelism and spiritual deepening. He knew that while the Spirit alone ultimately brings people to faith in Jesus Christ, the witness of men and women is always the context of the Spirit's activity. By means of addresses, workshops and books he strove to equip his people for the simple yet crucial task of inviting others to join them on the Way. The second item of his agenda was not new for him, but certainly new to Methodist church-members who had never been exposed to Wesleyan distinctives. He longed to see lukewarm pew-sitters aflame with that oceanic Love which bleaches sin's allure and breaks sin's grip and therefore scorches and saves in the same instant. He coveted for his people a whole-souled, self-oblivious, horizon-filling immersion in the depths of God and in the suffering of their neighbours.

In all of this he continued to help both lay preachers and ordained as books poured from his pen: *The Craft of the Sermon*, *The Approach to Preaching*, *Power in Preaching*. Newspapers delighted in his quotableness: "a nation of pilferers", "tinselled harlots", "the pus-point of sin". Yet his popularity was never won at the expense of intellectual profundity. The ablest student in philosophy his seminary had seen, he yet modestly lamented that Methodism lacked a world-class exponent of philosophical theology -- even as he himself appeared on an American "phone-in" television program where questions on the philosophy of religion had to be answered without prior preparation. Ever the evangelist at heart, he rejoiced to learn that two million viewers had seen the show.

Numerous engagements on behalf of international Methodism took him around the world and several times to America. While lecturing in Texas he had difficulty swallowing and walking. The problem was diagnosed as progressive muscular atrophy, an incurable neurological disease. His wife took him to the famous neurological clinic in Freudenstadt, Germany -- but to no avail.

His last public communication was an anguished note scribbled to the chief rabbi as a wave of antisemitism engulfed Britain in January 1960. Toward the end he could do no more than raise the index finger of his right hand. He died on May 24th, "Wesley Day", cherished as the date of Wesley's "heart strangely warmed" at Aldersgate with the subsequent spiritual surge on so many fronts.

Everything about him -- his philosophical rigour, his fervour in preaching, his affinity with saints who had drawn unspeakably near to the heart of God, his homespun writings (Lord, Teach Us To Pray), his genuine affection for all sorts and classes -- it all served one passion and it was all gathered up in one simple line of Charles Wesley, Methodism's incomparable hymn-writer:

"O let me commend my saviour to you."

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